

Imagined body in cyberculture discourse: A reading of William Gibson's technophilic body and Donna Haraway's cyborg consciousness

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Résumé

Dans cet article, nous proposons un examen de la nouvelle de William Gibson « Mnémonique » et le « Manifeste cyborg » de Haraway. Ces écrivains utilisent la métaphore d'un corps imaginé, le cyborg qui fonctionne idéologiquement et métaphoriquement pour disloquer les définitions épistémologiques de « l'organique » et du « machinique ». Dans les deux œuvres, le corps a des extensions technologiques, mais aussi mentales et spirituelles. Les transformations de Cyborg sont d'un intérêt plus actuel pour distinguer les forces socioculturelles émergentes. La manipulation continue de la surface du corps et l'échange constant de ses parties organiques et synthétiques peuvent produire des ré-écritures des formes sociale et culturelle du corps qui sont directement liées à la reconstitution des identités sociales. Finalement, le Net et le Web ont offert aux corps humains de nouveaux espaces pour des formations artistiques, utopiques, politiques et idéologiques.

MOTS CLES : Cyberculture, Cyborg, cyberspace, forces socioculturelles.

Abstract

In this article we provide a careful examination of two artistic works: William Gibson's short story "Mnemonic" and Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto". Both writers use the metaphor of an imagined body, the cyborg which functions ideologically and metaphorically to dislocate epistemological definitions of the "organic" and the "machinic". In both works, the body have not only technological, but mental and spiritual extensions. Cyborg transformations are clearly of more topical interest in distinguishing new and emerging socio-cultural forces. The continuous manipulation of the body's surface and the constant exchange of organic and synthetic body parts can produce re-writings of the body's social and cultural form that are related directly to the reconstitution of social identities. Ultimately the Net and the Web have offered to human bodies new spaces for artistic, utopian, political and ideological formations.

KEYWORDS: Cyberculture, cyborg, cyberspace, socio-cultural forces.

1 Introduction

Cyberculture is an exciting interdisciplinary field which explores ways in which technologies are reshaping cultural forms and practices in the new millennium. Cyberculture writings attempt to understand the ways in which cyberspace as a cultural phenomenon is currently being experienced and imagined.

More important, cyberculture considers the place of imagination and artistic representation and focuses on human interactions with the emerging technologies and emerging cybercultural formations. Here, it is clearly demonstrated that the pluralization of the self through cyberspace can be an important opportunity for rethinking and reconstructing the existing order. The self in cyberspace can be free from the restrictions imposed by being connected to the biological body in real life. Such a self permeates into real life and makes re-examination and reconfiguration of the existing order possible.

It should come as no surprise, given recent advances in information technology, genetic engineering and nanotechnology that these changes will encompass the human body and its sensorial architecture. As such the body will be an imagined body that will endeavour an array of possibilities and an array of multiple transformations and mutations. There seems to be little doubt that these changes will also produce new domains of domination, contestation and resistance.

First of all, this article explores such new experiences of bodies by studying some expressions such as William Gibson's short story "Mnemonnic" and other kinds of expressions like some Haraway (1991, 1999) cyborg feminist performances in her work "Cyborg Manifesto". My objective behind choosing these two cases from the cyberculture writings is that both William Gibson and Haraway clearly use the strategy of the imagined body to fulfill their political and aesthetic agenda by subverting and highlighting the challenging of binary thinking. Thus for example, the dichotomies inherent in categories such as mind/body, nature/culture, human/machine might be rethought and revisited. Secondly, both consider the functioning of technology in the more abstract sense, such as technologies of thinking, perception, mind patterning and bodily transformation. Gibson's character "Mnemonic" takes the shape of a "Tecnophilic body" in which the psychic part plays a central role, on the other hand, Donna Haraway's preoccupation was the cyborgian consciousness to look at how the Net and the Web havee offered women new spaces for artistic, political and ideological formations. Additionally, both artists take the myth system as their political language. Both of them find pleasure in the non-fixation fleeing bodies and spaces

so that they can lead their character to endeavour new, free but dangerous possibilities. They let their characters evolve deeply evolve towards dangerous psychic spaces.

