

## The Female Body in Bruce Sterling's Novel *Holy Fire*

### 1. Introduction to cyberpunk

As a subgenre of science fiction, cyberpunk offers a view of the future right around the corner. Globe-spanning corporations and heroic underground resistance to a successively aggressive, capitalist and exploitative system are the usual ingredients in a cyberpunk novel. Reading and interpreting cyberpunk novels can offer insights into our own current situation in the Western world, where capitalism and techno-euphoria go hand in hand with annihilation anxieties (eg biomedicine). By looking at cyberpunk mythologies in relation to the current emergence of new cultural formations in and around cyberspace, we can investigate ideological dimensions of contemporary cyberculture.<sup>1</sup> Particularly with a feminist agenda it can prove useful to attend to the expressive practices of cyberpunk to aim at a critical analysis of this specific sociohistoric conjunction.

As every discourse, cyberpunk is produced within a cultural-historical framework and is therefore a symbolic enactment of our cultural preoccupations, worries and hopes. Therefore, looking at a cyberpunk novel not only tells us what our future might possibly look like - extrapolating current trends into the future - it can also bring into crystallised focus issues that are relevant today and demonstrate underlying fears (eg of the dissolvance of the human boundary - be it between the sexes or between human and machine) or established "truths" that our societies rest upon (such as the need for firm and reliable boundaries).

A major issue beside the possibilities of technological enhancements are the fears of death and annihilation via diseases and contaminations that the body cannot cope with and is helplessly subjected to.

In the novel these fears had become stark reality with massive global plagues diminishing the population. Just as these very real threats and the subsequent fears were contained by huge leaps in medical technology and by strict hygienic procedures, today our fears of new dangers to the material body are kept at bay by popularising body technologies and fostering hopes and dreams of bodily reconstruction and possibly physical immortality.

The price to pay for survival in the future world envisioned by Sterling is constant surveillance and (self-)discipline.

Our wish and desire to eradicate diseases and threats to our bodies make us willing even today to submit to an ever more rigid system of cultural surveillance.

## **2. The Plot**

Bruce Sterling's cyberpunk novel *Holy Fire* appeared in 1996.<sup>ii</sup>

The main protagonist, Mia Ziemann, was born in 2001 - and therefore would already be alive right now - and is now 94 years old. During the 'almost-century' of her life, things have changed quite a bit: biomedicine is the dominating industry and power is in the hands of wealthy senior citizens. The world is ruled by a global gerontocratic elite, the so called polity. But wealth alone is not enough in this society: Your medical records are publicly available on the net and if you do not do everything to maintain your health, then you will have a hard time doing business - because people will not trust you - and you will not qualify for the better medical procedures. Seemingly liberal - alcohol and narcotics are not illegal, but any consumption thereof will show on your records - citizens are coerced into complying with the polity's needs: hard-working, responsible, trustworthy and self-sacrificing citizens who always have the best of the polity in mind.

Among the medical techniques available in the late 21<sup>st</sup> century are different forms of life-extension. Mia, who has been living a cautious and sensible life, taking meticulous care of her bodily health, qualifies for the most radical and new upgrade technology that will turn her into a twenty-year old again. But after the procedure not only her body has been completely restructured, her identity has also changed and casting off her old careful and conservative self, she tricks the medical personnel and runs off to Europe for fun and adventure.

In my paper I will focus on the very beginning of the novel, looking at the description of the old Mia, at the procedure she goes through and at the ways she has changed afterwards up to the point where she leaves for Europe.

### **3. Reading the Body**

Artificial reconstruction of the human body is already blossoming in our times. The dimensions of what counts as the 'natural' body have been subtly altered by such diverse practices as bodybuilding, liposuction, tattoos and the replacement of body parts - both functional (such as heart or limb replacements) and non-functional (such as the plastic testicle or the artificial breast form).

In what Anne Balsamo in her book "Technologies of the Gendered Body" (1996) calls a 'thick perception of the body' the aim is to understand "the ways in which the body is conceptualised and articulated within different cultural discourses" (3). How is this natural object 'body' turned into a sign of culture? And which cultural practices make this body gendered?

Several cultural theorists, among them Michel Foucault, Mary Douglas and Mary Poovey, as well as other feminists have contributed to a framework for interpreting the body as a cultural text.<sup>iii</sup> They claim that "the body is a discursive construction,

and therefore can be read, already effects a deconstruction of its natural posture. Such is the first act of thick perception.” (Balsamo 20).<sup>iv</sup>

In the following reading of Mia’s body I will draw mainly on Foucault’s ideas but will also incorporate recent feminist theories on the body.

