

Is Any Body Out There? Gender, Subjectivity and Identity in Cyberspace

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‘The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is *us*, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment.’ (Haraway, 1991: 180)

My paper starts with the recognition that Information, Communications and Telecommunication technologies (ICTs) are certain to play a central role in defining who we are, how we think and how we relate to one another. The guiding principle for my work, is that although change is an inevitable result of the conjunction between people and technology, the nature and extent of human intervention profoundly influences its shape and character.

What I believe to be important changes in the nature of the body, subjectivity and identity are the key concerns of this paper. I want to explore these terms and the debates surrounding them with particular reference to developments in ICTs. Rather than focus on more esoteric examples of technological development, I will restrict my discussion to the Internet and computer games.

My theoretical touchstones for this discussion are feminism and postmodernism, primarily because they have both been implicated and implicit in discussions of cyberspace and the possibility of social change that it represents.

Postmodernism, that most polysemic of terms, seems nevertheless to be discussed along a continuum between the utopian and dystopian, particularly when considering the possibilities for social change. Whichever reading is made of the term, notions of profoundly fragmented subjectivities and identities appear almost as constants. This seems particularly apparent in feminist responses to postmodernism. Feminists have broadly read postmodernism as either a threat to feminist social criticism or an opportunity for the questioning and contestation of notions of gender and sexuality (presenting the possibility of re-inscription of the body in post-gender terms).

Baudrillardian postmodernism sees the collapse of our referential universe, including its hierarchies and inequalities, as offering little hope for social criticism and change. This is a problematic position for much feminist thought, because of

feminism's identification of clear oppressive structures that can only be changed by unified social action by women. For Baudrillard, the descent into a mediated hyperreality offers us only the politics of refusal (to act) and the pleasures of the spectacle. In a short article, published in *Liberation*, he suggests that developments in media technologies have resulted only in 'panic and resentment', transforming us into 'free radicals searching for our molecules in a scanty cyberspace' (Baudrillard, 1995: 2)

Here we have a clear sense of our corporeal bodies exchanged for atomised virtual bodies in what we might think of as life behind the screen. Although Baudrillard has not written specifically of the Internet, he has clearly indicated a belief that media technologies have accelerated the transition from the 'real' to the 'hyperreal'. Baudrillard's assertion that the 'Gulf War never happened' is his most memorable and misconstrued example of media induced hyperreality². Following Baudrillard, Mark Nunes has suggested that an element of this shift to hyperreality has been the erosion of the realm of representation and the establishment of a mode of simulation. This new mode has produced, in cyberspace, an 'increasingly real simulation of a comprehensible world' (Nunes, 1995: 5).

In *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1988), Baudrillard outlined the fate of the 'real', with particular reference to our corporeal bodies and their associated subjectivities and identities:

"As soon as behaviour is focused on certain operational screens or terminals, the rest appears as some vast, useless body, which has been both abandoned and condemned. The real itself appears as a large, futile body." (Baudrillard, 1988)

For Baudrillard, the virtual world we are coming to inhabit is far from the global village envisioned by Marshall McLuhan in the late 1960s (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967). The rather comforting term, global village, was grounded in the assumption that ICTs would act as 'extensions of man' and serve to expand our knowable world and increase global interdependence. Baudrillard's cyberspace is a colder, more desolate space, where information has no meaning because it has been dislocated from its referential universe. In an article on global debt, Baudrillard claims that information about debt is meaningless because the debt can never be repaid. However, whilst having no financial meaning, the spectre of debt still has a purpose:

"It has no meaning but that of binding humankind to a destiny of cerebral automation and mental underdevelopment." (Baudrillard: 2)

