

Looking Back on Virtuality: The Strange Corporeographies of Cyberspace

by Helen Burgess

It is always at times of great technological advance that western culture reiterates some of its most persistent habits, notably the tendency to create differences and organize them hierarchically.

-- Rosi Braidotti

When, sometime late in 1994, I tuned into the latest episode of *Absolutely Fabulous* and saw Jennifer Saunders' hapless character Edina Monsoon donning VR goggles and walking straight into her bedroom wall, I knew that virtual reality was dead. In one ten-second sequence, Saunders had managed to suggest not only that VR couldn't *technically* deliver what it promised, but that the idea itself was flawed because it relied on the notion of being able to "get inside" another body. Indeed, the very premise of *AbFab's* humor (most of the jokes were about the futility of dieting, drugs, and sexual liberation) was that Edina was never able to get outside her own body; she was stuck with it. Doomed to be the butt of a new generation's jokes, VR had seen its day in the sun (or, more correctly, its day in the glow of cathode-ray tubes). VR was on its way out of contemporary culture and into the blipverse.

And yet, for a while things were looking good in cyberspace. Brenda Laurel was challenging the boys' network at Atari Labs with her research into VR interfaces. Stelarc was pushing back the boundaries of the body with his electronically enhanced performance art offerings, which frequently required attaching electrodes and mechanical implants to the surface of his skin. Howard Rheingold was imagining a new kind of democracy in his discussions of global electronic communities.¹ But at the same time, there was something not quite right about the whole affair, a ghost in the machinic interface. In fifteen years of *feminist* scholarship, cyberspace became something of a battleground. Even while Brenda Laurel was claiming VR as a radical space for new kinds of agency, other feminist theorists were wondering whether it represented a more familiar and sinister model of human agency. What, they asked, had happened to the body in cyberspace? Had the body become merely a simulation of itself, capable of being digitized and perhaps altered

in the process, or - even more scarily - had it disappeared altogether, in a puff of metaphysical transcendence? At stake was the understanding that, yet again, the body - traditionally aligned with nature, woman, the "other" - had been the loser in a system which seemed instead to privilege the rational, masculinist, concept of the disembodied mind. Donna Haraway had already called this "the translation of the world into a problem of coding," arguing that such a move had both long historical roots (the Cartesian model of the dualism of mind and body) and profound consequences for women in technologically advanced societies, who could find themselves "coded" right out of the system, or, alternatively, coded into yet another set of subordinate positions.²

It's my intention to think through some of the dominant feminist positions on VR and cyberspace. However it's also my intention to shake up the notions we have inherited from the "first wave" of feminist critiques of cyberspace. Rosi Braidotti's astute observation, quoted at the beginning of this paper, is that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Yet at the same time, the ways in which discourses of domination have remediated themselves in VR- and cyber-rhetoric in the last fifteen years suggests that feminist critiques must also change with the times. While an important step in ongoing feminist critiques of patriarchal cultural structures, the practice of identifying male/female mind/body dualities can only be a starting point today. In the wake of queer theory and studies of masculinity, we have discovered that the male was never really coded as "bodiless" - that masculinity conversely has its own set of codes and a body that, while set up as all-seeing and rational, is still a body. Rather, and more subtly, the male white body has been set as the "default" body - the one against which others could be measured and found, variously, too dark, too queer, too female, too animal, too "other." This is not to contradict feminist scholarship that depends upon the identification of woman as "bodied," but rather to say that *types* of bodies are just as important to an analysis of cyberspace as an identification of their existence. In the face of VR's highlighting of virtual embodiment, the question "what about the body?" must become more sophisticated if it is to be able to identify what's going on in cyberspace.

I will take a look at the problem of virtual bodies in three parts. Firstly, it is my contention that VR represents not a way *out* of the body in the traditional analytical sense, but rather a way *into* a body which, in its own way, may be just as dangerous - the disappearing virtual no-body of the male protagonist. Thus, I discuss the role of cyberspace in recreating virtually the kinds of bodies coded "self" and "other" that we are accustomed to analyzing in RealSpace.

An analysis of VR must go beyond the simple act of identifying representations, however. I want to suggest that the discourse of VR offers us the perfectible, fantasy body-politic; the body which can be "performed" in cyberspace and perhaps, "set us free." In the second part of this paper, then, I want to discuss the political context, or rhetorics of "agency," which surround the notion of the performative body, both in cyberspace and in RealSpace. In this section I discuss Judith Butler's notion of performativity, arguing that both Butler and cyberspace rhetoricians fail to account for the subtle effects of the lived experience of the body.

