Gendered Bodies and New Technologies
Gendered Bodies and New Technologies: Rethinking Embodiment in a Cyber-era

By

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For $D^2$ the air that I breathe
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INTRODUCTION

RETHINKING EMBODIMENT
IN A CYBER-ERA

Forgetting the body is an old Cartesian trick, one that has unpleasant consequences for those bodies whose speech is silenced by the act of our forgetting; that is to say, those upon whose labor the act of forgetting the body is founded—usually woman and minorities.¹

In this era of ubiquitous information flow, heightened mobility and limitless consumer convenience, human interaction with new technologies has become increasingly seamless. In the process the human body is effectively and steadily reduced to just another interface or a “second life.”² What is easily forgotten during this translucent transaction is that being human also necessarily implies being embodied. In other words, to constitute a body in its non-negotiable physicality is still what it entails to be human (amongst other things). To live daily in and through the complicated and dynamic intersection between “mind” and “body”, psychology and physiology—also known as embodiment—is what makes us human.

In contrast to most current cyber-theorists’ transcendental optimism about leaving the body behind, the position taken here on new technologies is an embodied material perspective. In taking such a position this text aligns itself inevitably with a particular cyberfeminist standpoint, which assumes that although embodiment is in constant flux, it remains the invariable nexus from where new technologies are engaged.

² The popularity of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs) such as Second Life, World of Warcraft, Everquest, and The Sims, which allows millions of users to simultaneously interact in virtual spaces and in the process create another life parallel to real life, all confirm the increasing pre-occupation with virtuality and by implication disembodiment in our societies.
Traditionally embodiment has been associated with women’s bodies. In my case, apart from the fact that it is the embodiment best related to my own situated experiences (being born a Euro-African female), it is also the embodied stratum, due to its positioning as “lacking” and “inferior”, that is probably best positioned and equipped to deal with the body-technology crisis. It is, however, not only the sex and gender of bodies that render them supposedly inferior, the ways in which race and class intersect and slice them into manageable chunks also contribute significantly to how they are (dis)positioned. In this regard the black female body is the embodiment said to contrasts most precipitously with the silicon cleanliness of new technologies, due to overwhelming associations with the organic and the visceral. Illustrating this point most poignantly is the fact that while techno-enlightened crusaders of the North build laboratories for immortality, where genetic manipulation, cloning and increasingly body-invasive technologies are developed and perfected, in vivid contrast 2.1 million adults and children in sub-Saharan Africa are estimated by UNAIDS to have died from AIDS during 2006. In fact the picture worsens as the UNAIDS 2006 AIDS Epidemic Update report states that two thirds of all persons infected with HIV are living in sub-Saharan Africa—that is an estimated 24.7 million people. What is more, South Africa is described as the “epicentre of the global HIV epidemic.” Furthermore, it is women who “bear a disproportionate part of the AIDS burden: not only are they more likely than men to be infected with HIV, but … they are also more likely to be the ones caring for people infected with HIV.” Once again, it seems as if women as the traditional bearers of embodiment are still carrying the heavier load of embodiment.

Although the female body is disregarded disproportionately it has a vital role to play in recreating perceptions about bodies and new technologies. According to Anne Balsamo, the struggle between technologies and nature will be witnessed from the female body in particular. As part of the challenge to re-signify and reposition the corporeal in terms of cyber-theories, the embodied female position, therefore, forms the central focus of my analysis.

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4 Ibid., 10.
5 Ibid., 10.
Techno-Transcendence: “No Bodies” Please

Antagonism towards the physical and bodily stratum is not a new trend within western thought systems. In fact, it is more accurate to argue that western philosophy is interspersed with trends, thought structures, ideologies and expressions that denigrate the body. Perhaps too glibly stated and grossly generalising, but from Plato to Aristotle, Descartes to Kant, and lately from William Gibson to Timothy Leary, the body, and specifically the sexed/gendered/raced body, is treated with suspicion and disregard. Most religious systems also sustain the so-called dualist “Gnostic trace”, which favours a value shift from the (female) fallible body to the (male) immortal spirit. The “Gnostic trace” has persevered in the twenty-first century, into what can now be described as techno-transcendence. Gnosticism and techno-transcendence both share utter disgust and contempt for the material realm.

