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BODIES AND CULTURE IN THE CYBERAGE. A REVIEW ESSAY.

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A REVIEW ESSAY[1].

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The astonishing velocity with which technological innovations confront us triggers the necessity to understand their functioning, multiple implications and possible transformations. It is not surprising, thus, that the scholarly production on science and technology is burgeoning. Since the present was declared to be the information age, and as we experience the effects of many new ways of communicating and processing information, magazines, books and articles have proliferated on such issues as cyberspace, cyberculture, cyberbodies, a proof that paper is also doing fine in an era of bits, bytes and screens. It could be argued that such a co-existence is a necessity for scholars educated in the early days of computer literacy, of people that are, by definition, paper lovers. But I'd rather think it as a sheer demonstration of the overlapping nature of communication technologies and apparatuses of reproduction.

In **Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk. Cultures of Technological Embodiments** editors Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows gathered a most representative collection of essays on the impact of computer technology on society, bodies and culture[3]. The book is a highly stimulating anthology, covering a wide spectrum of

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1. I do not pretend this to be a review in the classic sense of the term. Rather, the following are the many different thoughts inpired by the reading of **Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk. Cultures of Technological Embodiments**, edited by Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows (see endnote "i"). For readers expecting a typical review, I hope that this text will serve as an index of how stimulating the book is. This text will appear in CULTURE & PSYCHOLOGY, a journal published by Sage.

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3. The book is comprised of the following articles: `Cultures of Technological Embodiment: an Introduction', by Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows; `Feedback and Cybernetics: Reimaging the Body in the Age of Cybernetics', by David Tomas; `The Future Looms; Weaving Women and Cybernetics', by Sadie Plant; `The Design of Virtual Reality', by Michael Heim; `Postmodern Virtualities', by Mark Poster; `The Embodied Computer/User', by Deborah Lupton; `Rear-View Mirrorshades: the Recursive Generation of the Cyberbody', by Nigel Clark; `Ciberspace and the World We Live In', by Kevin Robins; `Descartes Goes to Hollywood: Mind, Body and Gender in Contemporary Cyborg Cinema', by Samantha Holand,; `Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner, by Alison Landsberg; `Meat (or How to Kill Oedipus in Cyberspace)', by Nick Land; `Beating the Meat/Surviving the Text, or How to Get Out of This Century Alive', by Vivian Sobchack; `Forms of Technological Embodiment: Reading the Body in Contemporary Culture', by

issues, something that will allow readers unfamiliar with this discussion to get directly into its state-of-the-art. This eclectic volume, heavily influenced by postmodernist agendas and rhetoric, comprises sophisticated examinations and accounts of the history of information and communication technology; of the relationships between people, culture, computers and virtual reality. It also illustrates the contradictory feelings, discourses and visions on technological innovation. There is a variety of positions: from feminist and Tai-Chi standpoints, to wishing Baudrillard finds himself in the middle of a car crash; from extensive theorizing about Robocop and the Terminator, to postmodern textual experiments. It includes essays that are laudatory of the NTCs (new technologies of communication), of the possibilities of body reconstruction, and texts that often assume visionary or apocalyptic perspectives. Consider, for example, the following passages:

> "There is no escape from the meat, the flesh, and cyberspace is nothing transcendent. These are simply the disguises which pander to man's projections of his own rear-view illusions; reproductions of the same desires which have guided his dream of technological authority and now become the collective nightmare of a soulless integration" (Plant, 60).

> "From the viewpoint of human evolution, VR (virtual reality, GLR) resembles the invention of fire"(Heim, 69).

> "Running free in cybernetic spaces, proliferating and transmuting at unpredictable velocities, autonomous digital entities operate at a further remove from the gaze or touch of the human agent than any prior generation of forms"(Clark, 130).

> "By prosthetic memories I mean memories which do not come from a person's lived experience in any strict sense. These are implanted memories, and the unsettled boundaries between real and simulated ones are frequently accompanied by another disruption: of the human body, its flesh, its subjective autonomy, its difference from both the animal and the technological"(Landsberg, 175).

> "VR is less a change of levels than a mutation of circuitry; a matter of additive sensory-motor reloopings, compressing anthropohistorical consensus reality into a menu option as it denaturalizes the brain"(Land 203).

