# The power of the techno-image-body

"We've got to hijack speech" (Deleuze, in Interview with Negri)

In this paper I would like to discuss a relationship between our current, technological society and the way in which we understand ourselves. Also I will make a few remarks on the role of the (digital) image in it, and how we might think about power in our current condition. I hope you will forgive me for not giving a highly specialized talk on one specific issue, as I am an old fashioned philosopher very much rooted in transcendental analysis, which – as you probably know – is not studying positive entities as such, but the *conditions* that determine its appearance for us.

From this perspective I also have studied the computer screen (or human-computer interface), which resulted in the book *Interface Fantasy* recently published at *MIT Press*. A historical note may help us here to understand this study of the screen.
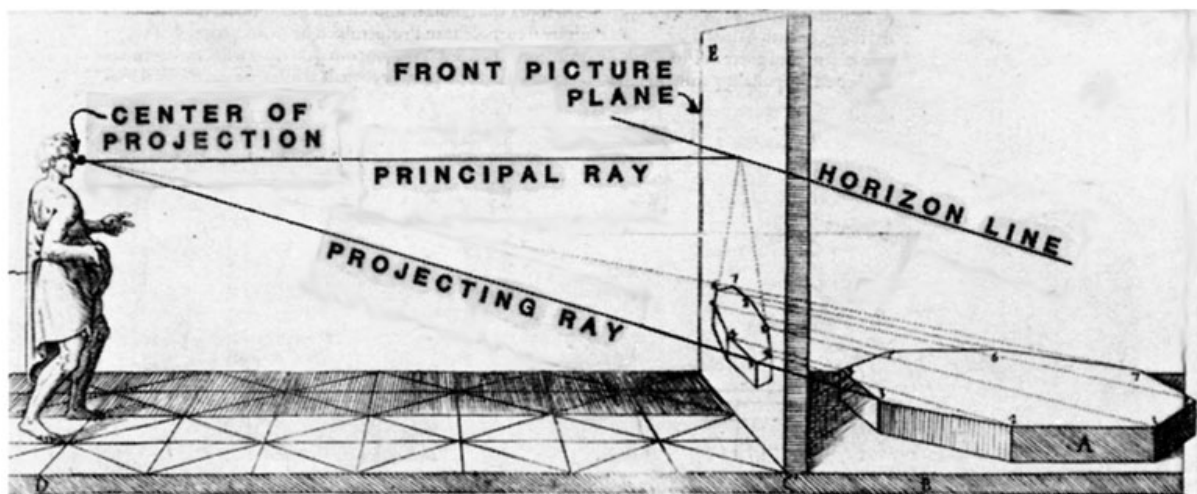
Renaissance Perspective

With Renaissance perspective and Cartesian mathematics it became possible to represent the world in three dimensions on a two dimensional screen. As Heidegger has called it, in the modern age the world itself became a screen (the age of the world picture, or world as picture). Now, in the postmodern age of representation largely determined by the computer screen, the specific characteristics of this screen, interactivity, multimedia and immersion, make the picture of the world not only something that we *look at* but something that

we *live in*. So we are not merely *spectators*, but *participants* in the environment that the image creates for us.
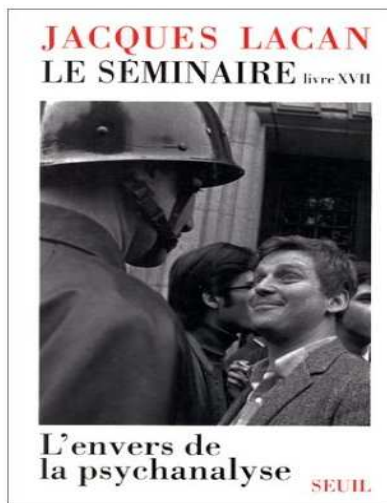

Star Treck: The Holodeck

This postmodern world of increasingly digital technologies is often analysed as a rupture with industrial society. Whereas the industrial society was a mass society characterised by collectivities, groups, communities and traditional structures, the post industrial society opens up a world of individuals and their personal choice, their freedom and autonomy. The central power structures of the mass society would have vanished or dissolved into the fleeting, flat and horizontal relations of the network society. Traditional authoritarian symbolic structures would have diminished, thus liberating the individual person. Apart from social developments such as emancipation and individualization technological developments, especially in the digital field, would cause this shift towards a so-called 'Fatherless society'.

