Bodies that [don't] Matter: Feminist Cyberpunk and Transgressions of Bodily Boundaries[*]

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Abstract

Science Fiction, through its flexible nature provides a most suitable medium for writers to speculate on social, political, linguistic and cultural issues and to invent new worlds, new universes from where they can examine the present day concerns and experiment with new alternatives. Although Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein or Modern Prometheus* has been claimed by many as the first science fiction novel, until the 1970s science fiction had been a predominantly male authored genre. In the 1970s, however, feminist science fiction emerged as a separate and highly influential genre.

Cyberpunk literature, a sub-genre of science fiction, is a phenomenon of the 1980s and it addresses the dissolution of the subject through the figure of the cyborg, a human-machine coupling alongside the electronically constituted and disembodied reality of cyberspace. The author whose work is analyzed in this paper, namely, Pat Cadigan and her 1991 novel *Synners,* questions whether the bodily transgressions of the cyborg and the bodiless space of virtual reality present women with an emancipatory space where the traditional gender dichotomies are nonexistent, as it was suggested by the cyberfeminists of the early 1990s. The answer Cadigan offers is that although through these new factual and fictional technologies sexual identity can be altered, rendered multiple and fluid, the society remains to be hierarchical and bifurcated. As Cadigan's novel shows, in spite of its revolutionary promise as a gender free space, cyberculture, in its actual manifestations and literary representations, duplicates the power dynamics of sexist and racist practices perpetuating inequality.

Keywords: Feminist, Cyberpunk, Pat Cadigan, *Synners*

Öz

Bilim-kurgu, esnek doğası gereği yazarların sosyal, politik ve kültürel konuları sorgulamalarına ve yarattıkları farklı dünyalar ve evrenler aracılığıyla güncel sorunları irdelemelerine ve alternatifler ortaya koymalarına olanak sağlayan bir yazın türüdür. Mary Shelley'nin 1818 yılında kaleme aldığı *Frankenstein ya da Modern Prometheus* adlı eseri bir çok eleştirmen tarafından ilk bilim-kurgu romanı olarak kabul edilse de, bilim-kurgu edebiyatı 1970'lere kadar erkek egemen bir tür olmuştur. Ancak 1970'lerden itibaren feminist bilim-kurgu başlıbaşına bir yazın türü olarak ortaya çıkmıştır.

Bilim-kurgu edebiyatının bir alt kategorisi olan siberpunk yazını ise, 1980'lerde ortaya çıkmış bir türdür ve temel olarak insan makine eşleşmesinden doğan siborg figürü ile bedenin varolmadığı sanal âlem olguları nezdinde öznenin çözülmesi konusunu ele alır. Bu makalede eseri incelenen Pat Cadigan, 1991 yılında kaleme aldığı *Synners* adlı

romanında, 1990'lı yılların başlarında siberfeministlerin iddia ettiği üzere siborg figürü ve bedensiz sanal gerçeklik ortamının kadınlar için geleneksel cinsiyet farklılıklarının varolmadığı özgür bir ortam yaratıp yaratmadığını sorgulamaktadır. Cadigan'a göre, bu hem gerçekte varolan hem de kurgulanmış yeni teknolojiler, sabit cinsiyet kategorilerinin ötesine geçişi mümkün kılmakla beraber, toplumda varolan hiyerarşik yapı ve ikiliğe dayalı cinsiyet kategorileri hâlâ etkilerini korumaktadırlar. Hatta, Cadigan'ın eserinde de görüldüğü üzere, sanal kültür vadettiği gibi cinsiyetsiz bir alan olmaktan çok uzaktır ve gerçek ve kurgusal tezahürlerinden de anlaşılacağı gibi günümüzde varolan cinsiyet ve ırk ayrımcılığını sürdürmekte ve böylelikle eşitsizliği devam ettirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Feminist, Siberpunk, Pat Cadigan, Synners

Traditionally a male oriented genre, science fiction has been a favorite among feminist writers since the 1970s, as it provided them with a fruitful means to express their opinions, articulate their dreams and voice their discontents about the status quo. By incorporating feminist themes in their narratives, these writers have disclosed, challenged and deconstructed, not only the social realities and attitudes of their societies but also the strict conventions – white, male, heteronormative, hard science – of the genre of science fiction. It was primarily science fiction's oppositional stance towards conventional realistic fiction and its freedom from the constraints of realism that made feminist writers choose it as the ground from which to express their criticisms and desires about the social realities of their era. In many ways however, mainstream science fiction shared with realist fiction many of the illusions of the culture that produced it. Themes of sexuality, family roles, the constructedness of gender, frequently went unchanged in the hands of male science fiction writers. As Sarah Lefanu observed, the conventions of science fiction such as "time travel, alternate worlds, entropy, relativism," were used by feminist writers as powerful tools to explore numerous societal constructs, primarily that of woman (1988, p. 4-5). It was also within this context that feminist science fiction writers of the 1970s and 1980s resorted to utopianism; the creation of better, yet nonexistent societies

that they juxtaposed with the highly dystopian realities of their own time. These utopias sometimes consisted of separatist, quasi-tribal, all woman communities, and sometimes involved nature-friendly, egalitarian societies wherein the sexual inequalities have been discarded through the metaphorical advocation of androgyny. Some saw the root-cause of women's oppression as embedded in language and religion, so they created oppositional languages and religions that would be transformative of the highly hierarchical and unjust ordering of society. Some advocated separatism, some celebrated diversity, and although their methods differed, they shared a common objective; eradicating the asymmetrical dichotomies, specifically the male/female dyad.

