Virtually Transcendent: Cyberculture and the Body

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❏This article examines the ethical implications of the desire for disembodiment situated in the texts and technologies of cyberspace. The article is divided into 2 parts. The first traces the conceptual history of dualism, demonstrating its exclusionary cultural politics and investigating the socio-political consequences of encoding this metaphysical information in contemporary media technology. The second part examines the material conditions of new communication technology, arguing that the issue of access reduplicates in practice the exclusivity of dualism. The article concludes by investigating the ethical implications of employing dualistic metaphysics as a legitimizing narrative of media technology and cyberculture.

For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. (Gibson, 1984, p. 6)

A recent MCI commercial (MCI, 1997) provided a succinct articulation of what has been considered the general ethos of the internet. "There is no race. There are no genders. There is no age. There are no infirmities." In this popular vision of cyberspace, the internet was presented as the great cultural mediator, leveling the differences that have divided and segregated human beings. The rationale animating this utopian promise lies in the technology's apparent disembodiment.[2] Cyberspace, it has been argued, provides a platform in which "people communicate mind to mind" (MCI, 1997) without the problematic constraints imposed by the meat-interface of differentiated bodies. As Dery (1994) explained in the introduction to *Flame Wars*, "The upside of incorporeal interaction [is] a technologically enabled, postmulticultural vision of identity disengaged from gender, ethnicity, and other problematic constructions. Online, users can float free of biological and sociocultural determinants" (pp. 2–3).

From the beginning, telemetric technologies have been informed by prophetic tales that forecast a time when we will be able to connect our consciousness to the matrix and surpass the cumbersome "meat" (Gibson, 1984, p. 6) of the body. This corporeal transcendence, which amounts to "nothing less than the desire to free the mind from the 'prison' of the body" (Biocca, Kim, & Levy, 1995, p. 7), not only constitutes one of the controlling

ideals of cyberspatial systems (cf. Biocca et al., 1995; Gibson, 1984; Hillis, 1996; Interrogate the Internet, 1996) but comprises the essence of the age of information. "The central event of the 20th century," stated the Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age, "is the overthrow of matter. In technology, economics, and the politics of nations, wealth—in the form of physical resources—has been losing value and significance. The powers of mind are everywhere ascendant over the brute force of things" (Dyson, Gilder, Keyworth, & Toffler, 1996, p. 295). Heaven's Gate cult (1997) both worked on the internet and engaged in ascetic practices that not only denigrated the flesh (celibacy, castration, and so forth) but ultimately sought "to leave the containers of the bodies" is not a mere coincidence but symptomatic transcendentalism in the circuits of cyberculture.

This essay undertakes a critical examination of cyberculture's "transcendentalist fantasy" (Dery, 1996, p. 8). In particular, it investigates the ethics of this proclivity to be liberated from the meat of the body. This inquiry is oriented by two suspicions concerning the value of technology and the logic of emancipation.

First, as Penny (1994) has suggested, "all technologies are products of culture" (p. 234). Technology, therefore, is never neutral but always inflected and influenced by specific ideologies and preconceptions. The transcendental pretensions of cyberculture have been informed and substantiated by the conceptual divisibility of the mind from its body. This ideology, which is called dualism, is associated with specific sociocultural circumstances and has its own complicated history and ethical consequences. Employing dualism as a legitimating discourse, therefore, not only entails a specific metaphysical doctrine but incorporates all the social, political, and cultural implications that have been associated with it.

Second, emancipation is never a simple operation. As Hegel (1830/1987) pointed out in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, "the one who merely flees is not yet free; in fleeing he is still conditioned by that from which he flees" (p. 138). Liberation, therefore, is not a matter of mere flight or simple leave taking. The very means of release are often bound up with the mechanisms and systematics of domination. Emancipation from the body, therefore, may itself be materially conditioned, rendering corporeal transcendence far more complicated and entangled than it initially appears.

Despisers of the Body

In promising to facilitate bodily transcendence, the Internet participates in a larger project that constitutes one of the defining elements of the modern ethos. The obvious point of intersection, and the one most often mobi-

lized in the discourse of cyberculture, is Descartes's *Meditations* (1641/ 1988)—said to have instituted not only modern philosophy but the doctrine of dualism. Dualism, the radical dissociation of the mind, or soul (Descartes conflated the two terms; cf. note 3, p. 74), from the body, does not, however, begin with Descartes. In Plato's (trans. 1961) *Cratylus* (circa 400), for example, Socrates suggested that the word "body" [σωμα] was coined by the Orphic poets who considered the living soul [ψυχη] to be incarcerated in the body as in a prison or grave [σημα]. This Orphic position is subsequently incorporated into the Platonic corpus in the *Phaedo* (Plato, trans. 1990), which is subtitled "On

