

# Cyberfeminism with a difference

## Rosi Braidotti

### Table of Contents

Introduction postmodernity  
Post-human bodies  
The politics of parody  
The power of irony  
Feminist visions on science fiction  
The cyber imaginary  
The need for new utopias  
Notes

### Introduction: Postmodernity

'In the city now there are loose components, accelerated particles, something has come loose, something is wriggling, lassoing, spinning towards the edge of its groove. Something must give and it isn't safe. You ought to be careful. Because safety has left our lives.'

Martin Amis: Einstein's Monsters <sup>1</sup>

In this article, I will first of all situate the question of cyber-bodies in the framework of postmodernity, stressing the paradoxes of embodiment. I will subsequently play a number of variations on the theme of cyber-feminism, highlighting the issue of sexual difference throughout. Contrary to jargon-ridden usages of the term, I take postmodernity to signify the specific historical situation of post-industrial societies after the decline of modernist hopes and tropes. Symptomatic of these changes is urban space, especially in the inner city, which has been cleaned up and refigured through postindustrial metal and plexiglass buildings, but it is only a veneer that covers up the putrefaction of the industrial space, marking the death of the modernist dream of urban civil society. This is primarily but not exclusively a Western world problem. The distinct feature of postmodernity is in fact the trans-national nature of its economy in the age of the decline of the nation state. It is about ethnic mixity through the flow of world migration: an infinite process of hybridization at a time of increasing racism and xenophobia in the West.<sup>2</sup>

Postmodernity is also about an enormous push towards the "third-worldification" of the "first" world, with continuing exploitation of the "third" world. It is about the decline of what was known as "the second world", the communist block, and the recurrence of a process of 'balkanisation' of the whole Eastern European block. It is also about the decline of the legal economy and the rise of crime and illegality as a factor. This is what Deleuze and Guattari call 'capital as cocaine'. It proves the extent to which late capitalism has no teleological purpose, no definite direction, nothing except the brutality of self-perpetuation.

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

This shift of perspective, which I have analyzed elsewhere<sup>3</sup> as a move away from technophobia, towards a more technophilic approach, also redefines the terms of the relationships between technology and art. If in a conventional humanistic framework the two may appear as opposites, in postmodernity, they are much more interconnected.

In all fields, but especially in information technology, the strict separation between the technical and the creative has in fact been made redundant by digital images and the skills required by computer-aided design. The new alliance between

the previously segregated domains of the technical and the artistic marks a contemporary version of the post-humanistic reconstruction of a techno-culture whose aesthetics is equal to its technological sophistication.

All this to say that I wish to take my distance equally from, on the one hand the euphoria of mainstream postmodernists who seize advanced technology and especially cyber-space as the possibility for multiple and polymorphous reembodiments; and on the other hand, from the many prophets of doom who mourn the decline of classical humanism. I see postmodernity instead as the threshold of new and important relocations for cultural practice. One of the most significant pre-conditions for these re-locations is relinquishing both the phantasy of multiple re-embodiments and the fatal attraction of nostalgia.<sup>4</sup> The nostalgic longing for an allegedly better past is a hasty and unintelligent response to the challenges of our age. It is not only culturally ineffective - in so far as it relates to the conditions of its own historicity by negating them; it is also a short-cut through their complexity. I find that there is something deeply a-moral and quite desperate in the way in which post-industrial societies rush headlong towards a hasty solution to their contradictions. This flight into nostalgia has the immediate effect of neglecting by sheer denial the transition from a humanistic to a posthuman world. That this basic self-deception be compensated by a wave of longing for saviours of all brands and formats is not surprising.

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

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

In the rest of this paper, I would like to suggest that first and foremost among these iconoclastic readers of the contemporary crisis are feminist cultural and media activists such as the riot girls and other 'cyber feminists' who are devoted to the politics of parody or parodic repetition. Some of these creative minds are prone to theory, others - feminist science fiction writers and other 'fabulators'<sup>5</sup> like Angela Carter - choose the fictional mode. While irony remains a major stylistic device, of great significance are also contemporary multi-media electronic artists of the non-nostalgic kind like Jenny Holzer, Laurie Anderson and Cindy Sherman. They are the ideal travel companions in postmodernity.

### **Post-human bodies**

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

Dolly Parton

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

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

There you have the Pantheon of postmodern femininity, live on CNN at any time, any place, from Hong Kong to Sarajevo, yours at the push of a button. Interactivity is another name for shopping, as Christine Tambllyn<sup>6</sup> put it, and hyper-real gender identity is what it sells.

These three icons have some features in common: firstly, they inhabit a posthuman body, that is to say an artificially reconstructed body.<sup>7</sup> The body in question here is far from a biological essence: it is a crossroad of insensitizing forces; it is a surface of inscriptions of social codes. Ever since the efforts by the poststructuralist generation to rethink a non-essentialized embodied self, we should all have grown accustomed to the loss of ontological security that accompanies the decline of the naturalistic paradigm. As Francis Barker puts it <sup>8</sup>, the disappearance of the body is the apex of the historical process of its de-naturalization. The problem that lingers on is how to re-adjust our politics to this shift.

