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Life as Screen? Or how to grasp the virtuality of the body

In her book *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle assumes that the new computer technologies materialize »postmodern theory and bring it down to earth« (Turkle 1995, 18) And she continues: »Thus, more than twenty years after meeting the ideas of Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, I am meeting them again in my new life on the screen. But this time, the Gallic abstractions are more concrete. In my computer-mediated worlds, the self is multiple, fluid, and constituted in interaction with machine connections; it is made and transformed by language; sexual congress is an exchange of signifiers; and understanding follows from navigation and tinkering rather than analysis.« (Turkle 1995, 15)

Turkle is not the only »cyber-theorist« defining the new technologies as a kind of materialization or visualization of something previously invisible. Kathryn Hayles and Slavoj Žižek, to name but two, develop a similar position from within a Lacanian framework. But in doing so, they erase important differences. The difference, for instance, between a topological and a descriptive notion of the unconscious, the difference between the Other and the other, the difference between the body and its unconscious image.

Various examples of psychoanalytic cybertheories and (art) practice (media art, net-projects) demonstrate this impulse to erase these differences. But when an equation is made between an (artistic) netpractice and psychoanalytical theory, a crucial difference is lost, namely that which constitute the space of the subject.

New Technology (NT), it is claimed, reconstitutes the subject in a fundamental way, not only effecting his mental state but also and foremost his body. The new modes of perception introduced through NT claim to bring to an end the modern way of vision and the corresponding subject of central perspective. But the discourse on NT does not clearly define the subject nor is the notion of vision placed under rigorous scrutiny. With Lacan's question »What is a picture« both vision and the seeing subject are defined in a radically different way. In my paper I will work with a psychoanalytical definition of the subject in order to theorize the *otherness* or the novelty of the subject of NT.

Discourse about endings is at this moment very much to the point. The

spectre of the end of media, esp. mass media has been raised. The end of art has also been prophesized; not to mention the implosion of the public realm and the undermining of its apparent opposition the private. The end of the subject has been invoked again, on this occasion including the end of gender. In addition a lament for the passing of the human being has been intoned.

Such talk of endings leads naturally to a consideration of beginnings. It presupposes a beginning which is either ontogenetically or phylogenetically defined, or an inauguration of a conjuncture between specific historical epochs and psychical stages.

I have suggested the title »Life as Screen?« in order to evoke the question of those endings and their corresponding beginnings, as well as to pose the question of what and who comes to an end. Lacan's question »What is a picture«, which he posed in his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, was from the beginning essentially implicated with the question what is a subject. My question here will be which subject Lacan has in view and how it relates to the discourse of NT.

I shall begin with a short extract from Marge Piercy's novel *Body of Glass* (1992). In the following scene Shira, a programmer, encounters Jod, a cyborg:

»She wondered exactly what one did with a cyborg. She had waded through gigabytes of material on his hardware, but she was still confused. Could one kiss a cyborg? Would not his mouth be dry as an can opener? It was not. His lips were soft on hers. His tongue was a little smoother than a human tongue but moist. Everything was smoother, more regular, more nearly perfect. The skin of his back was not like the skin of other men she had been with, for always there were abrasions, pimples, scars, irregularities. His skin was sleek as a woman's but drier to the touch, without the pillow of subcutaneous fat.« (Piercy 1992, 227)

After initially hesitating to begin a sexual relation with Jod, Shira comes to be overwhelmed with his perfection to the point that she could no longer ignore her own human defects. Jod continually pursues her with questions about what it is like to be a human woman. Shira became ever more uncertain about the advantage of being human and the essential difference between human and non human.

A question raises itself here: whether in the context of the encounter between the technological, the machinic and the non-human the precarious nature of the centered human subject, to which Descartes drew our attention, has become manifest.

Lacan's meditations are germane to this issue. He argued historically

that the Ego (and I mean here the ego and not the subject) is not only a precarious psychic structure but also a fragile socio-historical accomplishment. The tragedy of this subject, to put in its fully pathetic dimension, is that in order to avoid losing itself in its environment, it must erase all difference between itself and its surroundings. (Cf. Brennan 1993, 4 ff.)

