Elfriede Dreyer, *Dystopia and Artifice in Late Twentieth-Century Visual Culture*. Extract from thesis for D Litt et Phil Art History, Unisa 2001.

Chapter 5: *Dystopian being*

OVERVIEW

In the previous chapters, the focus was on the late twentieth-century world and it was argued that, over the centuries, technological development has been the outcome of progressionist and ideological thinking. It was maintained that, in the late twentieth century, widespread dystopia with regard to notions of ideology has come about, and that technology is often depicted as posing a threat to humankind. At the centre of this viewpoint is the relationship between human beings and machines.

In Chapter 4 it was demonstrated that the exposure of the realities of the real has become a central preoccupation in late twentieth-century visual texts. In this concluding chapter, the focus is on the impact of technology on human identity and the human condition. The image of the nude is interpreted as a symbolic expression of the 'unclothed', naked, vulnerable state of the post-industrial human condition and as a vehicle to communicate the ideas of twentieth-century processes of the 'uncovering' and 'undressing' of logocentrism, master narratives and the absurd human real. The notion of undressing relates to the Baudrillardian concepts of transparency and twinship that will be investigated in this chapter. Other aspects such as role-playing, the notion of

identity as discourse and open-ended, the precariousness of the myth of the superhuman being, and the fallacy of the body as a bio-mechanism are explored.

There is greater emphasis on myth and belief in this chapter, since I believe that the greatest force to be reckoned with is not what people *know*, but what they *believe*. In the context of cyberspace these aspects play an important part in the dissolution of the real and the virtual and ensuing dystopia. The prevailing ambivalence in visual renderings of human beings in this period is investigated, focusing on an 'impure' dystopian identity articulation, especially in terms of machine culture.

In this chapter the figure of Spider-Man receives special attention, since the ideas of cloned identity, fractured identity, twinship and the deconstruction of centredness and genius are aptly demonstrated through this comic character.

5.1 Identity in cyberspace

With the onset of technoculture during the late twentieth century, another kind of real that was radically different from the sensory observed real came into being: a real postulated and facilitated through machines and computers. This new real was completely artificial but nonetheless generally credible. In all its mutations, identity in the context of technoculture shows an ideology of symbiosis between humans and machines.

Since its inception, tools have been invented to set up such a symbiosis in order to augment, modify and amplify the human being. During the Sixties the artificial extension and modification of human beings through computers was utopianistically postulated. The technology journalist David Fishlock's opening words in his *Man Modified: An Exploration of the Man Machine Relationship* (1969) are utopian: "man today need no longer die" (Fishlock 1969: 13). In *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the Making of Typographic Man* (1962), the media theorist, Marshall McLuhan, observes that the expediting of machine culture is typical of all attitudes to revolution and that " the future will be a larger or greatly improved version of the *immediate past*" (McLuhan 1962: 272). As such, the man-machine symbiosis will be an improvement on the 'purely human' human being. McLuhan declared that not only can machines and

computers become integrated with the human body, but the media may also be viewed as the extension of the human body (Friis-Hansen 1994: 57). This technological novelty is reflected in Marcuse's words in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964):

> The technological *a priori* is a political *a priori* inasmuch as the transformation of nature involves that of man, and inasmuch as the "man-made creations" issue from and reenter a societal ensemble. One may still insist that the machinery of the technological universe is "as such" indifferent towards political ends -- it can revolutionize or retard a society. ... [The] social mode of production, not technics is the basic historical factor. However, when technics becomes the universal form of material production, it circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality -- a "world" (Marcuse 1964: 154).

In the late twentieth century, artifice, mainly produced through computers, came to be 'the other', that which is fundamentally different from human beings. Baudrillard's words in *The Perfect Crime* (1996: 109) speak of identity in cyberspace and present a kind of prophecy about the technofuture:

> With the Virtual, we enter not only upon the era of the liquidation of the Real and the Referential, but that of the extermination of the Other.
> It is the equivalent of an ethnic cleansing which would not just affect particular populations but unrelentingly pursue all forms of otherness.
>
> The otherness of death - staved off by unrelenting medical intervention.
> Of the face and the body - run to earth by plastic surgery.
> Of the world - dispelled by Virtual Reality.
> Of every one - which will one day be abolished by the cloning of individual cells.
> And, quite simply, of the other, currently undergoing dilution in perpetual communication.
> If information is the site of the perfect crime against reality, communication is the site of the perfect crime against otherness.
>
> No more other: communication.
> No more enemy: negotiation.
> No more predators: conviviality.
> No more negativity: absolute positivity.
> No more death: the immortality of the clone.
> No more otherness: identity and difference.
> No more seduction: sexual in-difference.

No more illusion: hyperreality, Virtual Reality.
No more secret: transparency.
No more destiny.
The perfect crime.

Baudrillard expresses both utopia and dystopia regarding the cyberfuture of tomorrow. His view is typical of the ambivalence regarding the cybersociety and post-human identity which is still articulated today.

Until the Industrial age, human beings' relationships with machines displayed an essential orientation of experience of otherness; in contrast, the newness of the post-industrial human/computer interaction is the intimacy of the relationship. For many people their personal computer has become an office, a post-box, bank and play zone all in one. It can be stated radically that in post-industrial culture the self becomes articulated in and through the space of the interaction with the computer, that is, that in a Derridean sense the self as subject exists in and through discourse (Derrida 1973: 93).

With regard to the continual reinvention of the mythical self in relation to the machine, the notion of role-playing is of special significance.

5.2 Role-playing

The investigation of identity in the human/machine interface in the late twentieth century necessitates scrutiny of the notion of collectivity and role-playing within the technological collective and cyberspace. This is because it is related to the idea of utopia as a commonwealth and the individual's place within the collective as maintained in Chapter 1.

As pointed out in Chapter 1, most of the seminal utopian constructions are predicated on a communalistic principle, suggesting that the individual would find happiness in compliance with the mores and codes advocated by society. It was further indicated that utopian construction also entails designs of city and state that are entrenched in practical politics and aimed at the prosperity of the

proposed cultural grouping or state and not at the happiness of the individual. The individual should find happiness and fulfilment in playing a useful part in the bigger machinery of the state. Yet it was simultaneously pointed out that these utopian constructions are seldom happy or pleasant places (cf. 'unhappiness', Chapter 5).

The simulacrum industry of the late twentieth century concerns the artifice of self and the ease with which identity can be manufactured and even cloned (cf. 'simulacrum', Chapter 4). In the artifice of the Internet as a political space, for instance, it is easy to feign identity with resulting frivolity, arbitrariness, pretence and role-playing. A single individual can easily take on many other identities in the context of the faceless Internet and as such the monolithic identity of the individual is deconstructed in cyberspace. Conversely, Shields & Argyle (1996: 58) argue that there is no "loss of body in and through virtual reality technologies" and that the real of bodies and everyday experiences are the content of Internet communication. More so, they argue that Internet communication itself has become part of the banality of everyday social interaction (Shields & Argyle 1996: 58). Argyle maintains, furthermore, that social contact in cyberspace is a bodily, emotional experience, in which the distinction of 'truth' from identity masking can only be established through intuition and the senses of the body (Shields & Argyle 1996: 59):

> We experience the system through our bodily systems, and we exchange this experience with others through the communication of the network. The traces of others are carried within us as we experience together (Shields & Argyle 1996: 58).

This positive view on cybercollectivity is contradicted by views such as that of Baudrillard, who maintains that there is no answer to the "collective syndrome of a whole culture, this fascination, this mad whirl of denial of otherness, of all strangeness, all negativity, this repudiation of evil and reconciliation around the selfsame and its multiple figures: incest, autism, twinship, cloning" (Baudrillard 1996: 129).

Baudrillard's concept of twinship in identity is similarly manifest in the artifice of role-playing encountered in the societies of the late twentieth century, and demonstrated in identity roles such as the President of America and the Pope. These roles are in simulation of models without origin. They are novel in the sense of being reified versions of older ideas, but without a deep historical horizon.

Often the virtuality of the identity of the role constructed comes into conflict with the real of the identity of the individual playing out the role. In many cases, public figures have been removed from certain positions or roles because they do not conform to the artifice of the role.

Freundinnen (Female friends) of the German artist, Sigmar Polke, Figure 62, is a comment on such twinship and cloning in identity, in this case female stereotyping. The work demonstrates McLuhan's idea (cf. 'media', earlier in this chapter) that in the late twentieth century identity is an extension of the media. Even the kind of mark used by the artists is derivative of the centrality of the photograph in the media: Polke experimented at length with the possibilities of photochemistry and came up with a technique in which the material stratum that, under normal circumstances, would lead from the photographic shot to the final image, is accorded autonomy (Honnef 2000: 674). The result is a stippling that

Figure 62
Sigmar Polke,
Freundinnen (1965/66)
(Stiftung Froehlich 1996: 103)

sits somewhere between a blown-up digital image in large pixels and Neo-Impressionist pointillism, and conveys the idea of fractured, fragile and constructed identity.