With the invention of the personal computer, the world wide web and the advancements made in the fields of reconstructive and cosmetic surgeries in the last decades of the twentieth century, the traditional boundaries between humans and machines have undergone a radical transformation. Jean Baudrillard, in his article "Simulacra and Simulations," defines contemporary reality as "an age of the hyperreal" (1988, p. 167). According to Baudrillard under the postmodern condition characterized by mass communication systems and a consumer society addicted to these systems, the western societies have undergone a precession of simulacra, whereby the simulacrum (simulation) of something real replaces the thing being represented. According to Baudrillard, our age, the age of simulation begins "with a liquidation of all referrals . . . [and] by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs" (1988, p. 167) whereby the artificially constructed realities are valued over the real; exceeding the power and meaning of the latter, becoming not merely a copy of the real but becomes the real itself. An example to clarify what Baudrillard means can be given through today's virtual reality systems. Someone who is not very good looking; someone who falls outside of the beauty categories promoted via advertisements and magazines, may wish to create an avatar of themselves fulfilling the desired standards and become friends with more people than they can through face to face interaction via the ephemeral space of the internet. Or the same person may choose to undergo many painful surgical procedures that would turn them into a new person with the desired qualities. The two examples that I have given explain the lure of the "simulacrum" and the power it has in replacing the "real" that in many ways may be found wanting. For Baudrillard the dismissal of the real for the artificial implies becoming a part of what he calls the "orders"of simulation, a new world order, which is the subject matter of cyberpunk.

The term cyberpunk first appeared in the title of a short story by Bruce Bethke in 1983, and was appropriated by the critic Gardner Dozois to define a new generation of mainly white, male writers in the early 1980s. A typical cyberpunk fiction deals with a technologically enhanced dystopian near future, set usually in the aftermath of a war or natural disaster; where a system – usually a megacorporation – dominates the lives of individuals. The theme of body modification; prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cloned or genetically altered and engineered organs and the theme of mind invasion, brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence; technologies that radically transform

and redefine the nature of humanity, are among the most common themes of cyberpunk fiction (Sterling, 1986, p. x). Its characters are generally marginalized male loners who live on the fringes of the society trying to manipulate the system's technological tools for their own profit. Most of the action in the narratives tend to take place in the disembodied "cyberspace" and most of the characters are "cyborgs."

Cyborg is a shorthand term for "cybernetic organism" describing a human-machine coupling, most often a man-machine hybrid (Balsamo, 1996, p. 9). Cyberspace on the other hand, is a term coined by William Gibson in his short story "Burning Chrome" (1982), which he later described as a "consensual hallucination" in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer.* In its broadest sense, cyberspace refers to the imaginary space occupied by the programs and data systems around the globe. Referred to as the matrix or "the Net" in its fictional representations, cyberspace is the "non-space" between fixed computer consoles and portable computer desks (Balsamo, 2000, p. 490).

The response of women to the emergent technologies of the 1980s has been a contested one; while some recognized in them the traditional mechanisms of patriarchal oppression, others were optimistic in the transformations such technology entailed in the creation of a perfect world where the limitations and disappointments of our present world would be transcended. In its promise of liberating the mind from the body cyberspace initially has been acclaimed as an egalitarian utopia, especially by and for women, who have traditionally been identified with corporeality. As Stacy Alaimo in her article "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature" observes, since "woman" has always been associated with nature and the natural, hence excluded from the domain of transcendence, rationality, subjectivity and agency, most feminist theory has strived to free "woman" from "nature" (2008, p. 239). Therefore, the initial laudation of the budding technologies stemmed directly from women's desire to dissociate themselves from patriarchy's pejorative conceptualization of "woman" as "natural" hence inferior to the transcendent and cerebral "man."