The culmination of body contempt or striving towards “no bodies” came to prominence in the seventeenth-century Enlightenment in the person of René Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes viewed the body as an entity that is completely different and separable from the mind. Descartes’s dualism basically entails that the mind—the res cogitans (unextended thinking substance)—has the powers of intelligence, spirituality and selfhood, whilst the corporeal body—the res extensa (extended substance)—is simply a machine susceptible to mathematical (and specifically geometric) analysis. The Cartesian mind is constructed as falling outside the scope of “nature”, for material things have only geometrical properties and “because we cannot view the body as in any fashion thinking.” Accordingly, the mind is thought as having its own distinct and independent existence separate from the body. Descartes also constructed the mind, not surprisingly, as an immaterial subject or as the disembodied “I” in his famous phrase: “I think therefore I am” (Cogito, ergo sum).

Although this harsh dualism is culturally specific and does not exist without counter-discourses, Descartes’s body/mind split has overshadowed most popular philosophies and discussions about the body in the modern West. Even though Descartes’s dualism is obviously problematic and has been thoroughly discredited and scrutinised by postmodern criticism, most

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of his postulations have miraculously survived and cleverly morphed into recent cyber-projects that express aversion towards the body.

In fact, it appears as if the Enlightenment project has come full circle in contemporary renditions, such as the Post/Transhumanist movement, for instance. As a matter of fact the Transhumanists even claim the Enlightenment at their roots, by referring to themselves as part of a so-called “New Enlightenment.” Like good Cartesians, Transhumanists call on reason, autonomy, dynamic optimism, and political and morphological freedom to steer them into the virtual age. Transhumanists favour self-transformation as part of an auto-evolution process. They see themselves as no longer bound to biological evolution, but rather as free subjects who can choose their own evolutionary path. Anders Sandberg, a self-proclaimed Transhumanist, explains: “The responsibility of our development is now ours alone, we can choose what we want to become and how we want to become it.” This is patently a techno-version of the Cartesian “I think therefore I am.” The auto-reliant subject can now create his own universe according to his own specifications and preferences in alliance with new technologies. In the same way, recent research on Artificial Life (A-Life), steered by a “neo- or ultra-Darwinism”, echo Transhumanism’s body adverse stance: “No stuff, no matter, no bodies, no experiences associated with physicality and nothing beyond the one-dimensional functionality of information processing”, is regarded as valuable. Transhumanism, in all its varied manifestations, can be described as a reincarnation or rather an ironic re-embodiment of the Cartesian disembodied mind that has supposedly learnt how to deal effectively with bodily constraints by “using technology to overcome our limits, [and] to transcend.”

It is not only Transhumanist discourses, however, that long for a disembodied state, but there are other fin de millenium genres that also propagate techno-transcendence and body scepticisms, such as the literary genre of cyberpunk. Whereas Transhumanism preaches techno-optimism,
cyberpunk advocates a dystopian and rather bleak outlook—both movements, nevertheless, equally share scepticism towards the bio-body. William Gibson’s often-quoted cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer* (1984), is drenched with examples of body loathing. Evidently, the main character, Case, a futuristic hacker or “console cowboy”, has only contempt for his body, as becomes clear from the following introductory lines: “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*” [my emphasis].

Gibson’s texts, together with the work of other latter-day Enlightenment thinkers, view the encounters between bodies and new technologies as proof of the weaknesses and deficiencies of the body. The body is crudely perceived as a bad invention that needs to be redesigned and re-engineered. In the view of these “no-body” theorists, the redundancy of the physical body is a conclusive fact. All that remains to be done is to finalise the details of complete body depletion and replacement. Broadly speaking there are two general trends within the “no-body” techno-enlightenment project: the first attempts to remake the body, while the other aims to amputate the body in its entirety. The first project sets out to enhance and augment the body technologically by replacing body parts and re-engineering the body. The other aims consciously at full-scale transcendence, leaving the body behind and becoming cyber-consciousness (mind) only. If a body is still required at all, it will be a virtual body that can swim the ether. Both projects rely intensely on science and new technologies to achieve their goals. The first body modification project invests in new technologies such as genetic engineering, bionics, smart drugs, surgery and biochips. The other techno-transcendence project relies on technologies such as cryonics, the uploading of human consciousness into computers and mega-scale engineering, in order to achieve bodiless exaltation. None of these projects are deemed successful in so far as they disregard embodiment and fail to acknowledge the embodied ground of their own premises.

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(1998) “‘Cyberpunk’ before it acquired its handy label and its sinister rep, was a generous, open-handed effort, very street-level and anarchic, with a do-it-yourself attitude, an ethos it shared with garage-band ‘70s punk music. ... There is much bleakness in cyberpunk, but it is an honest bleakness. There is ecstasy, but there is also dread.”