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

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

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

Thus, the hyper-reality of the posthuman predicament so sublimely represented by Parton, Taylor and Fonda, does not wipe out politics or the need for political resistance: it just makes it more necessary than ever to work towards a radical redefinition of political action. Nothing could be further from a postmodern ethics than Dostoyevsky's over-quoted and profoundly mistaken statement that, if God is dead, anything goes. The challenge here is rather how to combine the recognition of postmodern embodiment with resistance to relativism and a free fall into cynicism. Secondly, the three cyborg goddesses mentioned above are immensely rich because they are media stars. Capital in these postindustrial times is an immaterial flow of cash that travels as pure data in cyber-space till it lands in (some of) our bank accounts. Moreover, capital harps on and trades in body fluids: the cheap sweat and blood of the disposable workforce throughout the third world; but also, the wetness of desire of first world consumers as they commodify their existence into over-saturated stupor. Hyper-reality does not wipe out class relations: it just intensifies them.<sup>9</sup> Postmodernity rests on the paradox of simultaneous commodification and conformism of cultures, while intensifying disparities among them, as well as structural inequalities.

An important aspect of this situation is the omnipotence of the visual media. Our era has turned visualization into the ultimate form of control; in the hands of the clarity fetishists who have turned CNN into a verb: "I've been CNN-ed today, haven't you?". This marks not only the final stage in the commodification of thescopic, but also the triumph of vision over all the other senses.<sup>10</sup>

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

In the light of the feminist work proposed by Luce Irigaray and Kaja Silverman, the idea has emerged to explore the potentiality of hearing and audio material as a way out of the tyranny of the gaze. Donna Haraway has inspiring things to say about the logocentric hold of disembodied vision, which is best exemplified by the satellite/eye in the sky. She opposes to it an embodied and therefore accountable redefinition of the act of seeing as a form of connection to the object of vision,

which she defines in terms of 'passionate detachment'. If you look across the board of contemporary electronic art, especially in the field of virtual reality, you will find many women artists, like Catherine Richards and Nell Tenhaaf, who apply the technology to challenge the in-built assumption of visual superiority which it carries.

Thirdly, the three icons I have chosen to symbolize postmodern bodies are allwhite, especially and paradoxically Michael Jackson. In his perverse wit, hyperreal con artist Jeff Koons (ex-husband of the post-human Italian porno star Cicciolina) depicted Jackson in a ceramic piece, as a lily-white god holding a monkey in his arms. With great panache, Koons announced that this was a tribute to Michael Jackson's pursuit of the perfectibility of his body. The many cosmetic surgery operations he has undergone testifies to Jackson's willful sculpting and crafting of the self. In the posthuman world view, deliberate attempts to pursue perfection are seen as a complement to evolution, bringing the embodied self to a higher stage of accomplishment. Whiteness being, in Koons' sublime simplicity, the undisputed and utterly final standards of beauty, Jackson's superstardom could only be depicted in white. Hyper-reality does not wipe out racism: it intensifies it and it brings it to implosion.

One related aspect of the racialization of post-human bodies concerns the ethnic-specific values it conveys. Many have questioned the extent to which we are all being re-colonized by an American and more specifically a Californian 'body-beautiful' ideology. In so far as US corporations own the technology, they leave their cultural imprints upon the contemporary imaginary. This leaves little room to any other cultural alternatives. Thus, the three emblems of postmodern femininity on whose discursive bodies I am writing this, could only be American.

### **The politics of parody**

Confronted with this situation, that is to say with culturally enforced icons of white, economically dominant, heterosexual hyper-femininity - which simultaneously reinstate huge power differentials while denying them - what is to be done? The first thing a feminist critic can do is to acknowledge the aporias and the aphasias of theoretical frameworks and look with hope in the direction of (women) artists. There is no question that the creative spirits have a head start over the masters of meta discourse, even and especially of deconstructive meta discourse. This is a very sobering prospect: after years of post-structuralist theoretical arrogance, philosophy lags behind art and fiction in the difficult struggle to keep up with today's world. Maybe the time has come for us to moderate the theoretical voice within us and to attempt to deal with our historical situation differently.

Feminists have been prompt in picking up the challenge of finding political and intellectual answers to this theoretical crisis. It has largely taken the form of a 'linguistic turn', i.e.: a shift towards more imaginative styles. Evidence of this is the emphasis feminist theory is placing on the need for new 'figurations', as Donna Haraway puts it, or 'fabulations', to quote Marleen Barr, to express the alternative forms of female subjectivity developed within feminism, as well as the on-going struggle with language to produce affirmative representations of women. But nowhere is the feminist challenge more evident than in the field of artistic practice. For instance, the ironical force, the hardly suppressed violence and the vitriolic wit of feminist groups like the Guerrilla or the Riot Girls are an important aspect of the contemporary relocation of culture, and the struggle over representation. I would define their position in terms of the politics of the parody. The riot girls want to argue that there is a war going on and women are not pacifists, we are the guerilla girls, the riot girls, the bad girls. We want to put up some active resistance, but we also want to have fun and we want to do it our way. The ever increasing number of women writing their own science fiction, cyberpunk, film scripts, 'zines', rap and rock music and the likes testifies to this new mode.

