

Chapter Seven

Conclusion: Virtually yours

This study has positioned embodiment as a crucial and nonnegotiable facet of being human amidst a flood of body-antagonistic theories and practices. All of these, in one way or another, want to transgress and renegotiate the categories of embodiment and “being a body” into a future that is oblivious to the body. Also, mostly underpinning these theories and practices is the impulse to dilute embodiment to information or to a code to be cracked, mastered and engineered.

Embodiment has, however, proven itself to be a more complex and diverse concept that cannot so easily be engineered into abstraction. Embodiment has a remainder, an aspect that is in excess of technological interference. It has also been shown to be the resilient or non-negotiable “thing” that is the prerequisite for any meaningful form of existence. Quite literally without a body no-one is identifiable, no agency and no place exist – a reality that is cleverly elapsing by cyber-theorists’ vision of complete disembodiment.

In order to establish embodiment as the invariable prerequisite for human existence, this study has explored four body types as they interact with new technologies. The four body types have been explored from a cyberfeminist framework that takes a responsible and challenging stand towards new technologies. By utilising four body types a richer and varied interpretation of the meeting between bodies and new technologies is made possible. It also allowed for a more complex reading of new technologies by showing how different types of new technologies create alternating expectations concerning embodiment. The impact on embodiment resulting from virtual reality is thus quite different from cosmetic surgery, just as physically changing sex is dissimilar in its embodied effects to online gender-swapping. Various technologies impact differently on embodiment and therefore, they need to be treated differently, as far as possible, in order to avoid a hegemonic argument.

Thus, the four body types selected have provided a varied and enriched reading of embodiment and new technologies. The first type is the techno-transcended body type. Associated on the semiotic square with the concepts of **absence** and **randomness** this body type has a great deal in common with older Enlightenment projects, which similarly distrusted the corporeal sphere. The techno-transcended body is perhaps best illustrated in the film *The Matrix* (1999), which reveals the sensory world, to which the body belongs, as codes that can be

manipulated and controlled by the power of the mind. Embodiment as constructed in the techno-transcendent version is a technicality that can be overcome once enough information becomes available that will ultimately make it possible to transgress the material realm.

Obviously, this body-technology configuration does not lend itself to a constructive cyberfeminist engagement with new technologies, since it wants to rid itself of the bodily sphere and all its implications. Read in strong feminist terms the techno-transcended body type wants to rid itself of the female and the feminine in its disembodied endeavours that relies solely on the masculinised mind's abilities. It is not surprising, then, that the techno-transcended body type's impact on the constructions of embodiment is critically viewed and treated with intellectual suspicion from a cyberfeminist position.

In the second identified body type, referred to as the techno-enhanced body type, materiality still plays a role, although this time the corporeal is under continual construction. This body type is associated with the concepts **absence** and **pattern** on the semiotic square. This indicates that the techno-enhanced body type also attempts to transgress the physical during its interactions with new technologies, but this time through a constant process of augmentation and enhancement. In other words, a body has remained, which forms the **pattern**, although that body needs to be improved. It is for this reason that the techno-enhanced body is best described by means of prosthetics, which enhances humanities' potential by seemingly overcoming the frailty of the human body.

In the case of the techno-enhanced body type, a cyberfeminist reading would implore that enhancing and improving the body are not problematic in itself. Since the cyberfeminist position does not favour a technologically innocent body, but accepts that bodies and technologies meet constantly with impetuous results. It is only, however, when these technological augmentations tend to supplement embodiment beyond existence, or beyond repair, that they become contentious. There are definite limits to how far the body can be enhanced and the body cannot be enhanced beyond itself. Once again, technological intervention collides with the embodied possibilities of the organism. Accordingly, it has been shown that the physical remainder cannot simply be negotiated to disappear or not to matter any longer. Therefore, embodiment remains the precondition for technological intervention. If there were no bodies what would technologies enhance?

In the penultimate body type, the so-called marked body, technology's intervention is focussed on the physical changing of sex (transsexuality) and the virtual swapping of gender online (transgenderism). These two seemingly opposing

categories are closely interlinked in the manner in which they privilege technological transcendence of either sex (in the case of transsexuality) or gender (in the case of transgenderism). Especially relevant to my analysis is how new technologies mark bodies as being sexed and gendered or belonging to a specific sex and/or gender. It is argued that although the body is **present**, it is a marked body that may seemingly take on different (or any?) sexes and genders at **random** that is present. Both sex and gender are treated as malleable constructions – as is the body. I do not wish to argue that neither sex nor gender is a construction, or that they are pre-ontological given entities that cannot change or be permuted, but rather to emphasise that, in order to become relevant, each changed sex and swapped gender need to be embodied from somewhere to be meaningful.

The position that cyberfeminism takes in relation to the marked body is, therefore, a cautious one, for how does one responsibly change sex or swap gender without considering the body and all that it implies as immaterial? Changing one's sex is not problematic in itself, as long as the change does not imply that the material body with its "erroneous" sex is mere clay in the hands of the "correctly" gendered and disembodied subject. The same applies to virtual gender swapping, which may provide wonderful opportunities for people to experiment with cross-gender roles. As long as the gender swapping does not suggest that we can escape our sexed/gendered embodiments completely, it may be a fruitful experiment. The gender that we portray online is, nevertheless, always in some way, positively or negatively, informed by the body which launches it.

