Dancing with the Virtual Dervish

Virtual Bodies

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The hybridization of the body and the incorporation of new technologies into the body itself has given rise to situations that can be qualified as grotesque in the body. In the body, heterogeneity problematic, the immaterial, light and virtual side, with as its image the angel, and the material, heavy and mechanical side, with as its image the monster. The comparison between the art of the grotesque and the technological image, unlike the immaterial approach with its appeal to the disembodied virtual, is based on the materiality of the body in its prosthetic couplings with technology. The proposition here is to examine the monstrous and grotesque side of the prosthetic alliance between the body and technology, and with all the impure mixtures and heterolite combinations that it may give rise to.

The grotesque is amply present in the fantastic universe. Staging of the body, with its strange hybrid creatures, the bizarre vegetable portraits of ARCIMBOLDO and in GOYA’s depiction of human barbarity, to name but a few. In these works of the grotesque the body becomes the theatre of a mixed reality. The body takes on a new space, resulting in a monstrous image. Besides the figure of the monster there are three characteristic aspects of the grotesque: ars combinatoria, the monster, and la grotesque, which forms the root of the word grotesque. The ars combinatoria, practically a synonym of the grotesque, consists of the combination of heterolite images in which elements of vegetable, mineral and animal kingdoms are randomly assembled and mixed. The membra disjecta refer to the body as an assembly of detached and detachable parts in a variety of possible, and usually unnatural, reconfigurations. The cave is the place where these deformations are most at home, it is a closed, dark and often artificial space with a strong symbolic charge. The grotesque resides in the relationship between the bio-technology, in their combinations which blur any defining boundaries between the organic and the technological, the human and the machine. The term grotesque is no longer there, but rather an aesthetic concept which best describes these multiple, excessive and anomalous characteristics that are the basis of monstrosity. The monster, by its very nature, represents the radically other. These heterolites do not derive from an origin which cannot be categorized within an order of succession. With the techno-grotesque it is no longer the biological anomaly which creates the monstrous, but the introduction of the biological into the technological, the machine as sphinx where the human and the machine merge, this undefined zone where prosthetic devices make the emergence of cyborgs possible. There where the body slips into the machine and vice versa, a site of transitional space where one form slips into another, opening new spaces of potential transformation, but it is also where the radical separation between body and machine is breached. The interface between technos and bios is made glaringly evident. It is in the interstices of this encounter, where the sensors touch the skin, the implants the organs, the interface the gaze that the monstrous is born.

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Dancing with the Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies
Diana GROMALA et Yacov SHARIR
Dancing with the Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies is a collaborative project in virtual reality (VR) by choreographer Yacov SHARIR. It was funded with a major grant from the Cultural Initiatives Program of the Department of Communications Canada through a two-year residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada.

Dancing with the Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies resulted in several dance performances where the dancer and audience members performed and interacted with a virtual environment in real-time. Two levels one to increase the perceptual feedback and the other to increase the performance space, and further encouraged participation. The opportunities and limitations of new interactive applications were developed in virtual reality and translated into broader communications. The neuroprosthesis project is divided into two major groups: those which are directly implanted into or onto the body, the neuroprosthesis from the bio-medical fields, and those that provide increased perceptual capacities, interface prosthetics and medical, military, aeronautic, and communication fields. The neuroprosthesis includes among others, auditory, visual and neuromuscular devices as well as bionic limb replacements. The prosthetics bridge the gap between the body's functions. The neuroprosthesis includes prosthetic voice recognition, video conferences, virtual reality and telepresence to name but a few. They extend and amplify our perception through communication media.

In the first category it is the integrity of the organic body that is altered, either through implantation of the inside or additions on the outside of the body: it is the order of the incorporation of the technological in the organic, the heavy material body, the techno-organic body. The second category is characterized by everything that alters the spatial occupation of the immediately space of the body, it is the prosthetic envelope. In the first case something is added to the body, and in the second it is the body itself that is added to a larger entity. These two categories can of course be mixed or be combined in a single prosthesis, the gear of virtual reality is probably the closest approximation of a total prosthesis.