The female figures pose seductively in Monroe style, playing out this role previously constructed for woman in patriarchal culture, and which has been perpetuated and exploited in the mass idiom. Marilyn Monroe may be interpreted as one of the previous century's most eminent *femme fatales* and artifices.

According to Baudrillard (1996: 119), the stereotype of the *femme fatale* is a good example of an artifice – an "unreal, fake, cerebral" construction. This gender type plays on speculation by hysterical inflation of femininity and becomes an overbearing object in the artificial ideal that has been manufactured for her. In many cases, it is not a fatal end that awaits her, but a triumphant destiny via the trap that is laid for desire itself, although an entirely mental construct.

Figure 63
Duane Hanson,
Man with Walkman
(1989)
(Duane Hanson
2000: 12)
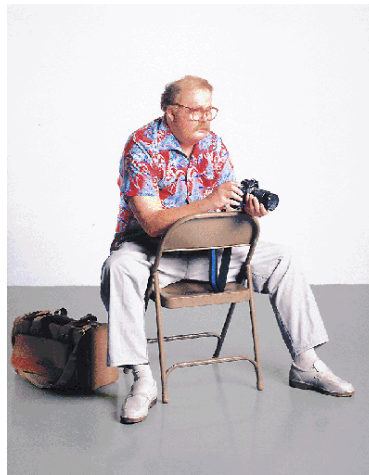
Figure 64
Duane Hanson,
Man with Camera
(1991)
(Duane Hanson
2000: 7)

Figure 65
Duane Hanson,
Man with Lawnmower
(1995)
(Duane Hanson
2000: 33)

The stereotype is a role, an artifice and a product of mass media. The American artist Duane Hanson has worked intensively with the idea of stereotyping in the American context and, in particular, as it is expressed in relation to mass culture and technology. The photographic naturalism of his work (discussed in the previous chapter) depicts typical Americans of the late twentieth century with detailed precision and, in doing so, examines the dystopian human condition in its artificial and labelled account. Presenting the figures as so completely and accurately banal, the artist evokes humour and embarrassment from the spectator, more so as a response to the confrontation with and recognition of the self.

Hanson's work (Figures 63 - 65) is a psychoanalytic reading of social types in the contemporary American society and a tragic presentation of a social narrative. All the figures are presented with downcast eyes and drooping shoulders, embodying the idea of post-industrial citizens as weary and disenchanted workers, *flâneurs*, surveyors and technology consumers.

Figure 66
marvel3D.jpg
(URL: www.webofspider.it)

Figure 67
mask.jpg
(Lee 2000: s.p.)

Hough (2000: 32) argues that in his choices of characters, the artist "selected individuals who have endured the heavy burdens of life without realizing the American dream". In his portrayal of boredom, despair, emptiness and life's tragic side, Hanson comments on human values and people who lead lives of "quiet desperation" Hough (2000: 32). He renders dystopia in presenting the characters as exhausted from playing out roles invented for them as a simulacrum of the ideal, utopian society, and says of his figures:

> These people can't keep up with the competition. They're left out, psychologically handicapped (Hough 2000: 32).

The notion of role-playing is explicitly articulated in the figure of Spider-Man. The costume that is essential Spider-Man attire includes a mask, which becomes metaphoric of his role-playing. Spider-Man's costume masks the whole body and, when wearing the costume, he takes on a superhero role and becomes endowed with superpowers. In Figure 66, a still from the forthcoming Spider-Man blockbuster film due for release in May 2002, Spider-Man's mask is separated from the costume and presented in combination with, inter alia, items of manufacture and photographs. In Figure 67, Spider-Man is 'caught red-handed' changing into his costume and instantly changing his identity from Peter Parker to Spider-Man, thus cloning superherodom. Both illustrations articulate the idea that identity is artificial, almost like a mask that can be worn and removed at will. The man inside the costume is *both* Spider-Man *and* Peter Parker, *both* real *and* fictional. One character is folded into the other and inseparable from the other, although being mere fictional characters both are artificial. It is a matter of choice (or perhaps of fate calling) which identity will be presented to the world.

In the Spider-Man narratives, the dystopian urban setting is sketchy and simplistically rendered in terms of a dichotomy between good and evil forces, and a marked articulation of technology-out-of-control or technology-as-threat. In both reals there are threats and unpleasantness. Spider-Man is a dual character and both sides of his character represent the 'good' dimension. He is *both* the pleasant, good-natured Peter Parker, a real-life person living an ordinary life in urban dystopia, *and* Spider-Man, a muscular hero swinging between the buildings of New York (Video clip 23) and performing heroic deeds in utopian urban dystopia. Spider-Man constantly fights criminals, such as Electro, an evil superhuman being. Although there are distinct differences in the characters of
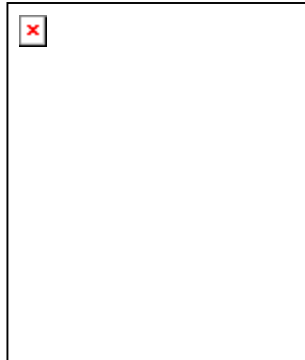
bugle.mov
(Marvel Comics 1995)

Figure 68
Richard Lindner, *Telephone* (1966)
(Ruhrberg et al 2000: 328)

Figure 69
Still from *The Matrix* (2000)
(Silver 2000)

Peter Parker and Spider-Man and their respective roles and functions in the urban New York environment, their memories, emotional life and experiences are the same. As such, the boundaries between the 'real' of Spider-Man's life as Peter Parker and the 'non-real' of Peter Parker's superhuman alter ego, are flattened and dissolved.

Not only is Spider-Man a super-hero equipped with special powers, but he is also fully human and his wife, Mary Jane, is pregnant. In his 'real life' he experiences the normal hierarchy of a boss who is checking up on him (Video clip 19), work pressure and so on, and he is in a relationship with his wife, May-Jane, whom he wants to please. She detests his heroing, considering it too dangerous, and Peter Parker has to tiptoe out at night while Mary Jane sleeps in order to respond to the call of duty as Spider-Man and rescue New York from disaster and dangerous criminals.

> This had been just one more of many situations in his [Spider-Man's/Peter Parker's] life lately which had made him wonder whether being able to invoke the inherent cachet of superherodom openly would be any use. ... There were some heroes who functioned without secret identities, and when you saw them socially - if you did - they seemed to be managing okay. All the same, Peter suspected their answering machines were always full when they got home from heroing ... . (Duane 1994: 27).

Spider-Man as figure is a prime example of role-playing. Since the Sixties, the idea of role-playing has been rendered through various images such as masks, painted faces, tattooing, as well as through the image of sunglasses as, for instance in the work of Richard Lindner (Figure 68).

The image of the sunglasses (also in Figure 69) represents an urban ideology of loss of identity and anonymity within the context of mass culture and empowerment through 'being cool', that is, in control and keeping pace with new trends, not 'falling behind'. The mask or role-playing as especially articulated in the film *The Mask* (1997), with Jim Carrey in the lead role, which includes instances of hiding behind dark glasses and wearing, amongst others, a Spider-Man costume as a kind of protection against the threats of the dystopian, technology-ridden society and its embedded inclination towards potential disaster.

Such hiding behind a mask or sunglasses implies an easy, non-participatory attitude in directing and guiding the world towards any kind of satisfactory solution to existing problems or dilemmas. It entails a dystopian condition of *flâneur*ship, of passive participation in and comfortable role-playing within the world. Hiding in the masses means that one does not have to take any position or stand with regard to any ideological stance or utopian vision of race or gender. The fading or disappearing within the group identity or spirit becomes a form of empowerment without a central locus as new goods are produced and new trends and fashions produced. The group migrates towards, develops, even profiles and generally reflects multiplicity within the general mores and arrays of the group.

It would seem that identity in the post-industrial, digital society is ambivalent. On one hand it is dystopia, existing in a hostile environment, where the individual is weary of the pressures of industry and work, and wants to disappear in the masses and evade the self. On the other hand, it is utopian, operating in a milieu where knowledge and friendship through global communication is facilitated and escapism through entertainment and dodging of the self becomes a pleasurable pastime. Essential to the post-industrial identity, and a result of the context of technologisation, are role-playing, twinship and artifice. In the next section these aspects are investigated in relation to the concept of the cyborg.

5.3 Cyborgs

The cyborg is a fiction of a real human being inhabiting cyberspace. Both the terms 'cyborg' and 'android' are late twentieth-century neologisms and not interchangeable concepts (cf. 5.4 Androids).

The first manifestation of cyborgs inhabiting cyberspace occurs in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1986) (already discussed in Chapter 4). In the American biologist Donna Haraway's *A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s* (1991), she defines the cyborg as a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway 1991a: 28). Haraway views the cyborg as the offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism (Haraway 1991a: 29) and argues that:

> [by] the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation (Haraway 1991a: 28 - 29).

Haraway articulates a radical dystopian idea of post-industrial human beings by arguing that the cyborg "does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden, ... [since it] would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust" (Haraway 1991a: 29). My interpretation is that the cyborg's memory is short and shallow, since

its historical horizon is filled with so much information and imagery, and with a rapidly expanding present, and there is no room for a concern with a deep past.

