

DIGITISING THE FEMALE BODY: A STUDY OF COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN IN CYBER SPACE

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Abstract

The advent of Internet has created a new/parallel universe that opens up the global traffic of knowledge, measurements, indicators, entertainments, commodities and alters human agency taken on form. William Gibson, for the first time, named this parallel world as Cyberspace in his work *Neuromancer* (1984). Gibson envisions it as a graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Michael Benedikt has defined the cyberspace as “a common mental geography, built, in turn by consensus and revolution, canon and experiment; a territory swarming with data and lies, with mind stuff and memories of nature, with a million voices and two million eyes in a silent, invisible concert to enquiry, deal-making, dream sharing and simple beholding” (2000:19). Pierre Levy situates the core of cyberspace in the fact that it embodies a new universality not based on the fixity and independence of signification, but built and extended by interconnecting messages through virtual communities. Thus, it provokes the continuous renewal of meanings and the performance of a collective intelligence, whereby people share their individual expertise in order to meet shared goals and objectives. Therefore, cyberspace is a matrix of embedded practices and representations in the virtual world. It examines how computer and information technologies take the dynamics of culture and social relations in dramatically new directions. JakubMacek points out that the cyberculture is an ambiguous, confusing, unclear term describing a set of issues. It can be used in a descriptive, analytical or ideological sense. So Macek emphasises that cyberculture has multiplicity of meanings that connected to representations, texts, images and so on.

The multiple facets of cyberspace have been welcomed by Donna Haraway (1991), Sadie Plant (1997), Susan Lukman (1999) and Anna Munster (1999) to seek feminist characteristics of the virtual world. Cyberfeminists emphasise the transformative power of cyberspace, or the virtual world that allows women to transcend gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and other identity categories to generate a more egalitarian reality within the virtual public sphere. They define cyberfeminism as a fresh understanding of the relationship between gender, space and technology. But the actual interventions in cyberspace show that it cannot escape the social construction of gender because the space is constructed by gendered individuals. Unlike the cyberfeminist notion of cyberspace as an idealised public sphere, it actually functions as a text for commodification of the female body. E-Commerce sites, those achieve maximum reach through social media, use the female body to create a hyperreal condition. As women constitute the large section of targeted consumers, the greater inclusion of women in cyberspace is entertained for corporate needs. So the cyberfeminist myth of the cyberspace as an idealised

public sphere assists the capitalist marketing strategy. The paper studies how women are being reified in their marginalised position in cyberspace.

Keywords – Cyberculture, cyberspace, cyberfeminism, commodification, surveillance capitalism

The rise of new digital technologies of Information and communication has introduced an accelerated rate of change in the global economy and socio-cultural practices. It has enhanced the management of information and communication systems, which have gradually developed a style of life, turned to a culturally and socialized stabilized medium. The advent of Internet is considered as a social revolution more than a technological revolution. The Internet performs multiple functions such as a world-wide broadcasting capability, a mechanism for information dissemination and a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers regardless of their geographic location. It has caused the emergence of a new culture named cyber culture. The word “cyber culture” is used in a variety of ways, often referring to certain cultural practices born of computer and technologies, but also to specific subcultures that champion computer-related hobbies, art, language, and so on. It is not just the culture that results from computer use, but culture that is directly mediated by the computer. Cyber culture is a way of thinking about how people who use digital technologies interact, how people live together. It refers to ways of life in cyberspace or ways of life shaped by cyberspace. Cyberspace is a matrix of embedded practices and representations in the virtual world. It examines how computer and information technologies take the dynamics of culture and social relations in dramatically new directions. Jakub Macek points out that the cyber culture is an ambiguous, confusing, unclear term describing a set of issues. It can be used in a descriptive, analytical or ideological sense. So Macek emphasises that cyber culture has a multiplicity of meanings. Thinking about cyber culture involves thinking about representations, meanings, images: about the ways in which we assemble particular narratives, about how the technologies have changed, are changing and will change our change our lives (2005:35). In a broad sense cyber culture refers to activities and movements carried out through internet like “cyber activism,” “cyber café,” “cyber art” and so on. All these activities pretend to come under the umbrella term “cyber culture.” As a cultural model, an adaptive strategy, it has caused the emergence of new society that leads to the social and cultural change. During 90s and in the beginnings of 21st century, it is seen that cyber culture, at the core of internet, is assumed as a new cultural model that would change the patterns of social relations, self identity and community. It would bring new ways of political practice and economic exchange.