Finally, in the third part of this paper, I want to suggest an altogether different model for the body in cyberspace. I hope to flip the usual statement that the VR body is some kind of fantasy, which haunts us. Rather, I will argue, the "fantasy" body of cyberspace is itself haunted by the "real" body. And this is thus the final purpose of my paper: to suggest that perhaps, when we look for the ghosts that haunt our technological spaces at the millennium's end, we are looking too far from home. For if it is possible that the rhetoric of cyberspace is dependent upon the repression of the physical body in favor of an imaginary body, then I contend that virtual technologies fail to account for the constant return of the physical body as that which is "left over" or unaccountable in the system. This "return of the repressed" offers, I believe, an alternative way of reading cyberspace: as an environment which cannot contain the lived experience of the body within its masculinist technologies of domination and control. In other words, material bodies haunt the immaterial world, not the other way around - the body always comes back to haunt us.

To this end, I finish with an analysis of a now historically placed virtual reality machine, Brenda Laurel and Rachel Strickland's *Placeholder*, as an example of a VR machine which, at

the height of its hype, was unable to escape from the ghostly return of its human users. It is my hope that, by pointing to the ways in which the body cannot be contained by cyberspace, I can counter claims that cyberspace represents the masculinist triumph of technology over the marked, gendered, raced and classed body. Instead, these bodies always remain the ghosts in the VR machine, perhaps pointing to the very reason why virtual reality hype was unable to overcome the contextual historical circumstances which meant it was doomed to become an historical artifact representing an overly eager foray into a poorly defined space.

Embodying space: cyberspace as abstract maternal body

Man is time, woman is space.

- William Blake

Cyberspace is poorly defined for good reason. An environment that claims to be mysteriously able to transcend the bounds of the body is easier to imagine if it floats somewhere beyond the bounds of ready explanation. But by the same token, cyberspace has a necessarily material interface. Thus by the term cyberspace, I mean the intersection of a set of *concrete* technologies with an *ideological framework* which allows a person to experience the *illusion* of immersive interaction with (and within) an imaginary or fantasy environment. This definition could, of course, be extended to include all forms of imaginary production (novels, television shows, Medieval mystery plays); but for my purposes I'm concerned with the kinds of cyberspaces we see rendered graphically in video games, foreshadowed in William Gibson's *Matrix* and Neal Stephenson's *Metaverse*, and depicted in the films *Lawnmower Man* (1992) and *The Matrix* (1999): electronically-generated environments which produce the illusion of a separate world in which the user can manipulate data in the shape of virtual "objects." Cyberspace is fiction, just like these other genres, but it's a technologically produced cultural fiction from a specific time and place: the end-of-the-millennium digital culture in Europe, Japan and North America.



Scene from *Lawnmower Man 2: Beyond Cyberspace* (1996)

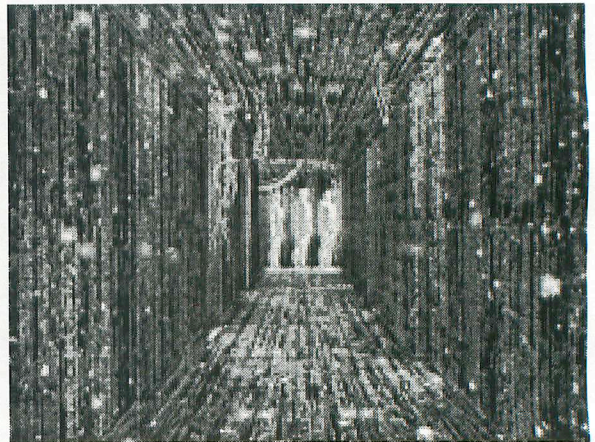
Within this category, I'm most concerned with the cyberspaces in which we project ourselves into an imaginary or re-surfaced digital body, which may (in hi-tech versions) provide us with sensory feedback in the form of pressure pads on the skin, or merely (as with video games) present us with a visual "body" on a screen which we can manipulate using joystick or keyboard. In the spirit of playfulness, and for the sake of my own theoretical position, I have chosen to name the embodied experience we live every day, outside of these virtual technologies, "RealSpace" – a term which helps remind us that, while the "real world" is important, it is in many senses also a construction of identity, place and time. Life, indeed, is a kind of "virtual reality" itself, but it's one which is necessarily dependent upon a body (however constructed by scientific and cultural discourse) to shape its perceptual experiences.