Although in a lesser extent, the book also includes perspectives that are overtly critical of the debate's hyperbolic rhetoric and of some of its hidden agendas. Kevin Robins, for instance, states: "the contemporary debate on cyberspace and virtual reality is

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Anne Balsamo; `Ciber(body)parts: Prosthetic Consciousness', by Robert Rawdon Wilson; `Corpses, Animals, Machines and Mannequins: The Body and Cyberpunk', by Kevin McCarron.

something of a consensual hallucination, too. (...) It is a tunnel vision. It has turned a blind eye on the world we live in"(135). For Vivian Sobchack -- herself "prosthetically enabled ... nonetheless, not a cyborg" (210) -- the "alienated and highly fetishized fascination with the body-object (the body that we have) and the devaluation of the lived-body (the body that we are) is a consequence of a dangerous confusion between the agency that is our bodies/our selves and the power of our incredible new technologies of perception and expression"(211). She criticizes the "romanticism and fantasies of techno-sexual transcendence"(207), "high-tech millenarism" with its disavowal of the "moral material and significance of the lived body" (210), the "delusional liberatory rhetoric of technophiles"as well as the "dangerous liberatory poetry of cultural formalists like Baudrillard who long to escape the lived body and its limitations and write it off (quite literally) as just another sign of its times"(210)

The diversity of positions within the book is one of the sources of its virtues but is also indicative of some limitations typical of the discussion on technological innovation. Arguments are often caught in the utopia/dystopia trap, a bias that orients the formation of two distinct groups dubbed integrationists and apocalypticists by Umberto Eco (1976). For authors who are likely to think of themselves as vanguardists struggling with problems that are at the cutting-edge of their own time, it is hard to avoid the temptation of futurology, a rather common endeavor in this period of ideological turbulence and transition[4]. Such a 'temptation' develops into an ambivalent fascination with novelty, something clear in authors' rhetorical strategies.

In this connection, **Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk. Cultures of Technological Embodiment** is a good example of the fluid, contradictory field where authors working with technological innovation find themselves. It includes, for instance, discussions on "post-bodied and post-human forms of existence", "post-gendered possibilities", "cybersociety", "new disembodied subjectivities", "a machine-based history of the western body", "cybernetic feminism", "alternate world syndrome", "apperceptive virtual reality", "new cultural formations of the self", "simulational culture", "psychotopography of machine culture", "technosocial subject", "computerphobia", "simstim " (simulated stimulation), "hyperbolized bodies of the digital domain", "prosthetic memory", etc. It is clear that such a propensity for neologisms, besides being common to the academic milieu, stems from the very nature of the inquiries. After all, if there is an activity directly linked to progress and innovation that is technology.

I want to suggest that we need to be more critical of the fascination with novelty. It often develops into narcissistic textual exercises where authors get seduced by the beauty and creativity of their own writings, no matter how far this seduction might take them from reality. The status of reality is a central problem in social sciences epistemology, one that is often revisited with striking nonchalance when the topic is cyberspace. The verb is to blur. The noun is transcendence. I am not arguing in favor of empiricism. Cyberspace and virtuality do pose new questions about the way we face the real world and, thus, they require new imaginative efforts. But the mediation of symbolic and linguistic systems, pivotal to the understanding of VR, is as primordial to the definition of human agency as

4. Despite the fact that postmodernists criticize the modernist vanguards they surely write as enligthtened intellectuals. The very prefix 'post'is also indicative of a presumed advancement in relationship to an outmoded historical period.

technology. What we are currently experiencing is an exponential increase in the role of simulacra and simulations in the way we perceive natural and social reality.

Virtuality is nothing new, it is embedded in our ability to use symbols and to communicate. It has always enlarged, deferred and decentered subjects since it allows for a person to imagine himself in other situations, to create real structures from pure abstractions, to know of people and places he will never personally see, to extend his grasp on the world and his representation of himself to others that will never share copresence with him. However, given NTCs capabilities, virtuality's visibility is reaching unprecedented levels of accuracy and frequency. I think of virtuality as a third category between reality and imagination (Ribeiro, in print). These three entities maintain relationships of transit between them, mutually informing each other. The main difference between imagination and virtuality is that while the first invades subjects, the latter retains subjects capacities of agency (Maldonado 1994). One can always stop reading a book, leave a movie theater, turn off the TV or the computer.