In the course of time, Internet has developed as a new technology that affects all spheres of life. It has caused a new social definitive division or “digital divide” that makes the people, societies, states that will not participate in the technological revolution as the “Other.” Gradually it has turned to a new social context that developed internet emergent culture or “systemic whole.” The virtual societies as well as virtual communities lead to the emergence of new cultural forms. The social interactions those take place in online social contexts recall anthropological theories and concepts to explain the emergence of community in those kinds of online settings. On the other hand, cyber space may turn the text of social interactions, not of technology. That is why David Porter points out in the *Internet Culture* that:

Communication through Internet can be understood from the perspective of culture since in virtual space one can find shared systems of beliefs, values and norms, specific ways

of doing, a common understanding of symbols of emotions, a netiquette and other signs that can perform a collective sense of belonging and community.(1997:141)

Here David Porter refers to the theoretical background linked to a holistic perspective of culture. In the structural- functionalist approach, a social group can be studied in isolation, as a complete cultural system. Thus, his studies on the online practices in relation with the daily lives of people in concrete cultural contexts explain that those may eventually turn to a part of routine activities, a social practice.

Cyberspace

The term cyberspace that appeared for the first time in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), denotes this parallel virtual universe that emerged with the advent of Internet. By cyberspace, Gibson has envisioned a graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Accordingly "[Cyberspace is an] unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights receding" (1984:61). Later in his paper "Academy Leader," Gibson has called cyberspace as "neologicspasam." Gibson defines cyberspace as "consensual hallucination" or an imaginary realm. In *All Ellipses in Original*, Gibson further goes on to say that this hallucination is daily experienced by billions of legitimate operators of all around the world for it is a domain of unthinkable complexity which eludes the nets of representation. Moreover, the non-coherent nature of the definition and Case's dismissive response suddenly align cyberspace with the sublime. So Scott Bukatman says that "if cyberspace is a "consensual hallucination" that enables users to make sense of both their actions and the circulation of information, then that hallucination works by continually referencing the kinetic urban landscape of machine-age modernity" (1994:84). In fact, both of them put forward the analysis that the urban space and data space are overlapping. The relation between them is that the image of each is consistently modifying the conception of the other. Both these weave together the consumers by invisible networks and abstract linkages.

David Tomas, an anthropologist viewed that Gibsonian cyberspace is futuristic for he has devoted due attention to the chilling socio-economic implication of cyberspace in a post-industrial context. Analysing the lives of lower social level society David Tomas shows the possible consequences of the future information age in post-industrial social and economic forms. So he suggests that the advanced digital technologies which generate cyberspace can act as a testing ground for the post-industrial anthropology. Gibson states that "cyberspace has a nice buzz to it, it's something that can advertising man might thought up, and when I got it, I knew that it was slick and essentially hollow and that I'd have to fill it up with meaning (Cited in 1992:122). He explains that he reached on this interpretation from watching children play video arcade games for they seem "to develop a belief that there's some kind of actual space behind the screen, some place you can't see but you know is there" (1996:195). A vast pool of interpretations comes out by the random searches. Howard Rheingold states in his book *Virtual Community* that "cyberspace...is the name some people use for the conceptual space where word, human relationships, data, wealth, and power are manifested by people using computer-mediated communication" (2000:5). The multiple facets of cyberspace is welcomed by a group of feminist who has been later called as cyberfeminists.