> We see the Internet as an expression of, and even the savior of high modernism. . . . It, above all else, promises the possibility of achieving the ends of the Enlightenment: a sense of mastery and escape from the limits of the frailties of incarnation. (Interrogate the Internet, 1996, p. 125)

the Soul." According to tradition, the *Phaedo* not only argues for the separability of the soul from the body but provides several "proofs" for the soul's immortality (cf. Loraux, trans. 1989). Similar dualistic formulations are developed in Aristotle's (trans. 1907) *De Anima*, the Letters of St. Paul, the works of the Medieval neoplatonists (Plotinus, Augustine, and so forth), and the tradition of Scholasticism.[3]

The mind–body dichotomy, however, is not unique. Rather, this binary opposition participates in a general dualism that has constituted the very fabric of Western metaphysics. Metaphysics, which is not one region of knowledge among others but that on which such distinctions have been founded, is animated and informed by a network of dualities. "The fundamental faith of the metaphysicians," wrote Nietzsche (1886/1966), "is the faith in opposite values" (p. 2). A sampling of these opposite values that have been persistent in the Western tradition has been collected by Haraway (1991). They include, among others, "self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, totality/partiality" (p. 177). Within the traditions of the West, these dualities are never situations of peaceful coexistence. Rather, they constitute violent hierarchies (Derrida, 1972/1981). As Elizabeth Grosz has explained (1994), "Dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart" (p. 3). Within the West-

ern tradition, mind has always been situated above and has ruled over the body, which has consequently been understood as the negation of everything that is determined of and for the mind. This determination, in turn, has been accomplished by mobilizing the elements of the other binary pairs that constitute the field of metaphysics. Mind, for example, is associated with divinity, whereas the body is relegated to the realm of brute animality. Mind is determined to be immortal; the body is perishable. Mind is whole or indivisible, whereas the body remains divisible. Mind is essential, the body merely accidental. Because of this precedence and privilege granted the mind over its negative and deficient other, Nietzsche (1892/1983) has characterized the general ethos of Western thought as "despisers of the body" (p. 146). The internet and its promised emancipation from the body, therefore, is nothing other than a technological incorporation of this ancient practice.

Discourses that promise liberation from the body through technology mobilize this tradition. The mind is posited as the essence of the person and is considered to be the source of one's true identity. The body and its complex of variations, on the contrary, is construed as a mere accident of biology, something that is inessential to what the individual actually is. Tracing the implications of this assumption, Gurak (1997) wrote:

> It is almost as if we could simply plug a coaxial cable directly into another person's brain and get at their true self, avoiding the messiness of race, gender, and other of these darn confounding variables that get in the way of who we truly are. (p. 1)

According to this logic, differentiation in gender, race, physical ability, and age are considered to be mere externalities that do not affect or belong to one's essential being. This formulation is not only consistent with the metaphysical understanding of difference as variations in and of the same (cf. Bataille, trans. 1985) but has traditionally been deployed to substantiate antisexist and antiracist positions. Elizabeth Spelman (1988) provided a rather succinct formulation of this procedure:

> Since the body, or at least certain of its aspects may be thought to be the culprit, the solution may seem to be: Keep the person and leave the occasion for oppression behind. Keep the woman, somehow, but leave behind the woman's body; keep the Black person but leave the blackness behind. (p. 128)

This formula for emancipation does not challenge the dualisms that structure Western thought but employs its despising of the body as the means by which to secure liberation from sexist and racist prejudice. Such a procedure, however, is doubly problematic. First, as Gurak (1997) argued:

To imagine that a technology, any technology, could possibly allow us to separate our minds from our social and emotional states encourages the worst kind of Cartesian thinking and detracts from our responsibility to learn how to live together in a diverse, complex democracy. It is dangerous to believe that you can escape into a space where issues of race and gender do not exist. (p. 2)

Second, and more fundamental, the doctrine of dualism does not challenge but has been the primary mechanism of prejudice and inequality. According to Leder (1990),

> In our cultural hermeneutics women have consistently been associated with the bodily sphere. They have been linked with nature, sexuality, and the passions, whereas men have been identified with the rational mind. This equation implicitly legitimizes structures of domination. Just as the mind is superior to and should rule the body, so men, it is suggested, should rule over women. (p. 154)

Similar associations have been made in the area of race and ethnicity:

> Certain kinds, or races, of people have been held to be more body-like than others, and this has meant that they are perceived as more animal-like and less god-like. For example, in the *White Man's Burden*, Winthrop Jordan (1974) describes ways in which white Englishmen portrayed black Africans as beastly, dirty, highly sexual beings. Lillian Smith (1961) tells us in *Killers of the Dream* how closely run together were her lessons about evil of the body and the evil of Blacks. (Spelman, 1988, p. 127)

Throughout the Western tradition, therefore, mind has been associated with and has served to legitimate specific positions of cultural hegemony. Dualism, then, is not merely an abstract formula. It is also a social and political principle that has substantiated and legitimated all kinds of prejudicial and exclusionary practices. Because of their associations with the body, certain persons and groups of people have been excluded from the transcendental domain of the mind.