For Baudrillard, both global debt and global media are so pervasive that they deaden any attempts at social change. There is too much to watch and to worry

about to lift our heads from the screens and contemplate progressive social change. This pessimistic postmodernism hardly seems to offer a productive base for the re-
definition of identities and subjectivities central to feminist theorising. One of the
difficulties with this strand of postmodernism is the seemingly totalising belief in
fragmentation and alienation which it asserts, whilst dismissing totalising
explanatory categories such as race, gender, ethnicity and class. Such categories of
inequality have until recently been seen as both the impediments to progressive
social change and the means by which to agitate for such change. Baudrillarian
postmodernism seems to sweep away these tools for liberation and domination. As
Mark Poster has suggested:

"The postmodern position is limited to an insistence on the constructedness of
identity. In the effort to avoid the pitfalls of modern political theory, then,
postmodern theory sharply restricts the scope of its ability to define a new political
interest." (Poster, 1995: 2)

Anyone interested in progressive social change must surely ask if the transition to a
simulated virtual world is really so contingent on a loss of value and meaning? To
restate the question: is there anything left beyond Baudrillard's morose fatalism?
Many of those staking their claims on the electronic frontier of the Internet see
themselves engaged in the construction of value-laden (and decidedly masculine)
virtual worlds predicated on existing notions of subjectivity, identity and wider
democratic concerns. Few pioneers of the Internet lack a sense of meaning and
purpose. For instance, Mitch Kapor, founder of the US-based Electronic Frontier
Foundation³, has little doubt about the guiding principles of the Foundation's
vision of cyberspace:

"Life in cyberspace ... at its best is more egalitarian than elitist and more de-
centred than hierarchical ... In fact, life in cyberspace seems to be shaping up
exactly how Thomas Jefferson would have wanted: founded on the primacy of
individual liberty and commitment to pluralism, diversity and community." (Kapor
in Nunes, 1995: 7)

Kapor's assessment of cyberspace is deeply contradictory. We are first offered a
vision of a de-centred and egalitarian virtual space, then this is overlain with a
Western (more accurately, North American) view of democracy based solidly on
the primacy of the individual (neat shorthand for capitalist social organisation).
Kapor's vision seems to belie the supposedly fragmented and schizophrenic
domain of cyberspace, which Baudrillard puts forward. Citizens of the Internet
appear to be taking their cultural and social baggage with them on their journey to
the other side of the mirror.

Although existing structures of inequality are, I would argue, becoming apparent in cyberspace⁴, they may be even more heavily contested than they have been in 'real' space. The Internet, because of its decentralised structure seems to militate against unified concepts of citizenship and community and presents a heterogeneity of subjectivities and identities. Whilst people may wish to transfer the more stable values of the *real* into the realm of *simulation*, such attempts are often contested⁵. Resistance is more likely because virtuality, almost by definition, reveals the constructed nature of subjectivities and identities.

The case of Louise Woodward reveals the jarring effect of juxtaposing contradictory identities and positions. In the domain of cyberspace (enabled by the trans-frontier nature of satellite technology), the reduction of Woodward's sentence was presented simultaneously with celebrations at the Rigger pub in the English village of Elton. Judging from the Internet discussion group provided by the local Boston newspaper, American opinion was deeply offended by the virtual co-presence of the jubilant villagers and their assumption of Woodward's innocence.

For many contributors to the American discussion, the villagers appeared to be 'dancing on the grave' of a dead child. Before the advent of instantaneous cross-cultural communication such juxtapositions would not have been possible. Virtuality offers this co-presence, but the reaction to it in this case, seems to support claims that such cultural encounters are replete with struggle and meaning, rather than free of them. A posting by Katie is typical of the angry and mystified response of many American contributors to the clash of co-present cultural identities:

Without a Doubt, Louise Woodward *IS* Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!

by Katie, 11/6/97

As I said in other postings...

Poor Louise Woodward... she loved eight-month old, innocent Matthew Eappen... so she wrote to her family and friends back in England...she did not see Matty hurt his head she testified teary eyed...but smiled broadly and gave a little laugh when next she was asked if she **slammed** Matty's head.