There is definitely a touch of violence in the mode exposed by the riot and guerilla girls: a sort of raw directness that clashes with the syncopated tones of standard art criticism. This forceful style is a response to hostile environmental and social forces. It also expresses a reliance on collective bonding through rituals and ritualized actions, which far from dissolving the individual into the group, simply accentuate her unrepentant singularity. I find a powerful evocation of this singular yet collectively shared position in the raucous, demonic beat of Kathy Acker's *In Memoriam to Identity* <sup>11</sup>, in her flair for multiple becomings, her

joy in the reversibility of situations and people - her border-line capacity to impersonate, mimic and cut across an infinity of 'others'. As many feminist theorists have pointed out, the practice of parody, which I also call 'the philosophy as if', with its ritualized repetitions, needs to be grounded in order to be politically effective. Postmodern feminist knowledge claims are grounded in life-experiences and consequently mark radical forms of re-embodiment. But they also need to be dynamic - or nomadic - and allow for shifts of location and multiplicity.

The practice of 'as if' can also degenerate into the mode of fetishistic representation. This consists in simultaneously recognising and denying certain attributes or experiences. In male-stream postmodern thought<sup>12</sup>, fetishistic disavowal seems to mark most discussions of sexual difference<sup>13</sup>. I see feminist theory as a corrective to this trend. The feminist 'philosophy of as if' is not a form of disavowal, but rather the affirmation of a subject that is both nonessentialized, that is to say no longer grounded in the idea of human or feminine 'nature', but she is nonetheless capable of ethic and moral agency. As Judith Butler lucidly warns us, the force of the parodic mode consists precisely in turning the practice of repetitions into a politically empowering position. What I find empowering in the theoretical and political practice of 'as if' is its potential for opening up, through successive repetitions and mimetic strategies, spaces where forms of feminist agency can be engendered. In other words, parody can be politically empowering on the condition of being sustained by a critical consciousness that aims at the subversion of dominant codes. Thus, I have argued<sup>14</sup> that Irigaray's strategy of 'mimesis' is politically empowering because it addresses simultaneously issues of identity, identifications and political subjectivity. The ironical mode is an orchestrated form of provocation and, as such, it marks a sort of symbolic violence and the riot girls are unsurpassed masters of it.

*I am sick and tired of Virtual Reality technology and cyber space being toys for the boys. I am mildly amused and tolerably bored with the sight of recycled aging hippies who, having failed to shake off their narcotic habits from the 60's, simply resolved to transpose them to 'video or computer drugs'. This is only a displacement of the pursuit of one solipsistic pleasure onto another. I, as one of the riot girls, of the bad girls, want my own imaginary, my own projected self; I want to design the world in my own glorious image. It is time for the unholy marriage of Nietzsche's Ariadne with Dionysian forces; it's time for the female death-wish to express itself by setting up workable networks of translation for female desire into socially negotiable forms of behaviour. It is time for history and the unconscious to strike a new deal.*

*The metaphor of war is invading our cultural and social imaginary, from rapmusic to cyber space. Let us take the example of popular music. I would start with the realization of the decline of rock'n roll as a subversive political force, as evidenced by two parallel phenomena: one is the second coming of what I call 'geriatrics rock', that is to say the never ending 'returns' of the Rolling Stones and other 'cock rock' relics from the 60's.<sup>15</sup> Will they ever retire? The second, far more problematic effect is the military use to which rock'n roll has been put by the American army. Started in Vietnam, the use of rock music as an assault weapon was perfected in the attack on Noriega in Panama City.<sup>16</sup>*

*Now rap has taken over and masculinist war-mongering 'gangsta rap' images have taken over rap. Listen to the women's rap band Salt'n Pepper- however and you will have to reconsider the inevitable connection between subversive music and aggressive masculinity. Yes, the girls are getting mad; we want our cyber dreams, we want our own shared hallucinations. You may keep your blood and gore, what's at stake for us is how to grab cyber-space so as to exit the old, decayed, seduced, abducted and abandoned corpse of phallo-logocentric patriarchy; the death squads of the phallus, the geriatric, money-minded, silicon-inflated body of militant phallocracy and its annexed and indexed feminine other'. The riot girls know that they can do better than this.*

Creative writing in the fictional mode is another important example of the politics of parody. Writing in postmodernity is not only a process of constant translation, but also of successive adaptations to different cultural realities. This point is raised strongly by the Vietnamese Californian writer and film-maker Trinh Minh Ha who, following Deleuze's rereading of nietzschean dionysian forces, speaks of: 'writing in intensity'. This indicates that writing marks an intransitive sort of becoming, i.e.: the kind of becoming that intensifies one's level of joyful creativity and pleasure.