Donna Haraway's now classic "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," was one of the earliest efforts "to contribute to a socialist-feminist culture and theory in a postmodernist, non-naturalist mode and in the *utopian tradition* of imagining a *world without gender"* (2000, p. 292, italics mine). Haraway's conception of the cyborg as a postgendered figure bearing the potential of making gendered boundaries obsolete has been accepted by many women as a feminist figure. Cyberspace and the cyborg seemed to offer women what Susan Bordo defined as "dream of everywhere," an epistemological perspective free of the locatedness and constraints of embodied existence (1997, p. 250). Through her manifesto, Haraway created an "ironic political myth" (2000, p. 291) situating at its center the image of the cyborg and suggesting that "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" (2000, p. 291). For Haraway, the cyborg, as a matter of both fiction and lived experience does not only embody the potential to change women's experience in the late twentieth century but also "takes pleasure in the confusion of boundaries

and responsibility in their construction" (2000, p. 292). Claiming that the cyborg is "a creature in a postgender world" (2000, p. 292), Haraway insisted that the imagery of the cyborg could suggest "a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (2000, p. 316) and to render possible the "building and destroying machines, categories, relationships, spaces, stories" (2000, p. 316).

However, as I will be arguing in this paper, cyberculture in general, and cyberpunk literature in particular, are the products of a mindset that is thoroughly and insidiously entrenched in the masculine, reiterating (or resuscitating) the sexist attitudes of early science fiction – and patriarchy in general.

In the 1990s, the rise of cyberculture gave way to a new form of feminism called cyberfeminism which concerned itself primarily with women's gaining access to new technologies and participating in the devising of such technologies for their own emancipation. Cyberfeminists claimed that in the "virtual societies" the male/female dyad will no longer exist and this erasure of gender will constitute a space of equality for women. In this view the internet is seen as a new space within which gender does not disappear but can "reinstate itself to the advantage of women" (Wakeford, 2000, p. 186). As Faith Wilding stresses in "Next Bodies:"

> Cyberfeminism began with strong technoutopian expectations that the new electronic media would offer women a fresh start to create new languages, programs, platforms, images, fluid identities and even subjectivities in cyberspace and that women could recode, redesign, and reprogram information technology to help change the female condition. (2003, p. 27)

One of the most ardent exponents of cyberfeminism is Sadie Plant who argues that since virtual reality brings fluidity to identities, it opens up spaces for women that enables them to undermine not only the worldview but also the material reality of "two thousand years of patriarchal control" (2000, p. 325). Interpreting cyberspace as a space for feminist utopia, Plant points to the fact that in its very constitution cyberspace is essentially a feminized space since the word for womb in Greek is *hystera* whereas in Latin it is *matrix* which connotes both matter and mother (2000, p.333). Similarly, Claudia Springer has also pointed out the womb-like quality of cyberspace, but she seems to lack Plant's laudatory interpretation. For Springer, jacking in the net --which sounds a lot like "jacking off"-- is nothing but another form of "masculine masturbatory fantasy of a penetrative return to the womb" (1996, p. 74). Cyberspace, in its dissolution of the boundaries of identity, seemed to promise its users a flexibility and fluidity where one can become anything and anyone:

> In the ultimate artificial reality, physical appearance will be completely composable. You might choose on one occasion to be tall and beautiful; on another you might wish to be short and plain. It would be instructive to see how changed physical attributed altered you interactions with other people. Not only might people treat you differently, but you might find yourself treating them differently as well. (Krueger, quoted in Robins 2000, p. 138)

Contrary to the argument posed by Krueger, Anne Balsamo in her article "The Virtual Body in Cyberspace" convincingly argues that both cyberspace and the cyborg often function to recreate traditional identities. She says:

> If we look to those who are already participating in body reconstruction programs -for instance cosmetic surgery and body building – we would find that their reconstructed bodies display very traditional gender and race markers of beauty, strength and sexuality. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that a reconstructed body does not guarantee a reconstructed cultural identity. Nor does "freedom from a body" imply that people will exercise the "freedom to be" any other kind of body than the one they already enjoy or desire. (2000, p. 495)

Furthermore, as Claudia Springer shows in her book *Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desire in the Post-Industrial Age* (1996), while through these novel technologies sexual identity can be altered, rendered multiple and fluid, in most cyberpunk fiction the roles assigned to men and women remain conventionally hierarchical and bifurcated. In spite of its revolutionary promise as a gender-free space, cyberculture, in its actual manifestations and literary representations, duplicates the power dynamics of sexist and racist practices perpetuating inequality.

Many fans and critics see William Gibson's 1984 novel, *Neuromancer* as "the quintessential cyberpunk novel" singlehandedly initiating the cyberpunk movement (Sterling, p. xiv). The opening lines of Gibson's novel: "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" (1984, p. 3), stressed the blurring of the distinctions between nature and technology, showing them as collapsing into each other where the artificial and the natural are no longer dichotomous but contiguous.

Jenny Wolmark points to the fact that cyberpunk heralded by Gibson is strongly embedded in the masculine; with its heroes drawn from high-tech environment of hackers and rock music and employing a rhetoric echoing that of hard-boiled detective and adventure fiction (1993, p. 109). Gibson's main female character in the novel, Molly Millions, is a technologically enhanced female assassin. With her surgically implanted mirror shades in her eye-sockets and "double-edged, four-centimeter blades" hidden beneath her "burgundy nails" Molly, according to Laurie Leblanc reverses the stereotypical gender definitions. With a fair amount of silicone in her head, rather than her breasts, and a surgical procedure that has routed back her tear ducts into her mouth – so that she spits on the rare occasions that she cries; Molly is a "cyborg woman in a masculine role" (Leblanc 1997, p. 3).