In spite of the fact that the seduction exerted by NTCs provides interesting grounds to write essays, the most challenging issue, and not necessarily a new one, is to understand how changes in the uses of language, signs, symbols and icons relate to changes in the structuration of human subjects. This may lead us to further understand what Lévy (1993) calls the "technologies of intelligence", to reach a plateau from which we will be able to investigate the impacts that new forms of communication may have on subjectivation. Otherwise, we will be left with a mixture of dystopian or utopian approaches that rely on a naive conception of human subjectivity and agency. Dystopian approaches will tell us that men are succumbing to their own gimmicks, being overruled by them, and being led to a catastrophic dehumanized dead-end. Utopian approaches will say that this is another evolutionary step towards a point of perfection in the future. Both approaches will often resort to some version of the overload of information syndrome and will not be able to answer questions such as what is the difference between, for instance, my generation, the TV generation, and my greatgrandparents' in terms of subjectivity formation. Are we substantively distinct? Or, is this radical difference the destiny of the "digital generation"? How does an increase of exposure to information and virtuality relate to changes in subject formation? This is really an anthropological problem. We know that there are different cultural and historical modes through which men think and construct reality, but this recognition does not imply incommensurability.

I will consider other issues related to the fascination with novelty. First, it is the source of uncritical imports of worldviews and lexicon of practitioners and ideologues of technological advancement as expressed in the field of computer mediated communication and of the digital world. Second, it relates to an epistemological and ideological crisis within the social sciences that may have profound implications for the future of sociology and anthropology, for instance, and of which the postmodernist debate is an index. This crisis generated fertile grounds for new agendas and perspectives but also generated a foundational desire for new theoretical frameworks.

The powerful impacts that cultural studies, literary analysis, post-structuralism and postmodernism had on social scientists are perhaps the source of a propensity to emphasize the importance of fiction as a privileged universe of analysis and interpretation. But to confound science fiction with social theory may be a form of what Pierre Bourdieu (1991) called spontaneous sociology. This is problematic not only because writers are not social

scientists (and do not need to think as social scientists) but mainly because programmatic claims are certainly smuggled into 'social theory' when authors uncritically take visionary discourses as their analytical and interpretetive horizons and tools.

I am not arguing that social scientists can or should construct ideology-free theories, and mine is not a corporate claim nor a defense of any canon. It is obvious that intellectuals may develop fine interpretations in a manner independent of professional or academic membership. Cross-fertilization is also a current and auspicious factor. My concern is that the trend I am criticizing may result in the reifying of literature and in the suspension of the proper theoretical effort within the social sciences, in favor of an assumed enlightened theory of the social embedded in literary texts. I can reasonably ask several questions. If the metaphorical power of **Neuromancer**, by William Gibson, for instance, grants his fiction the status of a "prefigurative social theory", to use Mike Davis expression quoted by Featherstone and Burrows (8), should we go back to the books of Jules Verne (1828-1905) and read them as social theory and not as insightful indexes of the possibilities of his time? Why must writers know more about social reality than social scientists themselves? If that is the case, why are people trained in such a tradition? Is it enough to be intuitive about one's own society, culture and historical time? What are the limits of metaphors[5]? Writers, artists, politicians, leaders, shamans, and many others, often have powerful insights about their own time, culture and society. This does not necessarily turn their discourses into "social theory". Otherwise, anthropology, for instance, would not be necessary. It would suffice to record natives' discourses. Imagine if the criticism of the realist claims of ethnographic texts reached the point where the only legitimate interpretation would be that of the native. In a perverse loop, we would be back to empiricism.

The quest for originality, for understanding the new "high-tech millenarisms"(to quote Sobchack's provocative phrase) in the absence of other more radically political forms of millenarisms, has many derivations that are not limited to the academic field. As we turn our attention to "disembodiments" we should not forget to ask whose bodies we are talking about. Issues such as power inequality that, perhaps twenty years ago, were deemed as fundamental, are now seldom considered or tend to be considered only in the midst of wide abstractions, such as when authors refer to transnational capitalism. We may again be facing a vanguardist attitude, one that supposes that in the future the possibility of radical body reconstruction will reach everyone. This may be true, but at present we need to take into account the pragmatics of body reconstruction, i.e. the social, economic and political contexts where such new possibilities are inserted. This is needed if not only to be able to influence how the future will be.

