Electric Nirvana : A few thoughts on the extended subjectivity of posthumanism

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A closed-circuit television camera installed behind the monitor captures the statue, and its image is projected on the television screen in real-time. The bronze Buddha sculpture gazes into its own image on the screen. Nam June Paik, the "father of video art" and a leading figure of Fluxus, created multiple versions of *TV Buddha*, using different sizes, shapes, and settings of statues and monitors.

When looking into these cumbersome CRT monitors, one may glimpse a reflection of the delirious adolescent of the Information Age, or Digital Age, spanning from the mid-20th century to the present day. Its human-machine ambiguity also reminds one of the Cyborg fantasies. While Buddha reach Moksha and relieve all creature out of miserable secularity, cyborgs take on an anti-Anthropocentrism view and crush patriarchy. So in that eternal gaze from the retro-feel installations, we dose off into wonder that can TV-Zen really transcend the flesh? And can a cyborg utopia bring about an electronic Nirvana to everything? Or, to put it less metaphorically, can it extend and even deconstruct subjectivity?

The answer to the first one is no. When a closed loop is formed, in which the Buddha is constantly confronted with their projected digital image, falling into a state of eternity, they are unable to shed the corporeal form, as one intention of Paik when creating such a piece was to illustrate the conflict between traditional eastern ethics and the 1970s western popular culture. But the second one, in Donna Haraway’s theory, it works and further promotes feminism.

By challenging the rigid boundaries between nature/culture and human/machine, and by transcending outdated scientific, technological, and biological determinism, Donna Haraway, a historian of science and biologist, neither naively affirms nor pessimistically dismisses the study of science and technology. Unlike many feminists who limit themselves to merely opposing male dominance, Haraway boldly draws on cybernetics and information theory as her theoretical tools, imaginatively creating a fictional cultural practice figure—the cyborg—and constructs a new feminist epistemology—situated knowledges—thereby providing a new space for the development of postmodern subjectivity and offering a new perspective for breaking down the power structures associated with binary oppositions.

In an era of high technology, with the rapid development of digital technologies, science and technology increasingly challenge epistemology and ontology, becoming an integral part of people's lives. Thus, maintaining a purely critical stance towards technology is becoming increasingly inappropriate. The dissolution of the boundaries between nature and culture, sex and gender, and science and technology and society has become a core element in the reconstruction of contemporary epistemology and ontology. However, in the 1970s, feminist approaches to technology fell into the black-box theory and technological determinism. Feminists and critical theorists alike emphasized that science and technology were products of "masculine culture," condemning technology as "evil" and overlooking how new media and biotechnologies were reshaping the relationship between nature and technology, as well as gender relations. By the late 1980s, feminist perspectives began to enter the field of the philosophy of technology, and a significant number of "technofeminist" scholars emerged. The term “technofeminism” describes feminist approaches that use sociological methods to study gender issues in the field of technology. These feminists first critique the male-dominated thinking in science and technology and then reflect on how the development of technology can align with feminist values, seeking to develop a technoculture theory based on feminist positions.

As one of the most outstanding critics in the field of feminist technoculture, Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1985) is one of the most influential feminist cultural critiques of the 1980s. In this work, Haraway provides a powerful cultural critique of science and technology from a feminist perspective by describing and examining the key transformations in contemporary society and culture. She introduces the cultural concept and utopian imagination of the cyborg and establishes a socialist-materialist feminist critical framework. From a socialist feminist standpoint, Haraway argues that the cyborg is not an enemy. Socialists, feminists, and others should focus on the social relationships between science and technology because they mediate and shape our bodies and the construction of nature. On the one hand, Haraway emphasizes the importance of using scientific and technological methods, urging women to infiltrate the field of technology while avoiding naive attitudes and phobias toward its design, production, or use. Feminism should not fear but embrace science and technology, as feminist intervention is possible, necessary, and desirable. "For us, in imagination and other practices, machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves," Haraway points out. (Today, we can more clearly see how outputs from AI like ChatGPT, Claude, and Bard are being woven into our own work.) On the other hand, unlike some feminists who see the technological field as dominated by patriarchy and seek to escape it, Haraway views technology as a force for human liberation, a source of hope for the emancipation of all people, especially women. She opposes condemning technology, as when used rationally, its harmful effects can be mitigated. Haraway discovers the potential for self-expression and growth in the technological revolution. For her, by merging the body with the machine, people gain the ability to extend themselves and endlessly reconstruct their identities.

