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**Disembodiment and Cyberspace:
A Phenomenological Approach**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the entangled relationship between the technology of cyberspace and the rhetoric of disembodiment by using Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach. I start with an overview of the Enlightenment's epistemology regarding the body and precisely that of the Cartesian split, then go on to argue how the body still subsists in the symbolic world created by virtual reality, focusing on materiality, speciality and bodily experiences within the realm of cyberspace. This is an attempt to negate the idea that digital environment is the location *par excellence* for fulfilling the dream of Cartesian dualism.

Amidst the incessant encounters with new technologies and the hyperbolic narrativisation of their possibilities, key Enlightenment ideals come into being again, all the while confusing and deranging modernity's notions of self and body, of individual and community. In every utopian encounter, images are conjured of how technology may set us astray from the reality of our own existence, from the limitations of time, distance and space, and most saliently, from the constraints of our own bodies. In this essay, I shall attempt to phenomenologically examine what is believed (Coyne, 1999: 5) to be shared pervasive themes in both, Enlightenment and new technology: the body, subjectivity and identity. As a starting point for this task, I shall highlight some of the dominant Western visions of the self, furthering the analysis with particular reference to cyberspace.

◆ digital narratives represent one of two antagonistic stands of the Enlightenment: rationalism and romanticism. Their continual antagonism seems to impel much of the intrigue with information technology, and further support its participation in the myth of unity

and multiplicity. Many people eschew rationalism, but in doing so simply move to a romantic orientation, reworking old ground.

Coyle, 1999: 6-7

Be it in terms of romanticism or rationalism, to Coyne, digital narrative is but a reiteration of Enlightenment philosophy and a refurbishment of its epistemology: community building (cyberspace as a virtual locus for social interaction, constructed through binary codes of bits and bytes), proximity (erosion of time and space boundaries through electronic communications), virtual reality (engineered emulation of reality), artificial intelligence (the basis of knowledge is grounded in numbers, 'pure ideas' and hence positivism), subjectivity (subjective and personal aspirations as the source of the aura and creativity in romanticism), utopia (the quest for a better life through technology) and what is of most interest to us at this instance, conceptual disembodiment (transcendence of body limitations through electronic prosthesis). The point of departure for this cyclical culmination, yet unending venture of Enlightenment was Descartes' (cited in Seidler: 1998: 17 and Springer, 1996: 16) metaphysical axiom '*Cogito, ergo sum*' (I think, therefore I am), which extolled the capacity of individual reason as the foundation of awareness and the locus of knowledge. As a rationalist philosopher and mathematician, Descartes forcefully separated between mind and body and thereby articulated a Cartesian dualism that has long provided a pivotal feature for the hegemony of Western culture.

Central to this Cartesian epistemology is a systematic belief in the supremacy of logical reason over the illogical nature, as such; Enlightenment philosophy assumes that the rational self has an 'inner' relationship with the mind and an 'outer' relationship with the body. Therefore, the body is conceived not as part of 'who we are' but part of nature, hence an object to be controlled and mechanised (Seidler, 1998: 17). With the Kantian philosophy of ethics, reason is identified with morality for it provides the *priori* principles for knowledge, certainty and universal law, whereas the body is identified with feelings and emotions, which are, according to Kant, external 'forms of determination and a lack of freedom' taking us away from the path of pure reason' (Seidler, 1998: 17). Indeed, this very attitude of inflation towards the mind and deflation towards the body has long set the stage for the 'transcendental' ideals in an attempt to articulate the order of 'empirical' world beyond its particularities and peculiarities, or to use phenomenological terms, beyond its 'immanence' (Husserl, 1990: XVII), driving the Western culture to its quest of disembodiment.

