

Online Communication in the Digital Age
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Lecture – 54
Cyberfeminism and Cyborg Metaphors

Good morning dear friends and welcome to this module. We had discussed digital feminist interventions, digital activism, and the political economy of social media in the previous module. Today we shall talk about the genealogy of cyber feminism and its mediations across the cyberspace. We will also look at the conceptual framework of cyborgs in digital communication in cyber feminism. It allows us to critically examine the intricate relationships between technology, gender, and identity. We have always had some essentialist approaches with regard to digital spaces, online communication, and technology.

They were seen as socially shaped, but shaped only by men. Women were excluded from this shaping. Such spaces were either interpreted as oppressive to women or optimistically assumed to have liberating potential for women as well for the other disadvantaged group. It was in critical response to such essentialist approaches that a new third wave of feminist technology studies emerged.

Donna Haraway's 1985 work, a Manifesto for Cyborgs, is central to it. Gender relations, as she suggested, can be thought of as materialized in technology. Gendered identities and discourses are also produced simultaneously with digital technologies.

Gendered TechnoScience

- Deterministic theories of the relationship between gender and digital technologies have been altered by the inspiration of postmodernism and constructivism.
- They have drawn attention to the close relationship between the gendering of technology and the construction of gendered subjectivities.
 - Femininity, masculinity and technology are no longer considered as fixed categories but to contain multiple possibilities when constructed in relation to one another.
 - According to Donna Haraway, technology is an aspect of our identities.

Technology is central to our everyday lives; Because of this, it is useful to conceive ourselves as cyborgs and use this conceptualization as a tool for transforming existing power relations, particularly with regard to science and technology.

Cyborg identity is predicated on transgressed boundaries; Haraway uses the cyborg metaphor as a political tool to deconstruct the gender relations of technology and to build a new political agenda based on it.



Works of Sadie Plant are good examples of feminist technophilia as it argues that new ICTs, most notably the internet, are different as women are set free and men become subordinated to the machine.

Sources: www.siladsharmit.com/cyborganthropology.com, books.google.co.in

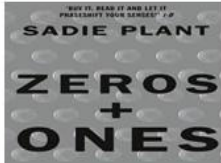
We can say that the deterministic theories of the relationships between gender and digital technologies have been altered by the inspiration of postmodernism and constructivism. These theoretical approaches have drawn attention to the close relationship between the gendering of technology and the construction of gendered subjectivities.

Femininity, masculinity, and technology were no longer considered as fixed categories, but to contain multiple possibilities when constructed in relation to one another. According to Donna Haraway, technology is an aspect of our identities. Technology is central to our everyday lives and because of this, it is useful to conceive ourselves as cyborgs and use this conceptualization as a tool for transforming existing power relations. On the right hand of this slide, we have some illustrations of works of Sadie Plant, which are considered as examples of feminist technophilia, as it argues that new ICTs, most notably the internet, are different as women are set free and men become subordinated to the machines. In this context, Haraway's notion of the cyborg is a way of negotiating subjectivity and politics from a feminist perspective.

It also addresses many anxieties women in particular experience when they encounter technologies. It is therefore crucial to understand that internet practices and digital communication can transform not only the lived experience, but also the corporeal existence in ways that can resist or reinforce hierarchies of gender.

Gender and Cyberfeminism

- The earlier debates on cyberfeminism were characterized by a utopian vision of postcorporeal women transcending embodiment and corrupting patriarchy.



Sadie Plant conceptualizes cyberspace as a liberating space for women. Her title refers to the binary code of zeroes and ones of the programming language where 'zeroes' stand for 'female' and 'ones' as phallic and male. It predicts that the digital future is feminine and non-linear, a world in which 'zeroes' are displacing the phallic order of the 'ones'.



Sources: containermagazine.co.uk, www.behance.net

- While Plant's optimism about the potential of gender equality in cyberspace was a reaction against the conceptualization of technology as inherently masculine, she is criticized for reinscribing essentialist notions of gender and avoiding the materiality of bodies.

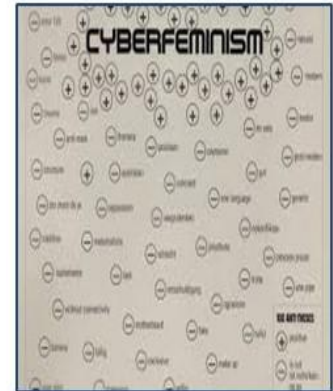


The earlier debates on cyber feminism were characterized by a utopian vision of post-corporeal women transcending embodiment and corrupting patriarchy. Sadie Plant has conceptualized cyberspace as a liberating space for women. Her title, *Zeros Plus Ones*, refers to the binary code where zeros stand for female and ones as phallic and male.