Poor Louise Woodward... 27 seconds after the guilty verdict was announced she became hysterical...(aah! how sad, she is just a child, such injustice, cried Geraldo, Gibson, and the like)...her hysterics lasted all of 118 seconds...minutes later she left the courtroom **unassisted**, **composed**, and **dried eyed**.

Poor Matthew Eappen... the media decided to focus on poor Louise Woodward.

In the realm of cyberspace we become arbiters of the identities and positions paraded before us. Of course, our existing cultural ties have a considerable impact on who we choose to identify with us, but we cannot ignore the co-presence of other identities, which call into question the construction of our own. Texter has

identified the Internet as the first stage in the construction of a virtual reality, towards the manufacture of identity without the corporeal body:

"The social construction of the body becomes clear in cyberspace, where every identity is represented [for Baudrillard, simulated], rather than 'real'. The consensus of cyberspace is a precarious one; identification is entirely contingent, based on a consensual agreement to take one's word for it." (Texter, 1996: 3)

Texter suggests identity in cyberspace is often about 'passing off', offering up a fluid sense of self, projected onto an imaginary virtual body. As a slight corrective, I think it is important not to exaggerate the difference between the creation of real world identities and virtual ones. Judith Butler contends that the constitution of identity (with particular reference to gender) is *always* something of an unstable and contradictory performance, whether simulated or real:

"Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or a locus of agency from which various acts follow, rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts." (Butler in Texter, 1996: 4)

Perhaps what the Internet does, by removing the visual cues that partly gender us, is open up possibilities for experimentation and play with existing manifestations of subjectivity. Here, the work of Donna Haraway is particularly important. Haraway's influential *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) has inspired other cyber-feminists, such as Sadie Plant, to foresee a post-gender future where existing boundaries and categories no longer have the profound structuring effects that have resulted in gender inequalities under patriarchy.

Haraway's work marks a profound break with feminist thought that posits a unified category of 'women', who can only be liberated by the development of collective consciousness and action.

"There is nothing about being female that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested social-scientific discourses and other social practices." (Haraway in Keen: 1)

Haraway's profoundly anti-essentialist analysis rests on the notion of the cyborg, an entity based on the conjunction between technology and our selves. Haraway contends that we are 'all cyborgs now', because of our immersion in, and dependence on, techno-culture. She does not mean to suggest that we are robots in the Science Fiction sense, but that the relationship between people and technology is so intimate, that it is hard to tell where machines and people end and begin. As

an example of our close relationship with technology, try to wrestle the TV remote control away from its regular user (who is also often, coincidentally, the male 'head of the household'). For Haraway, we have come to see our bodies as high-performance machines that must be monitored and added to by technological innovation.

Given that the boundaries between the *natural* and the *technological* have collapsed, then so have the assumptions that cluster around these terms. For instance, the belief that women are 'naturally' passive, submissive and nurturing can no longer be sustained in the era of the cyborg. The cyborg displays a 'polymorphous perversity (Haraway in Kunzru, 1997: 4), and in conjunction with technology constructs identity, sexuality and gender as it pleases.

Haraway has little time for either techno-utopians or the knee-jerk techno-phobia she sees in some feminist thought. She urges women to become part of networks (such as the Internet) that constitute the cyborg world. However, her ideas of connectivity should not be taken to equate with existing concepts of community based on the model of organic family. For her, the cyborg has no fear of 'partial identities and contradictory standpoints' (Quoted in Keen: 2). What is not allowable in the cyborg world, is a call to arms around a unified notion of 'women' posed against an equally cohesive notion of 'men'.