### **3.1 Discursive systems produce truth effects at the level of the body**

Arguing that discursive, as well as political and social practices enable an intelligibility of the body, that is, establish it as a subject or object with meaning, Foucault analyses how and with which means power is exercised. The so-called “apparatus” or “technology” is the connection between the discursive practices, the institutional relations and the material effects, which - all working together - produce a truth effect for the human body. These effects then become part of an apparatus of control. It is therefore necessary to analyse, which taken-for-granted “truths” are culturally constructed and institutionalised.

In the novel this is exemplified by the “truth” that the body is essentially fragile, prone to sickness and decay, and therefore needs constant surveillance and strict hygiene.

The net is a central institution in the construction of discourse, since

The late twentieth century shone in tidiness. Dilemmas of this sort [here how to behave at the deathbed of your lover of 70 years ago] were exhaustively debated in endless rounds of calls for commentary, working papers from boards of experts, anecdotal testimonies, ethics conventions, sworn public hearings, policy manuals. No aspect of human existence escaped smoothing over by thoughtful, seasoned and mature counsel” (1-2)

If discourse is everywhere today, then the citizens of the late 21<sup>st</sup> century are virtually - in both senses of the word - immersed in it.

But not only advice and counselling can be found on the net, every persons medical records are publicly available on the net. This, together with the fact the medical industry is the dominating force in society, leads to a body constantly under

surveillance. Not only your doctor and you yourself observe, analyse and watch your body, but the polity as well as every interested citizen. The medical institution directly interacts with the government as it makes public every detail of your behaviour or rather mostly your misbehaviour - and this has direct political, economic and social consequences. Together with something so powerful as 'public opinion' the pressure exerted on the individual is immense. The power of these discursive practices and institutional relations becomes apparent in the material effects of these "truths": first, the better you behave, the better the medical treatment you're entitled to (since you earned it); second, if you do not prove yourself to be responsible, careful, and far-sighted in how you take care of your body, then nobody will consider you to be trustworthy in other areas, particularly in business; third, you will willingly accept the surveillance, since it is supposedly for the good of you!

Another obvious "truth" of this society is, that there are people who more deserve to live than others. Your behaviour should be as follows:

You could, for instance, be conspicuously and repeatedly good. You always voted, you committed no crimes, you worked for charities, you looked after your fellow citizens with a smile on your face and a song in your heart. You joined civil support and served on net communities. You took a wholehearted interest in the well-being of civilization. The community officially wanted you kept alive. You were probably old, probably well behaved, and probably a woman. You were awarded certain special considerations by a polity that appreciated your valuable public spirit. You were the exact sort of person who had basically seized power in modern society.

If you were responsible in your own daily health-care practices, the polity appreciated the way in which you eased the general strain on medical resources. You had objectively demonstrated your firm will to live. Your serious-minded, meticulous approach to longevity was easily verified by anyone, through your public medical records. You had discipline and forethought. You could be kept alive fairly cheaply, because you had been well-maintained. You deserved to live. ...

If you wanted to destroy your health, that was your individual prerogative. Once you were thoroughly wrecked, the polity would encourage you to die. (59-61)

As becomes quite obvious here as well, is how power works not top to bottom but rather along more indirect lines, not easily traced. You are not *forced* to do anything, rather the arguments are so convincing within their particular historical moment that you cannot but comply. Anything else would simply be “stupid.”

### 3.2 Docile Bodies, Gender and Surveillance

Surveillance figures largely in the society at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What is considered to be private has changed significantly, your health and your body certainly aren't (instead of small talking about the weather, people now rather talk about their ailments) and other issues of your private life are equally open. Quote:

“Tell me about those two young people over there...”

Stuart stared at her, his monocle gleaming. “Are you kidding? What business is that of yours?”

“I'm not asking you what networks their accessing,” Mia explained. “I just want to know a little about their personal lives.”