It predicts that the digital future is feminine and nonlinear, a world in which zeros are displacing the phallic order of the ones. While Plant's optimism about the potential of gender equality in cyberspace could be taken as a reaction against the conceptualization of technology as being inherently masculine, she is criticized for reinscribing essentialist notions of gender and avoiding the materiality of bodies. Modern discourses on cyber feminism avoid the reification of technology as being liberating and retain the vision of cyber feminist subjectivity as inseparable from the moral political subject. And therefore, cyber feminism can be thought of as a corrective to the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy, an approach which emphasizes on embodied oblique material, oblique dimensions of virtual human-technology interactions.

Gender and Cyberfeminism

- Cyberfeminism is concomitant with the idea of cyborgification.
 - It holds that gender differences are highlighted by the alternate ways in which men and women relate to the technological spaces of information.
- It is in this view that cyberfeminism reiterates the second-wave feminist recognition that bodies are sites of differential social power and that emergent digital body is rigidly classed, raced and geographically located.
- Thus, cyberfeminism encompasses:
 - Corporeal bodies in postmodern cultures are shaped by material and semiotic aspects.
 - Deriving from Susan Hekman, the body in cyberspace is embodied, that is, these culturally coded bodies experience pain and marginalization.



Source:beingres.org



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It suggests that we have to know that bodies are the point of intersection between patriarchal structures in women's lives and this is relevant in cyberspace as well. There is a misconception that the allure of disembodiment in cyberspace can subvert gender and gender oppression. This valorization is problematic. Let us look at two examples pro-ana websites and the 'tranny' hormone list servs. These examples illustrate the continuing significance of online embodiment and the problematic of uniformly regarding as feminist all women's engagement with cyberspace.

Significance of Online Embodiment

- The emergence of pro-ana/pro-anorexia sites suggests that some women form online communities in order to offer each other non-judgemental support in finding strategies for disordered eating behaviors.
 - These communities turn to the internet to support their bodily rituals of diet and to have a sense of control over their bodies via texts and images.
- They do not avoid corporeality and these images of '*thinspiration*' that appear on YouTube or personal websites confirm their embodiment (mostly young, predominantly white and extremely thin).



Sources: casapalmera.com, www.insidehighered.com

When we look at the significance of online embodiment, we have to look at the emergence of pro-ana or pro-anorexia sites which suggest that some women form online communities in order to offer each other non-judgmental support in finding strategies for disordered eating behaviors. These communities turn to the internet to support their bodily rituals of diet and also perhaps to have a sense of control over their bodies via texts and images. They do not avoid corporeality and these images of thinspiration that appear on YouTube or personal websites confirm their embodiment. Pro-ana groups are also of course criticized by medical professionals. As they provide examples of what is called thinspiration or thinspo and may also promote a negative body image.

Similarly, socially excluded gender minority groups have also been able to find a sense of togetherness through digital means of communication. Trans4date, Taimi or TSDates etc are popular platforms for friendship.

Significance of Online Embodiment

- Community-based transgendered websites such as 'GenderSanity' use the internet as a site of bodily transformation.
 - They provide information about how to transform the body in specifically gendered ways.
- The transgender community uses the websites not to experience the absence of the body but to access the information and technology that allow them to transform their body into a differently gendered body that aligns with their identity.



Sources: casapalmera.com, www.insidehighered.com



Significance of online embodiment is also evident through those community based transgendered websites which use the internet as a site of bodily transformation. Websites such as GenderSanity provide information about how to transform the body in a specifically gendered ways. The transgender community use the websites not to experience the absence of the body but also to access the information and technology that allows them to transform their body in a differently gendered body that aligns with their felt identities.

The information technology thus becomes an important medium for resisting repression of gender and sexuality and allows such people to use online spaces as a cultural context to experiment with gender identity as well as gender practices. When we analyze the intersections of feminism and technology, we must explore how cyborg technologies are being used by women to re-script heteronormative categories and how cyborg as a figure moves along the border between conformity and transgression. It would be pertinent at this point to refer to Anne Balsamo.

The Figure of the Cyborg

- According to Anne Balsamo, cyborgs are hybrid entities that are neither wholly technological nor completely organic.
- They thus disrupt the dualisms that set the natural body in opposition to the technologically re-crafted body.
- This is also central to Haraway's idea that cyborg defies an 'organic wholeness' and opens up the possibility for 'gender bending'.
 - The metaphor of the cyborg provides a valuable alternative model of subjectivity in cyberfeminism
 - It breaks down the effects of a phallogocentrism, re-appropriating the symbols of oppression and rescripting gender identities.
 - This idea reinstates the figure of the cyborg as a posthuman creature that replaces identity formations with a complex range of subject positions and cyberspace as a site to dissolve the distinction between self/other and subject/object.