Laurie Anderson's performance-art is an interesting example of intransitive becoming through an effective parodic style. Unsurpassed master in the 'as-if' mode of creative expression<sup>17</sup>, Laurie Anderson proposes a conceptual universe where situations and people are always reversible. This allows Anderson to depict a high-tech kind of continuum between different levels of experience. In turn this makes for her extraordinary talent to evoke complexity in a minimalist mode. Interventions in public spaces form also an important element of this kind of artistic sensibility. For instance, Barbara Krueger's large billboards are strategically set up in huge intersections at the centre of the metropolises of the Western world. They announce 'We don't need another hero' with breath-taking force<sup>18</sup>. In these days of post-industrial decay of the urban space, artists like Krueger manage to return to the artwork the monumental value that used to be its prerogative in the past, while also preserving its politically committed nature. Similarly, Jenny Holzer's electronic panels flash right across the advertisement-infested skyline of our cities and relay very politicized and consciousness-raising messages: 'Money creates taste', 'Proper ty created crime', 'Torture is barbaric', etc. etc.<sup>19</sup> Holzer also uses the airport spaces, especially the information panels of luggage carrousel, to transmit her staggering messages, such as: 'Lack of charisma can be fatal' and ironical ones, such as; 'If you had behaved nicely, the communists wouldn't exist' or: 'What country should you adopt if you hate poor people?' .

Krueger and Holzer are perfect examples of postmodern, insightful and nonnostalgic appropriations of urban, public spaces for creative and political purposes. In their hands, the city as an area of transit and passage becomes a text, a signifying space, heavily marked by signs and boards indicating a multitude of possible directions, to which the artist adds her own, unexpected and disruptive one. The guerilla girls have been doing this with supreme talent for years. The public spaces as sites of creativity therefore highlight a paradox: they are both loaded with signification and profoundly anonymous; they are spaces of detached transition, but also venues of inspiration, of visionary insight, of great release of creativity. Brian Eno's musical experiment with 'Music for airports' makes the same point very strongly: it is a creative appropriation of the dead heart of the slightly hallucinating zones that are the public places.

### **The power of irony**

One of the forms taken by the feminist cultural practice of 'as if' is irony. Irony is a systematically applied dose of de-bunking; an endless teasing; a healthy deflation of over-heated rhetoric. A possible response to the generalised nostalgia of mainstre am culture cannot be summarized, it can only be performed:

*No spectacular fin-de-siecle for us contemporary statistical units. No theatrical come back in broad daylight. We are the anti-Lazarus generation of the post-Christian era. No cry of alarm, no tears. The age of tragic aesthetic arrest has been replaced by the principles of the photocopy - the eternal absent-minded reproduction of the Sarne. Walter Benjamin and Nietzsche with I.B.M. and Rank-Xerox.*

*Sitting in the post-Becket gloom I lost the last fragment of wholeness. I had the impulse to wait, wait for the accelerated particles to come. Nothing very tragic, just the steel-cold blue light of reason reducing us to insignificance. Life a mere re aching-out for non-being, a living ab-negation. Love is dead in metropolis. My voice is dry and fading already. My skin getting cracked and rougher at each clicklng of the digital mastermind. The Kafkaesque plot is working its way through my genetic apparatus. I'll soon be a gigantic insect and I shall die after my next attempt at copulation.*

*This is the way the world will end, my post-mortem lover, not with a bang but with the whimpering buzzing sound of insects crawling upon a wall. The long-legged spiders of my discontent, my heart a cockroach's delight. S(t)imulating, dissimulation. They failed to keep the margin of negotiation open, stayed right on target till they pushed us over the edge, drawing the penphery to the centre and we were blasted off-balance. Aphasic. So beautiful, ever so beautiful it made me long for the nine teenth century, before god died. It must have been nice to say: "God, it is true!" and not feel the probabilities pulling us apart.*

*Not that I mind the loss of the classical narrative. Lyotard tells all about modernity and the crisis of legitimation. I don't mind not having a single shred of discursive coherence to rest upon. Conceptually, it is quite a stimulating position, rich with epistemological potential, and yet I know: I have already paid for this. Deep in the heart of the gaping hole of my heart I mourn the loss of*

metaphysical grandeur, I mourn the death of love divine. I miss the sublime, as we plunge headlong into the ridiculous.

Yes, the world will end, my post-Zarathustra friend. It will go out like a brief candle. Dying is an art and one must have a flair for it. And you do it exceptionally well, you do it so it feels like hell, you do it so it feels real. We're only killing time. I hope you make your killing in time.

Unconditional surrender, o Hiroshima mon amour, my own private Enola Gay. What immortal eye drew your breath-taking dissymetry? What injection of post-heideggerian angst, what fatal nuclear leak traumatized you into such a state of emotional incompetence? When did you turn into such an autistic machine, a collection of non-integrated circuits? Where did your death-wish go right, my posthuman travel companion?