1 The body in Cybercultural discourse

Cyberculture provides languages and knowledge to explore the emergence of the ‘virtual machine’ and its impact on the human body. Understandably, the body in the cyberculture discourse is used as a strategic element that can be ideologically and metaphorically instrumentalised to express political and social issues. Relatedly, Cyberculture’s project is continual exploration of new identities, new subjectivities, their merging with machines, bodies and technologies, within the greater machine of technological, cultural and aesthetic evolution.

The questioning of the subjective and the pre-subjective becomes one of several vital questions in any discourse on cyberculture, since any use of the computer, whether through the web, email transactions involves some sense of what we know as “subjective encounter”. That mind-space might be a place for subject empowerment, pleasure play and creative connection.

Among other philosophical issues in cyberculture relation with the body is the question of ‘boundaries’²¹ and ‘boundary states’, Gibson and Haraway clearly highlight the challenging of binary thinking through starting with the classical opposition between body and mind. For example, the dichotomies inherent in categories such as mind/body, nature/culture, human/machine might be rethought and revisited. The ‘interface’ between each of these categories is not so fixed. In terms of using the computer, the interface between the user and the screen might be the subject of the debate. The space between user and screen induces new conceptions of identity and subjectivity and new manifestations of the ‘body’.

Relatedly, the body in cyberculture is also included within the spectrum of a cyborgian consciousness where the issue of ‘cyborg and cyborbodies’ is closely connected to myth and utopia. The explosion of images of cyborgs (and theorising about cyborgs) has given a repertoire for writers and artists to re-configure the body-technology interface which has become so central to cyberculture work. Writers in this field view that to the extent that cyber-technologies are implicated in all our lives, then we could argue that systems such as the transnational

²¹ The term ‘boundaries’ in this context is related to persons who with thin boundaries may tend to confuse fantasy and reality and tend to have a fluid sense of identity, so that they tend to merge or lose themselves in their relations with others, the concept was developed by psychoanalyst Ernst Hartmann.

commodity markets and multinational corporate make this a truly global experience that can impact on anybody's life, no matter where they are and how seemingly removed they are from that technology, as Bell (2000) points out: "We are all, to some degree or another, becoming cyborg" (p. 6). Eventually, the body in the cyberculture discourse is determined to be technologized and is destined to be inscribed within the trap and the process of an infinite cyborgisation.

2 William Gibson's Technophilic body

Gibson is viewed as a vital voice in the field of science fiction and several of his stories have been widely anthologized in science fiction magazines, most of them display reality infinite options and problematic sensitivity to semiotic fragments.

Generally William Gibson is considered as one of the greatest science fiction soothsayer of the past four decades since the publication of his short work in the late '70s and early '80s, and especially since the explosive impact of his novel *Neuromancer* in 1984. Without his books, readers wouldn't have had the concept of cyberspace; his vocabulary for describing this strange space and the people and bodies who use it has influenced our own ways of talking about the sociology and the function of the Internet. The ways Gibson described the future alone have come to influence the way people design it.

Science and technology seem to be very useful sources for most Gibson's fictional work. But as he always points out he is more interested in the language of computers than the technicalities. On the most basic level, computers in his artistic work are simply a metaphor for human memory.

Gibson recognized that cyberspace allowed for a lot moves, because characters can be sucked into apparent realities-which means you can place them in any sort of setting or against any backdrop. His feelings about technology are totally ambivalent: "When I write about technology, I write about how it has already affected our life. [...] My aim isn't to provide specific predictions or judgments so much as to find a suitable fictional context in which to examine the very mixed blessings of technology".(The Rumpus interview with William Gibson, 2015, November 30th).

Gibson also utilizes features such as flashbacks, vivid imagery, juxtapositions, and metaphors. Central to Gibson's stories are his grim vision of the future, misfit characters, the role of memory as well as the artist in society, and a reliance on dense layers of technological information and slang.

In his short story *Mnemonic*, Gibson describes his character as a technophilic body. It is the product of various degrees of aesthetic and functional transformations directed to the human body's surface and functional organic structure. David Thomas 'On technicity' defines that type of Gibson's metaphor of the body in the following: "Such transformations can be divided into two distinct categories. The first category is composed of techniques and technologies that are used for various aesthetic manipulations of the body surface. The second category is directed to fundamental functional alterations to the human body's organic architecture". (David, 2000, p. 176).