The tenor of the theorists of the new technologies is that this subject has come to a total end. In the epoch of the human interface there is no more place for Cartesian dualisms: Instead nature/culture, body/mind as well as male/female are transformed into technical questions in the sense that they are only temporarily fixed through a coupling of the human with the machine. (Cf. Poster 1995)¹

Donna Haraway's cyborg illustrates this new hybrid form of being, half electronic, half biological, but also historically constituted. According to Haraway the cyborg arises at historical moments of social transition; times of radical uncertainty when borders are broken or under threat, and traditional strategies of drawing boundaries no longer function: moments such as the present when the distinction between man and cybernetic organisms are breaking down. (cf. Haraway 1990) In this context Haraway draws particular attention to the porosity of bodily boundaries, in particular the skin. According to Freud the skin is a key element in the construction of the Ego as such. It follows that the bodily interface is not only a question of the NT but also, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the question of the subject itself.

Thus, when Lacan refers to a historical formation of the Ego he means this in a thoroughly material-bodily sense. This historically unfolding Ego – a social-psychotic figuration – must physically demarcate the boundaries of its body.

In the next section I move from considering the historical Ego to an exploration of the psychic subject, a subject which according to Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, is always and already at war not only with its environment, but also and especially with itself, and with its image which is always othered, and to which it can never be reconciled.

The excess of the image

Lacan relates the embattled status of the subject to narcissism. The subject neither loves its image nor is beloved by it, but rather loves that which

¹ This is, of course, only one dominant strand in discourses on the NT. The other strand signals the fulfillment of the Enlightenment conception of the subject. (Cf. Penny 1994, Žižek 1997)

exceeds the image. The subject loves the picture's excess, a picture behind the picture. This »behind-the-picture« is the ideal-ego, that psychic function in which the child exists as its own ideal or, to put it more correctly, will have become its own ideal retrospectively. As Lacan makes the point, the ideal-ego is that point »at which he [the subject] desires to gratify himself in himself«. (Lacan 1981, 257) Or as he defines it elsewhere: »That where the subject sees himself, namely, where that real, inverted image of his own body that is given in the schema of the ego is forged, it is not from there that he looks at himself.« (Lacan 144)

Here a distinction appears between the eye and the gaze which will be important to us in what follows.

The basis of this distinction is Freud's differentiation between the drive and the instinct. Through this radical differentiation, which Freud and Lacan were never tired of invoking, the notion of primal lack is introduced. This lack is the proper place of the subject. For the rest of his life the subject will haunt and be haunted by this lack, which takes form in his image, before his image, behind his image.

The drama of being part of the picture

Lacan has associated this overdetermined split (Spaltung) between drive and instinct, ideal-ego and egoideal, eye and gaze with the constitutive function of primal aggression. He explains this aggression in terms of an unusual concept of mimesis as an intransitive resemblance in which there is no resembled object.

Lacan adapts this concept from Roger Callois's work on the mimetic capacity of insects. According to Callois the tendency of insects to take on the colour of their background is not to be understood as self-protection or flight from an aggressor but rather as an attempt to become part of a picture. As Michael Taussig puts it in »Mimesis and Alterity« it is a matter of being seduced by space, a *spacing out* of the self, a drama »in which the self is but a self-diminishing point amid others, losing its boundedness.« (Taussig 1993, 34)

Whereas animals hunt each other through the sense of smell, mimicry arises in the field of seeing. It signals a failure to maintain the boundary between inner and outer, between the body and its environment, or as Joan Copjec defines it, between »an unconscious being and a conscious semblance«. The effect of mimicry or the effect of representation, as Copjec argues, does not place the subject in »happy accord with the reality« but

rather induces the »suspicion that some reality is being camouflaged«. (Copjec 1995, 37) In response to such representation – mimicry, the subject's own being breaks up between the unconscious being and conscious semblance. As Lacan makes the point: »To imitate is no doubt to reproduce an image. But at bottom, it is, for the subject, to be inserted in a function whose exercise grasps it.« (Lacan 100)

Picture and gaze do not meet

How do these considerations bear on the question of NT's, mourning for the subject and the hymn to a new »fluid and polymorphic structure of identity«?

At the end of the *Four Fundamental Concepts* Lacan surprisingly mentions what he says we can call the »mass media«. He indicates that it is tempting to see these media as augmenting the society of the spectacle, to use Guy Debord's term. Instead, he claims, they contribute to a diffusion of the gaze and the voice, but he makes no further comment on this matter.