When considering post-industrial identity, the particular kind of space in which such identity is articulated is critical for its characterisation. In the previous chapters, several traits of the dystopian condition as observed in society and the global world were painted, including fragmentation, fracturedness, continual intertextualisation, incompletion, intermingling and layers of different reals. It was argued in Chapter 4 that the artificial space of the city has become the new mythical home and natural habitat of human beings, replacing nature as human beings' 'original' habitat. In the interpretation of Jenny Holzer's work in the previous chapter, virtual reality was explained as another kind of artificial space entailing ambivalence, especially with regard to time and space, that can be interpreted as "the place of the individual within the collective and the power struggle that unfolds as boundaries are renegotiated, broken, and formed anew" (Jones 1997: 53). As mentioned in the previous chapter, following Michael Heim, cyberspace can be interpreted as an essentially erotic space in which there is desire towards connectivity.

In the Japanese television producer-artist Toshio Iwai's interactive electronic work, *Museum in the Air* (1993), Figure 70, the physical museum environment is entirely virtual and the spectator is confronted with an interchanging of real, virtual, duplicated and continually renegotiated spaces. The 'artwork' is a process work that makes creative use of telecommunication technology and is an experiment in multiple activities and presented as a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (translated as 'collective art work') and *Gesamtraum* (my own word: translated as 'collective space'). *Museum in the Air* is a live broadcast of fax art received during the broadcast from the programme viewer's children, hung and filmed on the walls of the museum. After the broadcast the children kept on faxing in art, turning the event into an ongoing, unfinished artwork. *Museum in the Air* is a deconstruction of the idea that the museum space is a 'sacred' space, intended for high art only, as well as of the idea that the museum and artworks can only be physical entities. In the cybermuseum as a collective space, television viewers-spectators, child-'artists' and the television producer as artist-director join in the artmaking event.

Figure 70
Toshio Iwai, Screen shots from
Museum in the Air (1993)
(Pijnappel 1994: 94)

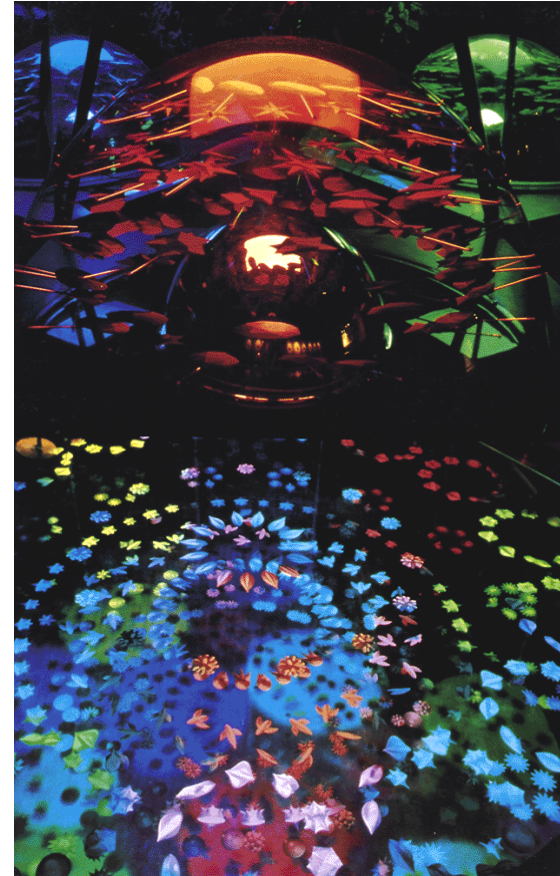

Figure 71
Toshio Iwai,
Time Stratum II (1989)
(Pijnappel 1994: 88)

In general, Toshio Iwai's aesthetic orientation is aimed at the pleasure derived from virtual entertainment, vividly coloured visual images, collectivity and the artwork as a site of shared experiences. Toshio Iwai's interpretation of cyberspace in *Time Stratum II* (1989), Figure 71, is one in which subjective worlds as artifices are folded into one another. It consists of colourful bubbles of fictional beauty giving pleasure to the viewer and inhabitant. In this interactive world, imaginary 'domes' are born and die at the impulse of the viewer/user.

They are temporal and fragile, they belong to no one and come from nowhere, they just *are,* making them dystopian; yet the image of the dome is a referent to ideology and utopia, as discussed before (cf. Figure 6). The continual materialisation and dematerialisation of images of bubbles represents the endless births and deaths of worlds, contexts and identities. This is the space of the cyborg.

The cyborg does not find pleasure in a projected utopia somewhere in the distant future or in an imagined exotic place (cf. 'pleasure' in Chapters 1 and 2). It finds pleasure in the here and now of the artificial. As such, within the understanding of the cyborg, a new mythology of the 'original' or ideal 'home', other than pre-lapsarian paradise or post-lapsarian utopia, is created. The new mythical home can be articulated not as a simplistic, mono-narrative mythology, but as many continually redefined homes premised in the present. The collectivity inherent in cyberspace is an enjoyable experience to its cyborg participants. The pleasure of connecting cyborgs manifests itself in the many 'chat rooms' on the Internet, and in the satisfaction derived from communicating with other cyborgs with similar interests in different parts of the global world.

Haraway takes the notion of pleasure to its radical extreme in her *Cyborg Manifesto* and argues that in cyberspace there is pleasure to be found in the confusion of boundaries (Haraway 1991a: 29) and in the notion of connectivity. Baudrillard in *The Perfect Crime* finds a pleasure principle in the simulation and fantasy possibilities of cyberspace and narcissism located in the "inner mirror" or the self as "happy self-reference" (Baudrillard 1996: 125). In this regard, he refers to the rock singer, Madonna, who by virtue of artefacts and technology "lacks nothing", constantly producing and reproducing herself in simulation of the perfect contemporary goddess (Baudrillard 1996: 126).

In Vanessa Beecroft's Performance work, *Show* (April 23, 1998), presented at the Guggenheim Museum in SoHo, New York, Figure 72, she staged twenty models with flawless figures posing as lifeless mannequins in a performance of three hours. The artist interrelates the ideas of sexuality, beauty and media image in the portrayal of the cyborg as, in Haraway's (1991a: 28 - 29) words, a condensed image of *both* imagination *and* material reality. In this work, the physical space of the museum is transformed into a display window and woman's physical beauty reduced to its consumer and spectator value. The presentation of both nude and clothed women speaks of layers in identity, truth, perception and reals, as well as the construction and uncovering thereof.

Figure 72
Vanessa Beecroft,
Show (April 23, 1998)
(*Duane Hanson* 2000: 58)

There is fusion of several entities: real and artificial; shop and museum; viewer as consumer and viewer as producer of meaning; objectified woman versus empowered woman; and woman as creature of social reality as well as of fiction.

Baudrillard (1996: 127) argues that the construction of an artificial double of the body ends in the culmination of a desireless "hyperbody, of a now indifferent and useless sexual function". He further refers to the transparency of the body "disincarnate" which has become pornographic, since the gaze has become ironic. *Coastal resort*, Figure 73, by the South African artist, Tracy Payne, speaks about the gaze at the nude body that has become ironic and disjunctive, since the idealised and beautiful female sexual body has collapsed into pitiful wreckage.

It is not only the social history of woman as victim and her 'debris' that is commented upon, but also the perception itself, the gaze and its embedded ideology which has been 'trashed'. In Payne's work, both the technological debris of manufacture surrounding the figure and the female figure presented as a mannequin comment on the devastating effects of artifice on people's lives, that is, on late twentieth-century dystopia.

Considering Tracy Payne's depiction of androgyny in *Sebastian*, Figure 74, Baudrillard's (1996: 124) postulations on the dissolution of identity boundaries, caused by a process of perpetual change and the moving gaze induced by the deconstruction of authorities and master-narratives, are illuminating. He maintains:

> In facial features, sex, illnesses and death, identity is perpetually changing. ... If the body is no longer a site of otherness but of identification, then we have urgently to become reconciled with, repair it, perfect it, turn it into an ideal object. ... And it is the body's resemblance to its model which becomes a source of eroticism ... . (Baudrillard 1996: 124).

Figure 73
Tracy Payne,
Coastal resort (1996)
(Williamson & Jamal 1996: 116)

Payne uses the narrative of Saint Sebastian, the martyr, to evoke meaning associations of sublimity and displacement from the real. In the depiction of the haloed figure in a trance, religious suffering and passion are blasphemed in their intermingling with sexual daze and eroticism, and it is in the subverted resemblance to the model of Saint Sebastian that an infringement of identity boundaries is suggested. The figure's temporal mutation into sainthood is a sad affirmation of its broken, tragic state of mortality, articulated through its sexuality.

Figure 74
Tracy Payne,
Sebastian (1994)
(Williamson & Jamal 1996: 117)

Socio-culturally *Sebastian* can be interpreted as denoting a kind of subculture that Dawn Dietrich of Western Washington University calls 'New Edge' culture: a new cyberspatial network and the formatting of a new kind of social space in which raves, body alteration, smart drugs and technospiritual movements are propagated (Dietrich 1997: 169). These alternative cyberpractices herald the new technologies in what amounts to "an almost nostalgic longing for the ultimate 'metanarrative' - the world sewn together through the electronic fibers of the Net - ... combining social consciousness with rampant consumerism" (Dietrich 1997: 170).