Cyberspace is ubiquitous enough an idea today to have spawned its own cultural genre. VR's companion literature Cyberpunk, a subgenre of science fiction that flowered in the mid-1980's, premised itself upon the notion that digital technologies had profound consequences for the way we would live our lives. William Gibson, writing his future-fictional account of wired-up America, coined the term "cyberspace" to indicate what he called a "consensual hallucination." In one of the most quoted passages in cultural studies of SF, Gibson laid the foundation for thinking about information as a construct of data "ranged in the nonspace of the mind." In his seminal novel

Neuromancer (1984), the kings of cyberspace were the data cowboys, who plugged themselves into the abstracted graphical world of the Matrix using direct-brain neural connections: an experience combining the tension of high-crime computer hacking, the excitement of online gaming and the immersivity of full surround sound-and-vision virtual reality. Gibson's anti-hero cowboy, Case, imagined himself as a "disembodied consciousness" who cultivated a "certain relaxed contempt for the flesh."³ In Gibson's cyberspace, the mind was in control, and the body was more-or-less useless meat. VR offered us, fantastically, a way out of the body; Gibson's distanceless realm, the rapture of cyberspace, was filled with disembodied ghosts: the *loa*, voodoo spirits created as mouthpieces for the AIs who inhabited cyberspace.

And yet, even while Gibson was imagining his dreamscape of disembodied hackers, the budding technology of virtual reality was already becoming aware of its own dependence upon bodies. In VR labs and mall arcades, cyberspace became not so much a way of getting out of the body altogether, as a way of getting out of a specific body and into a preprogrammed body, which might represent omniscience but more likely represented a privileged body-type, the body set up as the default in the western traditional sense - the unmarked, perfectible male body. Rather than no-body, cyberspace gave us the dream of new, indestructible fantasy bodies.

These bodies, of course, occupied - and still occupy - spaces already quite familiar to us. On the simplest level, let us take the most common form of readily available access to cyberspace - video games. Games such as *Tank Commando*, *Mortal Kombat* and *Doom* consist of a point-of-view visual journey through a land figured respectively as the enemy terrain of Vietnam, an exotic China, and a "dungeons-and-dragons"- style labyrinth, complete with fireball-hurling demons and images of bloody animal sacrifice. In each case, the games are played from the perspective of a male protagonist/assailant, whose job it is to engage in a variety of bloody combat techniques in order to win the rights of a prize (usually land, and often also a woman) and, of course, to stay alive. Even less overtly violent games, such as the number-one selling Nintendo game *Banjo-Kazooie*, written for young players, features a typical quest-narrative scenario, in which Banjo the Bear and Kazooie the bird travel through a landscape dotted with resources to consume and territorial villains to avoid. In each case, space is coded as the object of desire (in the shape of resources, ammunition or energy-packs) or, alternatively, as an object to be overcome - a gendered division which rewrites the landscape as a female object to be consumed and conquered.



Beneath "reality" in *The Matrix* (1999)

It is almost too easy to point to examples of the masculinist model of domination and warfare evident in mainstream cyberculture. These models are also predominant (indeed, almost exclusive) in goggle-and-helmet Virtual Reality-style arcade games, which typically offer hand-to-hand combat and little else. In many ways, it doesn't even come as much of a surprise - most VR applications in commercial circulation are the side-products of heavy investment by the Military in virtual technologies: tank and flight simulators, laser-guided missile simulations, and computer-aided strategy modeling. In each case, it is not exclusively the body one puts on which determines one's gendered relationship to virtual space, but the way in which space is "mapped out" to be metaphorically penetrated and conquered by sword, gun or hand. In fact, it is vital to consider the definitions of "space" incorporated into cyberspace, in order to recognize that cyberspace, too, is "embodied" in an abstract and fantasmatic way.

Rosi Braidotti, talking of recent science-fiction forays into the realm of computer-generated

worlds, claims that “[c]yberpunk dreams about the dissolution of the body into the Matrix (as in ‘mater’ or cosmic womb), in what strikes me as a little boy’s final climactic return to Big Mama’s organic and forever expanding container.”⁴ Similarly, the “space” in cyberspace, controlled as it is from a singular, point-of-view perspective, often seems enveloping. The technologies used to access virtual reality arcade games usually involve wrap-around VR goggles, effectively covering the player’s eyes; arcade games involving spaceship or racing car piloting are often played out in a rounded, womb-like cockpit. Games and VR adventures modeled on Doom-like scenarios, such as *Quake*, allow the user/protagonist to wander (or force his way through) darkly lit tunnels and corridors. All these models suggest a longing for a return to the dark tunnel and the womb, so that the body of the user is coded as a penetrative male, while the cyberspatial environment becomes coded as a kind of infinite, yet intimate, fantasy of the mother.