I shall attempt to relate this diffusion of the gaze to the novelty of the NT specifically in order to follow up the question of the »location of the subject«.

In his book *Techniques of the Observer* (1995) Jonathan Crary argues that NT are new insofar as they operate without a point of view, that is without a place which the viewer can occupy. Thus the camera obscura model with its centrally focussed perspective is undermined. And this, Crary observes, might potentially have fatal consequences for the subject and might foreground in concrete fashion the spectacle of its fragility.

As I already noted, Lacan defines the Ego as historically and psychically always already precarious. He has emphasized this precarious status through his distinction between the Subject and the Ego, echoing the split between eye and the gaze, a gaze which poposes an impossible location which cannot be occupied by the subject.

By thinking together these two impossible locations, the computer-generated one mentioned by Jonathan Crary, and the psychic one considered by Lacan, I propose to bring together the radical exteriority of both the technical and psychic structuration of the subject.

In order to undertake this thinking together I will criticize two strands of thought in media theory: on the one hand, Screen and Apparatus theory, which both focus upon the image, the screen, and their equation with the mirror. And on the other a similar equation of the mirror with the monitor

within the discourse on NT. In the latter discourse the monitor is understood as a mirror and virtual reality is conceived as the space of the Lacanian imaginary.

At the center of film theory lies the model of the Lacanian mirror stage as an original misrecognition of the subject in the image of »an-other«. Both Apparatus theory (Baudry, Comolli, Metz) and British Screen theory (Mulvey, Heath, Wollen) take over Lacan's theory of the mirror stage in order to identify the screen as a mirror before which or better in which the subject misrecognizes itself. In this taking over, the Lacanian mirror stage is subjected to an overgeneralization which is fatally repeated in the field of NT.

I want to demonstrate this briefly by discussing Kaja Silverman's definition of the gaze as a cultural gaze.

According to Lacan, in the relation between the mirror image and the child a third element intervenes, the gaze of the mother. In the same way, according to Baudry, in the relation between the screen image and the spectator a third element is involved, which Baudry like Lacan identifies as a gaze. This third element makes possible and guarantees the identification between the child and the mirror image as well as that between the spectator and the screen image. In the case of the cinema, Baudry argues, this third element is the gaze associated with the camera.

I now want to return to the question of the split between the eye and the gaze about which Lacan says: »I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.« (Lacan 72) We are, he continues, »beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world. (...) Is there no satisfaction in being under that gaze (...) that circumscribes us, and which in the first instance makes us beings who are looked at, but without showing this?« (Lacan 75)

In a conscious waking state this function of the gaze is usually elided, but shows itself only in special moments (Lacan mentions the images of the dream, paintings etc.). In other words, the gaze is that which is invisible. This is also the moment through which the absence of the signified is manifested. The gaze does not acknowledge the subject, it does not look, but rather causes a disturbance, a toppling of the subject. This gaze unfolds itself in the place of the Other and enables the child's first identification at the cost of an originary alienation: »The gaze is something from which the subject has separated itself off, but which was once part of the subject; it is thus an *objet petit a*.« (Cowie 1997, 288)

Silverman takes up this difference between the eye² and gaze in asserting that the gaze does not look, that in this sense it is misleading even to refer to

² In Silverman's considerations the eye is the look, the bodily context of the eye, the

it as a gaze. Nevertheless in her subsequent arguments she indicates, in explicit reference to Lacan, that the gaze is in a metaphoric relation to the camera. The only function of this cinematic apparatus, according to Silverman, is to put the subject in the picture. How this »being in the picture«, this »being photographed«, how this operates is not a function of the gaze, but rather the concern of the »cultural screen«. While the gaze represents the presence of the others as such, it is the function of the eye-look to determine the direction of meaning production, that is to decide which aspects are mobilized in/through being photographed. Thus the eye-look becomes the place in which the imaginary subject encounters the almighty gaze. In this context there is a dedifferentiation of the gaze and the eye through the mediation of the »cultural screen«. The gaze as cultural gaze becomes the site of socio-cultural power which leads individuals into their respective modes of being.

The definition of the gaze as an anonymous societal look in the sense of the Foucauldian panopticon resurfaces in modified form in the analysis of the NT.