The Problematic of Cyberfeminist Vision

Cyberfeminism is one of many strands of feminisms, such as liberal, socialist and so on. Like other feminist ideologies, cyberfeminism emphasises gender as the locus in social relations and other consequent oppression of women. They consider the Internet as a potentially powerful platform for women's subversions of gender stereotypes and for development of virtual public sphere that more strongly reflects the values, priorities and aspirations of women. As a popular avenue, cyberfeminism envisions contemporary feminist interventions in technologically mediated structures of power. The word cyber feminism was coined by Sadie Plant. Cyberfeminist founders like Sadie Plant (1997), Susan Luckman (1999), AnnaMunster (1999), and Donna Haraway (1991) have long purported a utopian vision of cyberspace where gender inequalities would cease as soon as the virtual world become accessible to women. The cyber feminist venture is to challenge the male centred culture of the internet by imprinting their own models of open and accessible computer-mediated communication onto the new technologies. It draws heavily on postmodernism and psychoanalysis and challenges the ideology that technology can save the world. Cyber feminist activity is frequently utopian in its outlook. The cyber feminist exemplars are women for whom information technologies have become a central part of their everyday lived practice. They advocate that on cyberspace it is possible to construct a female centred alternative to the overwhelming cultural dominance of men with regard to matters of technological agency. Cyber feminist discourse gives voice to the women within computer culture.

Cyber feminisms have flourished in a number of Anglophone western nations like Australia, New Zealand, North America and Western Europe. Originally it is based on Plant's conceptualisation that information technology is a realm in which women should feel at ease. Plant argues that cyberspace is intrinsically a female space. Computers do not serve man's interest, for virtual reality destroys his identity. According to her, software systems are used as man's tools, his media and his weapon; all are developed in the interests of man. Women's liberation, according to her, is sustained and vitalized by the proliferation and globalisation of software technologies, all of which feed into self-organisation, self-arousing systems and enter the scene on her side. A programme of feminist intervention is not ultimately desirable for all ideas required to sustain a conception of identity which unites or negotiates women's place in the cyber space. But Plant links the desire to establish a sense of identity to essentialist attempts to construct intractable biological defences of ideological inequalities.

For cyber feminists, the Internet is an idealised public sphere, a space epitomising the much heralded level playing field. It gives a chance to challenge the existing notions of subjectivity. In cyber space, women choose to identify themselves as males whenever they need/want. This cyber-sex-change is a means to explore different facets of oneself in social interaction. It is an act of reification of existing inequalities of power structure. Cyber feminism lags behind in admitting this condition.

The Idealised Market Place

The optimistic views of telecommunication innovations are undercut by the interests of global capital, which seeks to regulate and control cyberspace. The Internet is increasingly policed by corporate interests. Almost every site, including social media, mostly functions as the text of corporate market economy. A large number of e-commerce sites are running successfully in cyberspace. In addition, cyberspace has turned a good text of advertisement. In both ways, like all other media, cyberspace serves the interests of dominant class.

Female body is commonly used as bait in vast number of advertisements for it is said to have more photogenic quality. It is used to create a hyperreal condition that can enchant consumer psyche. So the cyberspace also follows the strategy. Women's bodies are a major commodity of Internet consumption, with the pornographic industry a popular source of Internet commerce. Moreover, pornographic and commercial sites reflect male fantasies of mastery over women. So, in cyberspace, female body is continuously fetishized. The cultural forces in the real world shape the strategies of e-commerce. It seldom encourages reflections/representations of empowered women unless it serves market interests. The patriarchal power relations in the real world are being extended to the virtual world. As the cyberspace is directly under the surveillance, whichever sites the user visits frequently are used to read one's needs and tastes. So the class interests of capitalism, the industry's preoccupations with demonstrating men's mastery over women, are reflected in cyberspace.

E-commerce sites need maximum consumers. Women, for their limited mobility in public sphere, rarely spend time in real market. Virtual market may be more reachable for women. Working women, who can spend more freely, seem to be one of the targeted consumers of the virtual market. So, maximum inclusion of women consumers is a high need of the corporate. The cyberfeminist propaganda that the cyberspace is an idealised public sphere enhances the active involvement of middle class (who can avail Internet comparatively easily) in cyberspace. Ultimately, the credibility and the accessibility of cyberspace that the cyberfeminist attributes to the cyberspace accelerates the market motives where women continue to be both the object and the commodity.

Conclusion

The cyberfeminist notion of the cyberspace as a post gender arena is nothing but a utopia. It cannot be an idealised public sphere for the cyberspace merely functions as an extension of real world power relations. Women cannot transgress their object position in cyberspace as it serves the dominant class, capitalist class interests. Cyberfeminism acts as a powerful tool for capitalists to flourish their interests both economically and ideologically. Women continue to be the subaltern in cyberspace. So cyberfeminism can be said as functioning as a philosophy of reifying women's position as digital subaltern.

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