Introduction

Going Nowhere without Bodies

The proposition that we can indeed, become bodiless, in other words, make progress, go forward without being embodied beings that actually constitute physical bodies, already suggest a critical disparity or unbridgeable chasm between physicality and meta-physics. The proposition assumes that there is a state that can be aspired towards, where visceral functions and pains can be eliminated on the way towards incorporeal virtual consciousness. It is the task of this book to subvert such notions, by showing that there is no existence possible without embodiment of some sort. Central to a cyberfeminist approach is the notion that embodiment is a prerequisite for existence, for, once ruined, embodiment cannot be replaced. Katherine Hayles reiterates: “Embodiment can be destroyed, but it cannot be replicated. Once the specific form constituting it is gone, no amount of data massaging will bring it back.”

In this book several embodied material locations and particularly from a South perspective will be hermeneutically researched in terms of how they are depicted in relation to and within new technologies. Among new technologies the following are specifically noted: microelectronics, telecommunication networks, nano-technology, virtual reality, computer-mediated communications and other forms of computer technologies. In short, “new technologies” refers to all things digital. These technological practices manifest corporeally in cosmetic and sexual re-assignment surgery, bioengineering (genetics, eugenics, cloning, prosthetics, implants and transplants) and new reproductive technologies (embryo transfers, artificial wombs and insemination), to name only a few. An extended understanding of new technologies is utilised, however, so as also to include new image technologies such as film, video, the Internet, virtual reality, advertisements and the engrossing landscape of visuality in which we are increasingly immersed.

As will become painfully evident to write on/from/about the body in a “virtual age”—an age during which the relationship between self and body is said to be drastically changing—is notoriously complicated. The body is that which is assumed to be a given and yet, it is also that which indefinitely escapes final delimitations. Simplistic statements and predictions about the interactions between bodies and technologies will

not suffice. Furthermore, any attempt to expand the ways in which to resignify bodies and new technologies from a cyberfeminist position challenges existing feminist and non-feminist positions alike. For, in an attempt to morph\(^{17}\) a cyberfeminist position, the body is viewed as a singular event that cannot be completely appropriated by a technological symbolic order, or rather bodies are viewed as singular events that are in excess of the controlling parameters of new technologies. However, neither bodies nor technologies are represented as unified agencies of power or subjectivity. Instead, each meeting between body and technology is unique and singular and should be treated as such as far as possible. By using such a singular approach, I hope to elude body determinisms on the one hand, and transcendental Cartesian escapisms of the corporeal on the other. As bodies and technologies meet intermittently in the new technological symbolic order—with both harmonious and/or disastrous results—a cyberfeminist position is constantly being negotiated. Throughout the text bodies are perceived to be constantly changing and adapting to technologies, just as technologies change and adapt to bodies, but at no stage are bodies perceived as fatally disappearing into virtual oblivion.

In order to unpack this cyberfeminist position there are a few eminent debates that inform the discussion on bodies and new technologies, of which the topic of essentialism in feminism is perhaps one of the most pressing. The issue of essentialism is dealt with up front so as to situate my discussions on gendered bodies and new technologies within the broader feminist debate from the outset.

### How Bodies Matter

The fierce intensity with which the issue of essentialism and non-essentialism have been tackled by recent feminist debates indicates that writing on and about the body within a cyberfeminist idiom without also

\(^{17}\) The term “morphing” refers to computer-produced visual effects in which one physical object appears to metamorphose or morph into another. The term became a household word with movies such as Terminator 2 (1991) in which a killer robot, T1000, morphs into many different shapes due to its liquid metal construction. For an interesting compilation of essays on morphing, not only in computer graphics, but also on a metaphysical level see Vivian Sobchack, ed. *Meta-morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick-Change* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
necessarily grappling sufficiently with this issue would be short-sighted.\textsuperscript{18} Bonnie Mann succinctly states: “Today, the term ‘essentialist’ functions more than ever to discipline feminist thinkers in the academy, rather than to inspire careful scholarship.”\textsuperscript{19} In short, feminist analysis that aligns itself with “essentialism” has been branded as “bad feminism”, while “good feminism” is now associated with “an emphatically anti-essentialist feminist epistemology, where a sublime melting of determinacy into discursive contingency takes center stage.”\textsuperscript{20} The fact that this text aligns itself although not unqualified—with a post-Irigarayian idiom (generally perceived as an essentialist position) as similarly voiced, for instance by Rosi Braidotti, Vicky Kirby and Elizabeth Grosz, may be cause for concern for some readers. Accordingly, I have to position myself strategically and carefully at the outset in this debate that has overshadowed most of the feminist agenda since the dispersal of the unitary (male) subject became a theoretical reality with the assistance of poststructuralist and postmodernist (in the broadest sense) theories.

