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Notes towards a feminist futurist manifesto

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As I start to write this brief contribution to the launch of *Ada* – an exciting initiative not only in feminist publishing but also in the wider questions it raises about the relation between politics and technology now – it is not clear to me whether, or to what extent, “we” need another feminist manifesto, let alone a futurist one!¹ Futurism is inherently problematic, not so much in its tendency to make predictions that may or may not (usually not) prove accurate, but in its adherence to technology-driven visions that play out a limited dualism of utopias and dystopias, of secularized heavens and hells. Notwithstanding the rich and often wonderful visual, popular and literary culture these visions have produced, have we not learned enough about the complex relation between technology, politics and the social to be done with the future today?

Maybe not. I’m reminded of David Lyon’s intervention in the Information Society debate (1995). Neither a celebrant nor a skeptic, Lyon simply refuses to separate technology from ‘some view of the good society’ (7). For him, futurism is legitimate if it is neither ignorant of technology nor driven by it. When it comes to technology, we are still learning to think outside of the terms of all or nothing and to regard it, in short, less as an independent agent – that will either supersede us (in intelligence, in the evolutionary stakes) or act as a panacea on our behalf – and more as a co-constituent of what we call human -- a form of agency that we work and are simultaneously worked with (Haraway 1991; Hayles 1999; Stiegler 1998; McLuhan 2006). If technology is not our friend, it does not need to become our enemy. It is important to recall the master/slave history of human-machine relations at a time when we’re being told that our smart devices and environments are designed solely to meet our individual needs, wants and whims (Suchman 2007). That is because these technologies are serving us in a double sense. They are serving us – up. They are converting their servility into a praxis of TTL (Targeting, Tracking and Location), integrating systems of marketing and surveillance and, by degrees, turning human subjects into data objects destined for advertisers and app developers. Industry-led visions of the technological future have always been disingenuous, but never more than now. There is therefore the distinct possibility that we’ve never been more in need of alternatives. A feminist futurist manifesto – especially one with an eye on the past – might offer one such alternative.

History is often deployed against the errant, beguiled, forward-looking lover of media and technology. I use the military metaphor advisedly. This is a long, drawn out and frankly tedious war between the technophobes and technophiles and their alignment, respectively, with what is properly academic and scholarly and what, on the other hand, is at best the sort of intellectualizing that serves as an indirect apology for capital and progress. Marshall McLuhan’s trajectory has been described and dismissed in this way. Yet his work says so much about the technological environment we inhabit and comprise -- so troubles the paranoid dialectic of use = use or be used -- that it is being reprieved, refashioned. I am one of a number of theorists who wants to think with McLuhan again, with provisos, but without (academic) prejudice (Bolter and Grusin 2000; Lister et. al. 2009). I’m certainly troubled by

aspects of his work, not least its gender blindness. Still, I find its imaginative reach more fruitful than the grounded, but ultimately flattening approaches that oppose it and that use history as a/their weapon. Is the internet really no more than ‘an instantaneous telegraph with a prodigious memory’ (Marvin 1988: 3)? The very premise is absurd. It proposes that history is linear and simply tracks back what the opposition has projected forward, creating, precisely, nothing but a counter-progressive, anti-teleological argument. Following Bolter and Grusin (following Foucault, following Nietzsche) I think of history as genealogy, not teleology – it simply does not move in straight lines.² In this scenario, we’re faced with the remediation of the telegraph through the internet and that process is at once iterative and transformative.

Feminists have co-opted Foucault’s genealogies of hospitals, prisons, schools, workhouses, asylums and so on to tell hidden histories of our own.³ Our genealogies of feminism itself are also important precisely because they are not an investment in linearity – in going backwards to go forwards – but rather in ways of recognizing the complex, contested process of iteration and transformation. I appreciate Vikki Bell’s yoking of feminist histories and futures and most of all her observation that ‘the alternative vision of feminism is a display of an imaginative faculty’ (1999: 5). I am drawn to Clare Hemming’s account of what is at stake in feminist stories about feminism, and to her courage in suggesting that we might want to tell these differently – without recourse to narratives of progress, loss and return – if we are to sustain the ‘radical potential of feminist theory’ (2011: 2). Feminist genealogies, in addition to genealogies of feminism, rather than deploying history against the future, engage it through an investment that is necessarily imaginative, even speculative, in the possibility of political change. The premise, as Hemmings urges us to both see and tell, is that (our) politics are far from lost.