"The emphasis on such things as prosthetic devices and lens implants indicates not symbolic corruption but consumer desire, linked to the great American belief in reinventing the self," writes Kevin McCarron (268). Not only that. The possibility of overcoming

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5. I found the following passages by David Tomas (33) very appropriate to illuminate this issue: "An analogy or metaphor that is pushed too far could prove to be as damaging as a false or superficial analogy. (...) The binding power of metaphors and analogies could ... work in both directions. They could create fields for investigation or they could just as easily curb investigation through seduction, the spells cast by simple clear and elegant images or relationships, as in the case of the computer as mind/mind as computer analogy".

diseases through organ transplants raises old problems related to the works of unequal development. It is certainly a minority who has access to such a possibility, and a minority mostly found in the United States and Europe. It is Kevin McCarron again who is sensitive to this matter. He quotes two strong passages from Marge Piercy's novel 'Women on the Edge of Time'(1976): "poor people are not like people. They're walking organ banks" and "the multinationals own everybody"(269). As medical technologies improve in a fast pace, we witness another perverse inversion. This time poor people are banks and poor countries are donors[6].

Techno- and Cyberprojections.

There is a good degree of coincidence in the book on cyberspace and cyborgs as part of a search for transcendence and as indexes of the cultural anxieties of our times. David Tomas (21-43) argues, amongst other things, that cybernetics creates the scientific background which allows for the existence of a unified semantic field that implodes the man/machine line, fostering speculations about fusions and visionary machine/human entities. This "technological imaginary" (Robins, 137) feeds uncertainties about the human bodies and, for Tomas again, makes the "cyborg" a cultural category part of the post-modern phenomenon. The body can now be conceived as pure information and virtuality (Tomas 39).

Deborah Lupton notes the existence of a strong utopian discourse on computers as a means of escaping the body (100), the "idealized virtual body" propitiating an "apotheosis of the post-Enlightenment separation of the body from the mind"(101). The cyborg is the closest entity to this ideal. For Lupton personal computers are sites "redolent with cultural anxieties around the nature of humanity and the self"(108) . This is part of a larger situation where, she believes - following Anthony Giddens - trust became "central to human interactions particularly in relation to complex technical systems"(108); the problem is that this trust is based on ignorance, which in turn is the breeding ground for ambivalence, skepticism or caution (108). For Kevin McCarron, the abandonment of the body is a characteristic of cyberpunk literature "to privilege the genre's ultimate goal: pure mind"(262). For him, although cyberpunk writers remain caught in the Cartesian dichotomy of body/mind, they "introduce machinery in the form of 'enhanced' humans, androids and cyborgs which complicates Descartes' satisfying binary division; an ambivalent third term is inserted and the subsequent disquieting experience, of characters in the texts and by readers and viewers of the texts, is primarily ontological"(263).

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6. It would be interesting to follow the unfolding of the debate over the American organ transplant policy, for instance. Federal agencies, politicians, nonprofit organizations, doctors and patients, comprise a unique political field where choosing who lives or dies is not immune to pressures based on political, economic or scientific leverage. The problem involves a complex system of weighing priorities and is not only of interest for medical ethicists but also for social scientists who study body, discourse and power. See Weiss (1996).

I agree with Anne Balsamo for whom the "postmodern embodiment is not a singularly discursive condition" (233). I tend to think with the above authors that the symbolic efficacy of cyberpunk, cyberspace and cyborg resides in its power to metaphorize not only the body condition in postmodernity, when culture and technology clearly implode into each other, but also many of the present cultural and ideological anxieties informed by the technological imaginary. In the following pages, I will take into consideration a broad view of this metaphorical power, something typical of technology in general, but much more powerful when we deal with technologies of communication. Later I will explore a more restrict set of metaphors related directly to cyberspace.

Cyborgs and cyberspace provide the exploratory grounds to discuss ontological issues involving the relationships between man, nature and man-made environment and objects. What is human? What is artificial? What is life? The changing conditions of reproduction of social life place, once again, these old questions in the front scene. Humans have always been immersed in metaphorical universes that enabled the questioning of the unknowable. Interestingly enough, these metaphors commonly involve simulacra, 'replicants' that often revolt against their creators threatening them or their established order. It has been the case from Adam through Frankenstein and cyborgs. Transcendence is the key word, since technological creations imply extensions of the finite mortal body and the empowerment of subjects in their relations with nature and social actors.