In this context the computer monitor is assimilated to the mirror and the electronic space is taken as a materialization of the unconscious. In this respect, then, it is the ideal ego which greets us in cyberspace.

To consider these claims, I shall briefly consider two examples, taken from Kathryn Hayles and Slavoj Žižek.

Virtual reality, Žižek writes, renders explicit that mechanism which until now has been hidden but was always and already foundational to the subject. And Kathryn Hayles claims in connection with cyberspace that it materializes the Lacanian mirror stage. Lacan's imaginary is thus given a three-dimensional physical reality. That is, the imaginary is made real in the sense of a technological production. Whereas Hayles equates the imaginary with physicality, she introduces the symbolic through equating it with the virtual, i.e. the electronic produced data realm or data space. Thus, she argues, »cyberspace represents a powerful challenge to the customary construction of the body's boundaries, opening them to transforming configurations that always bear the trace of the Other. The resulting disorientation can function as a wedge to destabilize presuppositions about self and the Other.« (Hayles 1993, 187)

As is well known, Lacan makes a distinction between the (lower case) »other« and the (capital) »Other«, a distinction which Žižek equates with the difference between the ideal ego and the ego-ideal as well as between

look as bodily spectacle, which is to a certain extent resistant to the gaze. (Cf. Silverman 1996, 137 ff.)

symbolic and imaginary identification. Whereas the relation with the other is imaginary in the sense that the self resembles the other, the relation with the Other is symbolic, that is, depends on the structure of language. Symbolic identification is identification with the Other, the place from where we see ourselves as likeable. This place of the Other, the symbolic order, carries within it a kernel, a Thing (das Ding), a void which the subject must conceal. That is, this gaze from the place of the Other is not a gaze in a full sense. Rather, it is an empty gaze, by which the subject is haunted and feels itself observed, but nevertheless *for whom* the subject wants to »play a role«, as Žižek points out. Both identifications – the imaginary and the symbolic – are not strictly separable because imaginary identification is always an »identification *on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other*«. (Žižek 1994, 106)

In Hayle's considerations of the »Mirror of the Cyborg«, thus the Lacanian Other slides very over into concrete others. Cyberspace is understood as offering a whole range of possibilities to interact, to communicate with »other people«. According to Hayles, the self's boundaries have to denigrate their outside. Thus women are constructed as castrated men, blacks as inferior whites, etc. The mirror (of the cyborg), by contrast, conflates self and Other, thus entailing new encounters where the Other »is accepted as both different *and* enriching«. (Hayles 188) The puppet on the screen, the avatar, thus carries the »potential to become more than a puppet, representing instead a zone of interaction that opens the subject to the exhilarating realization of Otherness valued as such.« (188)

Here it becomes clear, that both the Lacanian mirror stage and his concept of the Other have lost their meaning. The Other, as the site from which the subject is spoken, has been reduced to multicultural and social differences.

And even Žižek takes on a somewhat mystical tone when discussing the increasing computerization. He like so many others asks himself the apocalyptic question whether it is possible that the end of sexuality and the end of the human subject are at hand through the emergence of the PC. (Cf. Žižek 1996, 284)

According to him, a confusion arises with the advent of the computer, one which reactivates a stage before originary loss, before the split between ideal ego and ego-ideal.

The end of sexuality as Žižek describes it, is introduced through a partnership with a post or non-human being. Here the story between Shira and Jod, which I mentioned in the beginning, is relevant. Through this non-human being into which the subject is so to speak locked, a primordial asexual stage of being is achieved, a stage before any sexual marking and

therefore before subjectivity. Žižek illustrates this in terms of the possibilities the net offers for gender switching and creating new bodies: »What fascinates people far more than the unprecedented access to information, the new ways of learning, shopping, and so on, is the possibility of constituting virtual communities, in which I am free to assume an arbitrary sexual, ethnic, religious, etc., identity. A gay male, for example, can enter a closed sexual community and, via the exchange of messages, participate in a fictionalized group sexual activity as a heterosexual woman.« (Žižek 1996, 285)

Žižek concludes that these encounters represent the absolute fulfillment of the Cartesian subject, because all features (of the subject's identity) are contingent and interchangeable. In his description of changing one's identity on the net, Žižek equates sexual identity with ethnic and religious identity. Thus he conflates the decisive difference between the »role of gender« and the »imperative of sex«. According to Charles Shepherdson, sexual difference in contrast to gender roles is not a »human convention, like democracy or monarchy, a social form that was invented at some point in historical time, a contingent formation that one culture produced, but that might be replaced by another form«. (Shepherdson 1994, 160) Rather it has to be seen as the effect of the drive which Freud has strictly distinguished from the instinct. Gender difference, by contrast, is tied to representation, to the symbolic order, to the call of the Other and his desire.

