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The Cartesian Subject 2.0

**Body/Mind Dualism and
Transhumanist Thought**

Pathological narcissism represents a dominant form of subjectivity in post-industrial societies. (Žižek 1987, Lasch 1982) When the subject, characterized by the culture of narcissism, enters cyberspace, it becomes immortal. The body becomes obsolete and the game of immortality begins. The anthropological understanding of culture, in which culture represents a "natural environment" for humans, can be reinterpreted: cyberspace is the perfect natural environment for pathological narcissism. "Cut off from the real body, we construct a substitute body: ourselves online. We treat it as if it were our actual self, our real life. Over time, it does indeed become our life." (Ullman in Boler 2007: 159) Digitalized bodies represent a "historically constructed Western individualist subject" (Green in Boler 2007: 163). Furthermore,

> ironically, this new digital Cartesianism, initiated by a rhetorical cheerleading of the mind/body split as a desirable aim of CMC, ultimately results in the invocation of stereotyped bodies in order to confer authenticity and signification to textual utterances. (Boler 2007: 140)

In cyberspace one can do anything; change the way they look, explore alternative sexualities, play a fictive game of life and death, and the Game Over is always followed by New Game. If any aspect of the virtual existence becomes unpleasant, the user can start anew, with a different avatar, fresh taste in music, another blog. "Reality is perceived as malleable by Americans living lives of serial substitution, with the culturally acceptable premise that consciously manipulating or altering "reality" is a reasonable, if not desirable, option" (Barnett and Magdoff 1986: 416).

One of the constitutive elements of pathological narcissism is an irrational fear of death, manifested as utter denial of the idea of the mortal Self. This trait can be found in "normal" narcissism too; Freud (1914) was persistent in his claim that primary narcissism disables one's ability to think one's own death. He argued that in the realm of the Unconscious there was no death. Similarly, death is absent from cyberspace and in this sense, cyberspace represents the perfect metaphor for the Unconscious.

Netizens still appear to be quite sure of the difference between reality and cyber-reality. Nobody has doubts as to which one of the two is more "real". Yet, this does not prevent very explicit cyber implementations of the fact that

no one believes: if you are not online, you are probably dead (see death-switch.com etc.). Furthermore, if you Google yourself and get no results, you most likely never existed at all. Modern Westerners, swearing by hard sciences, medicine, scientific certainty and similar ideological constructs, realize suddenly that the only final, convincing death is the failure of the digital, rather than the physiological function. You are dead when you get disconnected.

This goes beyond "social" death, as it can involve perfectly "real", physical death, too. Biology no longer appears to be the final instance which we cannot overcome. To prove this, one must only look at the numerous cases of death connected to the online game World of Warcraft. In 2005 a Korean baby died while the parents, passionate gamers, simply forgot about him. So much for the "maternal instinct". The "survival instinct" is not doing much better; there are several reports of deaths due to playing WoW for days on end, leading to multiple organ failure. For example, a Chinese player, called Snowly, collapsed and died after 160 hours of playing. There is a famous print screen of her funeral in Second Life circulating on the Internet, showing virtual bodies mourning the loss of a physical body that failed to endure the virtual strain. Or, as Balsamo put it:

> Upon analyzing the 'lived' experience of virtual reality, I discovered that this conceptual denial of the body is accomplished through the material repression of the physical body. The phenomenological experience of cyberspace depends upon and in fact requires the willful repression of the material body [...] (Balsamo in Boler 2007: 159).

In the light of the ultimate narcissistic fantasy of immortality, that coincides with the ultimate transhumanist agenda of digital immortality, uploading the consciousness onto a super-computer (Harris 2001: 134), the physical body has become excess weight, burden, annoying carrier of viruses. Realization of such fantasies may seem like sci-fi and is utterly utopian from the point of view of prevailing morale, if not from the point of view of technology, but to us the mere fact that transhumanism, even if sometimes understood as the hi-tech version of social evolutionism, celebrating values of Enlightened humanism, rationalism and classical liberalism, is re-invoking the classical Cartesian subject, imprinted with body-mind dualism, can be interpreted as symptomatic rather than humanist. It is perhaps the transhumanists that represent the contemporary culture of pathological narcissism best.

References

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