The work speaks of desire incarnate, of solipsism in the return to the self, and of the self-referentiality innate to simulation. It also denotes layered identity

and role-playing. Following Dietrich, a gendered reading of *Sebastian* entails interpreting the transvestite act of the male dressing up like a female as the male cyborg 'putting on' cybernetic space like a garment, like a female (Dietrich 1997: 170). Whilst in *Sebastian* there is disembodiment through the process of transcendence, at the same time there is a reference to the epistemic structures by which physical bodies have become culturally encoded, and as such, ascribe meaning to gender, identity and the physical body itself.

The figure in *Sebastian* is placed in a mundane environment, a bathroom, surrounded by banal toiletries, and its body posture is reminiscent of popular images of Jesus Christ on the Cross. Such decontextualisation of the suffering

saint from the spiritual, heavenly reals to the bathroom mock notions of religious belief; 'higher' authorities and spiritual domains that have been in place for centuries. Yet it is more than profane sexuality that is articulated: it is an explicit rendering of a collapse of purist and ideological notions of identity and of the migration of identity in late twentieth century into 'other' realms, being faced with challenges such as cloning and genetic engineering through advanced developments in chemistry, physics and computer technology. *Sebastian* becomes a radically dystopian depiction of human beings who on one hand *do* remember mud and dust (à la Haraway 1991a: 29) and on the other are faced with the uncertainty of their future as cyborgs.

It seems that a new mythology of place and being is being defined for cyborgs in cyberspace. A new kind of global cognitive mapping has developed, entailing a process of dissolution, dematerialisation, recontextualisation and Baudrillardian 'transparency'. As the purist prerogative is challenged more and more, so the dystopia intensifies.

5.4 Androids

The discourse on twinship as demonstrated in the figure of the androgyne and the artificial double continues in the phenomenon of androids. The android is a fiction of a humanoid, manufactured from some kind of artificial material. In visual texts many kinds of androids are found, some diverting quite radically from the human principle, such as in hybrids of insects, robots and human beings, but in all these fictions the reference to the real through the reference to the human being as model is clear. These humanoids and androids existing and operating in cyberspace remain simulacra of the real in its open-ended form of materialisation.

Ideological speculations on human beings becoming bio-mechanisms (as already mentioned in Chapter 1), lie at the root of the concept of the android. The robot as android signifies the beginnings of the discourse of the totally artificial humanoid. Initially, robotic fantasies were indicative of utopian thinking, aimed at relinquishing and conquering the limitations of the human body. In this frame of mind, it is matter of human beings modified, amplified and augmented (Fishlock1969). Human beings in 'enhanced' form have the utopian potential to unlock dreams of a better future.

The technology theorist and specialist on the topic of robotics, James Fleck, maintains that although ideas of artificial men or thinking machines have pervaded legends, literature and visual culture from the earliest times, it is only in the late twentieth century in the development of technologies such as industrial robots and artificial intelligence that these utopian ideas seem to have the potential for realisation (Fleck 1984: 189). He argues further that the articulation of these ideas has ranged from happy utopian to dark dystopian themes, but that robots have rarely been made the centrepiece of utopian or dystopian accounts (Fleck 1984: 189). My interpretation of the robot in the context of dystopia differs from that of Fleck in that I interpret dystopia as dissolution, fragmentation and an in-between state; therefore the robot is fundamentally dystopian in that it is *both* utopian in its embedded ideology, *as well as* entailing a fusion, a dissolution of closed definitions.
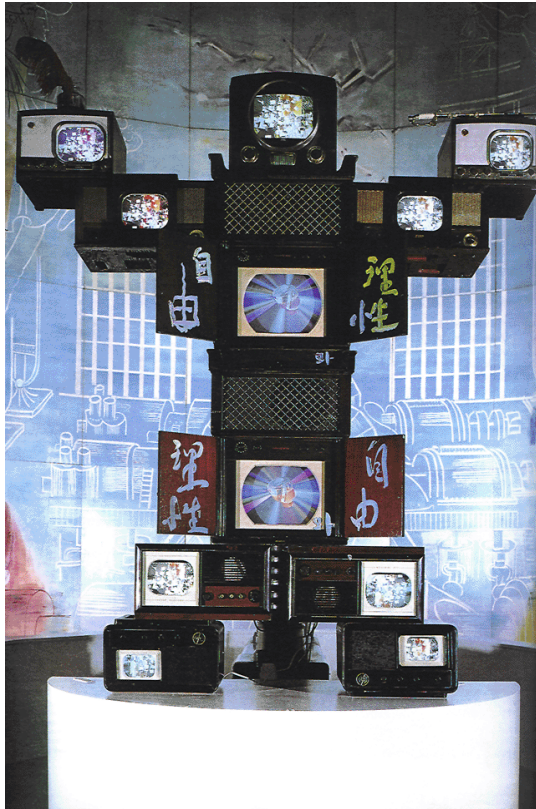
The first traces of symbiosis between humans and machines are found in the literature of the Thirties in the figures of androids and robots, all simulating the mechanism of the human body. Between 1750 and 1850 the most fascinating creations in the realms of mechanics and utopia were automata, that is, devices that move themselves (Woesler de Panafieu 1984: 127). Examples of mutating humanity in nineteenth century literature are a result of the effects of the Industrial Revolution, a time when life became more and more mechanised. Often, as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), for example, it is a depiction of scientific experiments resulting in mutating humanness-gone-wrong, although there are already signs of dystopia in Frankenstein being *both* monstrous *and* capable of love.

The eroticisation of the body, as found in nineteenth-century French materialist theories, is echoed in the cyborg's distinct extroverted sexuality. The deliberate process of the media and arts in the twentieth century to make public the absurd, the tragic and the gruesome aspects of the sensory real in the drive to decentre and question moral truths as absolutes for centuries, has brought with it a process of unveiling a radically erotic human real. The reason for this, Woesler de Panafieu (1984: 134) argues, is that the visual form of sexualised mechanical devices and machines such as clocks, aeroplanes, cars, engines, locomotives (cf. Figure 48), pianos, coffee grinders and sewing machines, is not equivalent to their functions. In fact, in literary genres and visual styles such as Symbolism and Surrealism there was an explicit determination to render these images as naturalistically as possible.
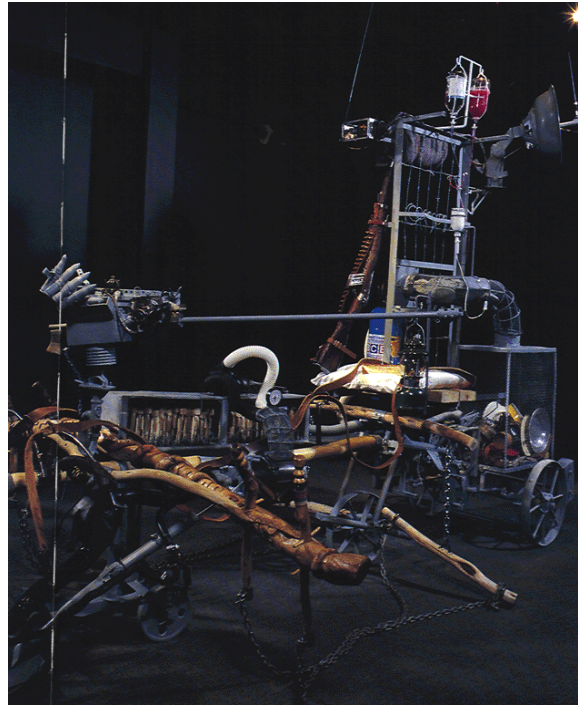
Thus, in these pre-twentieth- and early twentieth-century images, as in the images of late twentieth-century androids and cyborgs, there is disembodiment and the form of the device/machine/body becomes transparent and a vehicle for the expression of an idea. The sexuality of the android or the cyborg becomes a spectacle in accordance with the 'mechanical (/digital) workings' of the computer which are no secret and essential to the maintenance and effective functioning of global society.

The human/non-human dichotomy has always been one of SF's most established sources of narrative. In twentieth-century SF, the inhuman machine as represented by androids and robots, has been read as embodying our contradictory hopes and fears about an increasingly mechanised world (Fitting 1991: 301). The term 'robot' was introduced by Carl Čapek in the Twenties in his play, R.U.R. or The Insect Play (1923). The play, surprisingly, does not deal with robots as mechanical but rather as organic machines. It is striking how similar this first reference to robots is to cyborgs, rather than to industrial or even Star Wars mechanical men. Genetic engineering and cloning are also implicitly foretold. Nevertheless, in the play the managers in the factory refer to the robots as only machines, yet they do seem more like pets of which one can grow fond. R.U.R. ends with the Biblical words, "... And God created man in his own image ..." , an indication of the intrinsic utopian/dystopian dialectic.

