# Virtual sexes and feminist futures

## The philosophy of 'cyberfeminism'

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*It's not just that 'god' is dead; so is the 'goddess'.*
Donna Haraway

Whilst the majority of her work has received little critical attention, Donna Haraway's 1985 essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto'[1] has rapidly attained cult status in many branches of contemporary theory. With this single text Haraway appears to have succeeded in both capturing the imagination of a generation of technophiles eagerly probing the electronic frontier and simultaneously exposing the raw nerve of cultural alarm consequent upon the re-engineering of the 'social'. Perhaps the greatest enthusiasm for her notion of the cyborg has come from those self-proclaimed voyagers in virtual reality – the 'cyberpunk cowboys' – currently championing the 'digital revolution'.[2] By contrast, the most obvious resistance to her work has emerged from the political Left, a somewhat ironic consequence given the clear feminist sympathies of 'A Cyborg Manifesto'. Since such diversity of opinion derives in part from the suggestiveness of the term 'cyborg', an understanding of its imbrication within a particular *philosophical* framework is a prerequisite for any assessment of its political implications.

In what follows I propose to offer some remarks on this now infamous tract, seeking to respond to the concerns of Haraway's critics. The principal focus for this discussion will be an exploration of her ideas concerning the production of the 'real', which I shall argue are pivotal for appreciating her unorthodox brand of feminist philosophy. Taking the view that 'cyberfeminism' implies a general critique of transcendent systems – and as such that Haraway's text is immune from many of its standard criticisms – I shall go on to ask whether it is possible nevertheless to take issue with her project in its own terms.

### The advent of the cyborg

Whilst contemporary responses to the encroaching technization of social life range from the euphoric to the paranoiac, few commentators have attempted to explore the 'middle ground'. The information revolution has had a profoundly polarizing effect on the cultural imagination despite its consensual hallucination that historical agency is obsolescing in inverse ratio to the emergent intelligence of the machine. For high-tech cybernauts cruising the datascape in an odyssey of hedonistic consumerism, the seeming collapse of the old social and political institutions has signalled a release from tradition in every sense. Critics of 'technoculture', on the other hand, dispute the loss of the vocabulary of the social and the political implicit in the latter's anarchistic rhetoric and register their anxieties about the novel possibilities for human domination engendered by advanced technology.[3] From the increasingly sophisticated developments in entertainment and hypermedia to the horrors of panoptical computerized surveillance tracking its disenfranchised labour force, technoculture appears both complacently 'smart' and dangerously dystopic – a confused and distorting place to be.

Beyond the flickering screen of such contrary visions, Donna Haraway's unashamedly utopian 'A Cyborg Manifesto' emerges as something of a curio. As is indicated by its frequently omitted subtitle – 'Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' – the scientific and the technological are theorized in conjunction with a political perspective that has hitherto seeemed antithetical.[4] Indeed, this is a socialist feminism of a strictly *unorthodox* kind. As a primatologist and historian of science, Haraway maintains a deviant relationship with

the dominant humanist concerns of mainstream politics and philosophy, prioritizing the behavioural study of chimps and microchips above the intentionalist analysis of agency and affect. At the outset of 'A Cyborg Manifesto' she describes her work as an attempt to construct 'an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism', but with the qualification that the fidelity here inscribed is 'perhaps more faithful as blasphemy is faithful, than as reverent worship and identification'.[5] She goes on to cite her essay as a contribution 'to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a postmodernist, non-naturalist mode and in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender';[6] but, as her scattered and occasionally acerbic references to semiotics and deconstruction reveal, her postmodernism is only minimally inflected by the hermeneutics of the signifier.[7] Rather than endlessly tracking the trace of *différance* or the unfolding of the concept, Haraway draws attention to notions of hybridity, connection and emergent kinship, all functioning at the level of material production. Her sacrilegious incursion into contemporary socialist-feminism thus entails jettisoning core philosophical and political concepts such as 'sex' and 'class' in favour of a materialist analysis of the *processes* involved in their emergence as fundamental theoretical terms. At the heart of this project, she invokes the hybrid of machine and organism – the notorious 'cyborg' – which has become the critical focus for much of the controversy surrounding her work.

According to Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto' was written 'to find political direction in the 1980's in the face of the hybrids "we" seemed to have become worldwide'.[8] Essentially, the work is driven by the desire to cultivate a notion of political 'community' and 'affinity' whilst acknowledging the demise of vanguard politics – by now an almost stupefyingly familiar preoccupation in postmodernist theory. However, what rescues Haraway's project from the endemic tedium of the 'embracing heterogeneity'/ 'openness to the other' sloganizing is its negotiation with a philosophical dynamic especially appropriate to the post-industrial age of information technology – namely, the *immanent comprehension of the real.* This is best described in terms of key transformations in life sciences in the late twentieth century, in particular the shift from 'a science centred on the organism, understood in functionalist terms, to a science studying automated technological devices, understood in terms of cybernetic systems'.[9]