Taking into account that the body, whether politically or philosophically constructed, has formed the main focus of feminism in all its variants, makes the essentialism/non-essentialism debate all the more pressing for the purposes of my analysis. At the centre of this fierce debate rests the problematic concept of “woman” or, rather, the assumption that woman does indeed have an essence: or, differently phrased, that woman has a specific sexed body. Essentially speaking, “woman” is then designated to a number of so-called inborn attributes that stretch across time, place and context, and, if these specified attributes are no longer present, the category “woman” apparently also ceases to exist.\textsuperscript{21}

Typically, feminists who have been branded as essentialist, such as Andrea Dworkin, Adrienne Rich, Susan Griffin and Nancy Hartsock, base their theories on the specificities of the female body as experienced

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{18} See Elizabeth Grosz’s \textit{Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism} (1994), Vicky Kirby’s “Corporeal Habits: Addressing Essentialism Differently”\textsuperscript{(1991)} and Naomi Schor’s “This Essentialism Which is Not One” (1994) for valuable contributions on the essentialism/non-essentialism debate.  \\
\textsuperscript{20} B. Mann, “World Alienation in Feminist Thought. The Sublime Epistemology of Emphatic Anti-essentialism,” 53.  \\
\textsuperscript{21} Latest developments in reproductive technologies such as the recent incident of a New York man who was impregnated and carrying a foetus, begs the question of what differentiates women from men, for childrearing may soon no longer be an activity which distinguishes the sexes and genders.
\end{flushright}
particularly in everyday life. It is especially the embodied female experiences that exclude men, such as menstruation, vaginal penetration, giving birth, nursing, menopause and lesbian sexual practices that become favoured “essentialist” viewpoints. Women’s experiences are narrowed to these bodily essences and those who fall outside the scope are obviously excluded from the “women” tag.

Another problem that arises from such an essentialist and confessional mode of revealing the body only in her specificity and locality is obviously that a broader public or political concept of the body is submerged and lost in the details of a private “my body.” In other words, the private body is absolutised and individualised to such an extent that the public body loses all political possibilities. As Rhonda Shaw notes: “And as part of a narcissistically constituted body project, the centrality of body-cultivation is tied up primarily with activities of self-construction, self-assembly, and self-control … [resulting] in the waning of collective political purpose.” Whereas the private body has previously been excluded from the public domain, it now becomes the encompassing focus and all political action is reduced to the private and the individual. Accordingly, it has become impossible to speak for and about “women”, for no one fits the description perfectly or complies completely with the requirements. The disparities that exist between individual private female bodies have now become so vast that the notion of a publicly constructed category “women” is completely scattered. For how can “women” be treated as a homogeneous category if that category is splintered by class, race, sexual preferences, gender constructions, labour divisions, religious beliefs and access to technology, to name only a few dividing factors? The female body is, nevertheless, not only essentialised by certain feminisms, but it has also been conveniently transfixed and essentialised by patriarchal discourses and systems as that which embodies, bears children, tends to the private domain and is closest to nature. By positioning women solely as embodied beings, men could erect themselves politically and intellectually on the corporeal substratum of women’s unmediated and therefore, unpolicitised bodies. Women’s bodies have become sites on to which men’s economy; society; religion and philosophy were and are still being constructed. While women “minded” immanent bodies (“nature”), men were allowed the luxury of “embodying” transcendent minds.

(‘culture’). Given this context of inequality, it makes perfect sense that feminists began to doubt the category of “women.” For most feminists the act of uncritically occupying the doubtful site that is “women” has been interpreted as playing ludicrously into the hands of patriarchy and it was argued that occupying that dubious site actually corresponded to accepting it.

It is precisely because of a reluctance to fall back into the “women” trap and the problems associated with the “female body” that most poststructuralist feminists refrain from using the term “women” altogether. As Donna Haraway states, “There is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women.” Similarly, Toril Moi insists that to define woman is also necessary to essentialise her. On the other hand, when so-called non-essentialists do use the term “women”, they do not refer to an embodied material female, but rather to a discursive construct. In this regard, Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* (1993) has become an extremely important path-guider in the discourses on essentialism and feminism. Butler utilises the concept of “discursive performativity” to show how bodies are materialised in discourses or rather how bodies are made to “matter” within discourse. She explains:

> We may seek to return to matter as prior to discourse to ground our claims about sexual difference only to discover that *matter is fully sedimented with discourses* on sex and sexuality that prefigure and constrain the uses to which that term can be put [my emphasis].