In the Japanese artist, Nam June Paik's *Voltaire*, Figure 75, video monitors have been arranged in such a way as to simulate a robotised human form. In South African Willie Bester's *Ox wagon*, Figure 76, there is a similar integration of found materials and technological debris as building blocks of the human form, alluding to genetics and physics. The twinship of human and machine extends into space, gains presence in scale of the presentation and, as such, speaks of the ideology of such a symbiotic relationship.

In the photographic reproduction of the real and the presentation of two female mannequins (androids) in Olaf Martens' *Marie, Friederikke,*

Figure 75
Nam June Paik,
Voltaire (1989)
(Ruhrberg et al 2000: 576)

Figure 76
Willie Bester,
Ox wagon (1996)
(Williamson & Jamal 1996: 136 -137)

Leipzig-Plagwitz (1992), Figure 77, an interplay between the notion of the sexual cyborg as real and the real human being as artifice takes place. There is reference to the double play of reality and illusion in the identical appearance of the two models. The two girls are posed like two

Figure 77
Olaf Martens, *Marie, Friederikke,
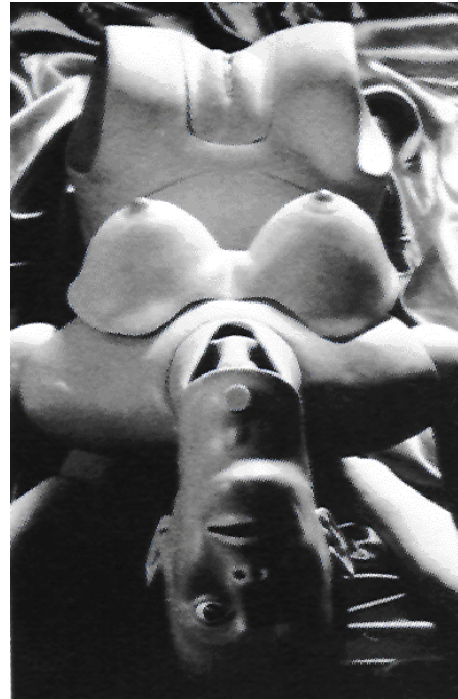Leipzig-Plagwitz* (1992)
(Ruhrberg et al 2000: 675)

Figure 78
Cindy Sherman,
Untitled (1992)
(*Duane Hanson* 2000: 58)

long-legged Barbie dolls and appear lifeless and emotionless. No traditional art materials have been used in the artwork and everything speaks of manufacture. In this work identity is presented as instant and fake as two life-size dolls taken out of their boxes/crates. Their context is the artifice of manufacture, their identity articulated as something between a fetish doll and a throwaway paper cup, artificial and temporal.

In American Cindy Sherman's photograph of an android in Figure 78, as well as in South African Jane Alexander's *Stripped ('Oh Yes' Girl)*, Figure 79, the artists extend the traditional process of creating illusion or artifice through the imitation of the real into a

Figure 79
Jane Alexander,
Stripped ('Oh yes' girl) (1995)
(Williamson & Jamal 1996: 23)

Figure 80
Moshekwa Langa,
Untitled (1996)
(Williamson & Jamal 1996: 88-89)

process of *both* creating *and* presenting the artifice. Instead of using the convention of presenting an imitation of a real-life woman, and in most instances of a beautiful woman, Sherman subverts the notion of beauty and presents a banal, crude image of a lifeless doll, thereby expressing the idea that in the artifice of the media, identity is nothing more than a construct and manufacture. At the same time, the Sherman work is still about imitation and an illusion of the real, since the doll *is real* although being lifeless, since it is

part of the manufacturing industry.

In Figures 77, 78 and 79, the unclothed figures speak of a 'stripping' of individual identity and personality within media context, as well as of a 'vanishing' of the real woman. Woman is presented as a cloned identity sitting somewhere between a doll, a mannequin, a perfect media image and a real person. These assorted identities merge and interface to the extent that all of them disappear and appear at the same time.

It is interesting to note that in the three abovementioned images, the women, being presented as semi-automata, become objects. This confirms Woesler de Panafieu's (1984: 135) feministic reading of "female automata express[ing] the masculine ideal of women and that in a mechanical style", which stresses the inherent utopian undercurrent. The marked differentiation in the form of 'male' images, such as the locomotive (Figure 48), and female images, such as the abovementioned five, expresses the utopian (and dystopian) undercurrents of technology. The skin of the human body then becomes a kind of socio-historical site for ideological projection.

In Figure 80, South African Moshekwa Langa reduces the body to skin, as such expressing radical disembodiment and Baudrillardian disincarnation. The work can be interpreted as expressing the view that the ideologies of Nationalist *Apartheid* in South Africa have had disastrous consequences for the human condition in the country in general with ensuing inequality in education and living conditions. The work seems to communicate the idea that the skewed racial policy of Apartheid, although utopian in principle, has proved in the end to be dystopian in its exclusivity and catastrophic effect on people's lives. Yet, just as the skin is that part of the human body that is continually shed, and thus in a state of flux, politics is a dynamic domain. As such the work stands in contradiction to the idea of the human body as superpowered bio-mechanism and instead communicates the frailty of the body, the body as projection, and Baudrillardian nothingness, transparency and disembodiment.

In cyberspace, there is fracture of identity and, according to Haraway, "identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic" (Haraway 1991a: 31). I cannot conclude without stating the fallacy of the body as a bio-mechanism as reflected in the literary and

visual renderings of mannequins, androids and robots, since it is nothing more than projection, ideology or playful fiction, and can never aspire to anything else.
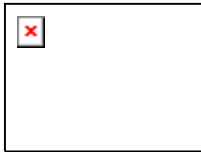
5.5 Other cybercrossbreeds

In the late twentieth century, the scope of the virtual imagination realised through the continually expanding range of new technologies is endless. At present, the discourse on twinship and cloning of identity has become even more complex when looking at the myriad possibilities in the field of humanoids, especially in the context of popular visual culture. The continual recontextualisation and 'crossbreeding' of identity types in cyberspace suggests a crossinteraction of the genders as well as of humanoids in which a mixing of human beings with machines, animals and insects takes place.

The character of Spider-Man, originating in the Sixties, stills reflects utopian thinking and is a kind of humanoid crossbreed, a hybrid of human and insect (Figure 1), but also of hybrid of a 'saint', a hero (Figures 84, 85) and an ordinary man. Spider-Man's robotic powers are located in his spider-sense acquired after a spider-bite in a science laboratory. His robotic characteristics manifest as superhuman strength, muscle, perception and intuition. Spider-Man is neither a cyborg nor an android; he is simply a totally fictive humanoid 'crossbreed'. Although robots have become technologically far more advanced and sophisticated and are still used in factories, laboratories and operating theatres, in the very late twentieth century the utopian thinking around the human-machine fusion or the android has become thwarted into limitless, gratuitous virtual creations of, inter alia, robotic insect/human crossbreeds.
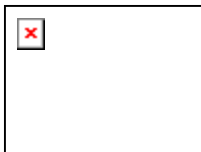
In Video clips 20 and 21, scenes from the film *Starwars Episode 1* (2001), there is rampant fantasy and dystopia. Androids and cyborgs of varying shapes, sizes and identities intermingle in a surreal orgy of science fiction. Historical epochs are distorted and medieval-like figures with laser swords are at war with futuristic insect-robots and robotised animal-like creatures. The logic of time, place and identity as measured against the known real is deconstructed and redefined into an absurd tale ascribing to old myths of heroism and survival.

In the film there is total fusion of humans/cyborgs and machines/androids and both have been genetically and digitally engineered to be highly intelligent. In Video clip 22, a scene from the film *Blade Runner* (1982), (also investigated in Chapter 2), this process of human engineering through the use of technology is depicted.

Although human engineering is bathed in utopian thinking and has been the topic of scientific fantasies for the last few centuries, its impotence as utopia is presently being argued in literature on technoculture. James Fleck (1984: 211), for instance, argues the

Video clip 20
Video clip 1 from
the film *Starwars
Episode 1* (Lucas 2001)

Video clip 21
Video clip 2 from
the film *Starwars
Episode 1* (Lucas 2001)

Video clip 22
Video clip 2 from
the film *Blade Runner*
(1982)
(Scott 1982)

impossibility of artificial intelligence and its reductionist nature by pointing out that, firstly, on an ontological basis artificial (digital) intelligence is wrong, since the human brain works from a phenomenological *Gestalt* perspective, and not from a digital basis working with the type of data that is discrete, explicit and determinate. Computers cannot deal with the emotional aspects inherent in thought processes. He argues that artificial intelligence thus "comprises a simple dystopian view which contrasts digital and analogue, calculation and intuition, artificial intelligence and man, and draws on the dichotomous epistemology implicit in the wider ideological superstructure to distinguish man and machine" (Fleck 1984: 213).