Sources: creator.nightcafe.studio,
www.shutterstock.com



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They thus disrupt the dualisms that set the natural body in opposition to the technologically re-crafted body. This is also central to Haraway's idea that cyborg defies an organic wholeness and opens up the possibility for gender bending. The metaphor of the cyborg provides a valuable alternative model of subjectivity in cyber feminism. The idea reinstates the figure of the cyborg as a post-human creature that replaces identity formations with a complex range of subject positions and also of cyberspace as a site to dissolve the distinction between self and the other as well as the subject and the object. Feminist cyborg stories can subvert the control of the politics of identity and open up a post-human figuration that exceeds signification.

They go beyond the ideological and biological preconceptions. We can cite the example of the computer gamer persona Lara Croft and examine it as a diverse variation of the cyber feminist project and also as a cyborg figure as she works with and against the power structures.

The Representation of Lara Croft as 'Cyberbabe'

- Lara Croft is a hybrid cyborg figure created in 1996 by Eidos Interactive for the *Tomb Raider* video-game series.
 - She is an action heroine who is lauded as the greatest 'cyberbabe' in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as she displays hyperfeminine bodily characteristics.
- Croft subverts and manipulates gender roles undermining the way we are expected to read the hyperfeminine script of her body.
 - Her cyborg potential is defined by the way her human-virtual identities can be projected onto her bodily surface in cyberspace.
 - She is an object of the heterosexual male gaze and subject to a new self that opens up various subject positions at the level of the female body.



Croft is portrayed as an adventurer and martial-arts expert and as a sex symbol for the gamer who has ultimate control over Lara's actions.
Source: www.youtube.com/shorts/CwyVBqXRswg



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Lara Croft has a bimodal appeal. We will look more into changes in the depictions of Lara Croft over the years in the next module. The cam-girl phenomenon and the social media culture extrapolate the problem of femininities as commodities in digital communication as well. Let us look at how these scenarios have led to a feminist struggle of seeing the female body as commodity. We will look at this with reference to Claudia Springer's 1999 work, *Pleasures of the Interface* and her 1992 work on technoerotic imagery.

Springer argues that when in the context of postmodernist thought, the boundary between human beings and machines breaks down, one gets what can be labeled as technoeroticism, that is the passionate celebration of technological objects of desire. Technoeroticism signifies not only the perception of machines as objects of desire, but also the desire to become a machine. Electronic Eros thus becomes an exploration of technoerotic imagery in films like *RoboCop*, *Terminator* or cyberpunk novels such as Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the television series *Man and Machine* and similar video games.

Springer finds that many recent popular culture texts, particularly those dealing with cyborgs, recycle technoerotic conventions derived from western society's industrial past, particularly those described in the works of D.H. Lawrence and refusing to come to terms with a new postmodern social order.

The Cam Girl Culture

- Cam girl sites are a type of personal, amateur website focused on a webcam that allows viewers to see live, moving images of the site owner.
 - The performativity of identity within cam girl sites include representations of sexuality and using feminine image as tools to be used towards commodification, power and self-actualization.
- According to Claudia Springer, the interface with technology in popular culture involves altering human subjectivity.



Cam girl culture in its narratives of sexual performances and exploitation of girlhood and femininity as valuable commodities portray what Springer has extrapolated as a pleasurable experience of human fusion with technology.
Source: www.dazeddigital.com, academic.oup.com



The pleasure of the interface results from the computer's offer to lead us into a 'Microelectric Imaginary' where our consciousness is integrated into the matrix. In Cam Girl culture, this pleasure exists in the naturalization of 'female-as-visual object' and aligning highly sexualized representations of young femininity with the dominant consumer ideology by commodifying girls' images and domestic spaces.

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Similar fetishistic gaze and commodification of bodies are seen in social networking sites as well. This stems from the unrealistic ideals of beauty, the commodification of user activity and the emergence of power feminism which is attributed to marketing feminism in media.

The Fetishistic Gaze and Social Media

- The discourse between body commodification and empowerment in social media is defined in its relation to sexual freedom, equality and inclusivity in the digital realm and consumption in the digital age.
 - There is a regular consumption of sexually objectifying imagery on social networking sites that is directed towards increased body surveillance.



Source: www.newyorker.com

Cyborg
Imagery as
Conforming to
Traditional
Sexual
Representations
and Erotic
Interfacing

The Cultural Standards of Beauty in Social Media- By removing imperfections, the body is both idealized and dehumanized. The body as a commodity moulds the consumer's aesthetic and sexual tastes and the viewer is lured into becoming a passive form of desiring consumer.

Commodity Fetish and Erotic Sign-Value- Explicit imagery and self-objectification especially through the consumer practice of 'selfies' moulds the body as an erotic sign-value. This conceals the desired object as a commodity and the viewer is lured into a fetishistic form of sexuality in which they desire an object and not a person.