I want to highlight two aspects of a feminist genealogical approach to a technological future that isn’t (and never was) all about technology. The first consists of taking stock, of re-reading and of bringing forward, particularly those silenced, forgotten or marginalized areas of feminist debate so that we may avoid the tendency to repeat ourselves or indeed to make ‘turns’ that are predominantly or in part returns to concepts, categories and methodologies we have known.⁴ What, I wonder, would the now effectively silenced discourse of feminist psychoanalysis contribute to the current physics-inspired emphasis on agential relationality?⁵ Is the need to extend our range of analysis from people to particles enough to justify the elision of an entire dimension of desire and other-than-conscious drives? Do we presume that the subjects of contemporary technological culture lack an unconscious (that desire is a two-dimensional, mind-body affirmation of our becoming) or are we merely happy to leave that realm, that third dimension (or is it fourth?) to the writers and artists of science fiction who, presumably, have nothing to do with us? *Do we no longer trade in desire when we write our feminist theories?* My own re-reading of the once ‘new’ French feminists (who lie behind Haraway as solidly as Whitehead does), of Cixous in particular, was nothing short of stirring from the outset: ‘I shall speak about women’s writing: about what it will do’ (1985: 245). Did we stop speaking about this because of an essentialism that was never, at least unproblematically there, that was never *not* framed or contested from within, from the recognition by Cixous herself that there is ‘no general’, ‘no one typical’ woman? What Cixous highlights is richness, diversity, non-homogeneity. ‘Women’s imaginary’, she says, ‘is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing...’⁶

Cixous' injunction to write – 'write, let no one hold you back' – is, broadly speaking, the other aspect of a feminist genealogy that I seek to highlight here, in my proto-manifesto that is necessarily a manifesto of the 'manifestoes' that came before it, that also marked the launch of new journals and that sought, as I do too, to trouble the waters of feminist successes and failures and to persist in the project of transforming knowledge and/as life via the exposure of a certain masculinity that – surely – continues to reside there: 'The frightful masculine fashion of speaking always surprises me. Speaking in order to be right – how ridiculous!' (Gauthier 1985: 200).⁷

Xavière Gauthier lambasts an imitable and imitated (by "us"?) tendency to speak in order to be right or 'in fact, to put someone else in the wrong' (200). This is speech without reference to the vocal or the spoken, deaf to 'the mutilation of meaning' that must otherwise occur. It persists, she says, even 'while a new voice is beginning to be heard' through the gaps, speaking 'on behalf of the unsaid'. This, perhaps never really new spoken – and written – voice continues to come through the gaps in 'a socio-symbolic order' that is not only, but still significantly masculine not least in its persistent claim to be right. If we call this claim representationalism,⁸ and the counter-claim is performativity⁹ then the question for me – following the logic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis – concerns the kind of critical languages (Franklin 2007), the modes of communication and critique (formed by and forming of a voice that speaks and writes on behalf of the unsaid) that are made possible or even necessary by the particular problems and challenges we now face.

The second part of my virtual¹⁰ manifesto addresses this question of problems and, if not solutions then strategies to tackle them. The key to the latter will include, especially, a re-appraisal of 'our' -- meaning not exclusively women's, but post-cyborg, feminist -- writing. Broadly, and from the standpoint of my own research in media, science and technology, those problems are threefold.

We are faced with exacerbated asymmetries in gendered forms of power and knowledge including or especially where those asymmetries appear to be addressed. This of course is characteristic of a neoliberal rationality¹¹ which is embedded and naturalized in contemporary embedded and naturalized forms of so-called ubiquitous computing and in the partially present futurisms of supposedly human-centric, relational, affective, intelligent and intimate environments of the home and/or city. The re-orderings (of human subjects as data objects for integrated systems of surveillance and marketing) that structure these environments are rendered opaque by industry-driven investment in, even colonization of the quotidian, the ordinary everyday life of the individualized user/consumer. It is of note that the machinations of Facebook and Google are assimilated within specific, branded developments of ubiquitous computing known as Ambient Intelligence and Ambient Media. These emergent technosciences seek to reinforce a notion of everyday life even as they change it almost beyond recognition. We need to expose this sleight of hand – this Trojan Horse – especially in the light of reifications of everyday life in aspects of cultural studies (Hall 2008); notions of use and user-driven social media (Lovink 2011) and a tendency in current forms of theorizing to regard processes of affect and relationality as solutions to asymmetries of power rather

than as questions we have begun to pose to them (Suchman 2007). Re-orderings at the level of subject and object privilege feminist ethical, political, epistemological and ontological interventions.

Another key problem concerns the extension of reductionism or the alignment of women with particular forms of re/productivity including, now, precarious labour plus a move away from the reduction of bodies to code (courtesy of internal as well as external critiques of genetic determinism) towards a more diffuse alignment between computationalism and (everyday) life itself. I'm thinking here not just of the segue from Artificial Life to Synthetic Biology but of Artificial Intelligence to *Ambient* Intelligence. The apparent downsizing of contemporary science and technology from claims to artifice (machines that can think and live) to those of ambience and augmentation are deeply disingenuous and, in as far as they extend the reach of biopower through i.e. gendered visions of the smart home,¹² servile agents and avatars embodying female stereotypes etc, they require a gendered form of biopolitics.¹³ Even within the short life span of Ambient Intelligence, the iconic agent of servility has shifted from that of the butler to that of the nurse. Ambient intelligent nurses, designed to manage and regulate an ageing population @home rather than in the care of the state, would know when they were needed, come when they were called and cost next to nothing compared with the flesh and blood variety who are already ever more precariously employed.

