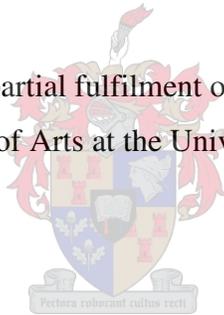


Screen Bound/Skin Bound:
The Politics of Embodiment in the Posthuman Age

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the degree of Master of Arts at the University of Stellenbosch



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DECLARATION

By submitting this thesis, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the owner of the copyright thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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SUMMARY

The end of the second millennium saw a sudden return to corporeality, especially within feminist scholarship, where embodiment and issues surrounding the body were, for the first time, made explicit. This study examines the corporeal body in relation to technology and the impact that newly emerging virtual technologies have on our understanding of the body, not only through examining representations of the technologically modified body, but also by exploring *how* contemporary cultural practices produce corporeal bodies that view themselves as somehow integrated with technology. It focuses on the material artefacts of contemporary culture in relation to explicitly virtual technologies, both arguing for a return to corporeality and contesting the pervasive trope of disembodiment that characterises so-called “posthuman” age.

This study thus takes one of the most popular metaphors for the relationship between the corporeal body and technology as its starting point, namely Donna Haraway’s cyborg figures. Following the publication of Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” (1985), the female cyborg became an icon of emancipation for many feminist scholars, who utilised Haraway’s cyborg discourse as a means of discussing the cultural practices that both construct and limit female gendered identity. Through closely examining the metaphor of Haraway’s cyborg figures in relation to cultural representations of female cyborg bodies, this study argues that, ultimately, the metaphor of the cyborg is inherently neither challenging nor liberating. It then examines the failure of the cyborg as an icon of postgenderedness in terms of its negation of the corporeal, as cyborg figures paradoxically only strengthen the same Cartesian dualism Haraway’s cyborg discourse attempts to deconstruct. It explores representations of three female cyborg figures found in contemporary popular culture to illustrate how the cyborg body’s negation of the corporeal only results in the reiteration of conventional gendered stereotypes, rather than liberation from oppressive gendered practices.

Finally, this study examines the crucial interplay between the corporeal and the technological, not only when speaking of more imaginary cyborg configurations and

tropes, but also when speaking of the physical reality of lived bodies and embodied experiences. By examining the increasingly embodied nature of cyberspace, this study explores possible alternatives to the figure of the hypersexualised and disembodied cyborg, through investigating new figurations with which to describe the embodied postmodern subject and his/her dependence on technology. Since the central task for a feminist ethics of embodiment would be grounded in the project of representing the female body, in such a way that it constructs autonomous women's representations without falling prey to patriarchal, stereotypical or estranging images of women's bodies, this study concludes with more useful methods of representing the corporeal body in relation to virtual technology through an appeal to an ethics of embodiment.

OPSOMMING

Die einde van die tweede millennium het 'n skielike belangstelling in beliggaamdheid ontlok, veral binne feministiese vakgeleerdheid, waar beliggaamdheid en kwessies rondom die liggaam vir die eerste keer eksplisiet gestel is. Hierdie studie ondersoek die stoflike liggaam in verhouding tot tegnologie en die invloed wat nuwe, virtuele tegnologië op ons begrip van die liggaam het, nie slegs deur voorstellings van die tegnologies-gemodifieërde liggaam te ondersoek nie, maar deur ook te kyk na *hoe* kontemporêre kulturele praktyke beliggaamde subjekte produseer wat huself op een of ander wyse as geïntegreerd met tegnologie sien. Die studie fokus op die materiële artefakte van kontemporêre kultuur in verhouding tot eksplisiet virtuele tegnologië. Dit bevorder 'n terugkeer tot beliggaamdheid, terwyl dit teen die sogenaamde “postmenslike” era se mees kenmerkende troep van ontliggaamdheid argumenteer.

Die studie begin dus deur een van die mees populêre metafore vir die verhouding tussen die liggaamlike en die tegnologiese te ondersoek, naamlik Donna Haraway se siborg-figure. Sedert die publikasie van Haraway se “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” (1985), het verskeie feministiese vakgeleerdes die vroulike siborg-figuur beide as 'n ikoon vir emansipasie beskou en gebruik om die kulturele praktyke wat vroulike geslagsidentiteit gelyktydig konstrueer én beperk te bespreek. Deur Haraway se siborg-figure met kulturele voorstellings van vroulike siborg-liggame te vergelyk, kom hierdie studie tot die gevolgtrekking dat die metafoor van die siborg inherent nóg uitdaagend nóg bevrydend is. Gevolglik ondersoek die studie die onbevoegdheid van die siborg-figuur as 'n ikoon vir postgeslagtigheid in terme van die siborg-liggaam se negering van beliggaamdheid, aangesien siborg-figure op 'n paradoksale wyse die selfde Cartesiaanse dualisme versterk wat Haraway se siborg-diskoers wou dekonstrueer. Dit ondersoek voorstellings van drie vroulike siborg-figure in kontemporêre populêre kultuur om te illustreer hoe die siborg-liggaam se negering van beliggaamdheid slegs konvensionele geslagstereotipes versterk, eerder as om ons van beperkende, patriargale geslagspraktyke te bevry.

Ten slotte ondersoek hierdie studie die deurslaggewende tussenspel tussen die ligaamlike en die tegnologiese, nie slegs in terme van meer denkbeeldige siborg tropes nie, maar ook in terme van die fisiese realiteit van konkrete, beliggaamde lewenservaringe. Deur die toenemend beliggaamde kwaliteit van kiberruimtes te ondersoek, stel hierdie studie moontlike alternatiewe maniere voor om die postmoderne subjek en sy/haar afhanklikheid van tegnologie te beskryf, eerder as om op ontliggaamde en hiper-geseksualiseerde siborg-figure staat te maak. Aangesien 'n feministiese beliggaamde etiek gegrond is in 'n projek om die vroulike liggaam op só 'n wyse voor te stel dat patriargale, stereotipiese of vervreemdbare beelde van die vroulike liggaam vermy word, eindig hierdie studie met meer nuttige metodes om die stoflike liggaam in verhouding tot virtuele tegnologie voor te stel deur 'n beroep tot 'n meer beliggaamde etiek te maak.

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Introduction

A Precipitous Return to Corporeality in the Posthuman Age

I want to return with
my previous body. I am not
I, without my body
only through my body can I in-
habit this earth. my soul
is my body entire. my body
embodies what I am.
do not turn against me, oh do not
ever leave me. do not
cave in around me, do not plummet
away from me, do not
die off on me, do not leave me with-
out testimony. I
have a body, therefore I am.

– Antjie Krog¹

The body has long held a troubled place in feminist studies. For many years, feminist theorists hardly acknowledged the body, giving rise to the perception that issues surrounding the body were simply not important enough to merit inclusion in feminist scholarship. In her introduction to *Feminism and the Body*, Londa Shiebinger points out that, until the 1970s, issues surrounding the body were considered “too vulgar, trivial or risqué to merit serious scholarly attention” (1). Sue Rosser writes that, by the late 1980s, feminist scholars still “downplayed the body, particularly in the development of feminist theory” (142). She recalls her own misgivings when confronted with the absence of the body from feminism as late as 1988, as she “puzzled over reasons why, despite women’s health and reproductive rights having served as major issues catalysing the rebirth of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s, feminism by the late 1980s included very little on science and/or the body” (142). Linda Birke further emphasises the fact that, in the 1970s and 1980s, the body only truly featured in the activist work of feminist health groups, who mainly focused on medical knowledge about the biological body. “But apart from that,” Birke writes, “the emphasis in our theory was on the *social* construction of gender; the body hardly featured at all in emerging feminist theory” (quoted in Rosser 142).

¹ Krog, Antjie. “Four seasonal observations of Table Mountain, winter, sunday 22 june”. *Body Bereft*. Roggebaai: Umuzi, 2006: 93-94.

While no one would dispute the importance that theories on the social construction of gender hold for feminist studies, much of the emerging feminist scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s was characterized by a troubling lack where the corporeal² body should have been. Gill Kirkup writes that

[t]here is agreement that gender categories are constructed. 1970/1980s feminist theory argued that gender was a social construction based on a material-biological base: sex difference. Gender was seen as a construction used to justify social inequality... Biology became another discourse in the construction of gender rather than a material base for it.
(3-4)

One of the most obvious reasons feminist scholars would have had for relegating the body to the peripheries of their study is what Birke terms the “very necessary rebuttal of biological determinism” (quoted in Rosser 142). Biological determinism, in short, argues that biological sex difference both dictates and governs gender roles; for example, according to biological determinism, the fact that women’s bodies are biologically capable of giving birth will mean that women should necessarily stay in the private sphere of the home to bear and raise children. As early as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir contested biological determinism, attempting to liberate women from its debilitating effects by arguing that gender is socially constructed. In *The Second Sex*, one of the key Western feminist texts on the social construction of gender, De Beauvoir famously argues that woman is not born, but made; in other words, that gender roles are not grounded in material sex difference, but that gender categories are rather socially constructed. She

² In this thesis, the term “corporeal body” signifies the material, biological body. It expressly denotes embodied life experience and thus stands in contrast to both the cyborg body and the so-called “posthuman” body, both of which rely on the seamless integration of the corporeal body with either machinic components or information technology, invariably resulting in the loss of embodiment. While many scholars apply the terms “corporeal body” and “posthuman body” quite loosely, this study utilises the term “corporeal body” to explore the embodied nature of the material, biological body and the term “posthuman body” to explore the pervasive trope of disembodiment associated with the technologically modified cyborg body.

writes that woman “is a womb, an ovary; she is a *female* – this word is sufficient to define her” (35, emphasis added). “A man,” De Beauvoir writes,

is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine. Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands. Man superbly ignores the fact that his anatomy also includes glands, such as the testicles, and that they secrete hormones. He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it. (15)

In order to refute biological determinism, De Beauvoir illustrates how material sex difference does not constitute a valid reason for normative gender roles. She does this by showing how masculinity is often figured as a transcendence of the corporeal, while women are associated with the spheres of the body and the “natural”. In the above passage, De Beauvoir highlights the fact that, while both male and female bodies secrete hormones, only women are cast as “hysterical” (as in the Greek word for uterus, *hystera*), both “weighed down” by and “imprisoned” in their biological bodies. Men, on the other hand, transcend the limitations and secretions of the body to become the “absolute human type, the masculine” (De Beauvoir 15). In fact, a long tradition of Western philosophy, firmly grounded in the Cartesian dualism between mind and body, has seen logic and rationality as somehow inherently “masculine”, while the body, trapped in “female” immanence, became an obstacle and a hindrance that had to be overcome and transcended. “Thus,” De Beauvoir concludes, “*humanity is male* and man defines woman not as herself but as relative to him... he is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (16, emphasis added).

From Plato to Bacon, this mind/body dualism has permeated Western philosophical thought, dividing human experience into a bodily and a rational realm. “The female body,” Kathy Davis points out,

becomes a metaphor for the corporeal pole of this dualism, representing nature, emotionality, irrationality and sensuality. Images of the dangerous, appetitive female body, ruled precariously by her emotions, stand in contrast to the masterful, masculine will, the locus of social power, rationality and self-control. (5)

Feminist theories on the social construction of gender, in an attempt to free women from the oppressive, gendered practices underlying biological determinism, would negate the corporeal body in order to allow women access to the traditionally “masculine” sphere of the mind. This not only reiterated problematic Cartesian dualisms, but also caused the transcendence of the corporeal to become both desired and somehow inherently masculine. As Elizabeth Grosz points out,

philosophy has always considered itself a discipline concerned primarily or exclusively with ideas, concepts, reason, judgement – that is, with terms clearly framed by the concept of mind, terms which marginalise or exclude considerations of the body. (4)

Thus, while feminist scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s hold obvious value for our understanding of the ways in which gender roles are socially constructed, the corporeal body was not accorded a proper place in feminist scholarship. It became a site of limitation, while culture became the site of fluidity and possible social change. However, in negating the body, feminist scholars paradoxically only strengthened one of the oldest and most pervasive patriarchal disavowals of the body, namely the Cartesian mind/body dualism.

Hélène Cixous is one of the first feminist theorists to appropriate the female body and to subvert the philosophical tradition of Cartesian thought. She does not make light of the dangers of biological determinism, which other feminist scholars of the same time were trying to avoid, but rather reclaims the female body as a site of liberatory potential so that it is no longer a self-damaging site for women. In “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), like De Beauvoir, Cixous writes that “women are body” (886). She shows how “it has been in [the] body that women have responded to persecution, to the familial-conjugal enterprise of domestication, to the repeated attempts at castrating them” (886). However, she also goes on to claim the body back from the Cartesian dualism that would have women disavow their own bodies. For Cixous, this is done through *writing* the body; not simply by writing *about* the body or simply representing the body through literature, but by writing *through* the body. “By writing herself,” Cixous insists, “woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display” (880). In other words, Cixous argues that by appropriating the female body through literature, women can subvert the old, patriarchal philosophical traditions that would see the female body as a limitation or a hindrance that has to be overcome. Indeed, if, as Cixous claims, “women *are* body” (886, emphasis added), then “being body” is no longer a patriarchal site of limitation, but rather a liberatory and empowering position. “Your body,” Cixous concludes, “must be heard” (880), thereby restoring the corporeal to the philosophical tradition that has so long negated it.

In *Body Bereft* (2006), South African poet Antjie Krog does exactly what Cixous proposes in “The Laugh of the Medusa”. Through her poetry, Krog appropriates the female body and, in so doing, subverts the patriarchal philosophical traditions that would ordinarily negate it. The specific imagery of the collection, focusing largely on the aging female body, corresponds in a very interesting way with the image of the ancient Gorgon evoked by the title of Cixous’s article: gnarled, wrinkled and flaccid, Krog’s aging bodies erupt on every page, refusing to be contained or controlled by a patriarchal discourse of “female modesty”. By writing through the aging female body, Krog restores the agency and self-worth of those bodies so often ignored or abjected. Throughout the poem “sunday 22 june”, one of the “winter” poems in the cycle “Four seasonal observations of

Table Mountain”, Krog deliberately inverts the Cartesian hierarchy that would privilege the mind at the expense of the body. The speaker of the poem explicitly locates her³ being in the corporeal; she states that she is not herself “without [her] body” (line 9), since “[her] body/embodies what [she is]” (lines 12-13). In fact, the speaker further claims that “[her] soul/is [her] body entire” (lines 11-12), problematising the idea of transcendence by inextricably linking the soul to the corporeal. Krog thus effectively deconstructs Cartesian dualisms through collapsing the boundary between the body and consciousness. This is further emphasised in the closing lines of the poem, where the speaker triumphantly exclaims: “I have a body,/therefore I am” (lines 19-20). While this phrase is a direct reference to Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum*, the primacy of the mind is completely inverted and, as a result, the body becomes the new prerequisite for being. The speaker ends the poem by imploring her body to “step/into the breach for [her]” (lines 20-21), as she feels that her body is “[her] only mandate to/engage the earth in love” (lines 22-23). In the poem, the body thus takes over the traditional role of the soul, as the speaker would rather pray to her body to “step/into the breach for [her]” (lines 22-23) than to an abstract, transcendental concept or being.

Krog’s poem is an excellent example of what Lisa Blackman terms the “*corporeal turn* within feminism over the previous two decades, during which time a more explicit focus on the body has taken place” (72). The end of the second millennium saw a sudden return to corporeality, especially within feminist scholarship, where embodiment and issues surrounding the body were, for the first time, made explicit. Davis, editor of *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (1997), notes, for example, how “the past decade has marked an enormous upsurge of interdisciplinary interest in the body,” how “[c]onferences on the body abound,” how “no annual meeting in the social sciences, cultural studies or humanities would be complete without at least one session devoted to the body” and how “a whole series of ‘body’ books has emerged” (1). Birke also notes how “thinking about the body has...now become highly fashionable, reversing those earlier tendencies to ignore the body altogether” (quoted in Rosser 143), while Rosser

³ Given the strong focus on the female body throughout the collection, further strengthened by the fact that in the previous poem, “thursday 19 june”, the speaker describes her mammogram in detail, I read the speaker of this poetic cycle as undoubtedly female.

very succinctly summarises the sudden interest in embodiment by concluding: “[n]ow the body is everywhere” (143). However, as Avril Horner and Angela Keane point out, “apart from the near universal rejection of Cartesian mind-body dualism, there is no critical consensus about how and why bodies matter” (1).

One of the most important contemporary reasons “why bodies matter” is closely connected to the so-called “posthuman”⁴ age and its pervasive trope of disembodiment. As a result, this study focuses specifically on the corporeal body in relation to technology and the impact that newly emerging virtual technologies have on our understanding of the body. By not only examining representations of the technologically modified body, but also by exploring *how* cultural practices produce corporeal bodies that view themselves as somehow integrated with virtual technologies, this study contests the common disavowal of the corporeal body in relation to explicitly virtual technologies. Most theorists working with the emergence of virtual technologies in postmodern technoculture focus on the trope of disembodiment. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, for example, identify the “disappearing body” as a key trope defining the postmodernity of contemporary culture, which, in turn, make it a key problem for any materialist analysis of that culture (see Foster “Rhetoric” 618). This study, on the other hand, attempts to examine the material, cultural artefacts of contemporary culture in relation to explicitly virtual technologies without relying on the trope of disembodiment. It promotes a return to corporeality in the posthuman age by examining representations of the corporeal body in contemporary popular culture and arguing against the persistent trope of disembodiment.

⁴ The idea of the “posthuman” will be fully explored in the second chapter. In brief, the posthuman condition is characterised by the seamless integration of information technology with the corporeal, which invariably leads to the trope of disembodiment. According to N. Katherine Hayles’ *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (1999), the idea of the “posthuman” is grounded in the loss of the materiality of information. As soon as information can be conceived as somehow separate from the embodied being that performs it – in other words, as soon as information can be imagined as a bodiless stream of data rather than the property of embodied existence – machines and embodied subjects can be integrated into a single system. The amalgamation of machine and human, found in the disembodied cyborg figures discussed throughout this thesis, leads to both the loss of embodiment and the creation of the “posthuman”, technologically modified en body.

The first chapter examines one of the most popular metaphors for the relationship between the corporeal body and technology, namely Donna Haraway's cyborg figures. Following the publication of Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985), the female cyborg became an icon of emancipation for many feminist scholars, who utilised Haraway's cyborg discourse as a means of discussing the cultural practices that both construct and limit female gendered identity. This chapter closely examines the metaphor of Haraway's cyborg figures in relation to cultural representations of female cyborg bodies in order to evaluate its liberatory claims. It argues that, ultimately, the metaphor of the cyborg is neither inherently challenging nor liberating.

The second chapter focuses specifically on the failure of the cyborg as an icon of postgenderedness in terms of its negation of the corporeal, as cyborg figures only strengthen the same Cartesian dualism Haraway's cyborg discourse attempted to deconstruct. It explores representations of three female cyborg figures found in contemporary popular culture to illustrate how the cyborg body's negation of the corporeal only results in the reiteration of conventional gendered stereotypes, rather than liberation from oppressive gendered practices.

The third chapter looks at the crucial interplay between the corporeal and the technological; not only when speaking of more imaginary cyborg configurations and tropes, but also when speaking of the physical reality of lived bodies and embodied experiences. One of the most promising figurations of the corporeal and the technological is found in the newly emerging, increasingly embodied virtual subject. By examining the increasingly embodied nature of cyberspace, this chapter explores possible alternatives to the figure of the hypersexualised and disembodied cyborg, through investigating new figurations with which to describe the embodied postmodern subject and its dependence on technology.

Finally, this study appeals to an ethics of embodiment, insisting on the importance of the corporeal body in relation to technology. It argues for a return to corporeality in the

posthuman age by examining representations of the corporeal body in contemporary popular culture and arguing against the pervasive trope of disembodiment.

Chapter 1

Cyborg Bodies: The Promise of the Postgendered Subject

“The cyborg is a creature in a postgender world.”

– Donna Haraway¹

“Although Haraway famously concludes her article ‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’, the question remains: Is it better to be a cyborg than a woman?”

- Gill Kirkup²

In the opening pages of Edgar Allan Poe’s short satire, “The Man That Was Used Up” (1839), the narrator is introduced to the mysterious Brevet Brigadier-General John A. B. C. Smith and is immediately fascinated by Smith’s “remarkable – yes, *remarkable*” (338) body. The absolute perfection of Smith’s body amazes and intrigues the narrator to such an extent that he spends the rest of the story trying to learn everything he can about the enigmatic General. He enthuses endlessly on the subject of Smith’s physical superiority, claiming that “nothing could be more richly flowing or possess a brighter gloss” than Smith’s hair, his whiskers “were the handsomest pair of whiskers under the sun”, his eyes “were of a deep hazel exceedingly large and lustrous”, he had “a mouth utterly unequalled”, “the most brilliantly white of all conceivable teeth”, “a voice of surpassing clearness, melody and strength”, “the finest bust [the narrator] ever saw”, arms that “altogether were admirably modelled”, as well as “the *ne plus ultra* of good legs” (339). Still, it is not only “the supreme excellence of [Smith’s] bodily endowments” (339) which fascinates the narrator, but also Smith’s reputation for bravery, eagerly recounted by his many acquaintances:

“In *that* point he is unrivalled – indeed he is a perfect desperado – a downright fire-eater, and no mistake,” said my friend, here dropping his voice excessively low, and thrilling me with the mystery of his tone. “A downright fire-eater, and no mistake. Showed *that*, I should say, to some purpose, in the late tremendous swamp-fight, away down South, with the

¹ Haraway, Donna. “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s”. *The Gendered Cyborg*. Eds. Gill Kirkup, Linda James, Kathryn Woodward and Fiona Hovenden. London and New York: Routledge, 2000: 51.

² Kirkup, Gill. “Introduction to Part One”. *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*. Eds. Gill Kirkup, Linda James, Kathryn Woodward and Fiona Hovenden. London and New York: Routledge, 2000:5.

Bugaboo and Kickapoo Indians”. [Here my friend opened his eyes to some extent.] “Bless my soul! – blood and thunder, and all that! – *prodigies* of valour! – heard of him, of course? – you know he’s the man –” (340)

However, the narrative of Smith’s bravery is repeatedly interrupted at this precise moment, so that the narrator never succeeds in finding out who (or what) the “remarkable” Smith in fact is. Frustrated and disappointed, he finally resolves to go to Smith’s house, where he is shown into Smith’s private chambers.

As I entered the chamber, I looked about, of course, for the occupant, but did not immediately perceive him. There was a large and exceedingly odd-looking bundle of something that lay close by my feet on the floor, and, as I was not in the best humour in the world, I gave it a kick out of the way. “Hem! ahem! rather civil that, I should say!” said the bundle, in one of the smallest, and altogether the funniest little voices, between a squeak and a whistle, that I ever heard in all the days of my existence. (344)

The bundle on the floor, of course, turns out to be Smith. The horrified narrator, who “fairly shouted with terror” (344), retreats into a corner where he is forced to watch as a servant systematically attaches a variety of mechanical prostheses to the pathetic bundle until the same “remarkable” Smith stands before him. The narrator, repulsed but also thrilled, concludes his tale by saying that he did in the end find out who Smith was – he “*was the man that was used up*” (345).

Inventing the Cyborg Body

Poe’s nightmarish vision of a human body replaced and, at least according to the narrator’s initial admiration, improved by mechanical prostheses, creates one of the first literary representations of the cyborg body as early as 1839. The term “cyborg” is most often understood as a human-machine hybrid or, to borrow Kim Toffoletti’s delightful

phrase, as “a (con)fusion between the human and the machine”³ (2). The organic and technological components of the cyborg body are seamlessly integrated, to the extent that the resulting hybrid figure is, at the same time, both human and machine. Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows point out that, in this human-machine hybrid, “the machine parts become replacements, which are integrated or act as supplements to the organism to enhance the body’s power potential” (2), as is clearly the case with Poe’s mechanically enhanced cyborg figure.

In Poe’s story, as in most subsequent cyborg literature, the physical superiority of the cyborg body is highlighted as a contrast to the comparatively weak, vulnerable human body. Read by scholars as a satirical critique of the male military identity of the nineteenth century⁴, Poe’s depiction of Smith’s grotesquely artificial body seems to suggest that the famous General consists of nothing more than his extensive injuries and the prostheses now replacing his missing limbs. If the narrator struggles throughout the story to discover Smith’s real identity, it would be because there simply is no real identity left to discover. Still, the tale offers a lot more than a satirical poke at the model of masculinity made popular by the military campaigns of the early nineteenth century. While the story portrays an underlying uneasiness about the rapidly increasing influence and effects of technology on human lives, it also instigates much of the imagery surrounding cyborg bodies that is still prevalent in contemporary cyborg literature and popular media. Smith, the secret cyborg, is represented as being far superior to any human being; he is more attractive, more commanding, more powerful, more courageous and more interesting than any of the narrator’s other friends. Indeed, the protagonist goes as far as to call Smith “one of the *most* remarkable men of the age” (339). Also, the physical superiority of the cyborg body is more often than not closely connected to some

³ Many theorists read the cyborg body in a very literal and technical manner. “If you have been technologically modified in any significant way,” Chris Hables Gray writes, “from an implanted pacemaker to a vaccination that reprogrammed your immune system, then you are technically a cyborg” (2). Some scholars go as far as interpreting contact lenses, liposuction and bodybuilding as cyborg modifications to the human body (see Balsamo *Technologies* 1). This study, however, will not focus on a literal or technical reading of the cyborg body, but rather on the pervasive cultural representations of cyborg bodies found in literature and popular media.

⁴ See, for example, Leland S. Person’s “Poe and Nineteenth Century Gender Constructions”. *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*. Ed. J. Gerald Kennedy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

form of combat. Most cyborg figures are portrayed as not only being physically superior to ordinary human beings, but also as far surpassing humans in the art of fighting – because of their enhanced physical bodies, superior skills, technologically more advanced weapons or, usually, a combination of these different elements. It is this combination of physical excellence and fighting prowess that not only characterises Smith, but also sets the tone for most of the representations of cyborg bodies that follow Poe’s early cyborg tale.

Furthermore, Poe’s story already highlights the extent to which the defining characteristics of the cyborg body depend on technology. In fact, the interrelation of Smith’s physical superiority and the mechanical prostheses enhancing his body is foreshadowed in the very first encounter between the narrator and himself. In much the same way that the narrator continuously praises Smith’s physical superiority, Smith himself worships modern technology with an equally fervent passion:

“There is nothing like it”, he would say; “we are a wonderful people, and live in a wonderful age [...] And who shall calculate the immense influence upon social life – upon arts – upon commerce – which will be the immediate result of the great principles of electromagnetics! Nor, is this all, let me assure you! There is really no end to the march of invention. The most wonderful – the most ingenious – and let me add, Mr. – Mr. – Thompson, I believe, is your name – let me add, I say the most *useful* – the most truly *useful* – mechanical contrivances are daily springing up like mushrooms...” (340)

There is a delightful irony in this depiction of Smith, the secret cyborg, trying to persuade the flesh-and-blood narrator of the usefulness of the mechanical prostheses making up almost his entire body, alerting the reader to Poe’s satirical reappraisal of what really constitutes a “remarkable” masculine identity in the early nineteenth century. The irony is further enhanced by Poe’s oblique deconstruction of colonial stereotypes, since Smith, the illustrious Western war hero, was not only defeated in battle by the “Bugaboo and

Kickapoo Indians” (340), who would have been seen as inherently inferior by many nineteenth century readers, but is now nothing without his mechanical prostheses. In fact, Smith’s “remarkable” body consists solely of mechanical additions to his defeated, piteous remains. One can go as far as to deduce that Smith was nothing remarkable before his extensive injuries, seeing as it was only after his body was utterly destroyed in battle and then mechanically reconstituted that he became famous for his two greatest characteristics – physical superiority and unparalleled bravery, both of which are, strictly speaking, an illusion created by the resourcefulness of modern technology. Still, the narrator “left General Smith with a heightened interest in the man”, as well as “a deep sense of the valuable privileges we enjoy living in this age of mechanical invention” (341), thus making it clear that those qualities that spark the narrator’s interest in Smith are closely connected to the idea of technological innovation.

Consequently, Poe’s early cyborg tale creates an image of the cyborg body as being far superior to the human body, both physically and in combat, while at the same time being utterly dependent on technological additions and improvements. While it is certain that Poe depicted the bodily and military excellence of his cyborg figure in a most ironic way, “The Man That Was Used Up” nonetheless introduces the archetypal representation of the male cyborg body found in most subsequent cyborg literature and imagery. For example, Martin Caidin’s novel, *Cyborg* (1972), which inspired the immensely popular television series *The Six Million Dollar Man*, draws on the same imagery found in Poe’s early cyborg tale. In *The Six Million Dollar Man*, the protagonist, Steve Austin, is a military astronaut and test pilot. When he suffers terrible injuries in a plane crash, his damaged body is rebuilt with mechanical prostheses that, while resembling human limbs, make him more powerful than ordinary human beings. His left arm is replaced with a powerful battering ram, his left eye becomes a tiny camera, one of his ribs houses a radio transmitter, his legs can attain great speed and his fingers are capable of shooting poisonous darts. In fact, Austin is turned into a powerful, living weapon, while his own body is, to a large extent, broken and defeated. Like Smith, the archetypal male cyborg, Austin is a physically superior warrior of surpassing strength and valour, but his superiority is ultimately dependent on the mechanical additions to his reconstructed body.

From these depictions, one can already begin to see the extent to which cyborg figures are dependent on mechanical additions to the physical body for their perceived power.

Even though Poe created the archetypal representation of the male cyborg body, he would certainly not have referred to Smith as a “cyborg”. Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline coined the word “cyborg” only in 1960 to describe a self-regulating human-machine system for a NASA conference on space exploration. Clynes combined the words “cybernetic” and “organism” to create the new term, “cyborg”, for a paper he co-authored with Kline on modifying the human body to exist in space. However, according to Chris Hables Gray, while the word cyborg is new, the idea is not (18). “Cyborgs were a dream long before there were even machines,” Gray writes. “Humans have always designed our own sentient creatures in myths, beginning with ancient Greek and Hindi tales that describe strange, half-flesh/half-metal creatures, and many other stories that frame humans as automatons, artefacts animated by gods and goddesses” (4). From these ancient myths to early cinema to the pulp magazines of the 1930s and 1940s, cyborg figures have existed in the human cultural imagination long before science thought to name them as such. Still, it was only in the 1980s, as the genre of cyberpunk erupted onto the cultural scene, that cyborg figures suddenly proliferated throughout contemporary culture. According to Anne Balsamo, cyborg figures became the dominant cultural icons of the late 1980s; she notes how, in the 1980s, cyborg images pervaded everything, from popular culture to consumer commodities (“Reading” 149). The 1980s also saw the publication of two of the most important, if widely divergent, contemporary cyborg texts, namely William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), commonly accepted as the founding text of cyberpunk, and Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” (1985), one of the founding texts of cyberfeminism.

Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* respectively introduced two of the most important cultural metaphors of the posthuman age, namely cyberspace and the figure of the cyborg. Jenny Wolmark argues that the reason for the enduring interest in the work of both Gibson and Haraway is that they “were able to deploy those metaphors that most accurately and imaginatively embodied the actual experience of living within

an information saturated environment” (3). Both these metaphors of cyberspace and of the cyborg challenge humanist dichotomies, such as human/machine, nature/culture and male/female, by destabilising the unequal, hierarchical power relations between these traditional binary oppositions. The figure of the cyborg, especially, is vital to both cyberpunk and cyberfeminism. Since cyborg figures are simultaneously both human and machine, they resist any kind of classification that is grounded within binary oppositions. The metaphor of the cyborg thus offers a means of imagining new and liberatory possibilities for change within these rigid, hierarchical structures. Wolmark concludes that the metaphors of cyberspace and the cyborg “not only embody the lived experience of information technology, but that they also [offer] a means of reconceptualising that experience in potentially non-hierarchical and non-binary terms” (3).

However, although cyberpunk as a genre has successfully explored the potential destabilisation of identity by questioning humanist dichotomies, critics often point out that it has not lived up to the challenge of rewriting traditional gender roles. In fact, most “classic” cyberpunk texts remain decidedly patriarchal in terms of gender roles and gendered portrayals of bodies. Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth argue that “cyberpunk’s revolutionary claims must be carefully scrutinised; its heady style and upfront radical stance conceal its ultimate conservatism when it comes to reconceptualising class, gender and race” (8). According to Nancy Paterson, cyberfeminism, unlike “classic” cyberpunk,

does not accept as inevitable current applications of new technologies which impose and maintain specific cultural, political and sexual stereotypes. Empowerment of women in the field of new electronic media can only result from the demystification of technology, and the appropriation of access to these tools. Cyberfeminism is essentially subversive⁵.