Finally, in the search for a responsible and creative merger between bodies and technologies, the cyborg body has been explored. The cyborg body is described as the body that is **present** and follows a **pattern** in its being present. The cyborg body does not necessarily indicate that the meeting between bodies and technologies is a joyous and harmonious affair. In fact, the meeting can be painful and even detrimental to the bio-organism. What the cyborg body does, however, suggest is that no bodies are pure and untouched by technologies. Our bodies are permeated by new technologies, but this does not result in the annihilation of bio-bodies. This means that bodies need to be negotiated in the correspondence between materiality and information, organism and machine.

Cyborgs are embodied creatures and how they are embodied plays a distinct part in their political intentions and interventions. This indicates that cyborgs are not neutral technological machines, but the way they are positioned *vis-à-vis* the discourse of embodiment also immediately situate them in a specific gendered

relation towards embodiment. There are no gender-neutral cyborgs, just as there are no completely disembodied cyborgs.

Naturally, the cyborg body is the embodied position most preferred from a cyberfeminist position, since it allows for a responsible and creative embodied position. The cyborg is not fearful of new technologies, but neither does it fatally merge with new technologies. It is a new creature negotiated between that which cannot ultimately be altered, namely the body and that which is extremely changeable, namely information technologies. Between these oppositions of fact and fiction the cyborg is being embodied.

I want to conclude this study by directing the discussion to the factual and the local, and specifically to the continent from which I am “speaking” and where I am concretely embodied. I want, therefore, to tie up my arguments about gendered bodies and new technologies by returning to the locality and specificity from which I am writing, namely the continent of Africa and, to be more specific, sub-Saharan Africa.

Sub-Saharan Africa is a region that is rich in tradition and, importantly in embodied traditions. It is likewise a place where embodiment is respected and treated with dignity, as is borne out by rites and rituals of the region. Even so, it is also a place torn apart by famine, disease, poverty, war, and racial, class, gender and sexual conflicts. It is thus a locus or topos where embodiment cannot easily be disregarded or transgressed. It is very difficult to ignore the plights of embodiment, such as pain and hunger, especially when human existence has been reduced to these basic issues of endurance. Sub-Saharan Africa is thus a region where privileged dreams of techno-transcendence, with their quick and clean disembodied “fixes”, do not play a significant role. In fact, as ethnic lines are drawn and the class divides are becoming canyons, it is also sadly a place that has the potential to become a mere reservoir of body parts (recalling Heidegger’s *Bestand/standing reserve*) as the trade in body ware increases.

While techno-enlightened crusaders of the North build laboratories for immortality, where genetic manipulation, cloning and increasingly body-invasive technologies are developed and perfected, in vivid contrast millions of Africans are estimated to die before 2005 from AIDS alone. In these parts, embodiment cannot be reduced to a designer item awaiting the latest techno-enhancement or prosthetic fitting. Embodiment remains a site that is to be borne and lived through, as well as being the emblem of human mortality. And even though mortality is treated by cyber-theorists such as Hans Moravec and Timothy Leary as an abstract riddle (due to a

lack of information) in need of a clever solution, it remains the non-negotiable premise on which human existence is based.

Sub-Saharan bodies are the most likely embodiments to be disregarded and disposed of by old and new Enlightenment dreams of techno-transcendence as figured in mind uploading, head transplants and other complete technological substitutions for the body. They are also the bodies most unlikely to receive techno-enhancement or to be treated as designer items on the consumer horizon. Neither are these embodiments anticipating sexual and gender realignment, for the lived and situated bodies in these parts cannot be reduced to mere wearable gendered items. These are examples of lived bodies that, in their frail situatedness, undeniable locality, specificity and materiality, need to be negotiated and taken account of in both the theory and practice of new technologies. Cyberfeminism faces the political challenge of not only dismantling the debilitating myths that align men/masculinity and technology, but also of opening access to women and other gender outlaws.

It is my contention that a meaningful posthuman existence, as it merges and morphs with new technologies, depends mainly on how embodiment is organised in that collision. And although embodiment is virtual, for embodiment is a mediated activity that mediates the clusters of “mind” and “body”, inside and outside, the discursive and the material, it is a necessary virtuality. Our bodies are virtually ours, they are *flesh*, the *sensible transcendent* that cannot be owned (as one might “have” a body), but are rather lived (because we are bodies) through mediated body images and other “languages”. This does not mean that the “realness” and materiality of the body are denied. Mortality testifies to that insurmountable fact: nevertheless, we do not have direct access to our bodies, except by means of mediating languages.

This study has shown the misguided premises on which instrumentalist theories and practices of embodiment such as techno-transcendence, techno-enhancement and marking the body differently are based. It is due to the luxury of being a body (embodied) that these theories and practices can imagine themselves as disembodied or construct embodiment as a malleable tool. And, even though embodiment is not predetermined, but pliable and adaptable, there are limits to embodiment’s plasticity. Embodiment – that there is a body – forms the necessary and non-negotiable supplement of disembodied flights of fancy. Without embodiment there can be no cyberspace or virtual spectres flying on the screen.

Women – understood in the broadest sense – were traditionally “burdened” with the temporality and changeability of bodies, and this now suits them well in the virtual age where technologies and bodies are merging into cyborgs. As subterfuge posthuman agencies, who have never been fully hu(man), but who have mimed their

humanity, women's bodies are well positioned to become "hopeful monsters". And it is from this monstrous site that embodiment can responsibly and playfully be negotiated, morphing new facts and fantasies for gendered bodies' encounters with new technologies.