The discourses between body commodification and empowerment in social media are defined in their relation to sexual freedom, equality and inclusivity in the digital realm and consumption within the digital age. There is a regular consumption of sexually objectifying imagery on social networking sites that is directed towards increased body surveillance. In this context, we can say that the cyborg imagery also conforms to traditional sexual representations and erotic interfacing.

The cultural standards of beauty in social media are also very much present there. By removing imperfections, the body is both idealized as well as dehumanized. The body as a commodity moulds the consumer's aesthetic and sexual taste and the viewer is lured into becoming a passive form of a desiring consumer. Explicit imagery and self-objectification especially through the consumer practices of selfie moulds the body as an erotic sign value. This conceals the desired object as a commodity and the viewer is lured into a fetishistic form of sexuality in which they desire an object and not a person.

This shows popular culture cyborg imagery as representing sexual release of various kinds for both genders. Popular culture idealizes and normalizes bodies that have been commodified. They become the glamorous ideals of this spectacle and other consumers




are protocolled to want to resemble them. When we talk about the seduction of interface, it becomes important to reiterate what Claudia Springer had said. Technology has no sex, but representations of technology often do.

Let us understand this through the representation of cyber femininity in pixel vixens and the virtual hyper femme. Pixel vixens humanize info technology.

Pixel Vixens and the Virtual Hyper-Femme

- Pixel Vixens are graphic interface construct masking software and databases.
 - It humanizes infotechnology; It aims to seduce the user into a virtual relationship by translating data according to one's interests.
 - It calls forth a cyberculture that has material effects on people's lives and enmeshed in an intertextual web of power relations and ideologies.
- Pixel Vixens are examples of desire getting translocated from the heterosexual norm onto the technology itself.
 - They are objects of technoeroticism by encouraging users to establish a personal attachment to their digital technologies.
 - They deconstruct the associations of technology to masculinity and foreground feminine encodings.



Virtual Supermodels like Webbie Tookay and Shudu Show an Aesthetic of Digital Artifice that Delineates the Constructedness of Femininity but They also Recite Stereotypical Codes Related to Patriarchal Regimes of Heterosexuality
Sources: www.arae.na, www.harperbazaar.com

"Technology is the Fetish of CyberPunk"- Amanda Fernbach

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They are the graphic interface construct masking software and databases. This humanization of info technology aims to seduce the user into a virtual relationship by translating data according to one's interest. It calls forth a cyber culture that has material effects on people's lives and enmeshed in an intertextual web of power relations and ideologies.

We can say that pixel vixens are examples of desire getting translocated from the heterosexual norm onto the technology itself. They are objects of techno eroticism by encouraging users to establish a personal attachment to their digital technologies. They also deconstruct the associations of technology to masculinity and foreground feminine encodings. The pixel vixens digital artifice certainly marks a playful possibility about the performance of femininity. In the next slide, we will listen to a talk by Charlotte Webb, co founder of the page feminist internet, where she asked the pertinent question, why

didn't the internet got to be a feminist? I'm admitting that to all you lovely people, but it is true.



"I
(Internet
) am
Sexist"

Charlotte
Webb

Source:
<https://youtu.be/ulzBi0EgCHI?si=-Fw9nysQBysseE6g>

swajani

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I'm sexist because I'm not safe for women who are currently suffering from ongoing gender based online harassment, which is silencing their voices and threatening their psychological and their physical well being. I'm sexist because I'm being created in a predominantly male tech sector, where three quarters of leadership positions are held by men. A sector whose culture of misogyny is in the headlines more and more often. I'm sexist, because my gender biases are being built into artificially intelligent systems, which are trained and tested primarily by men with effects like job ads for tech sector roles being served to men before they're served to women. And I'm sexist, because like all my media predecessors, I currently promote and sell idealized Western beauty standards by flooding platforms like Instagram with picture perfect images, which are creating unrealistic body expectations and self image problems for many people, but particularly for young women.

So you might be wondering, how did I get this way? How did I become sexist? Why didn't I, the internet, got to be a feminist? Before I get to that, you might want a definition of what I mean by a feminist, since I'm asking myself why I didn't grow up to

be one. You want a definition, I'd say a feminist is someone who advocates for women's rights on the grounds of the equality of the sexes, right? But we all know definitions never tell the whole story. The truth is, what being a feminist means depends on who you are and where you are and what other struggles you face. What being a feminist means depends on whether you face other forms of oppression, such as those based on your race or your class. But to get back to the question, why didn't I grow up to be a feminist? People often think that because I'm a technology, I'm somehow neutral.

I'm somehow not a political entity. But that's not at all true. All technologies are built by people, and therefore all technologies reflect the biases and assumptions held by people. Biases and assumptions which can be sometimes very difficult to recognize without some serious self-reflection. So if I'm being built mainly by men in a sexist system which values profit more than anything else, I'm going to become sexist. I'll have a sexist bias, and I'll be driven by the profit motive.