Although Laurie Leblanc seems to be celebratory of Molly's reversal of her feminine traits into highly masculine ones, in her characterization I see little to be celebrated but much to be lamented. Molly's adaptation of the masculine role is achieved through a wholesale negation of her female traits; betraying not only an idealization of the male as the form (and the norm) to be striven towards, but reiterating the repression of the female body at the same time. Furthermore, in various instances of the novel Molly is sexualized in traditional terms as a woman to be penetrated and controlled. In their joint

struggle against a cyberspace invasion, when Case has to "enter" Molly's body through the technologies of the "simstim" that enables him to experience her bodily sensations though they are physically apart, the experience is rendered in highly sexual terms; enabling Case to see "just how tight those jeans really are" (1984, p. 55). And while Case is inside Molly, he finds the "passivity of the situation irritating" (1984, p. 56) as he has no control over her body. But even this passivity is turned into a sexual act, as Balsamo also suggests as when soon after Case and Molly have sexual intercourse, Molly is reminded of "their mutual grunt of unity when he had entered her," (1984, p. 56) his previous cybernetic penetration of her body doubling his actual penetration during the sexual act. As Balsamo suggests "[i]nside of cyberspace or out, the relations between [t]he cybernetically connected bodies often recreate traditional heterosexual gender identities" (1996, p. 129).

Cyberpunk's reification of dominant heterosexual masculinity through the repression of the feminine and marginalization or complete eradication of non-heterosexual relations has also been commented on by others. In "Feminist Cyberpunk," Karen Codora comments on the absence of women and alternative sexualities in mainstream or malestream cyberpunk: "Populated exclusively by men and located in the male-dominated field of computers . . . cyberpunk is ripe for the homoerotic. Sadly, fierce queens and flaming queers are absent from the pages of traditional cyberpunk. Indeed, cyberpunk is characterized by its rather rampant heterosexuality" (1995, p. 361).

Within this context, Claudia Springer, also points to the fact that an overwhelmingly great number of today's visual media, the Hollywood movie industry in particular, privilege the muscular and violent figure in their depiction of the cyborg: From Robocop to Terminator cyborgs are distinguished by their large size and physical power whose technologically produced form embodies metaphors of human sexuality: steely hard phallic strength is opposed to feminine fluidity (1996, p. 102-103).

As Deborah Lupton has also pointed out, the filmic representations of the cyborg, in their portrayal of the cyborg body as far stronger than human body and far more immune to injury and pain; address anxieties around the permeability of body boundaries in its "clean, hard, tightness of form" (2000, p. 101). Emphasizing the gendered nature of these portrayals, Lupton maintains that, the cyborg body is predominantly masculine in its contrast with the "seeping, moist bodies of women" (2000 p. 101). Furthermore, since the cyborg and/or virtual body does not "eat, drink, urinate . . . defecate . . . [or] die" (Lupton 2000, p. 100), it represents that which is free from abject; from the messy mortality of the body. From another perspective, however, in its disrespect for "borders, positions and rules" and in its ontological status as an "inbetween, the ambiguous [and] the composite" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4), the cyborg body is the ultimate abject body.

Writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1997, Victor Keegan made the eye-opening observation that "[m]ost of the world's population has never made a phone call, for the simple reason that the vast majority doesn't have a telephone" (qtd. in Calcutt 1999, p. 36). Keegan's statement is merely one of the many unpleasant facts that

point to the new inequalities emerging through the so-called democratizing effects of cybertechnology; the rise of a new elite who has unlimited access to technology against a majority who has none. Chela Sandoval, on the other hand, in her article "New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed," talks about a group of real time cyborgs who seem to be quite unaware of the equalizing potential the figure holds. Sandoval begins her article with Silicon Valley, the seat of many of today's companies that are producing cybertechnologies; Lockheed, IBM, Macintosh, Hewlett Packard among others. Companies under which thousands of workers toil daily, workers who work in the labor-grade sectors; the majority of whom is made up of:

> US people of color, indigenous to the Americas, or those whose ancestors were brought here as slaves or indentured servants; they include those who immigrated to the US in the hopes of a better life, while being integrated into a society hierarchized by race, gender, class, language and social position. (2000, p. 374)

As Sandoval argues, for these workers cyborgization is an everyday reality, for they know already "the pain of the union of the machine and bodily tissue, the robotic conditions . . . the cyborg conditions under which the notion of human agency must take on new meanings" (2000, p. 375). According to Sandoval, the workers who "grow tired in the required repetitions, in the warehouses, assembly lines, administrative cells and computer networks" and those who "flip burgers . . . and speak the cyborg speech of McDonalds" (2000, pp. 374-75) have developed the cyborg skills required for survival under techno-human conditions, not with the recent electronic technology but through three hundred years of exploitation.