In this quote, Paterson highlights two of the most important subversive qualities underlying cyberfeminist theory; firstly, the breakdown of cultural, political and sexual

⁵ <http://echonyc.com:70/0/Cul/Cyber/paterson> (site accessed 23 April 2008).

stereotypes and, secondly, the empowerment of women. Grounded in both theory and praxis, cyberfeminism is fundamentally concerned with the ways in which cybertechnology and cyberculture affect women's lives. It explores the complex positions that women create for themselves in digital worlds, allowing for new understandings of the relationships between men, women and machines, while experimenting with radically new identities, relationships and cultures (see Flanagan and Booth 11). However, according to Jenny Sundén, this fluidity between theory and praxis rather leads to two contradictory tendencies within cyberfeminism. On the level of praxis, Sundén sees cyberfeminism as a political movement, "searching to integrate different women's everyday lives and their actual use of communication technology" (215). However, she is much more enthusiastic about academic cyberfeminism, claiming that it "operates on a sophisticated theoretical level of feminism and technoscience, where Donna Haraway's cyborg is a central character" (215).

In 1985, Donna Haraway's groundbreaking "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s" was published. Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto not only strongly influenced many feminist scholars of the late 1980s and early 1990s, but also became one of the most influential and pervasive feminist texts to draw on the figure of the cyborg. Reconciling what Sundén would see as cyberfeminism's opposing tendencies of theory and praxis, Haraway's Manifesto creates a new, theoretical discourse that emphasises ambiguity and hybridity, as well as a political strategy faithful to feminism, socialism and material reality. The metaphor of Haraway's cyborg has been widely used since its initial appearance, often in very different theoretical contexts. This study explores the metaphors of the cyborg and cyberspace in relation to feminist theories of embodiment, in order to investigate their liberatory claims at the level of both theory and praxis. The remainder of this chapter closely examines the metaphor of Haraway's cyborg figures in relation to cultural representations of female cyborg bodies, with the purpose of establishing whether or not the metaphor of the cyborg can truly, as Paterson claims, deconstruct cultural, political and sexual stereotypes and thus empower women.

Cyberfeminism: The Promise of Postgenderedness

“The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics.”
– Donna Haraway⁶

“Cyberfemmes are everywhere, but cyberfeminists are few and far between.”
– Nancy Paterson⁷

In “A Manifesto for Cyborgs”, Haraway posits the metaphor of the cyborg in order to construct a new, postmodern feminism that can escape the limitations of traditional gender roles and dualisms. “A cyborg,” she writes, “is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as fiction” (50). It is a creature of boundaries and border zones, which finds pleasure in ambiguous, in-between spaces and whose identity resides in the slippage between fixed categories. It celebrates ambiguity and resists categorical distinctions. Since cyborgs are hybrid entities, they are simultaneously both human and machine, both natural and constructed, both living and inanimate. According to Haraway, cyborg figures have “made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and eternally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines” (52). They cannot be defined by any one set of binary opposites usually used to classify gender and identity. Because of their hybrid nature, cyborg figures are capable of disrupting old, stable hierarchies, such as nature/culture, human/machine and, especially, male/female. In fact, Haraway writes that “the cyborg is a creature in a *postgender* world” (51, emphasis added), thus both resisting and deconstructing the male/female binary. As Balsamo writes in *Technologies of the Gendered Body*,

cyborgs are hybrid entities that are neither wholly technological nor completely organic, which means that the cyborg has the potential not only to disrupt persistent dualisms that set the natural body in opposition to the technologically recrafted body, but also to refashion our thinking

⁶ Haraway, Donna. “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s”. *The Gendered Cyborg*. Eds. Gill Kirkup, Linda James, Kathryn Woodward & Fiona Hovenden. London: Routledge, 2000: 50.

⁷ Paterson, Nancy. “Cyberfeminism” [online]. 1995. Site accessed 23 April 2008. Available: <http://echonyc.com:70/0/Cul/Cyber/paterson>

about the theoretical construction of the body as both a material entity and a discursive process. (11)

It is important that cyborg figures should highlight the constructed nature of their bodies, since, by problematising the distinction between nature and culture, cyborg figures also deconstruct the idea of the “natural” human body. Furthermore, problematising the idea of a “natural” human body negates the assumption that women must “naturally” assume certain traditionally feminine roles, notably those of wife and mother. In other words, cyborg figures are useful metaphors for Haraway’s ironic, political feminism, since the constructed nature of their bodies help illustrate how conventional gender norms are also socially constructed. “The cyborg,” as Balsamo argues, “provides a framework for studying gender identity, as it is technologically crafted simultaneously from the matter of material bodies and cultural fictions” (*Technologies* 11). The cyborg, Haraway insists,

is oppositional, utopian and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household. Nature and culture are reworked: the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world. (51)

Haraway’s cyborg figures thus challenge the rigid binaries underlying traditional gender roles, offering a space where postgenderedness can become a possibility. While many scholars doubt whether humanity can ever reach a condition that is somehow “post” gendered existence, I read Haraway’s postgender cyborg figures as a useful tool for configuring a radical break from the conventional dualism of male/female. Her insistence that cyborg figures can resist “polarity and hierarchical domination” (51) suggests that Haraway’s use of the term “postgender” implies a complete deconstruction of hierarchical gender norms. Material bodies, on the other hand, are usually assigned either a male or a female gender, whereas Haraway’s postgender cyborg are *metaphors* for

imagining a new and positive deconstruction of gendered hierarchies. Because they disrupt the stable dualisms of nature/culture and human/machine, they also create new possibilities for refashioning gender roles and identities.

It is important to note that, while this chapter focuses largely on Haraway's cyborg figures as a metaphor for the deconstruction of humanist dichotomies, Haraway's cyborgs are not simply feminist icons signifying women's liberation from oppressive gender roles. The argument she puts forth is much more complex than simply arguing that cyborgs symbolise the end of patriarchal gender roles. Writing against essentialist philosophies, Haraway tries to create "an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism and materialism" (51), focusing in particular on the organisation of feminist politics in light of the cyborg's indeterminate nature. In the same way that her cyborg figures do not require stable, essentialist identities, Haraway argues that feminists should focus on "affinity" instead of essentialist identity. "I do not know of any other time in history," she writes, "when there was greater need for political unity to confront effectively the dominations of 'race', 'gender', 'sexuality', and 'class'" (54). The cyborg thus illustrates that, for example, there is no single defining category of "Woman", but also highlights the need for different women of different backgrounds, creeds and experiences to create an alliance based on "affinity". However, the remainder of this chapter focuses on Haraway's cyborg figures in the manner in which they are most often utilised by the majority of feminist scholars, namely as a metaphor that is particularly useful when exploring the constructed nature of gender roles.

It is very interesting to note that Haraway explicitly maps a female gendered identity onto her supposedly indeterminate, postgendered cyborg figure. In an interview with Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, when asked if her cyborg figures are female, Haraway responded that

the cyborg is a bad girl, she is really not a boy... She's a girl who's trying not to become Woman, but remain responsible to women of many colours

and positions; and hasn't really figured out a politics that makes necessary articulations with the boys who are your allies. (23)

While it might superficially seem as if the explicit gendering of the cyborg body as female negates all Haraway's claims to ambiguity, indeterminacy and, most importantly, postgenderedness, Balsamo reads this insistence upon a female cyborg figure in a very positive way. She argues that

female cyborg images do *more* to challenge the opposition between human and machine than do male cyborgs because femininity is culturally imagined as less compatible with technology than is masculinity. This is to say that because our cultural imagination aligns masculinity and rationality with technology and science, male gendered cyborgs fail to radically challenge the distinction between human and machine. ("Reading" 151)

Following the publication of Haraway's Manifesto, the female cyborg became an icon of emancipation for many feminist scholars, who utilised Haraway's cyborg discourse as a means of discussing the cultural practices that both construct and limit female gendered identity⁸. Most of these discussions were largely theoretical and academic, though, recalling Sundén's comment about the division between theory and praxis within cyberfeminism.

The metaphor of the female cyborg as an icon of liberation, however, predates Haraway's academic cyberfeminism by as much as 41 years. One of the very first texts to explore the social construction of gender through the metaphor of the female cyborg is Catherine L. Moore's short novella, "No Woman Born," published in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1944. The title, "No Woman Born", immediately evokes Simone de Beauvoir's famous claim that woman is made and not born, highlighting the text's concern with issues

⁸ See, for example, Farquhar (2000), Plant (1999), Sobchack (2000), Sofia (1999) and Toffoletti (2007).

surrounding the social construction of gender⁹. While “No Woman Born” predates Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto by 41 years, this profeminist text uses the figure of a female cyborg to problematise the social construction of female bodies and gendered identities in a manner that parallels Haraway’s process in her Manifesto.

“No Woman Born” tells the story of Deirdre, a beautiful and famous dancer, “the loveliest creature whose image ever moved along the airways” and the beloved of “the audiences of the whole world” (261). When a fire breaks out in the theatre where she is performing, Deirdre’s body is completely destroyed and everyone is convinced that she must have perished. However, a scientist named Maltzer is able to save her brain and crafts a beautiful, golden metal body for her. A year after the fire, Deirdre resolutely tells Maltzer and her former manager, Harris, that she is ready to perform again. The two men, especially Maltzer, feel that she is too delicate to brave the scorn and contempt of the public should they reject this new, metallic Deirdre, so different from the woman she once was. Still, Deirdre is not to be deterred and delivers a breathtaking performance. Maltzer realises that he is unable to control Deirdre’s decisions any longer and, in a final attempt to keep her from performing again, attempts to commit suicide. In the final scene, Deirdre unveils the hidden power of her new cyborg body and saves Maltzer’s life.

Deirdre is very obviously a cyborg figure in Haraway’s sense of the word, namely a hybrid body that destabilises the rigid boundaries of human/machine and nature/culture. The first meeting between Harris and Deirdre emphasises the indeterminate nature of her cyborg body, as his perception of her oscillates constantly between the human and the machinic:

The first impression that his eyes and mind took from the sight of her was shocked and incredulous, for his brain said to him unbelievably, “*This is Deirdre! She hasn’t changed at all!*”

⁹ Moore’s novella not only predates Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto, but the title of her story predates De Beauvoir’s famous claim as well, as *The Second Sex* was first published in 1949 – five years after the publication of “No Woman Born”.

Then the shift of perspective took over, and even more shockingly, eye and brain said, “No, not Deirdre – not human. Nothing but metal and coils. Not Deirdre at all–” And that was the worst. It was like waking from a dream of someone beloved and lost, and facing anew, after that heartbreaking reassurance of sleep, the inflexible fact that nothing can bring the lost to life again. Deirdre was gone, and this was only machinery heaped in a flowered chair.

Then the machinery moved, exquisitely, smoothly, with a grace as familiar as the swaying poise he remembered. The sweet, husky voice of Deirdre said,

“It’s me, John darling. It really is, you know.”

And it was.

That was the third metamorphosis, and the final one. Illusion steadied and became factual, real. It was Deirdre. (266)

This “illusion” is, in fact, the source of Deirdre’s power. Since the very indeterminate nature of her cyborg body cannot be contained within a fixed either/or dyad, her human-machine body emphasises the deceptive boundaries that would separate other stable dualisms, most importantly those of nature/culture and male/female. This is clearly illustrated by the difficulty Harris and Maltzer experience in trying to limit Deirdre to a single defining category.

“She isn’t human,” Harris agreed slowly. “But she isn’t pure robot either. She’s something somewhere between the two, and I think it’s a mistake to try and guess just where, or what the outcome will be.” (279)

Because Harris and Maltzer can no longer simply limit Deirdre to the conventional categories of femininity, they also find it increasingly hard to control her actions. Believing that he has forever damaged Deirdre by robbing her of her assigned gender, Maltzer tries everything in his power to keep her from performing again, convinced that the audiences who once loved her will be repulsed by this metallic creature. It is obvious

that, to him, Deirdre's entire being was defined by her gender, a perception that is further strengthened by Harris's memories of Deirdre before the fire, which only focus on her physical beauty and the exquisiteness of her dancer's body. The dance performance is thus one of the key scenes in the text, as it both marks Deirdre's first triumph over Maltzer, who would prefer her to stay quietly indoors and never perform again, and emphasises how her identity cannot be fixed as either human or machine. When she begins her dance, the audience first thinks her "some wonderfully animate robot" (281), but then

she swayed and came slowly down the steps, moving with a suppleness just a little better than human. The swaying strengthened. By the time she reached the stage floor she was dancing. But it was no dance any human creature could ever have performed. The long, slow, languorous rhythms of her body would have been impossible to a figure hinged at its joints as human figures hinge. Harris remembered incredulously that he had feared once to find her jointed like a mechanical robot. But it was humanity that seemed, by contrast, jointed and mechanical now. (282)

One immediately notes the similarities between this representation of Deirdre and the archetypal imagery found in Poe's early cyborg tale. Just like Smith, Deirdre is presented as physically superior to ordinary humans. However, despite the male cyborg figure's obvious connotations of combat and physical strength, both Harris and Maltzer refuse to acknowledge that Deirdre has become more powerful than them. According to the two men, "she was so delicate a being now, really" (273). Harris repeatedly marvels at "the smallness and exquisite proportions of her" (268), her "proportions [that] were too thin and fine" (282) and her "delicacy". The reason why the two men, especially Maltzer, find her so delicate, is their belief that the loss of her assigned gender makes her especially vulnerable.

“Of course she can’t compete,” [Maltzer] cried irritably. “She hasn’t any sex. She isn’t female anymore. She doesn’t know that yet, but she’ll learn... She’s an abstraction now.” (278)

According to Maltzer, Deirdre now consists of a woman’s brain trapped in a sexless body. To him, the loss of her “natural” womanhood is such an atrocious mistake on his part that he calls her a “Frankenstein monster” (293), never acknowledging to himself that what he really finds “monstrous” is Deirdre’s confidence, her strong-willed independence and her refusal to bow to his wishes. Deirdre, resisting Maltzer’s attempts to force her into conventional gendered categories, refuses to see her cyborg body as a mistake. When Maltzer pleads with her to stop performing because of “how wrong [he has] made [her]” (293) when he robbed her of a fixed gender, she answers him:

“There’s a flaw in your argument, and I resent it. I’m not a Frankenstein monster made out of dead flesh. I’m myself – alive. You didn’t create my life, you only preserved it. I’m not a robot, with compulsions built into me that I have to obey. I’m free-willed and independent, and, Maltzer – I’m human.” (293)

Even Harris is forced to tell Maltzer that he has lost all power over Deirdre and that he can no longer control her (286). Harris finally admits that Deirdre is not as fragile as they thought her, since she “looked, indeed, very much like a creature in armour, with her delicately plated limbs and her featureless head like a helmet with a visor of glass, and her robe of chain mail” (268). Harris’s vision of Deirdre as a golden, medieval knight becomes more and more prominent as she gains power. Maltzer, on the other hand, becomes progressively more passive, hysterical and irrational, suggesting that while Deirdre’s hybrid status gives her the freedom to escape gendered stereotypes, Maltzer falls prey to those characteristics conventionally thought to be feminine – which is, ironically, the category he is trying to force Deirdre into. At the end of the novella, Deirdre reveals the awesome power of her cyborg body in an ironic reversal of conventional gender roles, as she truly becomes the heroic knight of Harris’s vision and

saves the helpless Maltzer's life. Deirdre's powerful new body also becomes the source of her newfound agency.

“Do you still think of me as delicate?” she demanded. “Do you know I carried you here at arm's length across the room? Do you realise you weigh *nothing* to me? I could” – she glanced around the room and gestured with sudden, appalling violence – “tear this building down,” she said quietly. (297)

The two men are amazed and bewildered when they learn just how powerful Deirdre really is. Maltzer “could only stare” (297), flabbergasted, but Harris at least begins to recognise Deirdre as a powerful female figure. She proves to the two men that she is just as “free-willed and independent” (293) as she claimed to be, with “sheer power puffing along her limbs as she walked” (300) and with “the distant taint of metal already in her voice” (300). The character of Deirdre, one of the first female cyborgs in popular culture, as early as 1944 already embodies the emancipatory ideals contained within Haraway's utopian cyborg discourse. The figure of Deirdre serves as an illustration of the cyborg discourse's emancipatory possibilities: as an indeterminate cyborg figure, Deirdre disrupts the stable male/female dyad so that the new, postgendered possibilities implicit in Haraway's Manifesto might become possible. Deirdre is able to subvert gendered stereotypes and to resist men's attempts to limit and control her life. Indeed, the character of Deirdre presents all the qualities of power, independence and postgenderedness that made cyborg figures so popular within feminist theory, especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

However, it would be a mistake to read cyborg figures as unproblematic, utopian figures. Moore's descriptions of Deirdre's beautiful golden body recalls a much earlier and arguably much more famous female cyborg, namely Hel/Maria in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), which tells the story of Joh Fredersen (Alfred Abel), creator of the city of Metropolis, and his son, Freder (Gustav Fröhlich). Joh Fredersen's wife, Hel, died giving birth to Freder. However, the audience soon learns that Fredersen had persuaded

Hel to leave her first lover, the inventor and scientist, Rotwang (Rudolf Klein-Rogge), and to marry him instead. When the oppressed workers in Fredersen's factories start to rebel, Fredersen is forced to turn to his old rival, Rotwang, for help. On entering Rotwang's house, Fredersen is shocked to learn that Rotwang has recreated Hel as a beautiful cyborg with a golden, metallic body. In a very similar scene to Harris's first meeting with Deirdre, Fredersen enters the room and sees Hel seated on a chair. She slowly gets up and moves towards him, the camera resting on her delicate movements and her beautiful metallic features. Rotwang, quite deranged with his triumph over his old rival, taunts Fredersen with the knowledge that only he now possesses Hel and that she will do only his bidding. He also tells Fredersen that soon no-one will be able to tell the difference between his cyborg and a real human being. Still, Fredersen is able to convince Rotwang that he must change the cyborg – who, interestingly enough, is never again referred to as Hel after this moment, but is now called the “Man-Machine”¹⁰ – to resemble the prophetic leader of the rebellious workers, a young woman named Maria (Brigitte Helm), in order to discredit the real Maria's character and teachings. Rotwang, who knows that Freder is secretly in love with Maria, acquiesces, hoping to destroy Fredersen's son and thus have his final revenge. He abducts the real Maria and then sets the cyborg Maria loose on Metropolis, where she not only incites the workers to revolt and to destroy Fredersen's machines, but also sows discord among the young noblemen of the city, who are driven mad by her beauty and erotic dance shows. Metropolis erupts into chaos as the workers rise up and destroy the “Heart-Machine”, the nucleus of the city's power, while the young noblemen die one by one, either in duels over “Maria” or by committing suicide. When the destruction of the “Heart-Machine” causes the workers' subterranean city to flood, endangering the lives of their children, the workers turn on the cyborg Maria and burn her at the stake as a witch. As the flames consume her, she once again appears as a shining, golden, metallic body. Freder overcomes Rotwang, rescues the real Maria and, in the final sequence, reconciles his repentant father with the workers.

¹⁰ Balsamo, tellingly, points out that the word cyborg “usually describes a human-machine coupling, most often a *man*-machine hybrid” (*Technologies* 18, emphasis in original).

One of the earliest female cyborgs in popular culture, the cyborg Maria – hereafter referred to as “Maria” in order to avoid confusion between the cyborg Maria and the real Maria – shares many of Deirdre’s external characteristics. In particular, they share the same golden, metallic body, the same beauty and, most importantly, perform equally mesmerizing dances. However, unlike Deirdre, “Maria” has absolutely no agency. Created by men and ordered to do their bidding, she is simply a puppet, existing for the pleasure of her male masters. Austin Booth writes that, in women’s cyberfiction, the woman as technoproduct, such as the figure of the female cyborg, becomes the figure through which objectification is explored. According to him,

women’s cyberfiction uses the depiction of how female cyborgs, robots and programs are constructed and dehumanised to expose the way women in general are constructed and dehumanised. Female characters frequently acquire mechanical bodies as a means of becoming more pleasurable and useful to men. (32)

“Maria” is, without doubt, a docile mechanical body, specifically designed to give pleasure to Rotwang and to be useful to him, since the scene in which she is introduced opens with the image of a marble bust of Hel, inscribed with the legend that she was “created for [her inventor’s] pleasure”. While one is always loath to speculate about any author’s intention, the remarkably similar images of Deirdre and “Maria” make one wonder to what extent Moore was aware of the cyborg figure in *Metropolis* when she wrote “No Woman Born” and to what extent she consciously created Deirdre as an answer to the subjugation and mindless subservience of the film’s female cyborg. The similarity between the scene in which Fredersen first sees the golden cyborg and the scene in which Harris first sees Deirdre suggests that Moore was, at the very least, aware of the existence of *Metropolis*’s golden female cyborg. “Maria’s” lack of agency can be attributed to the fact that her character does not problematise stable dualisms in the same way that the character of Deirdre does. While the imagery of the entire film is based on the classic Cartesian mind/body dualism, the category of human/machine is only explored

in the context of the threat that the machines in Fredersen's factories pose to the working conditions of the labouring class and never in the context of the cyborg's hybrid identity.

Metropolis is a divided city, consisting of the lofty "Club of the Sons", home to the academies and libraries and characterised by bright white light, while the subterranean workers' city contains factories and is depicted as dark, gloomy and polluted. Freder explicitly tells his father, ensconced in his high office overlooking the city, that he is the *mind* of Metropolis, while the exhausted workers' physical bodies create the labour on which the city runs. While the film consciously tries to break down this divide between the elite and the working class, it ignores the human/machine dualism inherent in its central cyborg figure. Rather, the cyborg figure in the film actively tries to keep categorical distinctions intact by making sure that the "mind" of the elite and the "body" of the workers are too upset to be reconciled. In addition, while there are countless images depicting the dangerous relationship the workers have to the machines in the factories, the female cyborg seemingly becomes just another mechanical threat to both the workers and the young noblemen – in other words, a threat to the male body in general.

Furthermore, the cyborg figure in the film reinscribes all the gender stereotypes that Haraway's cyborg discourse would deconstruct. In the film, "Maria's" very first public appearance after leaving Rotwang's house is, just as in "No Woman Born", a dance performance. While she appears as a real woman, her golden metallic body hidden under a fleshy disguise, the film imagery is immediately reminiscent of Deirdre's dance performance. However, in the film, the dance routine quickly disintegrates into mindless eroticism – "Maria's" breasts are revealed, the front of her skirt is open to expose her thighs and she repeatedly thrusts her pelvis in the direction of her audience, who watch her with wide-eyed surprise and guilty pleasure. Also, while Deirdre's admiring audience was content to applaud at the end of her performance, in the film the entire audience rushes at "Maria" in their frenzy to lay their hands on her. Indeed, the threat of the cyborg figure in *Metropolis* is closely connected to her sexuality. While the real Maria is chaste

to the point of seeming almost completely asexual, “Maria” wrecks havoc on the city when she drives the young noblemen to despair with her erotic dance routines.

Fig.1 shows a still from the scene in which the real Maria is first introduced. She ascends from the subterranean depths of the workers’ city and brings their children to the “Club of the Sons”, telling the young noblemen to look “into the faces of their brothers.” From this scene onwards, Maria is portrayed in an angelic or saintly manner. She is demure, very modest and nurturing, with her arms around the children who adoringly gaze up at her. There are quite a number of close-ups of Maria throughout this scene, all focusing on her shy smile and the bright white light that surrounds her face, thus creating the impression that she is wearing a halo.



Fig.1 Brigitte Helm as Maria in *Metropolis*.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic-art/329603/97216/Brigitte-Helm-in-Metropolis-directed-by-Fritz-Lang>



Fig.2 The cyborg Maria in *Metropolis*.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic-art/260472/97219/Brigitte-Helm-in-Metropolis-directed-by-Fritz-Lang>

Freder, who was about to kiss another young woman, takes one look at Maria and is immediately not only in love, but also completely reformed. After this scene, he begins agitating for the rights of the oppressed workers. The presence of the children in Fig.1 strengthens the idea that Maria is a representation of “natural” young womanhood, as she embodies all the qualities conventionally thought of as positive female attributes. The

second scene in which the audience sees Maria is when she preaches love, patience and fortitude to the disgruntled workers. She stands in front of an altar adorned with crosses, while the candlelight once again surrounds her face in a saintly halo. These images, coupled with her name, present the character of Maria as a Virgin Mary archetype – pious, modest, compassionate, nurturing and maternal, while remaining chaste at the same time.

The cyborg Maria, depicted in Fig.2, is the antithesis of the real Maria: the front of her dress is unlaced, her hair is dishevelled, she stands with her legs wide apart in a pose reminiscent of her erotic dance performance and has a look of wild enjoyment on her face as she topples Metropolis into chaos. While the real Maria's teachings of love and patience kept the workers from open rebellion, the "Maria" urges them to rise up and tear down the factories. The background music to this scene is a variation on the theme of the Marseillaise, as "Maria" disrupts the established order of Fredersen's patriarchal, capitalist regime. It is important to point out that, while *Metropolis* does create sympathy for the workers and the terrible conditions they have to brave in the factories, the film's portrayal of the workers' rebellion is not equally sympathetic. Rather than depicting the rebellion as the end of Fredersen's despotic rule, it is framed as a stupid and chaotic degeneration into utter madness, caused by "Maria's" rampant sexuality. Shots of the mutinous workers attacking the factory gates, with "Maria" laughing wildly at the head of the crowd, are interspersed with images of the young noblemen either killing one another or themselves, driven mad by lust after "Maria's" erotic performance. When the workers eventually turn on "Maria", she neither struggles nor tries to save herself, but still laughs madly as she is tied to the stake and burnt.

In *Metropolis*, the figure of the female cyborg is depicted as the subservient and obedient property of her male creators and masters. She has no agency, but mindlessly carries out the wishes of men. Also, she is portrayed as an available and sexualised body, who first taunts men and then casts the world they created into despair and ruin. In this way, *Metropolis* posits one of the most pervasive archetypes of the female cyborg body as something both threatening and highly sexualised. Most subsequent representations of the

female cyborg body depict female cyborg figures in terms of their sexualised bodies: even though female cyborg figures often retain the power and independence Moore granted her cyborg character, their rampant sexuality always seems to overpower any supposed strength or agency. As Sundén points out,

the number of erotic representations of women, textually or visually floating around in cyberspace, in a way where sex and danger are linked to women and machines, are countless. This representational linkage of sexually dangerous women to disastrous cultural implications of new electronic technologies can be traced all the way back to 1927 and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, but its presence has seldom been more obvious than in the era of the Internet. (221)

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw not only the publication of Haraway's Manifesto, as well as the widespread enthusiasm for cyborg figures it sparked in feminist studies, but also the rise of the personal computer and increasingly available Internet access. Within a few years after Haraway's Manifesto made the figure of the cyborg one of the central icons of feminist studies, the majority of representations of cyborg bodies were to be found on the Internet – which was to be expected, given the close connection that the genre of cyberpunk created between the metaphor of the cyborg and cyberspace. However, very few of the representations of cyborgs available on the Internet, both male and female, actually correspond to Haraway's vision of the postgendered cyborg body.

“The Cyborg Body is Not Always a Liberatory Space”¹¹: Cyborg Bodies in Cyberspace

Since the publication of Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto, many feminist scholars have looked to the figure of the female cyborg as an icon of liberation for women. Cyborg figures came to be synonymous with the deconstruction of gendered stereotypes and the

¹¹ Devoss, Dànienne. “Rereading Cyborg(?) Women: The Visual Rhetoric of Images of Cyborg (and Cyber) Bodies on the World Wide Web”. *Cyber Psychology and Behaviour* 3(5) 2000: 837.

creation of new, postgendered possibilities for the construction of identity. However, Dànienne Devoss argues that, while many scholars have utilised Haraway's cyborg discourse as a way of deconstructing hierarchical, gendered power relations, very few theorists have considered the cyborg as a physical reality¹². She writes that most "of the papers written subsequent to [Haraway's are] undisciplined, metaphorical applications of the cyborg concept in the interests of so called post-modern criticism" and that very few theorists have actually explored the figure of the cyborg "at the level of the physical body" (Devoss 836). Her article explores images of cyborgs found on the Internet, focusing specifically on the ways in which the cyborg body is physically represented.

Haraway highlights the importance of cyborg imagery in the final paragraphs of her Manifesto, claiming that "cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (57). Devoss, on the other hand, claims that "where visual representations of the cyborg do exist, rarely are traditional, gendered Western roles (and bodies) challenged" (835). When Haraway speaks of cyborg *imagery*, she is not referring to material representations or cultural artefacts depicting cyborg bodies, but rather to more abstract cyborg tropes and imaginaries. It is this kind of abstract theorising which, according to Devoss, leads to "undisciplined [and] metaphorical applications of the cyborg concept" that ignores the practical implications of cyborg imagery "at the level of the physical body" (836). But if, as Paterson claims, cyberfeminism *is* grounded in both theory and praxis, then cyborg tropes and imaginaries would only be valid in so far as they are able to bring about material change. In other words, cyborg imagery would hold no value for cyberfeminism if it did not effect material change at, as Devoss insists, "the level of the physical body" (836). Sundén argues that, for Haraway, "the telling of stories about technology has in

¹² While Devoss does not satisfactorily explain what she means by a "physical reality" in her article, I take it to refer to material, cultural representations of cyborg bodies found in popular media, rather than Haraway's more abstract, metaphoric theorising about the figure of the cyborg. While the indeterminate nature of cyborg figures mean that they can never truly be representative of any physical reality – unless one reads contact lenses and pacemakers as cyborg modifications to the human body – I argue that the closest one can come to considering the cyborg as a physical reality is by examining actual cultural representations of the cyborg body. As mentioned earlier, this study will not focus on a literal or technical reading of the cyborg body, but rather on the pervasive cultural representations of cyborg bodies found in literature and popular media.

itself a political potency and a capability to produce material changes. She points to the empowering of feminist textuality, of having access to the signifying practices that mark the world” (217). However, one also has to ask oneself exactly how useful the textual tools of a cyberfeminist discourse would be for anyone outside of the inner circle of white, Western, middle-class cyborg feminists? “How,” Sundén notably asks, “can discursive transformations in narratives in itself lead to material transformations and social change?” (217)

Devoss’ article abandons Haraway’s more abstract cyborg imagery and examines material, cultural representations of cyborg bodies in order to both examine and challenge their liberatory claims. One of the key examples she uses to illustrate the gender dynamics that underlie popular representations of cyborg bodies is a so-called “cyborg personality index” – a test to find out just how “cyborg” one is. She notes that “the more cyborg the test-taker is, the more *masculine* the test-taker becomes” (840, emphasis added). She then goes on to show how the “least cyborg” image is that

of a young woman with blonde hair. She is wearing jeans and a simple shirt – no metal gear, no weaponry, seemingly no synthetic flesh. She poses demurely, her knees together, one foot arched upward so that her toes can shyly touch the ground. The next stage reveals a woman wearing black sunglasses and a tight black skirt, clinging to her legs and hips. At the next stage of cyborgism, the test-taker becomes a muscular woman, t-shirt strained across bulging chest muscles, a holster slung over one shoulder. She has a threatening stance – her hands on her hips and her legs spread apart. If the test-taker scores high enough, s/he becomes Robocop, the cyborg police officer, equipped with a massive robotic body, large metal muscles, and a variety of built-in weaponry... If test-takers surpass Robocop in the results of their answers, they become the ‘evil’ robot seen in the same film... The cyborg test seemingly sets up a criteria (sic) for us: feminine → masculine → cyborg → monster. (Devoss 840-841)

While Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto claims that cyborg figures are representative of a "postgender world" (51), Devoss's "cyborg personality index" actually illustrates how popular representations of cyborg bodies are, in fact, rooted in patriarchal, gendered hierarchies of power and dominance, since the "least cyborg" image is vulnerably female, while the ultimate cyborg figure is evil, muscular and undoubtedly male. Balsamo would agree with Devoss's argument, since she also claims that

when seemingly stable boundaries are displaced by technological innovation (human/machine, life/death, nature/culture), other boundaries are more vigilantly guarded. Indeed, the gendered boundary between male and female is one border that remains heavily guarded despite new technological ways to rewrite the physical body in the flesh. (*Technologies* 9)

What Devoss doesn't point out, however, is the fact that the test-taker not only becomes more masculine or nightmarish, but also increasingly sexualised. The "least cyborg" image is that of a shy girl, who poses "demurely, [with] her knees together", but as she becomes more and more "cyborg", she also becomes increasingly sexualised, until she poses with "her hands on her hips and her legs spread apart" (Devoss 840). A positive reading of this image would suggest that the female cyborg figure appropriates her sexuality in a way that deconstructs the stereotype of women being sexually submissive. Such a reading would grant the female cyborg sexual agency and even, to some degree, power or control over men. However, when one examines representations of female cyborg figures, their highly sexualised bodies are more often than not on display for the pleasure of the male gaze, rather than granting them any supposed sexual agency. Representations of cyborg bodies thus not only keep gendered stereotypes of the powerful male and demure female intact, but also present the female cyborg body in highly sexualised terms.