In marked contrast to the classical paradigm of the closed, 'conservative' system premissed upon equilibrium thermodynamics, cybernetic systems are complex, feedback-controlled systems, responsive to the flows of matter and energy that pass or 'dissipate' through them. Considered ergonomically as labouring, desiring and reproducing systems, organic creatures are integrated within information circuits as populational biocapital. As Manuel de Landa has shown, within dissipative systems a population (of atoms, molecules, cells, animals, humans) may exhibit 'emergent' or 'synergistic' properties not displayed by its individual members in isolation.[10] Since hybridity emerges within the processes of material production as an immanent modification of the system, hybrid 'identity' is entirely coextensive with its functioning. Translating these ideas into a political idiom, Haraway's hybrid or 'cyborg' community may be regarded as an 'emergent' localized configuration operating without reference to any pre-established structure and identifiable solely in terms of its participation (e.g. the political campaign without the political party). Tempting as it is to invest the formal conditions for synthetic connection with substantive content, Haraway makes it clear that for her the cyborg is not an empirical 'subject', but rather its vanishing point:

> By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation.[11]

In simultaneously aligning the cyborg with reality and fantasy, Haraway frustrates attempts to import qualitative distinctions between the literal and the figurative, a gesture which also constitutes a refusal of hierarchical codings between mind and body, organic and inorganic, human and animal, and human and machine. Rejection of these traditional dualisms renders Haraway's notion of the cyborg particularly attractive to feminists seeking to articulate the contradictions of 'woman's identity' as both non-human (i.e. not-male) and non-animal. Indeed, her concern is less with 'essences' (robust systems with limited complexity) than with their social production as thresholds of coherence ('truths' resilient to 're-invention'). Above all, the cyborg 'is' a boundary engineer, the *emergent product* of inventive coupling:

> Like any important technology, a cyborg is simultaneously a myth and a tool, a representation and an instrument, a frozen moment and a motor of

> social and imaginative reality. A cyborg exists when two kinds of boundaries are simultaneously problematic: (1) that between animals (or other organisms) and humans, and (2) that between self-controlled, self-governing machines (automatons) and organisms, especially humans (models of autonomy). The cyborg is the figure born of the interface of automaton and autonomy.[12]

## Another patriarchal stereotype?

With considerable justification the notion of the 'cyborg' has been described as the 'most sweeping expression' of technoculture.[13] Whilst commentators such as Margaret Morse note that 'the actual status of the cyborg is murky as to whether it is metaphor, a dream-like fantasy, and/or a literal being,'[14] the celluloid iconography of the robotic sci-fi mutant continues to feed most critical discussions. Hence, it is typically argued that 'willing the cyborg into being appears equivalent to wishing the problems of organic life away',[15] or that the cyborg promises 'an idealized state of computer existence that rectifies the inadequacies and injustices of contemporary human life'.[16] Despite conceding that 'ideally, Haraway's cyborg would liberate us from social hierachies that perpetuate sexism and racism', critics such as Claudia Springer suspect that cyborg fusion is basically escapist, appealing to those 'unable to cope with the complexity of human emotions':

> Vulnerable late-twentieth-century bodies and minds turn to electronic technology to protect themselves from confusion and pain. Fusion with computers can provide an illusory sense of personal wholeness reminiscent of the Lacanian Imaginary; the fused cyborg condition erases the difference between self and other.[17]

Such interpretations are in part premissed on an identification between Haraway's cyborg and the technology associated with 'virtual reality', which has been said to reify a 'mind/body split that is essentially patriarchal and a paradigm of viewing that is phallic, colonizing, and panoptic'.[18] The infamous cyberpunk fantasy of leaving the 'meat' behind in favour of the 'bodiless exultation of cyberspace' (Gibson) has further reinforced the view that the 'interface' of human and machine is less symbiotic than monopolistic – a clear continuation of the rationalist dream of transcending the body.