Indeed, the role of technology is crucial here. Our species is definitely caught in a feedback system that involves our bodies, the external world and our ability to control and enhance it for our own benefit. The use of tools, in an evolutive time scale, implied organic and anatomical differentiations that were crucial for the development of Homo Sapiens. We are in as much a product of culture as of biology (Geertz 1978). In the time scale of the species evolution, the line between man's internal and external conditions is blurred. It is clear that in the process of becoming human we internalized the effects of our manipulation of the external world. In this sense, human beings have always been cyborgs.

The flipside of our technological extensions is the phantom of the revolt of the things, especially, as mentioned before, when "things" are simulacra intended to mirror their creators. Endowed, to lesser or greater degree, with our own functionalities and capabilities things are projections that can revert their own powers against humans[7]. Machines and prostheses, besides being supplementary to the body, are also causes of death. According to Robert Rawdon Wilson "any consideration of prostheses has to take into account their potential failure and, even, the conditions under which they might go wrong or turn against their users. The consciousness of machines always includes, as Porush observes, a dimension of fear"(242).

But, now, we are faced with a hyper-complex relationship with technology; one where the body can be engineered, rebuilt, reshaped, reconfigured. In **Cyberspace, Cyberbodies and Cyberpunk** this new situation is well explored. Fears of loosing memory, identity, integrity, agency, power and control are taken into account in several articles. The ambivalent fascination of technology reveals itself entirely. On one hand, the wish of transcendence. On the other, the fear of subjugation, of dehumanisation.

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7. Lupton mentions the existence of an "anxiety around the technologies'capacity to consume us"(106).

There are many projections that can be made and explored with regards to cyberspace since it is a locus prone to metaphorize all kinds of situations and desires (Aranha 1996). For Allucquère Rosanne Stone (1994: 107) cyberspace is directly related to the desire and fantasies of young males[8]. Transcendence, together with the feeling of omnipresence associated with the Internet, obviously remits to god's image. But I want to allude to more immediate projections. Clark's and Lupton's passages (102-3, 118) on hackers called my attention to how much of the hackers' conceptions of bodies, social and cultural life (especially given their importance in early cyberculture history) is present (a) in the kind of addictive and ambivalent (hate and love) relations regular users maintain with their PCs, and, specially, (b) in emergent cyberculture, cybercommunities and cyberpolitics. Hackers are often described as reclusive and as people that do not like their own bodies. In cyberspace they find an environment to project their own fantasies. It is a place they master, where they are not lonely anymore, and where they can assume whatever identity they please. Clark seems to have a positive vision of this. For him "early hackers" attracted by the playful universe of numbers and the many possibilities of the "digital underworld" found there "a ground for the stabilization of identity: identity based on substance rather than surface, performance rather than appearance"(119).

Notwithstanding hackers' contributions to the construction of a decentralized network and the fact that playing with one's own identity is not something exclusive to cyberspace (think of how many people do that in the real world of metropolitan cities, where anonymity also reigns), I deem Kevin Robins' preoccupations worthwhile considering. In his attempt to re-socialize and re-politicize the issue, he criticizes the idea that in cyberspace identity is a matter of choice (137 and ff). He is worried about "narcissistic forms of regression" and with the fact that "the created environment may respond to psychotic states of mind"(143). For him the virtual world is a psychotic space where the "reality of the real world is disavowed; the coherence of the self deconstructed into fragments; and the quality of experience reduced to sensation and intoxication" (144). Furthermore, "virtual empowerment may be a solipsistic affair encouraging a sense of self-containment and self-sufficiency" (idem) and "a refusal to recognize the substantive and independent reality of others and to be involved in relations of mutual dependency and responsibility" (ibidem).

Robins arguments are well taken but sometimes he exaggerates and draws a total dystopian picture. In fact, he acknowledges that perhaps he overstated his case (Robins, 152). Virtual reality and apparatuses are technological innovations that, like many others, can be used by different people for different purposes. Cyberspace may indeed attract psychotic persons. It could be argued, though, that these people are psychotic in the real world and find a means to actualize their views in the virtual one[9]. Furthermore, many

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8. Several authors in the book also consider different types of technological advancement, with their implications of body manipulation and penetration, as directly linked to males' desires. Samantha Holland (167) mentions a need to assert "transcendental masculinity" as part of her discussion on cyborgs and the **Terminator** films.