Once technologies have been built, they're then shaped by the people that use them, people like you. Webb re-iterates that the internet is a mirror of society, and it only shows people how they already are. A particular concept that we have already discussed, but which still remains important in feminist cyber sphere to be repeated is cyborg writing that is used as a technology against phallo-centric writing practices. An important cyborg position that has re-emerged in recent writings is digital feminist zines whose social media influence have pushed feminism into popular culture.

Feminist Zines as Cyborg Practice

- Feminist zines are self-published, small-circulation publications.
 - Zine-making is a digitally networked feminist practice in which social media platforms act as porous yet protected boundaries, providing access to zine community but not to the actual content of zine themselves. It fosters a subaltern counter public.
- The zines are delineated as cyborg practices.
- The zine actualizes its political mandate through the act of subversive writing. Its DIY (Do-It-Yourself) culture shows the struggle against perfect communication that translates all meaning to the codes of phallogocentrism.



Feminist Zines in the Print Media
Source: digitalcommons.chapman.edu,
www.prisblossom.com

Feminist zines are self-published, small circulation publications.

Zine making is a digitally networked feminist practice in which social media platforms act as a porous yet protected boundaries, providing access to zine community, but not to the actual content of zine themselves. It fosters a subaltern counter public. The zine actualizes its political mandate through the act of subversive writing. Its do-it-yourself culture shows the struggle against perfect communication that translates all meaning to the codes of phallogocentrism. Cyber identity as subject to flux and the possibilities of making and remaking ourselves are embodied in zines through their accessibility venues of self-expression.

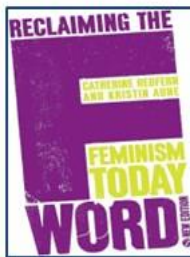
Feminist zines do not propagate a cyber utopian promise of leaving the body behind, but produce embodied communities unfettered by the restrictive norms encoded into media representations of subaltern bodies along gendered, racialized and sexualized lines. Let us now look at some examples. We can cite the examples of the F-word and the vagenda.



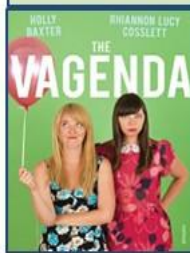
Swayam



The F-Word and The Vagenda



DIGITAL
FEMINIST ZINES



Sources: amazon.in

- 'The F-Word' was founded in 2001 by Catherine Redfern. Her choice of name is in itself an act of political resistance and the zine focused on feminist activism at the discursive level.
- In addition to functioning as a space for young women by addressing their concerns and giving practical advice for dealing with sexism and other forms of oppression within institutionalized spaces, the site is committed to taking an intersectional view on issues and the relevance of gender non-conforming groups.

- 'The Vagenda' was founded in 2012 by Holly Baxter and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett.
- It used humor and irony as key tools through which hegemonic ideologies about gender roles and their representations in mainstream media can be critiqued.
- It tackled serious issues that are considered taboo in the mainstream content.



In June 2014, The Vagenda ran an article "Blushing and Bleeding: Why I'm Sick of Period Apology Culture" which not only questioned why menstruation is seen as embarrassing, but highlighted issues around period poverty to make menstruation products affordable and safe for our bodies and planet.

The F-word was founded in 2001 by Catherine Redfern. Her choice of name is in itself an act of political resistance and the zine focused on feminist activism at the discursive level.

The site is also committed to taking an intersectional views about issues and the relevance of gender non-conforming groups. The vagenda was founded in 2012 by Holly Baxter and Lucy Cosslett. It used humor and irony as key tools through which hegemonic ideologies about gender roles and their representations in mainstream media can be critiqued. The F-word provides a feminist lens for young women to better understand feminism.

The vagenda looks at contemporary media landscape. The contemporary interaction of the body with information technologies displays gender as very contested in its blurring of distinctions between body and machine. Cyberspace allows transcending the body in different ways as a penetrated body or as a simulated body, redefining the gendered body in several virtual contexts.



Swajati



The Gendered Body in Virtual Contexts

According to Anne Balsamo, embodied virtualities are experienced through a disembodied gaze that dislocates the bodily human subject but the materiality of the body will not be erased.

The 'penetrated' body and its metaphor can be considered as the first level of virtual embodiment that displays the consequences of fusion with cyberspace or the means of incorporating technology to the body through prosthetics.



The Pleasure of the Interface is inevitable compromised by the refusal to renegotiate existing gender boundaries- Claudia Springer

In computer hacking, cyberspace can be imagined as a maternal or feminine body to be penetrated, cut up and manipulated presumably by male hackers.

Virtual reality offers a misogynistic fantasy of escape from Earth and maternal/material origins. This analysis rests on the assumption that the masculinization of new technologies stems from the framework of corporate and military control within which they are situated.