Pat Cadigan's *Synners,* engages in theoretical debates heretofore outlined, elaborating the many faceted aspects of cyberculture. Cadigan envisions a highly technologized society where not only the existing modes of oppression and division prevail, but also new ones are being created. In her novel, Cadigan also challenges the romanticized cyberpunk fantasy of escaping the body. In *Synners* Cadigan's female characters are shown to value their corporeality over the disembodied consciousness offered by cybertechnology, whereas, the male characters are presented as more willing to forget, suppress, or completely get rid of their bodies. Using the tropes of cyberpunk literature, Cadigan emphasizes the primacy of physical and localized ontology of the body and the idea that unless humanity maintains a "subjective kind of bodily sense in mind" in negotiating contemporary technoculture, it will amount to nothing short of human extinction (Sobchack qtd. in Springer, p. 137).

Hailed as the "Queen of Cyberpunk" by the British *Guardian,* Cadigan, since her foray into the field of cyberpunk in the 1980s, has been one of the most respected members of the genre, the only woman writer to be included in Bruce Sterling's anthology *Mirrorshades* and the only cyberpunk author to have received the Arthur C. Clarke Award twice. Among her novels are *Mindplayers* (1987), *Synners* (1991), *Fools* (1992), *Tea From an Empty Cup* (1998), and *Dervish is Digital* (2001) and her shortfiction

compilations include *Patterns* (1989), *Letters from Home* (1991), *Home by the Sea* (1993) and *Dirty Work* (1993). *Synners,* Cadigan's second novel that has been awarded the prestigious Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1992, is accepted to be her most successful, most "cyberpunkish" novel. The title's pun on "sinners," functions in two ways; firstly it is a postmodern gesture of playing with the original word, on another level it also makes a comment on the multibladed complications and the ethical questions surrounding cybertechnology; the human-machine synthesis and the price humanity would pay in its relentless search for knowledge and power, highly synonymous in the age of information:

> Knowledge is power. But power corrupts. Which means the Age of Fast Information is an extremely corrupt age in which to live.
>
> 'Arent they all?' Sam asked him.
>
> He smiled his dreamy little smile at her. 'Ah but I think we're approaching a corruption unlike anything we've ever known before, Sam-I-Am. Sometimes I think we may be on the verge of an original sin.' (Cadigan, 1991, p. 53)

The world Cadigan imagines in the novel is set in a not too distant future America where technology has infiltrated every aspect of life. The nation state is no longer extant while big corporations have taken over the rule, and everything, even information, the most important commodity in the future, is very expensive. The majority of the people live in the decaying urban center called the Mimosa where there is a "feel good clinic" around every corner, treating people's depressions with drugs, electroshocks, and if need be with brain implants that would cure their dis-ease, but also turn them into addicts. The all pervasive dataline (the equivalent of today's television) seems to be showing only porn; food porn, disaster porn, prison porn, med porn, news porn, tech-fantasy porn, sex porn –perhaps a literary representation of what Jean Baudrillard called "technology of seduction." In "The Ecstasy of Communication," Baudrillard elaborated the degree to which TV in contemporary society became a "control screen:"

> disengaging the viewer from actively producing one's own life, while passively consuming spectacles: with the immanent promiscuity of all these networks, with their continual connections, we are now in a new form of schizophrenia . . . too great a proximity of everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance, with no halo of private protection, not even his own body, to protect him anymore. . . . He can no longer produce the limits of his own being. . . . He is now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence. (1983, pp. 132-33)

For Baudrillard the contemporary era is characterized by "networks . . . contact, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface" (1983, p. 127), that he describes as "pornographic" and "obscene." For Baudrillard, the "obscenity" lies in the dissolution of the private where "secrets, spaces and scenes [are] abolished in a single dimension of information" (1983, p. 131):

> The obscene is what does away with every mirror, every look, every image. The obscene puts an end to every representation. But it is not only the sexual that becomes obscene in pornography: *today there is a whole pornography of information and communication* . . . It is no longer the traditional obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, forbidden or obscure; on the contrary, it is the obscenity of the visible, of the all too visible. It is the obscenity of what no longer has any secret, of what dissolves completely in information and communication. (1983, p. 130-131, emphases mine)

The main action of the novel involves the invention of a new technology of cerebral implants that enables its users to have direct interface with the computer and with everyone who is jacked into the system at the same time. While the novel makes use of the traditional cyberpunk elements of a highly computerized society dominated by megacorporations and the struggles of few individuals against this control through cybernetics, the author's main point of interest rests on gender and the gendered interpretations of cybertechnology. The four characters in the novel, Gina and Mark and Gabe and Sam – two male, two female characters – have a different way of interacting with cyber technologies. As Anne Balsamo argues, while the female characters "actively manipulate the dimensions of cybernetic space in order to *communicate* with people," the male characters "are addicted to cyberspace for the *release* it offers from the loneliness of their material bodies" (1996, pp. 136-7, emphases mine).

