Attribution of Affect in Mona Lisa Overdrive

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As Donna Haraway notes, there is no real reason to assume that the body is limited to that which is circumscribed by the skin; the body could represent any number of things, including others and the community in which one exists. "Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other bodies encapsulated by skin ?" (Haraway 178). The ascription of so-called "human" qualities to machines reflects a reversal of this tension between the human and the machine in cyberpunk literature that might serve to superficially avoid the very real dilemma posed by Tal, but as I will demonstrate, certain assumptions inherent in this ascription limit its effectiveness.

To imagine that a machine thinks, feels, and behaves like a human being is one way to get around the human/machine split. This behaviorist interpretation privileges observable actions as identification and evidence of (ostensibly) human traits as intentionality. Using this interpretive scheme, one avoids the temptation to segment the self, classify the body as "meat", and establish women as the inevitable consequence of this classification -- "meat-puppets", prostitutes, sex objects. Not surprisingly then, the characters for whom this ascription of intentionality to machines is common behavior, especially in Gibson's works, are "good girls", women who are invaded by technology only insofar as they are the victims of it; the limitation of this ascription is that the technology remains outside them and beyond their control. Often a masculinist stance is implied here as well; the women, humanists who empathize readily with the machines and grant them human status, remain unskilled in dealing with the technology on its own terms. Technology is, as usual, the domain of the skilled, the powerful, the masculine; those in power implicitly or explicitly forbid women to fathom its secrets, to learn its languages and codes.

Although Joan Gordon praises *Mona Lisa Overdrive* for its inclusion of three female protagonists, its value as a ground-breaking text in the history of cyberpunk feminism is questionable, at least insofar as Gibson creates two of these three characters along the lines of the female/humanist cliché representative of these "female principles" (McCaffrey 198), that Gordon herself, incidentally, finds repellent. Angie, the woman in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* with the remarkable ability (thanks to her father, who "installed" a certain software in her brain, establishing her as both his creation and his guinea pig) to access the net without attaching herself to a cyberspace deck (therefore preventing the technology to invade her body in order to get into her mind), structures her experience in a way that privileges the human and ascribes human qualities to machines :

> "[Angie] was accompanied, on these walks, by an armed remote, a tiny Dormier helicopter that rose from its unseen rooftop nest when she stepped down from the deck. It could hover almost silently, and was programmed to avoid her line of sight. There was something wistful about the way it followed her, as though it were an expensive but unappreciated Christmas gift." (17)

This ascription merely reflects Angie's character; these machines never speak from their own point of view, thus assuring us that she is right about them -- that they are indeed human or human-like. For Angie, technology can never be anything more (powerful) than the products of the way she structures her world. The "wistful" helicopter is compared to an unappreciated Christmas gift, but the gift itself cannot be wistful either; both are

inanimate objects. Gibson portrays Angie as the type of character who would find those sorts of things wistful, and who projects those feelings onto objects. Angie's self exists in close relation with those objects, but the closeness is not empowering; she and the technology, insofar as they are connected to her only by projection of her self (and not, perhaps, a more active extension of it) are still strangers to each other. The machine does not work for her; it works for the people who watch her and prevent her from doing the things she wants to do. Moreover, the self-other dichotomy remains unchallenged by either Angie's character or by technology. Angie remains untouched by the technology, and furthermore she is portrayed as reluctant to touch it herself; Gibson keeps Angie in a sort of "virginal" state -- one might, on the other hand, wish that she were more like Molly, able to harness the technology and make it work for her, instead of the other way around.