

TECHNOLOGICAL DISEMBODIMENTS

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The Summer 1989 issue of the *Whole Earth Review*, "Is the Body Obsolete?" reveals, with stark and disturbing clarity, the relations between gender, technology, and power.¹ The writers are diverse, including, among others, Marvin Minsky, William Burroughs, Kathy Acker, Starhawk, Selarc, and X-rated film actresses Hyapatia Lee and Nina Hartley. The articles in the issue are divided along gender lines, with the women in favor of the body and most of the men against it. The women love and admire the body; Hyapatia Lee opens her piece by saying: "The body isn't obsolete, but the mind is."² With a few notable exceptions, the men regard the body as flawed. What do the men love? Machines. The women are wisely suspicious of the notion that the body is obsolete, regarding it as an expression of male hatred that directs itself against women, life, and the earth. Stephanie Mills writes: "Is the body obsolete? This is, literally, a senseless question, senseless and sinister. It pisses me off because if somebody in a lab is asking it, soon there will probably be billions of dollars of federal funny money spent to answer in the self-fulfilling affirmative."³ Unfortunately, the question is being asked by men in labs financed, for the most part, by the military.

Three themes of abandonment permeate the articles of the men who claim that the body is obsolete: the body will be abandoned in favor of machines, the earth will be abandoned in favor of outer space, and women will be abandoned in favor of asexual reproduction. It is not sur-

prising that these men are either closely associated with the military, or have a fascination with violence. Mark Pauline of Survival Research Laboratories is a good example.⁴ What do the machines produced by SRL do? Answer: they destroy things, they destroy other machines, and they destroy themselves.

Yaakov Garb and Michael Blumein are two men who have a positive assessment of the body. Garb raises social and political questions about the supposed obsolescence of the body. Garb's approach to the question "Is the body obsolete?" is important. Instead of arguing for or against, he says: "More fruitful, perhaps, is to wonder why this kind of illusion emerges with such urgency in these times: who holds these fantasies, and what is it about our political, social, cultural and environmental condition that allows (and funds) them to entertain these latest incarnations of the longing for individual and global disembodiment."⁵ Blumein is a physician, a doctor with a deep appreciation for the body. He takes issue with the mind/body duality, indicating that it is unhealthy in itself and that it actually leads to diseases.

The goal of the men who affirm the obsolescence of the body is to implant a human mind into a machine, to "download" human consciousness into a robot. The notion of downloading consciousness into a robot is the latest version of a perverse and demonic male fantasy that's a lot older than computer technology. This fantasy, motivated by womb-envy and a narcissism bordering on psychosis, is the fantasy of being able to give birth to oneself without involving women at all. Downloading human consciousness into a robot doesn't just render the body obsolete; by rendering sexual reproduction and pregnancy obsolete, it specifically makes *the bodies of women* obsolete. This male solution to the problem of sexual reproduction is also a kind of final solution to the problem of women.

Speaking of the body, William Burroughs says "We have the technology to recreate a flawed artifact."⁶ Well, why exactly is the body flawed? He presents a scenario about the extinction of the dinosaurs. Dinosaur bodies were obsolete and the dinosaurs became extinct. This scenario reveals the reason why Burroughs considers the body to be flawed: death. Human beings, like the dinosaurs, run the risk of extinction. We die as individuals, we can die as a species. Death is the argument against the body.

Since the body dies, since it denies us the immortality we narcissistically crave, we turn against the body in so many ways. We develop a hatred of the flesh. The flesh is evil, a prison for the soul. The death of the body inspires not only the hatred of the flesh, but also the imagination of a perfect condition of disembodiment. The mission of the soul is to become disembodied and thereby immortal.

The hatred of the flesh and the imagination of a condition of disembodiment are two dominant themes of western patriarchal metaphysics and religion. For most of the history of the west, the condition of

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disembodiment is otherworldly. The notion of an other world is discredited by modern science, but the content of patriarchal metaphysics does not vanish. On the contrary, the entire content of western patriarchal metaphysics and religion flows into a cult of technology, a cult that provides this content with the material means to realize its anti-body goals. The condition of disembodiment, no longer otherworldly, is now technological. When the soul is released from its body, it enters a machine instead of a transcendental heaven.

As Platonism and certain types of Christianity demonstrate, the hatred of the flesh is a hatred of the entire material world: the other world in which the disembodied soul achieves its immortality is an unearthly world. Burroughs is explicit in his negation of the earth: evolution makes progress by getting us not only out of our bodies, but also off the earth. Our destiny is to leave the planet and venture out into space. The metaphysical hatred of the body and the earth is accompanied by a hatred of women: Plato was explicitly misogynistic, regarding women as degenerate forms of men. Gnosticism, to which Burroughs is greatly indebted, is misogynistic to the extreme. Get rid of the body, get rid of the earth, and get rid of women. The negation of the body, the negation of the earth, and the negation of the feminine are the three themes that form the trinity of patriarchal metaphysics. Nietzsche, however, summed it up in one word: nihilism.

Or consider the murderous contempt that Marvin Minsky has for the human species: "There are always ethical problems with anything. Ethical problems depend on people's ethics. I don't believe in any absolute ethics anyway. Ethical problems are actually political and evolutionary problems. 'Thou shalt not kill' is senseless if you think in terms of competition between species. I think the importance of downloading is just allowing evolution to proceed."⁷ What Minsky is saying, basically, is that it's fine for machines to kill people. Nothing unethical about military robots. Hey, too bad, that's evolution. I wonder if Minsky has seen *The Terminator*. One of the significant aspects of *The Terminator* is that the robot's mission is to kill a woman, and he is to kill her because she will bear a child who will lead the human race in its fight against the machines. The hatred of the machines is directed specifically against the female body in its capacity to bring new life into the world, it is directed specifically against pregnancy. While Minsky dreams of replacing human beings with artificially intelligent machines, Nina Hartley writes: "To seriously entertain the thought of supplanting human life with artificial intelligence is the epitome of cynicism. It is this kind of 'techno-thought' that makes me fear that western civilization has gone mad."⁸

This issue of *Whole Earth Review* shows that western culture has hardly abandoned its hatred of the flesh or its imagination of conditions of disembodiment. Today, however, the hatred and the imagination have become technological. Addressing the domination of instrumental rationality in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology", Martin

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Heidegger quotes these lines from Holderlin: "Where the danger lies / there also grows the saving power". The danger lies in our carnality, in our being as flesh. It comes from an embodiment that is fearful, one that turns against itself. But if Holderlin is right, then our carnality is also where the saving power holds sway.

Men and women exist as bodies on this earth. How we exist as bodies, the style of our carnality, manifests itself in numerous relations extending beyond the body: relations between men and women, relations between human beings and their environment. Existing as bodies, courageously responding to the fact of death as a part of our embodiment, we must maintain ourselves in the ethical task of elaborating an embodiment that is affirmative of the flesh, the feminine, and the earth. An affirmative carnality.

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Notes

1. The *Whole Earth Review* is published quarterly by POINT, a non-profit corporation. The editorial offices are located at: 27 Gate Five Road, Sausalito, CA, 94965. All citations are from issue No. 63, Summer 1989.
2. *Whole Earth Review* No. 63 (Summer 1989) p. 41.
3. *Ibid.* p. 45.
4. *Ibid.* p. 40.
5. *Ibid.* p. 53.
6. *Ibid.* p. 54.
7. *Ibid.* p. 37.
8. *Ibid.* p. 41.