Lost in Space: Consequences of Multiplying Subjectivity

The landscape of cyberspace, designated to the functionality of technological beasts, such as the cyborg[1] and avatar, has debatably become a habitat for disembodied souls, and an infinite shelter for information networks woven into the space of technologically-enhanced human interaction. Yet the concept of posthuman disembodiment operates in more than just one manner. In fact, the very concept itself implies its own infinite capabilities as much as it implies the infinite dispersion of its subjects. This essay will be an exploration of what occurs when subjectivity is multiplied through technological systems, what consequences are suffered by the body and subjectivity as a result, and how disembodiment can function as both a stabilizer and threat of being. The inevitable process of multiplying subjectivity by mechanical means will prove to confuse identity and existence by way of destabilizing the constructed duality of being, while simultaneously bringing infinite power to the individual.

I. Multiple Subjectivities in Cyberspace

The first step of analyzing consequences of subjective multiplicity is to explore the way in which subjectivity is multiplied in a cybernetic landscape. The occurrence of such dispersion or multiplication is examined by theorist and scientist N. Katherine Hayles in her work, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, where she identifies the virtual space within a computer network, cyberspace, as "the domain of virtual collectivity, constituted as the resultant of millions of vectors representing the diverse and often conflicting interests of human and artificial intelligences linked together through computer

[1] See Donna Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs" for further reading.

networks."[2] Hayles further defines this zone as one that is "heterogeneous and fissured,"[3] which destabilizes signification from a "presence/absence"[4] relationship to one that is based on "pattern and randomness."[5] That is to say, already in this virtual arena there is a shift from the dichotomy of presence and absence to an open field regulated by chance connections and transient existence.

In this space, Hayles uses the figure of an *avatar*, a human-operated virtual body, to describe the transformation from thinking as a singular being, a human, to thinking through a dispersed cybernetic network in a flux of codes. "The avatar both is and is not present," says Hayles, "just as the user both is and is not inside the screen."[6] Using Allucquère Roseanne Stone's theory as a foundation, Hayles expands on the figure of the avatar in an attempt to acknowledge the effect on the body resulting from any similar type of technological simulation:

> Merely communicating by email or participating in a text-based MUD (multi-user dungeon) already problematizes thinking of the body as a self-evident physicality. In the face of such technologies, Stone proposes that we think of subjectivity as a multiple warranted by the body rather than contained within it.[7]

The body, rather than containing subjectivity, instead allows it to become *multiple* in the cybernetic realm by inserting the conscience into the network using a virtual body double. The implication of the body *warranting* subjectivity to become multiple already points to a certain

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[2] N. Katherine Hayles, "How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, By Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), 2177.
[3] Hayles 2168.
[4] Hayles 2168.
[5] Hayles 2168.
[6] Hayles 2167.
[7] Hayles 2167.

separation and disposal of the body—leaving it in the world of "reality" in order for subjectivity to infinitely expand within technological networks.

This dispersion outward from the singular body into multiplicity is further explained in Hayles' analysis of the point-of-view, or *POV,* which she describes as "a substantive noun that constitutes the character's subjectivity by serving as a positional marker substituting for his absent body."[8] Through the pov, consciousness is no longer locked within the body looking out, but rather it "moves *through* the screen to become the pov, leaving behind the body as an unoccupied shell."[9] From this arises the fear that consciousness is capable of functioning in this virtual world on its own, in a new state of multiplicity without its former material shelter. The subject fears what Hayles describes as a "*systematic devaluation of materiality and embodiment*,"[10] or fear of "losing [the] body to information."[11] Hayles, however, combats this fear by arguing that within the process of becoming a pov or avatar there still requires a sort of humanizing of data, as it takes on the qualities of consciousness, as well as a simultaneous computerizing of subjectivity. This, she says, creates interdependency between data and the subject—"the computer molds the human even as the human builds the computer."[12]

Momentarily putting Hayles' consolations aside, there still remain questions of what occurs during this interaction between subject and coding machine. Is losing the body to information the only imagined consequence at stake in the interplay between the human and its technological counterpart? To further observe and understand the significance of this transformation from presence and absence to pattern and randomness within the scope of

[8] Hayles 2176.
[9] Hayles 2177.
[10] Hayles 2186.
[11] Hayles 2180.
[12] Hayles 2186.

subjectivity, a similar, yet more simplistic kind of multiplication can be examined within the realm of film.