Yet, realising that the matter of bodies is sedimented in discourses—almost entirely but not fully—how do women rally for political issues if there are no bodies to base these claims on? If there are no “women”, how for instance, can women mobilise and campaign for reproductive rights or violence against women? These rights, although in part discursively constructed, are embodied in specific locations, contexts and sexed bodies. Susan Bordo challenges the discursive limits of how

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bodies have been constructed in postmodern and poststructuralist theories as follows:

The deconstructionist erasure of the body is not affected, as in the Cartesian version, through a trip to ‘nowhere’, but in a resistance to the recognition that one is always *somewhere*, and limited [original emphasis].

In accordance with Bordo, it is argued here, contra the essentialist view restricting certain bodies to particular essences; the confessional individualised “my private body” mode; as well as the full bodied submergence into discursiveness, that some form of embodied materialism remains the necessary precondition for any political action to take place. The uncritical alliance that some feminisms share with postmodernism has lead to “a material displacement, in which we are dispossessed of our ability to inquire into and articulate our relationship to the earth itself.”

In relation to new technologies the “soft” and “hard” postmodern influences on cyberfeminism is critically unpacked by Ilan Gur-Ze’ev in “Cyberfeminism and Education in the Era of the Exile of Spirit.” By uncovering inherent contradictions such as the denial of “real oppression of women and the actual suffering” through cyber-optimism and cyber-utopianisms, cyberspace actually “dehumanizes” and alienates women from their bodies, locality and identity. This material displacement means we have given into placelessness as Bonnie Mann describes it, aggravated in turn by the self-enclosing nature of discourse:

Intellectually, we find ourselves in equally desperate circumstances, trapped as we are inside a language that can refer only to itself. This self-enclosure becomes a kind of no place, a world-alienated space without place and feminist thinking is set adrift from the physical places that give feminist thinkers our moment by moment sustenance.

Women need a site—a *somewhere*—to operate from, no matter how temporary and provisional that locus may be. In this regard Elizabeth Grosz maintains, “if women cannot be characterized in any general way ...

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then how can feminism be taken seriously? ... If we are not justified in taking women as a category, then what political grounding does feminism have?” 32 Grosz also finds a convincing way out of essentialising women into one universal body type, by suggesting the use of multiple different body types interspersed by sex, religion, class, and race. She states: “there is no body as such: there are only bodies—male or female, black, brown, white large or small—and the gradations in between” [original emphasis]. 33 This means that women do not have one essential body, but rather a field of different bodies distinguished by their specific sexualities and by racial, cultural, gender and class specificities and intersections. It is the aim here to develop such a politics of incarnation. In this regard I align myself with Seyla Benhabib’s notion of a “strategic essentialism”, 34 which allows for a form of (although highly temporal and preliminary) politicised identity or “concrete standpoint” from which political actions can be launched.

If we are then not referring to one body type, but rather to different body types, we are nevertheless, still referring to specific and particular bodies. Vicky Kirby in “Corporeal habits: addressing essentialism differently” (1991), argues that the name “woman”, although not a proper name, is never immaterial. She adds, “For if women matter at all, it is as this word’s embodied realization.” 35 If women are denied a specific bodily existence, as some anti-essentialists suggest, this has more or less the same political implications for women as patriarchy’s confinement of women to being mere or animalised embodied beings. Elaine Graham argues this point as follows: “If women’s representation as ‘Other’ within the deep symbolic of patriarchy is fundamental, then it can only be radically remade into a truly women-centred subjectivity and politics founded on the sexual specificity of women. The sexuate body is the foundation of women’s real, lived experience because it is the ground of the very lack of symmetry in the symbolic order of patriarchy.” 36 Therefore, in some instances, non-essentialism, by over-emphasising the discursive body, ironically plays

into the hands of patriarchy—exactly the same problem that is levelled against essentialism by these anti-essentialists.

By arguing such, it is not suggested that the non-essentialist debate does not make meaningful contributions to the feminist discourse in general and that it is not an important part of defining feminisms in a virtual age, but I am more interested in showing the limits of the non-essentialist debate by revealing the essentialist assumptions on which it is in turn based. Arguably, neither essentialism nor non-essentialism are consolidated or finalised concepts, but should rather be referred to as multiple essentialisms and non-essentialisms. The attacks and criticisms launched against essentialism are, similarly, not launched from one consolidated position and are not focused on a unified “enemy” either. In fact, Naomi Schor states that anti-essentialist criticisms “serve diverse, even conflicting interests and draw on distinct, often incompatible conceptual frameworks.”