Butler's work on the performative nature of gender reaches many of the same conclusions, regarding the category of 'women' central to much feminist thought as limiting and exclusive. She argues that feminist theory "has taken the category of women to be foundational without realising that the category effects a political closure on the kinds of experiences articulable as part of feminist discourse." (Butler in Nicholson (Ed.), 1990: 325)

Post-structuralist feminism has long attempted to question the essentialising concept of gender in feminist thought, but some writers have been wary of jettisoning gender as a unifying and explanatory category for the nature of women's oppression. Angela McRobbie, who is by no means hostile to postmodernism or post-structuralism, has expressed the tension poignantly, in a discussion of the nature of identity:

"On the one hand, it is fluid, never completely secured and constantly being remade, reconstructed afresh. On the other hand, it only exists in relation to what it is not, to the other identities which are its other." (Quoted in Texter, 1995: 18)

I broadly accept McRobbie's argument that any re-definition of identity needs something to define itself against. I would further argue that our existing tools for the construction of identities are drawn from often narrow and predictable paradigms, particularly when commercial considerations become part of the process.

In my concluding section I would like to offer an example of how the structuring effects of gender seem to be still very apparent in the more mainstream sectors of cyberspace.

Two computer games have secured huge followings in the last couple of years. Both are touted as offering virtual reality experiences (although without the headsets and gloves of experimental virtual reality). *Quake* and *Tomb Raider* are available across a variety of computer and video game platforms and both render quite 'real' simulated virtual worlds to explore and three-dimensional adversaries to shoot at⁶.

My first example, *Quake*, presents us with a subjective view of our virtual world. Screen-shot: the view through your eyes.

We, as the heavily armed protagonist, are able to freely roam through this world. All we see of our virtual self is the end of whichever weapon we have selected. In *Quake* we see the virtual world through our *own* eyes. When we are low on energy we hear our breathing become laboured. When we are killed we view the world from a prone position (our subjectivity seems to survive death) until the text 'Game Over' appears. The sound of our breathing and the grunts that emanate from us are decidedly masculine. *Quake* offers us an uncomplicated masculine gender identity based on the idea of identification with a male protagonist who drives the narrative towards a possible (although not inevitable) resolution.



Quake closely conforms to the observations made by Laura Mulvey on the dominance of the male gaze in narrative cinema. Mulvey, writing in the early 1970s, suggested that Hollywood Cinema routinely places the active male at the centre of the narrative and invites us to identify with this character, which through force of personality, brings about narrative resolution. It is somewhat depressing to note that the virtual reality offered by *Quake* is such an unreconstructed one. The fit with Mulvey is very close:

"As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the egoistic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence." (Mulvey in Easthope and McGowan, 1992: 163)

In *Quake* identification is aided by the conflation of the male protagonist with our selves, perhaps even intensifying our 'satisfying omnipotence'. Even if we read *Quake* 'against the grain' in a Barthesian sense (as some of my women friends do), it is hard to argue that this commercial manifestation of virtual reality offers us anything but a very clear, uncomplicated subject position to inhabit. What we do

not get with *Quake*, is much space within the text to contest existing gender categories.

My second example, *Tomb Raider*, offers a much more ambivalent experience. In this game, the main protagonist is a heavily armed female character identified as Lara Croft. Unlike in *Quake*, Lara is represented on-screen. She is modelled in the Anime style that originated in Japanese ‘graphic novels’ and animations. Lara, as can be seen from the screen shot below, is both attractive and physically powerful.



Screen-shot: Lara Croft on-screen

A number of my female students raised the issue of *Tomb Raider* in a discussion on the gendering of video games and said that they regularly played the game and found it an empowering experience (partly because of the novelty of having a female protagonist to identify with).

Having played video and computer games since the late 1970s I was interested by the notion of a game that seemed to contradict the usual masculine gendering usually found within this medium. Although Lara does drive the narrative, she is also heavily eroticised. We control her movements and identify with her, but she is also the object of our gaze⁷.

Mulvey suggests that female characters in narrative cinema often halt the narrative flow (Mulvey in Easthope & McGowan, 1992: 163) for moments of ‘erotic contemplation’. Initially, the active narrative role of the protagonist in *Tomb Raider* seems to defy this, but the game does encourage us to gaze at Lara ‘though male eyes’.