The cyborg, a fusion of machine and human, is a "fictional being," an ironic mythological figure explored in cultural critique. Standing on the identity and political ground of the cyborg, Haraway denies fixed, foundational views of nature and culture, turning instead to constructivist epistemology and the technological critiques of posthuman research in cybernetics, artificial intelligence, immunology, and brain science. As Katherine Hayles points out in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), a transformation is underway as humanity transitions towards the posthuman. Rosi Braidotti, in *The Posthuman* (2013), also notes that "the posthuman condition is not a list of seemingly infinite and arbitrary prefixes but proposes a qualitative shift in thinking, addressing a series of profound questions about who we are, what our political systems should look like, and our relationship with other beings on this planet. It introduces a whole new way of thinking." In short, Haraway's posthuman thought concerns the future of feminist epistemology.

Haraway borrows Simone de Beauvoir's famous saying, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." In traditional feminism, female identity is often seen as a unified subject with common characteristics, but Haraway opposes this essentialist thinking. Through the figure of the cyborg, she proposes a concept of multiple identities—in postmodern society, subjectivity is no longer unified and fixed but fragmented, multiple, and hybrid. This concept of identity reflects the reality of the modern technological environment, where gender, race, class, and other factors intertwine to form a complex network of identities. Identity is multiple and fluid, not singular and fixed. As a result, subjectivity is no longer an intrinsic essence independent of external influences but a product of the intersection of social, cultural, and technological forces. This understanding of identity and subjectivity aligns closely with post-Lacanian thought, particularly Judith Butler's gender theory. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed identity but something constructed through repeated actions and performances. Gender identity is not inherent but the result of external, socially constructed forces. When considering today's queer movement, one might conclude that innumerable genders exist. By questioning subjectivity, Butler suggests that women don't have to replace men in seeking the same kind of pleasure or power. This current trend toward inclusiveness and diversity may shed light on Haraway's earlier proposals. Both Haraway and Butler question the legitimacy of traditional binary oppositions (such as male/female, human/machine), seeing them as products of social norms and power structures. In a sense, the *cyborg* transcends gender—it is neither male nor female but a being with multiple identities, possessing virtual, self-constructing characteristics, thereby breaking the deadlock of power.

How curious it is that cyborgs are more Buddha-like when facing a monitor! While reducing the physical existence to a minimum, this utopia depicted by Haraway values all creatures equally, whether made of carbon or silicon. (And as a bonus, Buddha has no gender.)

Yet again, this is not the complete answer. A sheer reflexivity exists in Haraway's crucial concept of Situated Knowledges, and is a very critical part of a rebellion. In her famous essay "*Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*", Haraway argues that genuinely objective knowledge does not arise from a "God's-eye view"—an all-knowing perspective unaffected by any specific context—but from situated observation and understanding. The denial of the specificity of knowledge leads to a "conquering gaze from nowhere" (the gaze of the white, male, middle-class perspective). Knowledge must acknowledge and reflect its situatedness; this "situatedness" is the source of its authenticity and objectivity. In other words, the objectivity of knowledge does not come from escaping specific contexts but from being self-aware and reflective of its context. Like TV Buddha, the physical existence, the place one stands（or sits）cannot and should not be cast away.

*The Cyborg Manifesto* was initially published by Haraway in 1985 in *Socialist Review* and later included in her book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991). Over thirty years have passed since its publication. The posthuman figure of the *cyborg* proposed by Haraway dismantles the boundaries between nature and the artificial, between body and machine, and sets her on a path toward a post-gender world. By the 21st century, with the emergence of new technologies, the internet, new media, and the intersections of medical technologies, family, markets, schools, and hospitals have all been profoundly impacted.

C*yborg* is no longer the most exciting metaphor—a metaphor that acknowledges the complexity of human experience and desire. However, these metaphors as intermediaries in the production of knowledge confirm Haraway's call for "Situated Knowledges": In the virtual world, gender roles become less important, as people can change them at will. Recognizing the stubbornness of essence, acknowledging the social construction of scientific knowledge, and emphasizing that the world we understand is the world we create, whether literally or metaphorically, implies a responsibility for the practice of world-creation. Thus, Situated Knowledges continues the problem consciousness of *The Cyborg Manifesto*: From this moment on, all of us—technology, culture, will, and nature—are collectively weaving the future where we may eventually achieve electronic Nirvana.