There is a clear distinction between the workings of the human mind as both analogue and emotional and the digital emotion-lessness of virtual artifice. At present, in the light of the development in science in technology, this dichotomy is immutable. The different versions of androids and cybercrossbreeds, although concrete manifestations of earlier utopian dreams, still have not conquered the limitations of the human body, but can be interpreted as tragic signifiers of dystopian, fractured existence in the late twentieth century. Human beings in 'enhanced' form still have not unlocked the utopian dream of a better future.

But it is just possible that artificial intelligence may have the revolutionary potential to relinquish the traditionally human real and create a totally new mythology, not for humankind, but for cyborgs in cyberspace.

5.6 Genius deconstructed and reconstructed

In the twentieth century conceptions of utopia have given way to a new sociological awareness entailing acknowledgement of pluralism in viewpoints and a re-evaluation of marginalised groups and peripheral cultures. Such post-modern sociology of knowledge can be interpreted as, amongst others, grounded in late nineteenth-century Nietzschean radical scepticism, Modernist Heideggerian phenomenology, early twentieth-century existentialism, and twentieth-century pragmatic and sociological theories and their insistence on knowledge premised in experience and locality. The notions of genius, authority and origin have similarly been deconstructed in the late twentieth century and the relativity and plurality of knowledge has been argued.

In the Introduction it was pointed out that the concept of the chosen one, the *avant-garde*, is related to that of genius, indicating a similar kind of 'running-ahead', 'showing the way' and that these concepts are in turn related to the concepts of utopia and ideology. Progressionist ideology can also be expressed through the notion of the hero and the genius, postulating a belief in human potential and human intervention. The expression, 'the death of man', often used in reference to post-industrial society, may also be seen as a fallacy when applied in the context of virtuality and the cyborg.

Haraway (1991a: 35) refers to certain dualisms that have been systemic to the logic and practices of domination of the other and have been persistent in Western traditions, such as "self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, ... reality/appearance, whole/part, ... truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man" (Haraway 1991a: 35). Most of these dualisms and dichotomies have an embedded history of hierarchy and domination, such as racial and gender oppression.

Figure 81
*Captain Marvel
Adventures* No 109 June
(Wright 2000: 54)

Figure 82
*Captain Marvel
Adventures* No 6 Jan 9
(Wright 2000: 56)

In the late twentieth century there has been a radical scepticism with regard to these dichotomies as they have been historically produced, but, Haraway (1991a: 36) argues, this is especially so in high-tech culture: It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine" (Haraway 1991a: 36).

During the period of early High Modernism such distinctions were still rife and the early Marvel Comics series such as Captain Marvel (Figures 81 and 82) were viewed as part of popular, 'low' art. During the Thirties and Forties "many, many characters were born and died" Wright (2000: 54). Wright further states that "as the characters evolved, changes had to be made along the way" (Wright 2000: 54), illustrating the industry of character artifice that manifested itself at the time as a result of the emergence of popular visual culture. This is ironic in the light of the fact that Captain Marvel was presented as a genius, endowed with wisdom, strength, stamina, power, courage and speed. By saying "Shazam!" the name of the wizard who bequeathed him his magic powers, he became the mightiest and strongest man in the world (Wright 2000: 56).

During this time of growing post-industrialisation and computer technology, it is ironic that in popular visual culture there was a return to mythological figuration. In the figure of Captain Marvel, the mythology of the chosen one merges with many other mythological characters such as Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles and Mercury. This reflects Marcuse's viewpoint that in Western societies during the Sixties, it is mainly the dichotomy between 'higher culture', that is, advanced industrial or technological society, and the leftovers of the pre-technological, mythological world that merged (Marcuse 1964: 63). In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse maintains: "Today's novel feature is the flattening out of the antagonism between culture and social reality through the obliteration of the oppositional, alien, and transcendent elements in the higher culture by virtue of which it constituted another dimension of reality" (Marcuse 1964: 57).

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* Walter Benjamin deals extensively with the function of art and the irony embedded in the so-called 'aura' of the original work of art that, in an age of sophisticated means of technological reproduction, can be endlessly reproduced (Benjamin 1973: 224). He argues that such reproduction processes 'lowers' the status of the artwork from its 'high art' position, since it eliminates space and brings objects closer. Such reproduction is part of the massification of culture. Reproduction and art forms that allow reproduction such as photographs, film and digitally produced images enforce the simultaneous collective experience. The post-modernist, under the influence of the immediacy of technology, looks for role models in the recent past or the present and often creates fast and easy methods of making and enjoying art. This attitude also sees the

end of the great tales of the past, which creates a sense of alienation in post-modernism. Reification is prominent in post-modernism, indicating the process of giving new meaning to old concepts; or the appropriation of abstract or ancient concepts to the present; or the process of making sense of the present via the past, thus the borrowing of old ideas.

Figure 83
Spider-Man, the hero
URL: www.webofspider.cbj.net

The figure of Spider-Man is an interesting case study in this regard, since his character is ideologically conceived in the typical format of the utopian genre, but at the same time there is deconstruction of the myth of the genius and the hero through various contextual and relativistic means (Figures 83 and 84). The Spider-Man narratives are ambiguous in the sense that they both confirm ancient heroism and ensuing empowerment, and deconstruct such empowerment through the presentation of Spider-Man as a double character. Peter Parker's masking is almost like wearing sunglasses and it becomes a double irony in the sense that he 'masks' himself as Spider-Man by 'disappearing' into his character as suburban Peter Parker. Just as the sunglasses offer protection from the real (sunlight), as well as anonymity, Peter Parker finds refuge, solace, in the real as a kind of protection from the threats implicit in the virtual life of Spider-Man. It is probably possible to argue that every artist masks a secret alter ego of hoped-for genius, of genial achievement or realisation.

Innate to the character of Spider-Man is the twinship of leading a double life as a journalist-photographer by day and the saviour-hero by night. Spider-Man in his fictional capacity represents the chosen one endowed with special powers, superhuman and therefore specially empowered, singled out. It is exactly this aspect that renders him vulnerable, since he is constantly singled out by super-villains also empowered with special, though evil, powers. As such there is a deconstruction of the notion of genius through the articulation of the ambivalence of both ordinary versus superhero.

In *Spider-Man: The Venom Factor* (1994) by Diane Duane (most probably a pseudonym), the tales of Spider-Man's adventures are told against the backdrop of post-industrialisation. His heroic actions demonstrate post-industrial responsibility towards technique and technology. He says: "I swear I'm going to start using my power with greater responsibility, and finally become the hero that Spider-Man should ..." (Marvel Comics: *The amazing Spider-Man*, 'Blood Brothers' Part 2, May '96).
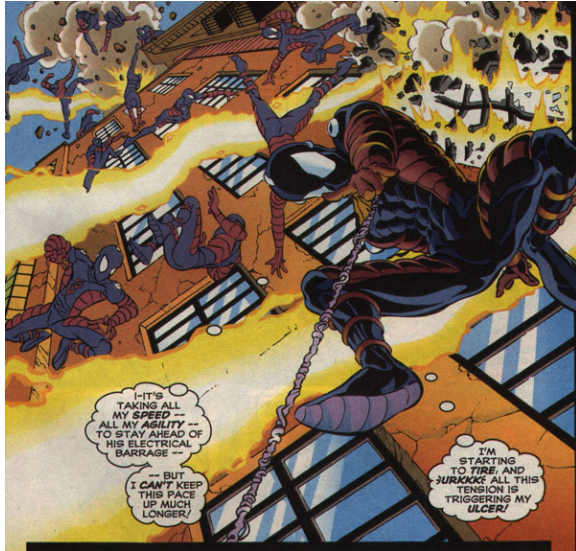
Slinging his web on his way through the city of New York, Spider-Man moves fast and efficiently from surface to surface and from location to location (Video clip 23). The invisible threads of his web span large areas and facilitate his connections and movement. He swings from site to site in an attempt to save the world from evil and ever-looming destruction, and he overpowers evil characters by catching them in his web. His actions are metaphoric of the argument commonly encountered in discourses on global culture, namely that the spread of technology is like a 'webbing' of the world, driven by superpowers.

The words, 'WE KNOW WHO YOU ARE!!' (Marvel Comics: *The amazing Spider-Man*, 'Blood Brothers' Part 2, May 1996), reflect post-modern approaches to myth. According to many contemporary theorists, myth is not found in a prototype in ancient history, but must be discovered in the present. Since Spider-Man is a fictitious character that has been created by a person, it may be interpreted as a reflection of the conception that human beings as super beings, the creators of technology, are still in control of their destiny and even myth. It further opens up the possibility of a new mythology of cyberspace and the interpretation of Spider-Man as a symbolic cyborg.