“Oh, okay, no problem,” Stuart said relieved. (34)

The only place for real privacy is the net, and that only if you are able to use such old systems that they are virtually unpoliceable. This becomes apparent in the bequest Martin - Mia's lover 70 years ago - leaves Mia: a so-called memory palace, a virtual fortress so old that it is safe from the polity. Martin thinks that a little privacy is necessary and useful - as he says: “I've just given you the key to a fortress. You and I deserve our privacy, don't we? We both know what life is like nowadays” - whereas the old, conservative and law-abiding Mia has her doubts for what it might be useful (it will come in quite handy, later when the young Mia is not on the 'good' side anymore).

Besides the surveillance on the net, citizens are also observed within their own homes. Mia has a 'cleaning woman' coming twice a week to clean up and check up

on her: “Mercedes called her civil-support work ‘housekeeping,’ because that was a kindlier description than ‘social worker,’ ‘health inspector,’ or ‘police spy.’” (18)

But not only are people constantly monitored during their lives, even after death the watchful eye does not rest as can be seen in the description of Martin’s funeral:

The scanners set to work, Martin’s final official medical imaging. Gentle ultrasonics shook the body apart, and when the high-speed rotors began to churn, the emulsifier’s ornamental flowerbeds trembled a bit. Autopsy samplers caught up bits of the soup, analysed genetic damage, surveyed the corpse’s populations of resident bacteria, hunted down every subsymptomatic viral infection and prion infestation, and publicly nailed down the cause of death... with utter cybernetic certainty. All the data was neatly and publicly filed on the net. (23)

Of course Mia is told beforehand that her recovery process will entail even more detailed surveillance than is usual, since the procedure is so new that this is necessary both for her own safety and for the advancement of medical knowledge and therefore for the good of society. It is interesting to note here, that the surveillance equipment for the recovery period - which Mia can examine on a previous patient - is compared to jewellery and other female accessories:

A nude man appeared. He was festooned from head to foot in what seemed to be junk jewellery. A plastic coronet. Earrings. False eyelashes. A little glued-on breastplate. Armlets. Bracelets. Ten identical finger rings. A dozen adhesive patches on his torso, groin, and thighs. Knee buckles, anklets, and shiny little toe rings. (70)

As will have become clear, these practices produce what Foucault has termed ‘docile bodies’: individuals that are so preoccupied with monitoring their bodies and taking care of them that they are no threat to the established order. In our society docile bodies are produced via the fitness and dieting madness, anti-aging programmes, bodybuilding and also medical surveillance (eg during pregnancy). While recognising that docile bodies are usually female bodies, Foucault has failed to address gender as an underlying organising framework for deciphering the disciplined body. Feminists have severely critiqued him on this fault.<sup>v</sup> For him, gender seems to

function as a natural given that is not to be questioned. Similarly, Sterling puts into question surveillance, docile bodies and truth effects at the level of the body, but neglects to address gender issues. Therefore gender also serves as a natural given within his novel. For example it is never questioned, which gender or sex Mia's reconstructed body should have. Also, descriptions of male and female behaviour are sometimes quite stereotypical. Furthermore, womanhood is defined in close relation to sexuality, both of which are grounded in 'naturalness'. On several occasions Mia describes herself as beyond womanhood, because she no longer has desires for a lover or a family.

I'm not a girl anymore. Nowadays I'm someone who used to be a woman. ... I haven't been anyone's woman for a long time: I don't have lovers. I don't love anyone. I don't look after anyone. I don't kiss anyone, I don't hug anyone, I don't cheer anyone up. I don't have a family. I don't have hot flashes. I don't have monthlies. I'm a postsexual person, I am a postwomanly person. I'm a crone. I'm a late-twenty-first-century techno-crone. (19)

Womanhood is here traditionally defined as having to do with lovers, with caring, with family and with certain bodily processes (that are again related to sexuality) - if you are not sexual, then you are not a woman.

Strikingly, Mia's resolve to change her life and undergo the radical life-extension procedure is initiated by sexual envy and motherly memories.

It starts when Mia befriends a young girl in her twenties and takes her home (already a mothering and caring behaviour - something she would not previously have permitted herself). But looking at Brett sleeping naked on the floor later that night evokes more than motherly feelings:

Mia rose and went in to look after the girl. In the tranquil grip of sleep the girl had slid from beneath her blanket and achieved some sort of primal state of delicious repose. She sprawled there on the patterned carpet like an odalisque, wrapped in the kind of deeply erotic slumber that women achieved only in the Oriental genre paintings of nineteenth-century Frenchmen. Envy rose in Mia like poisoned smoke. (54)

Looking at her again a little later, the motherly feelings again dominate and the memory of watching her daughter sleep many years ago (together with her husband) and of the “profound joy, ... an emotion like holy fire” (56) fills her with the resolve to change her empty and hollow life.