Cyborg transformations are clearly of more topical interest in distinguishing new and emerging socio-cultural forces. The continuous manipulation of the body's surface and the constant exchange of organic and synthetic body parts can produce re-writings of the body's social and cultural forms that are related directly to the reconstitution of social identities.

Technophiles strive to redesign the human body so that it can function as a technological site whose optimum performance is measured in terms of its ability to sustain a competitive edge over similar other bodies. Social identity and social bonding are not directly dependent on the surface manipulation of the body in these cases.

Two of Gibson's characters, Johnny Mnemonic and Monny Millions, are excellent examples of this functionality oriented type of sophisticated cyborg technophile. Mnemonic has opted for a process of stylistic normalization because of a provisional need to disguise his identity. The real logic of his cyborg identity lies elsewhere-in a series of more profound functional alterations. In the course of Gibson's story we learn that Mnemonic is, in fact, a piece of highly sophisticated hardware, functionally enhanced by a modified series of microsurgical prosthesis so that his brain can serve as a data storage unit for illicit information. The stored information can only be accessed by a client possessing the correct code. Mnemonic's ability to sustain a competitive edge in the world he moves through is predicated on the economic advantage provided by these data storage implants. His edge is therefore based on information storage, as he points out, in another context: "We are an information economy, they teach you that in school, what they don't tell you that it is impossible to move, to live, to operate at any level without leaving traces, bits, seemingly meaningless fragments of personal information. Fragments that can be retrieved, amplified". (Gibson, 1996, pp. 16-17).

We notice then that when one is presented with a culture governed by cosmetic and functional alterations to the form and organic structure of the human

body, it is not hard to imagine merging cyborg species that will evolve according to different evolutionary logics, and more deeply to dangerous psychic spaces as we will see in the next chapter about cyberfeminism's cyborg.

Moreover, Gibson's characters are exemplary technophiles whose brand of technicity is cerebrally cyberpsychics opposed to materially technic, once they have accessed corporate data formation. They set about stealing or manipulating information. These oppositional and disruptive activities focus on much of the ebb and flow of social action in Gibson's depiction of cyberspace and cyborgisation. In using this strategy of technophilic body in his stories, Gibson has well described and highlighted the distinction between /inside/ outside, exclusion/inclusion. The distinction is of course between those who do and those who do not have access to corporate data.

As a conclusion, Gibson's stories are always constructed from the point of view of those who are excluded from an industrial/military order.

Ultimately, Gibson finds pleasure in problematizing the fixed body and the fixed space. Where technology ends and the human begins is often unclear, and a person's true identity is what emerges from this melding. Gibson imagined body can evolve towards multiple but dangerous possibilities of reality.

3 The female body "cyborg consciousness" in Haraway "Cyborg Manifesto" (1991, 1999)

Cyberfeminism is also a central component of the current debate about the issue of identity, power, autonomy and its relation to technology. Technology is in fact fundamental to these new feminist epistemologies, which raise essential concerns about woman and technology, women's bodies connected with the machine, her cyborg ontologies; and this cannot only mean literal technologies such as the internet, but also technologies in the more abstract sense, such as technologies of thinking, perception, mind patterning and bodily transformation. Within this abstract sense, prostheses are not just technological 'add-on' but complex perceptual and conceptual elements in thinking processes. Through the prosthetic cultures, a woman's body is no longer conceded to its natural biological state, with woman culturally coded as 'nature'. Indeed she may, through choice, be re-designed technologically as a complex hybrid of biological, psychological and hormonal pharmaceutical components

Haraway's cyborg theory (1991, 1999) rejects the notions of essentialism, proposing instead a chimeric, monstrous world of fusions between animal and machine. Cyborg theory relies on writing as "the technology of cyborgs", as

cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of “phallogocentrism”. Instead, Haraway’s cyborg calls for a non-essentialized, material-semiotic metaphor capable of uniting diffuse political coalitions along the lines of affinity rather than identity. Following Lacanian feminists such as Luce Irigaray²², Haraway’s work addresses the chasm between feminist discourses and the dominant language of Western patriarchy. As Haraway explains that grammar is politics by other means and effective politics requires speaking in the language of domination.