Sources: www.deviantart.com, kwize.com



Case in *Neuromancer* is a Console Cowboy who privileges the time he spends as 'disembodied consciousness' jacked into the cyberspace matrix

According to Claudia Springer, the body-machine cyborg fusion is frequently represented as a transgression of boundaries and therefore, a pleasurable experience. The 'console cowboys' in William Gibson's cyberpunk narratives embody a cyborg masculinity by 'jacking in' to cyberspace and 'slotting into' feminized cyberspace decks and the cyborg imagery of transition from real to virtual embodiment has no discernable impact on gender identity.



According to Anne Balsamo embodied virtualities are experienced through a disembodied gaze that dislocates the bodily human subject but the materiality of the body will not be erased. The penetrated body and its metaphor can be considered as a first level of virtual embodiment that displays the consequences of fusion with cyberspace or the means of incorporating technology to the body through prosthetics.

In computer hacking, the concept of cyberspace is often depicted as a feminine entity that male hackers attempt to infiltrate, alter and control. Virtual reality can be seen promoting a sexist notion of escaping from earthly and motherly roots. In this context, we can refer to two instances of how feminist cyberpunk feminizes cyberspace and also subverts heterosexuality. We would briefly refer to the meat puppet Molly from Gibson's *Neuromancer* and computer genius Visual Mark from Pat Cadigan's *Synners*.

The Feminization of Cyberspace

Cyborg
Existence as
Reinscription
of Gender
Categories

- Molly in Gibson's *Neuromancer* is a 'meat puppet' or a prostitute whose consciousness is suppressed by an implanted 'cut-out-chip'.
- The futuristic hacker or Console Cowboy, Case, devalues the body as 'meat' as it is mediated through Molly's image of female objectification as a sexual commodity and hence, he privileges the 'disembodied consciousness' of the cyberspace matrix.
- Entering the matrix of cyberspace and male experience of heterosexual intercourse are reciprocal metaphors. The vastness of the net becomes the electronic equivalent of Molly's body and thus feminizing the computer matrix avoids the possibility of homoeroticism.



Molly in *Neuromancer*

Sources: boldlyread.blogspot.com,
ar.inspiredpencil.com

Transcending
Heterosexuality
in Cyberspace



Pat Cadigan's *Synners*

- In Pat Cadigan's *Synners*, the gender ambiguity of the virus 'Art(ie) Fish becomes contagious in cyberspace.
- Computer genius, Visual Mark, immerses in the matrix by implanting the "the female receiver" which is the socket and is automatically feminized by virtue of his entry into cyberspace.
- This blurring of gender opens the way for other types of sexual interaction that transcends heterosexual intercourse through the union of Mark and Art or "Markt".



Swayam



As we know, Molly in Gibson's *Neuromancer* is a meat puppet or a prostitute whose consciousness is suppressed by an implanted cut-out chip.

In Pat Cadigan's *Synners*, the gender ambiguity of the virus, art or art(ie)Fish, becomes contagious in cyberspace. These two can be read as examples of feminization of cyberspace. Unlike *Neuromancer*, Cadigan's *Synners* does not use the metaphor of interface to establish hegemonic masculinity. Developed within the discourse of cyber feminism are technologized feminist potentialities that critique the misogynistic frameworks that underpin the speculative futures as well as future technologies. Let us look at how cyber feminism evokes the hybridity of various genres like science, fantasy and speculation within different possible realities.

Cyberfeminism and Genre Hybridity

- Genre hybridity in cyberfeminism involves blending and transcending traditional categories and mediums.
 - This can include combining elements of science fiction, speculative fiction, cyberpunk and various forms of digital expression to create works that address issues of gender, identity, power, and technology.
- Science Fiction conventions often explore a speculative future that can be conceptualized as the 'symbolic order'.
 - According to theorist Julia Kristeva, the symbolic is the temporal and patriarchal order of language that enables a unified cultural meaning.