Both the gaming model and the VR model, by coding the environment female and the user male, from the outset manage to reinscribe the dualism of mind and body into virtual space. Space is constructed as maternal and mysterious or infinitely exploitable; the user remains the desiring male consciousness who exploits the space around him. One of the problems with this model is that space becomes overdetermined, while bodies become underdetermined. Indeed, many computer games feature protagonists who don’t seem to have a body at all – rather, the point-of-view from which the player operates is an invisible body clutching a visible weapon – the video screen projects a gun, and perhaps a hand, but no body. This visual operation situates the player as the one who sits safely “behind” the screen. Similarly, VR is conducted from “inside” an imaginary body, which is seldom, or never seen by the player.

And yet, at the same time, it’s quite clear that there is a body here. The real problem for feminism is that the constructed virtual bodies we’re given act as if they don’t have to deal with the consequences of *being* bodies. They are fantasmatic bodies disconnected from their environment: male Arnold Schwarzenegger-types, who act on their surroundings while remaining unchanged and invincible. Again, this operation is gendered: the protagonist is a stable male entity which gazes out on the world and is unchanged, while the environment around it becomes the female material which is exploited. Thus even though users “put on” virtual bodies in cyberspace, these are underdetermined, “default” bodies which pretend they’re not; implicitly male constructs which bespeak the desire to leave the “weak” flesh and become invincible manifestations of the mind.

What happens when the protagonist is female is even more telling. Some recent computer games, notably Playstation’s *Parasite Eve* and *Tomb Raider*, have attempted to upset this dichotomy by providing the player with a female-coded body, which is, situated “inside” the viewframe of the game itself. These games can be compelling as an alternative – they feature, after all, women with physical strength who can control the environment around them. However, I believe these games ultimately end up falling into the same rubric of power relations (penetrator/penetrated), with the additional and even more disturbing implication that the bodies themselves, situated within the screen and marked by their large breasts and impossibly long legs, are “controlled” by the (again, usually male) player. These fetishized female bodies are thus recuperated into a killer queen/sex doll aesthetic – hardly a position of feminine agency. There’s a body in cyberspace all right, either a default male, desiring and all-seeing, or a default female, controllable and sexually marked.

Performing Cyberspace

It seems, now, that we are at an impasse. For if we have established that the popular discourse of “disembodied consciousness” in cyberspace is just another example of the constructed mind/body dualism so pervasive in white western culture, then is cyberspace solely a tool for the oppression of those with bodies marked “other”? Can we appropriate cyberspace for a corporeal feminism, which challenges the *types* of bodies in which we’re forced to carry out our gendered roles?

As an attempt to answer this question, in this section I will look at Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, in which she argues that bodies and identities are fundamentally linked, and

that therefore bodies can be used to enable some of the possibilities for political change. Some theorists, notably those working in the field of performance art, have suggested that Butler's notion of "performativity," in which we can "perform" identity differently by recontextualizing bodily gender performances, might map onto cyberspace, allowing us a space to perform identity in a way that allows us release from the racial, sexual and gender oppression we encounter in RealSpace. I want to argue that in both Butler's performativity and cyberspace rhetoric the ghost of the lived body always comes back to haunt us; "performing" the body in cyberspace, thus, is a fantasy which fails to account for the operations of exclusion and oppression which happen to the body in RealSpace.

Butler's notion of performativity depends on the observation that "acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause."⁵ In other words, rather than a core, essential identity which inhabits a body and controls its actions, she maintains that identity is an effect of the actions, shape and movement of the body, as well as an effect of the social forces which write or inscribe themselves onto its surface. This identity then appears to exist essentially, as somehow prior to or separate from the body. Gender, as one of the operations of the social order on the body, thus works in the same way to essentialize itself, not only by laying claim to identity but also by working on the surface of the body to produce the appropriate physical characteristics which mark it as gendered.

Gender is a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it produces on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation), the illusion of an inner depth.⁶

Butler suggests that one way to de-essentialize gender, and thus to think about ways in which to skew gender performances, is to think of gender as a kind of drag. She argues that "[d]rag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation."⁷ This offers us a way of thinking about gender identity as potentially unstable and changeable, so that the heterosexual, binary gender norms of male and female become performances which can potentially be changed, by changing the ways in which the body is performed.