I would also want to highlight the ongoing mechanization and commercialization of the entire life process through developments in genetic engineering, Synthetic Biology and their alignment with apparently less hubristic projects like Ambient Intelligence and Augmented Reality that are actually anything but. If we were to look back at our concerns in the 80s and 90s with a rationality of total control particularly in the context of imaging and reproductive technologies (Stabile 1992; Treichler 1990) we might ask what happens to that argument about control and totality now that it is, perhaps, more *visibly* about what markets do than science and technology per se.¹⁴ What and where are the limits to control when there is no recourse to nature/body/life outside of their instrumentalisation?

Feminist methodologies are forms of intervention, of making a difference and my own trace a course (not necessarily a progressive one) from dissent to dialogue back to what Derrida calls dissension – the internal revolutions or overturnings that might afford us non-entrepreneurial opportunities or spaces for some serious play. Dissensions occur through the non-homogeneity of all fields of praxis, including our own. They occur through technological limitations, hubristic absurdities and for me, especially through the entanglements of science and storytelling. My recent re-reading of the cyborg manifesto, rightly distanced by Haraway due to its cold war connotations, reinforced my determination to pursue and advocate storytelling as theory for post-cyborgs and writing as a pre-eminent technology of intervention (1991). Bearing in mind that anthropologists as well as novelists, feminists as well as scientists are storytellers and that writing long exceeded the word to include cells, sounds and media-making – I don't think we have reached the full potential or implications of this approach. *If the potential is there for us to do knowledge differently, for example through cell-making that is not for profit and through generating forms of media that are always already critiques of media* (Juhasz 2011) then the implications are that we can no longer retreat into our own forms of story-free scientism, disown our own failed writing experiments or talk of the

limitations of off-the-peg categories and concepts – subject/object, nature/culture, human/machine – in theory as if theory weren't already a form of practice, experimentation, speculation.

Of course, not all forms of storytelling are treated equally so we need, I think, a re-appraisal of writing strategies such as parody alongside our pursuit of innovations in publishing, trans/mediality and disciplinarity and a shift, perhaps in how we see ourselves in relation to the academy, industry and publics.¹⁵ [15] In one possible vision of a feminist future steeped in post-cyborgian storytelling, we take more responsibility for our becomings within, and without the academy.

¹ In fact, it was clear to me at a discussion about Fembot and *Ada* that took place at ICA, Phoenix in May 2012 that this initiative raises some of the key questions that currently cut across industry and academia, namely those concerning the future of (academic) publishing, the gendered re-organisation of labour, emergent and open business models in the creative economy and issues of copyright and IP.

² Vikki Bell, writing in the context of feminist genealogy, presents genealogy as 'an attempt to historicize values' (1999: 2). For Bolter and Grusin (2000), Foucault's genealogies are also hidden histories that are refashioned and re-circulated in the present, thus constituting an alternative to linear, progressive histories oriented to a an ultimate goal or endpoint.

³ See notably Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* (1995).

⁴ Affective, material, performative and so on.

⁵ Jan Campbell (2006) has written on psychoanalysis and notions of time but I'm thinking also of un-revisited work such as that of Jessica Benjamin on intersubjectivity (1988).

⁶ 'What they have *in common* I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes – any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing...' (245).

⁷ 'Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs...' (247).

⁸ Representationalism, for Barad 'is the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent' (2007: 46). Where these refer to forms of knowledge – including science – as well as images, it is notable that where Haraway genders them, Barad does not.

⁹ Performative understanding constitutes an alternative to representationalism: '*Performative* approaches call into question representationalism's claim that there are representations, on the one hand, and ontologically separate entities awaiting representation, on the other...' (2007: 49). Barad's turn to performativity is arguably something of a return.

¹⁰ Virtual meaning real but not actual – a philosophical distinction concerned with the efficacy of potentiality. Also a play on online/almost...

¹¹ One that absorbs and deepens differences assimilating values unto itself (Brown 2005).

¹² See Microsoft's Janet and her amazing talking kitchen worktop: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODpReoKQVXM>.

¹³ If biopower signals Foucault's concern with the operation of regulatory power at the level of the individual and social body, biopolitics signals the particular regimes, tools and techniques by means of which biopower operates.

¹⁴ Industry and government driven visions of control have always exceeded the ability of technologies to actually deliver them.

¹⁵ Imagine the potential of combining the still masculine Oulipian project, based on plagiarism, parody and the emergence of potential literature (Motte 2007) with the desire to parody, to remake as ridiculous, the voice that speaks in order to be right!

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