Employing dualism as a legitimating narrative of liberation and equality, therefore, is necessarily complicated by these associations. Such discourses promise liberation from sexist and racist prejudice by deploying a concept that reinscribes and reinforces the very ideology of sexism and racism from which one would be liberated. This procedure is not only self-contradictory but insidious. It is contradictory insofar as it employs as a mechanism of social equality a dualistic formula that always and already excludes and marginalizes certain persons and groups of people. It is insidious, for it reinscribes traditional modes of domination and prejudice under the guise of liberation and equality. Under the discursive formula-

tions circulated in the advertising of MCI, the fiction of cyberpunk, and the scholarly investigations like those initiated by Mark Dery (1996), Frank Biocca (Biocca et al., 1995), and Ken Hillis (1996), the internet has come to participate in these problematic operations. Through the rather naive formulations posed in these texts, telemetric technologies come to substantiate and reinforce the very systems of oppression and prejudice they promise to supersede and surpass. What is needed in assessing the sociocultural significance of the internet, therefore, is not a blind faith in the emancipatory and egalitarian rhetoric of technology but a critical engagement with the philosophical and cultural traditions that have come to empower and inform our employment and understanding of technological innovations. As Judith Butler (1990) suggested, "any uncritical reproduction of the mind/body distinction ought to be rethought for the implicit gender [and racial] hierarchy that the distinction has conventionally produced, maintained, and rationalized" (p. 12).

The Matter of Cyberspace

The doctrine of dualism is not a mere abstract ideology. It is also a practical mechanism of actual social and political discrimination. By employing this doctrine as a legitimating discourse, cyberculture necessarily comes to participate in this activity. As a result, individuals customarily associated with the body and materiality are restricted from participating in the incorporeal realm of cyberspace. This conceptual marginalization, however, does not remain at a mere ideological level. Rather, it is substantiated by the actual milieu of the internet. The net, therefore, not only reiterates current systems of domination through its employment of the doctrine of dualism but reinforces this discrimination in practice. To participate in cyberculture, one needs, minimally, a computer, modem, telephone service, and an internet service provider (ISP). One's access to the transcendent, virtual realm, therefore, is materially conditioned. In addition, it should be no surprise that those individuals generally restricted from accessing cyberspace are precisely those who have been traditionally marginalized because of their associations with the material of the body: women, people of color, and the impoverished.[4] Transcending the body, therefore, is a luxury that

> No network connection at all makes you a digital hermit, an outcast from cyberspace. The Net creates new opportunities, but exclusion from it becomes a new form of marginalization. (Mitchell, 1995, p. 18)

belongs to a certain group of people for whom material limitations in general have not traditionally been an issue. In this way, "the Net is not only another way to divide the world into haves and have nots" (Critical Art Ensemble [CAE], 1997, p. 6), but this information apartheid actually adheres to and reinforces current systems of oppression and inequality.

Cyberspace has been and remains the domain of white males. In this matter, John Perry Barlow, cofounder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, did not realize with what exactitude he had described the evolving demographics of cyberspace: "Cyberspace . . . is presently inhabited almost exclusively by mountain men, desperadoes, and vigilantes, kind of a rough bunch" (Gans & Sirius, 1991, p. 49). Recent studies on computer usage and internet access corroborate this conclusion. According to a 1996 RAND report on computers and connectivity, the majority of U.S. "netizens" are male (68%), white (87%), college educated (64%), and highly compensated ($60,000 average annual income). This report not only found great discrepancies in access to cyberspace due to race, gender, and class but, by comparing the data obtained in 1996 with that from earlier studies conducted in 1993 and 1989, concluded that the gap between the information have and have nots has been growing steadily (Bikson & Paris, 1996).[5]