II. Multiple Subjectivities in Film

The transformation an audience member's consciousness experiences during the viewing of a film, or any technology-based storytelling for that matter, can help to illuminate what occurs to subjectivity upon inserting consciousness into a network of codes that embody the subject outside of its material form. Film acts a technological precursor to the computer in that the viewer is capable of imagining him or herself in the place of an onscreen avatar by way of camera pov shots—an element Hayles considers important in the amalgamation of human and machine. The initial event of dispersion of consciousness within film screening is described by Walter Benjamin in his article "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," where he observes that, "A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work…by contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves."[13] For Benjamin, the same type of dependent interaction previously seen in Hayles' computer study also occurs when experiencing works of art—the focus of which for this essay's purpose is centered upon the art of film. The audience will psychologically enter the particular film they are viewing, molding onscreen situations to fit their subjective perception, while at the same time allowing the film to penetrate and mold their subjectivity in return.

This manner in which subjectivity becomes molded by film further strengthens the concept of multiple subjectivities seen in Hayles' articles. When a viewer yields personal

[13] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, By Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), 1069.

perception to a film's reality, consciousness permeates a realm of networks both human and mechanical—a realm composed of the film's cast and crew as well as all equipment involved per shot. Benjamin states that the effect of this is such that "the audience's empathy with the actor is really an empathy with the camera. Consequently, the audience takes the position of the camera…"[14] A viewer must necessarily allow his subjectivity to function through the camera's eye in order to think and believe *this is what I see*, and thus take on the identity of the camera, while simultaneously thinking itself as identifying with one of many characters on and off screen. This surrender allows subjectivity to subsequently disperse through a variety of onscreen povs and avatars, scattering the conscience into other bodies represented onscreen, as well as inadvertently thinking *through* the mechanical apparatus of the camera. Subjectivity in this instance no longer belongs to the spectator alone, but is multiplied by a mechanical illusion and quantified relative to the number of cameras and characters involved in that particular film production.

Yet the network of cameras and characters within a film are constantly changing. Shots appear from different angles and through the eyes of different characters, voices and sounds are heard from varying directions, sometimes even as a narrative thought, and lighting plays with the vision of the camera. As a result, the subjectivity that has been handed over also becomes as unstable and ever-changing as the bouncing perception of the film. Moreover, the viewer has no control over such violent transitions—shots flip, switch, and cut against the will of the audience, whose perception is being moved in various directions from one moment to the next. This is strikingly different from the computer avatar Hayles speaks of, which moves and functions at the controller's demand. It is this kind of autonomous technology that creates a second fear in regard

[14] Benjamin 1060.

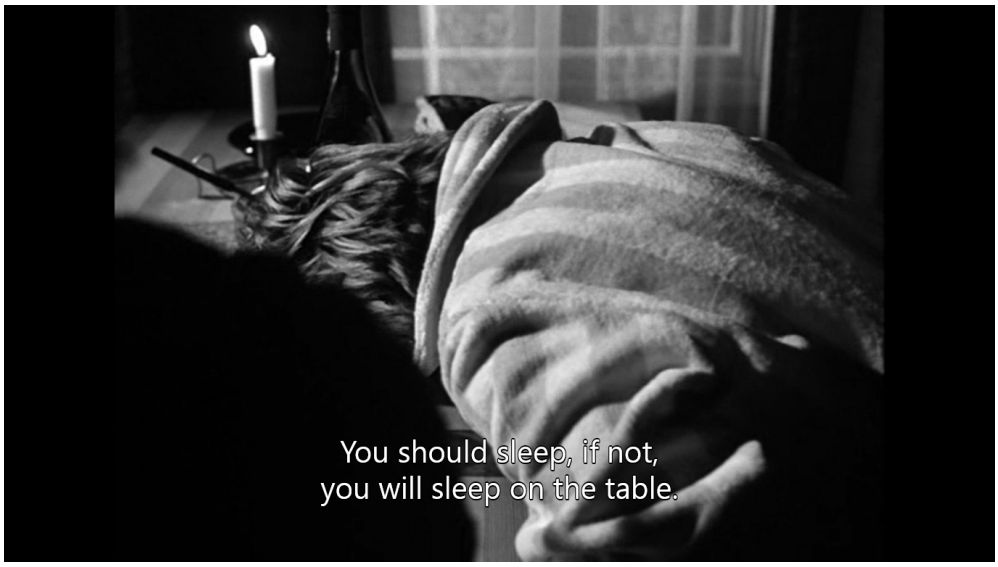
to the computer: the loss of control over an intangible body of networks that is in current possession of a person's subjectivity. Essentially, whatever happens within the network, the subject is forced to adapt accordingly, otherwise the system breaks down. In the sense of film, if the viewer's subjectivity does not mold itself to the necessities of the network, the "reality" of the film is lost and can no longer function.