We can manipulate our view of the character to see her from a range of angles using movements of the frame that closely resemble cinematic zooms, tracking shots and pans. These features make the game-play rather clumsy but allow us to fetishise the protagonist. As Mulvey comments on narrative cinema:

"[This fetishism] builds up the physical beauty of the object transforming it into something satisfying in itself." (Ibid. 165)

This perhaps explains why, when I first played the game, I spent some time making Lara perform a variety of acrobatic manoeuvres that were far removed from the task of killing adversaries.

The ambivalence in *Tomb Raider* lies in the unusual tension between its basis in the male gaze and its simultaneous identification with an active female protagonist.

That my female students felt empowered by, and attracted to, *Tomb Raider*, suggests it does mark a shift in conceptions of subjectivity and identity. However, this shift is not total and still appears to be rooted in existing gender definitions.

Whilst some of the claims of cyber-feminism seem overstated, and rather too willing to claim the existence of a virtual space where traditional dualisms and hierarchies have collapsed, virtuality may offer new sites for contestation and the expression of difference. Indeed, in a recent interview, Donna Haraway has suggested that technology is a value-laden area of contestation rather than a blank screen to be straightforwardly inscribed with new subjectivities and identities:

"Technology is not neutral. We're inside of what we make, and it's inside of us. We're living in a world of connections and it matters which get made and unmade." (Haraway in Kunzru: 1997: 6)

I am conscious of having steered a fairly delicate and cautious course through the hazards and attractions of structuralism, post-structuralism and postmodernism throughout this paper. I recognise that the body is becoming an increasingly contested site of theoretical debates and diverse social and cultural practices. The erosion of subjectivities and identities seems to be closely bound up with the heightened sense of mediation and virtuality that inflects the way we view the world, and equally importantly, how it views us. Postmodernism helps us trace the shifts from unified to fragmented subjectivities and identities, but it is a poor tool for investigating the possibilities of social change and identifying the barriers to it. I have tried to show how the tools of structuralism still have salience, even when applied to the texts of cyberspace.

It would perhaps be convenient to wish away the seemingly intractable hierarchies posited by structuralism, but to do so might also lessen the space for cohesive social criticism and unified political action. This is clearly a tension felt by many feminists and certainly not one I have managed to resolve in this paper. What I hope I have done, is to point out the necessity of retaining some existing explanatory categories, whilst recognising the need for constant reflection on, and reaction to, changing subjectivities and identities both in the 'real' world and the

emerging virtual world. If Baudrillard is proved right, and we do eventually come to exclusively inhabit a rather hyperreal and schizophrenic virtual world, the need for critical engagement will surely be more vital than ever, however difficult and contradictory such critical practice might prove to be.

Notes

¹ Much writing on subjectivity and identity in cyberspace uses marginal practices as illustrative examples. I think this focus on what might fairly be called an avant-garde often descends into futurology. The mainstream may not be as exotic, but it is where most of us live, and will live, in the future.

² What Baudrillard seems to have meant was that the Gulf War never happened for those of *us* in the West, beyond the simulated hyperreality of ‘surgical strikes’ and Cruise missiles with the ability to wait at traffic lights and avoid innocent civilians on the way to their targets.

³ The use of the term *electronic frontier* indicates powerful myths of male colonisation, the establishment of laws and the hierarchical regulation of behaviour.

⁴ According to UNESCO 95% of the world’s computers are located in advanced industrial countries and the ten richest countries have 75% of the world’s telephone lines. Networking and poverty seem to be effectively de-coupled at the moment

⁵ For example, the on-line group *Guerrilla Girls* are working against the masculine domination of cyberspace, albeit in a playfully aggressive and ironic manner.

⁶ *Quake* can be played across computer networks and has been held responsible for jamming up corporate networks in North America.

⁷ There are a number of Internet sites devoted to *Tomb Raider*. All of them contain numerous screen-shots of Lara Croft. On one site there were even a collection of images of Lara sans clothing, suggesting that male identification with Lara is rooted largely in objectification.

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Note: Where publication dates are not listed this is because the material is drawn from Internet articles where such dates are absent. Internet addresses are given where known.

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December 1997



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