From here, the notion of transcendence went on to act as a basis for objective and universal knowledge, reinforcing the Cartesian 'method' of existence and cognition, and ratifying the need of disembodied experience, yet, dialectically espousing a synthesis of mind and body where the latter became the obedient

rather than the 'prison' of the former. In fact, this disdain for the body entails a disdain for anything relating to it, such as emotions, feelings and subjectivity. As such and in the episteme of transcendence, experience is deemed to be 'real' only if deeply entrenched within consciousness and entirely detached from the corporeal. Personal subjectivity is thus regarded as a threat to the credibility and validity of experiential knowledge, and can be transcended only if thawed into the crucible of 'unity', in other words, into the realm of Kant's unified 'transcendental subjectivism' (Husserl, 1990: XX). This transcendental idealism becomes the legacy of the androcentric, white, Christian, heterosexual culture (Seidler, 1998: 20), where reason and rationality are regarded as the source of the taken-for-granted masculine superiority, for women are believed to be uncontrollably carrying the much-disdained and denied aspects of nature i.e. body, sexuality, emotions and impulses: 'Kant holds that women are morally encumbered by being the specific agents of nature's purposes as creatures led by their emotions and incapable of grasping principles' (Rumsey, 1997: 130).

With this Western phallogocentric Cartesian thesis and its promises of control, knowledge and superiority, it is no surprise that the question of disembodiment lies at the very heart of technological discourses. However, in order to understand the ontology or epistemology of disembodiment within any given discourse, it is first essential to understand the conditions of embodiment or put crudely, the reality of what constitutes the materiality, spatiality, and experience of the body itself, however, beyond its Cartesian configuration. To do so, let me consider some of the retrievable conceptions regarding the body and precisely *vis-à-vis* the Merleau-Pontyan phenomenological perception of it.

It is from the soil of Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenological *sancta* that new attempts emerged, attempts to reconcile the division between the body and self, and recover the embodied subjectivity through a re-evaluation of perception that goes beyond the duality of the Cartesian metaphysics. In so doing, Merleau-Ponty (1962: 90-96) provides a psychological dimension for 'being' a body in the world, making the embodied experiential stand in for the disembodied transcendental. In a way that is contrary to Descartes' abstract *cogitatio*, perception plays a fundamental role in Merleau-Ponty's work for it challengingly overrides the entire concept of consciousness, a notion that is crucial not only to the Cartesian epistemology but also to the Husserlian phenomenology. Perception in Merleau-Ponty's terms is a 'system' of meanings by which the phenomenological process of recognising and 'sensing' objects takes place, and it is through the medium of the body that we get to 'experience' and 'perceive' the world: 'Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 203). As such and insofar as we understand and perceive the world via our body, perception can only be embodied, hence, the production

of knowledge, whether subjective or objective, can only exist within a corporeal reality that is itself embedded within an implosion of specific contexts and situations. In so believing, Merleau-Ponty extols the body as the ‘subject of perception’ (1962: 206), demystifying Descartes’ maxim ‘I think, therefore I am’ and almost overriding it by what could be termed as ‘I perceive, therefore I am’.

According to Merleau-Ponty (1962: 298), to be a subject of perception is to have a world; in other words, to be a body is to have a space where the materiality of this body can be endowed and where its existential potentiality of movements and hence actions can be exercised. As such, neither experience nor knowledge can be perceived as being ‘out there’ but rather, as emerging out of the inextricability of the body and its spatiality:

Consciousness is removed from being, and from its own being ♦ The consciousness of the world is not *based* on self-consciousness: they are strictly contemporary. There is a world for me because I am not un-aware of myself; and I am not concealed from myself because I have a world.

Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 297-298

Indeed, it is this intertwined and inseparable relationship between body and space that brings about the myriad of sensory experiences which contributes to the significance of body movements and thus the meaningfulness of personal actions. As such, to deny these psychological recourses would be equivalent to not only denying one’s body, but also erasing one’s awareness of space and hence knowledge, as ‘according to Kant himself, knowledge [is] connected with space’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 244). In fact, to reject the presence of the body within any given experience would be same as rejecting the entire membership in the essential fact of being and the existential act of becoming, because as mentioned earlier, the body is the medium *par excellence* for being-in-the-world – and becoming-in-the-world too- as such, by no means can it be a deniable, dispensable or disposable ‘object’. Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s teleology is all about existential politics, which clearly seek to re-establish the fundamental union between the self and the world, redirecting our attention to the fact that this union is but embodied, and hinting to the notion that identity by virtue of the latter is a cognitive accumulation of phenomenological bodily experiences.

Following on from here, one might assert that to have an identity is to be able to existentially putting claim to have a ‘presence’ in the world albeit when the functionality of the ‘sum’ of body parts is reduced to nothing as in modernist terms, the ‘whole’ may still be eligible to claim some kind of presence within the spatiality it –actively or not- occupies¹, and let me go to the extent to crudely but not essentialistly suggest that to have an identity is to have a body, for whether it is at the level of immanent embodiment or transcendental disembodiment, the

body is yet the point of departure from itself, the point of return to itself and most ostensibly, the point of being in itself. Having said that, we may also add that identity is and becomes an oscillation between the initial state, that is the physical, and the ultimate –but not always attained- state, that is the metaphysical, both of which are yet in a consecutive and sometimes concurrent reliance on the body for their realisation. As such, even at the very epic moment of transcendence and the highest level of phenomenological reduction, the body is still the reference, the anchor and the trajectory of any transcendently experiential instance, for denying the body is in itself recursively ratifying its inevitability, especially that empirically, transcendence is but a ‘transient’ state of being/becoming-in-the-world rather than a ‘permanent’ state upon which the self can indefinitely settle.

Nonetheless, it might be objected that such assertions are valid only insofar as they are uttered *vis-à-vis* the physicality of the tangible world where the rule is: one body, one identity, whereas the impalpability of cyberspace may lay claims to a disembodied transcendence where experience is no longer a matter of sensory phenomena à la Merleau-Ponty but rather a diffusion of information that is based on a *pure* mental capacity to ‘live’ before even ‘perceive’ that experience. This, in turn, smashes the links between space and body and foregrounds virtuality instead of materiality. However, and as I shall attempt to demonstrate, even within the virtuality of cyberspace, the construction of identity, subjectivity and self is not entirely devoid of bodily perceptions, but initially takes off at a socio-cultural ontogenesis, travelling through a realm of simulation and eventually lands on a runway of what we could call a pseudo-disembodiment or a pseudo-*hypercogitatio*, ‘pseudo’ because –consciously or not- the user’s presence in cyberspace first and foremost derives its functionality and directionality from a concoction of both, sensory and mental data, and as such, the belief in the possibility of a neo-Cartesian split through cyberspace is but a naïve delusion or to put it in Baudrillard’s (1983: 26) terms, a banal strategy of ‘deterrence’.

Being no more than a warmed-up Descartes but in a high-tech style, many proponents of computer technology contend that the dream of cyberculture is all about reaching the eventual obsolescence of the body in order to ‘leave the ‘meat’ behind and to become distilled in a clean, pure, uncontaminated relationship with computer technology’ (Lupton, 2000: 479), and ultimately open up possibilities for creating new and autonomous identities (Poster, 1997), which are unencumbered by the constraints of physical cues such as sex, gender, race, class, etc (Haraway, 2000). As such, cyberspace is seen as a divine hyperpotency, a utopic Cartesian map sketched on a metaphoric ‘custom-made’ canvas through a suspension of corporality in exchange for virtuality that is made possible through the density of information and communication networks. So no longer does the body occupy the status of the compelling ‘container’; instead, a new relation of

body to identity is being laid down, that of which reassigns a new state of 'being', set apart from the body as the phenomenological 'catalyst' or the referential 'location'. This intensity of alienation from one's body via technological prostheses is seen by avid cyber-enthusiasts as fleshless exultation beyond bodily corruption (Gibson, cited in Jones, 1997: 48), which by virtue of its ontology plays midwife to the Cartesian dream.