Whereas this unmistakable has all sorts of positive and liberating effects on the individual person, there might also be a darker or hidden side to it. And it is this side that I will seek to address in order to contribute to how power might function nowadays - a side that I consider to be a privileged field of my studies. For the line of thought that I am in has as its masters Nietzsche and Freud (and to a lesser amount: Marx – as I was always primarily focused on the individual or subjective mind and less on the collective mind). And Nietzsche and Freud are, as you know, the 'masters of suspicion'. It is with such a suspicion that I regard the current liberating stories on the effects of new, digital technologies. For the euphoric belief that we have liberated ourselves from the old power structures might hide the rise of other (unconscious, unknown, hidden) power structures. Here I align my sceptical approach with that of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who reproached the enthusiastic students of 68,

who were visiting his seminar, drunken with the idea of revolution, that they were just aspiring for another master. And he added to it: 'You will get it'.

So where might we find this other master nowadays? When traditional authoritarian structures (coming from the family, the village, the nation, tradition, religion, etc) do not so much determine anymore who we are, what than is determining our identity? Who or what is ordering us what to do and who to be? My answer - and here I undoubtedly draw from the psychoanalytical tradition of Freud and Lacan, which is currently being taken up by Slavoj Zizek - is that we might have to look for this new power by analysing our close and intimate relation to the image, especially the image of ourselves. This is of course not a new power, as the myth of Narcissus may remind us of. People have always been fascinated by their self-image, and always have been trying to discover who they are by means of reflecting themselves (the ancient art of philosophy is, after all, a systematic way of reflection in order to find out 'who we are'; its mission is to 'Know thyself').

The new thing about the image in our postmodern, individualized society – and here is where my introductory remarks on the Fatherless society come in – is that its *meaning* is less determined by fixed and rigid symbolic contexts. The power of the traditional context has diminished. But, and this is my point, this has at the same time increased the power of the image. And from a psychoanalytical point of view this power of the image is above all the power of our "own" (put between inverted commas) unconscious fantasies. So to put it in blunt, oppositional terms – which of course do not do justice to the

complexity of the situation but only help us to see what is at stake – where in the industrial society our lives used to be guided by all sorts of 'Fathers' (bosses, priests, dignitaries) in the post-industrial society our lives are guided by our own (unconscious) identifications and affective relations (our 'choices' - as the rational approach would have it). The position of the teacher may serve as an example here. Where he used to be a guide by means of his symbolic position and his authoritarian power, now his role as a guide is (also, or: largely) established when he serves as a 'figure of inspiration', a 'role model', someone who shows us an ideal that one affectively tries to follow. And this may also explain why the Fatherless society is so much looking for all sorts of role models, stars, heroes, and examples of fascinating lifestyles – figures which are mostly provided by media.

In order to show you the fundamental, and intimate connection between who we are and our image, I want to show you some fragments from the short film _Svyato_ made by the Russian cinematographer Victor Kossakowsky. He has filmed the very first encounter of his 2 year old son Svyato with his mirror image (after having removed all mirrors from the house in the time preceding this moment.

So what we see in this film are some fundamental issues of the role of the mirror image in identity formation – as also described by Jacques Lacan in his theory of the mirror stage, which is the stage in mental development, between 18 and 24 months, wherein the human infant is able to recognise its image and thereby itself as some sort of individual unity – a unity in the fragmented body experience that characterises the infant until then. For this is what the image does. It provides us with a unity, a unitary form that takes in all differences. So although the infant may have a fragmented sense of itself and the world because it gets its impressions via different senses and places of the body, the image provides it with a unity, and thus with some steady sense of self. According to Lacan this virtual image functions as an ideal that the defective being (the being characterized by lack) longs for. It identifies with something that it is not. And it is therefore that this relationship is also characterized by an ambiguous affectivity – between desire, adoration and rivalry, aggressivity. This unity of the image is virtual, the real body is at a distance from it, and different from it. There is a gap between the real and the virtual, and our Self is situated

exactly in this gap. Our Self is 'dressed up' by the mediating function of fantasy, which mediates the real and the virtual - just as the infant may dress up differently and thus find a different appearance of itself, which it actually does in the film by starting to play with its image (this shows the importance of fantasy and play in identity formation). So we are guided by the image of ourselves, but what this image looks like is also a matter of fantasy (as we are the 'non-determined' animal). And media can have such an enormous impact because they offer so many appearances, ideals with which we can identify.