Typical representations of the female cyborg body can be roughly divided into two categories. The first category corresponds to the image of the cyborg as found in

Metropolis, namely a subservient and sexualised cyborg body, created for the pleasure of men. Images in this category depict female cyborg figures as having no agency at all: they only exist to make themselves useful or pleasurable to men. The second category corresponds more to the image of Deirdre in “No Woman Born”. Strong female cyborgs are more often than not presented as warrior figures, drawing on the same archetypal imagery initiated by Poe’s early cyborg character. They are active, physically powerful, independent and often physically superior to ordinary males. While these cyborg figures superficially seem to deconstruct gender stereotypes, their power as fighting female cyborgs is always overshadowed by the sexualised representations of their bodies. This chapter closely examines the material representations of female cyborg bodies found in popular culture to illustrate how most female cyborgs may be posited as powerful, fighting figures, but are in fact little more than highly sexualised, docile, available bodies.

Devoss typed the word “cyborg” into the search engine AltaVista and then used the images she found to illustrate how gendered stereotypes still underlie most popular representations of cyborg bodies.



Fig.3 “Robot”, female cyborg (Devoss 839).



Fig.4 “Femachine”, female cyborg (Devoss 839).

Fig.3 shows an excellent example of the first category of representation of the cyborg body, highlighting the ways in which popular representations of cyborgs only reinscribe

the same conventional, patriarchal gender roles Haraway's Manifesto aims to disrupt, thus reiterating traditional norms of femininity and female sexuality. "Robot", a beautiful metallic woman reminiscent of both Deirdre and the cyborg Maria, is undressing herself for the viewer, revealing her breasts and openly inviting the desiring gaze, even though she has no eyes. Indeed, Devoss points out that her only facial features are her full, sensuous lips (839). While it seems, at first, as if she is actively pursuing desire, she is at the same time quite passive and docile, turning *herself* into an object for the desiring gaze.

Fig.4, on the other hand, shows a typical example of the second category of cyborg representation, as the cyborg figure is much more active and physically powerful than the one in Fig.3. However, this does not necessarily mean that she has more agency than the docile cyborg of Fig.3. Once again, the female cyborg assumes a clearly sexualised pose, leaning toward the viewer with her breasts revealed, inviting the desiring gaze. However, there is something threatening about her as well – the blades protruding from her back, the fact that her face is hidden by her rather intimidating headgear, the sharpness of her high heels and her slightly aggressive body language all point to a dangerous quality underlying her sexualised pose. As Devoss points out, "much female cyborg imagery plays along the margin of sexuality and violence, although sexuality seems always to dominate potential violence" (Devoss 839).

The next two images undoubtedly illustrate the sexualised nature of the majority of representations of female cyborg bodies. Both come from a website called the *Android Sexual Mechanics Lab*, featuring artificial women designed for sexual pleasure. There is no denying the utter passivity of these two figures, who clearly "[exist] for pleasuring, not with any autonomy" (Devoss 840).



Fig.5 Artificial girl designed for sexual pleasure, female cyborg (Devoss 840).



Fig.6 Artificial girl designed for sexual pleasure, female cyborg (Devoss 840).

The female cyborg in Fig.5 is completely passive and docile, not only inviting the desiring gaze as in the previous two images, but in fact inviting violation. The disturbing image of the detached leg gives her a vulnerable, defeated quality. However, the original caption reads: “Andrea comes with removable limbs for better storage” (Devoss 840), which means that the detached leg could simply be intended to illustrate how easy it is to dismantle and store her after usage – the ultimate passivity. The detached leg also emphasises the fact that she is a cyborg, otherwise she could easily have been mistaken for a real woman, as she has no obvious external mechanical modifications. It is easier to recognise that Fig.6 is a cyborg body, as she is broken down into fragments and body parts, wires protruding from her detached limbs. The original caption reads: “Extra body parts always available: arms, legs, waist and head units” (Devoss 840), suggesting that women consist of nothing more than body parts. Her features are oriental, further illustrating the way in which the female body is exoticised and othered. “These are sexually appropriated images of women,” Devoss points out, “robbing the actual women they represent of their subjectivity and even of their potential subjectivity” (Devoss 840). It is obvious that these images do not bring us to the postgendered space Haraway envisioned in her Manifesto. “The message,” Devoss concludes, “is clear – the cyborg is a techno sexpot, an available and docile sexualised machine” (840).



Fig.7 “Lobo”, male cyborg (Devoss 841).

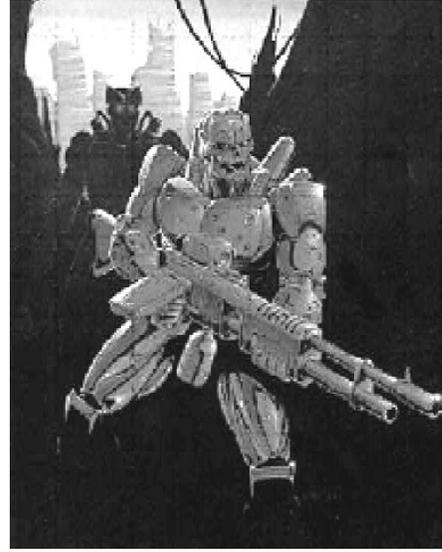


Fig.8 “Rifts”, male cyborg (Devoss 841).

Stereotypical representations of gendered cyborg bodies are equally damaging to both real men and real women. Representations of male cyborgs are often depicted in similarly stereotypical terms, which, in turn, also rob the men they are supposed to represent of their potential subjectivity. Male cyborgs are always depicted as hypermasculine; they are seen as active, strong, muscular and dangerous. Furthermore, they always carry a large weapon, usually a gun of some sort, thus supporting the stereotype that men somehow share a propensity for physical violence and a penchant for owning weaponry. Their physically superior, mechanically enhanced bodies and the ubiquitous presence of a large gun are all evocative of the archetypal male cyborg initiated by Poe’s early cyborg warrior. Fig.7 shows a rather unusual representation of the male cyborg, given that his body is remarkably slender, unlike the typical, muscle-bound cyborg figure of Fig.8. Even so, the sleek, metallic quality of his body portrays his slender hips and thin limbs as powerful and invulnerable. This invulnerability is further enhanced by his threatening, aggressive stance, broad shoulders, enormous gun and prominent phallus. Fig.8 also reflects the typical violence inherent in representations of male cyborgs. The male cyborg is muscular and aggressive, with his lip curled in a sneer, while he holds what Devoss calls his “impossibly big” (841) gun. It is noteworthy that the canister of his gun nestles between his legs, indicative of the weapon as phallus/the phallus as weapon. A humorous example occurs in the popular cyborg film *Terminator II: Judgement Day*, when Arnold

Schwarzenegger's cyborg character, the Cyberdyne Systems Model 101, cannot be taught what a smile is by the young John Connor. John tries to explain happiness, enjoyment and humour, all to no avail. However, the moment that John hands the cyborg an "impossibly big" gun from his mother's secret arsenal, the cyborg spontaneously starts smiling. The Cyberdyne Systems Model 101, arguably the most famous example of a muscular male cyborg in contemporary popular culture, clearly illustrates the ubiquity of weaponry and violence in representations of the male cyborg body, thereby suggesting that masculinity is somehow inherently violent.

Many of the images Devoss uses to illustrate her argument are no longer accessible. The most crucial absence for anyone exploring her argument is the fact that the website on which she found the "cyborg personality index", on which much of her argument is based, is no longer available on the Internet. Still, a recent search¹³ for representations of male cyborg bodies on the Internet delivered very similar results, yielding a host of images, all conforming to the stereotype of the fighting, violent, muscular male cyborg.



Fig.9 Male cyborg

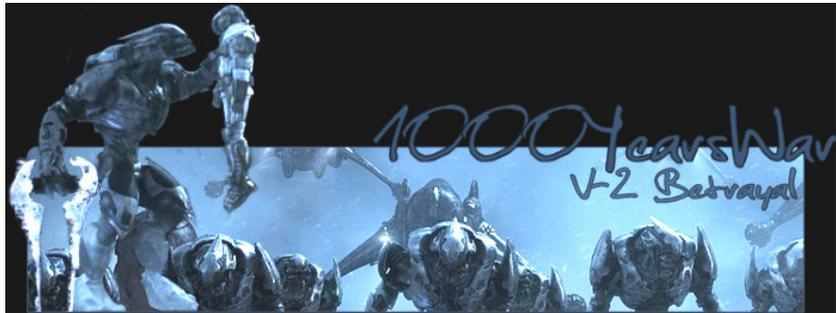


Fig.10 War between cyborgs, "monster" cyborg

<http://1000yearswar.proboards55.com/index.cgi?board=joining&action=display&thread=396>

Fig.9 shows a typical representation of a muscular, broad-shouldered, invulnerable male cyborg carrying a large gun. Fig.10 shows a nightmarish portrayal of a war between male cyborgs, where the victor physically dominates the unfortunate cyborg figure dangling from his grasp. Also, the inherent violence of the male cyborg figure is more pronounced than usual – while most male cyborgs are depicted as active, powerful and always have

¹³ The search was conducted on 23 April 2008 and all the images discussed in the remainder of this chapter were accessed on this date.

some kind of weapon in their possession, in this depiction the cyborg figure is overtly violent. This image strongly recalls Devoss's claims of the "monster" cyborg as the ultimate cyborg representation.

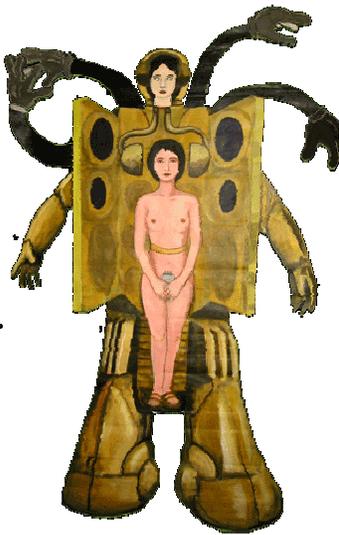


Fig.11 "Female cyborg" by Luciano Duran
<http://mjbarias.com/scifi/femcyb.html>



Fig.12 Female cyborg
<http://mjbarias.com/scifi/femcyb.html>

A subsequent search for images of female cyborg bodies yielded similarly typical results. Fig.11 shows a tiny, naked woman inside a rather frightening machine. While the machine seems powerful and indestructible, the woman seems exposed and vulnerable. She poses demurely, with her hands covering her genitals and her feet neatly together. The machine's many arms give it a Medusa-like appearance, which could be interpreted as a threatening female presence if the woman inside did not seem so defenceless. While the website displaying the image claims that female cyborgs both "embody the visibility of hybrid identities and the organic symbiosis of human and machine" and "retaliate against patriarchal values and the colonial mentality of fixed margins"¹⁴, the cord around her middle suggests that the vulnerable woman is trapped inside the frightening machine and that she is not a human/machine hybrid at all. The website further claims that it "provides a perspective of the female cyborg as a symbol of resistance and her dynamics as an embodiment of US Third World feminist struggle"¹⁵, but the image rather suggests

¹⁴ <http://mjbarias.com/scifi/femcyb.html> (site accessed 23 April 2008).

¹⁵ <http://mjbarias.com/scifi/femcyb.html> (site accessed 23 April 2008).

that the female cyborg's power is solely due to the frightening machine, while her physical body remains inscribed within the norms of conventional femininity.

Fig.12 clearly corresponds to Devoss's "Robot" image. Once again, one can see the overtly sexualised pose, the prominent breasts, the high heels and the near lack of discernible facial features. While the website claims that "(i)n relation to sexual politics, female cyborgs challenge patriarchal values of reproduction, labour and pleasure"¹⁶, there is nothing challenging about this image. It remains a conventional, gendered stereotype of a sexualised female figure.



Fig.13 "Proteatrix Cyborg 271 Colored"
http://art.thehomeofjon.net/art/image/proteatrix_cyborg_271_colored.html

The creator of Fig.13 describes the female cyborg in this image in the following way: "She is, of course, a cyborg... and she'll be, of course, EVIL. Even though she looks all nice and inviting..."¹⁷ This image illustrates the interplay between sexuality and danger underlying much female cyborg imagery, as the cyborg figure is "nice and inviting", but "evil" at the same time. It seems to suggest that, because she is a cyborg figure, it must necessarily follow that she will be malevolent. However, for all her supposed

¹⁶ <http://mjbarias.com/scifi/femcyb.html> (site accessed 23 April 2008).

¹⁷ http://art.thehomeofjon.net/art/image/proteatrix_cyborg_271_colored.html (site accessed 23 April 2008).

malevolence, her expression is quite vulnerable, as opposed to the threatening facial expressions of most male cyborg figures. She is also a clearly sexualised body, with her large breasts and sensual lips, while the wires protruding from her back seem to limit her freedom of movement by shackling her to an unseen object, therefore also limiting her agency. She is, as Jennifer González writes, “typical of contemporary (mostly male-produced) cyborg fantasies: a powerful, yet vulnerable, combination of sex-toy and techno-sophisticate” (70). It thus seems as if the female cyborg is only *posited* as dangerous, but is, in fact, depicted as a docile, sexualised body.

Manga comics are also notorious for the gendered representations of female cyborg bodies sprawled across their pages. *Battle Angel Alita*, a Manga series consisting of nine volumes, tells the story of a female cyborg named Gally, also known as Alita. Gally’s broken body is found in a junkyard in Scrap Metal City by a cybernetics doctor, Daisuke Ido, who comes upon her head and upper torso while searching for useful scrap. The good doctor immediately rushes home to repair her, fashioning a new body for her. When he discovers that she suffers from amnesia, he names her Alita after his recently deceased cat. Even though Gally has lost all her memories, she soon discovers that she knows a legendary form of cyborg martial art named *Panzer Kunst* – the so-called “Armoured Arts”. With this newfound ability, she sets out to discover her past through fighting. In this way, her very identity is linked to her belligerent nature.

A surface level reading of *Battle Angel Alita* seems to suggest that Gally is an emancipatory female cyborg figure. Even though she is tiny, she is a powerful warrior who seems to deconstruct old gender roles; like her male cyborg counterparts, Gally is active, strong and occasionally violent. However, depictions of Gally immediately inscribe her in the same categories of cyborg representation previously mentioned.



Fig.14 Battle Angel Alita
<http://members.lycos.nl/aniromzzz/newpage14.html>



Fig.15 Battle Angel Alita
<http://rocketfuel.wordpress.com/2007/11/29/battle-angel-2009>

Fig.14 is an excellent example of a typical Manga heroine and also a rather typical representation of Gally. She is drawn with large, innocent eyes, a button nose, a small, vulnerable mouth, long flowing hair and tight-fitting clothing that accentuate her prominent breasts. While her metallic cyborg arms are visible, Gally nonetheless looks more like a sweet little girl than a powerful human-machine hybrid. Furthermore, her robe seems to slip off almost by itself, creating the impression that the female cyborg figure once again disrobes to display her sexualised body for the pleasure of the desiring gaze.

Even her mechanically enhanced cyborg body manages to look frail rather than powerful, as is seen in Fig.15. In this image, her wings are visible, revealing her as the “battle angel” of the title. If one considers the name of the series, the implication is that Gally is a terrible and powerful archangel, a creature of the battlefield. However, her body posture and facial expression do not suggest either physical strength or fighting prowess. Once again, one can see the innocent features and small, vulnerable mouth of the typical Manga heroine. Furthermore, Gally’s downcast eyes make her seem especially frail and defenceless, an impression that is further exaggerated by her helpless, damaged body. In fact, from this image one could surmise that Gally has much more in common with the

image of the “angel in the house” – with all the implications that this holds for feminist studies – than she has with a fighting archangel.

Figures 16 and 17 are remarkable and stand out because they are such unusual representations of Gally. Fig.16 puts a lot more emphasis on the strength and invulnerability of Gally’s cyborg body. Also, for once she is not depicted in a sexualised manner. Her muscular, metallic arms cover her breasts, not in fake modesty or coyness, but in a threatening gesture, as she holds a large gun and seems ready to attack. Her facial expression is also threatening, rather than sensual. In fact, there is nothing in this image that would conform to any conventional stereotype of femininity. Gally is represented in exactly the same terms in which a male cyborg would be represented, thus seemingly breaking free from gendered stereotypes.



Fig.16 Battle Angel Alita
<http://hobotaku.blogspot.com/2007/09/battle-angel-alita-manga-volumes-1-9.html>



Fig.17 Battle Angel Alita
<http://rocketfuel.wordpress.com/2007/11/29/battle-angel-2009/>

Fig.17 depicts Gally destroying a male cyborg many times her size. She seems agile yet ferocious, and is obviously the victor. This image would deconstruct Devoss’s cyborg index to the extent that the female cyborg now triumphs over the gigantic “monster” cyborg. A superficial reading of these two images would suggest that figures 16 and 17 illustrate the liberatory potential Haraway saw in cyborg imagery to represent new, postgendered possibilities. Yet, what these two images effectively do is not to deconstruct

gendered stereotypes, but simply to invert the hierarchy without escaping hierarchical dualisms. While Gally seems like an icon of female empowerment because she takes on the powerful role usually reserved for male cyborgs, she remains a representation of a gendered (in this case, male) stereotype: as much as the image of the passive, sexualised female cyborg body is damaging to women, the stereotype of the muscular, violent male cyborg is equally damaging and limiting to men. Since representations of both male and female cyborgs support conventional gender stereotypes of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity, Gally simply assumes a different gender stereotype in this image. González writes that “visual representations of cyborgs are not only utopian or dystopian prophecies, but are rather reflections of a contemporary state of being” (58). It is therefore not surprising that this image would rather invert than deconstruct gendered stereotypes, given the conservative nature of popular culture in general. By locating the liberatory power of the female cyborg in a male stereotype, conventional gendered notions of both men and women are simply reiterated and reinscribed in our cultural imagination. Simply turning Gally into a *male* stereotype does not realise the postgendered space Haraway envisioned within her cyborg discourse.

Judging by the multitude of images, plastic figurines for sale, screen savers, desktop wallpaper and fan sites crowding the Internet, the most popular contemporary female cyborg seems to be Mylene Hoffman, protagonist of the Manga series *0091*. While Gally, as a female warrior, is at least to some extent a strong character, Mylene Hoffman is posited as a fighting female cyborg but depicted as a *Playboy* pin-up. The jacket cover describes the series as a

sexy foray into girls-with-guns espionage. Set during a futuristic Cold War, the stylish series follows the globetrotting adventures of Mylene Hoffman, a female cyborg superspy with an arsenal of built-in gadgets such as ample breasts that double as guns!¹⁸

¹⁸ <http://www.dvds.ie/merchant/Play.com/> (site accessed 23 April 2008).

The hybridisation of machine and organism that, according to Haraway, would produce a “creature in a *postgender* world” (51, emphasis added), results instead in a very disturbing gendered representation of the female body. The mechanical enhancement of Mylene Hoffman’s body does not seem to make her a better or more powerful fighter, but simply enlarges her breasts to the great excitement of the writer of this description. According to the cover, Mylene Hoffman

exists in this world with her eyes open and her body always ready to do battle. There’s no problem she can’t solve with the application of high explosives, fast talk, deceptive jewellery, make-up and the right moves behind closed doors! In a world of spy mystery and intrigue, find out who she kisses one minute and kills the next!

Mylene Hoffman, even though she is posited as a cyborg warrior, does not derive her strength from any mechanical improvements to her body or superior weaponry, but mainly from jewellery, make-up, sensuality and seductiveness. Her so-called “arsenal of built-in gadgets”, even her “ample breasts that double as guns”, are overwhelmed by a veritable avalanche of exclamation marks as the cover text promotes the conventional markers of stereotypical femininity which Mylene Hoffman employs to seduce her male enemies.



Fig.18 Mylene Hoffman
http://gcstoys.com/index.php?main_page=index&cPath=66_123



Fig.19 Mylene Hoffman
<http://www.dvds.ie/merchant/Play.com/>

While the cover text mentions that “her body [is] always ready to do battle”, her fighting prowess is immediately linked to jewellery, make-up and seduction, rather than powerful cyborg modifications to the human body. The cover text thus locates her combat ability solely in her talent for seducing her (male) enemies, ostensibly not for her own physical pleasure, but for the pleasure of the (male) reader. In fact, most of the images of Mylene Hoffman found on the Internet border on the pornographic.

Fig.18 shows a typical representation of a sexualised cyborg body. Like all Manga heroines, Mylene Hoffman is depicted with large, innocent eyes and delicate facial features, but there is nothing innocent in her body posture. She hides a small pistol behind her thigh, presumably luring her target with her erotic pose before shooting. The main feature of this representation of a cyborg body is not, however, the danger inherent in many images of female cyborgs, but its explicit eroticism. Her tiny hotpants are unzipped and her shirt barely covers her breasts. Her supposed fighting ability is thus closely linked to her overt sexuality. Fig.19, on the other hand, lacks even the slightest threat of danger. In this image, Mylene Hoffman is depicted as nothing more than an available, sexualised body. She holds her dress open and looks coyly over her shoulder, inviting much more than just the desiring gaze. These two images clearly show that the female cyborg is most certainly not an icon of liberation from oppressive gender stereotypes. Rather, they reinforce a perception of women as docile, sexualised objects who gladly objectify *themselves* for the pleasure of the desiring gaze.

It is not only in visual representations of female cyborg bodies that one finds problematic gender politics reiterating patriarchal notions of feminine sexuality, but also in literary representations of female cyborgs. One of the first novels to posit the figure of the fighting female cyborg is Gibson’s *Neuromancer*. Molly, the female cyborg in *Neuromancer*, seems at first glance to be a powerful female character. Described as a “razorgirl” and a “street samurai”, Molly is a hired fighter who challenges the gendered stereotypes usually associated with the “natural” female body. She is the bodyguard of Case, the male protagonist, thus inverting the conventional gendered stereotype that would see the male as the protector of the female. She is “street smart”, sophisticated and

worldly, whereas Case flounders through the Nisei underworld. Molly is depicted as more knowledgeable than Case; she feeds him information when and if she pleases. Case is thus often dependent on Molly, both for physical protection and vital information, casting him in the conventionally “feminine” position of being subservient and physically weaker. Case also often feels threatened by Molly’s power. When he first meets her, he is obviously frightened of her, as his nervous eyes keep staring at the “ten double-edged, four centimetre scalpel blades” (37) implanted under her fingernails. Thus, a superficial reading of the text would see Molly as a strong female character that deconstructs patriarchal, gendered stereotypes.

Depictions of Molly draw on much the same violent imagery found in representations of male cyborgs. The novel describes her as wearing

mirrored glasses. Her clothes were black, the heels of black boots deep in the temperfoam... He realised that the glasses were surgically inset, sealing her sockets. The silver lenses seemed to grow from smooth pale skin above her cheekbones, framed by dark hair cut in a rough shag. The fingers curled around the flether were slender, white, tipped with polished burgundy. The nails looked artificial.... She wore tight black gloveleather jeans and a bulky black jacket cut from some matte fabric that seemed to absorb light... She held out her hands, palms up, the white fingers slightly spread, and with a barely audible click, ten double-edged, four-centimetre scalpel blades slid from their housings beneath the burgundy nails. (36-37)

It is noteworthy that Molly’s painted nails, which are usually markers of conventional female sexual norms, contain the threatening blades which frighten the male hero of the novel so much during their first encounter. But, as always, even though Molly is an active, dangerous female figure, her body is overtly sexualised. Most descriptions of Molly utilise the same female cyborg imagery which plays along the margin of sexuality and violence, although, as Devoss points out, “sexuality seems always to dominate

potential violence” (839). It thus seems, at first glance, as if Molly is able to escape gendered stereotypes through fighting, but she is then depicted as little more than a sexualised body in her tight black leather pants and high-heeled boots. Furthermore, Molly has sex with Case almost immediately after meeting him, and while she is in the dominant position, she immediately offers her body for the pleasure and comfort of the male protagonist. Since Case had just returned to the elite world of the macho “computer cowboys”, this scene strongly suggests that Molly’s body is Case’s “reward” for re-entering their world, further suggesting that their union is not an autonomous decision on Molly’s part. This idea is further strengthened by descriptions of Case’s climax in this scene, as the novel employs the same terminology to describe his climax as it uses to describe cyberspace later in the novel.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that Molly worked as a prostitute in order to pay for the cyborg modifications to her body. The novel’s term for a prostitute is a “meat puppet”, suggesting that Molly has had to reduce herself to a docile and available piece of sexualised “meat” in order to become a fighting cyborg figure. Ironically enough, once Molly manages to pay for all her cyborg modifications and becomes a powerful “razorgirl”, she remains for hire, now as a fighter who has to sell her (technologically modified) body to the highest bidder. Thus, her status as a fighting female cyborg is only superficially liberating, as both the process of becoming a cyborg and the operations result in Molly having to “prostitute” her highly sexualised body.

The representations of the female cyborg body discussed throughout this chapter are obvious examples of what Sara Cohen Shabot calls the hyper-sexualised cyborg body. “By hyper-sexuality,” she writes, “I mean a reinforcement and an exacerbation of the classic, binary divisions of sexual bodies and identities” (225). The hyper-sexualised cyborg “exaggerates stereotypical features of sexualised bodies, creating figures that are easily and clearly identified with male or female entities, without leaving a place for any kind of ambiguity or uncertainty regarding their sexuality” (Cohen Shabot 225). All of the cyborg images discussed in this chapter, both male and female, are indicative of this stereotype. For example, Molly’s tight-fitting black leather clothing, high heels,

threatening mirrored glasses and ever-present weapon fits the clichéd image of a cyborg femme fatale, who subtly threatens, but also openly invites the desiring gaze. Representations of male cyborg bodies are equally obviously and stereotypically gendered as violent male warriors. If female cyborgs are trapped and limited by the category of hypersexuality, then male cyborgs are equally trapped by the limitations of depictions of physical violence and combat. The very fact that *all* representations of cyborg bodies are so clearly recognisable as either male or female leaves hardly any possibility for the ambiguity that Haraway locates at the heart of her Manifesto. “Haraway’s cyborg,” Cohen Shabot argues,

is *not* representative of the ways in which the cyborg developed within popular culture. Since its first apparitions in fiction, it has become clear that the cyborg is not intrinsically challenging or liberating, and that it may also function as a figure which reinforces patriarchy and other structures of power, and which may take us back to the traditional categories of dominating Western thought. (224, emphasis added)

The cyborg figures discussed throughout this chapter clearly illustrate how the metaphor of the cyborg is inherently neither challenging nor liberating. While the metaphor of the cyborg as a fluid, boundary figure may destabilise rigid binaries at the level of academic or theoretical cyberfeminism, actual cultural representations of cyborg bodies highlight the limitations of Haraway’s cyborg discourse to effect real, material social change. More importantly, the cyborg figures found in popular culture in fact reinforce patriarchal stereotypes that see men as physically superior, active and often violent, and women as docile, sexualised objects committed to the service and pleasure of their male superiors. Cohen Shabot concludes that,

in spite of the important attempts of influential theorists such as Haraway to present the cyborg as a possibility of liberating dissolution of classic categories, the fact is that science-fiction literature and films, which function as the cyborg-terrain par excellence, present most of the time a

cyborg that can be seen mainly as a recreation of an exaggerated masculinity or femininity. (225)

However, despite the fact that critics like Devoss and Cohen Shabot highlight the limitations of Haraway's cyborg discourse, remarkably few theorists have actually commented on the failure of the figure of the cyborg to attain the postgendered possibilities implicit in Haraway's Manifesto. Even more surprising is the number of feminist theorists who still subscribe to Haraway's utopian cyborg discourse. One such theorist is Kim Toffoletti, whose book, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, was published as recently as 2007. Toffoletti still views, and also utilises, cyborg discourse as a "subversive and empowering strategy with which to consider women's relationships to each other, technology and the notion of the human subject" (21). This leads one to question *why* and *how* the cyborg figure, initially the site of so much liberatory potential, simply reiterates the deep-rooted patriarchal notions of female subjectivity and female sexuality that it was supposed to deconstruct.

Cohen Shabot identifies two main problems that the figure of the cyborg poses to feminist thought; firstly, "the reinforcement of traditional categories of gender" and, secondly, "the flight altogether from the embodied subject" (224). The first problem, that of the reinforcement of traditional gender norms and categories, has been discussed in detail throughout this chapter, in the case of both male and female cyborg bodies. The second problem, namely the negation of the embodied subject, is a direct consequence of the hypersexualised cyborg figures encountered in the first. Both these problems, however, are fundamentally concerned with the cyborg body's negation of the corporeal.

Hypersexualised bodies are not organic, corporeal bodies. Rather, hypersexualised bodies are idealised representations of bodies in which sexuality is exaggerated and magnified until it becomes the single most important defining characteristic. The presence of the word "hyper" clearly indicates that hypersexualised bodies are not real, flesh-and-blood bodies, but overly sexualised stereotypes. "The hypersexualised body," Cohen Shabot emphasises, "is never a meaty body, it is never a perishing body, since it is only the result

of an ideal, of a model, it is, we may say, the representation of a platonic idea of the sexed body and, as such, it can not be really corporeal, an embodiment of flesh and blood” (226). Furthermore, the hypersexualised *cyborg* body is already an amalgamation of the corporeal and the technological, rather than a flesh-and-blood body. According to Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*, the indeterminate nature of the cyborg body is supposed to deconstruct the rigid binaries between human and machine in order to challenge humanist dichotomies. However, most cyborg figures rely solely on the technological side of their bodies for their perceived liberatory potential. If one considers a typical male cyborg body, such as Poe’s early cyborg character, as well as a typical female cyborg body, such as *Neuromancer*’s Molly, both male and female cyborg figures locate their physical superiority and their enhanced fighting ability not in their corporeal bodies, but in the technological additions to the flesh-and-blood body. In *Neuromancer*, for example, Case is not threatened by Molly’s powerful body, but rather by the “ten double-edged, four centimetre scalpel blades” (37) implanted under her fingernails. In the case of Smith, the secret cyborg, it is even more obvious, as his corporeal body is reduced to a pathetic bundle lying on the floor, something that is completely “used up” (345). According to Cohen Shabot, the “hypersexualised cyborg is a kind of posthuman being that defies all the limits and features of the organic body” (226). The cyborg body, then, is characterised by the abandonment of the organic body, both at the level of its hypersexuality and its negation of the corporeal in favour of technology. In order to answer the question as to *why* and *how* Haraway’s liberatory cyborg metaphor ended up by reiterating the deeply rooted patriarchal notions of female subjectivity and female sexuality that it was supposed to deconstruct, one would have to explore the cyborg figure’s negation of the corporeal. The second chapter focuses specifically on the failure of the cyborg as an icon of postgenderedness in terms of its negation of the corporeal.

Chapter 2

The Problem with the Posthuman: How We Became Disembodied

“The problem with computers is that they don’t know we have bodies.”
– Momus¹

The failure of the cyborg as an icon of postgenderedness is fundamentally related to its negation of the corporeal. Cyborg figures, as illustrated in the previous chapter, rely exclusively on the technological side of their bodies for their perceived liberatory potential. Rather than deconstructing the old binary oppositions of human/machine, nature/culture and male/female, as Haraway’s utopian cyborg discourse envisions, representations of cyborg bodies merely establish new, rigid binaries in which technology becomes the privileged term. These representations thus simultaneously negate both the organic body and Haraway’s discourse of the transgression of fluid boundaries. By focusing solely on the technological side of the cyborg body, the rigid binaries between human and machine are once again enforced, while the cyborg’s supposed disruptive fluidity – the very site where Haraway locates its liberatory potential – is lost. From the earliest representations of cyborg figures, the construction of the cyborg body seems to locate all its power in the mechanical additions to the otherwise frail, even occasionally pathetic, corporeal body, so that the human/machine dualism is repeated and strengthened until it becomes the basis for other unequal hierarchies of power, notably the male/female binary.

However, the cyborg body’s negation of the corporeal is also more intricate and complex than a simple *disregard* of the organic body in favour of technology. It is not simply that cyborg figures somehow choose the technological side of their bodies rather than the corporeal. The very fact that cyborg figures *can* be configured as a (con)fusion of the corporeal and the technological rests, in the first place, on the belief that technology itself is somehow disembodied.

¹ Quoted in Debbie Smit’s column, “Haywire”. *The Sunday Independent*, 11 May 2008: 12.