You are a wire electrifying, when bared. Hardly a self, an entity, an individual in any old humanistic sense of the term. Heraclitus revisited with Deleuze, you embody the decapitated modern subject. You declared yourself pure becoming, but you were actually a rñere reflector, a moving synthetic image - one-dimensional and yet multi-functional.

Is this how one should read Deleuze's machines dÈsirantes? Is this what Lyotard is getting at? And Baudrillard with his hyper-reel and the simulacrum? Are all these just elaborate metaphors for the metabolic bankruptcy we are going through? Of course all this necrophilic discourse makes me nervous and if you had my brains you'd be nervous, too. I am a human, sexed, mortal being of the female kind, endowed with language. Just call me - woman.

### **Feminist visions on science fiction**

The post-human predicament implies a blurring of gender boundaries. I think this does not always work to the advantage of women, though. Many feminists have turned to both writing and reading science fiction in order to try and assess the impact of the new technological world upon the representation of sexual difference.

All fans know that science fiction has to do with fantasies about the body, especially the reproductive body. Science fiction represents alternative systems of procreation and birth, ranging from the rather child-like image of babies born out of cauliflowers, to monstrous births through unmentionable orifices. This gives rise to what Barbara Creed defines as the syndrome of the monstrous feminine.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it is no coincidence that in *Alien*, a classic of this genre, the master computer that controls the spaceship is called 'Mother' and she is vicious, especially to the heroine (Sigourney Weaver). The maternal function in this film is displaced: she reproduces like a monstrous insect by laying eggs inside people's stomachs, through an act of phallic penetration through the mouth. There are also many scenes in the film of ejection of smaller vessels or aircrafts from the mother-dominated, monstrous and hostile spaceship. Mother is an allpowerful generative force, pre-phallic and malignant: she is a non-representable abyss from which all life and death come.

Following feminist critics of science fiction, I want to argue that science fiction horror films play with fundamental male anxieties and displace it by inventing alternative views of reproduction, thereby manipulating the figure of the female body. Julia Kristeva has argued that the 'horror' part of these films is due to the play with- a displaced and fantasized 'maternal' function, as holding simultaneously the key to the origins of life and to death. Just like the Medusa's head, the horrific female can be conquered by being turned into an emblem, that is to say becoming fetishized.<sup>21</sup>

Some of the forms of post-human procreation that are explored in science/fiction films are: cloning (*The Boys from Brazil*); parthenogenesis (*The Gremlins*). Another topos is the impregnation of woman by aliens, as in the '50's classic *I married a monster from outer space*, *Village of the Damned*, and psychological dramas like *Rosemary's Baby*. The production of the human as machine is also quite popular; (*Inseminoid*, *The Man Who Folded Himself*); this entails the intercourse woman/machine (as a variation woman/devil) (*Demon Seed*, *Inseminoid*). Actually, Spielberg is the master of male-birth fantasies. The film *Indiana Jones* is the perfect example of this: there is no mother in sight, ever, but God the father is omnipresent. In the series he produced: *Back to the Future* the teen ager boy's fantasy of being at the origins of himself is given full and prolonged exposure.<sup>22</sup> Modleski has pointed out that in contemporary culture, men are definitely flirting with the idea of having babies for themselves. Some of this is relatively naive, and it takes the form of experimenting with new and definitely helpful social forms of new fatherhood.<sup>23</sup> In postmodern times, however, this male anxiety about the missing father must be read alongside the new reproductive technologies. They

replace the woman with the technological device - the machine - in a contemporary version of the Pygmalion myth, a sort of high-tech 'My Fair Lady'<sup>24</sup> If you look at contemporary reconstruction of femininity and masculinity through media culture, you cannot help being struck by its staleness. Take for instance masculinity in the alternative Cameron-Schwarzenegger or Cronenberg modes. Cameron and Cronenberg are the great reconstructors of the post-human masculine subject. They represent two opposed trends: Cameron takes a deep plunge into what Nancy Hartsock calls 'abstract masculinity' by proposing a hyper-real male body in the Schwarzenegger format. Cronenberg, on the other hand, explodes phallic masculinity into two diverging directions: on the one hand the psychopathic serial killer and on the other, the hysterical neurosis of the overfeminized male. The latter is also celebrated by the Toronto-based academics Arthur and Marielouise Kroker. In cyberpunk, the theme of death and the ritual burying of the body is so omnipresent that it overrules the procreative factor. We all know how very maledominated cyberpunk is, so to argue that it reflects male fantasies and especially the male death wish, would be an understatement. Cyberpunk dreams about the dissolution of the body into the Matrix (as in 'mater' or cosmic womb), in what strikes me as a little boy's final climactic return to Big Mama's organic and forever expanding container.