Similarly, we could talk about cyberspace as a kind of "drag" which calls attention to the constructed nature of RealSpace identity. Virtual reality and MOOs and MUDs are places where we "put on" a new body, sometimes opting to "perform" our gender, race or class differently. However, although Butler's notion of gender performance suggests that identity in cyberspace is equally fluid and thus potentially the site for changing one's place in the power structure, critiques of her work, such as that undertaken by Molly Rothenberg and Joseph Valente, suggest that there is a logical contradiction in such a claim. In accounting for concrete oppression of gays, lesbians, transsexuals and more generally of women, Butler must contend with the problem that although gender identity is *performative*, this is not the same as *performance*, in which a prior subject chooses somehow to perform his or herself:

Gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express. It is a compulsory performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence.⁸

Although Butler, in her statement above, does her best to acknowledge and account for this problem, Rothenberg and Valente have pointed out that her work, concerned with creating a viable place for a subject that might be able to resist the networks of power-discourse, still blurs the line between performativity and performance. Rothenberg and Valente suggest that this creation of a

“volitional agent” constitutes a flaw in Butler’s argument, one which gives her permission to move freely from the notion of “being performed” to the idea of performing oneself differently, without facing the consequences of often vicious oppression.⁹ In other words, the experiences of the lived body always return; our raced and gendered bodies are always already marked.

Given this problem in Butler’s argument, we must ask ourselves whether there can be a place for her theory of performative embodiment in the theorization of cyberspace. I would argue that indeed there is, but in a back-handed kind of way: *critiques* of Butler’s argument are uncannily close to the kinds of critiques we need to bring to bear on cyber-discourse. On close examination, Butler’s repeated slippages into intentionality mirror the slippages in cyberspace discourse. Butler, despite her best intentions, tends to jump from performativity to intentional performance, claiming that one can get agency by performing one’s body and oneself differently; similarly, cyber-discourse suggests that by performing ourselves and our bodies differently in cyberspace we can reshape our RealSpace identity. Thus, just as Butler’s notion of “performing identity” fails to account for just how strong techniques of discipline on the lived, experienced body are, so too cyberspace discourse masks the fact that there is a “real” body out there, subject to the same disciplinary processes. It is easy to discipline somebody in cyberspace – just cut off their access (an action popularly known in MUDs as “toading”).

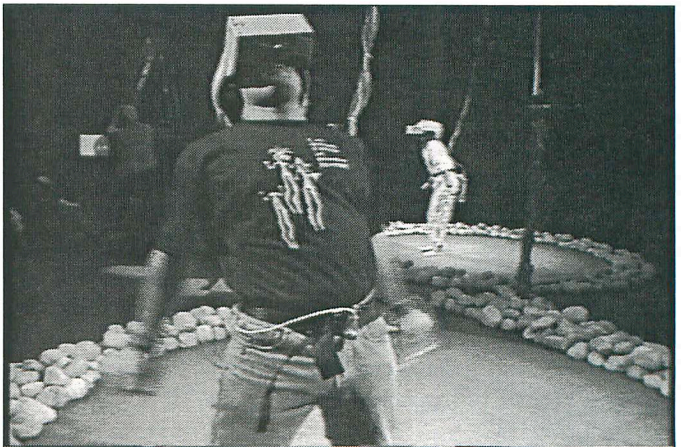
The issue of access, finally, brings the phantasmatic body back into the picture. Cyberspace users occupy a privileged space where they can safely enact “performative” fantasies, but Internet access is still predominantly an elitist tool available to a white, western technocracy. The argument that cyberspace is a great democratizing environment in which users can explore other identities, including those of different races, classes, and genders, fails to take into account the very real way in which such technologies are restricted, often, across race, class and gender lines. It fails to consider the socioeconomics of Internet access. In cyberspace, just as in performativity, the lived body comes back to haunt us.

Putting back the body: Placeholder

To illustrate some of the problems with performativity in cyberspace, I want finally to examine a virtual reality machine, which tries to repair the mind/body split by “putting back the body” into cyberspace. *Placeholder*, designed by Brenda Laurel and Rachel Strickland, is a VR environment which attempts to think through identity as precisely that which is embodied, rather than that which is left after the body is taken away. Thus Laurel and Strickland inform us that “[o]ne comes to know a place with all the senses in concert and by virtue of the actions that one performs there, from an embodied and situated point of view.”¹⁰

Placeholder is an artificially simulated and abstracted environment modeled on Banff National Park of Alberta in Canada. Three locations – a cave, a waterfall and a rock formation overlooking a river – are digitally modeled and displayed on wrap-around visual screens which sit in front of the interactor’s eyes, effectively blocking out the surrounding physical environment. Players move through this virtual world by pointing their hands, which are wired up to a Silicon Graphics computer that constantly regenerates the player’s point-of-view location.