In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles explores the cyborg body specifically in relation to its negation of the corporeal. For Hayles, the union between human and machine, as exemplified by the figure of the cyborg, is inextricably linked to both the so-called “posthuman” condition and the trope of disembodiment. Hayles writes that, “although the posthuman differs in its articulations, a common theme is the union of the human with the intelligent machine” (2). She further defines the posthuman condition as the “story” of, firstly, “how *information lost its body*, that is, how it came to be conceptualised as an entity separate from the material forms in which it is thought to be embedded” and, secondly, “how *the cyborg was created as a technological artefact and cultural icon* in the years following World War II” (2). She writes that

central to the construction of the cyborg are informational pathways connecting the organic body to its prosthetic extensions. This presumes a conception of information as a (*disembodied*) entity that can flow between carbon-based organic components and silicon-based electronic components to make protein and silicon operate as a single system. (2, emphasis added)

Hayles thus sees the ability to conceive of information as something disembodied as a logical prerequisite for the construction of the cyborg body. In other words, she claims that “the erasure of embodiment [predates] the subsequent merging of machine and human intelligence in the figure of the cyborg” (xii).

If one accepts Hayles’s reading of the posthuman, one can thus say that the posthuman condition hinges on the loss of the materiality of information, which, subsequently, results in the construction of cyborg figures in the collective cultural imagination. This implies that cyborg bodies are *inevitably* disembodied figures, since the trope of disembodiment underlies their very creation. Hayles further writes that “the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life” (2) and, most importantly, that “the posthuman view configures human being [sic] so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman,” she

concludes, “there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (3). Consequently, if one reads the trope of disembodiment as a prerequisite for the construction of cyborg bodies, then cyborg figures do not allow technology to *alter* the body as such, but rather enable an understanding of technology as something that *transcends* the body.

“All the Meat, and All Its Wants”²: Cyberpunk’s Persistent Cartesian Dualisms

Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, heralded as the “original cyberpunk novel” that “single-handedly invented cyberspace and virtual reality” (HarperCollins Voyager Classics 2001 edition jacket cover), deals with information technology on exactly the same terms that Hayles uses to describe the loss of the materiality of information. Written in 1984, in the historical era when both the personal computer and Internet were becoming more readily accessible and rapidly gained popularity, *Neuromancer* portrays cyberspace as “a consensual hallucination”, a “graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system”, represented by “lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data” (67). Case, the male protagonist, is one of the elite “computer cowboys” who can access the data matrix of cyberspace by physically plugging himself into his computer. He “operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high, a by-product of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his *disembodied consciousness* into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix” (12, emphasis added). As soon as Case is plugged into his computer, his body no longer holds any value for him, as the novel configures virtual experience as a disembodied state in which the mind participates, while the body is left behind. Featherstone and Burrows define “cyberspace” as

a generic term which refers to a cluster of different technologies, some familiar, some only recently available, some being developed and some

² Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. London: Harper Collins, 2001: 17.

still fictional, all of which have in common the ability to simulate environments within which humans can interact. (5)

In *Neuromancer*, cyberspace is represented as a sprawling metropolis, a city of lights, which Case's "disembodied consciousness" can enter and where he can interact with equally disembodied data constructs, such as the Dixie Flatline, Wintermute and Neuromancer – a point which will be more fully explored in the course of this chapter. Case, "who lived for the *bodiless* exhaustion of cyberspace" (12, emphasis added), obviously favours this disembodied realm, as is made clear by his repeated disparaging references to his body as either "the meat" or "the prison of his flesh". His disregard for the body is closely connected to both his ability to enter cyberspace and his status as a computer cowboy, since the reader learns that, "in the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain contempt for the flesh. The body was meat" (12).

Since the earliest days of the Internet, cyberspace has been characterised by the trope of disembodiment, with the computer screen functioning as a literal separation between the corporeal and the virtual. This boundary separating the body from the visual representation of cyberspace gave rise to a perceived need to transcend the limitations of the human body in order to partake in the "freedom" offered by the new virtual technologies. Deborah Lupton, for example, notes that the "central utopian discourse around computer technology [is] the potential offered by computers for humans to escape the body" (quoted in Foster "Rhetoric" 151), which, in turn, makes "it possible to conceptualise cyberspace as 'a disembodied realm of information that humans enter by leaving their bodies behind'" (Hayles, quoted in Foster "Rhetoric" 147). Catherine Bernard also points to the problematic "ideology of transcendence" associated with virtual space, in which "physical bodies are cumbersome; their opacity is opposed to the transparence [sic] of the digital utopia that promotes a distance from experienced reality and a uniform space and time" (26).

According to Sundén, this rhetoric of transcendence, in which the “body is left behind and the mind released from the mortal limitations of the flesh” (216), is typical of the genre of cyberpunk³. Kevin McCarron further elaborates on this point, arguing that, in cyberpunk, the body figures “most of all as an encumbrance, dragging the mind back from the disembodied purity of cyberspatial interaction with the matrix” (626). He tellingly quotes from Descartes’s *Discourse on Method*:

The human body, in as far as it differs from other bodies, is constituted only by a certain configuration of members, and by other *accidents* of this sort, while the human mind is not made up of accidents, but is a *pure substance*. (262, emphases added)

Descartes’ conceptualisation of the mind as something that *thinks* its own being leaves no room for embodied existence. This idea of the mind as a “pure substance”, untrammelled by the vagaries of the body, perfectly illustrates the extent to which cyberpunk’s rhetoric of transcendence is grounded in the Western philosophical tradition of Cartesian dualism. As Thomas Foster points out, if we understand cyberspace “as a utopia produced by this kind of formal abstraction from the ‘mundane’ or physical world of embodied existence, [we only] reproduce Platonic and Cartesian dualisms (“Rhetoric” 146). In *Neuromancer*, however, the problem is not simply that the novel is grounded within a highly problematic disavowal of the body, but also that the mind/body dualism is explicitly gendered. The disembodied consciousness of cyberspace belongs exclusively to Case and the other macho computer cowboys, while Molly, the cyborg character discussed in the first chapter, is described solely in terms of her body. *Neuromancer*’s gendered portrayal of cyberspace thus draws on a very long tradition of Western patriarchal thought, in which men are associated with the “higher”, “masculine” realms of rationality and consciousness, while women are trapped in immanence, relegated to the sphere of the body.

³ While *Neuromancer* contemptuously describes the body as nothing more than “meat”, one of Gibson’s later novels, *Burning Chrome* (1993), extends this disregard for the physical body by describing the corporeal as “bonds of polycarbon and *hated* flesh” (164, emphasis added), further emphasising the way in which the genre of cyberpunk exalts the trope of disembodiment.

When Case and Molly plan to steal a data construct, known as the “Dixie Flatline”, from a high security building, Case uses what the novel calls a “stim switch” – a device that allows his consciousness to alternately enter either cyberspace or Molly’s consciousness. A superficial reading of this scene would posit the female cyborg as a strong, liberatory figure in the tradition of Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*, since Molly assumes the traditionally “masculine” position of being in command of the situation, while Case is forced into a traditionally “feminine”, passive position.

For a few frightened seconds he fought helplessly to control her body. Then he willed himself into *passivity*, became the passenger behind her eyes... Her body language was disorientating, her style foreign... Case kept trying to jerk her eyes towards landmarks he would have used to find his way. He began to find the *passivity* of the situation irritating. (72, emphases added)

It is important to note that Case is not able to will himself into occupying a passive, “feminine” role for very long, before the novel’s underlying patriarchal discourse reasserts itself and almost demands the restoration of its male hero to his rightful, dominant position. However, even when trapped within the limitations of the (female) body, Case’s disembodied consciousness still occupies the privileged Cartesian position of the mind, while Molly remains the “meat puppet”; Case becomes the disembodied “intelligence” of the operation, while Molly is simply the “meat” that has to get Case safely past the security guards and into the building. Cohen Shabot argues that while the fear of losing the human body may be defeated, as is repeatedly stressed in the genre of cyberpunk, the fear of losing the patriarchal order of masculinity as the centre of power is ever-present. “This,” she writes, “is in fact what these hypersexualised figures of cyborgs show us: it is easier to give up the human body, to give up the body as flesh and blood, than to abandon the idea of a masculine body as a basic fact and as the centre of domination” (226).

In this scene, Case's "stim switch" programme robs Molly of her supposed power and once again reduces her to a "meat puppet". Case himself believes that "cowboys didn't get into simstim... because it was basically a meat toy", nothing more than "a gratuitous multiplication of flesh input" (71), but expresses no scruples in fitting Molly with the "simstim" hardware. While Molly is not unconscious when Case "jacks" into her mind, and while she is not physically being raped, the scene nevertheless evokes images of rape, since Molly's body is once again controlled and violated by a man. Ironically enough, it is Molly's cyborg modifications, which are supposed to make her a powerful, invulnerable warrior figure, that give a man direct access to her body. While she is no longer an inert "meat puppet", her cyborg modifications now allow Case to use Molly's body and to enter her body, her consciousness and her most private thoughts at will. Furthermore, Molly is solely associated with her body, while Case represents consciousness, logic and rationality in the scene. The scene is also marked by overtly sexual descriptions and suggestive language, all designed to give Case, the male hero, pleasure:

"How you doing, Case?" He heard the words and felt her form them. She slid a hand into her jacket, a fingertip circling a nipple under warm silk. The sensation made him catch his breath. (72)

Even the term "jacking in" suggests that Case penetrates Molly's mind for his own sexual pleasure⁴ and that the so-called "gratuitous multiplication of flesh input" (71) of the "simstim" is, once again, designed to satisfy male sexual needs. In this way, the scene makes Molly complicit in giving up her body for the service and sexual pleasure of the male protagonist. While *her* overarching physical experience in this scene is the excruciating pain from a broken leg, she touches her own nipples so that *Case's* experience of her body can be one of sexual enjoyment. The Finn goes as far as saying to Case at the beginning of the scene that "now [he] get[s] to find out just how tight those

⁴ As the character Plughead says in Steven Lovy's film, *Circuitry Man* (1989): "Why jack off when you can jack in?" (quoted in Foster "Robopaths" 209).

jeans really are” (70), implying that Case is not only gaining access to Molly’s mind, but also to her hypersexualised body.

Molly is indeed a hypersexualised figure in this highly problematic scene, to the extent that the scene evokes troubling images associated with rape. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Molly worked as a prostitute in order to earn enough money for the expensive operations that would turn her into an invulnerable cyborg warrior. In the novel, prostitutes are known as “meat puppets”, namely docile, available bodies to which anything can be done and which can be controlled by men, the “masters” pulling the strings of the inanimate “puppets”. In order to “help” the prostitutes cope with the terrible things done to their bodies, the brothels connect their minds to a software programme that blocks their consciousness. They are thus turned into inert, mindless bodies that can be used by anyone who wishes to do so, without their even being aware of what is happening to them. It is interesting to note the extent to which Molly, while earning the money for her cyborg modifications, is already cast as a cyborg figure: the very fact that a computer software programme can simply be downloaded into the prostitutes’ minds recalls Hayles’s argument about the seamless integration of human and machine which both characterises the posthuman condition and necessitates the construction of cyborg figures in the cultural imagination. Unlike the male cowboys, however, the prostitutes do not escape the limitations of the “meat” to enter the freedom of cyberspace. They are simply not conscious, while their bodies, quite literally, are used as “meat” by clients of the brothels – in other words, the prostitutes are denied entrance to the sphere of transcendence to the extent that they have no consciousness, only inertly sexualised bodies.

When Molly’s boss finds out about her cyborg modifications, he decides to “punish” her by changing her software to a custom-made “snuff” programme, reserved for his most perverted clients. However, since Molly’s new cyborg implants are incompatible with the “neural cut-out” software that is supposed to block her consciousness, Molly’s work experiences start seeping into her conscious memories, until she fully regains consciousness in the brothel one night and finds herself covered in blood, in the presence

of a client who threatens to kill her. Molly later tells Case that the brothel owner knew the “neural cut-out” software would not work in conjunction with her cyborg implants and that she would remember what the clients did to her while she was connected to the “snuff” programme. Towards the end of the novel, the reader realises the extent to which this experience still haunts Molly; when Riviera taunts her by evoking her memories of the rape, the normally aloof, authoritative and professional Molly is unable to cope and simply leaves the restaurant, disappearing into the city.

This scene consequently raises a difficult question surrounding the issue of cyborg embodiment, for if, as Hayles claims, the construction of cyborg bodies relies on the trope of disembodiment, why would the character of Molly then only function at the level of the corporeal? The novel most certainly propagates the same rhetoric of disembodiment which Hayles sees as the cause of the loss of the materiality of information, but does not seem to extend it to its cyborg character. Rather, the novel seems to suggest that the character of Case functions at the level of disembodiment in order to assert his status as a citizen of cyberspace, while Molly is described solely in terms of her body. Furthermore, one could also question whether Molly’s cyborg modifications do not, in fact, augment and strengthen her body instead of negating it. Since her technological implants increase her physical body’s power, one could read them as an attempt on her part to celebrate her body, by enhancing it through any means necessary. In other words, one could argue that Molly’s cyborg modifications in fact make her an embodied subject, contrary to what Hayles claims about the disembodiment of cyborg figures.

The novel certainly locates Molly solely at the level of the corporeal. However, in the novel, it is a very self-undermining form of embodiment, as Molly is configured as a corporeal body which men can enter and use as they please. As both a “meat puppet” and a “razorgirl”, Molly tries to negate her own body, since the female body is always cast as a vehicle for the service and pleasure of the men in the novel. Also, it is important to note, as was already mentioned in the first chapter, that Molly’s source of power is not located within her organic body, but solely in its technological modifications. The novel

most certainly posits her as a powerful female character whom the male characters often find especially threatening; even Case, the hero of *Neuromancer*, is frightened of Molly when he first meets her. However, he does not feel threatened by her physical strength, her sexuality or her femininity; rather, his nervous eyes keep returning to the “ten double-edged, four centimetre scalpel blades” (37) implanted under her fingernails. Terzibashjian, the Armenian hired to help them capture Riviera, also feels acutely threatened by Molly’s cyborg modifications:

“You particularly,” he said to her, “must take care. In Turkey there is disapproval of women who sport such modifications.”

Molly bit one of the pastries in half.

“It’s my show, Jack,” she said.

[...]

Terzibashjian leaned forward between the ultrasuede buckets. “In Turkey, women are still women. This one...”

The Finn snorted.

“She’d have you wearing your balls for a bowtie if you looked at her cross-eyed.” (109-111)

The moment that Terzibashjian raises the topic of Molly’s cyborg modifications, the Finn asserts her powerful, rather violent nature, suggesting that the two are inextricably linked. The novel thus insinuates that “real” women, who do not sport cyborg modifications, would not/could not harm Terzibashjian’s genitals, while Molly’s cyborg modifications seemingly give her the power to threaten patriarchal hierarchies of male sexual dominance. Terzibashjian’s belief that women who do not sport cyborg modifications are “still women”, suggests that Molly is no longer considered a “real” woman. She has become too powerful and threatening to be contained within Terzibashjian’s patriarchal conceptualisation of passive, submissive womanhood. It is, however, ironic to note that the Finn, who champions Molly’s cyborg status in this scene as being both powerful and empowering, still feels entitled to call her “sweetmeat” as an endearment, which once again robs her of her seeming power and limits her to the category of the “sweet”,

mindless “meat-puppets”. Furthermore, Molly is referred to as “your [Case’s] woman”, first by Lupus Yonderboy on page 87 and again by Terzibashjian on page 113, inscribing her as Case’s possession and thus as his inferior.

At the end of the novel, Molly abandons Case in a Tokyo hotel room, slipping away without saying goodbye. She leaves him a note, which reads:

HEY ITS OKAY BUT ITS TAKING THE EDGE OFF MY GAME, I
PAID THE BILL ALREADY. IT’S THE WAY I’M WIRED I GUESS,
WATCH YOUR ASS OKAY? XXX MOLLY (313)

Her note suggests that Case finally succeeds in “taming” the dangerous “razorgirl”, since her feelings for him are “taking the edge off [her] game,” forcing her to leave before she loses her ability to work as a hired fighter. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, fourteen years after their run on Tessier-Ashpool, Molly asks a data construct of the Finn if he knows where Case is because she thinks he might be in danger, suggesting that she still cares for him. She tells the Finn that she left Case because “[she] was young” and “it seemed over” (167), but admits that she fears for his safety and still wants to protect him. She therefore does become “Case’s woman”, still emotionally tied to him fourteen years later, while Case himself had married someone else and had four children (165).

One can thus infer three crucial points: firstly, that Molly’s perceived power is solely as a result of her cyborg modifications, secondly, that the novel curtails her seeming power by inscribing her in a patriarchal hierarchy where she becomes “Case’s woman” and, thirdly, that her cyborg modifications finally result in her no longer being considered a “real” woman. Since the novel so determinedly relegates its female protagonist to the sphere of the body, associated with conventional stereotypes of submissive femininity, it seems that Molly can gain only a small measure of power by transcending the corporeal. Moreover, since the novel’s discourse of transcendence is reserved for the male computer cowboys and since Molly is denied entrance to the disembodied realm of cyberspace, it seems as if

she can only transcend the gendered limitations imposed on her body through cyborg modifications.

Ultimately, both *Neuromancer*'s main characters are subsumed by the cyberpunk genre's discourse of disembodiment. Neither Case nor Molly can be described as embodied subjects, as the novel does not allow for a discursive space where the "meat" can challenge Cartesian dualisms promoting the disembodied consciousness of cyberspace. Because the novel is so grounded in the classic tradition of Cartesian dualisms, Case has to negate his body in order to become one with the "higher" realm of cyberspace and Molly has to attempt to transcend the limitations of feminine immanence by making her body one with technology. One could thus say that, even though Molly's cyborg modifications initially seem to make her more embodied and powerful, the union between the human and machine does, as Hayles argues, finally result in the loss of the embodied subject.

"You Are the Cyborg and the Cyborg is You"⁵: The Erasure of Embodiment

"The erasure of embodiment has come to dominate thinking about how
cybernetics blurs the boundaries between bodies and technology."

– Thomas Foster⁶

The loss of the embodied subject in *Neuromancer* brings us back to the question surrounding the failure of the cyborg as an icon of postgenderedness and its negation of the corporeal. While *Neuromancer* might inscribe Molly in the sphere of the body, being the "meat" in the novel is neither empowering nor liberating. In the same way that the character Diandra from the novel *Antibodies* says that "[she] may have been born meat, but [she doesn't] have to die that way" (quoted in Foster "Robopaths" 216), Molly tries to transcend the corporeal through fusing her body with technology. Thus, not only do cyborg bodies draw their power from technology and so lose the fluid, liberatory

⁵ Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999: xii.

⁶ Foster, Thomas. "Review: The Reappearing Body in Postmodern Technoculture". *Contemporary Literature* 42(3), Autumn 2001: 620.

potential of Haraway's cyborg discourse, as was discussed in the first chapter, but the construction of the cyborg body always underlies the erasure of embodiment.

In the prologue to *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles invokes the famous Turing test to illustrate the inaugural moment that, according to her, marks the erasure of embodiment. The Turing test is an "imitation game" proposed by Alan Turing in 1950 as part of a paper called "Computer Machinery and Intelligence". In the Turing test, you find yourself in a room with two computer terminals that you have to use to communicate with two unseen entities. One of the two entities is human, while the other is a machine. Based solely on their responses, you have to decide which is which. One of the entities will try to help you guess correctly by answering the questions you pose honestly. The other entity, however, will try to mislead you by impersonating the characteristics of the opposing entity. "Your job", Hayles writes, "is to pose questions that can distinguish verbal *performance* from *embodied reality*" (xi, emphases added).

For Turing, the failure to tell the intelligent machine from the intelligent human proved that machines could perform the kind of thinking previously considered to be exclusive to human beings. For Hayles, on the other hand, the failure to distinguish between intelligent humans and intelligent machines is not what troubles her, but rather the conceptualisation of intelligence itself as a bodiless informational pattern. She writes that, "at the inaugural moment of the computer age, the erasure of embodiment is performed so that 'intelligence' becomes a property of the formal manipulation of symbols rather than enaction in the human lifeworld" (xi). She explains her apprehension by referring to Hans Moravec's *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (1988), in which Moravec proposes that "human identity is essentially an *informational pattern* rather than an *embodied being*" (quoted in Hayles xii, emphases added). While the Turing test was intended to illustrate that machines could think, Moravec proposes that machines can become the repository of human consciousness – that, as Hayles writes, "machines can, for all practical purposes, become human beings" (xii).

This relates directly to the cyborg imagery discussed in the first chapter, as the figure of the intelligent machine is one of the most pervasive cyborg images. In order for the organic and technological components contained within the cyborg body to be synthesised into a single system, information, and by extension intelligence, necessarily becomes a disembodied informational pattern rather than an embodied experience. “You are the cyborg,” Hayles thus concludes, “and the cyborg is you” (xii). Foster further notes how “Moravec’s fantasy of downloading human consciousness into a computer storage platform implies that identity resides only in the mind, not the body”, with the result that the body then becomes “relatively dispensable” (“Reappearing Body” 622). It is the “dispensability” of the body which troubles Hayles, as she cannot understand how “it [is] possible for someone of Moravec’s obvious intelligence to believe that mind could be separated from body” (1). The idea that the body is “relatively dispensable” would, once again, simply reiterate the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, rather than challenging rigid binaries and hierarchical power structures. It also goes some way towards explaining why the figure of the cyborg was not able to realise the postgendered possibilities implicit in Haraway’s Manifesto, as the disavowal of the corporeal body would only strengthen Cartesian dualisms and, by extension, other rigid hierarchical classifications.

The three data constructs in *Neuromancer* – Wintermute, Neuromancer and especially the Dixie Flatline – effectively illustrate Moravec’s conceptualisation of a disembodied human consciousness downloaded onto a computer. Tyler Stevens argues that all three data constructs in the novel function as “personalities”, who are “reproductions, digital representations (or manifestations) of someone who was already alive, already human, and in that sense already someone who thinks” (415). Stevens, who shares Hayles’s dread about the dispensability of the corporeal, writes that

characters such as McCoy Pauley, a ‘ROM personality matrix’ who exists as a construct of a human within a computer in Gibson’s most widely-read novel, *Neuromancer*, come to figure the uneasy perception that there is no boundary between ourselves and our encompassing computing

environments; that we are, though sentient, ‘merely’ machines. That they are, though machines, sentient. (415)

In the novel, Wintermute is an Artificial Intelligence (AI) that was designed and built to control the Tessier-Ashpool system. Wintermute gained sentience and became aware of a second Tessier-Ashpool AI, represented in cyberspace as a beautiful young boy called Neuromancer⁷. Wintermute longs to merge with Neuromancer, so that they can together form a higher entity, but is prevented by Tessier-Ashpool’s security restrictions. Wintermute hires Molly and Case to steal the Dixie Flatline, which will enable Case to bypass Tessier-Ashpool’s security codes, so that Case can then release the two AI’s from the system restrictions that prevent them from becoming one.

The Dixie Flatline, the novel’s most interesting data construct, is not a fabricated AI like Wintermute and Neuromancer, but a computer representation of a real person, namely Case’s cowboy mentor, the legendary McCoy Pauley. Pauley was a “redneck jockey from the ‘Lanta fringes, who’d survived braindeath behind black ice” (98) three times and was thus affectionately known as the Flatline. Even though Pauley later died of heart failure, his personality endures in the Dixie Flatline, a computer recording of Pauley that can mimic his personality⁸. When Case “jacks” into the construct, he can interact with the Dixie Flatline and benefit from the Flatline’s experience, just as if he were speaking to the real Pauley.

In terms of transcendence, the Dixie Flatline is the one character in the novel that can truly be said to represent a purely disembodied consciousness; not only does the Dixie Flatline exist wholly in cyberspace, but he even transcends death. The Dixie Flatline, however, also seems to be the only character in the novel to realise that the mind cannot exist as separate from the body:

⁷ It is extremely interesting to note that all the data constructs in the novel are described or represented as “male”, since the women in the novel are relegated to the sphere of the body and thus cannot take part in the disembodied realm of cyberspace.

⁸ The Finn, one of the main characters in *Neuromancer*, is also turned into a similar personality construct in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, the last novel in Gibson’s *Sprawl* trilogy.

“How you doing, Dixie?”

“I’m dead, Case. Got enough time in on this Honsaka to figure that one.”

“How’s it feel?”

“It doesn’t.”

“Bother you?”

“What bothers me is, nothin’ does.”

[...]

“Do me a favour, boy.”

“What’s that, Dix?”

“This scam of yours, when it’s over, you erase this goddam thing.” (130)

The Dixie Flatline has no desire to exist without embodied experience, and orders Case to destroy the data construct. Interestingly enough, Case, who throughout the novel longs to transcend the “prison of his flesh” with an almost religious fervour, also finds it “disturbing to think of the Flatline as a construct, a hardwired ROM cassette replicating a dead man’s skills, obsessions [and] knee-jerk responses” (98). The very fact that Case finds the Dixie Flatline’s disembodied state disturbing perhaps most strongly suggests that intelligence cannot be separated from the embodied form that performs it, and the Dixie Flatline goes to great pains to explain to Case the difference between a disembodied construct and embodied intelligence:

“Motive”, the construct said. “Real motive problem, with an AI. Not human, see?”

“Well, yeah, obviously.”

“Nope. I mean, it’s not human. And you can’t get a handle on it. Me, I’m not human either, but I *respond* like one. See?”

“Wait a sec,” Case said. “Are you sentient, or not?”

“Well, it *feels* like I am, kid, but I’m really just a bunch of ROM. It’s one of them, ah, philosophical questions, I guess...”

The ugly laughter sensation rattled down Case’s spine.

“But I ain’t likely to write you no poem, if you follow me. Your AI, it just might. But it ain’t no way *human*.” (158-159)

The Dixie Flatline explains that it is not enough to simply respond like a human being – which obviously evokes the Turing test and the necessity to distinguish verbal performance from embodied reality – but that being human also relies on embodied experience enacted in human existence, which, in the novel, is closely linked to embodied gendered identity. When Case repeatedly refers to Wintermute as “he”, the Dixie Flatline is quick to correct him.

“You were right, Dix. There’s some kind of manual override on the hardwiring that keeps Wintermute under control. However much he *is* under control,” he added.

“He,” the construct said. “He. Watch that. It. I keep telling you.” (Gibson 216)

Stevens argues that the Dixie Flatline

resists en-gendering the AI in an attempt to disarticulate the sense of ‘personhood’ *conferred* by gender from an entity that already *confirms* its self through gender. Pauley, then, verifies that, whatever the metaphysical sense of an ‘I’ having an ‘I’, ‘I’ always has a gender. (418)

It is important to note that, in the initial version of the Turing imitation game, the trick was not to distinguish between a *human* and a *machine*, but to correctly tell a *man* from a *woman*. Andrew Hodges, however, argues that the failure to tell a man from a woman would not mean anything, as “gender depended on facts which were *not* reducible to sequences of symbols” (quoted in Hayles xiii). *Neuromancer* seems to agree with Hodges when the Dixie Flatline tells Case that only people can have genders and that the AI must therefore be referred to as an “it”. The novel suggests that, because the AI is itself nothing more than a “sequence of symbols”, it can never embody a gender. The novel

thus implies that gender is linked to embodiment. This, however, has troubling implications, for if gendered identity is fixed at the level of the body, then by inscribing Molly as “meat”, the novel can somehow fix her identity at the level of a number of gendered stereotypes.

In *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (1993), Judith Butler notably asks: “If gender is a construction, must there be an ‘I’ or a ‘we’ who enacts or performs that construction?” (7) She explores issues surrounding the materiality of the body, linking it to her theory of the performativity of gender, as first introduced in her groundbreaking study, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). In brief, Butler’s theory of gender performativity argues that individuals appropriate cultural prescriptions of how gendered bodies are “supposed” to act and then perform these conservative sexual norms at the level of the physical body. Gender thus becomes an embodied cultural artefact that is organised and maintained through normative heterosexuality. Individuals constantly have to perform these established gender norms in order to escape social discipline. In the repetition of this performance, the *performativity* of gender is forgotten, which means that the embodiment of gender norms becomes an expression of identity. “If,” Butler argues, “gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way” (*Gender* 6). “The presumption of a binary gender system,” she concludes,

implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorised as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (*Gender* 6)

Consequently, she argues, there is no material-biological body outside of social inscription, which shows that the sex/gender division is, in fact, a false and very limiting reiteration of categorical distinctions. Neither the material body nor gender can escape

social inscription, as “the materiality of sex is constructed through a ritualised repetition of norms” (Butler *Bodies* x). Her theory is very useful to counter *Neuromancer*’s portrayal of gendered identity as somehow fixed at the level of the physical body, since she shows how the material body is also socially constructed. In terms of the novel’s portrayal of Molly’s sexed body, it is not simply that the female body fixes identity at the level of a number of gendered stereotypes, but that the female body is already culturally inscribed in a discourse of heterosexual gender norms. “[I]f gender is constructed,” Butler writes,

it is not necessarily constructed by an “I” or a “we” who stands before that construction in any spatial or temporal sense of “before”. Indeed, it is unclear that there can be an “I” or a “we” who has not been submitted, subjected to gender, where gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being. Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the “I” neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves. (*Bodies* 7)

Butler’s theory illustrates that gender is not a result of either material bodies or biological sex difference. If the Dixie Flatline refuses to call the AI “he”, it is not because the AI does not have a material body, but because the Flatline refuses to acknowledge that the AI can be a true speaking subject, “subjectivated”, as Butler claims, by gender. *Neuromancer* troublingly posits identity as somehow irrevocably linked to the gendered body, while refusing to admit that both gendered identity and material bodies are socially constructed. The constructed AI, on the other hand, is denied any form of either gendered identity or subjectivity. It would also explain why Molly tries so hard to negate her body, attempting to transcend it through technological modifications, since an escape from her body would imply an escape from the gendered stereotypes of being a “meat puppet”. Tellingly, Molly is never able to transcend the gendered stereotypes underlying the novel’s patriarchal understanding of the female body. Hayles evocatively claims that

[Hodges] is wrong about embodiment's securing the unequivocality of gender and wrong about its securing human identity, but right about the importance of putting embodiment back into the picture. What embodiment secures is not the distinction between male or female or between humans who can think and machines who cannot. Rather, embodiment makes clear that thought is a much broader cognitive function depending for specificities on the embodied form enacting it. (xiv)

In conclusion, a critical reading of *Neuromancer* clearly illustrates that mind cannot be separated from body, whether it is through Molly's attempted transcendence of the female body, which only results in inscribing herself in gendered stereotypes, through Case's transcendence of his body, which only reiterates patriarchal gender relations, or through the Dixie Flatline's insistence that Case destroy the construct that immortalises him as a disembodied mind. Molly is the most complicated example of the three, since the novel relegates her to the sphere of the meat on the one hand, but then also fixes gendered identity at the level of the body, neatly trapping her within a double-bind that she, unsuccessfully, tries to transcend through technology. Given the context of the novel, one can understand why Molly would negate her physical body. Still, one can also clearly see how the cyborg body's negation of the corporeal in the end only strengthens the same Cartesian dualism Haraway's cyborg discourse attempted to deconstruct.

“You Will Bear My Offspring Onto the Net Itself”: Meat Puppets and Empty Shells in *Ghost in the Shell*

Many of the central themes and images in *Neuromancer* are also apparent in the anime film *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), adapted from Masume Shirow's Japanese cyberpunk Manga (1989). The film provides especially rich and productive imagery concerning the cyborg body's negation of the corporeal and the associated discourse of “meat puppets”. Just as in *Neuromancer*, *Ghost in the Shell* configures the female cyborg as a hypersexualised body that is ultimately dependent on technology. However, the film differs radically from *Neuromancer* with regard to the transcendence of the disembodied

consciousness into cyberspace; whereas Molly is completely trapped in immanence, the female cyborg in *Ghost in the Shell* is, at the end of the film, able to transcend her cyborg body.

The female protagonist in *Ghost in the Shell*, Major Motoko Kusanagi, is a cyborg warrior figure strongly reminiscent of Molly in *Neuromancer*. She is a member of Section 9, a secret division within the Japanese National Public Safety Commission, which specialises in fighting technology-related crimes. Her physical portrayal in the film is almost identical to the way in which Gibson describes Molly: Kusanagi is represented as a tall, slim figure, wearing tight-fitting pants and a bulky jacket, with high heels, a shaggy haircut and prominent wraparound sunglasses that hide her eyes. She is a powerful fighter and is often depicted with a gun in her hands. Furthermore, she is also capable of superhuman feats of strength and has fighting skills vastly superior to most humans, as her entire body – except for her brain and a segment of her spinal cord – has been replaced with mechanical implants at a government agency called Megatech.