To briefly explain this fear further, a particular moment in Ingmar Bergman's film, "Persona,"[15] helps bring to light how subjectivity must mold itself appropriately to its mechanical surroundings during transference from singularity to multiplicity, and how this submission can cause subjectivity to become vulnerable to the possibility of misplacement. Bergman brings together two heroines: Elisabeth Vogler, an actress who has suddenly stopped speaking, and her nurse, Alma, who takes Elisabeth away to a house on the beach in an attempt to place her in a tranquil environment and bring her back to a state of mental health. Over the course of their stay at the beach house, their two personas begin to intertwine and eventually become almost indecipherable from one another.

The beginning of the transformation takes place during a scene where Alma has become drunk, "intoxicated," so to speak, by both alcohol as well as the overwhelming silence of Elisabeth, who sits and listens to Alma speak of how similar they are, how they could easily be one another both in appearance and mind. The shot in question—coming from over Elisabeth's shoulder so that the audience cannot see her face—focuses on Alma who rests her head on a desk in front of her, her face turned away from the camera so that it also cannot be seen. At this moment, with neither of the actresses' faces available to verify the origin, a voice speaks, saying,

[15] Dir. Ingmar Bergman, *Persona*, Perf. Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann (United Artists, 1966).

"You should sleep. If not, you will sleep on the table."[16] The shot's layout appears as such:



The style of this shot makes it unclear as to whether Alma is speaking, Elisabeth is speaking, or whether either of the characters is speaking at all. Perhaps it is neither, and the voice is simply an internal thought, or the echo of a dream. Perhaps it never existed in the first place. But the sensation that is aroused by this shot is such that subjectivity, signified by the voice that is heard speaking, has been separated from all involved bodies, and therefore cannot manifest or stabilize itself in material form; the "I" can no longer be identified. It has thus not only left the former body and been multiplied within the film's system, but the film has simultaneously transformed subjectivity in such a way that it is forced to become unspecified in conjunction with the film's meaning at that moment—that neither of the characters know who they are anymore. It is not so much the body that has been lost here, but rather it is the viewer's subjectivity, surrendered to and scattered throughout the film's network, that has become "lost," or placed in a position of uncertainty. Subjectivity is forced to float freely as a result of attaching to and modifying with the unpredictable nature of the film's network.

[16] Bergman, *Persona*; Potentially an inaccurate translation, but the exact words are not crucial to the theory at hand.

III. Flickering Subjectivities

What must now be illuminated is the phenomenon that occurs within the moment that subjectivity is multiplied and transformed according to its technological setting. As was said, vulnerability of subjectivity in film is merely a precursor to the later transformation of subjectivity within cyberspace. Bergman portrays the way in which surrendered subjectivity must adapt in accordance to the happenings onscreen; when his two heroines lose sight of their identities, so too does the viewer, and subjectivity is left floating without a body for all involved parties. The way in which subjectivity must adapt in the computer world is intensified and can be discerned through Hayles' concept of what she calls the "flickering signifier."[17]

Hayles develops the flickering signifier after Jacques Lacan's idea of the "floating signifier,"[18] which Hayles explains determined that "signifieds do not exist in themselves, except insofar as they are produced by signifiers"[19] who themselves are "defined by networks of relational differences between themselves,"[20] thus creating "an ungraspable flow floating beneath a network of signifiers, a network that itself is constituted through continual slippages and displacements."[21] For Lacan, what is to be signified floats until the signifier, which is also floating in relation to other signifiers, stabilizes itself. For Hayles, however, the signifier no longer floats, but rather *flickers*. This occurs as a result of the emergence of informatics[22] in which she says "the signifier can no longer be understood as a single marker…rather it exists as