Once wired into their virtual environment, players are able to choose the body they will



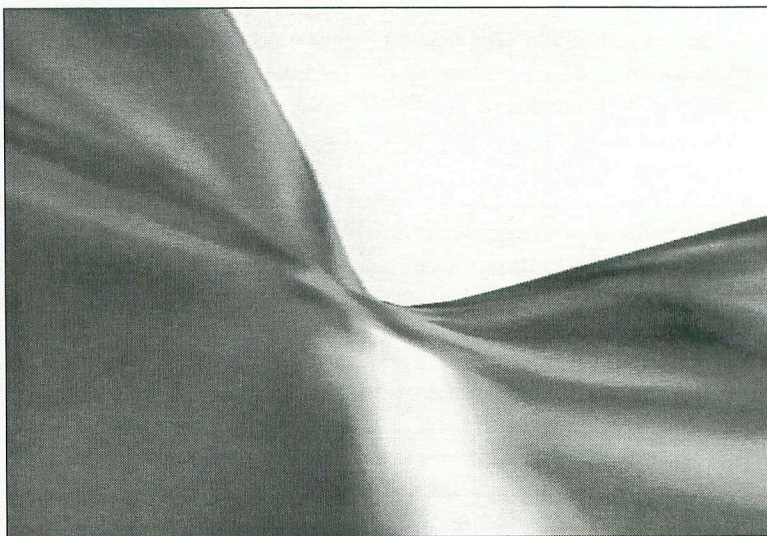
People experiencing virtual reality within Laurel and Strickland’s *Placeholder*

inhabit. The characters are based on four archetypal and mythical spirit animals – Fish, Spider, Snake, and Crow – each of whom has a specific set of characteristics and behaviors: Fish can swim but not fly, Crow can fly but not swim, Spider can climb but not fly or swim, and Snake can swim and crawl but not fly or climb. Laurel and Strickland call these characters “smart costumes that alter more than the appearance of the person within,”¹¹ suggesting that, as well as the body, players take on something of the character they choose. In addition, players can choose during session to change identities, jumping from one body and set of characteristics to another. Placeholder thus allows players to explore what it means to be embodied differently, and to find out how our bodies determine our situated understanding of the world.

Although *Placeholder* is an admirable experiment based on a non-masculinist, non-militarized application of VR, there is another way to “read” it as a cultural text. If *Placeholder* is an experiment in situated knowledges and embodied existence, it is also an example of just how limited such an experiment can be. What is most notable about *Placeholder*, and most evident in Laurel and Strickland’s short 1993 video documentary *Placeholder: Landscape and Narrative in an Interactive Environment*, is precisely what is left out or repressed in the simulation sessions.

The *Placeholder* documentary records the planning and implementation of the first VR sessions. It begins with a discussion, on location, of how to represent the landscape. Next we see a non-technology performance art version of *Placeholder*, in which interactive drama students run through possible encounter scenarios between the four characters, improvising stories for Crow, Spider, Snake and Fish to share with future players. However, it is when the two first players get wired up into the *Placeholder* system that we see exactly at what cost virtual embodiment comes. Each player stands in a separate stone-ringed circle, like a magic circle designed for mystical encounters; but instead of being surrounded by shamans or spirits, the first player is hovered over by technicians, who wire him into a complicated jumble of cords and heavy equipment. The wrap-around video equipment is cumbersome; each hand must be wired to a tangle of cables suspended from the ceiling, and the player carries additional wiring suspended from his back designed to track wide movements within the circle. In addition, he must move slowly to give the feedback monitors time to catch up with his movements. When the technicians ask the first player to take a practice walk within the circle, he walks too far and stubs his feet into the stones at the edge of the circle. Thus while the player is allowed some movement, this is a far journey from the improvisational drama students, who leap and swoop around their imagined environment with full physical freedom.

Once the simulation starts, the disjunction between cyberspace hype and the actual experience of *Placeholder* is even more evident. The “smart costumes” the players put on are little more than iconic representations; the visual environment is made up of abstract colored panels, which track too slowly for the players to move at a comfortable speed. Even with “twenty-five thousand lines of code and seven computers,”¹² including a high-end Silicon Graphics machine for graphics rendering, the technology is unable to keep up with the highest-bandwidth experience of all –



Perspective from VR goggles used in *Placeholder*

embodied “reality.” One player, attempting to switch characters but confused by the slow tracking and abstract representation of the virtual environment, engages in the following conversation with overseer Rachel Strickland:

Player:	Who am I?
Strickland:	You’re Spider.
Player:	Oh.. am I?