As the novel opens, the company Eye-Traxx for whom Gina and Mark have been working as *synners*; synthesizers who produce music videos for the masses, is taken over by Diversifications, Inc., one of the megacorporations in the industry. Having become corporate property as a result of the takeover, Gina and Mark are forced to undergo a surgical procedure that would revolutionize the music industry, delivering the rock videos to the consciousness of the listeners, from the consciousness of the synthesizers, rendering the old technologies of cd players, radios and the like, obsolete.

While Mark, the most gifted synner of all times, is thrilled with this technology, Gina is more reluctant to undergo the operation. When Mark projects his consciousness into the Net after the surgery it reads:

> He felt better than he had in years. Never mind better. He felt fantastic. He felt more than fantastic . . . He felt *unreal* . . . He lost all awareness of the meat that had been his prison for close to fifty years, and the relief he felt at having his burden down was as great as himself. His *self*. And his *self* was getting greater all the time, both ways, greater as in more wonderful and greater as in bigger. (1991, p. 232, emphases original)

Mark's reference to his body as a meat prison is reminiscent of William Gibson's character Case's musings at the beginning of *Neuromancer*, which is credited with initiating the cyberpunk movement:

> For Case, who'd lived in the bodiless exaltation of cyberspace, it was the   Fall.
> In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain
> relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his
> own flesh. (1984, p. 6)

In this passage Gibson rewrites the original story of the Fall, which involved humankind's fall from the Garden of Eden to Earth to suffer from physical pain and an imminent prospect of death. Through cyberspace – "the garden in the machine" (Wilbur 2000, p. 51), "man" has been restored to his previous state of divinity and immortality. In a similar manner, through immersion in cyberspace, Mark is able to escape the limitations of his corporeality that fixes him in time and space. His incorporation into the body of the machine can be interpreted as the reenactment of the child from the mother's body:

> The sense of having so much space to spread out in . . . a baby energing from
> the womb after nine months must have felt the same thing he thought . . . after
> the initial trauma, hey it's party time. (1991, p. 232)

Mark's rebirth into the inorganic and sterile body of the machine can be read in terms of Julia Kristeva's concept of the maternal body as an object of horror. Cadigan here reverses/replaces the original image of childbirth "as a violent act of expulsion" (1982, p. 101). The fear of re-incorporation into the "desirable, and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body" (1982, p. 54) seems to be allayed/realized through Mark's (re)entry in to the "matrix" of the machine; free from the abominations of the living/decaying maternal body, the womb of the machine offers him the paradise lost in his previous incarnation; regained in his present one. In his book Sex, Machines and Navels: Fiction, Fantasy and History in the Future Present, Fred Botting also pointed out how the new technologies of cyberculture provide a reenactment of traditional male fantasies:

> The [brain] socket forms an artificial navel . . . [to] jack in is to plunge through
> a hole towards a site of plenitude, one akin to that associated with the original
> matrix. An oedipal fantasy exceeds itself through the mastery provided by
> technology . . . . At last, man can return home taking a fantasy beyond fantasy in
> a palpable fulfillment of desire for a mother simulated as matrix. (1999, p. 56)

Gina, on the other hand, does not indulge in the hatred of the flesh Mark seems to revel in and when she undergoes the procedure she does it primarily out of her wish to be close to Mark and also for ethical reasons, for a more intimate interaction with other people:

> "I want it to matter," she said. "I want the fucking music and the people to
> matter . . . I want it to come out of something real, not some fucking box. I want
> it to come out of fucking human-beings, I want it to be something that makes
> you know you are live, and not another part of a bunch of fucking pels in a high-
> res video." (1991, p. 199)

Moreover, Gina's operation is described in a manner that invokes the imagery of rape, rendering it as an intrusion of the integrity of her bodily boundaries:

> Someone else gave her another hit off the mason jar before sinking the wires into her skull... She turned and ran again, but it overtook her, flying her down, and opened her up... Don't do it, she told them as they took her out. Don't fucking do it, crushed in the back of the rental with Claudio and his magic fingers . . . Don't do it she said as they took her down into the cellar. Don't do it, Claudio laying her down on the mattress, arranging her comfortably, pausing to kiss her on the mouth . . . Don't do it she said. Last time: Don't do it. Then they did it. (1991 pp. 230-31; 294)

Furthermore, apart from the imagery that is suggestive of a forced incorporation of the machine, this new technology that has not yet been properly tested, causes intracranial breakdown; a cerebral stroke that not only affects the person who has the stroke but is transmitted to all the users who are online at the time via the brain socket. In the course of the novel, Mark undergoes two strokes, the second of which kills his body, while his consciousness is projected into cyberspace, with the stroke that translates itself as a "spike"; a computer virus that not only kills but also results in the crash of the entire network. The showdown of the narrative concerns the efforts of Gina, Sam and Gabe to beat the virus and make the net a safe place again. Although they succeed in deactivating the virus, they cannot save Mark who in order to survive in the net becomes one with Art Fish, the sentient computer virus; and the symbiosis of both gives birth to "MARKT."

