



It is in light of this conundrum and in response to recent developments in feminist thinking by commentators such as Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant, whose article *Beyond the Screens: Film, Cyberpunk and Cyberfeminism* was printed in issue 14 of *Variant*, that Catherine Elwes has written her article. These two pieces formed the basis of presentations delivered at the seminar *Gender and Technology: Short-circuiting the System* held at Tate Gallery Liverpool. Other speakers included Sara Diamond, a practitioner and head of the TV and Video Programme at The Banff Centre for the Arts (Canada), Susan Collins, an artist using advanced technologies and Delta Streete, a video and performance artist.

Both Sadie Plant and Catherine Elwes explore the issue of technology in terms of sexual difference. Essentially, Sadie Plant suggests both women and technology converge as marginalised sites designated in the role of servicing a mainstream culture which is predominantly patriarchal. For Sadie Plant, women, like technology, are beyond nature pushed to the sides of culture and as such represent a 'virtual reality'. The development of connectivist and advanced technologies offers a site through which women can adopt the guise of the cyberfeminist and thereby bring about the demise of the patriarchal text. At the risk of making crude distinctions, Catherine Elwes adopts a socialist feminist perspective couched in terms

of pragmatic materialism to raise a cautionary note around the possibilities of technology for women and female identities. For Elwes, technology is positioned very much within culture which is patriarchal yet which is also the site of struggle and contestation marked in terms of gender, class and race.

Sadie Plant's article and the following form part of a new series by *Variant* to address this issue. By so doing, it is hoped that the debate generated through these follow up articles will contribute towards the language and conceptual framework in negotiating the relation of technology and gender and culture.

Helen Cadwallader

T E X T B Y C A T H E R I N E E L W E S

My mind is still reeling from the apocalyptic vision of the future that Sadie Plant, Donna Haraway and a timely Channel 4 series have beamed down to me over the last couple of months. Through the familiar taste of my morning coffee, I envisage a world in which the difference between men and women have dissolved, humans and machines merge, time and space fuse. As I argue with my son about his unfinished homework, I speculate about my unrecognisable great-great-grandchildren, custom-made, undoubtedly blonde and blue-eyed and completely reliable about homework. I then nervously negotiate the school run and begin to worry about the future criminalisation of technology. Each new development will spawn new crime "even before it hits the streets." Returning to feed the cat, I see in her rhythmical purring the first stirrings of a race of super-felines ready to take over once humanity has finally been annihilated by its own inventions. The Revenge of Nature. I open the final demand for my phone bill and reassure myself that this surely won't happen in my lifetime. I then settle back into the everyday anxieties of an everyday single parent.

But it's not so easy to dismiss these futuristic visions. Sadie Plant's Cyberfeminist theories claim that somehow all this is going to be good for me as a woman, as a feminist, perhaps even as an artist, so I now attempt to respond to some of her ideas, not in order to refute or even confirm Cyberfeminism as the new orthodoxy, but to contribute another, somewhat fractured perspective on the issues she has raised.

Much computer technology was developed to promote and speed up global communication and yet somehow the effect is one of disconnection and distance. Individuals are increasingly locked into the isolation of their homes (it isn't safe to go out) and they only make contact with the outside world through

telecommunications and networked computer-information systems. Not so much distance learning as living at a distance. The cybernetic future that Sadie Plant describes similarly conjures up distance and a flight from the existential present. Escape from reality into Virtual Reality, escape from the body, escape from the difficulties of inter-personal relations, escape from biology, escape from history and most significantly perhaps, escape from difference. This is a complicated package we are now being offered and I shall attempt to tease out some of its implications. I do not subscribe to the view that the escapism we are witnessing is a transcendental urge to break the boundaries of the body on a spiritual quest for the divine. Although the compulsion to do what has never been done is undoubtedly a factor, virtuality is also an inability to face the social, political and ecological present. Cyberfeminism could itself be an escape from feminism. Sadie Plant characterises Patriarchy as "a self-destruct mechanism with no history, no political project." We have to admit that in spite of modern feminism, the lot of women, taken globally, has not significantly improved. So, we may indeed find it easier to wait for men to destroy Patriarchy for us rather than ourselves find new political initiatives. In this way we may also disown history or rather her-story beginning with the pioneering work of the suffragettes, down to current campaigns for abortion, childcare, equal pay and so on. In escaping our history, we may also escape our mothers. We can dismiss the partial victories of '60s feminists and denigrate the female biology that they celebrated. This uncomfortable biology still binds us to our mothers and with Patriarchy proving so very resilient, many women do indeed experience biology as destiny. It isn't surprising therefore, that a disillusioned younger generation may be looking for another way to throw off their biological shackles. In this context, the limitless out-of-body experiences of virtual reality