Not only ‘womanhood’ is defined as something natural and essential but also sexuality is a primal force to be dealt with. This has already become clear in the above quote and is further underlined by the fact that Brett’s body is hairy like an animal’s: “Armpits, pubes, nipples. Huge flourishing glossy patches of black human fur, almost like abbreviated lingerie.” (50) Here again, sexuality and nature are linked and set off against the technologised world the protagonists live in. The issue comes up again, when Mia discusses the effects her life-extension procedure will have, with her doctor. One of the consequences of having a young body again will be that she will also have all the relevant hormones again and therefore sexual desires. During their discussion it becomes clear that sexual drives cannot be controlled: “If human beings could control sexuality, the human race would have ceased to exist during the Pleistocene” (68). And trying to repress them will be harmful for your overall bodily development: “Young people have a lot of hormones because young people really need those hormones, and you also need your hormones for the sake of proper development in your new brain tissue.” (69).

Sexuality is therefore an absolute, not a cultural construction or a specific sociohistoric practice. That gender and sexuality, taken as a natural givens, have always led to a more rigid control and more medical attention in women is pointed out by Mary Poovey<sup>vi</sup> who has examined medical textbooks of the nineteenth century. Historically, women’s bodies have been constructed as excessive and threatening to the epistemological boundaries of the prevailing social order, thereby defining the female body as “always lacking and needing control”. This in turn authorizes

ceaseless medical monitoring and control. So, while at the same time, a woman's body belongs to the realm of nature and therefore threatens cultural stability, it also properly belongs to the realm of medical discourse (and therefore 'culture'). As Anne Balsamo so aptly summarises: "Here we read the conflation between the political contest to establish the physiological facts of female nature, and the physiological consequences of symbolic representations of the female body".<sup>vii</sup>

The interesting twist in the novel is that Mia's formerly controlled, docile, 'natural' body is culturally reconstructed and rebuilt within a symbolic framework. This new, cultural body then actually becomes the transgressive body that society fears so much, when Mia chucks all responsibility, cautiousness and thoughts about the polity and runs off to live her own life. Her body is now the perfect example for the way the "female body functions as a border case; it is at once defined as part of a natural order *and* as an intensely fascinating and yet threatening object of cultural control".<sup>viii</sup>

In this respect Mia's restructured body is also a discursive enactment of Mary Douglas's theories on the female body.<sup>ix</sup> She argues that the body is always comprehended as an interaction between the materiality of what is given in a particular body and the symbolic constructions of the 'body' embedded within a given culture. Furthermore, she points out that while the physical body is structured by the symbolic representation of bodies (in the literal sense in the novel), it is at the same time the basis from which such representations are constructed. Therefore there is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience, demonstrating that it is not a linear process but an interaction.

By constructing Mia's new body in such a way that it belongs both to the realm of culture and to the realm of nature or better to the realm of symbolic meaning and to materiality, Sterling skirts the danger of a dualistic logic often inherent in theories of the body.

The novel therefore offers an interesting interpretation of the idea of the body as border case. Mia's body is shown at once to belong to the realm of nature (by focussing on its sexual desires) and of culture (since it is a complete technological restructuring), both to the realm of control and to the realm of transgression.

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- <sup>i</sup> See Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1996), 134.
- <sup>ii</sup> Bruce Sterling, *Holy Fire* (New York: Bantam Books, 1996).
- <sup>iii</sup> See for example Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol 1-3* (New York: Vintage, 1978-1986); Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (1970; New York: Pantheon Books, rev. ed. 1982); Mary Poovey, "Scenes of an Indelicate Character: The Medical Treatment of Victorian Women", in Gallagher and Laqueur (see below), 137-68; See also: Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985); Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur, eds., *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987); Donna J. Haraway, "A Manifest for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s" in Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991).
- <sup>iv</sup> Balsamo 1996, 20.
- <sup>v</sup> See for example Balsamo 1996; Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, eds., *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1988)
- <sup>vi</sup> Poovey 1987.
- <sup>vii</sup> Balsamo 1996, 27.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.* 28.
- <sup>ix</sup> Douglas 1977; see also Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; London. Ark Paperbacks, 1984).