It is precisely within the epistemology of this total corporeal amputation that the notion of cyberspace as virtual reality takes shape, lending itself to infinite imagination and culminating into a matter for the mind and the mind alone. Cyberidentities are thus conceived as a matter of momentary performances, reality as an illusive metaphor, subjectivity as a mere possibility and body as a vital impediment to the metaphysical infinity of virtuality. Cyberspace as a lived experience is therefore extolled not solely as a platform for a distant dream but mostly as a point of take-off towards the 'realisation' of this dream and precisely that of 'we are all Gods' (see Robins, 2000: 78). In such framework, a phenomenological shift occurs: the subject behind the computer screen is reincarnated -or rather disincarnated into a *hypercogitatio* that progressively abandons the body to freely float between the inner world and the outer world, and in doing so, reaches a status of 'terminal identity' where any 'felt' sense of selfhood is entirely eliminated from the picture. As such, Bukatman (1996: 208-210) came to deduce that:

Cyberspace is a celebration of spirit, as the disembodied consciousness leaps and dances with unparalleled freedom. It is a realm in which the mind is freed from bodily limitations, a place for the return of the omnipotence of thoughts ♦ the return of the animistic view of the universe *within* the scientific paradigm.

However, if cyberspace really allows the return of these so-called omnipotent thoughts and animistic view, then it should be a return with a cataclysmic vendetta, that of which subverts and disrupts the overall schema of physical limitations that has long served as a terrain for legitimising and exercising modes of subordination, coercion and exclusion. Nevertheless, this hyperbolisation of cyberspace only conceals rather than reveals the social problems for which the empirical practices provide the fuel. Even the Internet proponent Mark Poster suggests – and precisely in terms of gender- that 'the disadvantages suffered by women in society carry over into the 'virtual communities' on the Internet: women are underrepresented in these electronic places and they are subject to various forms of harassment and sexual abuse' (Poster, 1997: 222). As such and if contained within realistic proportions, cyberspace can only be seen as what Gibson (cited in Robins, 2000: 77) calls a 'consensual hallucination', which merely offers the delusive impression of transcendence and omnipotence, wrapped up in euphoric utopia and craving desires for a better world, a world

where the unconscious (dream) may become conscious (reality) through the wizardry of new technologies. However, it is this very notion of consensual hallucination that Robins (2000) seeks to problematise, recognising the need for a political discourse in making sense of the fact that while we are voluntarily immersing ourselves within the delirium of virtual reality, we may as well leave the issue of who controls this reality unscrutinised:

I think we should urgently set about dis-illusioning ourselves. There is no alternative and more perfect future world of cyberspace and virtual reality. The institutions developing and promoting the new technologies exist solidly in this world. We should make sense of them in terms of its social and political realities, and it is in this context that we must assess their significance.

Robins, 2000: 78-79

According to Robins, a starting point for this political discourse is to painstakingly examine the question of self-identity and its relation to techno-reality. Indeed, anyone interested in this theme would surely at some point ask if the shift towards virtuality does really offer a great deal of autonomy in deciding upon one's identity. Put simply, are we really disembodied in cyberspace or do we faithfully carry our old baggage with us on our virtual journey? Is this cyberspace a truly egalitarian realm or is it merely shorthand for the American and thus capitalist much-vaunted ideals of freedom and choice? Well, Robins' assessment seems deeply sceptic about these so-called new cyberidentities as well as the totalising belief in autonomy and power, which they uncritically claim:

New identities, mobile identities, exploratory identities -but, it seems, also banal identities. Only the technology is new: in the games and encounters in cyberspace, it seems there is little that is new or surprising.