9. See, for instance, the case of a Maryland woman who had a business on the World Wide Web and that in electronic "chat rooms"dealing with necrophilia asked several times to be tortured to death. According to **The Washington Post**, "several men corresponded with her but stopped when they concluded she was serious". Other people in the Internet tried to convince her to forget her

people commit crimes and violence inspired by telephone conversations, movies, TV shows and books. Are the latter "psychotic spaces"? They can surely be, but not necessarily. One unexpected implication of taking the "cyberspace = psychotic space" interpretation to its limit may be the opening of a window to explore the use of cyberspace and virtual reality (the utmost screen for projections of fantasies and repressed memories) in psychological cure[10].

The meaning of "imaginative identification" and "emotional possession" is what is at stake here. Alison Landsberg (179) brings in these notions developed in the thirties by Herbert Blumer to assess the effects of motion pictures on viewers. Some passages of her essay: "What individuals see might affect them so significantly that the images actually become part of their own personal archive of experience"(179); "the experience within the movie theater and the memories that the cinema affords - despite the fact that the spectator did not live through them - might be as significant in constructing, or deconstructing, the spectator's identity as any experience that s/he actually lived through (180). I also think that we are at the onset of a "new regime of visuality" (Clark, 127, quoting Jonathon Crary). Equally important is what is known and unknown about the operations of virtuality in the constitution of the human subject[11]. But, at this point, I want to emphasize amongst the powerful elements attracting people to enact different identities in cyberspace not only the wish to escape from the constraints of the different iron cages they are immersed as social actors, but the fact that they can enhance the interplay between imagination, virtuality and reality, an interplay that exerts fascination since it is at the core of the dynamics of the universe of human communication.

I will rapidly mention other types of projections that could be further explored. Kevin McCarron (268) made an important point when he recalled the American myth of the endless possibilities of self-reinvention. Indeed, puritanism and individualism should also be part of our considerations. For Balsamo (220) "an often-repressed dimension of the information age [is] the material identity of the technobody". McCarron, again, goes straight to the point: "it is possible that, perhaps paradoxically, much of cyberpunk's appeal lies in its puritanical dismissal of the body"(262). The issue of American individualism, on

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intentions. The woman finally met a man who "engaged in raw, sexual and violent conversations" with her by e-mail. She travelled to meet this man, a computer programmer in North Carolina. After her husband notified the police that she was missing, her body was found with a rope that "may have been the means of her death", buried by the home of the computer analyst. The man is being charged for homicide. The police found a letter left behind near her computer that said: "if my body is never retrieved, don't worry. Know that I am at peace". In Struck and Shen (1996).

10. It is equally important to take into consideration the possibilities opened by computers to assist persons physically impaired or with cognitive problems. Here an interesting field of research is also opened for medical anthropology. Finally, as asserted by Featherstone and Burrows (13-16), simulations within cyberspace are yet to be explored as a means to enhance our understanding of social processes.

11. The works of A.R. Stone (1992, 1994, 1995) and Pierre Lévy (1993) represent important contributions towards that direction. In **Cyberspace, Cyberbodies...** the notion of "alternate world syndrome", a lag that "occurs between the virtual body and the biological body" (67), introduced by Michael Heim, could have been more explored.

the other hand, needs to be understood in the context of a media-saturated society and of the Internet's demographics, a realm dominated, until now, by white, middle-class males. The Internet is a latecomer in a suburbanized mass society that has been experiencing different upheavals in the relationships between its private and public domains. We need to understand how the (re)production of solitude is linked to contemporary processes of media production, consumer culture, and urbanization in mass societies, especially in advanced industrialized ones. The United States, for instance, is a country with many lonesome people. Numbers have grown in the past 25 years. A recent study of the U.S. Census Bureau indicated, for the year of 1995, an astonishing percentage of 25% of single-person households (Kilborn, 1996).

Last but not least, computer networks may also be treated as metaphors of transnational capitalism, a trend inaugurated perhaps by Jameson (1984) and very much present today. It is common to find in cyberpunk fiction a critique of capitalism. It is McCarron who concludes: "the demonic, the truly inhuman, in the texts I'm considering here is the global, multinational corporation, a body not made of flesh but of money, and the Faustian characters who are at the apex of the corporate structure"(271).