Figure 84
electro24dichotomy.jpg
(DeFalco 1997)
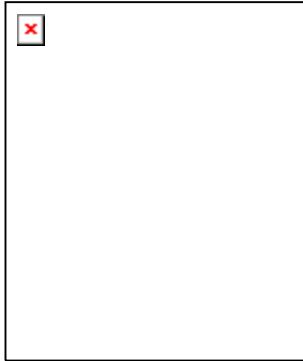
Video clip 23
lngswng.mov
(Marvel Comics 1995)

Inherent in the Spider-Man narratives is the dichotomy between myth and technoscience, intersecting in his post-technological or post-industrial world. Spider-Man is portrayed as a hero and his 'technical' actions as noble, therefore the underlying ideology is that technology is noble and potentially meritorious The ideology underpinning the invention of the machine and technology is similarly shaped by the infallibility of the machine or the absence of error. The human/non-human dichotomy has always been one of SF's most established sources of narrative, where the inhuman machine, as represented by androids and robots, has been read as embodying our contradictory hopes and fears about an increasingly mechanised world (Fitting 1991:301). According to Marcuse, the post-industrial world has become post-technological, since the mythological world continues to survive by haunting the contemporary consciousness in images and positions (Marcuse 1964: 59).

As Spider-Man, Peter Parker is a law unto himself. There is no one to consult or to report to. He makes his own decisions and follows his own best advice; in fact, he is God. If Spider-Man is vanquished, the city will disintegrate and be vanquished as well, since there is no one else to do his work. He has all the knowledge of the 'good' and commits only morally inspiring acts. However, it is through fate that he has acquired this status, that is, through the spider bite that endowed him with special powers. He has not been appointed by anyone, nor has he really been chosen. It seems that he inhabits a world without God or authority.

John Welchman (1995: 39) in his article, 'Bordering-on I: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Transgression', similarly views the dissolution of dichotomies and opposite traditions as a post-modern flattening or diffusion of borders. He describes this process as having three historical moments; a territorial history, a formalist history and a conceptual history, as well as the history staged between visual discourses and their intertexts; that is, between art and life themselves. According to Welchman, the 'space' of the border remains a political one, which speaks of social control and ideology. In the same way, the 'space' between the dichotomies embedded in the

figure of Spider-Man are dissolved conceptually, formally and territorially. Similarly, the various reals articulated in the Spider-Man narratives intermingle as a result of the ideology expressed regarding Spider-Man as late twentieth-century saviour of other human beings, threatened by technology-out-of-control and lost in a dystopian, crime-ridden world. As such a schizophrenic sense of real is evoked.

In Video clip 24, the figure Lara Croft is presented in Spider-Man fashion as a tumbling, swinging, athletic, superwoman. The mythic idea of the female as the 'weaker sex' is thoroughly deconstructed and Croft is self-assigned in a cosmic battle to save the world from an emerging group, 'people of the light', set to gain power and domination over all other groups through certain planetary manoeuvres. In this film and series of five computer games, the myth system becomes "a political language to ground one way of looking at science and technology and challenging the informatics of domination" (Haraway 1991a: 37).
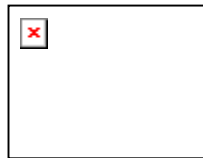
Video clip 24
Preview from *Tomb Raider*
(West 2001)

The Lara Croft narratives further present the idea that the machine is not to be worshipped, but is to be found *in* human beings. As Haraway 1991a: 37, argues, "intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin" and becomes an aspect of embodiment by recognising such potential in the human body and inflating it in an imaginative and fantastical way. The virtual reality of the games and the film serves to propagate a belief in human capacity, ability and strength and negates the idea of technology as threat. Lara Croft is a new breed of genius: a utopian cyborg in a dystopian environment.

In the film, *The Matrix* (Figure 85, also Video clip 16), there are similar flying, tumbling, running side-ways and other superhuman acts, but with a difference: it is not only the 'good' main character, 'Neo' in 'real' life and 'Mr. Anderson' in the matrix (virtual reality, derived from Gibson), who is endowed with super powers, but also the 'evil' characters inside the matrix. In this film it becomes

virtually impossible to distinguish the matrix from the real, or the superhuman identity of the various characters. The matrix has become a radical 'other': an entirely artificial real, simultaneously a novelty and a clone of the real that simulates the real so closely that different reals intermingle and one moves in and out of the other.

Figure 85
Group of stills from *The Matrix* (2000)
(Silver 2000)

The twin characters of Neo/Mr. Anderson are a clone of the pair of Peter Parker/Spider-Man and the real is in twinship with the virtual. All the characters in the film, not only Neo, possess the makings of genius if they are prepared to maximise the potential of their human brains.

Anselm Kiefer moves the locus of genius from the ordinary person as chosen one to the artist as chosen one. In *Chuwawa/Gilgamesh* (Figure 86), the artist plays model and poses as an androgynous prophet/shaman in a white robe. The work is *both* a performance *and* an overpainted photograph of the event in which the artist reenacts the story of *Gilgamesh* (cf. Gilgamesh in Chapter 1). Gilgamesh undertakes several journeys and enters the

Cedar Forest in search of the Other World where the Tree of Life can be found, guarded by a serpent. Figure 87 deals with the same theme and Kiefer presents himself as the prophet in comatose mode and as a receptacle of visions and superhuman powers.

Through this image Kiefer refers to a long history of the notion of empowerment through aspiration towards being a special being, transcending the limits of humanness.

Once again there is *both* affirmation *and* deconstruction of the notion of genius. On one hand Kiefer expresses a belief in the genius of the artist by playing the model of Gilgamesh the hero and the gifted. On the other hand, in the androgyny presented, the artist 'disrobes' fixed identity as well as mythical perceptions of the artist as genius. In the prostrate position, the artist depicts the 'prophet/shaman' as anti-hero, a vulnerable human being who is almost child-like. Whereas traditionally the male was advantaged in the sense of having the strongest 'voice', the child is disadvantaged in most communities as

Figure 86
Anselm Kiefer,
Chuwawa/Gilgamesh (1980)
(Rosenthal 1987: 90)

Figure 87
Anselm Kiefer,
Broken Flowers and Grass (1980)
(Rosenthal 1987: 93)

having the weakest voice.

In Figure 88, the French artist, Orlan, is subjecting herself to the pain and discomfort of plastic surgery under local anaesthetic as a Performance art work. This work is one of a series of similar surgical operations cum artworks in which she deals with metamorphosis of the self and the disfiguration and refiguration of the 'natural' body. Her identity, through her body, is subjected to a dynamic, never-ending process of alteration. Through the acts of plastic remodelling, Orlan makes a statement on the artist-as-God, being in possession of the divine power of transformation. The artist views life as a "recoverable aesthetic phenomenon" and maintains that human beings no longer need to "accept the body God and genetics have given us" (Weintraub 1996: 79). The body can be recreated, an aesthetic process which is beyond the secular and the self-expressive, and which turns the artist into a saint and her art into religious icons.

The affirmation/negation of genius in the abovementioned visual examples offers an ambivalent perspective on *Wunderkind* mythology. The dystopian artifice exists in the presentation of human beings as geniuses but only in amended, modified and augmented form. The characters are in control of self, world and machine, but *not* through being fully human as measured against the real, but through the endowment of special powers and physical strength. The texts entail pure fiction and illusion, as well as Baudrillardian simulacrum in the framework of genius. It would appear that in the late twentieth century the notion of genius and the *avant-garde* is both articulated and deconstructed, both revered and ridiculed.

The dichotomous articulation of genius in the visual examples becomes transparent, figurative matrixes presenting a fundamental trust and belief in the possibility of the amendment of human potential, ability, capacity and intelligence in the context of cyberspace. Presenting Lara Croft, Neo and Spider-Man symbolically as cyborgs and athletic superbeings in essence expresses what Haraway describes as " a myth system waiting to become a political language to ground one way of looking at science and technology and challenging the informatics of domination" (Haraway 2000: 37). This new mythology is that of the cyborg in cyberspace, which as Haraway suggests, can provide a way out of the maze of hierarchies and dualisms through which human beings have previously been explaining their bodies and their tools to themselves (Haraway 2000: 37) This, I might add, has up to now been less than satisfactory considering the disastrous consequences of, for instance, patriarchy and colonialism.

As new mythical horizons and territories of elevated levels of human genius and invention, facilitated through technology, are opening up and being explored, the known realms of the human real are shaken and fractured. A new, uncertain maze, that of cyberspace, is entered, and the old real abandoned. As the irresolution of the digital future is confronted, dystopia emerges because the utopian dream is radical artifice. One cannot help but to feel existential *Angst* develop as the real vanishes into the void of cyberdeception.

Figure 88
Orlan,
Trident and Skull (1991)
(Weintraub et al 1996: 20)

5.7 The dystopian void

Ambivalently, in late twentieth-century visual texts, dystopian themes of the banality and crudity of the real, as well as utopian themes of the celebration of human spirit and survival, are often found.
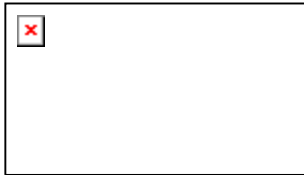
As mentioned in the previous section, the ambiguity of intertwined reals and dissolved truth dichotomies in cyberspace creates dystopia and a sense of uncertainty. I would like to add sensations of loss to these. This condition entails a loss of innocence, privacy and certainty, even if in the past these concerned naive belief in what was upheld as 'truths'. The result is a dystopian void where utopian dreams are *both* nurtured *and* shattered, as argued in Chapter 2.

