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ME++

A profile of William J. Mitchell, *Me++: The Cyborg Self and the Networked City*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003. 259 pp. $29.95 (cloth). ISBN: 02-6213-4349.

WILLIAM MITCHELL'S NEW WORK explores the architectural, corporeal, temporal and spatial consequences of networked and connected state of information and communications technology. As Mitchell points out in his "Prologue," telecommunication networks and digital controls are increasingly "integrat[ed]" with vehicles and transportation systems, electrical supply systems, water, gas and petroleum pipeline systems, dams and flood control systems, and systems of global trade. In short, technology infiltrates just about everything. What are the implications for the human body and the human personality in such a context? This is what Mitchell sets out to explore in *Me++*.

Mitchell begins by noting that "boundary conditions" have become increasingly porous. Connectivity (the network) is the chief characteristic of the 21st century. Bodies that are "jacked in" (as William Gibson put it in his cult text, *Neuromancer*, 1984) are linked to other bodies. Relationships and communities are formed online, exceeding the limits of physical/geographical habitats, as processes, time zones and locations stream continuously through networks.

The human body itself is increasingly augmented, as it is technologically, surgically, chemically and electronically modified. With extended limbs and expanded memories, bodies are networked with the planet itself—by means of connections such as telephone and sewer lines—creating what Mitchell terms a "spatially extended cyborg" (39). The potential scope of the networked body's gaze has multiplied with television and surveillance cameras. With cameras and "eyes" penetrating every space, the distinction between inside and outside, private and public collapse.

Such technologies involve issues of scale, bulk, distance and location. How much can a human body carry? Mobile cyborg systems and increasingly sophisticated automobiles (whose wireless Internet and mobile phones eliminate the need for

phone booths or ground cabling) are attempts to integrate several functions into one space. "Electronic nomadicity," as Mitchell calls it (57), is this connectivity of people and things independent of location and motion. The ability to access remote data, files, people and services through the network has tremendous implications for the social and cultural aspects of human life. Miniaturization and microfabrication—a core technology enabling networking and electronic nomadicity—are not simply functional issues: they are increasingly matters of *design*. That is, technological sophistication and multifunctionality relate to issues of fashion as well. Wearing contraptions that look like something out of H.G. Wells may be a technological advancement, but it is also, crucially, a matter of fashion. The body wears advanced and attractively packaged "things" in a world where technology has to be "state-of-the-*art*."

The miniaturization effect has become possible through increasing "codifi-cation." Things—people, memories, identities, and even money—can be reduced to a set of numbers, code. This informatization and mathematization of life means that an enormous amount of material can be compressed into invisible "bits"—the information behind the barcode on the product we buy, the book we check out from a library, or the ID we hang around our necks.

The swift transmission of information and instant connectivity between information-seeking/exchanging "bodies" means that we are in constant interaction with others. We are caught in the flow of narratives, leaving (electronic) traces and shadows. In a sense these electronic narratives are doublings, reproducing interactions, stories and events of the physical realm in cyberspace (one recalls the almost hypnotically cyclical replays of the collapse of the Twin Towers). However, such trace-effects also mean that we are (or can be) under perpetual surveillance. Information coded and transmitted through cameras and the Global Positioning System (GPS) means that people and objects can be tracked accurately to within a few meters. And now GPS can be integrated into wristwatches too. Thus "location" becomes a "coordinate," and being "lost" simply means that there is a disruption in the narrative being transmitted about you.

When matters such as place do not matter (and they are not "matter" anymore, just code) then it follows that manufacturing and marketing are also unconstrained by space and geography. In the information age production patterns have changed drastically. Global capital, decentralized production, and niche marketing make space irrelevant. Resources are obtained from one nation state, processed in another, and sold in a third—the entire operation controlled

by finances that originate in a fourth.[1] Likewise, notions of workspace and home have drastically altered. Mobile phones and laptops have created an office space within the home. In turn, intrusive personal calls to a far-away business space brings the home into the office. People working from home do not have an office other than the home. Telecommuting and virtual conferences redefine business meetings with the Board of Directors. The office and the home, public and private become conflated.

However, this electronomadism can lead to problems. As the events of 9/11 have demonstrated, collapsing boundaries can also lead to infiltration and corruption of various kinds. Mobility and dispersal can be used for subversion and terrorism. As a result the use of passwords and codes, identification tags and security checks has increased. In earlier times cities were encircled by walls; now defensive rings are thrown around any possible access site. A person can be quarantined in a telephone booth within a few minutes on suspicion of being a terrorist. Governments seek more and more information, which, theoretically at least, can also be used against the information-providing citizen. The paradoxical need for information coupled with the danger from it (as evidenced in "sexed-up" reports, falsified data, stolen information, embedded journalism, secret photographs, and commissions of inquiry) produce the lists and tags, databases and codes which create what Mitchell in his concluding chapter calls a "logic prison." The logic prison is made up of an increasing multi-layering of bodies, spaces, events, and identities, all narrativized into/as code—what Richard Doyle describes as the "sublime incapacitation of self by the agonizingly gorgeous unfolding of complexity."[2]

We can thus no longer see technology as a mere prosthesis, an addition to the body in which the new improved body is the body + technology in the way 2 is 1+1. There is no self-identical body ("1") to which technology ("1") is added.[3] The body is multiple and rhizomatic, merged into many electronic eyes and ears that constitute the body itself. Subjectivity is itself, therefore, not rooted in a place or thing. As Katherine Hayles states, subjectivity is "dispersed throughout the cybernetic circuit […] the boundaries of the self are defined less by the skin than by the feedback loops connecting body and simulation in a techno-bio-integrated circuit."[4] The new human identity may not be "Me++" at all, in fact, since "+"

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[1]   As Manuel Castells has shown; see his *End of Millenium: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Vol. II.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

[2]   Richard Doyle, *Wetwares: Experiments in Postvital Living* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 2003), 16.

[3]   Dianne Currier, "Assembling Bodies in Cyberspace: Technologies, Bodies, and Sexual Difference," *Reload: Rethinking Women + Cyberculture*, Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth, eds. (Cambridge: MIT, 2002), 519-538.

[4]   N. Katherine Hayles, "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers," *October.* 66 (1993): 69-71.

suggests an addition to an existing thing while "Me" itself has always been multiple, fragmented, modified and prosthetic.

Mitchell's new work is less deeply philosophical than *City of Bits*. In several sections, *Me++* reads like a catalogue of techno-fads or a dizzying *ars electronica.* The fragmented nature of his narrative—no doubt a metacritical comment on the information "packets" convulsing through networks—thus bears an uncanny resemblance to a list of "achievements of 20th century science." That said Mitchell has managed to provide a catalogue of issues that comes with the package labeled "technology." Identity, surveillance, terrorism, subjectivity, and relationships are all affected by the new forms of information technology. Mitchell is careful not to be overly optimistic about what technology enables us to do and therefore draws our attention to the potential negative effects—both short term (terrorist attacks) and long term (changed forms of human relationships)—of cyberculture. A balanced exploration of the social, cultural and political implications of the new technologies is Mitchell's aim—d and he achieves it with the erudition, flair and humor that we have come to associate with his work. *Me++* will be of great interest to students and scholars of cultural studies of technology.

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