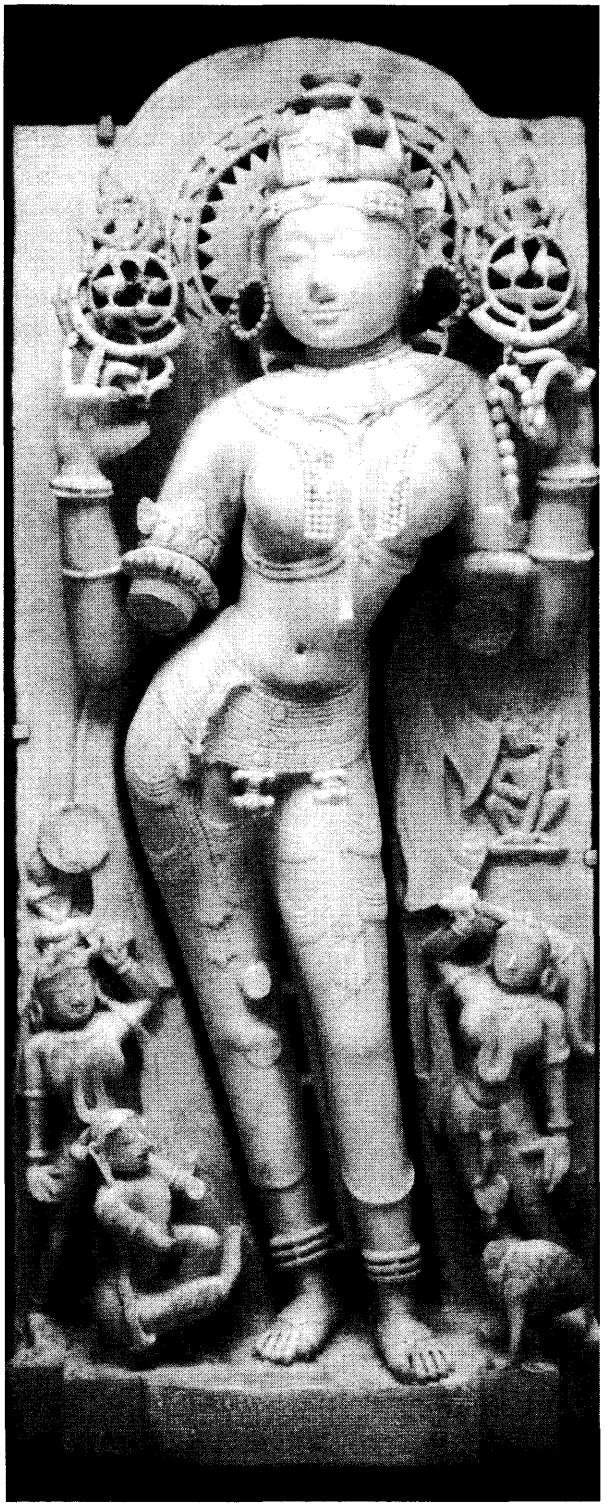
From a feminist perspective it has further been claimed that the 'cyborg has been constructed by patriarchal discourse;'[19] that the predominant ideology connected to the blurring of machines and humans is a militarist one 'of masculinist force and domination';[20] and that 'the interface with the cyberspatial realities takes a toll on the female subject rarely acknowledged by the cowboy heroes of cyberpunk'.[21] Anne Balsamo speaks for many when she argues that cyborgs 'reproduce limiting, not liberating, gender stereotypes', and hence that 'focusing on the cyborg image in hopes of unearthing an icon of utopian thought does a great disservice to feminism.'[22] The dominant representations of cyborgs in popular culture seem to sustain a patriarchal ideology that renders Haraway's invocation of the cyborg as an 'ironic political myth' an ultimately fruitless enterprise. Thus, Mark Dery writes:

> One thing that bothers me about the notion of the cyborg as a useful myth is the fact that the flesh cedes territory to invasive technologies – myoelectric armatures, cyberoptic implants, brain sockets. If machines continue to signify an impregnable masculinity, and if the flesh continues to be coded as feminine – as is so often the case in Hollywood SF – then the myth of the cyborg is one more story told about the feminine subjugated.[23]

Arguing in a similar vein, Tricia Rose suggests that 'the cyborg is a masculine construct in which the technology houses all of the hard, strong, *Terminator* capacity, and the softer stuff is understood as the weak portion, the part that bleeds, menstruates.'[24] In summary, for many commentators the cyborg is the apotheosis of phallocentrism, commodification and technological domination, a phantasmic identification of the most traditional kind.

Whatever merit these disparate criticisms might have, they share one common tendency, namely that of locating the notion of the cyborg within a pre-critical understanding of the machinic. Unambiguously dualistic, commentaries of this type imply a specific separation or distinction between technological 'agency' and the 'matter' of its operations, such that it is possible to speak of an *organic reality*, either irresponsibly wished away (in VR 'travel') or ideologically determined (as resource for exploitation). In each case, the implication is that a natural human integrity is grievously compromised by its contact with silicon intelligence or robotic might – a process to which the 'feminine' is deemed especially vulnerable. However, as even the most glancing analysis of her essay reveals, Haraway defines the cyborg as 'a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction'; an imaginary *and* real resource in a 'border war' against 'polarity and hierarchical domination'.[25] Viewed in this way one has to question the ease with which commentators equate the abstract cyborg con-

dition with its cinematic incarnations and the facility with which they equate technology with domination. Not only is this a failure to engage with Haraway's deliberately formal use of the term 'cyborg'; to ask whether it should be regarded literally or metaphorically is to persist with a specific distinction between the real and the imaginary which her argument resists. It would seem that most critical assessments of her work remain organized by a fundamentally *hylomorphic* conception of activity as deliberative (intention, design, labour, origin), within which matter is presumed to be the passive, lifeless and inert pole of a classical dualism. For such readings, the key issue is one of locating and interrogating the organizing agency, determining subject positions, and deciding once and for all the 'actual status' of the cyborg.



It is scarcely fortuitous that criticisms of this type should also reinforce a feminist agenda. The modernist belief that culture attains itself through its transcendence of nature has differentially informed a range of feminist theories which have sought to mark the commonality of exploitation suffered by women, animals and the earth.[26] This shared frame of reference is not without its own ironies given that most feminist criticisms of Haraway's cyborg focus on the blurring of the boundary between the human and the machine, with far less attention being given to the other major boundary transgression which she cites – that between the human and the animal (the separation of which 'nothing really convincingly settles'). Indeed, Haraway notes that 'many branches of feminist culture affirm the pleasure of connection of human and other creatures', where animal rights are not irrational demands of human uniqueness, but rather attest to 'a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture'.[27]

If Haraway's readers perceive the cyborg fusion between humans and animals as less culturally threatening, this may owe as much to a suspect species prejudice (the uncontested superiority of the rational animal) as it does to a shared sense of kinship with other organisms across the spectrum of natural life. However, by implication the automaton is still positioned as qualitatively distinct from (and potentially superior to) carbon-based life forms constituting the rich panoply of the 'natural' world. A nature/culture divide is thereby redetermined to the second power. Sustaining this rigid differentiation is the view that the boundary between the organic and non-organic is constitutive – an evaluation which in itself arguably represents a metaphysical commitment to the concepts of essential identity and qualitative purity. But for Haraway, in the default of absolute limits, there can be no extrinsic categorial determinations differentiating the production of the 'natural' from the 'cultural', nor any control mechanisms independent of the processes through which cyborg connections emerge. As we shall now see, this means that the cyborg is badly misconceived as the triumph of instrumental technology over the natural realm, but equally that feminism is badly misconceived as the liberation of oppressed nature from the dominance of patriarchal power.