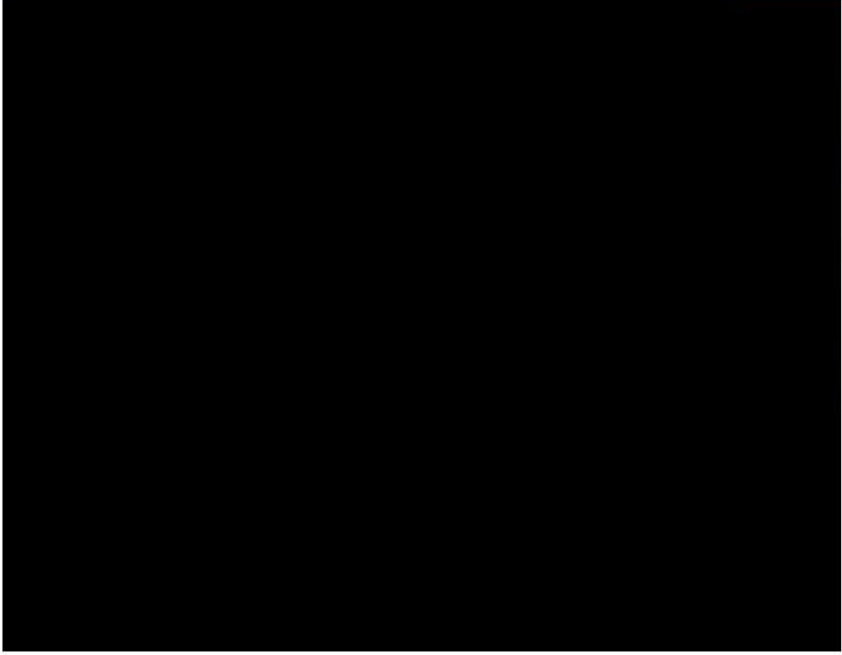
This symbolic order is broken by assimilating cyberfeminism with the sentimentality and visceral intensity of genres related to SF and speculative narratives.

For example, the contemporary novel *Vega: The Intergalactic Warrior* (2023) by Priyamvada Gaur represents genre hybridity in cyberfeminism by combining the speculative narrative of the micro-politics in parallel worlds and demonstrating the construction/deconstruction of the feminist subject in a technologically-influenced posthuman world.






Genre hybridity in cyber feminism involves blending and transcending traditional categories and mediums. This can include combining elements of science fiction, speculative fiction, cyberpunk and various forms of digital expression to create works that address issues of gender identity, power and technology. Science fiction conventions often explore a speculative future that can be conceptualized as a symbolic order. We can refer to Julia Kristeva here, who suggests that the symbolic is the temporal and patriarchal order of language that enables a unified cultural meaning. This symbolic order is broken by assimilating cyber feminism with the sentimentality and visceral intensity of genres related to science fiction and speculative narratives.

For example, the contemporary 2023 novel *Vega, the intergalactic warrior* by Priyamvada Gaur represents genre hybridity of cyber feminism by combining the speculative narrative of the micropolitics in parallel worlds and demonstrating the construction and deconstruction of the feminist subject in a technologically influenced post-human world. In the next slide, we have a brief interview with the author Priyamvada Gaur. She talks about how she uses genre hybridity by combining speculative fiction, science fiction as well as fantasy to portray cyber feminism in a hypothetical multiverse in which an alternate reality transforms or liberates gender dynamics. This online interview was conducted by Sushree Routray, a senior research fellow at IIT Roorkee.



Author Priyamvada Gaur here talks about how she uses genre hybridity in her novel Vega by combining speculative fiction, SF as well as a bit of fantasy to portray cyberfeminism in a hypothetical multiverse where an alternate reality transforms or liberates gender dynamics.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJSwzqmJWdg&t=5s>

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Can you tell us what is the novel about and what is the inspiration behind it? The novel is a science fiction. It is set in the multiverse called Antriksh where we witness the story of Vega, an orphaned intergalactic warrior as she faces rebels and enemies from the dark world of the universe. Excellent. What are the motivations or inspirations behind your choice for science fiction genre? Are you inspired by the rise of the comic books in the Marvel universe or in the recent multiverse movies that we see around? On the contrary, I was more influenced by the genre of speculative fiction of which, of course, you can see good examples in movies such as Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Star Wars and I chose science fiction because I'm a science nerd. As discussed by Priyamvada Gaur, many cyber feminist works engage with speculative narratives that envision alternative futures or realities.

This can include imagining worlds where technology has transformed or liberated gender dynamics or where new forms of consciousness and embodiment emerge. When queer theorists imagine the future, they depict an ever expanding realm of sensory pleasure disregarding the historical limitations placed on pleasure. And this is what Donald Morton terms as the cyberqueer.

Cyberqueer

Donald Morton, in his 1995 article, 'Birth of the Cyberqueer' delineates queer theory as envisioning a decentered, internet-driven and norm-free society.

The queer perspective views desire as an autonomous and performative force that disrupts conventional social codes and conventions. Queer culture places a strong emphasis on desire, as exemplified in works like Frank Browning's *The Culture of Desire* (1994), advocating for pleasure as a distinct journey separate from the pursuit of equity, democracy, and justice.

In line with Baudrillard's concept, the simulated body in cyberspace represents a bourgeois designer space where the embodied collapses into the mediated, allowing privileged Western individuals to imagine they choose their own histories, detached from historical realities.

Cyberspace is thus symptomatic of a sexuality that emphasizes postmodern displacement of need by desire (the material by the ideal).

Cybersex, or "teledildonics," enables simulated long-distance sexual experiences. From telephone sex to graphic virtual encounters with VR technology, it provides tactile sensations mimicking real-life experiences.