In this case, identity is not a matter of the player’s performance, but a confused moment in time experienced between one body (the physical) and another (the virtual). The player can still say “I,” because she is still speaking from her own physically embodied perspective. “Who am I?” in this case does not mean “what is my identity,” but “which imaginary embodiment am I occupying now?”

The documentary *Placeholder*, rather than showcasing a technology that enables players to experience another situated embodiment, actually does a better job of expressing just how limiting such virtual embodiments are. Michelle Kendrick argues that “[t]here can be no dismissing the space of our bodies, which perceive and sense, which gather the data on which to assemble our habitual fictions.”¹³ Even in a virtual space, there can be no dismissing the physical body, which receives the sense-impressions generated by the machine. Thus, the lasting images from the *Placeholder* documentary are not of players experiencing virtual embodiment, but of two separate people, standing in a stone-edged circle, wired into a machine which fails to live up to the complexity of their own embodied experience. As Elizabeth Grosz suggests, “the body exerts its own recalcitrance;”¹⁴ in other words, the physical body cannot be suppressed in favor of the virtual – it always returns to haunt us.

Saving something from Placeholder

Butler argues that when we manipulate our embodied identity, we are working with a “fantasy inscribed on the surface of bodies,”¹⁵ a summation which resonates with Grosz’s notion of the body as a “material surface on which messages may be inscribed.”¹⁶ This most certainly works in our conception of RealSpace, where we constantly code our bodies and are coded with social markers, and it would be logical to suggest that cyberspace, a digital medium, is the pre-eminent technology of inscription. However, in cyberspace we do not escape our physically embodied identities just by creating a new, virtual body. Cyberspace may well be a fantasy space, but we cannot “rewrite” our bodies there; our bodies are already “written” in RealSpace, and the slippage is constant. Even when we “put on” other bodies, as in Laurel and Strickland’s *Placeholder*, we must perceive those bodily perceptions through our own; even if we could tap directly into the visual cortex, create seamless sensory experiences, we’d still be processing them through our meat brains. Instead, for the most part, what we are doing is constructing a fantasy that is unlivable without a whole network of technologies, both ideological and material. In this way, while cyberspace isn’t another “liberatory” space, it does point to our embeddedness in technologies of control.

Although I have already critiqued *Placeholder* as an instance of wishful thinking, in which one gets imaginatively to escape one’s own body in cyberspace and explore other worlds only to be forcibly reminded that it is still only a fantasy, I believe that, just as Butler’s work contains its own useful critique, *Placeholder* also has something to tell us about embodied worlds. We can draw, in a positive light, the superficial lessons that other bodies are different to our own and contain their own unique constraints; indeed, the limitations of *Placeholder* also remind us of our own inescapable embodiment. As women, feminists, we must not ignore the powerful ways in which cyberspace can tell us about communication with the other; but we must not be too hasty to rush into a fantasy environment which privileges the life of the mind over embodied existence. Instead, we must always remember that our own bodies return to haunt us in cyberspace, and that cyberspace is a digital template that fits clumsily at best: a positive lesson for feminists, because it suggests that the

triumph of mind over body, fetishized in the face of virtual technologies, is an ultimately unsustainable dream.

Post-script: looking back after the end of the millennium

Just as cultural texts are placed in a specific time and place, cultural analysis has a context. Thus it would be easy to argue that, well, of course Placeholder was doomed to fail: it was 1991, the technology was slower, computer chips have gotten substantially faster... and so on. And yet, VR seems to have died a quiet and unnoticed death; it has gone underground to military labs and out-of-the-way academic projects. Therefore, does it really mean anything that the processing power to generate virtual realities has improved since Placeholder's inception in 1991? Is the failure of VR in the cultural imagination a matter of available technologies or something else?

I would argue that ultimately the drive to virtuality has very little to do with the availability of improved technologies, and everything to do with trying to work out whether living with VR technology is something we actually really want. Cyberspace has returned to its cyberpunk origins for the most part; movies such as *Strange Days* (1995) and *The Matrix* are the vestiges of the drive to virtuality and even they, though somewhat fascinated, are sharply critical of the drive to disembodiment, although for different reasons.