## Cyberbodies

In 'A Cyborg Manifesto' Haraway describes the cyborg as a 'matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century'.[28] Lest this be taken as an attempt to reify experience or to abstract general principles from empirical data, this assertion should be read in conjunction with two other significant claims: namely, that 'there is nothing about being "female" that naturally binds women',[29] and that 'the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world'.[30] Haraway's 'cyberfeminism' thus has no recourse to any biological 'reality', *nor* to any theory of gender. Moreover, she maintains that 'there is not even such a state as "being" female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices'.[31] With bold, reckless strokes fundamental concepts are struck from the feminist lexicon, leaving one to wonder how Haraway could purport to be contributing to feminist practice at all. Yet the impetus for her project lies not in the identification of sexed identities or social roles but in the exploration of the material processes of gendering which operate beneath the symbolic codes of identitarian thinking. This constitutes a retreat from more familiar 'subject/other'-guided feminist endeavours – already predicated upon an imaginary dialectic of presence and absence or constitutive bifurcation – and devolves upon understanding 'gender', 'class' and 'race' *systemically rather than structurally* in terms of immanent strata of intensity and their thresholds of coherence.

In this regard there is a potential alliance between Haraway's cyborg and certain branches of contemporary ecofeminism, which, in their analysis of flows of energy through the ecosystem, displace the rigid architectonics of transcendent control structures, tracking creative couplings beyond the purview of the regulatory ego. As Stacy Alaimo has commented: 'Since cyborgs complicate male/female designations, the animal/human blurring doesn't play into misogynist discourse the way the blurring between women and nature does'.[32] Indeed, Haraway fundamentally opposes the move to align woman with nature as oppressed materiality, a narrative that has proved less liberating than self-reinforcing. As she argues vociferously in *Primate Visions*, monkeys and apes have a privileged relation to nature and culture because they occupy the 'border zones between those potent mythic poles' and as such provide an oblique perspective upon the bio-politics of constructing scientific 'truth'.[33] Claiming that primatology is 'simian orientalism' which displays the Western imagination of the origin of sociality itself, she suggests that what might *count* as 'female' and as 'nature' in this context belongs to the logic of capitalist colonialism, for which 'nature is only the raw material of culture, appropriated, preserved, enslaved, exalted, or otherwise made flexible for disposal by culture'.[34] Just like cybernetic creatures, apes and monkeys can also call into question the realm of the 'born' and the 'made', problematizing the very notion of the 'organic' as such.

This is clearly not without consequence for the sex/gender distinction which has been so integral to feminism. In Haraway's view, 'Gender cannot mean simply the cultural appropriation of biological sexual difference; indeed, sexual difference is itself the more fundamental cultural construction.'[35] She notes how

Western feminist theory can be said to begin at the same historical moment – in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – as the discourses of biology and anthropology. In this period the 'organism' was regarded as the pre-eminent 'natural-technical object of knowledge', with functionalism as its ruling logic. Far from being ignored, 'the female animal emerged as a condensed focus of medical and other practices ... as woman emerged at the nub of social theory.'[36] Haraway suggests that in the age of bio-politics the female body is produced as the site of normalizing discourses of power which help to position woman within a heterosexist, racist and productionist paradigm: 'female embodiment seemed to be given, organic, necessary; and female embodiment seemed to mean skill in mothering and its metaphorical extensions'.[37] Whilst the cultivation of the concept of gender has proved useful in the feminist struggle to contest the naturalization of social inequities, it has simultaneously served to validate a notion of the grounding truth of female 'nature', legitimating the political construction of 'sex' as 'fact'.

To assert that there is no *given* reality beneath social inscriptions perhaps comes less readily to a scientist than to a philosopher, and Haraway is careful to avoid the pitfalls of a merely linguistic idealism. To claim that there is no world of which people struggle to give an account 'would be to reduce a complex field to one pole of precisely the dualisms under analysis'.[38] For similar reasons she is equally eager to mark her distance from any epistemological realism that purports to occupy a disinterested vantage point outside the cultural field that renders its account possible in the first place. Such caveats are set against 'an inherited analytical tradition, deeply indebted to Aristotle ... that turns everything into a resource for appropriation.'[39]

> Nature/culture and sex/gender are not loosely related pairs of terms; their specific form of relation is hierarchical appropriation, connected as Aristotle taught by the logic of active/passive, form/matter, achieved form/resource, man/animal, final/material cause. Symbolically, nature and culture, as well as sex and gender, mutually (but not equally) construct each other; one pole of a dualism cannot exist without the other.[40]

The thought of production implicated in the classical hylomorphic model deprives matter of any status as *agent* in the production of knowledge. As such, the appropriationist logic of domination built into the nature/culture binarism is replayed in the sex/gender distinction, but this time with the female body as the impassive, malleable clay.