The body of the techno-grotesque is this wired, amplified and reconstructed body, which finds itself projected into the virtual worlds through the environmental prosthesis. This body has simultaneously become a site of multiple transformations: increased motor capacities, perceptual and cognitive functions, etc.) and an abandoned, empty space that is left behind while one is plugged into a virtual environment. The techno-grotesque body is this impure construction, not quite organic anymore, and not yet altogether technological. It is not entirely embodied in the real, nor entirely virtual in the disembodied, in its awkward array of wires and plugs, as yet uncertain how to move within the virtual environments this techno-body is in the image of the grotesque.
I experience my movement within a computerized simulated world, I am able to reference my actions, initiate cause-and-effect relationships with each veil. I feel that these opportunities can be addressed using the possibilities of this technology?

Virtual technologies allow us to manipulate, extend and augment possibilities in a way to augment and extend possibilities creatively, experimentally, spatially, interactively.

When I experience the entrance into a computerized simulated world, I am able to reference - or - see - my digitized body within the simulation. Simulations prepare one for the virtual world. As I target my vision and move my hand forward, I am able to navigate through the simulation, birdeye. As my perception accommodates itself to a 3-D illusion, I experience a sense of being in another, additional skin - I feel immersed.

At the same time, I have this sense of heightened anxiety, caused by the doubling of my own body image. The sensation of disembodiment cannot be disconnected from the sensation of embodiment; that is, I feel the physicality, the groundedness of gravity simultaneously with the sense of immersion and altered abilities, such as the ability to fly through the simulation.

GROMALA: My first intention dealt with exploring experiential issues as they relate to notions of the body. In computer art, the body is used as a culturally constructed notion and text, but also as lived experience and material form. The aspect of materiality was especially important since discussions of the experiences attendant to virtual environments tended to underscore an underlying subscription to a virtual art construct a context that enables us to alter our relationship with ourselves and others to an unprecedented degree. Or is it?

Creating Dancing with the Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies pointed toward the strange character of this emerging medium. The grant itself was a significant investment by the Canadian government, which seemed to view the artistic projects in virtual environments as Research and Development, an otherwise quite expensive endeavour in the corporate realm. The grant, of necessity, went well beyond a lifetime of US/Canadian Endowment of the Arts grants, as equipment and personnel costs went far beyond the abilities of most art institutions to acquire or maintain. While many of the artists faced the grim reality of the limitations of this emerging medium, most seemed happy to have an opportunity to do what they do best. The supposed liberatory possibilities of the medium were superseded by actual performances and demos, many of which consisted of individuals' fifteen-minute explorations, demos and personnel costs went far beyond the abilities of most art institutions to acquire or maintain. Among other military sources eager to reconfigure technology for consumer purposes.

Could the transcendent state of a dervish be at risk? Could the transcendent state of a dervish be at risk? Could the transcendent state of a dervish be at risk? Could the transcendent state of a dervish be at risk?

The nature and the beast

GROMALA: Like GUTENBERG'S invention of the printing press, virtual technologies enable us to extend our will and ability to act upon the world through textual means. What is different about the more recent technologies, however, is the reach and scope of these tools, their instrumentality - their ability to allow us to - see - both inward into our own bodies and outward to the universe - to diffuse and consolidate power and distribute it - near and far, to interconnect with others and construct a context that enables us to alter our relationship with ourselves and others to an unprecedented degree. Or is it?

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The installation in question is made up of only a single element: a giant screen installed in the back of a dark room. Video images of floating blocks of light are projected on a black background, progressively replaced by electronic smoke in front of it, but which also destabilizes this border. It is as though it were no longer possible to fully and permanently ensure the impenetrability of the body, its immateriality, its distinctiveness, its difference. The destabilization is, therefore, and this is my hypothesis, that which triggers an uncertainty as to its limit: it is an image which raises these questions: Where does the body end and where does technology begin? How does one distinguish identity from alterity? These are questions which Mnemonic Interferences; and video in general, try to answer and in a paradoxical sort of way, but a failure which I would nonetheless qualify as productive.