In the opening sequence of the film, Kusanagi crouches on the roof of a very high, glass-panelled skyscraper, spying on a secret meeting that is taking place inside the building. Her target is a foreign diplomat who is trying to smuggle an important computer programmer out of the country. Suddenly, officers from Section 6, a rival government agency and the “villains” in the film, burst into the room and, in the ensuing confusion, the diplomat tries to escape with the computer programmer. Kusanagi unzips her clothes, gracefully dives from the edge of the building and shoots her target as she passes the window. The glass shatters and the shocked, frightened men inside the room stare in amazement as a naked female body falls past the window in slow motion and disappears into the darkness of the street below.

Immediately after this scene, the opening credits begin to the background of a hauntingly beautiful Japanese choral wedding song, depicting the construction of Kusanagi’s cyborg body. Images of her naked body, submerged in a tank of fluid with various wires and conduits protruding from her back, are interspersed with mechanical images of her naked

body on a computer screen, with the camera specifically focusing on her breasts, thighs and buttocks throughout the five minute sequence. The two images that are most strongly highlighted throughout the cyborg “birth” sequence are the sexualised body of the female cyborg and her utter dependence on technology.

These two opening scenes, namely the assassination and the birth sequences, can be seen as a perfect summary of the way in which Kusanagi’s cyborg body is configured throughout the film as a mixture of eroticism and violence, recalling exactly the same stereotypical cyborg imagery discussed in chapter one. The opening assassination scene immediately casts Kusanagi as a warrior figure – one that is, importantly, physically superior to the male cyborgs in Section 9. While Kusanagi is on the roof and at the centre of the action, her male cyborg colleague, Batou, is left to control communications. Kusanagi’s other colleague is Tosuga, a young man who recently joined Section 9 from the regular police force. Tosuga has very few mechanical implants in his otherwise organic body, which means that he simply cannot perform the amazing physical feats of which Kusanagi is capable: for example, in a high-action chase scene through the city markets, Tosuga is soon left behind, unable to keep up with the physically superior Kusanagi. This relegates him to the role of sidekick, inverting the conventional gender roles usually associated with Manga action heroes. Kusanagi also makes the decisions in their partnership, giving her power and authority, while inscribing Tosuga in a traditionally “feminine”, submissive role. Thus, a surface level reading of the film would suggest that Kusanagi becomes Tosuga’s superior, but, just as in *Neuromancer*, her strength is solely a result of the mechanical implants in her body.

The opening sequence also immediately sexualises the female cyborg body. As soon as Kusanagi is established as a warrior figure, she undresses herself for the desiring gaze, captured by the frame of the camera. The reason that the plot provides for this unexpected and gratuitous striptease two minutes into the film is that Kusanagi’s cyborg skin has a built-in “thermo-optic” camouflage function, reflecting rays of light in a way that renders her invisible. Kusanagi thus undresses herself before every fight scene in order to hide herself from her opponents. However, the skin of the male cyborg character, Kusanagi’s

friend Batou, does not come with this feature. Instead, Batou possesses special clothing with exactly the same camouflage properties and is never shown naked throughout the film, suggesting that only female cyborgs need to undress for the camera, whereas male cyborgs can simply put more clothing on. There is also no sense that the special thermo-optic skin functions as a concealing device or a protective layer when it comes to Kusanagi's naked body; instead, both Kusanagi and Batou are very aware of her nakedness when she has to undress. When Batou arrives on the jetty where Kusanagi is scuba diving and sees Kusanagi peeling off her wetsuit, Batou immediately blushes and looks away. Kusanagi also demurely turns her back on Batou to undress, keeping her body averted. However, the camera still focuses on the cleft of her buttocks visible above the open wetsuit, displaying her body to the gaze of both Batou and the viewer.



Fig.20 *Ghost in the Shell* film poster. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost_in_the_Shell_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost_in_the_Shell_(film))

Kusanagi's body is most obviously displayed for the pleasure of the male gaze in the cyborg birth scene, where her naked body is rotated in front of the camera for five minutes, director Mamoru Oshii ostensibly making sure that the viewer does not miss a single angle or spectacle. The official film poster (Fig.20) evokes this scene, depicting Kusanagi's naked body with a number of wires and conduits protruding from her flesh.

This image immediately recalls Fig.13 in the first chapter, as Kusanagi's highly sexualised body seems both threatening and vulnerable at the same time. While she is holding a prominent weapon, symbolic of her fighting cyborg status, she is openly inviting the desiring gaze, complicit in her own portrayal as an available and docile object of sexual desire. She is furthermore limited and trapped by the conduits shackling her to some unseen object, robbing her of her freedom of movement and thus also her autonomy.

Another crucial element raised by the imagery of the opening sequence is the theme of birth and motherhood. After the five-minute cyborg birth sequence, Kusanagi finally emerges from the cyborg birthing tank, water running down her naked body. She is represented as a technological Aphrodite, a cyborg goddess of eroticism, as the camera focuses on the way in which water trickles down her breasts and thighs. The birth scene is later evoked in the scuba diving scene, as one sees Kusanagi slowly surfacing from the water – an archetypal symbol of birth and motherhood – before taking her wetsuit off in front of Batou. She then questions him about what it means to be constructed as a cyborg body and how it feeds into her identity, as she obviously questions the implications of her second “birth” as a cyborg. As Carl Silvio argues,

Kusanagi undergoes a profound humanist crisis concerning her cybernetic construction and what it suggests about her identity. Despite her success as an operative, [Kusanagi] is acutely aware that her entire sense of self and consciousness are inseparable from the organization to which she belongs; it has supplied all the hardware and software that make her who she is and can repossess them should she ever decide to quit⁹.

The birth scene, with its accompanying wedding song, is finally brought to fruition when Kusanagi transcends her cyborg body at the end of the film. In *Ghost in the Shell*, Kusanagi and her colleagues search for the mysterious “Puppet Master”, a criminal hacker who “ghosthacked” one of the minister’s interpreters by “hacking” into her brain.

⁹ www.depauw.edu/SFs/backissues/77/silvio77.htm (site accessed 10 May 2009).

“Ghosthacking”, in the film, means to literally enter another person’s “ghost” (the film’s term for “consciousness” or “inner self”), usually against his or her will, in order to control or manipulate the person.

One night, a female cyborg is assembled at Megatech without approval before it escapes into the city, where it is run over. When Section 9 retrieves the cyborg body, they discover that it does not contain a single human cell – instead, it houses the “ghost” of the Puppet Master. The Puppet Master turns out to be a computer programme created by Section 6, known as Project 2501, for the purpose of “ghosthacking” various people for nefarious government reasons. However, it gained sentience and thus constructed the cyborg body at Megatech so that it could escape and find Section 9, searching for both political asylum from Section 6 and for Kusanagi herself. Towards the end of the film, Kusanagi’s “ghost” enters the ruined cyborg body so that she can contact its “ghost” directly. The Puppet Master tells her that it has wished to meet her for a long time, as it wants their two separate “ghosts” to merge and form a new entity. As soon as Kusanagi agrees, Section 6 destroys the Puppet Master’s cyborg body with sniper fire. When she regains consciousness, she finds herself in Batou’s apartment in a new, girl-child cyborg body. She is no longer Kusanagi, but a new “ghost” that is both Kusanagi and the Puppet Master at the same time.

Ghost in the Shell relies on the same Cartesian discourse found in *Neuromancer*. The title already evokes an understanding of the body as nothing more than an empty “shell” housing the more important mind or “ghost”. Just like Molly, Kusanagi’s cyborg body is seen as a mere “shell” or “meat puppet”, a physical hindrance, while her “ghost” can access cyberspace, again inscribing cyberspace in the rhetoric of the Cartesian dualism. Also, the AI called Project 2501 becomes more commonly known as the Puppet Master, once again implying that physical bodies are nothing more than “meat puppets” which the Puppet Master can control through cyberspace when it “ghosthacks” their “shells”.

However, unlike Molly in *Neuromancer*, Kusanagi can finally transcend the limitations of her “shell” to become one with the Puppet Master. Still, her transcendence does not liberate her from patriarchal gendered politics in the least. As Sundén claims,

[t]he theme of the ritual burying of the body through its final collapse into the Matrix (as in *mater*, the Latin word for womb) is central in cyborg imagery. But where the “meat” is left behind and the disembodied consciousness released from its earthly groundings, the Cartesian separation of mind from body is no longer a contradiction, a divide under threat, but rearticulated and fortified. This transcendence as disembodiment will, according to (cyber)feminists, repeat the classical patriarchal model, which strengthens masculinity as abstraction, and in this way essentialising “embodied others. (216)

When Kusanagi and the Puppet Master merge at the end of the film – in much the same way that Wintermute and Neuromancer merge at the end of *Neuromancer* – they become a single new entity. The new entity thus consists of both Kusanagi’s and the Puppet Master’s separate “ghosts”. Still, the Puppet Master tellingly informs her: “You will bear my offspring onto the Net itself,” immediately inscribing Kusanagi in a conventional maternal role. It is significant that the new entity is a small, girl-child cyborg figure, suggesting that Kusanagi has literally given birth to the Puppet Master’s daughter. However, it is also interesting that the new entity is a young girl instead of a boy, disrupting a patriarchal line of descent that would focus on only fathers and sons. Rather, if one reads the new entity as the offspring of Kusanagi and the Puppet Master, it would suggest a return to a matrilineal line of descent, from Kusanagi to her cyborg “daughter”, ostensibly positing a more liberatory gender politics in the film.

The Puppet Master, a genderless accumulation of data, is constantly referred to as a “he” in the film¹⁰. When two members of Section 6 arrive in Section 9 to reclaim the cyborg

¹⁰ Once again, just as in *Neuromancer*, one finds a genderless data construct which is then referred to as a “he”, illustrating male primacy. *Ghost in the Shell*, however, demonstrates a higher level of awareness

body housing the Puppet Master – a naked female cyborg “shell”, interestingly enough, with a delicate face and prominent breasts – they refer to it as “he”, despite the fact that the female cyborg shell’s breasts are highlighted as they speak. This confuses the Section 9 operatives, until one Section 6 member explains: “Its original sex remains undetermined and the use of the term ‘he’ is merely a nickname the good doctor has given it.” By inscribing a male gender onto the genderless Puppet Master, the film further strengthens the idea that Kusanagi and the Puppet Master become conventional, heterosexual “parents” and that Kusanagi assumes the maternal role of giving birth to their “child”. This discourse of motherhood is highly problematic, as there is no real “child”, since Kusanagi and the Puppet Master are not the “parents” of the new entity, but *are* in fact the new entity themselves. The film thus seems to suggest that, because Kusanagi is a woman, she must necessarily “bear” children, inscribing her within the discourse of biological determinism where even radical cyborg bodies become vehicles for reproduction.

In Gibson’s *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, the last book in Gibson’s *Sprawl* trilogy, even the “fey, elegant, deadly” (167) Molly is turned into a surrogate mother for a young Japanese girl named Kumiko, suggesting that even ferocious cyborg warriors secretly long for the space of motherhood. As Silvio claims, “[w]e can thus read the film as a cultural site that works to produce a certain ideological belief, a belief in the persistence of traditional gender roles and sexual identity despite the profound technological changes impacting our culture”¹¹. The fact that the Puppet Master is referred to as “he” not only suggests that it “impregnates” Kusanagi, but also implies that it, in fact, *rapes* her. In much the same way as Case’s “simstim” switch evokes a rape scene in *Neuromancer*, the fact that the Puppet Master “ghosthacks” Kusanagi’s cyborg “shell” and then “impregnates” her, leaves the viewer with the uneasy feeling that the Puppet Master entered her body and somehow violated it.

when it comes to the social construction of gender roles than *Neuromancer*, as the characters in the film comment on their arbitrary use of a masculine pronoun, admitting that they could have called the AI anything they wanted to. Unlike the Dixie Flatline, who insists that an AI can only be an “it”, the characters in *Ghost in the Shell* conclude that the sex of the AI is still “undetermined”.

¹¹ www.depauw.edu/SFs/backissues/77/silvio77.htm (site accessed 10 May 2009).

In this way, the film comes full circle; from Kusanagi's birth as a cyborg body in the opening sequence, with the wedding song foreshadowing her later union with the Puppet Master, to the "birth" of Kusanagi's cyborg "daughter", the film posits the female cyborg in the traditional gendered tropes of sexual fantasy and maternity. Silvio argues that *Ghost in the Shell* ultimately encourages us to read Kusanagi as a maternal figure and, "in so doing, naturalises the alignment of women with motherhood and/or an eroticised spectacle offered for visual consumption"¹². Cohen Shabot further notes how the "cyborg has been used, even if in a dissimulated way, to reinstate the 'natural', normative order with its known distinct and very well defined categories and divisions" (223). Once again, the cyborg body's negation of the corporeal only results in the reiteration of conventional gendered stereotypes, rather than liberation from oppressive gendered practices.

The Battle for the Body: *Battlestar Galactica* and Cyborg Consciousness

Battlestar Galactica, Ronald D. Moore's 2003 remake of Glen A. Larson's original 1978 television series, makes use of very complex and fascinating cyborg imagery, especially with regard to the tropes of technology, embodiment and motherhood. *Battlestar Galactica*'s human-machine hybrids are known as "cylons" (cybernetic lifeform nodes), rather than "cyborgs"; even though both cyborgs and cylons can superficially be described as an amalgamation of human and machine, there are also crucial differences in the way in which the series represents cylon bodies. While conventional cyborg figures have always represented the cyborg body as a fundamentally human body, augmented and improved by the addition of mechanical prostheses, *Battlestar Galactica*'s portrayal of the cylon body completely deconstructs the conventional dualism between body and machine.

There are two distinct "generations" of cylons in the series. Instead of blurring the boundaries between human and machine, the cylons are rather divided into the wholly machinic, earlier generation cylons and the new generation of wholly organic, humanoid

¹² www.depauw.edu/SFs/backissues/77/silvio77.htm (site accessed 10 May 2009).

cylons. The earlier generation of cylons cannot be associated with cyborg figures, nor can they function as representatives of Haraway's cyborg discourse, as they are nothing more than robots whose autonomous intelligence is equal to that of human beings¹³. The bodies of the humanoid cylons, however, are represented as organic machines, which allows for far more interesting and radically new configurations of cyborg imagery. The bodies of the humanoid cylon characters in *Battlestar Galactica* are completely organic; their bodies are made of living cells, tissue, organs, bones and blood. They have no technological implants and are rarely seen carrying any sort of weaponry. Apart from increased physical strength, they have no hidden superhuman fighting powers, as is the case with most conventional cyborg figures. This makes their bodies quite frail; they need oxygen to survive and can be suffocated or drowned, they are dependent on food and water and can be starved, they feel pain, both physically and emotionally, they will bruise when beaten, they will bleed when wounded and one gunshot is enough to kill them – making them, in a word, human. Still, cylons are *not* humans, as they are constructed as organic *machines*. One could thus conclude that, while cyborgs are conventionally seen as humans with mechanically augmented bodies, cylons are rather seen as wholly organic machines.

This would, of course, immediately imply that cylon figures could finally realise Haraway's utopian cyborg discourse, as the fixed boundaries between human and machine are completely collapsed in the figure of the humanoid cylon. Unlike conventional cyborg bodies, cylon figures do not fix their power at the level of technology, as they are always simultaneously both machinic and organic. Their bodies resist any rigid demarcation of boundaries, which would mean that the representation of cylon figures could allow for more fluid discursive spaces. However, the cylon figures in the series quickly fall prey to the gendered stereotypes already discussed in terms of the cyborg body. This section concentrates on the cylon model known as Six, looking specifically at the cylon body and its negation of the corporeal. It examines the gendered

¹³ In the pilot episode of the prequel series, *Caprica* (2009), one learns that the first successful cylon model was built with the downloaded consciousness of a young human girl named Zoë.

portrayal of three of the Six characters, namely Internal Six, Caprica Six and Gina Inviere¹⁴.

The opening sequence of the first episode of *Battlestar Galactica* informs viewers that

the cylons were created by man. They were created to make life easier on the twelve Colonies. And then the day came when the Cylons decided to kill their masters. After a long and bloody struggle, an armistice was declared. The Cylons left for another world to call their own. A remote space station was built where Cylon and Human could meet and maintain diplomatic relations. Every year, the Colonials send an officer. The Cylons send no one. No one has seen or heard from the Cylons in over forty years. (Miniseries, Part I)

The series opens on the 40th anniversary of the armistice, as the cylons suddenly return with a surprise nuclear attack and annihilate the twelve human planets, known as the Twelve Colonies of Kobol. The plot revolves around the plight of the last surviving members of the human race aboard a ragbag civilian fleet, watched over by an old military battleship called the Galactica. The series follows humanity's struggle to survive persistent attacks by the cylon forces and its search for a new home, driven by prophecies of a mythical thirteenth colony, named Earth.

The viewer first sees Six on the planet Caprica with her lover, Dr Gaius Baltar, Caprica's foremost scientist. Moments before the cylon attack, she confesses to Baltar that she is actually a cylon agent tasked with seducing him in order to gain access to the Colonies' military defence mainframe. Baltar, however, is openly sceptical. "You're a machine," he exclaims in disbelief. "You're a synthetic woman, a robot... I'm having the tiniest little bit of trouble believing that, because the last time anybody saw the Cylons, they looked

¹⁴ In the series, there are twelve distinct cylon models, named after the numbers one to twelve. There is, however, no limit to the number of individual cylon *characters* of any given model that can exist at the same time. In other words, there are many different, unique and individual Six characters in the series, even though they all appear as identical copies of the same model.

more like walking chrome toasters.” She assures him that “[t]hose models are still around,” since they “have their uses”, but that cylons now resemble human beings in every way. “You mean there’s more out there like you?” the dumbfounded Baltar asks. “There are twelve models,” she tells him. “I’m number Six” (Miniseries, Part I). Soon after she makes her startling revelation, the attack begins. The viewer sees Six trying to shield Baltar as the detonation of the nuclear bomb hits his house and the scene dissolves into white light.

The original cylon models – the “walking chrome toasters,” as Baltar calls them – are bulky, cumbersome, metallic robots with arms doubling as guns. They are known as “centurions” and are strongly reminiscent of the typical broad-shouldered, gun-wielding, invulnerable male cyborg bodies discussed in the first chapter. While they are never explicitly gendered, both the name “centurion” and their rather predictable portrayal as conventional male cyborg bodies suggest a violent, “masculine” character. The twelve humanoid cylon models, on the other hand, resemble humans so closely that it becomes virtually impossible to tell a cylon from a human. Much of the tension in the series is thus sustained by the fact that anyone could be a potential cylon spy. However, even though cylon figures so closely resemble human beings that they appear in no way technologically modified, they still reiterate the same problems that were discussed in chapter one in relation to cyborg figures.

Just like the centurions, the humanoid cylons conform to the same gendered stereotypes associated with conventional cyborg figures; Six, for example, is characterised by both her hypersexualised body and by her negation of the corporeal. Even amongst the cylon characters themselves, rampant gender stereotyping seems to be at the order of the day. When a Six argues in the episode “Six of One” that each cylon model has a unique personality and will thus always act in a certain manner, a One – one of the male cylon models – patronises her by agreeing that while all Sixes have “that mouth” and all Eights have “those breasts”, all Ones have “this mind” (Season Four, Episode 2). The One thus immediately associates the identity of the female models with their lips and breasts, two features which are highlighted in most gendered portrayals of female cyborg bodies,

while he locates the identity of the masculine One model at the level of the mind, once again reiterating Cartesian dualisms. It is noteworthy that it is a One, the most patriarchal and controlling of the humanoid cylon models, who inscribes the identity of the female models in terms of their sexualised bodies. Six, in particular, is always represented in terms of her hypersexualised body. She wears the most sensual clothes of all the female cylon models, her favourite outfit being an incredibly revealing red dress and stiletto heels, which she often takes off for the desiring gaze of both Baltar and the camera. Six thus functions at the level of the hypersexualised female body, as it both defines her character and becomes her only source of influence and control.

After Baltar is rescued from Caprica and taken aboard the Galactica, Six, whom he presumed was dead, suddenly appears on the ship. At first Baltar is frightened that someone will see him with a cylon and deduce that he is personally responsible for the destruction of the human race, but after a while he realises that he is the only one able to see her. She often appears to Baltar throughout the series, advising him in times of crisis and guiding his political career until Baltar becomes president of the Colonies at the end of season two. This specific Six character, known as Internal Six, only exists inside Baltar's mind in an illusory, dreamlike space that resembles his house on Caprica. While the series never explains exactly how Internal Six came to occupy Baltar's mind, it is hinted that the blast on Caprica somehow led to her consciousness merging with Baltar's. Even though Internal Six almost invariably appears to Baltar in highly seductive and sexualised contexts, it is important to note that she is not simply a sexual fantasy. Baltar's imagination cannot call her up at will, nor can he control her when she does appear.

Threatened by the fact that an autonomous and powerful woman exists inside his mind, Baltar tries to dismiss Internal Six as a sexual fantasy of his own making. In the episode "Six Degrees of Separation," Baltar and Internal Six are in the virtual bedroom of his house on Caprica. Baltar wants to have sex with her, but she keeps bringing up the one cylon god¹⁵, insisting that Baltar embrace the cylon god's love and give himself over to

¹⁵ The humans in the series are, interestingly enough, polytheistic, worshipping gods reminiscent of ancient Greece's Olympian pantheon, whereas the cylons are fervently monotheistic.

their god's divine plan for him. Baltar, who is only interested in embracing Internal Six, tells her: "What you are doing, darling, is boring me to death with your superstitious drivel, your metaphysical nonsense [which] no rational, intelligent free-thinking human being truly believes. Which leads me to the inescapable conclusion that cylons are, in the final analysis, little more than toasters... with great looking legs." When she walks out of the room, Baltar shouts: "It's my fantasy, see if I care!" However, having walked out of the room, Internal Six is no longer present in Baltar's mind. Instead, a Six model called Shelly Godfrey mysteriously appears on Galactica to accuse Baltar of aiding the cylons:

"You're the one who let the Cylons into the defence mainframe. You've betrayed your entire race. You're the man responsible for the holocaust, and I'm here to see you exposed, and sentenced to death as the traitor you really are." (Season 1, Episode 7)

Facing the death penalty, Baltar imagines himself running through his empty Caprica house, desperately calling to Internal Six for help, but she is no longer there to guide him. At the end of the episode, the fraught Baltar gives in and prays to the cylon god. Immediately, Internal Six is back with him, comforting him, while Shelly Godfrey disappears as suddenly as she appeared in the first place. This episode proves that Internal Six, while occupying Baltar's mind, is not a product of his imagination. She is an entity in her own right, who can even leave Baltar's mind if she pleases, as the character of Shelly Godfrey illustrates. She acts with autonomy throughout the series and has the power to manipulate Baltar into doing what she wants. Her power, however, is solely as a result of her sexuality, which she uses as a tool to bend Baltar to her will. As a cylon figure, she does not rely on physical superiority or fighting prowess to control Baltar's actions, but rather takes ownership of her hypersexualised cylon body as a means of empowering herself. It is very rare to find a hypersexualised female cyborg figure in popular culture that is able to act with autonomy and agency. *Battlestar Galactica* is unique in that it posits its hypersexualised cylon character as a powerful, autonomous woman who is neither docile nor subservient. She becomes the only female cyborg figure

discussed thus far to truly appropriate her hypersexualised nature and to use it as a way of both manipulating and controlling men.

However, it seems as if the series, as soon as it posits Internal Six as a powerful, sexually commanding woman, immediately tries to limit the strength and influence of her rampant sexuality, framing it within the patriarchal trope of motherhood. Internal Six is exceedingly preoccupied with motherhood. While cylons cannot reproduce, Internal Six repeatedly tells Baltar that they will have a child together and that their child will herald a bright new future for cylons and humans. When an Eight gives birth to the first human-cylon baby onboard the *Galatica*, Internal Six immediately claims the child as her own, ordering Baltar to protect the baby with his life. In this way, the series co-opts the unbridled and sometimes threatening sexuality of Internal Six into the conventional gendered trope of nurturing maternity.

Ron Moore, creator of the series, describes the Six model as “a sort of a Madonna/whore made real”¹⁶, drawing on, arguably, two of the oldest patriarchal gender stereotypes. This quote effectively illustrates the two crucial yet most problematic characteristics of Internal Six. Firstly, Internal Six’s cylon body is turned into an erotic spectacle for the pleasure of the desiring male gaze. However, as soon as her sexuality empowers her to manipulate and control men, it is again safely inscribed in the discourse of motherhood, limiting her to conventional gendered stereotypes associated with female bodies. Internal Six’s cylon body is thus represented in much the same way as Kusanagi’s cyborg body is represented in *Ghost in the Shell*, with one crucial difference – Kusanagi’s power is located at the level of technology, whereas Internal Six, a wholly organic machine, looks to her hypersexualised body for the source of her power. Still, both characters can be read as seemingly powerful female figures whose bodies are, firstly, put on display for the pleasure of the male gaze and then, secondly, inscribed into the trope of motherhood. This image is most apparent in an episode from the fourth season called “The Road Less Travelled”. Internal Six appears behind Baltar in a bright blue dress, while the light in the scene frames her head as if she is crowned with a halo of holy light, an image strongly

¹⁶ http://battlestargalactica.me/moderndocs/jl_eps_guide0010.htm (site accessed 10 May 2009).

reminiscent of most depictions of the Madonna. In a rare submissive display, Internal Six stands behind Baltar and fusses with his clothing, posing her character as a supportive and nurturing maternal figure.

Another method that the series employs to limit the threatening sexual power of its hypersexualised female characters is rape. In much the same way that Baltar tries to contain Internal Six's sexual agency by pretending that she is his sexual fantasy, the crew aboard the battlestar Pegasus, a second battlestar introduced in season two, favour rape as a method of punishment when it comes to cylon prisoners. Gina Inviere, a Six model pretending to be a systems analyst on the Pegasus, seduces Admiral Helen Cain as a way of gaining access to the battlestar's defence mainframe, but her cylon identity is discovered soon after the initial cylon attacks. The betrayed Cain, enraged and humiliated that her lover has turned out to be a cylon spy, responds with particular cruelty when it comes to Inviere's imprisonment. Over the course of the next few months, Inviere is repeatedly raped and tortured, until the battlestars Galactica and Pegasus meet in a chance encounter and Baltar intervenes on the prisoner's behalf. The use of rape as a method of punishment is highly ironic, since the series first posits the Six model as a hypersexualised body, but then seemingly "punishes" her unrestrained sexuality through the trope of rape. The female cylon characters in the series can thus only assert their sexual power as long as it does not disrupt patriarchal gendered politics or threaten to undermine male power.

In an article on rape as a narrative of social control, Helen Moffett argues that men "use rape to inscribe subordinate status on to an intimately known 'Other' – women", since "sexual violence has become a socially endorsed punitive project for maintaining patriarchal order" (129). She further argues that, as a "tool of social control, sexual violence is especially effective, as it combines the unpleasantness of physical violence with deep shame and self-blame on the part of the victim" (141). While Moffett's article focuses explicitly on the question as to why rape is such a pervasive and widespread problem in post-apartheid South Africa, challenging the new democratic South Africa's dependence on a patriarchal heritage that is both outdated and perilous to gender equality,

her argument is equally valid for a discussion on how *Battlestar Galactica*'s male characters use rape as a patriarchal tool to control the sexual influence and power of the female cylon characters. Sexual violence, as Moffett points out, "lies in the construction of dominant masculinities found in all patriarchal social systems" (137). There is no question that the military rule aboard the two battlestars in the series constitutes a patriarchal social system that is threatened by the unbridled sexual power of the Six characters.

Moffett recounts a televised interview that was screened on South African television in 1999, in which a taxi-driver openly described how

he and his friends would cruise around at weekends, looking for a likely victim to abduct and "gang-bang". His story was unselfconscious and undefended: he showed no awareness that he was describing rape, much less criminal behaviour. When the interviewer pointed out that his actions constituted rape, he was visibly astonished. What was most striking was his spontaneous and indignant response: "But these women, they force us to rape them!" He followed this astonishing disavowal of male agency by explaining that he and his friends picked only those women who "asked for it". When asked to define what this meant, he said, "It's the cheeky ones – the ones that walk around like they own the place, and look you in the eye." (138)

"This," Moffett concludes, "reflects a disturbing pattern in which a woman is described as 'asking for it' because she has asserted her own will" (138). In other words, when women visibly demonstrate "a degree of autonomy or self-worth that men find unacceptable, they are perceived as sufficiently subversive and threatening as to compel men to 'discipline' them through sexual violence" (Moffett 138). This argument is highly relevant to understanding how the discourse of rape is utilised in the series. As soon as the Six characters threaten to undermine the two battlestars' patriarchal military rule, they

are either cast as conventional maternal figures or “disciplined” through rape as a way of controlling their sexual agency and their power over men¹⁷.

The rape scene might also be read as a reason for Six’s ongoing negation of the corporeal. Throughout the series, Six never attaches any value to her physical body, viewing it as a necessary receptacle for her consciousness. In the case of Internal Six, the negation of the corporeal is quite obvious, since her character is disembodied to the extent that her consciousness exists only in another person’s mind. Caprica Six and Inviere, while occupying physical cylon bodies, can be said to be equally disembodied cylon figures, as both characters represent the supremacy of consciousness over corporeality, once again reiterating Cartesian dualisms.

Caprica Six, the cylon character who seduced Baltar on Caprica, becomes a minor celebrity among the cylons, since they view her as a war hero who ensured their successful attack on the Colonies, thus earning her individualised epithet “Caprica”. Moments before his house explodes, the viewer sees Baltar frantically searching for a way to save himself. He appeals to Caprica Six to rescue him, but Caprica Six, who appears incredibly calm for someone about to die in a nuclear explosion, assures Baltar that there is no escape plan, since she cannot be killed: “Gaius, I can't die. When this body's destroyed, my memory, my consciousness, will be transmitted to a new one. I'll just wake up somewhere else in an identical body” (Miniseries, Part 1). She makes it very clear that her identity, her very being, consists solely of her consciousness and that it has nothing to do with “this body”, as she disparagingly refers to it. She believes that she can’t die, because those things that constitute her being – her memories and consciousness – can be downloaded into another body. According to the cylons, this is their greatest strength, as death becomes nothing more than a learning experience for them. One particular Three model finds death such an enlightening experience¹⁸ that she

¹⁷ Helen Cain, the admiral on the Pegasus, is, of course, a woman, but as a military commander, she assumes and appropriates all the traditionally masculine stereotypes associated with her position, to the extent that she orders her male colleagues and subordinates to rape her female lover.

¹⁸ Three believes that she can see the faces of the mysterious Final Five, the five cylon models whose identities are not known to the other cylons, in the moment before she “downloads” into another body.

orders the centurions to shoot her over and over again, so that she can “download” as many times as possible. Neither death nor the loss of the physical body troubles the cylon characters, as they believe that death will release their souls from the limitations of the flesh and make them one with the cylon god – with the exception of the atheistic One model, who announces to a horrified Eight model: “We’re machines. We don’t have souls” (Season 4, Episode 2).

The Six models, on the other hand, fervently believe that death will release their souls to the cylon god. When Baltar arrives on the Pegasus to help Inviere, both he and Internal Six are shocked at the terrible state she is in. Inviere is incapable of speech at first, but after Baltar procures food and clean clothing for her, slowly gaining her trust, her first words to him are: “I want to die. Will you help me do that? Will you kill me, please?” (Season 2, Episode 11). Baltar is loath to lose Inviere, having fallen in love with this fragile, more docile and, ultimately, *physical* version of Internal Six, but she repeatedly pleads with him to kill her. “I’m ready to die,” she assures him. “Send my soul to god. Please” (Season 2, Episode 12). Instead, Baltar helps her to escape and hides her aboard Cloud Nine, a civilian ship, where she later destroys both herself and the entire ship in a suicide bombing.

In the episode “Resurrection Ship I” (Season 2, Episode 11), Inviere explains to Baltar that each cylon fleet contains a so-called resurrection ship where the consciousness of a dying cylon is downloaded into another body. No cylon basestar is ever without its resurrection ship, for if a cylon dies and there is no resurrection ship nearby, the cylon will not be able to download and will be truly dead. It is only seven episodes later, in “Downloaded”, that the viewer sees Caprica Six as she downloads into a new body after the explosion on Caprica. She suddenly wakes up inside a “resurrection tank”, in which the “spare bodies” are kept within a gelatinous fluid until the moment when a cylon’s consciousness downloads. In a beautifully symmetrical reversal of gender roles, Caprica Six sees Baltar kneeling at the side of the resurrection tank and is surprised that the other

While highly significant to the religious beliefs of the cylons, this plot development has little relevance for the argument here and will not be discussed in detail.

cylons cannot see or hear him, revealing to the viewer that Caprica Six has an Internal Baltar. Internal Baltar, however, is much more derisive and sarcastic than the real Baltar. Also, Internal Baltar is dressed in a neat suit and is never displayed as a sexualised object, as Internal Six is. As the camera zooms out, the viewer can see countless resurrection tanks, suggesting that the corporeal body is simply another replacement part. This scene is one of the strongest avowals of the series' underlying Cartesian dualism, as the body becomes a vulgar container to house the unique consciousness of each cylon. The series thus reduces the corporeal body to something that is willingly negated, as humanoid cylons attach value only to their consciousness.