I find such images of the cosmos very sloppy, literally, but also quite essentialistic in its portrayal of the cosmic force of the archaic mother as the allpowerful container of death and life forces. Once again, sexual difference understood as dissymmetry results in different positions on the issue of the archaic mother.

We, the riot girls who have been persecuted, hassled and repressed by Big Mama all our life; we who had to fight mama off our backs and chase her out of the dark recesses of our psyche, we have quite a different story to tell. Virginia Woolf's famous injunction that the creative woman needs to kill 'the angel in the house' that inhabits the most ancient layers of her identity is quite relevant. It is the image of the caring, nurturing, self-sacrificing soft female that stands in the way of self-realisation. Women cannot be expected to share easily in the fantasy of a return to the Matrix, if anything, we want out of it and fast.

We, the riot girls want our own dreams of cosmic dissolution, we want our own transcendental dimension. Keep your own matrix dreams: your deathwish is not our death wish, so you'd better give us the space and time to develop and express my own wishes, or else we will get really mad. Anger will push us to punish you by deciding to enact, in our real, everyday life, your own worst fantasies of just how obnoxious women can be. As that other great simulator, Bette Midler, put it: *"I'm everything you were afraid your little girl would grow up to be - and your little boy!"*.

In other words, as a female feminist who has taken her distance from traditional femininity and has empowered new forms of subjectivity, the riot girl knows how to put to good use the politics of parody: she can impersonate femaleness in her extreme and extremely annoying fashion. To avoid such eruptions of female feminist anger, it may be advisable for us to sit down to a good talk in order to negotiate margins of mutual toleration.

### **The cyber imaginary**

While this kind of negotiation goes on, the gender gap in the use of computers, in women's access to computer literacy, internet equipment and other expensive technological apparati, as well as women's participation in programming and in designing the technology will continue to grow wider. Similarly, the gap between first and third worlds in the access to technology will also go on. It is always at times of great technological advance that Western culture reiterates some of its most persistent habits, notably the tendency to creating differences and organizing them hierarchically.

Thus, while the computer technology seems to promise a world beyond gender differences, the gender gap grows wider. All the talk of a brand new telematic world masks the ever-increasing polarisation of resources and means, in which women are the main losers. There is strong indication therefore, that the shifting of conventional boundaries between the sexes and the proliferation of all kinds of differences through the new technologies will not be nearly as liberating as the cyber-artists and internet addicts would want us to believe.

In analyzing the contemporary cyber-imagination, a special point needs to be made about the cultural production surrounding virtual reality technology; this is an advanced brand of computer designed reality, useful in its medical or architectural applications, but very poor from the angle of the imagination,

especially if you look at it in terms of gender-roles. Computer-aided design and animation has the potential for great creativity, not only in professional areas such as architecture and medicine, but also in mass entertainment, especially video-games. It originates in technology to train air pilots to fly jet fighters. The gulf war was fought by virtual reality machinery (it still resulted in the usual butchery); of late, the costs involved in producing Virtual Reality equipment have simply decreased, so that people other than NASA are able to afford it. Feminist researchers in this field have noted the paradoxes and the dangers of contemporary forms of disembodiment, which accompany these new technologies. I am especially struck by the persistence of pornographic, violent and humiliating images of women that are still circulating through these allegedly 'new' technological products. I worry about designing programmes that allow for 'virtual rape and virtual murder'.

For example, *The Lawn Mower Man* is one of the commercially released films featuring 'virtual reality' images, which are in fact only computer images. I find that it makes a very mediocre use of powerful images. The subject of the film is a scientist who works for NASA and has devised very advanced mindmanipulating technologies first using a chimpanzee as the object of a scientific experiment later to be replaced by a mentally retarded man, whose brain gets 'expanded' through this new technology.

The images of penetration of the brain are crucial to the visual impact of this film: it is all about 'opening up' to the influence of a higher power. You can compare this to Cronenberg's 'invaginated' male bodies, penetrated by the cathode tube radiations of *Videodrome* and more recently to the brains implants in *Johnny Memonic*. Thanks to this technology, the retarded man blossoms first into a normal boy, then grows into a superhuman figure. The reconstruction of masculinity in this film shows an evolution from idiot/little boy/adolescent/cowboy/ loses virginity/great lover/macho/ rapist/murderer/serial killer/psycho. The film implicitly raises questions about the interaction of sexuality and technologies, and both of them as forms of masturbatory and masculinist power.

At an intermediary stage of his development, he claims he can see God and he wants to share this experience with his girlfriend, to give her the ultimate orgasm. What follows is a scene of psychic rape, when the woman is literally blown apart and goes out of her mind. The woman will be insane from then on, as the boy progresses to become a god-like figure, a serial killer, and finally a force of nature. Thus, where as the male mind gets first to see and then to become god, the female one is just shown as cracking under the strain.