This question of the limit also brings with it the question of the visible. The destabilization is not yet developed on the level of form and content. It is not only make visible a different body, it must also put into play a difference which modifies the status of the visible. In video the visible, as the field or what is selected to be seen, the scope which can be perceived, or is made perceivable to the senses, is that which is constituted precisely where the body fails to maintain itself as a unit. In other words, the video destabilization of the body does not consist of a different body (those bodies which the norm excludes from subjectivity — women, gays to name but two groups), but also of a different body — called into question by the vacillation of the visible, that is a body, which although it appears as actualized in an image, fails to be stabilized by this actualization. The key question, within the context of this inquiry into the destabilization of the body in video, is therefore: What folio which does not represent a different body? Or to put yet another way, and here I paraphrase and reformulate the Italian philosopher Giorgio AGAMBEN: How can one confer the visibility of a body to another body (a body which the image would be thought in the light of what must exist as potentiality) but an — ethics? It is in the end a matter of taking the image in the light of subjective experience of potentiality through a laying bare of the inactuality which is proper to being.

A second video, La desserte blanche (1980) (The white sideboard) by Thierry KUNTZEL, is also real in this respect. Here we are dealing with a representation of the body which is being formed directly out of the tension of the visible and the invisible. In a process of materialization and dematerialization. Here, the image's workings cause it to lose its substance and is reduced to the body's failure to stabilize the visible. If this failure is what allows for the body's future actualizations, it is because it corresponds to the body's incapacity to ensure its materiality: the - skin - that is not cease to be confused with the grain of the image and the electronic scanning. Through this electrification of the body, the visible does not only bring the body into view, it also shows dissolution, which is, moreover, never irreversible.

So what do we mean by different body? One must first specify that the body of La desserte is not just any body, since it is the body of woman (in an iconography borrowed from MATISSE). This means that the dematerialization of the image is necessarily linked to a body that was materialized by Western philosophy. A priori, therefore, it seems that this video only consolidates the metaphysical dematerialization of the woman, since it uses it as the support for its dematerialization of the image. In the words of an American artist, Close-ups of the Woman (1989), Mary Anne DOANE argues that the images that pervade the reductibility of the feminine body in this way (the title of the work is a pun on MARLENE DIETRICH's character in the film Joseph von STERNBERG, for example, in fact do nothing more than restate woman as non-subjectivity). This is certainly true. La desserte, however, goes further. On the contrary the feminine body in this video is that which appears itself in the image, because the disappearance of the body, and here I draw on a model formulated by Laurence LOUPPE, is always reversible. A body which is capable of better reaffirming itself, to spread itself, change, gain in momentum: a body which is virtually stabilized precisely through the materialization-dematerialization process. Such is the body of La desserte: not a body of woman reproduced in its difference (excluding that which is already excluded) but a body that affects the visible of representation.

Two feminist publications (especially if they are read in parallel) are, in my view, crucial for an examination of the possibilities of this re-signification of the body: Unmarked. The Politics of Performance (1993) by Peggy PHELAN and Bodies that Matter (1993) by Judith BUTLER. The key-word of the title of the book is, of course, the body.

For Peggy PHELAN, if the image is a performance it is because it is always more than it mediates: it is, moreover, never an absolute reproduction. The body is capable of being called forth as a representation for the lack of equivalence between the real and its representation. The body must therefore be represented as this element which can never be fully resolved. In other words, and this is the ethical dimension that PHELAN develops in its work Unmarked, the representation of the body must integrate the incompleteness, loss, disappearance, and also the visible. Here we are at the confines of Mnemonic Interferences and La desserte. Nonetheless KUNTZEL's La desserte still permits us to push PHELAN's proposition a little bit further. In elaborating a reversible disappearance of the body, this monoframe integrates a sense of loss that corresponds to the pure and simple loss of a feminine body.

In fact, would not such an interpretation end up suggesting that it is possible to make sure that this lost something (for example the feminine body) must remain irremediably lost? If we pay close attention to what is written in PHELAN's Unmarked this something is in fact at the root of « woman », the excluded category of the Symbolic, which haunts (like a ghost) the confines of the representational visible. The lost is a Real whose absence must once accept, because without it being possible to retrace this lost body corresponded to the pure and simple loss of a feminine body.

Thus, even though this ethics of integration of disappearance, proper to performance, is crucial for a definition of woman, the excluded category of the Symbolic, which haunts (like a ghost) the confines of the representational visible. The lost is a Real whose absence must once accept, because without it being possible to retrace this lost body corresponded to the pure and simple loss of a feminine body.