As she details in a chart of the paradigmatic shifts from modern to postmodern epistemology within the Manifesto, the unified human subject of identity has shifted to the hybridized posthuman of technoscience, from “representation” to “simulation,” “bourgeois novel” to “science fiction,” “reproduction” to “replication,” and “white capitalist patriarchy” to “informatics of domination” (Haraway, 1991, 1999). While Haraway’s “ironic dream of a common language” is inspired by Irigaray’s argument for a discourse other than patriarchy, she rejects Irigaray’s essentializing construction of woman-as-not-male to argue for a linguistic community of situated, partial knowledge in which no one is innocent.

In her foundational work ‘A cyborg manifesto: science, technology, and socialist feminism, Haraway expresses her ironic political myth which initiates the cyborg as cybernetic organism, a hybrid machine and organism. As such, the cyborg functions ideologically and metaphorically to dislocate epistemological definitions of the ‘organic’ and the ‘machinic’(amongst other binaries).The Manifesto calls for ‘cyborg heteroglossia’; a breakdown of boundary categorization and confusion of boundaries, the cyborg has no origin. It is completely without positionality. As such it functions metaphorically, to disturb enlightenment epistemologies. Indeed, the cyborg skips the step of original unity, or identification with nature in the Western sense. Nature and culture are re-worked, Haraway argues, such that the one can no longer be the resource of appropriation by the other. Other binaries, such as animal/human or organism/machine, are similarly problematized. Haraway (2004) writes: “Machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed”. (p. 163)

Ultimately, Haraway treats her political agenda from globalised dimension; there is no global, universal ways of viewing women’s issues. Cyborg gender is a

²² French feminism contributes to cyborg heteroglossia. Birke (1981), Irigaray (1977, 1979).

local possibility taking a global vengeance. Race, gender and capital require a cyborg theory of wholes and parts. There is no drive for cyborgs to construct a total theory, but there is an intimate experience of boundaries, their construction and deconstruction. There is a myth system waiting to become a political language to ground one way of looking at science and technology and challenging the informatics of domination in order to act potently.

Haraway begins the Manifesto by explaining three boundary breakdowns since the 20th Century that have allowed for her hybrid, cyborg myth: the breakdown of boundaries between human and animal, animal-human and machine, and physical and non-physical. Evolution has blurred the lines between human and animal; machines have made ambiguous the lines between natural and artificial; and microelectronics and the political invisibility of cyborgs have confused the lines of physicality.

As a conclusion, Cyborg imagery can help express two crucial arguments in Haraway's essay: first, the production of universal, totalizing theory is a major mistake that misses most of reality, and second, taking responsibility for the social relations of science and technology and so means embracing the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all our parts. Cyborg imagery as she points out at the end of her essay can suggest a way out of the maze of dualism in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of common language, but of powerful heteroglossia.

4 Discussion and conclusion

Apparently, examining both projects, Gibson's fictional world of cyborg and technophilic body and Haraway's conception of cyborg's consciousness, they both suggest that the body because of its mingling with the machinic space can manifest itself in infinite, dangerous possibilities and multiple aesthetic expressions. As Gibson himself claims, "that kind of freedom can be dangerous because you don't have to justify what is happening in terms of the logic of character or plot." (McCaffery, 1991, p. 272).

What characterizes both cases is their imagination, their myth system becomes their political language and their creativity is real. Both find pleasure in dislocating the body in many technospaces and both have fun with these dislocations.

“No objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves; any components can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language.” Haraway (1999: 283).

Additionally, in their approaching of the body, Gibson and Haraway propose that it is better strategically to confuse the boundaries of the body and to problematize identities. They celebrate hybridity, utopia and heteroglossia, their artistic capability helps them to encompass more possibilities rather than limit them. If Haraway adopts a glocalised language and a partial knowledge to act for the women’s problems around the world, Gibson adopts a creolised language to subvert the multinational and the virtual elite of the net.

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