A feminist watching this cannot help being struck by the persistence of gender stereotypes and misogynist streaks. The alleged triumph of high-technologies is not matched by a leap of the human imagination to create new images and representations. Quite on the contrary, what I notice is the repetition of very old themes and clichés, under the appearance of 'new' technological advances. It just goes to prove that it takes more than machinery to really alter patterns of thought and mental habits. The fiction of science, which is the theme of science-fiction films and literature, calls for more imagination and more gender equality in order to approximate a 'new' representation of a post-modern humanity. Unless our culture can take up the challenge and invent suitably new forms of expression, this technology is useless.

One of the great contradictions of Virtual Reality images is that they titillate our imagination, promising the marvels and wonders of a gender-free world while it simultaneously reproduces some of the most banal, flat images of gender identity, but also class and race relations that you can think of. Virtual Reality images also titillate our imagination, as is characteristic of the pornographic regime of representation. The imagination is a very gendered space and the woman's imagination has always been represented as a troublesome and dangerous quality as the feminist film theorist Doane put it.<sup>25</sup>

The imaginative poverty of virtual reality is all the more striking if you compare it to the creativity of some of the women artists I mentioned earlier. By comparison, the banality, the sexism, the repetitive nature of computer-designed videogames are quite appalling. As usual, at times of great changes and upheavals, the potential for the new engenders great fear, anxiety and in some cases even nostalgia for the previous regime.

As if the imaginative misery were not enough, postmodernity is marked by a widespread impact and a qualitative shift of pornography in every sphere of cultural activity. Pornography is more and more about the power relations and less and less about sex. In classical pornography sex was a vehicle by which to convey power relations. Nowadays anything can become such a vehicle: the becoming-culture of

pornography means that any cultural activity or product can become a commodity and through that process express inequalities, patterns of exclusion, fantasies of domination, desires for power and control.<sup>26</sup>

The central point remains: there is a credibility gap between the promises of Virtual Reality and cyberspace and the quality of what it delivers. It consequently seems to me that, in the short range, this new technological frontier will intensify the gender-gap and increase the polarisation between the sexes. We are back to the war metaphor, but its location is the real world, not the hyperspace of abstract masculinity. And its protagonists are no computer images, but the real social agents of postindustrial urban landscapes.

The most effective strategy remains for women to use technology in order to disengage our collective imagination from the phallus and its accessory values: money, exclusion and domination, nationalism, iconic femininity and systematic violence.

### **The need for new utopias**

Another qualitative leap is also necessary, however, towards the affirmation of sexual difference in terms of the recognition of the dissymmetrical relationship between the sexes. Feminists have rejected the universalistic tendency which consists in conflating the masculine viewpoint with the 'human', thereby confining the 'feminine' to the structural position of devalorised 'other'. This division of social and symbolic labour means that the burden of devalorized difference falls upon certain empirical referents who can be defined in opposition to the dominant norm as: non-man, non-white, non-owner of property, non-speaker-of-a-dominant-language, etc.

This hierarchical organization of differences is the key to phallo-logocentrism, which is the inner system of patriarchal societies. In this system, women and men are in diametrically different positions: men are conflated with the universalistic stand and therefore are confined to what Hartsock defines as 'abstract masculinity'. Women, on the other hand, are stuck to the specificity of their gender as the 'second sex'. As Beauvoir observed: the price men pay for representing the universal is disembodiment, or loss of gendered specificity into the abstraction of phallic masculinity. The price women pay, on the other hand, is loss of subjectivity through over-embodiment and confinement to their gendered identity. This results in two dissymmetrical positions.

This produces also two divergent political strategies when it comes to looking for alternatives. The masculine and the feminine paths to transcend the phallogocentric socio-symbolic contract diverge considerably. Whereas women need to repossess subjectivity by reducing their confinement to the body, thus making an issue of deconstructing the body, men need to repossess their abstracted bodily self by shedding some of the exclusive rights to transcendental consciousness. Men need to get embodied, to get real, to suffer through the pain of re-embodiment, that is to say incarnation.

A splendid example of this process is the fall of the angels from the inflated heights of the Berlin sky in Wim Wenders' film: *Der Himmel über Berlin*. When the angels do choose the path of embodiment, the pain of incarnation is rendered with acute insight. Bell hooks astutely observed the culture-specific nature of such an exercise, in her rather witty reading of the Teutonic angst in this film<sup>27</sup>. I think she correctly points out the quintessentially Western character of the flight from the body and of the related creation of abstract masculinity as a system of domination of multiple 'others'. In her equally culture-specific account of the need for a revision of the phallogocentric socio-symbolic contract. However, Julia Kristeva also stresses the need for a redefinition of the position of the female body in this system.

I would like to argue therefore that the central point to keep in mind in the context of a discussion on cyberspace is that the last thing we need at this point in Western history is a renewal of the old myth of transcendence as flight from the body. As Linda Dement put it: a little less abstraction would be welcome.<sup>28</sup>

Transcendence as disembodiment would just repeat the classical patriarchal model, which consolidated masculinity as abstraction, thereby essentialising social categories of 'embodied others'. This would be a denial of sexual difference meant as the basic dissymmetry between the sexes.