Another character of importance in the novel is Gabe Ludovic, who works at Diversifications Inc., and who seeks escape from his dead end job, and a dysfunctional marriage through immersion in virtual reality. In his simulated world, which he created after a cheap adventure movie called, *House of the Head Hunters*, Gabe is a ruthless, brave hero who scenario after scenario saves himself and his two admiring female companions; two sexy bimbos called Marly and Caritha, from blood starved villains. Gabe's willing immersion into virtual reality where he can be everything he is not in real life, his desire to escape his body and the responsibilities and disappointments of real life double that of Mark. The time he spends in real time seems to be superseded more and more by the time he spends with his imaginary friends in his imaginary world of simulation so much that he starts losing connection to the real world:

> He'd been running around in simulation for so long, he'd forgotten how to run in real life, real time routine; he's forgotten that if he made mistakes, there was no safety net program ready to jump in and correct for him. (1991, p. 239)

The difficulty Gabe has in adjusting himself to reality outside his simulated reality constitutes and example to what Michael Heim calls "Alternate World Syndrome" (AWS) "an acute form of body amnesia which can become chronic Alternate World Disorder (AWD)" (1995, p. 67). According to Heim, AWS is a new form of sickness that has emerged in the techno-centered lifestyles of the Western world. AWS occurs when the virtual world obtrudes on the user's experience of the actual world:

> AWS mixes images and expectations from an alternate world so as to distort
> our perceptions of the current world, making us prone to errors in mismatched
> contexts. The virtual world obtrudes upon our activities in the primary world
> . . . [t]he responses ingrained in the one world get out of synch with the other.
> AWS shows the human being merging, yet still out of phase, with the machine.
> (1995, p. 67)

Gabe is saved from becoming another "homo datum" (Cadigan, 1991, p. 386) like Visual Mark, through Gina, who on every occasion that they meet, reminds him, albeit painfully, of his physicality. The first time they meet, Gina accidentally punches Gabe instead of Mark. Unlike "Gabe the hotwire" in the simulated adventure story who is invulnerable, the real life Gabe falls headlong to the floor, and carries the painful memory of Gina's punch well for a week:

> He must have stepped directly into the path of her fist, he thought later, adding
> his own momentum to hers and making the blow more powerful. At the time
> all he knew was that his head had exploded with color and sensation that he did
> not register as pain until a full second afterwards, so that the secondary hit of
> his body against the carpeted floor was too slight for notice. . . . "Is it physical
> [his boss] asked. "Of *course* it's physical, just *look* at him." (1991, pp. 98; 100)

Interestingly enough, just as Gabe lies on the floor trying to understand what has happened to him, in his mind he is having conversations with Marly and Caritha, "*Are you gonna take that, Hotwire*? (1991, p. 98), and imagine he is in his simulated castle with Caritha leaning over him and asking, "*Hotwire, you gonna live*?" (1991, p. 98). His real life subjectivity seems to be overtaken by the simulated self/characters he has created; only through them is he able to formulate his thoughts. Later in the story, however, when Gabe jacks into the cyberspace with Gina to go after the virus Mark's stroke has infiltrated into the system, he relives the incident – Gina hits him again while they are in the system – and this time, although he is in the Net, the pain is physical and more real than the first time:

> I *can't remember what it feels like to have a body*. . . . 'Can't *remember*? Well,
> lover, it's a lot like this.' His face exploded with pain. The secondary hit of his
> body on the carpet was negligible, but he felt it clearly this time, his lower back
> hitting first, then shoulders and head, his heels bouncing a few times. From
> behind closed eyes he felt his mouth stretching in a smile. (1991, p. 407)

The last of the four protagonists in the novel is Sam, who is a seventeen year old hacker and Gabe's daughter. Disaffected by her parents' loveless marriage and never-ending quarrels Sam has left home at the age of sixteen and has gained herself a respectful position in the underground hacker community. She is the stereotypical cyberpunk hero, in the sense that she is young and an outcast who makes a living through illegal hacking of the computer systems of big corporations. The fact that she is a "she" on the other hand, makes her an unusual cyberpunk character. Furthermore, the fact that Sam only goes online when she needs the money to buy food and some software crucial for her

profession and prefers the rather primitive life in the Ozarks to being online, accentuates her extraordinary status as a cyberpunk figure.