To emphasize the imperative of sexual difference means to insist upon the structural inevitability of representation for human sexuality. This does not imply a return to a bodily nature or a natural body but rather is an indication that sexuality (according to both Freud and Lacan) is comprehended neither as gender nor sex, and the body neither as a biological fact nor a social construct, but rather as constitutively denaturalized »organ-ized by the image and the word«. (Shepherdson 1994, 170)

Upon entry to the symbolic order, the subject is organized in terms of a binary opposition, either having or being the Phallus. The Other is implicated in this relation in the sense that the subject wants either to have or be for the Other. The question of which position will be/can be taken up depends upon the desire of the Other. As such switching between gender positions is only possible to a limited extent. That is, the phantasmatic exchange of sexual positions is always accomplished from an already relatively fixed position. This applies equally to Žižek's phantasies as to other stories of gender exchange on the net such as Sherry Turkle's. As Elizabeth Cowie makes the point: »The apparent mobility of sexual fantasy, whether enacted or imagine, can only arise with a – relative – fixing of the subject's position of sexual difference and its identifications.« (Cowie 1997, 248)

The earlier mentioned connection between the field of vision and sexual difference »takes place« on the level of the drive. Due to the split between the eye and the gaze it is »in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field«. (Lacan 73) The way in which Lacan defines masculinity and femininity coincides with this split to the extent that the two sexes or better their appearance in the symbolic order, involve a similiar structure of deception, of masquerade.

Lacan takes the reality of the unconscious as a sexual reality, which has no representation of masculinity and femininity. Their difference appears only in the symbolic order as a masquerade which has to conceal its fundamental loss. A loss which is not a sexually marked loss, but rather refers, as Lacan says, to »the relation between the living subject and that which he loses by having to pass, for his reproduction, through the sexual cycle.« (Lacan 199)

The fact that masculinity and femininity have to mimic this loss, to conceal it in a masquerade, can now be identified with the dialectic relation between the eye and the gaze. That is, both relations bear upon a fundamental structure of deception. Describing love Lacan himself has made this comparison.

»When in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that – *You never look at me from the place from which I see you.*« (Lacan 103) And with respect to the field of vision he continues:

»Conversely, *what I look at is never what I wish to see. (...) A triumph of the gaze over the eye.*« (Lacan 103)

What I have said, suggests that media apparatuses such as film and NT, each in their different way, conceal this masquerade, in the sense that they make the subject believe him/herself to be part of the picture. One now could speculate about NT's different modes of concealing than film's.

In sum, in order to theorize the end of the modern subject, and relatedly the end of art and media, as well as to understand the novelty of NT, it is necessary to define the notion of the subject one is talking about. Merely to state that NT undermine Cartesian dualisms and its gender-marked subject trivializes the issue. It is also misleading to equate the subject of the unconscious with the social other in the net, as Kathryn Hayles does echoing the »cultural screen« as introduced by Kaja Silverman. In Žižek's approach the Other is excluded in NT. But as Henry Krips made the point – isn't the Other in the case of the net a prosthetic Other (a cruel superego) from which pleasure can be derived. And isn't this function taken over by the virtual community of the users? In his more recent analysis – in the *Plague of Fantasies* (1997) – Žižek argues that what happens in VR is the foreclosure of the real. This comes very close to what I am arguing: that media

apparatuses are means of concealing the void. The question, then, is in what different ways NT blurs the line between the subject and the user? More specifically, what drives the subject, so that his location, which is strictly speaking a non-location, can be encompassed – as image, before the image and behind the image. Or to put it in a slightly different way: ... *in-between time after before but before after*.

This phrase by Brian Massumi, then, marks the bridge between the body (as such) and the representational body and might therefore be taken as an image to think with, to think of the relation between the body and its various stages of virtuality.

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Notes

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