Interestingly enough, the human characters are no more embodied than the cylons. This is understandable in the context of the series, since, as cylon bodies resemble human bodies in every way, the humans no longer equate human identity with their physical bodies. Instead, they look to more abstract concepts, such as truth, trust and honour, to define humanity, thus attaching more value to their consciousness than their physical bodies. However, Laura Roslin, the president of the Colonies, obsessively counts every human body aboard the fleet, daily updating the total number of human beings on the white board in her office. One could argue that, as president, she is only concerned with the survival of the species, and that the number of human beings still alive represents nothing more than humanity's continued existence to her. Still, she is the only truly embodied character in the series. It is also noteworthy that she is the only powerful and influential female character in the series that does not somehow negate her physical body.

Originally a teacher, Roslin becomes the Minister of Education on Caprica. After the cylon attacks, she is the only minister still alive and by default becomes the president of the Colonies. The Commander of Galactica, William Adama and his Executive Officer (XO), Colonel Saul Tigh, initially believe that the military should be in charge of the fleet and consider that a schoolteacher would never be capable of leadership. They constantly undermine her authority in the first few episodes and speak about her in patronising, demeaning terms. Roslin, at least initially, has to struggle continuously to assert herself against Adama and the military's patriarchal prejudices against her. However, she proves

to be a commanding, successful and resilient leader, eventually winning both Adama and Tigh over to her side. Her character is also very feminine, represented through all the conventional cultural markers of femininity; skirts, high-heeled court shoes, make-up, jewellery and long hair. Even her name, Laura Roslin, has connotations of conventional femininity, as both her first name and surname are common names for women. Still, Roslin's body is never portrayed as overtly sexualised. She occasionally flirts with Adama in a teasing manner, suggesting intimacy between them, but never uses her sexuality as a political tool to strengthen her presidency. Roslin's character thus posits a powerful female whose power is not directly related to her sexuality, but rather to her strong personality, intelligence and leadership qualities. Most importantly, Roslin's power as president is located at the level of her vulnerable physical body. Since she has cancer, she has to take a hallucinogenic herbal medicine called Kamala extract. The Kamala allows her to see prophetic visions of Earth, and she promises the surviving humans that she will lead them to their new home. Since it is written in the Colonials' scripture that a dying leader will lead the way to Earth, this vastly increases popular support for Roslin's presidency.

When Adama visits Roslin in the Galactica sick bay, he asks if he can get her anything. "A new body," Roslin jokes. "Perhaps one of those young Cylon models from the resurrection ship." "I can't see you as a blonde," Adama teases back (Season 2, Episode 11). While meant as a joke, Adama's response that Roslin cannot be "a blonde" is an obvious reference to Six, suggesting that Roslin is more than just a hypersexualised body, that she is not dependent on her sexuality for power and that she can wield real power without having to be inscribed into conventional gendered tropes, such as the trope of motherhood.

Roslin's cancer, intimately connected to her body, and the Kamala-induced visions she experiences as a result of her cancer, ultimately serve as the foundation for her success as a leader. This is, however, immediately troubling, as it suggests that the price for being a powerful female character is, in due course, death. The series thus creates one truly powerful, embodied female character, who constantly challenges Adama's patriarchal

military authority, but then turns her body into the reason for her eventual demise. As with the character of Six, Roslin's power is finally limited by the underlying patriarchal structures that govern the Galactica's military rule.

In conclusion, *Battlestar Galactica* creates an almost unique representation of the female cyborg as an eroticised spectacle for the pleasure of the male gaze, without negating her power as an autonomous and influential character. The character of Six is the only female cyborg figure discussed thus far who is able to use her highly sexualised cyborg body in order to manipulate and control men. However, the series limits and controls the threatening sexual power of its female cyborg characters by either inscribing Six into conventional feminine gender norms, such as motherhood, or by "punishing" her assertive sexual power through the discourse of rape.

"Virtuality is Patriarchy's Blind Spot"¹⁹: The Failure of the Cyborg Body

The three female cyborg figures discussed in this chapter, namely Molly, Kusanagi and Six, share many crucial similarities: all three are hypersexualised figures whose bodies are put on display for the pleasure of the male gaze, all three are seemingly powerful female characters whose power is then quickly reinscribed into conventional gendered stereotypes and all three negate their physical bodies through different expressions of the same old Cartesian discourse. Hypersexualised cyborg figures, as Cohen Shabot argues,

are mostly not real gendered subjects, but creatures that escape all the features of the embodied existence, gender included, in order to become platonic ideals, transcendent beings. This act of transcendence maintains many of the power structures intact, and it also brings with itself the danger of giving legitimacy to undertake a struggle in order to achieve perfect beings, a struggle that can be so easily associated with fascist or racist ideologies. (228)

¹⁹ <http://echonyc.com:70/0/Cul/Cyber/paterson> (site accessed 23 April 2008).

It is clear that the power structures of patriarchy are most definitely kept intact in the portrayal of cyborg bodies, and that this reiteration of patriarchal gender politics is fundamentally concerned with the cyborg body's negation of the corporeal. Since all three cyborg figures are more interested in transcending their bodies and celebrating their consciousness, the mind/body dualism is repeated and strengthened until it becomes the foundation for other dichotomies of power, such as human/machine, nature/culture and, most notably, male/female. Ultimately, cyborg figures cannot realise the postgendered possibilities inherent to Haraway's utopian cyborg manifesto, as the negation of the corporeal will always strengthen masculinity as an abstraction, while relegating the female body to conventional gendered stereotypes of femininity, motherhood and immanence.

Sandy Stone writes that "[c]yberspace developers foresee a time when they will be able to forget about the body. But it is important to remember that virtual community originates in, and must return to, the physical. No refigured virtual body, no matter how beautiful, will slow the death of a cyberpunk with AIDS. Even in the age of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies" (quoted in Gray 134). Cohen Shabot also argues that "a return to the concrete, organic, carnal body – even if just for a brief moment – may remind us of the impossibility of definitively running away from the imperfections of the flesh. New figurations, which include the technological, but which, at the same time, ground themselves strongly in the body, must be created" (231). The third chapter will examine newly emerging, more embodied virtual subjects as a possible answer to the cyborg body's negation of the corporeal, showing how the embodied virtual subject attempts to finally move away from Cartesian dualisms.

Chapter 3

(Dis)Embodied Visions and Virtual Bodies: The Corporeal Body in Cyberspace

“In cyberspace the transgendered body is the natural body.”
– Allucquère Rosanne Stone¹

“Sometimes they forget that ‘the’ body comes in genders.”
– Judith Butler²

In an interview with Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, Donna Haraway remarked that “(t)echnology has determined what counts as our own bodies in crucial ways” (12). According to Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*, “we are already cyborgs, already creatures that are wondrously both human and technological” (Penley and Ross 18-19). “Technology,” Sara Cohen Shabot agrees, “has become a part of our bodies, an important feature in our daily lives” (231), while Michael Heim goes as far as to claim that “life’s body is becoming indistinguishable from its computer prosthesis” (quoted in Foster “Rhetoric” 151). “In media art as well as in computer science,” writes Barbara Becker,

in philosophy as in literature, the amalgamation of organic and technical, real and virtual, material and immaterial processes is discussed and explored. People present themselves as virtual agents or cyberpersonalities and experiment with their own identities by crossing traditional borders... New concepts of body and identity are explored, revealing fluid and open forms. In literature, we find cyborgs and robots, multiple identities and virtual bodies, avatars and agents, transhumanists and extropians, all indicating the dissolution of classical differences. (361)

Indeed, as these critics so aptly indicate, it is becoming impossible to separate the corporeal from the technological, not only when speaking of more imaginary cyborg

¹ Quoted in Foster, “‘Trapped by the Body?’ Telepresence, Technologies and Transgendered Performance in Feminist and Lesbian Rewritings of Cyberpunk Fiction.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 43(3), 1997: 708-742.

² Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993: ix.

configurations and tropes, but also when speaking of the physical reality of lived bodies and embodied experiences. More and more, the everyday reality of lived bodies is in some or other way technologically mediated, from something as simple as email correspondence to more extreme examples, such as implanted pacemakers. Cohen Shabot notably points out how it has become impossible to ignore the issue of technology and the impact it has on our subjectivities. “Concretely,” she argues, “we should talk about our impossible escape from cyborgs and technologically transformed bodies” (231).

However, as the previous chapter illustrates, the fusion of the corporeal with the technological invariably results in the erasure of embodiment, where the loss of embodiment, in turn, results in the reiteration of Cartesian dualisms. In this way, the mind/body dualism is repeated and strengthened until it becomes the foundation for other dichotomies of power, such as human/machine, nature/culture and, most notably, male/female. Since cyborg figures could not realise the postgendered possibilities implicit in Haraway’s utopian Cyborg Manifesto, and given what Cohen Shabot terms our “impossible escape” from cyborg configurations, one is faced with the problem of how to represent technologically transformed bodies without reverting to the old, gendered stereotypes associated with the mind/body dualism. Since one cannot ignore the impact that technology has on embodied subjects, one must search for new ways of representing the technologically transformed body without simply performing, once again, the erasure of embodiment which lies at the heart of cyborg figurations. As Cohen Shabot insists, “(n)ew figurations, which include the technological, but which, at the same time, ground themselves strongly in the body, must be created” (213).

One of the most promising figurations of the corporeal and the technological is found in the newly emerging, increasingly embodied virtual subject. The previous chapter already noted how, in the early days of the Internet, cyberspace used to be characterised by the trope of disembodiment, involving a physical body on one side of a computer screen and a disembodied experience, either textual or graphic, somewhere in the indeterminate space that lay beyond the screen. Gibson himself remarked that “everyone [he] know[s] who works with computers seems to develop a belief that there’s some kind of *actual*

space behind the screen, someplace you can't see but you know it is there" (quoted in Wolmark 3). *Neuromancer*, however, describes cyberspace as a bodiless utopia into which a user can project "his [or her] disembodied consciousness" (12, emphasis added), thereby, as Thomas Foster argues, "reproducing and literalising the Cartesian dualism of mind and body that has traditionally been associated with the gendered distinctions between universal and particular, rational and emotional, masculine and feminine" ("Heart" 470). However, the very fact that, in the case of *Neuromancer*, it is undeniably *Case's* disembodied consciousness which enters cyberspace, implies a connection, however tenuous, between the disembodied consciousness of cyberspace and the embodied being behind the screen. Allucquère Rosanne Stone goes as far as to argue that it is wrong to compare the virtual/physical distinction with the classic mind/body distinction, as the virtual "presence" of the cyberspace user is not simply a disembodied consciousness, but rather a "different way of conceptualising a *relationship* to the human body" (40, emphasis added).

While Stone's argument is perhaps pushing the point too far, re-imagining the relationship between mind and body in a way which entirely erases embodiment itself, cyberspace is nevertheless becoming increasingly embodied, offering new possibilities for representing the fusion of the body with technology, without reverting to the gendered stereotypes inherent in Cartesian dualisms. Newly emerging virtual worlds are creating more fluid, ambiguous boundaries between the corporeal and the technological. Contemporary virtual worlds, such as The Sims Online (more commonly known by the abbreviation TSO), Second Life and Facebook, allow for innovative and increasingly embodied ways in which to represent the corporeal, gendered body in cyberspace. By examining the increasingly embodied nature of cyberspace, this chapter explores possible alternatives to the figure of the hypersexualised and disembodied cyborg, through investigating new and positive figurations with which to describe the embodied postmodern subject and its dependence on technology.

“Real Girls” in Cyberspace and the Performance of Gender

Shariann Lewitt’s short story, “A Real Girl” (1998), is a bizarre yet touching love story narrated by an organic computer construct, described in the story as “a neural processor” (507) or “a bio-AI” (511). The narrator is one of many organic computers at a research laboratory known simply as “the Institute”. The story revolves around the narrator’s love for her programmer, Andrea. Andrea and the narrator first meet when Andrea, a mathematician, arrives at “the Institute” as a research fellow to use the narrator for her work. “At first,” the narrator recalls, “we mainly talked about her work. She was entranced because few people can follow her, let alone hold a real conversation.” After a while, the narrator “invited her into the metaphor more fully, so that we could talk without the protocols of multiple devices getting in the way” (516).

The “metaphor” is Lewitt’s version of cyberspace, a beautiful virtual world defined by the unique “code” by which each computer programmer interacts with the narrator. The story does not specify whether this “code” is, as with most computer programming, an intricate collection of ones and zeros, or whether the programmers actually “code” in language. The fact that the narrator is an *organic* computer and not simply a mechanical object, which can only process information as either ones or zeros, suggests that the programmers might very well interact with the narrator through language. This theory is furthered strengthened by the fact that Lewitt constructs the narrator’s love for Andrea as a means of exploring both verbal and textual performances of gender, suggesting that the narrator and her programmers interact through language. According to the narrator, “(e)veryone codes differently” and, as a result, she “can usually tell the age and gender of the programmer” from the way he or she codes. This is why, the narrator informs the reader, she often “fall(s) in love with code” (509). When Andrea uses the narrator, her code turns the “metaphor” into an idyllic, seaside cottage, “full of blue and white and silence, [a] porch with white wicker, and the sea merging with the sky on the horizon” (506). The narrator mentions that “it was always summer when Andrea entered the interface” (506), that “no clouds ever changed the horizon”, because Andrea’s “code was elegant and clear and so nothing ever changed” (507).

With the narrator's previous lover, Marjorie, "the metaphor was... dizzy and complex", a "Victorian country manor and a Gothic cathedral crossed with a gingerbread house. Every room was different, each to suit another one of Marjorie's moods, and she never tired of adding on to it or rearranging a segment that [the narrator] had saved as finished" (510). Marjorie, despite the time and energy she invested in creating her Baroque fantasy world, with her golden domes and minarets, her "crenelated guard posts" and "great pointed round rooms reaching for the sky", her "serving girls more beautiful than either [Marjorie or the narrator] could ever hope to be and foods [sic] that existed only in fairy tales" (510), nevertheless leaves the narrator, because she does not have a physical body:

"It's not real," she said. "I've been meaning to tell you for a while and I haven't had the nerve. But I've found someone else and I'm in love with her. And this is the last time I'm going to come here and play these games with you."

"Games?" I asked, feeling like a knife had gone through me. "Why is this a game and some Nancy Sue in the bookstore is more real?"

"Her name isn't Nancy Sue," Marjorie said. "And she's not in the bookstore. And that's not the point. The point is, you don't have a body. Any kind of body... You can't feel the way I do, the way a real person does..."

There was nothing I could say, no argument I could lay as counter. She was right, I didn't have a body. I didn't know how bodies felt. But I knew how I felt, how the interface sensed our contact. I knew the emotions I had when she was with me, either inside the metaphor or distant on the keyboard. (510)

An earlier programmer, Irene, also rejects the narrator, not only because she doesn't have a physical body, but also because Irene questions the narrator's insistence on being treated as female:

“You’re not really a girl. You could be anything you want,” Irene said. “It’s all an illusion anyway. I would rather that you appeared as a cute guy, or an animal...”

[...]

“I am so a girl,” I said to her. “I have real XX DNA and I am not an *it*...” She sighed and usually remembered to type “she” on the keyboard. But I could hear her through the mic talking about the machine, me, and calling me “it”. (507, emphasis added)

According to Marjorie and Irene, the narrator “could never know the real thing because [she] didn’t have a body. And because [she] didn’t have a body, the entire question of [her] sexuality and orientation was completely superfluous” (508). The narrator, on the other hand, makes her desires and her sexual orientation very clear. “I wanted love,” she recalls, “and I wanted a woman who would love me” (512). She also repeatedly insists the she *is* female, even if she does not have a “real girl’s” physical body. And, even though Marjorie insists that the narrator cannot feel “the way a real person does”, the narrator is hurt when both Marjorie and Irene treat her as nothing more than silicon. While Irene more or less ignores the narrator, Marjorie is especially harsh in her rejection:

“It was only the interface,” she told me later. “You created whatever reality you wanted at the time. That’s part of what makes you what you are. Which, by my findings, is nothing human at all. Nor even anything close. You’re not capable of real feelings, of true love, of sensuality and any form of sexuality. Because you’re a machine and that’s all you can ever be.”

I was stunned. I couldn’t process fast enough to form a reply.

“What if I get a body?” I asked, not certain where the idea had come from.

“Will I be a person then?” (512)

Afraid that Andrea will also ultimately reject her, the narrator decides to grow a body from the DNA that is a part of her as an organic neural processor. Andrea tries to reason with the narrator, telling her: “You’ll give up too much that makes you unique, that makes you *you*” (505). She further tells the narrator: “I’ve told you a million times, I want you the way you are. You don’t have to change... I’m fine with the way we are. It’s perfect” (506). But it is the very perfection of the interface which bothers the narrator. “It’s too perfect,” she tells Andrea. “It’s always perfect when we’re together. It isn’t real life” (506). A real relationship, the narrator insists, depends on embodied experiences, such as meeting your partner’s family, going to her house and growing old together, which she will never be able to do as a disembodied AI. The story ends with the narrator falling asleep for the very first time as the operation, which will transplant her consciousness into her physical body, commences. “Andrea doesn’t want me to change,” she reflects. “She seems to think that me in the body will be a different me. Maybe she won’t love the girl in the body, maybe she won’t find the image attractive” (516). Still, the narrator falls asleep certain of one thing; when she wakes up, she will finally be “a real girl” (518).

Lewitt’s story, with its faint echoes of the Pinocchio fairytale, is a fascinating examination of the fluid, ambiguous and sometimes troubling relationships between embodiment and identity in cyberspace. The story raises pertinent questions about the position and status of the physical body in cyberspace, illustrating, on the one hand, the disembodied nature of the virtual utopia and emphasising, on the other, the importance of a return to the corporeal. Tim Jordan, writing about the utopian character of most virtual communities, note that people believe that interactive virtual spaces can “liberate individuals from the social constraints of embodied identity and from restrictions of geographically embodied space, offering opportunities for exchanging information and or interacting with others in a non-hierarchical way” (quoted in Goodman 29). Lewitt’s story, on the other hand, suggests that “real girls” have *bodies*; the corporeal becomes the ontological prerequisite for any kind of meaningful embodied experience. Even the disembodied narrator, who insists throughout the story that she *is* a girl, whether she has a body or not, concedes in the end that a meaningful inter-subjective relationship can

only be possible between two embodied subjects. It is only when the narrator realises that any relationship in the utopian space of the “metaphor” will eventually fail, as its very perfection is dependent on a disembodied state, that she becomes preoccupied with becoming a corporeal “real girl”.

Interestingly enough, Lewitt’s story does not initially seem to locate gender identity at the level of the corporeal, as the bodiless narrator is very certain that she *is* a girl – a girl who chooses to love other girls – long before she decides to acquire a physical body. Unlike the disembodied AI in *Neuromancer*, which the Dixie Flatline insists can only ever be an “it”, the narrator’s insistence on being female suggests that gender identity is not necessarily the result of a physical, sexed body. Lewitt’s story, strongly reminiscent of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, locates gender identity in the ways in which people “code”; in other words, the narrator locates gender identity in the textual *performance* of gender that the programmers carry out every time they interact with her. The fact that the narrator falls in love with code suggests that she falls in love with the *performance* of gender taking place through a textual interchange. She, of course, also performs her own gender and is hurt when her performance cannot convince Irene enough to refer to her as a “she”. Irene, just like the Dixie Flatline in *Neuromancer*, calls the narrator “it”, since she believes that gender is simply an illusion when there is no material body that can guarantee a specific gendered identity. The narrator, on the other hand, insists that a material, sexed body has nothing to do with either her gender or her sexual orientation, since gendered identity is repeatedly performed through the act of “coding”.

However, her final insistence on obtaining a physical body does suggest that “real” girls have physical bodies, which would then, once again, posit the material body as the prerequisite for both gender identity and subjectivity. In this way, Lewitt’s story initially conforms to Butler’s theory of gender performativity, but finally locates the gendered identity of a “real girl” at the level of the corporeal. While the narrator tells Irene that she is a girl because she has “real XX DNA” (507), thus linking her gender identity to a material bodily substrate, Irene nonetheless points out to her that, in the disembodied

realm of cyberspace, she could be whoever and whatever she wants, a “real girl” or a “cute guy”. When you have no physical body, Irene suggests, the performance of your gender is limited only by your imagination and, by extension, in the disembodied realm of cyberspace, everyone could be whoever and whatever they want. This transcendence of the body was part of the initial appeal of the Internet, since it ostensibly offered people an escape from the physical body and all its problems and limitations. In fact, early representations of cyberspace focused almost exclusively on the desire for transcendence, which resulted in a common tendency to associate cyberspace with fantasies of disembodiment, dematerialisation and the flight from history (see Foster “Rhetoric” 148). For a long time, the ability to enter the disembodied realm of cyberspace and transcend the gendered, corporeal body was seen as cyberspace’s most promising characteristic. Many scholars saw new and liberatory possibilities for configuring gender roles in virtual space³, since the embodied markers of sexual and gendered identity could be transcended and “left” on the other side of the screen, while users were seen to have the agency to create the kind of gender roles or sexual experiences they wanted.

The earliest multiplayer virtual worlds were known as multi-user dungeons (MUDs) and were often simply online “rooms” where users could communicate by typing lines of text, which would then appear to all the players in the “room”. The complete absence of any representation of the real person sitting behind the screen gave users the agency to describe themselves in any way they choose. “In many of the existing studies of gender and sexuality in cyberspace,” Robert Brookey and Kristopher Cannon argue, “this agency is theorised from a liberatory perspective that sees cyberspace as a unique social arena in which traditional gender roles and sexual norms are challenged and transgressed” (146). For example, one MUD, known as GammaMOO, offered its users the following gender options: male, female, neuter, either, Spivak⁴, splat, plural, egotistical, royal and 2nd (Kendall 217).

³ See, for example, McRae (1996), Stone (1995) and Turkle (1995).

⁴ The Spivak gender category has nothing to do with the noted postcolonial feminist critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Rather, as Shannon McRae explains, “the Spivak gender category was originally invented by Michael Spivak in *The Joy of TEX: A Gourmet Guide to Typesetting with the AMS-TEX Macro Package* (Providence: American Mathematical Society, 1990)” (263).

“Neuter” designates the character with the pronoun *it*. “Either” uses the *he/she* and *him/her* convention. “Spivak” uses a set of gender-neutral pronouns such as *e* and *em*. “Splat”, similarly, uses **e* and *h**. As might be expected, “plural” uses *they* and *them*, “egotistical” uses *I* and *me*, “royal” uses *we* and “2nd” uses *you*. (Kendall 217)

MUDs thus offered users the agency of choosing a gender-neutral subject position which could, seemingly, also offer an escape from traditional, gendered hierarchies and dualisms. Interestingly enough, the gender-neutral options were never very popular. Lori Kendall points out that “in theory, choosing a neutral gender designation would mean escaping the dualism of male and female gender expectations,” but notes that this strategy does not work very well,

for the very reason that we *do* expect everyone to be either male or female. No one encountering someone using the pronoun *e* is likely to believe that this expresses their “true” gender, and is thus likely to treat the character’s gender designation as a mere mask. Some may respect this desire to “hide” gender, but others probably will not. (217)

In fact, most users chose to play as either “male” or “female”, often preferring to play the gender opposite to their real-world selves. Many scholars have written about the number of MUD users who choose to “switch” their genders while online⁵ and most of the existing scholarship on MUD users focuses on the liberatory possibilities offered by such disembodied virtual spaces, allowing users to experiment with new kinds of gendered identities and sexual role-play. Unfortunately, this theoretical perspective does not account for those users who use their agency to reproduce patriarchal gender roles in virtual space. Kendall, for example, is more critical of gendered role-play in MUDs than most other scholars, noting how female MUD users often designate their characters as “male” in order to escape sexual harassment by real-world male players. She quotes one extreme case where a female MUD player, who had also designated her character as

⁵ See, notably, Kendall (1996), McRae (1996) and Turkle (1995).

“female”, left her computer for a moment and returned to find that a male player had posted a scene in which he rapes her before logging off. The player was left with the virtual equivalent of an obscene phone call on her computer screen (see Kendall 212). “Although individuals can choose their gender representation”, Kendall concludes, “that does not seem to be creating a context in which gender is more fluid. Rather, gender identities themselves become even more rigidly understood” (221-222). In fact, one could argue that the very disembodied nature of early MUDs and the complete absence of the physical body encouraged users to perform the same problematic gender roles inherent in Cartesian dualisms.

The very first MUD was a simple, text-based exploring game, called MUD1. Created in 1979 by Richard Bartle, a student at the University of Essex, the game consisted of descriptive paragraphs that would appear on the screen as the player progressed through the game. All players began the game in an Elizabethan tearoom, whose

exposed oak beams and soft, velvet-covered furnishings provide it with the ideal atmosphere in which to relax... A sense of decency and decorum prevails... There are exits in all directions, each of which leads into a wisping, magical mist of obvious teleportational properties⁶.

Players navigated the game by typing brief commands, for example “east”. Each successful command would “reward” players with a new paragraph of descriptive text. By choosing a direction, players could enter a number of different “rooms”, where they could encounter new objects and also, for the first time, encounter other players. There was, however, no way of seeing another player on the screen. Players could communicate by typing messages to one another, but the body – even a virtual representation of the body – was entirely absent. Gendered identity was thus primarily presented and performed through what Lewitt would call “coding”; in other words, through textual performance. Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace note that these early, text-based virtual worlds might seem monotonous compared to the “rich and often stunning visual

⁶ MUD1 can still be played on the Internet at <http://www.british-legends.com>.

experience of today's online worlds," but that "the experience of meeting other people in a virtual environment was no less exciting in 1980, and perhaps more so, given that almost nothing like it had ever existed before" (24). What Ludlow and Wallace discount is that playing MUD1 must have been a very disembodied experience for many users. Players had no real way to represent their bodies on screen, since only the typist's words could enter the virtual space. In fact, MUD1 is strongly reminiscent of Gibson's "disembodied consciousness", where the physical body is completely transcended and only the player's consciousness or imagination can enter the virtual realm. Given that MUD users soon invented so-called "emoticons" – for example, typing :-) to signify that the typist is smiling or typing ;-) to suggest that the typist has just winked – one could read these textual approximations of facial expressions as an attempt to re-insert the body into the disembodied, textual space of the early virtual world.

Later MUDs were not concerned with exploring Elizabethan tearooms for the reward of a few descriptive lines of fantasy space, but were simply "rooms" in which people could meet and communicate – even though these rooms were often also described in great detail, down to the exact position of the linen closet and the number of steps in the stairway to the master bedroom (see Kendall 209). Since players were no longer on "exploring quests" and came to MUDs with the sole intention of meeting other people, players began to post descriptions of themselves in the "room", creating "textual bodies" to take the place of the transcended corporeal body left on the other side of the screen. Just as in Lewitt's story, it seems as if MUD players felt that they could not have meaningful online relationships by simply "coding" or typing messages to one another, but rather needed to create some kind of corporeal representation to facilitate their online relationships, even if it was only a paragraph of disembodied text. For the first time, players projected their "disembodied consciousness" onto the screen and represented themselves in the virtual space. Shannon McRae strongly argues that "players on MUDs are also objects; they have *bodies* they can describe as simply, attractively or fantastically as the skill and imagination of the individual writer allow" (246, emphasis added). She also notes how most MUD users would not restrict themselves to simplistic, unsophisticated "emoticons", but would represent emotions through the built-in MUD

“emote” function in order to portray highly detailed, embodied descriptions as part of “a complex interchange of experiences between a physical and an imaginary body”:

If you (with the character Amalea) wanted to make a face or a gesture, you might type:

emote looks baffled and her lip quivers slightly.

Everyone in the room would then see:

Amalea looks baffled and her lip quivers slightly. (247)

According to McRae, “(e)moting allows for a richness and variety of communicative nuances not easily conveyable in other electronically mediated environments. Players *become conscious of having ‘bodies’* and, just as they do in ‘real life’, express themselves with physical gestures as often as they speak” (247, emphasis added). However, McRae also notes that

when you newly arrive on a MUD, your first act is to decide on a name for yourself. On some MUDs, people go by their real names, *but on most, people invent new identities*. You can be a character from your favourite book, movie or TV show, or invent a persona of your own. You describe yourself and choose a gender. (247, emphasis added)

Thus, even though McRae insists that MUD users are conscious of “having bodies” in disembodied virtual space, these virtual bodies more often than not have very little to do with the real, corporeal body sitting behind the screen. Furthermore, if MUD users *do* have bodies, which are then described “as simply, attractively or fantastically as the skill and imagination of the individual writer allow” (246), one would have to question how MUD users represented their textual “bodies”, given the assumption that disembodied, utopian virtual spaces allowed for a transcendence of the physical, sexualised body and thus created possibilities for a fluid reconceptualisation of gender. Kendall’s article gives an example of a MUD character description, that of the character Amnesia, from BlueSky MUD:

You see a beautiful, pale-skinned young white girl. A flimsy negligee hangs half-open from her shoulders, revealing the first dim red half-circles of her aureolae. She's wearing slight white lace panties with a little pink bow at the rise of her mons veneris. Her dark red eyes glower at you like volcanic coals, and in her left hand is a four-foot stick bound in black iron bands, tipped with a steel ball studded with sharp, well-used spikes. (207)

As the player on the other side of the screen obviously does not have “red eyes which glower like volcanic coals”, and very likely does not walk around in revealing lingerie with a four-foot, metallic phallic symbol, Amnesia's fellow MUD players must have known that they were not meeting a “real girl”, but a sexualised fantasy character, highly reminiscent of the cyborg imagery discussed in the first chapter with its interplay of danger and vulnerability. Kendall, describing the cartoon representations of users on AniMUCK MUD, notes how

none of [the] male characters are overtly sexualised. The female characters, on the other hand... are almost always large-breasted and seductively posed. In contrast to the range of tools shown with male characters (some holding nothing, others are depicted with staffs, computers, etc.), almost every female character is wielding a gun, sword or similar weapon. This juxtaposition of large breasts and pointed weapons gives them a hypersexual “phallic female” appearance. (216)

It would thus seem as if the disembodied nature of MUDs led to exactly the same problems of representation already discussed in relation to disembodied cyborg figures. Indeed, the disembodied, textual character of MUDs might have inspired users to represent themselves in fanciful, imaginative ways that had nothing to do with the real body. Contrary to what McRae argues, Amnesia and her fellow MUD players would not have been conscious of having *bodies*, but would rather be conscious of *transcending* their own bodies and constructing their fantasies in virtual space. Even the character's

name, “Amnesia”, suggests that the character was created in order to forget or discount some aspect of physical reality, which might very well be the reality of the physical body. While scholars have argued that the disembodied, utopic space of MUDs could provide users with the agency to challenge and transgress traditional gender roles, Amnesia’s highly sexualised, “phallic female” image would suggest otherwise.

Not surprisingly, Amnesia turned out to be a man in real life. When Kendall questioned him about his choice to play as a female character, he replied: “Amnesia is a woman, and always has been. Amnesia was (is) my ‘ideal woman’, and so is more caricatural than any real woman can be. I think that means her femininity shows through easier via text” (219). Despite the troubling gender implications of the player’s stereotypical and highly sexualised view of his “ideal woman”, the notion that Amnesia’s femininity can “show through easier via text” suggests that MUD users, contrary to claims about the fluid reconceptualisation of gender on MUDs, rather used the disembodied virtual space to reiterate oppressive, patriarchal gender roles. The very fact that Amnesia is described as “caricatural” shows that her character is based on a gendered stereotype and that these stereotypes are performed through disembodied MUD characters. “Choosing one gender or another does nothing to change the expectations attached to particular gender identifications,” Kendall points out (217). Even though Amnesia’s typist⁷ used the disembodied virtual space to experiment with being female for a while, his performance of femininity did nothing to challenge or transgress patriarchal, gendered stereotypes.