Nevertheless, non-essentialist discourses tend to treat essentialism as if it has one core or essence, which is clearly not the case. Even though neither essentialism nor non-essentialism is consolidated concepts, non-essentialism does not escape the tyranny of essentialism, for it tends to essentialise essentialism in its criticism thereof. Consequently, non-essentialism imitates exactly that which it finds so problematic about essentialism, becoming in turn essentialist about essentialism. In this regard Schor suggests a process of “de-essentialising essentialism”, acknowledging that both essentialism and non-essentialism have certain restrictions. The position taken here is an extension of such a process of de-essentialising essentialism by intentionally taking a “strategic essentialist” position, being fully aware that such a position is necessarily a construction with its own specific limitations. It is, however, a necessary construction and “critical juncture”, as Rhonda Shaw explains:

But addressing this critical juncture of bodies, both virtual and lived, is crucial if we are to consider the denatured techno-body and the materiality of bodies in all their multiple incarnations and differential forms.

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37 See N. Schor, “This Essentialism Which is Not One,” in Engaging with Irigaray, eds. C. Burke, N. Schor and M. Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 60, for a further discussion and identification of four such non-essentialist criticisms.
38 N. Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One,” 60.
In what follows the body of hysteria, as part of this “critical juncture of bodies” will first be traced in chapter one, prompting the ways in which the technology of neuro-psychology interrogated the “mute” and “unforthcoming” female bodies of the late nineteenth century hysterics. The “resistance” and “resilience” embodied by the hysterics of the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris between 1872 and 1893 treated by the demiurge of hysteria, namely the acclaimed French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, form the central focus of this chapter. The discussion of hysteria is a means to indicate that the materiality of the body is not appropriable or digestible through science and technology. The chapter concludes by expanding on Merleau-Ponty’s concept of *flesh* and Luce Irigaray’s *sensible transcendent* as strategies for re-thinking embodiment in conjunction with what has been revealed by hysteria.

After this early interface between the gendered bodies of hysteria and technologies the current debate on gender and technologies are investigated in chapter two. This chapter provides an overview of the state of women and technology and also interrogates the nature of technology. It attempts to ask why women and technology have been situated at odds with one another and what possible solutions may be offered to remedy this estrangement. The next two chapters (three and four) form part of the possible untying of the knot and deals with cyberfeminism as a feminist movement that considers a coalition between women and technology. The problems facing the cyberfeminist endeavour are unpacked here, as well as the ways in which women have been successful in weaving a web of allegiance with new technologies.

Finally, the cyborg as emblem of new technological embodiment is the topic of the chapter five and similarly the socio-political agency of the cyborgs is explored here. Donna Haraway’s post-gendered cyborg is critically examined where after the differences between “patriarchal cyborgs” and “cyberfeminist cyborgs” are compared with specific emphasis on how embodiment is constituted in each. Throughout the non-negotiable nature of human embodiment is emphasised. The text concludes with some pointers as to how cyberfeminism, specifically from an African perspective can deal with the daunting task of integrating women and new technologies in the twentieth first century.
CHAPTER ONE

POSITIONING THE BODY: HYSTERIA MEETS TECHNOLOGY

My scream got lost in a paper cup
you think there’s a heaven
where some screams have gone
I hear my voice and it’s been HERE
Silent all these years.¹

In an attempt to position the body in recent techno-discourses the controversial body of hysterical woman is first placed centre stage, enabling me to set an agenda for rethinking embodiment in a cyber-era. The body of hysteria or the hysterical body forms a leitmotiv throughout this book, as it becomes shorthand for the site where bodies and technologies constantly meet and morph.

Traditionally the bodies of hysteria—a disease essentialised as predominantly female—have been interpreted by psychoanalysis, philosophy and feminism alike as bodies, which cannot “speak.” In other words, hysterical bodies do not form part of the symbolic patriarchal order; due to the fact that these unruly bodies apparently do not “speak” the language of the symbolic order to be more precise. The bodies of hysterics have been constructed as discursively inaccessible and muted—a fate bestowed on most female bodies. What more suitable or rather more contentious site to start the process of rethinking embodiment than precisely from those overtly essentialised female bodies that have been constructed as excessively deviant and essentially different? Hysterical bodies are interpreted as overtly embodied bodies, inextricable proof of women’s inevitable materiality that needs to be overcome, especially in a cyber age.

By engaging with the body of hysteria, as meticulously documented in medical discourses of the late nineteenth century particularly, it is shown how science and technologies have actively construed the materiality of

the female body as different and other. It is also an opportune example of showing how embodied materialism can actively “write” and “speak” by manifesting differences and deviancies and actively being in excess of the techno-medical discourses that endeavoured to create and impound them.