Robins, 2000: 80

As such, Robins reaffirms that what new technology –and precisely cyberspace– does, by removing physical cues, is generating possibilities for hallucination that simply creates illusionary visions of heterogeneity *vis-à-vis* identities and subjectivities. This hallucination in effect, almost by nature and definition, hardly offers a 'concrete' ground for radical and progressive social change as one is too engrossed within the psychological borderline² of waking and dreaming through technology to such an extent that one can no longer take up any viable political action. This statement brings to mind the words of Baudrillard (1983, 1988), which proffer a valid headline for the abundance of banality and simulacra in cyberspace: with the implosion of the hyperreal and the diffusion of signs, all possibilities are lost into a state of immanency in which 'illusionary' freedom is synonymous to disembodiment, and disembodiment is synonymous to the

tele-omnipresence of hermaphroditic and androgynous beings. And alongside this loss of identities' foundational characteristics come a loss of subjectivities and ultimately a loss of 'concrete' freedom:

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 labour the act of forgetting the body is founded- usually women and minorities.

Stone, 2000: 525

The manifestation of such discourses surely urges for a re-examination of the body as yet a phenomenological experience, but this time not in terms of its relation to the physical space but the virtual one.

Space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible. This means that instead of imagining it as a sort of ether in which all things float, or conceiving it abstractedly as a characteristic that they have in common, we must think of it as the universal power enabling them to be connected.

Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 243

If we are to assume the position of Merleau-Ponty and consider cyberspace as a power enabling things to be connected, we should first ask the question: what is exactly being connected or probably disconnected in cyberspace? Of course, without a re-arrangement of things in a manner that would stimulate our perception, cyberspace would be no more than a duplicate, a *déjà vu* i.e. just as 'real' as the real world it attempts to supersede –although ironically, the design of virtual reality attempts to make it feel as real as possible (Penny, cited in Blackman, 1998: 133). Thus, as a prerequisite for the realisation of cyberspace, the things being connected within it should 'appear' to be new, transcendental and unrecognisable in the real world even if they are derived from it, which means an obliteration of all sensory resources that may stigmatise our reality. So we might think at this point that what is being connected in cyberspace is the remaining entity, i.e. the mental data and the leftover fetish of our unconscious yearnings, and the more we believe in this mental immersion, the more we come to conceive cyberspace as a substance of dreams. Nevertheless and paradoxically enough, even the mental data are bound to retain sensorial attributes in order to attain a degree of 'connectivity' with their producer i.e. the mind, hence, the inevitability of the obdurate body.

Inseparably bound up with perceptual virtuality, the phenomenal body becomes imperative to trigger the access to cyberspace and the realisation of the technologically mediated experience. This experience is facilitated through the

malleability and extendibility inherent within the very nature of the corporeal schema by which the body is able to morph itself and integrate a multitude of external instruments to continuously reconfigure its state of being-in-the world. This is further elucidated by Merleau-Ponty's (1962: 142-143) belief that the body is not restricted by its tangible boundaries where sensorial phenomena occur i.e. the skin, but may extend itself by rendering external objects as internal and projecting a body-image that is in continuous flux to incorporate new instruments:

A woman may, without any calculation, keep a safe distance between the feather in her hat and things which may break it off. She feels where the feather is just as we feel where our hand is. If I am in the habit of driving a car, I enter a narrow opening and see that I can't 'get through' without comparing the width of the opening with that of the wings, just as I go through a doorway without checking the width of the doorway against that of my body. The hat and the car have ceased to be objects. The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight.

Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 143

This statement is salient especially in bringing the ironic dialectic to the fore: in light of the technological rhetoric, new technology is suggested to be partly the 'instrument' by which we may override our bodily limitations and reach the transcendental moment. Yet, this instrument is but an extension of the body itself and as such, its *raison d'être* can only be realised through an embodied experience. In cyberspace, this embodiment is, in fact, an ad-hoc occurrence i.e. a spontaneous prerequisite for communicating in it and interacting with its interface, which is by no means a pure mental construct but a myriad of sensory dialogues (seeing, hearing, feeling, etc). As such and insofar as the body is the basis for our interactions and perceptions, virtual space can only be seen as a symbiotic synthesis of technology and corporeal phenomena.