In the project of exploring the dissymmetry between the sexes, I would emphasize very strongly the importance of language, especially in the light of psychoanalytic theory. In so doing, I also mean to take my distance from the simplistic psychology and the reductive cartesianism that dominate so much cyberpunk literature and cyberspace technology. In opposition to these, I would like to emphasize that Woman

is not only the objectified other of patriarchy, tied to it by negation. As the basis for female identity, the signifier Woman also and simultaneously pertains to a margin of dissidence and resistance to patriarchal identity.

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

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

The answer to metaphysics is metabolism, that is to say a new embodied becoming, a shift of perspective which allows individuals to set their pace and rate of change while moving towards workable social forms of consensus to readjust our culture to these shifts and changes. In her splendid text *In Memoriam to Identity*, Kathy Acker points out that so long as "I" has her identity and her sex, "I" is nothing new. I would add also that, as long as one believes in grammar, one believes in God. In modernity, God died and though the stench from his rotting corpse has been filling the Western world for over a century, it will take more than hysterical experiments with bad syntax or the solipsistic fantasy of joy-rides to get us collectively out of his decayed but nonetheless still operational phallogocentric folly.

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

#### Notes

1. Martin Amis, *Einstein's Monsters*, Penguin Books, London 1987, pp 32-33.
2. Stuart Hall 'Race', *Ethnicity, Nation: the Fateful/Fatal Triangle*, The W.E.B. Du Bois lectures, Harvard University, April 25-27, 1994
3. See especially Rosi Braidotti, "Re-figuring the subject" in *Nomadic Subjects*, Columbia University Press, New York 1994.
4. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism. Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham 1992.
5. Marleen Barr, *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory*, Greenwood, New York 1987.
6. Remark at the Conference "Seduced and Abandoned: the Body in the Virtual World", held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London March 12-13, 1994.
7. *Post-Human*, catalogue of the exhibition at Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, Germany, 1993.
8. Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body. Essays on Subjection*, Methuen, London 1984.
9. Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal (eds), *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1994.

10. Evelyn Fox Keller and C.R. Grontowski, 'The mind's eye' in: Sandra Harding and M.B. Hintikka (eds), *Discovering Reality*, Reidel, Dordrecht 1983, pp. 207-224; Fox Keller, *A feeling for the organism*, Freeman, New York 1985; Luce Irigaray, *Spēculum*, Minuit, Paris 1974; Donna Haraway, 'A cyborg manifesto' in: *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, Free Association Books, London 1990, pp. 149-182; Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges' in: *op. cit.*, pp. 183-202.
11. Kathy Acker, *In Memoriam To Identity*, Pantheon Books, New York 1990.
12. See for instance: Naomi Schor, 'Dreaming Dissymetry- Foucault, Barthes and Feminism', in Alice Jardine & Paul Smith (eds), *Men in Feminism*, Methuen, New York 1987; Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age*, Routledge, New York & London 1991.
13. Rosi Braidotti 'Discontinuous Becomings: Deleuze on the Becoming-woman of Philosophy', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol.24, n.1, January 1993, pp.44-55.
14. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, Columbia University Press, New York 1994.
15. Robyn Archer, *A Star is Torn*, Virago, London 1986.
16. On December 20, 1989, in Operation Just Cause, 23,000 U.S. troops with air cover seized control of Panama, to capture the rebel president Noriega; 230 people died. Noriega took refuge in the Papal Nunciature but, after the building was bombarded for ten days with rock music and other psychological measures, he gave himself up and was flown to the United States to await trial on drug charges. Source: the entry "Noriega" in *A Dictionary of Twentieth-Century World Biography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York 1992.
17. This point is argued by John Howell, *Laurie Anderson*, Thunder's Mouth Press, New York 1992, p. 17.
18. Barbara Krueger, *We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture*, I.C.A., London 1983; *Love for Sale*, Harry M. Abrams, New York 1990; "No Progress in Pleasure", in Carole S. Vance (ed), *Pleasure and Danger*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Boston 1984.
- 
19. Jenny Holzer, *Solomon R. Guggenheim*, New York 1988.
20. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine. Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London & New York 1993.
21. See on this point Rosi Braidotti, "Mothers, monsters and machines", *Nomadic Subjects*, Columbia University Press, New York 1994.
22. Constance Penley, Elizabeth Lyon, Lynn Spigel, Janet Bergstrom, *Close Encounters. Film, Feminism and Science Fiction*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1990.
23. Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age*, Routledge, New York & London 1991 .
24. This is the case of the film *Weird Science*, where you see three teen-ager boys designing their favourite woman on the computer, discussing at length the size of her breasts.
25. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Women's Film of the '40's*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1987.
26. Susan Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1987.
27. bell hooks, *Yearning*, Toronto 1990.
28. Remark at the Conference 'Seduced and Abandoned: the Body in the Virtual World', held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London March 12-13 1994.