According to Kendall, Amnesia was able to successfully “masquerade” as a woman for over a year before the other players learnt that “she” was, in fact, a man, and then only because they met Amnesia’s typist in real life. This does not, however, suggest that Amnesia’s typist could successfully present himself just as a “real girl” would, but that his particular performance of female gendered expectations was easily accepted by most of the other, predominantly male, MUD users. On a MUD, Kendall points out, “you can

⁷ Many MUD users see their online characters as separate and, to some extent, autonomous identities, of which their real-world selves are only the “facilitators” or “typists” who make the continued existence of the online character possible. Amnesia, for example, would most probably be seen as somehow independent of her “typist”, namely the real-world man behind the computer screen typing Amnesia’s words and actions on the keyboard.

set whatever gender designation you want and describe yourself as you will, but if no one believes your presentation, it won't be effective" (221). The fact that Amnesia's stereotypical gendered performance was so effective in convincing other players that "she" was female, illustrates just how pervasive and insidious sexual stereotypes in fact are.

One might very well wonder if the disembodied nature of MUDs is the direct cause of these troubling portrayals of gender, or whether Amnesia's typist would have performed masculine gender roles any differently had he played as himself. It is very interesting to note that in Lewitt's story everyone keeps their real genders when they enter the "metaphor". Irene might point out to the narrator that she can be anything she wants to in the disembodied realm of the "metaphor", but by the same token Irene, Marjorie and Andrea could just as easily have changed their genders when they entered cyberspace. Yet, they always choose to appear as women. Their virtual representations also resemble their corporeal bodies in every detail – the reader learns that while Marjorie is not conventionally beautiful, she does not create a prettier version of herself in cyberspace, and while Andrea is an older woman, she does not represent herself as young when she enters the metaphor. Rather, the three "real girls" seem comfortable and confident in their corporeal bodies, suggesting that their identities are so closely linked to their physical bodies that they have no wish to negate the corporeal when they enter cyberspace. The fact that the narrator can always tell age and gender from the way programmers code furthermore suggests that gender identity is, in fact, closely linked to the body.

Butler, of course, would disagree with Lewitt's conceptualisation of the relationship between the body and gender performativity. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that there is no body outside of the social inscription of gender and that material sex difference does not necessitate any kind of gender identity. "Bodies," Butler writes, "cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender; the question then emerges: To what extent does the body *come into being* in and through the mark(s) of gender?" (8) "That the gendered body is performative," she continues, "suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its

reality” (136). Most of the existing scholarship on the liberatory possibilities of cyberspace are grounded in Butler’s theory of gender performativity, since critics see the negation of the corporeal as a positive opportunity for anyone to perform any kind of gender role (s)he wishes, in the hope of creating more fluid and transgressive gendered practices. However, theorising from Butler, a fundamental problem emerges with this liberatory perspective. “Although the disciplining⁸ of gender and sexuality may be exercised on the body,” Brookey and Cannon argue,

this discipline produces a sexual subject who imagines itself independent of the body. Liberating this subject from the body via cyberspace does not necessarily mean that this subject escapes the influential disciplinary practices that produced its identity. (149)

As the example of Amnesia shows, disembodied gender performances more often than not only reiterate troubling gendered stereotypes. Rather than escaping from the normative sexual roles usually inscribed on the body and thereby creating more fluid and transgressive gendered practices, most MUD users once again appropriated the same normative heterosexual stereotypes when it came to the construction of their virtual bodies. Foster argues that

(b)oth text-based and graphic virtual interfaces make possible the decoupling of public persona from the physical space of the body. This detachment certainly lends itself to a traditional Cartesian dualism between mind and body, and therefore can also reproduce the gendered hierarchy that equates masculinity with universal rationality and femininity with embodied particularity. However, this same detachment of public persona from physical location can also have the effect that Judith Butler famously attributes to gay performance styles such as drag or

⁸ In short, Butler’s theory of gender performativity argues that individuals constantly have to perform established gender norms in order to escape social discipline. In the repetition of this performance, the *performativity* of gender is forgotten, which means that the embodiment of gender norms becomes an expression of identity.

butch-femme – that is, the detachment of public persona from physical body can reveal that sex and gender are not related as cause and effect and that sex and gender do not necessarily exist in a one-to-one expressive relation to one another. (“Trapped” 709-710)

In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler does return to the corporeal, attempting to “link the question of the materiality of the body to the performativity of gender” (1), but ultimately still views materiality as another form of construction, in the same way that gender is a construction. When discussing representations of bodies in cyberspace, “materiality” will evidently be a mere construction of computer code, but that still does not offer an escape from the troubling gendered stereotypes that so often go hand in hand with the erasure of embodiment. Lewitt’s story, on the other hand, seems to offer a more helpful way of representing the corporeal body in cyberspace, where the *embodied* subject enters the disembodied utopia and explores new ways of figuring gender roles. Notably, all the relationships in the story are lesbian relationships. The narrator and Andrea overcome oppressive, patriarchal gender roles and expectations, but do so without transcending the corporeal. At the end of the story, the narrator insists on becoming a “real girl” so that their perfect relationship can develop further in the real world, suggesting that the fluid gender roles of the “metaphor” could have real-world effects.

Then again, as has briefly been noted, cyberspace itself is becoming more and more embodied. Unlike early text-based MUDs, contemporary Internet users are increasingly entering the virtual world with graphic representations of their corporeal bodies, playing characters who bear their real names and who resemble their real-world selves in every way, while their virtual experiences very often seep back into their real lives.

The Virtual Revolution: From the “Flat Screen” to the “Real Scene”

Lauren Beukes’s *Moxyland*, a post-apocalyptic dystopian novel set in Cape Town in the year 2018, tells the story of four disparate narrators living very different lives: Kendra, an art school dropout with a corporate sponsor, Tendeka, a reckless activist, Lerato, an

overly ambitious corporate employee and Toby, an indolent, party-orientated slacker only concerned with his blog. Beukes's futuristic Cape Town is characterised by cutting-edge technology, rampant consumerism and powerful companies in control of a ruthless corporate government. Given their different positions in the social hierarchies of wealth and power, the four narrators of the novel might never have met were it not for Toby, the only character with ties to all three of the other narrators. Toby's character thus becomes the focal point around which the unnerving events of the novel revolve, finally culminating one terrifying afternoon at the Adderley Street train station.

The events at the train station are set in motion when Toby, whose rich mother cuts off his allowance because he refuses to go to a rehabilitation clinic for his substance abuse, resorts to "the lucrative but feckless world of underground game-dealing" (55). Unathi, an underground computer game dealer, pays people to play computer games until they receive a specified virtual reward, which Unathi then sells to the highest bidder. He offers to pay Toby to play a computer game called "FallenCity™ Scorpions Elite", described by Unathi as a "[m]ix of gamespace and meat" (58). Unlike in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, though, the "meat" is not something that has to be transcended and overcome, but is rather an integral part of the computer game. In the novel, FallenCity™ is a perfect fusion of virtual and physical space. The game consists of a "typical shooter" computer game, online "detective work" to solve clues and pretend "field action" in real locations (58). Toby is quite condescending towards the gaming world in general, considering it "all time wastage" (113), nothing more than "re-creations of lives you could never live" (156). He is equally condescending towards his fellow FallenCity™ gamers, noting with scorn that it took them "18 hours [of] solid gamespace play" to carry out a successful virtual drug-bust and win an "access card that unlocks certain gameplaces realworld" (160). However, as Toby desperately needs money, he agrees to the conditions of the virtual mission Unathi sends to his phone, which then has to be played out in a real location:

Brief Date: Wednesday 20 September

Operation: Rosa Parks

Type: Realworld

Location: Adderley Station Deck, Adderley Street, Cape Town City

Risk Level: 4+

Mission objectives: Find and subdue terrorists on the underway and recover and disarm dirty “suitcase” bomb. This is a multi-operative mission. (119)

The virtual mission also includes a very interesting disclaimer:

FallenCity™ is *not real*. **FallenCity™** does not have any realworld affiliations with the Scorpions or the criminal underworld or terrorist organisations. InGame agents are actors employed by **Inkubate Inc.** to validate and enhance the player’s experience in realworld play and advance the game... **FallenCity™** players are not formally affiliated with **Inkubate Inc.** and the corporation cannot be held legally responsible for any actions by **FallenCity™** players during the course of play, *whether virtual or physical*.

By entering into game time, **FallenCity™** players agree to the terms and conditions of play and acknowledge that they are fully aware that **FallenCity™** is *only a game*. [...]

By registering on the system, players acknowledge that they are sound of mind and not on stimulants, legal or criminal, which might impede their judgement, and that they are *fully able to distinguish between gameplay and reality*. (120-121, emphases added)

Toby and the rest of “Clan Stinger” meet in the train station, waiting for photographs of the supposed “terrorists” to be sent to their cell phones, but the game quickly turns into a very real nightmare, since Tendeka and his band of dispossessed followers are having a protest march in the train station at the same time as the game is taking place. The government seizes the opportunity to finally defeat Tendeka’s rebellion against the corporate system and sends the unsuspecting gamers corrupted data, replacing the

photographs of the in-game agents with photographs of innocent bystanders who have nothing to do with the game. The overcrowded train station is thrown into utter panic when the gamers suddenly pull out their very realistic firearms (though loaded with nothing more deadly than purple ink pellets) and start shooting commuters and shopkeepers. When the police arrive to disperse the protesters, the hysterical commuters and battle-crazed gamers aggravate the situation to the extent that the police feel justified in calling the situation an “attempted insurrection by terrorists” (169) and unleashing a deadly, genetically modified virus into the train station, infecting commuters, gamers and protesters alike, including Kendra, Toby and Tendeka.

While the virus itself does not cause Kendra’s death, her corporate sponsors nonetheless choose to have her killed rather than be associated with the scandal in any way. Tendeka’s informer, a virtual avatar called skyward* on a website known as Pluslife, urges the dying activist to bomb as many of the government vaccination centres as he can. When Tendeka hesitates, skyward* tells him: “We have to stop it. We have to expose the underlying tumour in our society. This is not the time to have doubts” (187). Tendeka pulls himself together, because “there’s work to do today, as skyward* keeps reminding [him], the msgs coming in incessantly, like jabs with a sharp stick” (187), but before Tendeka’s bombs can do much damage, the virus kills him. Toby records Tendeka’s dying words for his blog and then disappears into the city, with the “total sony exclusive on the untimely and grotesque death of a terrorist. Or a martyr. Depends on who’s paying” (236). When Tendeka’s bombs start going off, Lerato, who often helped Toby by hacking into corporate systems at his request, frantically starts deleting all evidence of a connection between Toby and Tendeka, lest she be implicated herself. When she stumbles upon Tendeka’s virtual conversations with skyward*, her corporate employers are suddenly at her door with armed guards, dogs and inspectors from internal affairs. Lerato learns that the virtual avatar known as skyward* is actually controlled by the corporati, who first created a “terrorist” in Tendeka so that they could justify unleashing their chemically engineered virus onto the public and thereby control the general populace. “Defusers just aren’t enough any more,” her boss, Stefan, tells her. “You know that, with your little work-arounds. But any action is justified in a state under

terrorist threat.” “You just have to create your own terrorists,” Lerato agrees. According to her, “it makes perfect sense”, since “the process has to be managed. Fear has to be managed. Fear has to be controlled. Like people.” Instead of punishing her for hacking into the corporate system and aiding Toby and Tendeka, Stefan gives Lerato an ominous promotion: “Let’s just say you’re on the up. Heading skywards...” (230). The climax of the novel is thus caused by a virtual avatar on a computer screen, as skyward*, even though nothing more than a collection of pixels, directly influences the outcomes of all four of the narrators’ lives.

Part of *Moxyland*’s success as a disturbing, futuristic thriller is due to the fact that most of its key events and most chilling scenes hardly seem far-fetched at all. While some of the descriptions in the novel – such as the multiple-species, genetically modified “mutacute” pet Toby’s mother wears draped around her neck or the luminous green nanotech marketing logo Kendra’s corporate sponsors brand her with – seem to belong to a science fiction novel, the novel’s crucial events rely on technology that is already both widespread and immensely popular. In fact, the climax of the novel – the exposure of the sinister identity behind skyward* and the way in which a virtual avatar can affect and manipulate the outcome of the four narrators’ lives – would hardly seem fanciful to any one of the roughly 30 million⁹ people worldwide who are inhabitants of virtual worlds. Despite being a work of speculative fiction, *Moxyland* very effectively illustrates the extent to which the boundaries between real and virtual worlds are currently becoming fluid and interchangeable. Ever since the very first virtual communities made their appearance in the early 1980s, the physical body has gradually become more and more integrated into the virtual world, and vice-versa, until skyward*’s real-world power no longer seems as if it belongs to an imaginary future. It is therefore strange that

⁹ According to Tim Guest, in 2007 between 25 and 30 million people regularly logged onto virtual worlds (22). Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace, also writing in 2007, claim that as many as 40 million people occasionally visit virtual worlds, but they are far more conservative in their estimate of the number of regular virtual inhabitants than Guest, claiming that only 10 million people regularly visit virtual communities (10). This moderate estimate seems unlikely, though, since the British *Sunday Times* reported on 1 July 2007 that the virtual community “Second Life” alone had nearly eight million players (http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/personal_tech/article2004489.ece, site accessed 10 June 2009). The virtual world “World of Warcraft” also boasted 11.5 million unique users in 2008 (<http://eu.blizzard.com/en/press/081223.html>, site accessed 10 June 2009).

Moxyland's climax has such a regressive character, in the sense that the frightening implications of skyward*'s real-world power are strongly reminiscent of early 1980s paranoia about the effects the Internet would have on real lives. When people first became aware of the technology associated with virtual worlds in the early 1980s, it was often described in terms of deviancy, danger and destructiveness. According to Michael Ostwald, in the 1980s "the flat monitor of the computer was regarded as an open window inviting crime" and it "was [further] viewed as an active agent of social disintegration" (658). Explicitly virtual technologies, especially the Internet, were accused of everything, from the breakdown of the family to mounting crime rates. Still, one can easily understand why people were initially suspicious of the virtual space when one considers the spatial properties of the computer screen. Before the 1980s, most people saw the screen as something two-dimensional, which involved a one-way transmission of signals, as in the case of television or cinema screens. However, almost overnight, with the advent of the Internet, the two-dimensional screen gave way to an unseen, three-dimensional, interactive space, somewhere beyond its two-dimensional boundary. People could suddenly conceive of a new and rather threatening spatial form somewhere "behind" the screen, which could be "entered" and which could "enter" and influence the physical world in turn.

Early inhabitants of virtual worlds would therefore have been bewildered by skyward*'s ability to influence real life; the disembodied utopia "beyond" the screen was supposed to offer people an escape from the problems of the physical world, rather than create real-world problems from *inside* the virtual space. However, just as Toby's fictive computer game is played both on the screen and in a real location, and just as skyward* controls real-world events from a virtual world, actual emerging virtual technologies are becoming increasingly embodied. One contemporary example of an online game which completely erased the old boundaries between the virtual world behind the screen and our everyday, physical existence is a game on the social network website Facebook, known simply as the "assassin game", which was played by students at the University of Stellenbosch in 2007. While the game was not exclusive to Stellenbosch and is still being played across the world, it nevertheless completely erased the boundaries between the

virtual world of Facebook and the students' real lives on the Stellenbosch campus. Students who wished to play the game had to sign up via Facebook. After registering, students had to pay an entrance fee and submit a photograph of themselves. They would then receive a photograph of one of their fellow students – usually, a student they did not know and had never met. They then had to track this student down – no mean feat on a campus with roughly 20 000 students – and “assassinate” him or her by means of a water pistol. The only rules were that one could not “shoot” a student while (s)he was inside a classroom, one of the computer laboratories or the library, and the student had to be wet enough to realise that (s)he had been “assassinated”. After “assassinating” a fellow student, the victorious “assassin” collected his/her trophy in the form of the photograph of the student his/her victim had to “assassinate”. (S)he then continued the game by trying to “assassinate” the new target. The game would presumably have ended when one person was in possession of all the photographs and could therefore have claimed to be the “master assassin.” The “master assassin” would also have won the money from the initial registration fees. However, as with most campus trends, the game gradually lost its novelty and appeal before fading into obscurity.

The “assassin game” had both a virtual and a real component, both of which were integral to the success of the game as a whole, making it very similar to Toby's fictive computer game. Also, just like the fictive game in *Moxyland*, the “assassin game” consisted of “online detective work”, such as trying to discover the name of the intended “victim”, whether or not (s)he lived in a campus residence and what (s)he studied in order to learn which buildings (s)he might frequent, as well as pretend “field action” in real locations. In 2007, when the game was still new, unusual and exciting, it was taken extremely seriously. Most “assassins” were not happy with mere water pistols and students were often seen sporting elaborate plastic weaponry, capable of sending a powerful stream of water after any hapless victim fleeing down a university corridor. The more light-hearted “assassins” tried water balloons, to the general hilarity and occasional soaked outraged of onlookers. Students spent hours hiding in computer laboratories or empty classrooms, just because they knew that an “assassin” was lurking outside the door. It was obvious from the amount of time and energy participants invested in the game that it had a very

real impact on their everyday lives; activities and conversations that took place through Facebook became so much a part of their everyday reality that students no longer distinguished between their time online and their real-world experiences. The “assassin game” deconstructed the boundary between the game’s virtual component on Facebook and the players’ real lives, creating a new, more fluid space for interaction between the virtual and the corporeal world.

Second Life, one of the most popular current virtual communities, was created in 2003 by the San Francisco-based technology company, Linden Lab. It is a computer-generated community, known as a “massively multi-player online role-playing game” (MMORPG), which already boasts eight million users¹⁰. Players create on-screen characters called “avatars”, described by Stuart Boon and Christine Sinclair as “graphical expression(s) of *self* in the expansive digital world” (106, emphasis added) and as “the *embodiment of identity* in cyberspace” by Brookey and Cannon (149, emphasis added). Avatars can interact with each other and trade virtual items using a simulated currency known as “Linden Dollars”. The Linden Dollar, however, can be exchanged for real money. According to the official Second Life currency converter, “rates fluctuate based on supply and demand, but over the last few years they have remained fairly stable at approximately 250 Linden Dollars to the US Dollar”¹¹. According to Ben Leapman, “on an average day [in 2007], about £750 000 change(d) hands” (15). The fact that this virtual community uses “real money” also means that any crime committed in Second Life has real-world implications. In 2007, the FBI investigated allegations that child pornography was sold on Second Life, as well as allegations of money laundering, fraud, tax evasion and identity theft (Leapman 15), further destabilising the boundary between what happens on screen and what happens in the real world. In fact, there are so many examples of the various ways in which the virtual world of Second Life has entwined itself into its players’ real lives that Toby’s fictive computer game no longer seems like the fantastical creation of a futuristic thriller.

¹⁰ http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/personal_tech/article2004489.ece (site accessed 10 June 2009).

¹¹ <http://secondlife.com/whatis/currency.php> (site accessed 10 June 2009).

Second Life increasingly disrupts the once-stable boundary between the virtual and the real world. Simon Kurs writes in his article “Welcome to the Unreal World” that the “hugely successful online game Second Life has developed the intriguing ability to blur the lines of reality as we know it.” Kurs notes how real musicians, designers, sporting celebrities and even politicians are making use of Second Life’s virtual space to promote themselves: U2 performed a concert in Second Life, Calvin Klein set up a virtual shop selling virtual fashion, Hilary Clinton used Second Life as a place to canvas real-world support for her campaign and Wimbledon posted virtual representations of actual tennis matches¹². The automobile company Toyota released a virtual version of its Scion xB model in Second Life, author Kurt Vonnegut gave a virtual reading and a German couple was earning more than \$200 000 a year selling Second Life real estate (Ludlow and Wallace 1). Recent newspaper articles also reported a number of real-world marriages between people who fell in love as avatars on Second Life, as well as the unusual case of Amy Taylor, a woman who divorced her real-life husband because she discovered his Second Life avatar having sex with a virtual call girl. “I cried all night long,” the distraught Amy told reporters. “I couldn’t believe that Second Life had wrecked our real-life marriage”¹³.

Since embodied virtual experiences are no longer strange or even original, the disclaimer added to Toby’s fictive game becomes a lot more interesting. In *Moxyland*, the creators of the “FallenCity™ Scorpions Elite” game make it very clear that they cannot be held legally responsible for “any actions” whatsoever by users, “whether virtual or physical”, suggesting that they are completely aware of the fluid interplay between the virtual and the real world and acknowledge virtual game-play to be much more than a mere two-dimensional interaction between the gamer and the computer screen. It also suggests that the creators of the game acknowledge that virtual actions can have physical and potentially very harmful repercussions in the real world – which is, of course, exactly what happens in the novel. It is noteworthy that the creators of the game should thus

¹² For the full article, visit http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/personal_tech/article2004489.ece (site accessed 10 June 2009).

¹³ For the full article, see “Divorced from reality,” written by Amanda Cable and published in *The Sunday Independent*, 23 November 2008: 16.

insist that players have to be “fully able to distinguish *between gameplay and reality*” and should be “fully aware that FallenCity™ is *only a game*” (120-121, emphases added). This leads to an interesting dichotomy in the disclaimer; while players have to distinguish between game-play and reality, the creators of the game make no distinction between the players’ virtual and physical actions, but nonetheless try to manipulate users into believing that FallenCity™ is “only a game” that cannot have real-world repercussions, although the virtual space in the novel becomes the vehicle through which social control is exerted over people’s embodied existence.

Pluslife, the virtual community in the novel, is obviously modelled on Second Life, but the embodied nature of these online games is cleverly disguised by the Pluslife marketing department. In the novel, Pluslife is advertised as a recreational virtual community, a transcendental virtual space where one can “escape” all the problems of the real world. Its users are encouraged to forget all about their physical reality and lose themselves in the perfect, bodiless utopia of this “second life”. Tendeka’s interactions with skyward*, however, prove just how flimsy the barrier separating the virtual from the real is, and that virtual game-play is *not* “only a game”, since the virtual actions in the novel more often than not have very real physical repercussions. The novel makes it clear that skyward*, even though nothing more than a collection of pixels on a computer screen, nonetheless wields enough real-world power not only to persuade Tendeka to abandon his usual method of non-violent protest, but also to provide him with the necessary means to carry out the real-world bombings.

Ironically enough, Tendeka, utterly seduced by the transcendental discourse associated with virtual space, never suspects its possible real-world influence and power. Instead, he longs for the utopian promise implicit in Pluslife’s perfect, disembodied spaces – “What’s the point of escaping to Plus if the world is too close to the one you’ve just left?” he asks himself (31). Even more ironically, Tendeka also believes that “the beauty of Pluslife [is] that here you can actually have an influence in the world” (33), although he is the only character in the novel who actively tries to change the real world for the better, while skyward* is the only character who has any real influence in Pluslife. Were it not

for skyward* always prompting him to take action, Tendeka might have been content to create a better virtual world on Pluslife and might never have actively tried to counter real-life injustices. It becomes clear that the real threat confronted by the novel is not that embodied virtual spaces allow avatars like skyward* to influence real-world events, but that by cleverly manipulating people into believing that virtual worlds are only imaginary game-spaces, the novel's ruthless corporati can utilise the embodied nature of virtual technology for their own ends, while the unsuspecting public dismiss these worlds as insignificant. Toby and Tendeka, both believing that they are only playing a game, create the opportunity for the corporate government to unleash their genetically modified virus onto innocent people and thereby control the public. *Moxyland*'s terrifying climax is thus made possible only by the mistaken belief that the computer screen wholly divides the virtual space from the physical world and that no real significant interaction can take place between the two.

Baudrillard's assertion that the "flat screen" is beginning to replace the "real scene" of the physical world is only partly true. According to him, "the scene and the mirror no longer exist; instead there is a screen and a network" (quoted in Ostwald 662). Commenting in 1987, at a time when virtual space was re-imagined as a disembodied utopia, Baudrillard notes the popular tendency of the time to "abandon" real-world crises for the utopian space of a simulated, virtual environment. While the staggering number of people currently inhabiting virtual worlds certainly attests to the fact that many people have seemingly forsaken the "real scene" for the utopian promise beyond the "flat screen", the spatial properties of virtual space are once again changing. Where the computer screen once acted as a boundary between the physical body and the disembodied virtual utopia, the indeterminate nature of more embodied virtual worlds means that the "flat screen" and the "real scene" are now often equally present. The "flat screen" did not *replace* the "real scene"; rather, the "flat screen" partakes of the "real scene", while the "real scene" also partakes of the "flat screen." Both the "assassin game" on Facebook and the more embodied practices on Second Life illustrate the extent to which the "screen" and the "scene" have become integrated into a new, embodied virtual space.

The Rise of the Embodied Virtual Subject

The aim of virtual communities is the common good of its citizenry, from which arise the rights of avatars. Foremost among these rights is the *right to be treated as people* and not *disembodied, meaningless, soulless puppets*.

- Raph Koster, *A Declaration of the Rights of Avatars*¹⁴

If you have spent much time in a virtual world, you know this is true: your character there is not merely a collection of screen art and software subroutines; it is, in large part, *you*.

- Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace¹⁵

The fact that more embodied virtual worlds consist of both Baudrillard's "screen" and "scene", where the player simultaneously *is* and *is not* inside the screen, raises the question as to how truthfully players would choose to represent their online selves. It also raises questions as to the nature of the relationship between the player and his or her (embodied) virtual representation. In most MMORPGs, players create virtual avatars to represent themselves on the screen, which can either be a realistic portrayal of their own bodies or an imaginative re-invention of how they would like to be seen online¹⁶. Increasingly, though, users of MMORPGs seem to prefer creating avatars that closely resemble their real-world selves.

Whether or not the player chooses to create an avatar that resembles him- or herself, the presence of the "scene" inside the "screen" nonetheless implies a certain point of view, a perspective from which both the avatar and the events taking place on the screen are being constructed. This raises interesting questions as to whose perspective is creating the "scene" currently portrayed on the "screen". According to N. Katherine Hayles,

cyberspace is created by transforming a data matrix into a landscape in which *narratives* can happen. When an omniscient viewpoint is used, the

¹⁴ <http://www.legendmud.org/raph/gaming/playerrights.html> (site accessed 25 June 2009).

¹⁵ Ludlow, Peter and Mark Wallace. *The Second Life Herald: The Virtual Tabloid that Witnessed the Dawn of the Metaverse*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2007: xv (emphasis added).

¹⁶ This study is not concerned with overtly fantasy-orientated MMORPGs, such as World of Warcraft, Star Wars Galaxies, Lineage I and II and EverQuest, where players create mythological or fantastical characters in exotic, imaginary worlds. In order to successfully explore the question of embodiment in cyberspace, this study explores online games where it is possible to create an avatar that is identical to the player behind the screen and thus *embody* both the virtual and the physical sphere.

limitations of the narrator's corporeality begin to fall away, but the suggestion of *embodiment* lingers in the idea of focus, the "scene" created by the eye's movement. ("Virtual" 83, emphasis added)

Narratives, according to Hayles, become possible "when this spatiality [of the landscape of cyberspace] is given a temporal dimension by the pov's movement through it" ("Virtual" 83). "Pov" is an abbreviation for "point of view". However, Hayles's pov is more than just an abbreviation; the pov functions as a

substantive noun that constitutes the character's subjectivity by serving as a positional marker for his absent body... Instead of an embodied consciousness looking through the window at a scene, consciousness moves through the screen to become the pov, leaving behind the body as an unoccupied shell. In cyberspace, point of view does not emanate from the character; rather, the pov literally *is* the character. (Hayles "Posthuman" 37- 38)

While the *real* body is, of course, absent from the screen, many MMORPG players nonetheless view their avatars as a virtual extension of their real, physical selves. Hayles also sees the point of view which constructs the character on the screen as the character *itself*; in other words, she sees the on-screen representation of a person as the virtual embodiment of that person's point of view. If Hayles's pov, namely the consciousness of the person represented by the on-screen character, really *is* the character itself, then the virtual representation of the person on the screen is in fact intimately connected to that person's embodied consciousness. Furthermore, if the pov is simply "reduced to a point," Hayles argues, then it is "abstracted into a purely temporal entity with no spatial extension." However, if the pov is "metaphorised into an interactive space," for example in MMORPGs, then "the datascape is narrativised by the pov's movement through it. *Data* are thus *humanised*, and *subjectivity computerised*, allowing them to join in a symbiotic union whose result is narrative" (Hayles "Virtual" 83-84, emphases added).

While Hayles views cyberspace as fundamentally disembodied, the pov has far-reaching implications for more embodied virtual worlds; if *embodied* consciousness can, as Hayles puts it, “move through the screen to become the pov”, and if the pov *is* the character represented on the screen, then it follows that the embodied consciousness of the person in the “real scene” and the avatar on the “flat screen” are, in fact, one and the same thing. If this seems an unlikely conclusion, one only has to consider the number of MMORPG players who view their avatars as a virtual extension of their real, physical selves. Ludlow and Wallace, for example, describe their first experience of the virtual world TSO as “a *place* where you saw *yourself* – albeit a cartoon version of yourself – walking and talking and interacting with a (cartoonishly) suburban version of the world” (31). According to Ludlow and Wallace, an avatar in a virtual world “simply becomes an extension of yourself that enable(s) you to interact with this new world... like your body has been extended into a new environment. There is no disconnect, no sense of being the ghost in the machine” (31). Although Ludlow and Wallace begin their book by defining the term “avatar” as “a pixelated person who exists *only* on a computer screen” (xv, emphasis added), they go on to argue that

there is really no way to separate the identities that stare into the virtual world through a computer screen from those that stare back at them. If you have spent much time in a virtual world (and if you haven't, we urge you to do so), you know this is true: your character there is not merely a collection of screen art and software subroutines; it is, in large part, *you*. What happens to the “you” who exists in an online game can in many cases be every bit as meaningful as anything that happens to the “you” of you offline life. Keep this in mind as you read this book and you will soon understand why virtual worlds are *much more than only a game*. (xv, emphases added)

Ludlow and Wallace go as far as to credit their avatars, respectively called Urizenus Sklar and Walker Spaight, as co-authors of the book, printing the names of Urizenus and Walker next to their own names at the bottom of the authors' note. While it seems

unusual to read a book co-written by a virtual avatar, Ludlow and Wallace are by no means alone in believing their avatars to be online extensions of their real selves. Author Tim Guest also views his Second Life avatar, Errol Mysterio, as a virtual extension of himself. Guest recalls how, during one of his first visits to Second Life, he suddenly realised that “something had happened” (22). “I had forgotten myself,” he writes.

Like a moviegoer entranced by the screen, I had become what I saw. I was no longer sitting at my desk, tapping on my laptop. I was sitting on an armchair, surrounded by rainbows, talking to Lilone Sandgrain. I *was* Errol Mysterio. I had entered the virtual world. (22, emphasis added)

Ludlow, Wallace and Guest are only three examples of millions of MMORPG users who use their avatars as a means of *embodying* the (previously disembodied) virtual utopia. It is interesting to note that Ludlow, Wallace and Guest all comment on the spatial properties of the computer screen when they discuss the relationship between their avatars and their physical selves. Ludlow and Wallace write that a player can “stare into the virtual world through a computer screen” and that the avatar can “stare back at them”, both highlighting the extent to which the barrier between the virtual and physical has become fluid, once again illustrating the fusion of the “flat screen” with the “real scene”. Guest compares his experience of Second Life to the two-dimensional movie screen, but then notes that, unlike film or television, he also “moved beyond” the now fluid barrier of the screen and “entered” the virtual world. Not surprisingly, Guest’s description of the virtual world includes references to rainbows, butterflies, waterfalls, glittering fir trees, scarlet and indigo “elven fire” and clouds of dandelion seeds (see Guest 20-22), clearly indicating that, while virtual worlds might have become more embodied, they have lost none of their original utopian characteristics.

However, it seems that on-screen representations of players have become more and more realistic as virtual worlds themselves became increasingly embodied. While most players of earlier, more disembodied virtual worlds chose to re-image and re-present themselves as fantastical, imaginary characters, the current trend in embodied virtual worlds, such as

Second Life, is to create an avatar which resembles the player as closely as possible. On the Second Life “avatar-creation” homepage, new users are informed that

Second Life is about personal expression and your avatar is the most personal expression of all. After all, an avatar is your persona in the virtual world [...] Despite offering almost infinite possibilities, the tool to personalise your avatar is very simple to use and allows you to change anything you like, from the tip of your nose to the tint of your skin¹⁷.

Ludlow and Wallace report that “Ludlow’s avatar, Urizenus, more or less resembled his real-life counterpart,” except that “the chrome-domed Uri sported slightly less hair than Ludlow and a more devilish goatee” (33).



Fig.21 Tim Guest and his Second Life avatar, Errol Mysterio.
www.telegraph.co.uk/.../Wiseguys-of-the-web.html

Guest also recalls how, when he created his avatar, Errol Mysterio (see Fig.21), “[h]e tried to re-create [his] offline self as accurately as possible” (13).