At the end of the novel all the four characters are joined together in their battle against the deadly virus that they are able to beat thanks to Sam's insulin pump which she has turned into a computer chip that takes its power from her body – it is connected to her abdomen via two needles as in a normal insulin pump – hence is safe from the virus that has affected the entire computer system. This is an ironic and significant comment on the supposed safety of the machine as opposed to the body. Since Gina and Gabe were offline at the time of Mark's stroke they too are safe, and jack into the system via their unaffected sockets. As the story winds down, the virus is "killed," and after spending sometime at the "St. Dismas Infirmary for the Incurably Informed," Gabe and Gina are reunited as a couple to live in a village away from the technological craze of the Mimosa.

Although *Synners* ends on a positive note for the characters, the system that has created the deadly technology of the brain sockets is still alive. While some degree of measures is being taken by the companies it is suggested that soon enough similar procedures will begin anew:

> "I thought for sure they'd just ban sockets, and that would put paid to it. The end."
>
> "No one is doing the procedure now." She said. "But that's temporary . . .Socket people. Socket doctors. The doctors are almost back in business. . ." (1991, pp. 434-435).

In spite of the fact that Cadigan creates the strong and able female characters like Gina and Sam, an unprecedented phenomenon in cyberpunk literature at the time when the novel was written, gender seems not to be her only point of interest. All the characters in the novel, independent of their gender are equally threatened/liberated by the new technologies that seem to have irrevocably changed the definition of humanity. However, by making her female characters more bound to their physicality than their male counterparts, Cadigan seems to be skeptical of the promise of transcendence celebrated by the male authors of the genre. In numerous instances in the text, she invokes the bodily needs of the characters that, even at times of immersion in cyberspace, lurk beneath their bodiless exultation, tying them to the materiality of their bodies. For instance, when Keely faints after long hours of jacking into the net, Gabe is hysterical thinking Keely too has been attacked by the virus in the system. Gina however sees through the reason right away:

> "Just guessing myself Gina said tonelessly, "I'd say he fainted from hunger. When is the last time *you* ate?
>
> Gabe looked at her, startled, taking notice for the first time of the ache that had been growing in his stomach over a period of hours. "Christ you had to bring it up." (1991, pp. 372-73)

Like Cadigan, Allucquere Rosanne Stone, in her essay "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?" points to the importance of the materiality of our bodies saying: "virtual

community originates in, and must return to the physical. No refigured virtual body, no matter how beautiful, will slow the death of a cyberpunk with AIDS. Even in the age of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies" (2000, p. 525) This, in fact is the message Cadigan is trying to convey in her novel. It is a fact that there is no end to technological advancements and with every new technology the fabric of our lives, our selves and bodies undergo some degree of change – sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. What matters however is what we do with these technologies and to what extent we let these technologies invade our bodies:

> All appropriate technology hurt somebody. A whole lot of somebodies. Nuclear fission, fusion, the fucking Ford assembly line, the fucking airplane. Fire for Christ's sake. Every technology has its original sin . . . Makes us original synners. And we still got to live with what we made. (Cadigan, 1991, p. 422)

Today, two decades after the publication of *Synners,* the hopeful promise of the cyborg remains unfulfilled. The rise and the celebration of virtual reality and cyborgization of the body had coincided with the break of the AIDS epidemic, an increase in drug addiction and with the insidious spread of psychosomatic illnesses such as anorexia and bulimia in the 1980s, promising people in general an escape from the undesired frailty of their bodies. For women, the cyborg and the disembodied cyberspace bore the potential of transcending physical difference, doing away with unequal binarisms. However, today, humanity is still far from achieving immanence and transcendence; not only have we not found a cure for AIDS nor for any of the ailments our physical bodies are prone to, but also in its present manifestations virtual reality and cyborg technologies perpetuate if not aggravate gender inequalities. As in Cadigan's near-future America, today, television channels are inundated with "porn"; ranging from makeover shows where women's bodies are given extremely painful "makeovers" via the latest cosmetic surgeries so that they can fit "the beauty norm" and hence fit in society, or countless reality shows where the self esteem and self worth of twenty or so otherwise successful women (and sometimes men) depend on whether or not they can a) pose with a feral animal and look dignified (modeling shows) b) manage to fall in love with the one man/woman in the show knowing that daily he/she gets physically intimate with nineteen other contestants than her/himself; more importantly manage to get a rose at the end of every week (match-making shows) c) cook a four-course meal in less than forty minutes (cooking shows) d) in case the aforementioned scenarios do not work they should get ready to be humiliated by the judges, to lament the fact that they have lost their one and only chance to be happy or have a bowl of boiling soup thrown at them because "it was not spicy/salty/hot enough," respectively, or in some cases concurrently. Furthermore, far from being an egalitarian utopia as Haraway had envisioned, the bodiless space of the internet today is replete with sites that are detrimental to women if not outright abusive. To give only one example, with more than 1.580.000.000 porn sites (only in English), the internet is far from being a bodiless space – in such sites women's bodies – thousands of female bodies of every race, size, age, and color are continuously objectified and fragmented, reduced to mere parts and catered to male fantasies, which makes the internet one of the major and perhaps the most ubiquitous upholder of the patriarchal mechanisms of oppression today.

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