In the film we can also see that it is through the father talking to the child that the identified meaning of the image is established for the child. 'That is me'', is what the child says. It is through a third party that the child gets to know its name. You are Svyato' – says the father; I am Svyato – the child tries to answer. This exemplifies the role of symbolic structures, of the Other, of the third parties in the formation of our identity. Identity formation is not only a matter of identifying in the imaginary realm, but also in the symbolic. Symbolic identification has to do with assuming your role or position in the discourses that govern our world.

A point made many times by scholars on new media and personal and identity (such as Sherry Turkle, Sadie Plant, Alequer Roseanne Stone) is that exactly this pressure, or oppression, of old symbolic (gender) structures is decreasing with the growing situation of living our live online. We all know the popular phrase that on the Internet you can be whoever you want to be (or: the cartoon on two dogs that say: on the Internet nobody knows you're a dog). New, digital media would thus have a liberating effect on individual consciousness. This is also what advertisement tells us

Oakley advertisement

Advertisement tells us to enjoy, and of course not to obey. To 'be ourselves' to be free, be an explorer, to make our own choices, etc.. Its paradoxical structure is that it is a discourse (that is: a coherent story with certain intentions, interests) that tells us not to obey any discourse. We can be designers, we can design ourselves, by consuming, and identifying with the right image, brand or product. So the freedom, variability, and multiplicity that the decreased grip of old structures offers, is taken up or filled in by an increased intimate and affective relation to fascinating images – related to our own unconscious desires, and externalized in all sorts of consumer products.

Designing also plays an important role with regards to our own body. Of course also here this ideal of managing your body and showing it to the other in a way that you like has a long history. We can just think of phenomena like dressing up, and using make up. However, we may ask ourselves whether the social processes towards individualization and the Fatherless society do not radicalize this ideal of 'social engineering'. We may think here of the work of French sociologist Jean Baudrillard who describes this postmodern Western society that is no longer regulated by structures of symbolic exchange as a society of hyperrealities. We are aspiring for a dimension that is more real than reality itself, and when the metaphysical or religious solutions have had its day, technology might do the job. For Baudrillard the hyperrealities are characterized by excess, which we no longer recognize as such. We can think here for instance of something like body building, and especially the role it plays in Californian society, where the body is pumped up in order to make it better than the real body itself. I have always interpreted Baudrillards work as an analysis of realized fantasies. When the symbolic codes of old communities are less governing our self-formation, as especially the case in the 'free state' of California, humans, left to their "own" devices (and own again between inverted commas), have a tendency for excess, a tendency to blow things up, to blow themselves up, their image.

By saying this I might situate myself in a sort of 'conservative' stream of thought which recognizes the excessive tendency of human desire, immoderateness, and therefore the necessity of some sort of 'authoritarian' structuration – that is: rules not being founded on the Self, but on the Other. There are, however, also conservatives who actually believe that this other (the

Other founding the Law) is still alive, that is: a substance: God. Such as the Dutch prime minister, who has governed the Netherlands for the last 8 years, with moderate success although the times were difficult, recently his fourth cabinet has fallen, and who held a plea for 'moral values' from a Christian point of view.

My point here, however, is that the supposed 'liberation' from 'old structures' also might have a darker side. This liberation may contribute, for instance, to our desire to build our body in a manner that we like. But this 'freedom' may also end up in another situation, which is, in the case of the body, gluttony, the excess of eating. Eating is no longer regulated by 'old structures' to particular times and places, as also a social event, with a restricted menu, but is encouraged as a continuous possibility, that we should not let pass, as there are so many opportunities. So how do we deal with the excessiveness and extravagance that is offered to us? The delicate situation of our desire for food, the difficulty of balancing it, may also explain the tendency towards its techno-scientific control.
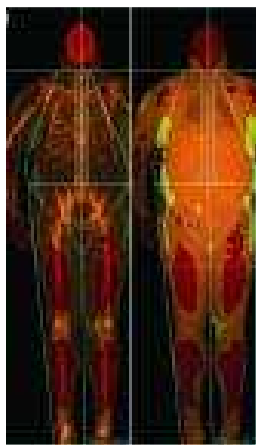

Dig. Imaging Techn. for Weight Management

In order to control our weight we can have a body composition assessment, and hear about our body mass index and hip-to-waste ratio. With new diagnostic imaging technologies one can go even one step further. The Lunar Imaging system of food producer Nestlé can provide information beyond the traditional body measurements by providing images of body fat location, and the amount of muscle and bone. These measurements will, at least that is suggested, play a key part in helping their scientists learn more about the relationships between diet, lifestyle and health. Knowing the location of your

body fat, and how that affects your health can provide an individual with more definite goals for weight management.