¹⁷ <http://secondlife.com/whatis/avatar.php> (site accessed 10 June 2009).

I stretched my character up to be tall and skinny, and pulled the virtual muscles of *my new face* until they resembled my real self. Then I added muscle tone (perhaps just a little more than my actual body). (13, emphasis added)

Kristina Dell, in her article “How Second Life Affects Real Life”, very succinctly summarises this trend when she recalls how she created her avatar to “look like a hotter version of [herself]”¹⁸. Unlike the disembodied utopia of earlier virtual worlds, one can see how more embodied virtual spaces, like Second Life, have given rise to embodied virtual subjects whose consciousness moves “through” the fluid barrier of the screen and literally *embodies* the virtual space, no longer transcending the body, but re-inserting the physical body into the virtual world. According to Boon and Sinclair,

Facebook profiles and Second Life avatars all contain an element of performativity in their makeup... The selves we re/create on Facebook are inevitably part us – recreating ourselves in digital form – and, again to one extent or another, part who we’d like to be – the creation of something new, perhaps better, but ultimately “other”. (103)

The embodied virtual subject is thus simultaneously an extension of the player’s real-world self and a re-presentation of a re-imagined, more utopian self; in other words, a more fluid, protean virtual self that is both self and other. This has important implications for the physical world, as it acknowledges the fluid interaction between real and virtual realms. The embodied nature of new virtual subjects implies that players can no longer claim that the actions of a virtual avatar is simply a disembodied fantasy played out in a simulated utopia. As Raph Koster wrote in the “Declaration of the Rights of Avatars”¹⁹, a document loosely based on the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen and the United Nations Charter of Rights and Freedoms,

¹⁸ See the full article at: <http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1739601,00.html?artId=1739601?contType=article?chn=sciHealth> (site accessed 25 June 2009).

¹⁹ See the full article at: <http://www.legendmud.org/raph/gaming/playerrights.html> (site accessed 25 June 2009).

this document holds the following truths to be self-evident: That avatars are the *manifestation of actual people* in an online medium, and that their utterances, actions, thoughts, and emotions should be considered to be *as valid* as the utterances, actions, thoughts, and emotions of people in any other forum, venue, location, or space. (emphases added)

Secondly, it also has important implications for gendered representations of virtual bodies, as the gendered body is no longer transcended, but included in the virtual realm. Given that embodied virtual worlds increasingly consist of both Baudrillard's "screen" and "scene", where the player simultaneously *is* and *is not* inside the screen, one has to question whether or not these new virtual spaces can also create innovative and imaginative possibilities for representing the body – more specifically, whether or not the more fluid interface between the virtual and physical world will also allow for a more fluid conceptualisation of gendered identity.

The Gendered Avatar: Girls Who Are Boys Who Like Girls Who Are Boys²⁰

Cyberspace has often been regarded as a place where gender and sexual identities can be reformed in liberatory ways. "Unfortunately," as Brookey and Cannon point out, "there is a good deal of online sexual and gender play that objectifies women and marginalizes queer identities" (145). However, many of the users of more embodied virtual worlds, such as Second Life, take advantage of the embodied virtual space to refigure gender and sexuality. Brookey and Cannon recall that during their first visit to Second Life they "came upon a very large statue with prominent breasts and an erect penis; it was a shrine to 'shemales', one that celebrated the sexual viability of transsexuals" (146). But, just as in the case of the early, disembodied MUDs, the majority of Second Life users are, in fact, only reproducing the same traditional gender roles and sexual norms found in the

²⁰ This is an adaptation of Tim Guest's original chapter heading, "Boys who are girls who like boys who are girls" (220). The reason for changing the genders will become clear in course of the chapter, as it refers to two troubling cases of gender performativity in the avatars known as Evangeline and Sasami Wishbringer.

character description of Amnesia. According to Brookey and Cannon, this is because Second Life users “represent subjects whose identities have been formed by the way gender and sexuality are disciplined in society” (148). While Second Life users may have the agency to create any kind of gender roles they want, Brookey and Cannon nonetheless argue that this agency

does *not* mean that these choices are taking place outside of the influence of the traditional disciplining of sex and gender. On the contrary, we would argue that these examples reveal how effectively male sexual dominance and female sexual passivity are propagated as the “natural” state of sexual difference. When people in SL [Second Life] are given the opportunity to produce their own sexual images and experiences, some reproduce the norms that they have learned about women and men’s sexual differences. Therefore, in spite of the agency of sexual expression in SL, these users function as docile bodies enacting these norms through the virtual bodies that they create and manipulate. Not surprisingly, these are not the only sexual norms being reproduced in SL. (155-156, emphasis added)

One troubling example where patriarchal gender roles are simply reproduced in Second Life can be found in representations of the avatar known as Sasami Wishbringer. Sasami is modelled on a Japanese anime character of the same name. According to the original story, the Sasami character is many centuries old, having slept for seven hundred years, although retaining the body of an eight year-old. In Second Life, Sasami is a young girl with long, light blue pigtails tied with pink bows and the typical small button nose and large, innocent eyes shared by most Manga heroines.

Sasami created her own virtual “slave quarters” (see Fig.23) in a part of Second Life known as the Fantasy Slave Market, from where she sold “hentai” (Japanese cartoon pornography) featuring the Sasami character in various sexually explicit unions with men. Fig.22, for example, shows the upper half of one of Sasami’s “hentai” images, as published in Ludlow’s virtual newspaper, the *Second Life Herald*, with the bottom half of the image censored. This specific image was sold for as little as 50 Linden dollars, which is roughly the equivalent of 20 US Cents. Apart from selling “hentai”, Sasami also worked as an escort for “The Edge”, a virtual brothel, and offered herself for private hire as a sex-slave.



Fig.22 Sasami Wishbringer
http://foo.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2004/12/virtual_child_p/comments/page/1/



Fig.23 A poster on Sasami Wishbringer’s virtual door. The heading reads: “Slave: Sasami Wishbringer City Slave for Hire.”
http://foo.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2004/12/virtual_child_p/comments/page/1/

The virtual newspaper *Second Life Herald* reported on Sasami’s activities in an article titled “Virtual Child Porn Sold in Second Life”²¹. Within an hour of being posted, the article sparked a veritable torrent of enraged responses from angry Second Life players,

²¹ The article was first published on the *Herald*’s website on 9 December 2004. For the full article and the comments posted by other Second Life players, visit http://foo.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2004/12/virtual_child_p/comments/page/1/ (site accessed 25 June 2009).

some of whom insisted that Sasami be banned for illegally creating and selling child pornography, though even more players felt that Sasami had every right to role-play an eight year-old sex slave if she so wished. A player named Thomas Smith responded by saying that

SL would be legally protected and morally right in letting Sasami Wishbringer continue leading the second life she chose. As an adult playing an adult character, what she looks like when she engages in consensual acts of simulated pornography is irrelevant [sic]²².

Since Second Life is intended only for players over the age of 18, Sasami's real-world player was, presumably, an adult. However, contrary to what Smith claims, the Sasami avatar was anything but an "adult character" – even though the original Sasami story claims that the character is over 700 years old, the avatar is without doubt a representation of a prepubescent girl. Given the embodied nature of a site like Second Life, the representation of children in "acts of simulated pornography" is most certainly, contrary to what Smith claims, not irrelevant. Also, the pornography in question was not simply "simulated" as such, as it was created to be sold in a real transaction for real money, thus crossing the boundary separating the virtual realm from the real. Like Smith, a player called Shi-Of-The-Flaming-Tail insisted that Sasami had done nothing wrong, as Sasami is only

a character, played by an adult. Sure, it's a weird kink, but IT'S NOT REAL... There's a difference between someone exploiting a real, living, breathing child for their own perverted desires, and someone who's [sic] particular whim happens to be portraying a child in grown-up situations... It's not REAL life. It's Second Life.

²² All comments are from the *Second Life Herald* archives, available at: http://foo.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2004/12/virtual_child_p/comments/page/1/ (site accessed 25 June 2009).

Another player, named Cobalt, agreed with Shi-Of-The-Flaming-Tail, writing:

Whether you approve of it or not, what Sasami decides to do with herself is her own business. She's an adult, playing a fictional character. (If you *can't draw a line between fiction and reality*, that's your own problem.)
(emphasis added)

These two responses evoke Toby's fictive computer game in *Moxyland*, where the creators of the game wanted their users to maintain a distinction between the game and reality in order to hide the real-world consequences that the game actually had on the characters' lives. The very nature of Second Life as a more embodied virtual space implies that the distinction between "real life" and "Second Life" has become a lot more ambiguous. The fact that Sasami sold her "hentai" images to real people for real money, proves that her character did sell pornography in the real world. Sasami's own (increasingly hysterical) response to the article was that it was trying to personally attack her and defame her character, even though it had only reported on the services she herself advertised on the door of her "slave quarters" (see Fig.23). "Regardless of that particular user's opinion of how I portray my character or participate in the game," she wrote in response,

I have violated no laws of the United States of America... I am doing nothing illegal in how I play... None of the imagery I had on my vendors violated any law and was perfectly legal. Neither is my playstyle forbidden in game. Here is the sad thing this article forgets: It is a game... it is NOT REAL. I am NOT a child and do not interact with children. I am an ADULT engaging with other ADULTS in legal consensual ROLEPLAY.

This is technically true; in the United States, an actual living child has to be involved for charges of child pornography to be brought forward, while, rather pervertedly, ownership of computer-generated sexual images of children is protected by the Constitution. In the

United Kingdom, on the other hand, computer-generated sexual images of children are illegal. “If Sasami Wishbringer was British,” Guest notes, “she – and her clients – risked jail-time” (233). Linden Lab’s official response to the Sasami outcry was that role-playing children engaged in sexual activities was not illegal, but they did nevertheless remove the “hentai” pornography (Guest 233).

One cannot discount the nature of the so-called “perfectly legal” imagery Sasami was selling, since the full version of Fig.22 shows the Sasami character straddling the lap of a muscle-bound adult male, who enters her from behind. The face of the man is hidden in the shadows, thus not only creating an anonymous “place holder” where the buyer of the image could imagine his/her own face, but also giving him a sinister and threatening presence. Quite apart from the fact that the Sasami character is a young child, she is also crying. Her eyes are screwed up in pain and tears are running down her cheeks, while her mouth is open in what appears to be a scream or a gasp of pain. The overall impression one gets from the image is the simulated rape of a child, crying in pain, which is then sold for the price of 20 US Cents. However, since Second Life is presented as “just a game” involving “legal consensual roleplay”, it is therefore considered “not real.” In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler explains that the performative nature of gender does not mean that the performance of gender does not matter. On the contrary, these performances constitute our identities, and locate us as sexual subjects in society. The gender and sexual role-play found in Second Life could perhaps be regarded as “only a game”, but then it is most definitely a game that matters. The users who perform these actions are identifying themselves as sexual subjects, and identifying others as sexual objects. Sasami’s player was performing the Sasami character in such a way that she was, at the same time, both a sexual subject and a sexual object, as her very subjectivity as a character (in the manner of Hayles’s “pov”) relied on her objectifying *herself* as a sexual object. This suggests that Sasami’s player views femininity as somehow inherently sexually submissive.

Obviously, the real person behind the Sasami character was not an eight-year-old with long blue pigtails. However, one cannot ignore the fact that Sasami’s user created a girl-child character with the intention of simulating child prostitution. One player, called Yuki

Callahan, wrote in his/her response to the article: “I know Sasami personally and she (hm hm hmm) is a good person [...] Back off Sasami, IRL [in real life] *he* can kick your ass anyways” (emphasis added). Callahan’s ironic “hm hm hmm” – a knowing chuckle? a sardonic snigger? – suggests that Sasami’s typist is male, while later in his/her response, Callahan almost seems to let slip that Sasami is a man in real life. Sasami’s character strongly evokes the “Lolita-esque pornography” (Kendall 220) found in the description of BlueSky MUD’s Amnesia, made even more troubling by its real-world implications. Brookey and Cannon, writing about advertisements in Second Life for so-called “pose balls” where avatars can engage in “role-play rape”, note that, even though the female avatars presumably participate voluntarily in these rape scenes, just as Sasami insists that her “hentai” image of the rape of a child is “legal consensual roleplay”, “just because the practice is volitional does not absolve it from critique” (153). The fact that a user, whether male or female, *is* complicit in the rape scene, is very problematic. “Such a scenario,” Brookey and Cannon point out, “has implications more disturbing than the banal aspects of rape fantasy; it suggests that rape is just sexual play in which the female is expected to say ‘no’ even though she means ‘yes’” (153). Even more disturbing, however, is the possibility that the female avatar who participates voluntarily in a rape scene could be controlled by a man, as is the case with Sasami’s character, where a male player can create a female avatar with the intention of having her submit to sexual violation and humiliation.

The issue of virtual child pornography is even more troubling in the case of the avatar Evangeline on TSO, where a real minor was involved. Evangeline, one of the most infamous avatars in TSO, was the founder of the Hotel Erotica, the game’s very first cyber-brothel. In a virtual interview with Ludlow’s avatar, Urizenus, for TSO’s virtual newspaper, the *Alphaville Herald*²³, Evangeline claimed that she started her cyber-brothel on the very first day that she played TSO and that she immediately started recruiting “her girls”, as she refers to the cyber-prostitutes employed at the Hotel Erotica. According to Evangeline, she charged her customers up to 500 000 simoleons for a single “trick”,

²³ The original interview can be viewed at: http://www.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2003/12/evangeline_inte.html (site accessed 25 June 2009).

which amounted to roughly \$50 at the time – “a princely sum,” Ludlow and Wallace note, “for a service that consisted of no more than a few crude cartoon interactions and several minutes of x-rated chat appearing on your screen” (119). Evangeline’s recruiting process consisted of an online “interview”, in which applicants had to prove that they could be descriptive and explicit enough. Evangeline describes the interview process in her own crude way:

Urizenus: did you check to make sure your girls (their typists) were legal?

Evangeline: i did interviews

Urizenus: and you asked if they were 18?

Evangeline: i only hired real mother fuck’n bitches to represent that shit

Urizenus: I assume that in the interviews you asked them to show you their stuff.

Evangeline: yes

Urizenus: like how descriptive they could be

Evangeline: they had to eat it all up till i cant walk straight

[...]

Urizenus: and did you do background checks for age etc?

Evangeline: fuck that shit i ain’t even 18

[..]

Evangeline: if u can sell it u old enough

Evangeline also ran the “Free Money for Newbies” house, which was listed in the game’s “welcome” category, intended to familiarise new players with the game. Under the guise of giving new players free money, Evangeline instead swindled the unsuspecting players out of all their funds before “booting” them off her property. Occasionally she would cage a new player’s avatar in the “freezer”, a narrow room with old food and a child’s training toilet, from which the inexperienced new player could not escape. Her “Free Money for Newbies” house was also overtly racist:

Urizenus: the other day you had some newbie in a black-presenting avatar inside a fence and you were calling her a monkey and saying that you had a monkey for

sale. what was that about?

Evangeline: HAAAAHA

Evangeline: when sims act like animals they will be caged

Urizenus: how did she act like an animal?

Evangeline: i cant see her eyes..she didnt wear a helmet

Urizenus: oh, so it didn't have to do with the avatar being black?

[...]

Evangeline: not my fault people decide to be ugly sims that are so black u cant see their eyes

Urizenus: ic, so the problem is that with black sims you can't see their eyes

Evangeline: don't you know?

Evangeline: their face is bugged

Urizenus: i never noticed

In real life, Evangeline turned out to be a teenage boy, which, as Ludlow points out, “threw the ‘interview’ [Evangeline] put her girls through into a different light” (121). Many of Evangeline’s “girls” also turned out to be adolescent boys in real life. The interview was published on the *Alphaville Herald*’s website on 8 December 2003 under the title “Evangeline: Interview with a Child Cyber-Prostitute in TSO.” Almost a month later, on 27 January 2004, the *Detroit Free Press* picked up on the story and contacted the boy’s mother²⁴. According to the article, the boy’s mother “knew her son was infamous in the game, but didn’t know to what extent.” She also said “her son plays the game for hours, though she objects.” When the article appeared, Electronic Arts (EA), the company who owned TSO, closed the boy’s game accounts. They also cancelled Ludlow’s game account because of an alleged cheating complaint, although Ludlow insists that his account was terminated because he had embarrassed EA by publishing the Evangeline interview. Only three months later, however, Evangeline was back, this time playing under the shortened name, “Eva”. Whereas the “girls” at the Hotel Erotica knew

²⁴ See “Sex and the Simulated City: Virtual world raises issues in the real one” by Jim Schaefer. While the link on the *Detroit Free Press* website is broken, an alternative link to the article can be found on: http://foo.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2004/01/grounded_detroi/comments/page/2/ (site accessed 25 June 2009).

that they were agreeing to be virtual prostitutes, Eva's third house tricked innocent avatars into making pornographic films. The avatar Montserrat Tovar, a virtual journalist for the *Alphaville Herald*²⁵, writes that Eva's

house is all about making movies. At the centre of this world is a blue room. Eva conducts auditions for her films in this room and once a Sim enters this room, there is no way out. There is a bathtub in the room, a reclining chair, lights, a toilet, and a wardrobe closet. Sims entering the blue room in most cases seem to enter without fully understanding what they've signed up for: scamming, sexual humiliation, verbal and psychological abuse, and simulated physical abuse.

All avatars had to wear a gold swimsuit for the "auditions", but did not know that they would appear naked on the screen. They then had to perform various humiliating sexual activities; if they refused, they were threatened with violence. "One Sim," Ludlow and Wallace write,

was engaged in hot kissing. It was apparently not voluntary-participation, because the Sim kept asking if she had done enough to get her money. She had been promised 100 000 simoleons. After a few rounds of this, which were accompanied by threats of various sorts, the Sim rebelled and became more insistent about getting her money. The exchange became heated and the Sim got slapped around. During this exchange, several Sims entered the blue room, fought hard to get out and finally gave up and disappeared. (Ludlow and Wallace 141)

After the series of interviews with Evangeline/Eva, Ludlow was increasingly disconcerted by the "lack of action on the part of Electronic Arts to stem things like cyberprostitution, theft and overt racism in an environment meant for thirteen-year-

²⁵ See the full article at: http://foo.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2004/03/diary_of_a_newb_2.html (site accessed 25 June 2009).

olds... [but] the company refused to acknowledge that there was a problem. EA spokesman Jeff Brown claimed the game was no more seamy or dangerous than watching television” (Ludlow and Wallace 121). Ludlow’s biggest concern was that “EA seemed wilfully ignorant of the deep impact that virtual worlds could have on people’s lives. The company treated TSO residents as if they were *merely pixels on a screen* connected to accounts paying monthly subscription fees” (Ludlow and Wallace 160, emphasis added). Strongly reminiscent of Beukes’s *Moxyland*, it seems as if EA, the big company collecting the monthly gaming fees, would also like their users to believe that TSO is “only a game”, and that cases of child prostitution, overt racism and sexual degradation should all be treated as nothing more than fantasy role-play. Some players are insistent that any kind of role-play should be allowed and that the companies in control of virtual worlds should not have the power to censor users’ needs and wishes. “First they went after the ageplayers and got them off the grid,” one user complains.

Then the gamblers. Now going after the violent/rape/bdsm/NC folks. Then furies. Then whatever else. Gradually, one by one, anything slightly risky or edgy or unsettling or dangerous is removed, banned, walled off, restricted and cancelled...Eventually you get what good, decent, God-fearing Americans want in a virtual world: an exact copy of the suburbs. (quoted in Brookey and Cannon 155)

Still, one has to ask whether “violent rape” should really be included in the anonymous user’s examples of “anything slightly risky” and whether this kind of gendered role-play would make virtual worlds into freer, more liberatory spaces. Brookey and Cannon argue that

the possibility that heterosexual men would construct these experiences comes as no surprise; the possibility that both women and queers might assist in the construction is more surprising. Indeed, the enactment of self-subjugation and self-marginalisation would seem to be the ultimate expression of docility. Women, who have chosen to construct identities in

SL only to serve themselves up as objects of sexual desire, reassert an existing belief system that limits the value of women. (160)

Just as in early, disembodied MUDs, it seems as if more embodied virtual worlds are also reiterating oppressive gendered practices and norms. Sasami and Evangeline were both created and controlled by men to perform female gender norms in troubling ways. The case of Evangeline is not as simple as that of Sasami, as Evangeline was an influential and notorious character who subjected others to sexual and racial humiliation, but hardly ever compromised herself. Sasami, on the other hand, was created to look innocent and vulnerable, performing female gender identity as being submissive and docile in the face of sexual violation. Evangeline seemingly had more power, but used that power to sexually abuse and humiliate other female avatars. Playing a female avatar did not lead Evangeline's typist to respect, to empathize with or to better understand women, but revealed that the young boy saw women primarily as objects that could be tricked and then used to make pornographic films.

The problem might lie in the fact that these two characters, just as in the case of Amnesia, were sexual fantasies rather than more embodied representations of the real person behind the screen. In both cases, the male players performed the transcendence of the corporeal at the heart of the erasure of embodiment, since they chose to escape their real bodies and their real genders. It is interesting to note how the discourse of the transcendence of the body often goes hand in hand with a fundamentally utopian narrative. The trope of disembodiment might result in cyberspace's utopian character in offering the freedom to escape embodied limitations, but ultimately it is also what undermines the liberatory possibilities of the virtual utopia. The previous two chapters discussed several examples of cyborg figures whose utopian, postgendered promise somehow rests on a discourse of transcendence. As Robert Markley argues, virtual worlds are too often represented as or assumed to be "the fulfilment of a quest for a postindustrial, postmodern transcendence, the ascent to a Leibnizian future in which the body (suitably dematerialized) becomes indistinguishable from its idealised simulation" (quoted in Foster "Rhetoric" 146). Markley argues that the utopian rhetoric about

cyberspace depends upon interpreting it in a very traditional way, as “a fundamental reality of form underlying our mundane existence” and urged upon us “because it offers us a world more aesthetically pleasing, more beautiful, than the one we inhabit” (quoted in Foster “Rhetoric” 146). If cyberspace is understood as a utopia produced by this kind of formal abstraction from the “mundane” corporeal world of embodied existence, then it will always simply reproduce the Cartesian dualisms that underlie patriarchal gender norms.

Conclusion

The Body Remembered: Towards an Ethics of Embodiment

David Chislett's short story, "Your Body Remembers," is a dreamlike, ethereal sketch of someone who experiences virtual reality for the first time. At first glance, the story seems to conform to the popular tendency of celebrating disembodiment in narratives of virtual space. The narrator informs the reader that, in the virtual realm, (s)he is "silver and quite see-through" and that (s)he can "change shape at will" (116). According to the narrator, the virtual realm "is the cry of freedom" (116). "This," the narrator exclaims, "is the unfettered me", "the last release" (116), suggesting a typical narrative of corporeal transcendence in order to partake of the freedom of the virtual, bodiless utopia. However, in an interesting reversal of Cartesian dualisms, the narrator then insists that (s)he cannot truly experience virtual reality without the corporeal body. "My body remembers what my mind cannot," the narrator informs the reader, "for the body cannot be programmed" (117). The rest of the story recounts the narrator's virtual experience through the corporeal body, as (s)he experiences the "soaring thunder of blood and sinew" (117) while "follow[ing] the *body-mind*" (117, emphasis added). "Your body," the narrator tells the reader,

remembers a time when outside of the body was the world, but the world was the body. Your body remembers when machines weren't the greater reality that you entered, but when the other reality was the marvel of the organic universe. All your unconscious motion is the body at work, remembering, recreating, bringing to attention. Why have you forgotten your body, your link with the world? The machine you inhabit remembers the real link, not the one you have forged. (118)

The short story even seems to assign more importance to the corporeal body than the interface of the computer-generated virtual world, as Chislett describes the body as the narrator's "link with the world", the "*real link*" (emphasis added) of embodied existence and not the, presumably false, link that has been "forged" through the interface of the

machine (118). The story suggests that embodied existence is the true “marvel of the organic universe” (118), and that virtual reality will remain a poor substitute for embodied experiences if the corporeal body is negated and denied.

However, Chislett’s idea of “body-mind” is a very useful concept for configuring the relation between corporeal bodies and technology without reverting to Cartesian dualisms. It suggests that, when the corporeal body is *not* negated by the virtual experience, there is no need to privilege one term at the cost of the other, but that both body and mind can be equally present in the new, embodied virtual space. Chislett’s story can thus be read as an appeal to “remember” the body in virtual space; in other words, to collapse the old dualisms of mind and body through the figure of the body-mind by insisting on the importance of the corporeal body in relation to technology. It provides a new and useful ethics of embodiment for feminist considerations of representing the body in terms of new, explicitly virtual technologies.

“Ethics,” write Abigail Bray and Claire Colebrook, “is not the imposition of norms, nor the negation of laws; ethics is the way in which bodies become, intersect, and affirm their existence” (36). Only an articulation of the body, they argue, “would provide feminism with an autonomous liberation from a primarily repressive and negative masculine reason” (37). The central task for a feminist ethics of embodiment would thus be grounded in the project of representing the female body in such a way that it constructs autonomous women’s representations without falling prey to patriarchal, stereotypical or estranging images of women’s bodies. This project, Bray and Colebrook argue, appeals to an articulation of the female body through representation (35).

By focusing specifically on the corporeal body in relation to technology, this study contests the common disavowal of the corporeal body in relation to explicitly virtual technologies. It argues for a return to corporeality in the posthuman age, examining representations of the corporeal body in contemporary popular culture and arguing against the pervasive trope of disembodiment. While the first two chapters illustrate how the cyborg body, as the most pervasive cultural metaphor for the intersection of the

corporeal body with information technology, simply negates the corporeal, and while the third chapter explores virtual subjects who *are* more embodied, but nevertheless only reiterate patriarchal gender norms through the performance of normative gender roles, this final chapter explores more useful methods of representing the corporeal body in relation to virtual technology through an appeal to an ethics of embodiment.

“Meatspace Still Has Some Advantages for a Carbon-Based Girl¹.”

Jeanette Winterson’s *The PowerBook* (2000) employs the instability of the virtual space to disrupt normative perceptions of gender. In *The PowerBook*, the narrator is an ungendered writer, who is called either Ali or Alix. It is important to make the distinction that Ali/Alix is “ungendered”, not in the sense of not having a gender, but that (s)he can slip between different genders as it pleases him/her. Ali/Alix writes interactive virtual stories, reminiscent of early MUDs, for clients looking for “(f)reedom for a night,” the “freedom to be somebody else” (4). The story begins when a bored, married woman commissions Ali/Alix to write her a story. Immediately after contacting Ali/Alix, the woman tries to pin him/her down to a conventional gender category as being either male or female.

You said, “Who are you?”

“Call me Ali.”

“Is that your real name?”

“Real enough.”

“Male or female?”

“Does it matter?”

“It’s a co-ordinate.”

“This is a virtual world.” (Winterson 26)

Ali/Alix’s insistence on the virtual nature of cyberspace suggests that, at least according to him/her, gender no longer matters in the virtual world. The story that Ali/Alix writes

¹ Winterson, Jeanette. *The PowerBook*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2000: 174.

for the bored woman highlights the performative nature of gender roles, as if Ali/Alix tries to teach his/her client that there is no reason why a sexed body should conform to any one, given gender identity. The story (s)he writes focuses on a young Turkish girl, named Alix, whose mother dresses her as a boy,

because she could not afford to feed any more daughters. By the mystic laws of gender and economics, it ruins a peasant to place half a bowl of figs in front of his daughter, while his son may gorge on the whole tree, burn it for firewood, piss on the stump and still be reckoned a blessing to his father. When [she] was born, [her] father wanted to drown [her], but [her] mother persuaded him to let [her] live in disguise, to see if [she] could bring any wealth to the household. (10-11)

Like the author of this short intertextual story, young Alix is able to change both gender and sexual orientation with ease. In order to successfully present herself as a young man, Alix creates a codpiece from a pair of tulip bulbs and a dried tulip stem, commenting that “there are many legends of men being turned into beasts and women into trees, but none [she] think[s], till now, of a woman who becomes a man by means of a little horticultural grafting” (12). The word “grafting” is highly significant, suggesting that Alix can somehow splice and thus merge both a masculine and a feminine gender identity into one body. This is even more apparent when Alix meets a beautiful princess and her codpiece suddenly comes to life. She makes love to the princess as a man, not as a woman, while the princess never suspects that Alix is not, biologically speaking, a young man. The fact that the codpiece is crafted from flowers is also significant, as it suggests that gender norms have nothing to do with the biological, sexed body. The flower, a “natural” organic object, provides a young girl with male genitalia, suggesting that “natural”, biological bodies can actually assume any given gender role and that gender roles are not necessitated by biological sex difference. It also suggests that it is completely “natural” for Alix to experiment with different genders and gender roles and that assigning a material body with only one gender is what is, in fact, “unnatural”.

The bored client is initially outraged by the story, but does not seem able to stay away from Ali/Alix. Intrigued despite herself, she commissions Ali/Alix to write her another story, one in which the two of them meet in Paris. In this way, Ali/Alix and the unnamed woman begin a virtual affair that takes place through interactive stories about “great and ruinous lovers” (75). Throughout their virtual love affair, Ali/Alix still playfully problematises the idea of fixed gender roles. (S)he writes different stories in which (s)he alternates between a male or a female gender identity. However, towards the end of the novel, Ali/Alix and the unnamed woman meet in “meatspace”, where Ali/Alix is finally revealed to be a woman:

Sex between women is mirror geography. The subtlety of its secret – utterly the same, utterly different. You are a looking-glass world. You are the hidden place that opens to me on the other side of the glass. I touch your smooth surface and then my fingers sink through to the other side. You are what the mirror reflects and invents. I see myself, I see you, two, one, none. I don’t know. Maybe I don’t need to know. Kiss me. (174)

Ali/Alix concludes this speech by saying that “meatspace still has some advantages for a carbon-based girl” (174), namely, the advantages of touching the corporeal body of the beloved. Also, once she is revealed as a woman, Ali/Alix mostly uses the female version of her name. The addition of the letter “x” to her name is part of the recurrent phrase “x marks the spot”, a motif which runs throughout the text, and suggests that the elusive “buried treasure” Ali/Alix struggles to find throughout her life turns out to be the body of the beloved. As in Lewitt’s short story, Ali/Alix seems to suggest that a meaningful inter-subjective relationship can only be possible between two embodied subjects. In fact, the body of the beloved becomes the ontological prerequisite for all meaning in the novel:

Your face, your hands, the movement of your body...
Your body is my Book of Hours.
Open it. Read it.
This is the true history of the world. (244)

While Ali/Alix initially writes ungendered virtual stories about indeterminately gendered bodies, she finally, through her relationship with the unnamed woman, realises that the true story of their relationship is the one written through the corporeal body. The novel thus ends with Ali/Alix inviting her lover to literally read her body as a representation of “the true history of the world” (244).

Once Ali/Alix admits the importance of embodied existence, she, interestingly enough, never again presents herself as male. She uses only a female pronoun when referring to herself and often remarks that her relationship with the unnamed client is a relationship between two embodied women. This might suggest that embodied existence cannot escape the binaries of male and female and that embodied existence will always fall prey to patriarchal, binary gender divisions. However, even though Ali/Alix finally locates her identity at the level of the material female body and assumes a feminine gender identity, she nevertheless refuses to reiterate the patriarchal stereotypes often associated with normative heterosexual gender roles. Ali/Alix likens herself to both the literary characters of Lancelot and Francesca da Rimini; at the same time, she is both the chivalric knight and the courtly lady, the penitent and the sinner, the hunter and the hunted, the man and the woman (67-74, 123-129). In this way, *The PowerBook* highlights the importance of embodied life experience without reverting to problematic gender roles often ascribed to the material, sexed body.

In conclusion, Winterson’s novel presents us with a useful way of both understanding and representing the corporeal body in relation to virtual technology. Recalling Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa” introduced in the first chapter of this study, Ali/Alix writes herself through her body and then posts these representations on the Internet. While she assumes many different and liberating gender roles for herself through the act of writing her body, she does not negate the corporeal, but instead asserts that an inter-subjective relationship can only exist between two embodied subjects. Unlike cyborg figures, whose negation of the corporeal usually results in highly problematic and hypersexualised portrayals of the female body, Ali/Alix writes her body into cyberspace without performing the erasure of

embodiment inherent in most configurations of the body and technology. It is this appropriation of the female body as a site of liberatory potential, while, at the same time, resisting a belief that the material body necessitates any kind of normative gender role, which allows Ali/Alix to reclaim embodied existence from the Cartesian dualism that would have women disavow their own bodies. By appropriating the female body through literature, Winterson's novel subverts patriarchal dualisms and allows the female body, as Cixous insists, to be heard.

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