In the context of this intellectual heritage, Haraway views the fundamental *feminist* project as commensurate with the 'reinvention of nature'. Consequently, in her work the physicalistic postulation that matter receives its achieved form 'from without' is liquidated in a nexus of cybernetics and chaos theory, and Aristotelianism is re-routed within an immanent system of intensive differentiation or tendential energy flux (nature as 'active'). No longer thought hierarchically or dialectically, the 'distinction' between nature and culture which continues to structure critiques of the cyborg is registered gradationally in terms of open-ended scales of complexity:

> Difference is theorized *biologically* as situational, not intrinsic, at every level from gene to foraging pattern, thereby fundamentally changing the biological politics of the body.[41]

Inasmuch as any 'creature' is both constituted and transected by flows of matter and energy, it is made up of differential rhythms which 'situate' and define the various strata, simultaneously 'expressing' immanent connectivity and difference: cyborg 'identity'.[42] This generates a new, 'non-organic' thinking about the nature of embodiment and 'real' limitation. In 'A Cyborg Manifesto' the vocabulary of constitutive limitation (conceptual opposition, hierarchical dualism, structural bipolarity) is superseded by a terminology of non-linear dynamics appropriate to communication technologies. As Haraway notes, cybernetic control systems 'concentrate on boundary conditions and interfaces, on rates of flows across boundaries – and not on the integrity of natural objects'.[43]

From a high-tech perspective the body is a biotic component or cybernetic communications system, in relation to which 'one must think not in terms of essential properties, but in terms of design, boundary constraints, rates of flows, systems logics, costs of lowering constraints'.[44] Limitation is accordingly formulated in terms of 'virtual boundaries' or immanent thresholds which are 'actualized' in the flows that cross them but which do not 'set' the landscape of possibilities in advance. That aspects of embodiment appear robust and 'lawlike' is a function of their attained coherence at a certain threshold of intensity but does not preclude further 'evolution'. This is not to invoke any theatrical or inherently symbolic notion such as gender 'masquerade' or free play of the signifier, but rather to understand the 'real' in terms of the way in which it is built. As a phenomenon such

as the 'phantom limb' indicates, lived bodily boundaries form part of an *intensive* corporeal schema and need not coincide with the borders of the body as empirically observed.[45] Haraway dubs bodies 'material-semiotic generative nodes' because 'their *boundaries* materialize in social interaction' and as objects 'do not pre-exist as such'.[46]

For this reason, cyberfeminism resists appealing to the organic body by opposing it to the technological body as some feminists have done.[47] Understanding embodiment in terms of processes of immanent self-organization enables one to engage effectively with the 'partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment',[48] which is to acknowledge that a woman does not persistently experience her corporeality as maternal or heterosexual. As contemporary feminists such as Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray have shown, 'sex' functions as a regulatory 'norm' which instantiates or 'materializes' a culturally specific (i.e. phallic) notion of sexual difference through its repeated 'citation' in discursive practices – one example being the (legal/medical/religious) recourse to reproductive capacity in the sexing of bodies as 'female'.[49] For cyberfeminism sexuality is 'virtual' – a voyage through a rich spectrum of corporeal possibilities and one scarcely touched by the much hyped gender-switching on the Internet.[50] Indeed, those critics who argue that 'virtual reality' reinforces Cartesian duality by replacing the body with a body image are right so long as cybersexuality remains organized by a binary gender system and mediated by the cyberpunk fantasy of leaving the 'meat' behind.

Haraway's notion of cyborg-embodiment, on the other hand, contests the premiss that 'the subject' is the tenant of its own private data net: 'Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?'[51] Implicitly conceiving the interface as the *becoming-flesh* of the machine, she *reintegrates* the technological within the natural. This is not a flight from 'the problems of organic life', nor the elaboration of 'an idealized state of computer existence', but an experiment in new ways of becoming embodied. Contrary to the critics who locate the cyborg within a masculinist paradigm of viewing, Haraway's reinvention of nature plunges philosophy into a tactile environment of communication beyond that which can be *seen*. In the eclipse of the Oedipal sun there is no castration myth to be rehearsed – or rather, there is *only* castration: the impotence consequent upon an enucleated speculative philosophy which apportions sexed positions in terms of the neon phallic sign. In the darkness of cybernetic circuitries bodies are constituted as fluid, open systems – myriad random programmes which simply 'find their way'.[52]

Haraway's rejection of the organic body as locus for body politics is clearly problematic for feminists wishing to root their activism in a more stable sense of corporeal subjectivity, but she insists that there are 'great riches for feminists in explicitly embracing the possibilities inherent in the breakdown of clean distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the Western self.'[53] Arguing that it is the 'simultaneity of breakdowns that cracks the matrices of domination and opens geometric possibilities', she cautions against the feminist attempt to construct a revolutionary subject from the 'perspective of a hierarchy of oppressions and/or a latent position of moral superiority, innocence, and greater closeness to nature'.[54] These agendas almost inevitably repeat the structures of domination that they diagnose by seeking to rewrite the feminine back into a history of phallocentrism:

> These plots are ruled by a reproductive politics – rebirth without flaw, perfection, abstraction. In this plot women are imagined either better or worse off, but all agree that they have less selfhood, weaker individuation, more fusion to the oral, to Mother, less at stake in masculine autonomy. But there is another route to having less at stake in masculine autonomy, a route that does not pass through Woman, Primitive, Zero, the Mirror Stage and its imaginary. It passes through women and other present-tense, illegitimate cyborgs, not of Woman born, who refuse the ideological resources of victimization so as to have a real life.[55]

For Haraway, having less at stake in masculine autonomy means to escape the transcendent structures of a subject-centred feminism. She thereby refuses to become stranded in the saltflats of a slavish politics of *ressentiment* which positions woman as either victim of an oppressive masculinity or guardian of moral virtue. Cyborg politics is freed from the need to root politics in obdurate insistence on bodily integrity, organic purity and the primacy of the maternal. What this facilitates is a politics of 'affinity' – the construction of a 'kind of postmodernist identity out of otherness, difference, and specificity'.[56] Haraway suggests that the label 'women of colour' may function as a non-natural, inclusive disjunction for all those non-white women negated by the category 'woman' and all the non-black women whose specific ethnic identity is negated by the category 'black'. This is a hybrid, cyborg identity that 'cannot affirm the capacity

to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship'.[57] Freed from the guilt of excluding and silencing women in the attempt to speak for Everywoman, cyborg politics furnishes political unities 'without relying on a logic of appropriation, incorporation, and taxonomic identification'.[58] According to Haraway, 'cyborg feminists have to argue that "we" do not want any more natural matrix of unity and that no construction is whole'.[59] Positively 'denatured' and machinically integrated with other flows which bypass the discursive control of transcendent terms, the cyborg names the formal possibility of a plenitude of interconnections in the integrated circuit.

## Cyborg responsibility?

As we have seen, the attempt to reinsert Haraway's cyborg within a phallocentric politics of domination is impeded by her critique of the hylomorphic and dualistic axiomatics integral to the logics and practices of domination in the Western tradition. To counterpose technology to 'the complexity of human emotions' or to view the cyborg as fatally compromised by its inherence in the military-industrial complex is to demonstrate a humanist prejudice against the idea of machinic nature. Just as organic life expresses a capacity for self-organization and immanent redesign, technology too organizes itself under market capital using humanity as a necessary machine part. This is the full sense of matter as active or nature as 'agent'. As Haraway comments:

> High tech culture challenges ... dualisms in intriguing ways. It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what body in machines that resolve into coding practices.[60]

If, in spite of it all, the cyborg remains too overdetermined as phallic icon to impact upon the dominant ideology, it is worth acknowledging that Haraway's rethinking of analytical boundaries simultaneously feeds into her socialist-feminist analysis of the new world order contoured by the social relations of science and technology. Pointing to the extreme mobility of capital, the emerging international division of labour, and the weakening of family groupings that are rendering traditional dichotomies ideologically questionable (e.g. public/private, male/female), she suggests that socialist-feminism should rethink boundaries systemically in order to appreciate that domains such as the 'home' and the 'workplace' are immanently redesigning themselves:

> The actual situation of women is their integration/exploitation into a world system of production/reproduction and communication called the informatics of domination. The home, workplace, market, public arena, the body itself – all can be dispersed and interfaced in nearly infinite, polymorphous ways, with large consequences for women and others...[61]

Because these consequences are very different for different people, oppositional movements are difficult to imagine but nevertheless 'essential for survival'. Since for Haraway 'the only way to characterize the informatics of domination is as a massive intensification of insecurity and cultural impoverishment, with common failure of subsistence networks for the most vulnerable',[62] the forging of new relations of affinity and cyborg 'identities' has never been more urgent.

Haraway's call for the rethinking of community in the age of technoculture is optimistic, upbeat and invigorating in its refusal to demonize technology, but some might argue that in spite of its good intentions it fails to follow through the implications of its philosophical stance. The issue here is not that Haraway avoids offering concrete solutions to the social problems she identifies, because, as we have noted, the conditions for cyborg politics are merely 'formal' and in no sense prescriptive. Indeed, the evolution of alliances unthinkable according to previous historical, cultural and sexual divisions may serve a wide range of political objectives when invested with substantive content. However, in a way this is precisely the problem. Relations of affinity can be constructed in all kinds of contexts, as the alliance of feminism and censorship in New Right politics is currently demonstrating. If it is the inherent rhetoric of domination and oppression (of 'natural human integrity') that disqualifies this and other such couplings from the politics of the cyborg, the problem of articulating 'progressive' and 'oppositional' political movements (Haraway's terms) still remains.[63] To ask what makes a cyborg alliance liberating rather than oppressive or parasitic may be to reinscribe an extrinsic moral vantage point, thereby misunderstanding Haraway's philosophy of immanence. But, arguably, this is precisely the move which she makes in the very act of contesting the structural dynamics of domination and oppression:

> The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped,

> and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; they do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are they.[64]