Therefore, virtual tools cease to be external objects and become part of our phenomenological corporality, just as the blind man's stick becomes an extension of his sensorial activity. Consequently, the construction of self in cyberspace follows an alternative mode of 'embodiment', a physical virtuality *per se*, within which a unity of disunity emerges, a synergy so to speak (this synergy is not akin to Kant's transcendental synthesis): the mind and body become one in order to pursue a unified goal, and if either is missing, the result is the non-existence of the experience. So however we might say it, in cyberspace one is, in effect, embodied in one's disembodiment. The body in this context is no longer seen as the obsolete object or the inert container of the mind, but an integral entity, which is reassigned with an indispensable role, that of the medium. Furthermore, the body is no longer seen as the basic tool for using technological apparatuses (typing on

the keyboard, seeing the screen, hearing through headphones, etc), but the very parameter for constructing cyberidentities and performing instances of gender bending and identity play, discourses of which have saturated cyberculture.

Rosalind: Were it not better,
Because that I am more than common tall,
That I did suit me all points like a man?
A gallant curtle-axe upon my thigh,
A boar-spear in my hand, and in my heart,
Lie there what hidden woman's fear there will,
We'll have a swashing and a material outside,
As many other mannish cowards have
That do outface it with their semblances.

Shakespeare, 1975: 28

Just as Shakespeare's character Rosalind uses gender-swapping as a mechanism for self-protection during her journey towards the magical forest of Arden, female users also adopt gender-swapping as an apparatus for protection against sexual harassment and objectification during their virtual journey in cyberspace (see Turkle, 1996: 215-222). In fact, regardless of being male or female, all users of cyberspace are exercising the Benjaminian legitimacy to be 'reproduced' and sometimes inverting but by no means subverting the dichotomies of the real world (gender, sex, sexuality, etc). Although it might seem that virtual reality is providing us with utopian substitutes where free and fluid identities are displayed before us, it is necessary to understand that our deeply rooted socio-cultural attributes have an immense impact upon who and how we may choose to be in cyberspace. And be it in terms of reality or virtuality, it is the body that bears the scars and reveals the marks of our being-in-the-world, it is the body that takes us to places where we may find or lose ourselves, and it is the body that carries our memory and with it our identities. The result: we cannot go farther than the body and parenthetically, this is not a nihilistic negation of reason à *la postmoderne* but that of the defective model of the Cartesian split. So no longer a matter of supremacy, the mind and body ought to live in harmony!

By problematising the notion of embodiment within cyberspace, I hope I have provided a critical answer to the question of disembodiment all the while drawing attention to the necessity of reinstating a corporeal return and reworking the ontological and epistemological premises of the relation of self to technology. Ending up on this tone, I can only see myself straddling again a set of questions

still circulating cyberdiscourse: does cyberspace mark the end of space? Does the virtual body mark the end of the real body? Does simulation mark the end of reality? And does information mark the end of imagination?

I would say No!

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Endnotes

1. Example: cases of total or partial body paralysis: identity is not erased as soon as a person has an accident and becomes paralysed, but rather identity changes according to the 'bodily' state of that person i.e. it becomes that of a handicapped or paralysed.

2. In terms of psychopathology, we may say that the fluid decentred and fragmented self inhabiting cyberspace, is witnessing a state of borderline personality which is usually characterised by instability in relationships (usually the case with virtual communities), a constantly changeable self-image (the character of the disposable cyberidentities), a disconnection from reality (virtuality/simulation), and an oscillation between idealising and devaluating the self and others (sense of omnipotence/self-sufficiency or alienation/estrangement –from self or others-).