The Matrix suggests that our sense of mediation is so saturated at the end of the millennium because our very existence is mediation; we have to choose to look behind the mask, and even then it's unclear whether that's the "real" at all – an overtly Baudrillardian moment. At the same time, though, *the Matrix* is a profoundly paranoid movie; it suggests that "the world is being pulled over our eyes" by someone, and that there's a "truth" to be uncovered.

Strange Days, on the other hand, while exposing a local conspiracy, suggests that we're doing it entirely to ourselves; there is no outside force victimizing us through technology. Rather, in *Strange Days*, as in *Placeholder*, the body (the body marked by technology, and the body marked by racism) comes back to haunt us, although this time in the shape of media-savvy serial-killers.



Reason to be paranoid, from *The Matrix*.

Perhaps the best lessons we can learn from VR are by analogy - *Strange Days* is scary because when we drift off into a mediated version of ourselves, the body strikes back, while *The Matrix* suggests to us that our mediated existence, "the world pulled over our eyes," is perpetuated by ideology, and our own fear to see ourselves as we "really" are. (This is precisely why VR might be attractive to the military -- the more soldiers can be trained to see their world as a simulation, the more likely they are to pull the trigger without remorse.)

If "corporeographies" means the production or study of the spaces of the body -- a kind of bodily geography -- then the "body-spaces" we encounter in VR, rather than allowing a new body, tend to reinforce our own corporeographies, if only because the difference reminds us that we are wearing a bodily "costume" of sorts. Media may be able to produce the illusion of an alternative environment (after all, we spin our external environment out of our heads every day), but it cannot change the inescapable fact that we apprehend the space of our own bodies through a central sense of what is part of us and what is not. We may alter that bodily sense (from plastic surgery to VR to the kinds of experiments attempted by performance artists such as Stelarc), but the haunting goes on, in such phenomena as the "phantom limb", in which the body continues to receive sensation from a lost limb or body

part long after its removal.

However this corporeography by no means produces a sense of “wholeness.” Rather, it tends to compound the split between whom we sense ourselves to be, and what we apprehend of the world and other people around us. This split has become formalized as the “inside/outside” dualism of self and other, a necessary fiction for operating in the world. Perhaps the biggest threat to this state is in certain mental/neurological illnesses, or drug-induced states, in which the subject perceives his/her body as flowing out into the rest of the world, or feels alienated from his/her own body. VR does not replicate these states, but it can replicate the sense of emptiness and confusion invoked by these states. Ultimately, then, *Placeholder* reminds us not only of the gap between ourselves and others but also of the (Lacanian) gap between ourselves and ourselves. Thus the ghost in the machine of virtual reality is not really the mind or the body, but our fantastic sense of ourselves as split between body and mind: a split that can never be healed by plugging into the machinic interface.

Helen J Burgess is a doctoral candidate in English at West Virginia University, where she works in new media and science fiction. She is the co-author of “Red Planet: Scientific and Cultural Encounters with Mars,” the first academically authored educational DVD-Rom, and serves on the editorial board of the “Mariner10” DVD-Rom Series at the University of Pennsylvania Press.

Endnotes

¹ Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Reality* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1992).

² Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 64.

³ William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 12.

⁴ Rosi Braidotti, “Cyberfeminism with a Difference,” *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, 29 (Summer 1996), 19.

⁵ Judith Butler, “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory and Psychoanalytic Discourse,” *Space, Gender, Knowledge: Feminist Readings*, ed. Linda McDowell and Joanne P. Sharp (New York: Arnold, 1997), 258.

⁶ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” *Inside / Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 28.

⁷ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 21.

⁸ Bulter, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 24.

⁹ Molly Rothenberg and Joseph Valente, “Performance Chic: The Fantasy of a Performative Politics,” *College Literature* 24 (February 1997), 303.

¹⁰ Brenda Laurel and Rachel Strickland (producers), *Placeholder: Landscape and Narrative in an Interactive Environment*, Documentary Video, April 1994, Interval Research Corporation.

¹¹ Laurel and Strickland, *Placeholder*.

¹² Laurel and Strickland, *Placeholder*.

¹³ Michelle Kendrick, “Cyberspace and the Technological Real,” *Virtual Realities and their Discontents*, ed. Markley (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 153-154.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, “Inscriptions and Body Maps: Representation and the Corporeal,” *Space, Gender, Knowledge: Feminist Readings*, ed. Linda McDowell and Joanne P. Sharp (New York: Arnold, 1997), 238.

¹⁵ Butler, “Gender Trouble,” 258.

¹⁶ Grosz, 237.