It should be noted, however, that this demographic information concerns internet usage in the United States. Global statistics, although currently unavailable, will obviously be more dramatic and potentially more disturbing, especially when one considers the fact that a majority the world's population does not have access to basic telephone service, "and hence it seems very unlikely that they will get a computer, let alone go on-line" (CAE, 1997, p. 6). From a global perspective, cyberspace remains a luxury of the postindustrial First World and, as a result, it is necessarily hardwired into the complications and paradoxes of colonialism (cf. CAE, 1997; Gunkel & Gunkel, 1997). Not only has the internet been considered "just another misunderstood 'white-man-thing'" (Dyrkton, 1996, p. 55), but experiments with telemetric technologies in the Third World have failed to provide the postcolonial liberation that has been espoused in the rhetoric of cyberculture theorists and multinational telecos like MCI. Rather, computer-mediated communication systems have actually reinforced current social inequities and systems of oppression. In June 1991, for example, the Organization of American States embarked on a plan to provide e-mail service to Caribbean and Latin American universities. Surveying the results of the SIRIAC (Integrated Informatic Resource System for Latin America and the Caribbean) program, Dyrkton (1996) made the following assessment:

> E-mail represents a significant advance for the university as a place on the margin of the Third World but it is also a political tool in a very polarized,

hierarchical society. E-mail can only exacerbate the gulf between classes; while it may help to rationalize the telephone system at various locations, it will not help realize appropriate sanitary facilities. The financially comfortable will learn to speak with computer literacy while the poor will continue in their world apart, just next door. (p. 56)

The question of technological access reinforces the complications encountered in the consideration of dualism. The internet has been determined to provide liberation from the problematic constraints of the body, namely, race, gender, and class. Access to this emancipation, however, is precisely dependent on one's race, gender, and class. Bodily transcendence via the internet, therefore, is a luxury that has been granted a group of individuals for whom race, gender, and class have never been problematic or restrictive. As Spinelli (1996) reminded us,

The internet is not some kind of *deus ex machina* of democracy .... The Net is only an emergent medium, existing in a specific context with a real set of material confines, and possibly with a real potential. But it is a potential that will remain unrealized if we allow the drive to virtualize to obscure its material base and economic realities of our culture. (p. 14)

For this reason, women and people of color find themselves doubly excluded by the transcendentalist pretensions of cyberculture. They are not only always and already positioned outside the realm of mind through conceptual associations with materiality and the body but have been practically limited in their access to technologies that would promise to facilitate this transcendence.

Conclusion

From the beginning, cyberculture has been informed and directed by transcendentalist pretensions. Cyberspace, it has been suggested, not only liberates one from the meat of the body but, in doing so, promises to surpass sociocultural restrictions that have been the source of prejudice, exclusion, inequality, and domination. The eschatology of this transcendentalist thinking is nothing short of utopia—a global community emancipated from the problematic constraints of race, gender, age, infirmity, and so forth. This incorporeal exaltation, however, is not only informed by the ideology of dualism, which has its own complicated history and consequences, but remains a luxury that

> We have no reason to delude ourselves that any new technology, as such, promises any sort of sociocultural liberation. (Penny, 1994, p. 247)

belongs to a particular position of cultural hegemony. As Stone (1993) has recalled,

> Forgetting about 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 women and minorities. (p. 113)

It is precisely through the transcendence of the meat, or data-trash (Kroker & Weinstein, 1994), of the body that Western thought has instituted and accomplished a violent erasure of other bodies and the body of the other.[6] Therefore, the cyberspatial researchers and critics who forecast and celebrate a utopian community in which "there is no race, there are no genders, there is no age, there are no infirmities" do so at the expense of those others who are always already excluded from participating in this magnificent, disembodied "technocracy" precisely because of their race, gender, age, class, and so forth. Far from resolving social inequities, this conceptualization of cyberspace perpetuates and reinforces current systems of privilege and domination, reinscribing traditional forms of mastery behind the facade of emancipation. In the end, what these various discourses *want to articulate* is resisted and undermined by what they are *compelled to articulate* because of the very metaphysical information they have deployed and utilized.

This dehiscence not only opens structural difficulties within the networks of cyberculture but, perhaps more importantly, implies rather disturbing ethical consequences. On the one hand, for those for whom material conditions have not been problematic, this transcendental rhetoric serves to obscure and to disguise current systems of privilege and oppression. In locating sociocultural emancipation in the transcendental promises of cyberspace, one not only promotes a mode of liberation that does not in any way problematize or question current positions of cultural privilege but obscures the fact that the very means of liberation is itself identical to the mechanisms of oppression. For the privileged few, these emancipatory promises bolster current modes of sovereignty while maintaining the facade of equity and democratization. On the other hand, for those already excluded through their association with materiality and the body, these emancipatory promises reinscribe current systems of domination. This procedure is not only contradictory but effectively legitimizes traditional forms of oppression and prejudice under the sign of emancipation. Unfortunately, this operation has all too often been the experience of those who have lived with and under oppression. Namely, what is promoted as liberation amounts to little more than another form of subjugation.