With this plea for 'responsibility', one of the central tensions of Haraway's work comes into focus. From the beginning of 'A Cyborg Manifesto' she is explicit in her argument for '*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction',[65] but simultaneously denies the appeal to transcendent agency that would render such responsibility possible. As she remarks, '"we" did not originally choose to be cyborgs but choice grounds a liberal politics and epistemology that imagines the reproduction of individuals before the wider replications of "texts"'.[66] If we do not choose to be cyborgs, *can* we choose our responsibilities for machines? Are 'we' still in control? This is a variant of the problem that hampers Haraway's endeavour to inject 'progressive' politics into a systemic conception of power. To label the network of relations the 'informatics of domination' only obfuscates the issue further, for what can the concept of 'domination' actually mean if it is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine? Similarly, responsibility for constructing boundaries can only have any validity if one continues to operate with a decisionist vocabulary. Haraway claims that 'feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control',[67] yet, despite her extremely incisive elaboration of the nature of cybernetic control systems, she seems to have an allergic reaction to thinking control immanently when she works through the political implications of unhooking production from both intention and teleology. In fear of losing the possibility of acting politically at all, she re-anthropomorphizes control – a fundamentally defensive gesture in the face of the threat of the uninhibited explosion of control implied by cyberfeminsm.

In insisting on 'political accountability'[68] and ethical obligation, Haraway struggles to rescue 'A Cyborg Manifesto' from the charge of technological determinism, but in so doing weakens the case for understanding technological revolution and biological evolution as symbiotic. Indeed, her uncritical appeal to responsibility smacks of the slave morality that cyberfeminism otherwise so refreshingly ignores. Short-circuiting her own ambitious reinvention of nature, she refuses to face the full trauma of dismantling the biological order, and, unable to tolerate the full cyborg coupling of science and politics, appeals to a security system of humanist values to protect her cyborg from illicit, anarchic and random liaisons. Perhaps in the desire to hold sway over a future that is potentially 'monstrous' for the economically vulnerable, she reinscribes the dialectical illusion of transcendent control in the guise of an ethical sensibility. In this gesture production is once again theorized in terms of transcendence; matter is separated from what it can do; and there is a paralogistic inference from control to an agent giving the orders. Having challenged the values implicit in the logics of the natural sciences, Haraway fails to carry through the critical project with respect to her own work, skirting close to mouthing the dutiful platitudes of many other postmodernist incursions into the political. By the same token, the danger of lapsing back into a classical philosophy of transcendence need not be overemphasized; for, after all, it is Haraway who has already presented this case so convincingly.

One may be left with the impression that politics is bankrupt in the anarchic self-designing landscapes of technoculture, and that cyborg politics is not only a hybrid term but a thoroughly otiose one. As long as one labours to graft a speculative model of revolution onto immanent communication systems this will probably remain a judicious appraisal. Perhaps we are left with the choice between either returning once again to notions of praxis and ideology and reconstructing a political space which enables one to mobilize an ethical vocabulary of rights and responsibility or junking morality, annihilating the super-ego, exacerbating the fantasies of the 'console cowboys' and jacking into cyberspace. Or perhaps it is illusory even to assume there is any 'choice'? In any case, Haraway's attempt to synthesize the two perspectives comes to grief, if only because it is assumed that in the absence of transcendent agency, political activism of any kind is idle. However, perhaps it is the assumption that such control ever existed which should be challenged. Understanding nature cybernetically suggests that 'individual' actions are always bound within larger material processes that both traverse and exceed them. Perhaps a more appropriate political vocabulary would be one in which situations are interpreted in terms of *degrees* of control, resistance, rates of stability and changes in flow – with all that this implies for diagnosing relations of power. In this regard it may be added that biochemists and computer programmers are now exploring the generation of systems which they do not 'control' – systems which have 'choices' among 'local destinies'.[69] One partici-

pates but interactively, not as a self-enclosed unit. At its most suggestive this describes the functioning of cyborg-embodiment as relational, adaptive and synergistic – a creative voyage into the unknown.