In order to set the stage a turn is made to Paris of the 1870s and specifically to the research of the acclaimed French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893). Charcot served during the so-called “golden age of hysteria” at the famous Salpêtrière hospital between 1872 and 1893. It was during the infamous “Charcot regime”\(^2\) that the percentage of women diagnosed with hysteria raised from one to eighteen percent in the years from 1840 to 1880. These statistics also reveal that hysteria was most often diagnosed in women, who had the cunning aptitude of miming all illnesses’ symptoms with such accuracy that the “real” patients could not be distinguished from the miming hysterics. The crafty and puzzling ability of the hysteric to mime any disease emerges here as one of the key features in morphing a cyberfeminist position on embodiment. As is shown, miming and morphing share commonalities that proves helpful to a cyberfeminist enterprise.

Although various valuable studies\(^3\) on hysteria exist, the analysis focuses more here on the body of the hysterical patient and how it has been constructed in medical discourses, specifically by the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. As the discussion on hysteria unfolds it will become clear that the interest here in the (dis)ease lies on a discursive level. In other words, hysteria as a discourse is of more importance than in its clinical and medical technicalities. The medical practices and theories, however, form part of the discourses of hysteria or the technologies of hysteria. By paraphrasing disease into a (dis)ease, certain unease with the so-called (dis)ease is shown. The suggestion is also made that the “golden age of hysteria” was an attempt to promote Charcot’s ambitious scientific career rather than based on any real disease. Therefore, some preliminary notes on hysteria as a (dis)ease are necessary before proceeding to a more theoretical reading of the (dis)ease.


\(^3\) See Ilza Veith’s *Hysteria. The History of a Disease* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1965) which provides a thorough historical overview of the disease, while others, such as Martha Evans’s *Fits and Starts. A Genealogy of Hysteria in Modern France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991) and Elaine Showalter’s *Hystories. Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) both take a feminist interest in the disease.
The Body of Hysteria: Wandering and Wayward Wombs

The term hysteria, derived from the Greek word *hystera*, literally means womb or uterus. The earliest records from ancient Egypt, as early as 1900 BC, identified hysteria as a (dis)ease, unequivocally linked it to the womb. It was, in particular, the position or whereabouts of the womb that apparently caused problems, and subsequently, hysteria was linked to the notion of “wandering wombs.” It was thought that the wandering of the womb in the woman’s body actually caused hysteria. The womb was considered to be like an animal—a separate living organism within the female body with a life of its own—that moved around. Aretaeus, the Cappadocian, writes in the second century: “the womb is like an animal *within an animal*” [my emphasis]. (Not only are women referred to as animals, but they also suspected of containing other animals, such as the womb, within their bodies!) In cases where the “little animal” strayed too far up in the body, it was lured back via the vagina with sweet-smelling substances or repelled downwards (like a little lap-dog) by administering “evil tasting and foul-smelling” substances.

The cause of hysteria in Greco-Roman medicine was thought to be the under-employment of the womb. Plato refers in the following manner to this presumed under utilisation of the womb: “The womb is an animal which longs to generate children. When it remains barren too long after puberty, it is distressed and sorely disturbed” [my emphasis]. In other words, if the womb did not produce children on a regular basis it was believed to dry out and float upwards in the body like a deflated balloon and suspected of causing pressure to build up on the (already waning) female brain. The wandering womb could also presumably cause choking, by means of obstruction, which was in turn diagnosed as “hysterical suffocation” or *globus hystericus*. The supposed ability of the womb to drift was refuted in the research of the great Galen of Pergamon (AD 129-99), who seriously questioned and denied the ability of the uterus to wander about. He, instead, identified the problem as “seminal retention.” This meant that the womb literally dried up due to sexual inactivity.

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7 Ibid, 265 n.16.
Subsequently, Galen believed that if women had regular sex and reproduced often, the hysterical fits would also subside.

Figure 1-1, André Pierre Brouillet, *A Clinical lesson of Dr. Charcot at Salpêtrière* (1887). Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine.

Much later, during the Victorian period, hysteria was also associated with a lazy or inactive womb. This meant that wealthy unmarried women were apparently most predisposed to hysteria. The prescribed remedy: marriage, utilising and aligning the “offensive” and “inactive” uterus with the purpose for which it was apparently created, namely bearing children. In Victorian England, working-class women suffered less from this strange (ma)lady, because their reproductive systems stood firmly in the service of patriarchal expectations. The situation did, however, differ at the Salpêtrière hospital in France, where most of the hysterical inmates came from the poorer rural areas. The case of the so-called *amanđiki* that “plagued” rural Zululand (South Africa) during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century can be interpreted as another example of the transcultural and geographically diverse occurrences of hysteria.10

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Hysteria did, therefore, not show an unvarying profile, but in fact differed greatly in geographical manifestations and occurrences at the time. However, the factor that united all these diverse profiles of hysteria was the budding medical sciences’ urge to closely monitor and treat the (dis)ease. It is in this context that Charcot’s treatment and surveillance of the female hysterical body takes on a specific meaning.