Alongside the social processes towards individualization, technological processes might be the other dimension for understanding the current, precarious situation. We know that with the rise of modern natural sciences there was also a growing conviction that the world was manipulable and controllable: man as the master of the world who could engineer it according to his will. This idea of 'engineering' or manipulability was particularly strong in the Netherlands, where the landscape was systematically designed and where social relations were intentionally planned. The newest trend is, however, that not just the world around us is an object of engineering, but that we, humans, ourselves are an object of engineering. Think of the so-called 'designer babies' whose sex can be determined on forehand, and where the possibilities of changing the characteristics of embryos are already there. We have smart drugs in order to produce and behave as is expected, we have plastic surgery, pills against depression, viagra for the brain in order to stimulate our memory and viagra for other functions that do not perform as expected, as desired, imagined.

My question is: who is expecting all this of us. That is: who is exercising that much control and power on us, when it is no longer the old 'Father' (that is: the boss, priest, teacher, etc). And my answer tends towards this: we ourselves are exercising this immense power over ourselves. Where 'ourselves' should again be put in inverted commas, as it might not be our conscious self that is pushing us, that is, the self that is transparent and that we can take a critical and reflective distance from. These governing powers might rather be played out at the level of our unconscious desires, which are so intimately and closely connected to the images of ourselves (think of the film Svyato, and of advertisement). And *these images promise us completion, fullness* – for that is the fundamental characteristic of the image: virtual unity.

And do *digital* technologies intensify this tendency for the desire to engineer ourselves? We may think that they do, as digital technologies largely increase the *manipulability* of the image – manipulability is *the* characteristic of the new media object as Lev Manovich has shown us. Digital images boost our living in a hyperreality. We can think of course of the manipulation of photographic

images (news photos of which we do not know whether they are real or not). But it gets even more interesting when we consider the digital images of ourselves, of our body (and let us remind here that those two, as Freud taught us, are closely connected: for Freud the ego is, before all, a body ego; constituted through the identification of the ego with its body image).

Take for instance a look at this photo

Virtual Smile Simulation

We can make ourselves smile better, a more perfect representation of ourselves; better than reality itself.

In the realm of medical science all sorts of imaging technologies (Radiography, CT, MRI, Ultrasound, Photo acoustic imaging) are available. And as a result of it there is a development towards medical avatars, that is, a virtual reality representation of the patient as a virtual person (Satava & Jones, 2002). As more and more of the medical technologies become information based, it will possible to represent a patient with higher fidelity to a point that the image may become a surrogate for the patient.

The Medical Avatar

"What you are looking at here is bits and bytes. Zeros and ones. But it's also a living, breathing, caring human being. This may well be a way to introduce the future to you... " (Dr. Richard Satava, 27.1.1998)

More recently IBM has developed the Anatomic and Symbolic Mapper Engine (ASME). A mouse click on the spine of the medical avatar for example brings up the patient's medical records related to that item. IBM describes ASME as improving medical information retrieval, and as a kind of "Google Earth for the body".
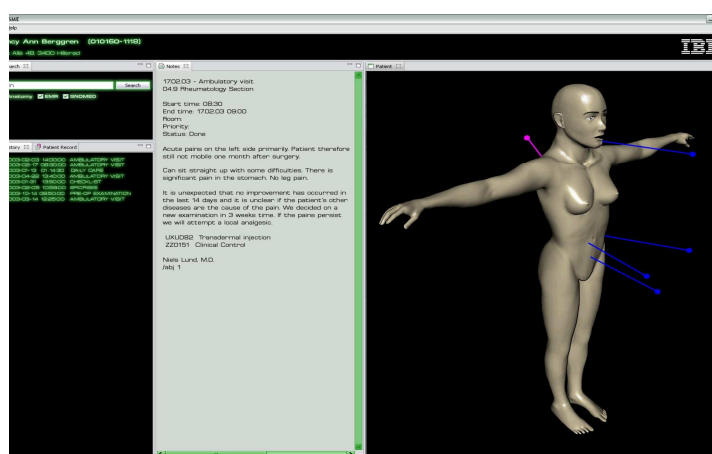
IBMs Medical Avatar