[17] Hayles 2170.
[18] Hayles 2170.
[19] Hayles 2170.
[20] Hayles 2170.
[21] Hayles 2170.
[22] Hayles defines informatics as "the technologies of information as well as the biological, social, linguistic, and cultural changes that initiate, accompany, and complicate their development," 2169.

a flexible chain of markers bound together by the arbitrary relations specified by the relevant codes."[23] Hayles explains further:

> …I see the lights on the video screen, but for the computer, the relevant signifiers are electronic polarities on disks…A signifier on one level becomes a signified on the next-higher level. Precisely because the relation between signifier and signified at each of these levels is arbitrary, it can be changed with a single global command.[24]

Because the network in the computer constantly reorganizes the coding within a variety of systems, the signifier and signified only become relevant at transitory occasions and are constantly reassigned according to ever-changing signals within the network.

This change from floating to flickering directly affects the integration of subjectivity within the network. Because subjectivity, as was seen in film, must necessarily adopt the technological processes in order for the computer to function, it too must adapt to this new transformation. The result is that subjectivity no longer marks a single being, nor does it float when the body cannot be identified in relation to other bodies. Rather, when subjectivity is immersed into cyberspace, which Hayles says is "created by transforming a data matrix into a landscape in which narratives can happen,"[25] the subjective narrative of the avatar, pov, and any other virtual body adapts to its surroundings and now *flickers*.

If thought of as flickering, subjectivity becomes something that drastically opposes its original concept. Formerly, the role of subjectivity in the body acted as a marker for perception possessing a specific historical background and existing within a particular place according to

[23] Hayles 2171.
[24] Hayles 2171.
[25] Hayles 2177-2178.

where the body was situated in time and space. However, the new point of view, which can now be deemed as flickering subjectivity, is "abstracted into a purely temporal entity with no spatial extension"[26]—it exists in a landscape of unidentifiable locations, and its physical and biological history is altered as a result of being cut off from the material body. Subjectivity becomes a marker of transient multiplicity—a seemingly omniscient role, rather than a subjective one.

When signified on screen, subjectivity seems to exist as a finite symbol resulting from pattern and randomness within the system, acting as a voice or executed action resulting from an agent's intention. But when in the process of flickering—in the indistinguishably small amount of time during a system's computation or hiccup—subjectivity seems to disappear; intention seems to have been misplaced within the network and conscience appears absent. However, the reality is that whether portrayed onscreen or absent from visibility, subjectivity remains within the system's coding in a constant state of potential. It contains the possibility of *anything*, while existing as *nothing* in particular. Thus subjectivity, in a type of mimicking of the flickering signifier, only exists in arbitrary relation to the relevant codes within the system that depend on pattern and randomness. The effect that a single command can drastically transform the signifier and signified, and therefore the subjectivity that is immersed with them, allows subjectivity to exist as a finite symbol, a multiple within the system, and infinite prospective. It flickers from one thing to the next, with a sort of omniscient potential, and a lack of specified being.

With its emergence in cyberspace, subjectivity undergoes a series of transformations that render it almost unrecognizable to its previously imagined form. Upon entering a technological system, it multiplies throughout the newly inhabited network, subsequently adapting to its new environment and eventually becoming susceptible to any transformations that occur within it.

[26] Hayles 2178.

Thus, in the shift from presence and absence to pattern and randomness where the signifier becomes something that flickers according to arbitrary code relationships, subjectivity likewise undergoes the transformation from a single marker to a flickering marker with multiple ends and infinite potential. What can finally be seen, then, is that the fear of losing the body, which Hayles so elegantly trumps in her essay, is necessarily accompanied by a comparable alarm: the *body's* fear that the familiar and stable concept of subjectivity may be *lost to the mechanics of the computer*; disfigured and rendered almost unrecognizable by the necessity to adapt and mold itself within the technological system it has become a part of. The conscience fears the ultimate futility of the body in light of computers' increasing development, while the body fears mechanical disfiguration of its conscience to the point that subjectivity no longer bares any human resemblance. While Hayles asks us, "let us remember the fragility of a material world that cannot be replaced," we now ask ourselves whether it is the immaterial world that will no longer remember its own irreversible makeover.

Notes

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. By Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. N. pag. Print.

Hayles, N. Katherine. "How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. By Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. N. pag. Print.

Persona. Dir. Ingmar Bergman. Perf. Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann. Released by United Artists, 1966. DVD.