## Notes

1. Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Free Association Books, London, 1991, pp. 149–81.
2. See Vivian Sobchack's 'New Age Mutant Ninja Hackers: Reading "Mondo 2000"', in Mark Dery, ed., 'Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture', special issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 92, no. 4, Fall 1993, pp. 569–84; and Scott Bukatman's 'Terminal Resistance: Cyborg Acceptance', in his *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 1993, pp. 299–329.
3. The Frankfurt School is the obvious locus for discussions of this kind. For a recent example of this kind of critique, see Simon Penny's 'Virtual Reality as the Completion of the Enlightenment Project', in Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckrey, eds, *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1994, pp. 231–48.
4. In articulating inequities in the sexual division of labour, socialist feminists have argued that technology is mediated by the economic environment of patriarchal capitalism. See Juliet Mitchell, *Women: The Longest Revolution*, Virago, London, 1984.
5. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p. 149.
6. Ibid., p. 150.
7. In her essay 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' (*Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, pp. 183–201), Haraway reflects on her intellectual development, including an early 'modernist poetic moment when cells seemed to be cells and organisms, organisms', wryly adding: 'but then came the law of the father and its resolution of the problem of objectivity, solved by always already absent referents, deferred signifieds, split subjects, and the endless play of signifiers. Who wouldn't grow up warped?' (p. 184).
8. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p. 3.
9. Ibid., p. 45.
10. See Manuel de Landa, 'Virtual Environments and the Emergence of Synthetic Reason', in Dery, ed., 'Flame Wars', pp. 793–815. See also Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos*, Flamingo, London, 1984, for a discussion of attractors and bifurcations in dissipative systems. Whilst Haraway does not directly engage with these theories in 'A Cyborg Manifesto', they complement her techno-biopolitics in clearly discernible ways. See in particular 'The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitution of Self in Immune System Discourse', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, pp. 203–230.
11. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p. 150.
12. Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, Verso, London, 1992, p. 139.
13. See Stanley Aronowitz, 'Technology and the Future of Work', in Bender and Druckrey, eds, *Culture on the Brink*, p. 19.
14. See Margaret Morse, 'What do Cyborgs Eat? Oral Logic in an Information Society', in Bender and Druckrey, eds, *Culture on the Brink*, p. 158.
15. Ibid., p. 159.
16. See Claudia Springer, 'Sex, Memories, and Angry Women', in Dery, ed., 'Flame Wars', p. 719.
17. Ibid., p. 718.
18. See Simon Penny, in Bender and Druckrey, eds, *Culture on the Brink*, p. 238.
19. See Tricia Rose in Mark Dery's 'Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose', in Dery, ed., 'Flame Wars', p. 773.
20. See Stacy Alaimo, 'Cyborg and Ecofeminist Interventions: Challenges for an Environmental Feminism', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, Spring 1994, p. 148. Despite her reservations concerning the 'phallotechnology' of the cyborg, Alaimo remains confident that Haraway's work is of value for ecofeminist ends. See discussion below.
21. See Bukatman, 'Terminal Resistance: Cyborg Acceptance', p. 316. Bukatman adds: 'In cyberpunk the desire to merge with the machine is romanticized as a necessary but voluntary action, the next evolutionary step. In feminist science fiction, this desire to merge with the machine is viewed as aberrant, and is often presented as an act of surrender rather than empowerment.'
22. See Anne Balsamo, 'Reading Cyborgs Writing Feminism', *Communication*, vol. 10, 1988, p. 341.
23. See interview in Dery, ed., 'Flame Wars', pp. 772–3.
24. Ibid., p. 773.
25. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p. 151.
26. See in particular Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, Harper & Row, New York 1978; and Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Beacon Press, Boston MA, 1978.
27. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p. 152.
28. Ibid., p. 149.
29. Ibid., p. 155.
30. Ibid., p. 150.
31. Ibid., p. 155.
32. See Alaimo, 'Cyborg and Ecofeminist Interventions', p. 140.
33. *Primate Visions*, p. 1.
34. Ibid., p. 13.
35. Ibid., p. 350.
36. Ibid., p. 289.
37. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p. 180.
38. *Primate Visions*, p. 12.
39. Ibid., p. 13.
40. Ibid., p. 12.
41. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p. 200.
42. This is not a line of thought that Haraway explicitly develops. For further discussion of these ideas, see Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'the machinic phylum' in *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Vol. 2 (1980), translated by Brian Massumi, The Athlone Press, London, 1988: 'the *machinic phylum* is materiality, natural or artificial, and both simultaneously; it is matter in movement, in flux, in variation, matter as a conveyor of singularities and traits of expression' (p. 409). See also Manuel de Landa, 'Nonorganic Life', in Jonathan Crary and Sandford

Kwinter, eds, *Incorporations*, Zone Books, New York, 1992.

43. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p. 163.
44. Ibid., p. 162.
45. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), translated by Colin Smith, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1962. On the 'imaginary limb', see Chapter 1. See also Chapter 3, in which Merleau-Ponty speaks of the superimposition of 'virtual' space onto physical space. (p. 111).
46. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, pp. 200–201.
47. Haraway cites Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich and Susan Griffin in this context (ibid., p. 174).
48. Ibid., p. 180.
49. See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993, for a diagnosis of the cultural production of gender norms. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), translated by Catherine Porter, Cornell University Press, New York, 1985, for experiments in their rewriting.
50. It would go beyond the parameters of this discussion to address these issues here, but I refer the interested reader to Juniper Wiley's 'No BODY is 'Doing It': Cybersexuality as a Postmodern Narrative', in *Body & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, March 1995, pp. 145–62. For a radical feminist critique of 'virtual women', see Dianne Butterworth's 'Wanking in Cyberspace', *Trouble & Strife*, no. 27, Winter 1993, pp. 33–7.
51. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p. 178.
52. See Sadie Plant's fascinating 'The Future Looms: Weaving Women and Cybernetics', in *Body & Society*, vol. 1, no. 3–4, November 1995, pp. 45–64.
53. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p. 174.
54. Ibid., pp. 174 and 176.
55. Ibid., p. 177.
56. Ibid., p. 155.
57. Ibid., p. 156.
58. Ibid., p. 157.
59. Ibid., p. 157.
60. Ibid., p. 177.
61. Ibid., p. 163.
62. Ibid., p. 172.
63. Whilst presenting the cyborg as that which will subvert 'the tradition of progress, the tradition of the appropriation of nature as a resource for the productions of culture' (*Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p. 150), Haraway continues to advocate – seemingly without irony – 'effective progressive politics' (ibid., p. 165).
64. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p. 180.
65. Ibid., p. 150.
66. Ibid., p. 176.
67. Ibid., p. 175.
68. Ibid., p. 169.
69. See Manuel de Landa, 'Virtual Environments and the Emergence of Synthetic Reason', p. 812.