My work so far tends towards stating that we humans have a fundamental desire for doubling ourselves, for creating a perfect, virtual image and leaving the real of the body behind. I think that we actually aspire for such a virtual world of information that is in our control – a sort of religious desire in technological forms, grown out of our fundamental condition of being interwoven with the image [excursus Durand?: fiction as escaping time and death]. Actually, from a psychoanalytical point of view, this fantasmatic desire is what *sustains* ourselves, our actions, convictions, beliefs. It also sustains our scientific efforts, and therefore the image of the (medical) avatar is a perfect image to illustrate the ghostly desire penetrating our human, scientific efforts.

By developing and using digital imaging technologies medical science is making a lot of progress at the level of the *real body*. However, my interest in it is situated in its effect on the *virtual mind*. And this effect might be shown most clearly when death, the ultimate philosophical object, comes in. Then it

becomes clear that not all of the real is an object of engineering, and that our virtual mind, sustained by the most fantastic images of ourselves, tends towards illusion, towards being deluded by the fantasy of engineering everything. Raymond Kurzweil, the famous American inventor and futurist, author of several books on Artificial Intelligence and transhumanism, may exemplify this 'trap of desire'. I cannot deny him being a brilliant mind, but his theories grow weak where he thinks that even death can be controlled and overcome by means of techno-science. It shows that the social and technological developments in our societies that I have sketched may put us – at some point - under the power of illusion.

For a side effect of the imaging technologies that help us engineer our lives is that we may come to believe that even the ultimate real, death, becomes a matter of engineering, that all limits, or limitations, can be negated. That is: we negate the passivity that is characteristic of death – for death is something that comes over us, something that we do not choose, that is already decided for at the moment of our birth, and we do not know when it will happen to us. However, in line with the tendency to make ourselves into an object of engineering, we want to make it into an activity. We ourselves then decide when we die. For that is what is at stake for the Dutch interest group Out of Free will that seeks to develop the legal possibilities for people to be assisted with dying when they have decided that there live is 'completed'. Our death is becoming our last piece of work, something that we must prepare carefully, and the scene of which we must design. *We* design the scenario of our own death, and this scenario must be put in practice when the time is there. From a psychoanalytical point of view, this is the ultimate fantasy: being present at your own death, presenting our own death, turning it into a scenario whose author we are ourselves.

I do not say that this scenario is stupid or blameworthy. Actually, I say that the rise of this scenario is very understandable. For as beings of desire, we exist in close connection to our image, we *are* to a large extent our own virtual image. We live simultaneously in two worlds: the real world of bodily entities, and the virtual world of immaterial presence. The screen of fantasy is actually the mediator between these two worlds: our medium with which we create idealized images of the real, images that again determine how we experience

or can control the real. Digital imaging technologies incorporate this functioning of fantasy, and actually allow us to realize specific fantasies step by step, by making increased forms of control and engineering possible. However, their success may tip towards our self-understanding, and stir fantasies of the impossible. And although we cannot do otherwise than fantasize about the impossible, things get distorted when we take those fantasies as a reality – as manifest in the desire, a desire made into a practical wish and demand, to design our own death.

I know that this approach implies saying that self-consciousness is primarily an effect of technological development. What we think and what we perceive as being real is to a large extend determined by the media, the *technological* media that we use, that disclose our world – and here we are back again at the main issue of transcendental analysis. I think that it is our human condition: we live in the world of images and symbols created by technology. That is our human condition – which actually makes us cyborgs from the start. However, what we name our *humanity* is also linked in a fundamental manner to some sort of impossible real, something that we cannot elevate or negate. For this ethical/anthropological/metaphysical relationship we use notions like astonishment, humility, responsibility, etc. When we start to believe that also this relation to the impossible is a matter of technological engineering, then we tumble into illusion, become a prey of hubris. Dying out of free will, as an authoring of our death, is such a hubris wherein we are guided by a power, and even arrogate or assume it, a power that is actually a desire in the field of the unconscious.