become an attractive proposition. There is the promise of new identities. A simulated world can be experienced from the central position of masculinity. Every possible permutation of any lived experience can be safely tried on for size with no physical consequences. As Sadie Plant points out, disguise is nothing new to women who have played the female repertoire of virgin/whore/mistress/mother since time began. But it is also not new for women artists to challenge the limitations of these roles and assume new identities. In the 19th Century, Rosa Bonheur dressed up as a man to gain access to the horse farms that were the subject of her paintings. Performance artists like Linda Montana have assumed and played out other selves, to extend the boundaries of female experience. Even now, the artist Orlan is undergoing plastic surgery and systematically transforming herself into key female ikons from the history of art. Unlike Cyberfeminism (as I understand it) these disguises do not deny difference. They are expansive, cumulative, enriching and redefine our concept of femininity whilst offering new creative possibilities for women. Virtual Reality reduces difference to what Sadie Plant calls "*a mere tactic of infiltration.*" But once the uniqueness, the otherness of the female body is lost, the biological base that underpins the transgression into 'unladylike' qualities and actions is also lost. The lady is thrown out with the bath water.

As has often happened in the past, there is a confusion here between difference and value. It isn't difference itself that oppresses women. The problem lies in the value that is placed on that difference. Femininity has negative value relative to masculinity, white skin is valued above black skin and so on. We might hope that cyberspace is free of these hierarchical judgements, but I wonder how different things really will be out there in the data stream?

Jeffrey Shaw has remarked that technology acts as a mirror to contemporary society. "*We live in a materialistic society*" he says, "*our virtual reality will also be materialistic.*" Contemporary society is Patriarchal, Racist and divides people according to class and age. It seems likely that our cybernetic future will be fashioned out of the same mould. I find it hard to believe that an egalitarian set of moral codes will be burnt into the "*grid reference for free experimentation*" that characterises Sadie Plant's vision of the future. In this new experimental world, will some cyborgs be more equal than others?

Here, I get bogged down in some logical problems around difference that I have, so far failed to resolve. As we have seen, Cyberfeminism heralds an escape form difference. The old dualities break down into what Inez van der Spek calls "*a fruitful or frightful pollution of naturalness and innocence.*" We will be able to tap into any reality and check out when we've had enough. But the experience of masculinity and femininity is based on difference and if difference has been abolished, what will it mean to press the button marked 'man.' Everything is relative. It is only interesting to try out masculinity if your experience until now has been that of a woman.

The physical, psychological and social experience of being a woman is built up over time. Since no-one will be obliged to stay in any one state for very long (perhaps only as a punishment) then the novelty value of being someone else will be minimal. But perhaps I'm missing something here? They say we will be able to plug into the life experience of any individuals in the data base—including their memories—so, as long as we are able to retain the information in the next 'life' we choose, the contrast will make it worthwhile. We will have to retain the experience of each 'trip' in order to enjoy the pleasures of contrast and comparison. But since femininity is at some level an experience of marginalisation, it can only work if there is no residual sense of self from our previous trip as a man... Do you see my problem?

For any of this to work at all, we need an extensive data base of 'real' lives, and maybe this is where the single mother struggling with the school run comes in. As contemporary artists is it not now our duty to provide samples of what it is to be a biological mother, homosexual male, black activist, politician, poet etc.?

In order to do so efficiently, we would have to live our lives untainted by 'other' possibilities. We are the raw material of future virtual realities. To liberate women now would surely involve the loss of that 'other' dissonant, transgressive voice that arises from the experience of social, political and sexual oppression. If the future is not to be a bland colourless affair, we must maintain the status quo and religiously record it for cyberposterity. In this sense, Cyberfeminism means the death of feminism and a post-political world.

I can even envisage a time when artists' colonies would mean literally that—places in which old-style humans are maintained in their natural-differentiated states for the rest of cybersociety to study. Psychic samples of individuals would be culled at intervals to replenish the databanks that posthumans use to construct their realities. Outside these colonies, would art continue to exist? Art grows out of a need to mark the passage of individuals through the time-space of a human life, and perhaps it is also a product of the struggle of certain groups to make themselves heard through repressive political systems. In the future, we would be infinitely reproducible and infinitely variable, so the artistic impulse might be reduced to a free-floating manifestation of circulating desires, continuously satisfied and re-kindled with no other object than the next virtual fix.

Perhaps the cynical historical and cultural montages of post-modernism have given us a foretaste of things to come. As the world slides towards its cybernetic destiny, we are making the shift towards the surface, playing with the infinite possibilities that were once experienced as life. Superficiality and a kind of cyclical stasis is what we can expect. Donna Haraway says she would rather be a cyborg than a Goddess. Given the choice, I suppose I would rather be that indefinable, difficult, contradictory, painful, resilient, political and deeply creative entity called WOMAN. ∞