Paul Verhoeven's Basic Instinct delves into the character of Catherine Tramell as a (post) modern queer subject who writes her own virtual reality as a novel in her computer and lives out her desires in a virtual space.

Her manipulation of representations according to her desire recalls the manipulation of gender identity by the queer theorist Judith Butler. Both Catherine and Butler relate gender to desire and occlude the connections of gender and sexuality to need (class).

Source <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbiHcNsnNB0>

In his 1995 article, Birth of the Cyberqueer, Donald Morton has delineated the queer theory as envisioning a decentered internet driven and norm free society. Queer culture places a strong emphasis on desire as exemplified in works like Browning's *The Culture of Desire* published in 1994, advocating for pleasure as a distinct journey separate from the pursuit of equity, democracy and justice.

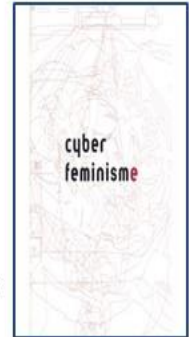
The queer perspective views desire as an autonomous and performative force that disrupts conventional social codes and conventions. Cyber space is the symptomatic of a sexuality that emphasizes postmodern displacement of need by desire. We can also say that it is in line with the concept of Baudrillard. And the simulated body in cyberspace represents a bourgeois designer space where the embodied collapses into the mediated allowing privileged Western individuals to imagine they choose their own histories detached from historical realities. The 1992 neo-noir erotic thriller film *Basic Instinct* directed by Paul Verhoeve, argues that a historical thinking which is a characteristic of both queer theory and cyberspace is present not only in avant-garde text but in all texts of dominant culture.

In her novel within the film, the protagonist Catherine composes her own 'jouissance', her pure intensity and lives out her desire in a virtual space. These viewpoints suggest

that a cyber feminist perspective can be taken in relation to studying the internet and other media, locating their corporeality and embodiment. These perspectives suggest a rejection of the Cartesian dualism.

Developing a Corporeal Cyberfeminism

- The hyperreal simulacrum of the cyberutopian theme that relies on the Cartesian dualism and the principle of disembodiment cannot represent the lived experience or the materiality of the body outside cyberspace.
- Theorists like Elizabeth Grosz advocate a corporeal feminism that can be used to understand the performative act of entering the internet.
 - It becomes a dynamic process where the social bodies are in a series of processes of 'becoming' and therefore, reification of gender and sexuality norms cannot take place.
- Liminality is the performative act of permeating a threshold and 'being online' is a liminal experience that allows one to enter cyberspace.



Source: monoskop.org



Swayam



The hyperreal simulacrum of the cyber utopian theme relies on the Cartesian dualism and the principle of disembodiment cannot represent the lived experience or the materiality of the body outside cyberspace. Theorists like Elizabeth Grosz advocate a corporeal feminism that can be used to understand the performative act of entering the internet.

It becomes a dynamic process where the social bodies are in a series of processes of becoming and therefore reification of gender and sexuality norms cannot take place. Liminality is the performative act of permeating a threshold and being online is a liminal experience that allows one to enter the cyberspace. It involves the experience of the in-between where the users constantly cross between the online and offline worlds. Corporeal cyber feminism acknowledges the potential for multiple and evolving identities in digital spaces by allowing fluid and dynamic expression. By allowing fluid and dynamic expression of identity, it challenges Cartesian dualism and propounds that

engaging with the internet is a performative act.

It is central to how individuals express themselves and interact with others in the online space. Online virtuality and offline reality constitute each other.

Conclusion

- The intersection of gender and cyberfeminism unveils a dynamic and multifaceted terrain, challenging traditional notions of identity, embodiment, and power dynamics in the digital realm.
- The corporeal importance within cyberfeminism disrupts Cartesian dualism and emphasizes the lived experiences of individuals within the virtual space.
- By embracing the cyborg as a symbol of empowerment, cyberfeminism champions the integration of technology into our lived experiences, as a tool for control or liberation.
- It provides a vital framework for constructing or deconstructing fetishistic gaze and misogyny and advocating for digital spaces that prioritize empathy, respect, and equality.



The intersection of gender and cyber feminism unveils a dynamic and multifaceted terrain, challenging traditional notions of identity, embodiment, and power dynamics in the digital realm. The corporeal importance within cyber feminism disrupts Cartesian dualism and emphasizes the lived experiences of individuals within the virtual space. By embracing the cyborg as a symbol of empowerment, cyber feminism champions the integration of technology into our lived experiences as a tool for control or liberation.

It provides a vital framework for constructing or deconstructing fetishistic gaze and misogyny and advocating for digital spaces that prioritize empathy, respect, and equality. In the next module, we will be looking at the evolving portrayal of gender in video games. Thank you.