The Issue of Cybercommunities

As more and more people enter cyberspace, the idea of virtual communities becomes popular. Howard Rheingold (1993) wrote a best-seller on this subject. He is criticized by Kevin Robins who sees virtual communities as a nostalgia for real ones and as dreams of perfect Rousseauist communities. For him "there is the invocation of community, but not the production of a society. There is 'groupmind', but no social encounter. There is on-line communion, but there are no residents of hyperspace. This is another synthetic world, and here, too, history is frozen. What we have is the preservation through simulation of the old forms of solidarity and community. In the end not an alternative society but an alternative to society"(150). But pretending to create an idyllic collectivity is an artifice present in all claims to community. What this means is that "communities" are products of selective, political and symbolical processes, a phenomenon that we could (re)christen as "community building". To be a member of a collective entity is coterminal with the definition of man. Social actors need to feel they are members of distinct imagined collectivities in spite of the fact that all of them are historically, politically and culturally constructed and differentiated. In his interesting critique of "virtual communities", Robins seems to understate the fundamental role played by classificatory and communication mechanisms such as totems (Durkheim, 1968), books and newspapers (print capitalism as Anderson, 1991, puts it), in the creation of "societies" and "communities". Furthermore, the fact that you cannot have copresence in VR does not mean that you are not able to meet people and interact with them (electronic copresence) and that you cannot have a "sense of unity and mutuality in a shared whole" (Robins, 150). Besides, a member of a "community" in the real world does not necessarily know each one of his/her fellows. Rather s/he imagines the collectivity of which s/he is a member. All communities are imagined, and this is a function of our linguistic and symbolic capabilities. It is true that virtual communities in the Internet are new, since cyberspace is new, but virtual communities are also created by other media and have existed before

cybercommunities (Stone 1992)[12].

Since Robins text is basically marked by a dystopian perspective, he comes to state that "techno-community is fundamentally an anti-political ideal"(151). This is not entirely true. I envision, following Benedict Anderson's steps, the Internet as the techno-symbolic basis of an emergent transnational virtual-imagined community (Ribeiro, in print). Moreover, there is a great amount of politics and power games in cyberspace (Kroker & Weinstein, 1994; Critical Art Ensemble, 1994; Schwartau, 1995). Virtual space is not only "a domain of order, refuge, withdrawal"(152). Hackers, for instance, are ambivalent figures that are also seen as a threat to the reproduction of economic, military and political power, now highly dependent on the complex interaction of electronic and magnetic means. The use the EZLN (**Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional**) makes of the Internet, is perhaps the clearest demonstration of what I call the efficacy of "witnessing at distance", the virtual power of the world public opinion, of the transnational community, a phenomenon typical of globalised mass societies (Ribeiro, 1996). Witnessing at distance is taken to paroxysm in the Internet since it allows for instantaneous, collective, decentered, and transnational "activism at distance". In another paradoxical operation of cyberspace it enlarges public sphere and political action through the virtual world and reduces them in the real one[13].

As we see, it is not only the nature of community but of power in the contemporary world that needs to be debated in light of the discussion prompted by the cyber prefix. My concerns about the future of democracy lead to a brief and last comment. Robins is right when he criticizes techno-dreams of Rousseauist political bodies. Full-fledged electronic, direct democracy is a fascinating possibility. But it can also transform the democratic process, a process based on innumerable power negotiations and rhetoric games that qualify individual and collective political actors, into a string of dull, sometimes meaningless referenda performed not at the open public scene but at ascetic and shielded individual electronic homes. The choice frenzy of consumer culture unequivocally migrates to the political market. Just push the button on any kind of issue and you will be partici-choosing. The very core of democracy, the transformative, discursive, and hopefully knowledgeable mediation of conflicts and interests, can be reduced to a technical and numerical event. If such a simulation of democracy (simdemo) is ever installed it will certainly represent a most effective mode of reproducing the status quo.

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12. I agree with Mark Poster (90), for whom "just as virtual communities are understood as having the attributes of 'real' communities, so 'real'communities can be seen to depend on the imaginary: what makes a community vital to its members is their treatment of the communications as meaningful and important. Virtual and real communities mirror each other in chiasmic juxtaposition".

13. Cyberspace also blurs the line between public and private, since one can literally bring home a virtual anonymous crowd. This prompts new problems: "home is now no longer a place of safety and refuge for children ...'Outside'danger [such as "contact with paedophiles, pornography and sexual exchanges over email or chat networks", 109] is brought 'inside', into the very heart of the home, via the Internet" (Lupton, 110).

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