Notes

1. A nascent version of this text was presented at the second annual Ethics and Technology Conference at Loyola University, Chicago, June 1997.
2. For a brief analysis of the utopian rhetoric employed by MCI, cf. Gurak (1997).
3. Direct correspondence between cyberculture and the Judaeo-Christian tradition has been demonstrated in the texts of William Gibson. In an August 1993 interview on National Public Radio, Gibson explained that Neuromancer was based, in a large part, on "some ideas I'd gotten from reading D. H. Lawrence about the dichotomy of mind and body in Judaeo-Christian culture" (Dery, 1996, p. 248). As Dery (1996) explained by way of Meyers (1990), Lawrence had blamed St. Paul for his "emphasis on the division of the body and spirit, and his belief that the flesh is the source of corruption" (p. 236).
4. A good portion of the rhetoric surrounding the social significance of the internet comprises a digitalization of arguments that had been initially developed for earlier forms of communication technology, that is, printing, telegraph, radio, and television. One explanation for the apparent blind optimism and rather uncritical assessment of the internet is that we have simply forgotten, either deliberately or not, the lessons of history. Similar utopian rhetoric, for example, had been deployed with the emergent technology of wireless and radio broadcasting. In response to the FCC's antitrust investigations of RCA chief David Sarnoff espoused, in terms that explicitly foreshadow the MCI advertisement, the social benefits of broadcast communication. The importance of broadcasting cannot be measured in dollars and cents.

   > It must be appraised by the effects it has upon the daily lives of the people of America—not only the masses who constitute a listening audience numbered in the tens of millions, but the sick, the isolated, and the underprivileged, to whom radio is a boon beyond price. (Spinelli, 1996, p. 4)

   Commenting on the context of Sarnoff's speech, Martin Spinelli reminded us that this "utopian rhetoric . . . functioned largely to obscure a profit motive" (p. 8). The same maneuvers are evident within the texture of the MCI campaign. The social benefits ascribed to online communication serve not only to recode but simultaneously to conceal a specific motive for profit. From the perspective of a telecommunications corporation, race, gender, age, and infirmity are indeed irrelevant and inconsequential. For MCI, the race, gender, age, and health of its customers is accidental and superfluous. Telecommunications, unlike other commodities and services, is not restricted to a particular ethnic group, gender, or age. All that matters from the corporate perspective is that individuals become and remain consumers of services. It is under the recoded identity of consumer, therefore, that the MCI advertisement promises to erase difference and achieve social equality. For multinational telecommunications corporations, there is no race, there are no genders, there is no age, there are no infirmities; there are only consumers.

   It must be admitted that this operation is not unique in the world of advertising. Most commercials, whether in print or electronic media, function by associating a product with an intangible and desirable property, that is, love,

success, freedom, social justice, and so forth (cf. Jacobson & Mazur, 1995). MCI, therefore, would seem to be in compliance with industry practice, engaging in what can only be called smart marketing. This approach, however, is rather devious and potentially dangerous. First, the advertisement promotes emancipation from oppression through subordination to a multinational teleco. This procedure suggests, ostensibly, resolving one form of subjugation by simply replacing it with another. Apart from the obvious structural contradiction, this stratagem is further complicated by the fact that one does not name this alternative subordination as such but bestows on it the contrary designation "liberation."

Second, through MCI's commodification of liberation, race, gender, and age are not so much transcended as they are translated and recoded. In the discourse of pancapitalism, this recoding always takes place in terms of class. It is no surprise, therefore, that class has been suspiciously absent from the advertisement's litany of emancipation. This programmed absence, however, is no mere accident. Excluded from the emancipatory potential offered by MCI will be those who cannot afford to be consumers of telecommunication technology. This includes individuals who do not have either the money for the apparatus, skill to use computers and telemetric systems, or both—statistically, women, people of color, and the aged. MCI, therefore, does not so much resolve the contemporary crises associated with race, gender, and age but recodes and redistributes these complications as class. Liberation from the problematic limitations of the body, therefore, is a luxury available only to those who can afford it; specifically those for whom corporeal limitations have not traditionally been restrictive or oppressive.

5. Similar results have been obtained in the Times Mirror national survey of 1994 and the 1995 Georgia Tech/Hermes survey of Web usage (Bikson & Paris, 1996; Hoffman, Novak, & Chatterjee, 1996).
6. For a critical examination of the fundamental exclusivity of Cartesian metaphysics, see Chang (1996).

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