Figure 89
Still from the film *Blade Runner* (1982)
(Scott 1982)

The void is the result of the disappearance of essence and wholeness in the intermingling, cloning and hybridisation of various types and parts, as well as of the dissolution of the divisions between the genders and the human, animal and plant species as these have been separated in the past. In the fracturing and playful mutation of identities into fantastical virtual clones and twins, the real (as it has been observed and known before) vanishes more and more. To Baudrillard, the "original void" is perfect and no reality can emerge there (Baudrillard (1996: 61). The "Nothing, the Void, primal scene of the material illusion, and continuation of the Nothing as perpetuation of that state" (Baudrillard 1996: 61) is what enables the description of the real, in the face of illusion, the virtual and artifice. In the 'nothingness' of the space in the artifice of *The Matrix* (2000) (investigated earlier), there is total disembodiment and dematerialisation with ensuing annulment of the metaphysics of the human body. In Figure 89 and Video clip 25 the 'known' real has disappeared and in its place have come pure illusion and artifice. The 'live' creatures exist in a vacuum of fiction and the narrative is perpetuated though pure artifice.

Video clip 25
Video clip 3 from the film *Blade Runner* (1982)
(Scott 1982)

However, the creatures created (born) through genetic engineering die a 'natural' death (Video clip 25) like humans, killed in warfare. The credibility of their death is located in the reference to the human real. The text demonstrates that the void of the

Figure 90
Caroline Schneemann,
Hand/Heart for Ana Mendieta (1986)
(Weintraub et al 1996: 29)

disappearance of the real, ontologically, can only be radical emptiness in its measurement against the real. As such, Baudrillard's definition of the void is problematic since although "no reality can emerge" in the dystopian void, it *originates in* the real and is the product of absolute *em*bodiment and human 'meat'space. Baudrillard (1996: 85) contradicts his own statements and argues after the above statement that "illusion [or artifice] is *not the* opposite of reality; it is a more subtle reality which *enwraps* the primary one in the sign of its disappearance" (my emphasis).

In a Performance work by the American artist, Caroline Schneeman, Figure 90, she creates a trail of body outlines that are traces of the body of artist Ana Mendieta in commemoration of her death and a simulation of her land art projects in which she often worked with traces and outlines of the human body.

The 'disappearance' of the artist's body becomes a symbolic act of commemoration of losses of various kinds as well as of the disappearance of the real. The work visually depicts Baudrillard's ideas of 'a perfect crime' in which a crime has been committed in the sense of a 'murder', a 'disappearance' (of the real). Ambivalently, at the same time, the ritual entails a very 'real' process of a real human in a natural world, being photographed. Following Baudrillard, the process of artifice continues in that the photograph preserves "the moment of disappearance and thus the charm of the real, like that of a previous life" (Baudrillard 1996: 85).

Katherine Hayles of the University of California is in contradiction with Baudrillard's stance of cyberspace and virtual reality as void. She does a psychoanalytic reading of the void in 'The Seductions of Cyberspace' and finds that occupying a virtual space means that

one can have the benefits of physicality without being bound by its limitations. The *both/and* advantages of virtuality imply that the boundaries of the body can be extended without the perils of physicality (Hayles 2001: 311).

The violation or dissolution of the boundaries of the body can be viewed as essentially erotic. Hayles investigates the feminist theorists Hélène Cixous and Lucy Irigaray, in their reinterpretations of the post-structuralist psychoanalyst Lacan, and argues that it is not a void or a lack that creates anxiety in cyborg identity but anxiety about "informational patterns that must cohere for continuity of the subject to be assured" (Hayles 2001: 317). According to her, it is possible to rewrite Lacanian psycholinguistics as cyberlinguistics. It is, however, an erotic linguistics, which entails highly charged sexual signifiers creating complex symbolic structures:

> In the cyborg mirror, three-dimensionality is reconstituted only after the encounter with the two-dimensional surface of the screen, which preexists before the virtual world opens and lingers after it has faded. Flatlining [castration] is a two-dimensional phenomenon, marking the screen as the juncture between the body, vulnerable to attack and decimation through physical means, and the cyborg puppet, vulnerable to destruction through the informational pattern that constitutes it. As the gendered patterns of concavity and convexity move through the surface of the screen, they become more arbitrary, subject to rearrangements and reassemblies that are bound by informational rather than physical constraints (Hayles 2001: 318).

In the discourse in this section as well as in the previous chapter, the interchangeability and relatedness of the concepts of cyberspace, void, nothingness, dematerialisation, disappearance, disembodiment and loss are apparent. What is fundamental, though, is that these concepts remain constructs and that it is essentially in the context of the artificial that these processes and conditions are manifest.

5.8 The cyborg worker

Conversely, continuing the psychoanalytic reading of the void, it is possible to relate the notion of the void to the symbolics of the womb as space, which can be reinterpreted as the fertile space of new life, dreams and the imagination. It is also the space where life 'continues' through the continual recreation of new lives.

Katherine Hayles quotes Randal Walser who argues that the cyberspace user, unconstrained by physical space, will begin to play, learn, exercise and work in magical new worlds (Hayles 2001: 311). In this process the body becomes an "absent signifier", a kind of surrogate body. Within such perspective of the erotic dissolution of the body boundaries in cyberspace or the void, it is possible to do a gendered interpretation of the cyborg as symbolic worker and agent, as found in many late twentieth-century visual texts (as in Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 7, Figure 8, Figure 22, Figure 23, Figure 24, Figure 26, Figure 29, Figure 33, Figure 37, Figure 39, Figure 43, Figure 66, Figure 72 and Figure 73). This interpretation harks back to the nineteenth century and early twentieth-century French materialism in which bodies are interpreted as sexual bio-mechanisms (as already mentioned in Chapter 1). In the interface of body and machine, the cyborg as agent and worker is therefore an erotic stance. This view can be amended with the interpretation of the cyborg as filling the void, the abyss of nothingness.

In the relationship with the machine culture, humans are inevitably in a pivotal position, occupying the role of operators and 'technicians'. Today, in every field, the most efficient method is sought. The dichotomy of the 'embodied' worker and the 'enabled' machine that are ideologies of the post-industrial world, is manifest in Spider-Man as cyborg and his heroic actions. Just as in the global world the most skilful method is sought to communicate as fast and effectively as possible, so Spider-Man employs a range of methods to overpower and capture the villains. Utilising his user-defined and self-authored web as tool in his heroic superman actions, Duchamp's Bachelor Machines and Magritte's masturbatory figures (Figure 48) are recalled.

Spider-Man's world is populated by many kinds of superpowered mutants, humanoids and androids, mostly of an evil nature, and it is plagued by cataclysms, disasters, eruptions and explosions. The abyss as sexual space is rendered symbolically in the 'space' above the city as in Video clip 12 and Video clip 23. The dystopian matrix is an abyss of nothingness, filled with pleasure, mainly in the form of entertainment and the prompting of curiosity and desire opened up by the limitlessness of the boundaries of knowledge and information of the Internet and global cyberspace. These avenues seem to have been established in an attempt to deal with the existential *Angst* after deconstruction and to fill the void created by the annihilation of history, human values and certainty.

5.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, the following core arguments of theorists were illuminated:

Jean Baudrillard's idea of 'twinship' in identity that is manifest in cyberspace, especially in the dissolution of the 'extermination' of the Other through the interconnectivity and loss of privacy in cyberspace;

Michael Heim's idea of the erotic ontology of cyberspace as a drive towards knowledge and completion;

Donna Haraway's idea of the cyborg's pleasure in the dissolution of boundaries in cyberspace; and

Katherine Hayles' idea of the erotic linguistics of cyberspace and the violation and extension of the boundaries of the body as erotic.

My argument in response to the abovementioned ideas, in conclusion, is that the only common characteristic that human beings share is their humanity; probably the most unifying element in a context of late twentieth-century visual expressions in which radical fragmentation and disjunction of most of the tenets of rational thinking and universal patterning predominate. It would seem that in the context of cyberspace, Derrida's (1973: 93) statement that the self as subject exists only through discourse could not be truer. As already mentioned, in the artifice of the Internet it is easy to feign identity and an individual can easily take on many other identities. The self and the body as monolithic utopian site has dissolved into a dystopian fracture of clones, doubles, simulacra and twinships.

It can be argued further that, considering the extroversion of the banality and absurdity of the real and the violation and the dissolution of the boundaries of the body in late twentieth-century visual culture, there is no way to describe it other than as pornographic. In cyberspace the private and intimate self has been extroverted into the public domain to such an extent that it has become obscene. The interaction of humans and machines has been transmuted into the euphoria of sexual metaphor.

The question remains – why? Although machine culture as an artificial real is in dichotomist opposition to human culture, its shaping and direction has been and is initiated, steered and controlled by human beings. Yet it is questionable whether human beings can find ultimate happiness in this self-constructed dystopia of the virtual environment, although it can bring short-lived ecstasy. Could it be that in the experience of the proposed immortality of the machine, human beings are experiencing the self as mortal and fallible and that this is expressed most effectively through the metaphors of new life, death and sexuality as the core life processes?