As part of his surveillance techniques Dr. Charcot held regular public lectures for his students and colleagues. During these public lectures female bodies were displayed and unveiled in their apparent deviance and to make matters worse, it seems that the female bodies on display obliged unfailingly with fitting collapses and turbulent convulsions. French artist André Pierre Brouillet’s work entitled *A Clinical Lesson of Dr. Charcot at Salpêtrière* (1887) depicts in dramatic tones, the spectacle of a hysterical attack in full view of an audience (Figure 1-1). Not only were these women’s bodies specula(rise)d\(^\text{11}\) by medical science, but they became spectacles in themselves by obliging with spectacular performances. In other words, they rose to the dramatic occasion with spectacular results and their bodies did indeed connote a “to-be-looked-at-ness” \[\text{original emphasis}\].\(^\text{12}\) Sadly in this morbid theatre of the “hysterisation of women’s bodies” \[\text{original emphasis}\], women’s bodies were denigrated as being saturated with deviancy, both physically and psychically, and consequently, as being intrinsically pathological. Not surprisingly, women were found to be “disgustingly” over-embodied and therefore not fit for the public domain and its intellectual challenges.\(^\text{14}\) In this regard Michel Foucault describes the role played by surveillance in late nineteenth-century medicine, which played an active part in constructing hysteria, as follows:

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\(^{11}\) My use of the term specula(rise)d is indebted to Luce Irigaray’s use of the term “specula(riza)tion” in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. G.C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985a), 308. Irigaray’s term inverts the instrument of the speculum and the need to see into the female body by creating the neologism “specula(riza)tion.”


\(^{14}\) This devaluation of women’s intellectual capacities and their so-called inability to perform in the public domain will become an important point of discussion again in chapter three and four when the work of the first “computer programmer”, Ada Lovelace, is discussed.
[Medical surveillance] was an enormous apparatus for observation, with its examinations, interrogations, and experiments, but it was also a machinery for incitement, with its public presentations, its theatre of ritual crises, carefully staged with the help of ether or amyl nitrate, its interplay of dialogues, palpations, laying on of hands, postures... its hierarchy of personnel who kept watch ... monitored, and reported, and who accumulated an immense pyramid of observations and dossiers.\textsuperscript{15}

At the time hysteria was also steadily being linked to women’s suffrage, especially in England. As The Times of 11 December 1908 sardonically reports: “One does not need to be against woman suffrage to see that some of the more violent partisans of that cause are suffering from \textit{hysteria}” [my emphasis].\textsuperscript{16} In the face of women’s increasing mobility and transgression of traditional gender roles their biological destiny had to be reasserted.\textsuperscript{17} Women had to be reminded of their bodies, their apparent abilities and consequently, of their wayward wombs. The figure of the “militant Suffragist” and the hysterical female were conflated into a powerful anti-suffragist image and both were suspected of moral decay and aberrant behaviour.\textsuperscript{18} The image of the Suffragette also corresponded with that of the so-called New Women, who were similarly portrayed as home-breakers neglecting their family duties. Women’s activities were scrutinised and even an inconspicuous activity, such as the reading of a novel,\textsuperscript{19} was viewed with suspicion for it could apparently jeopardise

\textsuperscript{15} M. Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality. An Introduction}, 55-6.
\textsuperscript{17} See, in this regard, Thomas Laqueur’s “Orgasm, generation, and the politics of reproductive biology,” in \textit{The Making of the Modern Body. Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century}, ed. C. Gallagher and T. Laqueur. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 1, wherein he describes how: “The body generally, but especially the female body in its reproductive capacity and in distinction from that of the male, came to occupy a critical place in a whole range of political discourses.”
\textsuperscript{18} The deviancy of the hysterical woman is closely associated with that of the figure of the witch, especially in representation and diagnoses. In fact Martha Evans explains in \textit{Fits and starts}, n. 26, that, when church leaders searched for stigmata that would reveal witches’ supposed alliance with the devil, it was done in a similar way to the manner in which hysterical women were tested for skin sensitivities by medical scientists, namely by pricking the naked body all over.
\textsuperscript{19} Reading was perceived to be a dangerous activity for women, for it could apparently fill their heads with “nasty” ideas. A ban was placed at the time on “imagination, impression, curiosity ... illicit conversations, no reading that might stimulate the imagination or could leave strong impressions other than religious or