

# FELIX :: Issue 5 - The Internal Organs of a Cyborg

articles

## Jane Prophet

*The Internal Organs of a Cyborg* is a CD-ROM artwork by Jane Prophet which offers cyborg bodies for the voyeuristic gaze. It presents the user with a photostory narrative combining the visual approaches of the photo love magazine with the science fiction graphic



novel or comic (Fig. 1). A narrative is fused onto scrolling pages of full colour images using ready-mades from Photodisc's stock photography CD-ROMs. The stock photographs are largely taken from Photodisc's *Health and Medicine and Modern Technologies* archives. The material has been cropped, distorted and montaged to tell the story of virtual lovers from different sides of the tracks whose paths cross in the emergency room.

The photostory describes a young woman from south London. She earns money by participating in drug trials and surgical implant research. She also buys additional implants on the black market to satisfy her interest in augmenting her body. Having been discharged from a private clinic following surgery (which involved the insertion of nanotechnological devices) she goes out drinking with friends. Across the bar she sees the repo man and flees. He pursues her to take possession of the item that she has bought on credit, a PCID (a microchip which has had her personality downloaded onto it). During the chase she is shot as the repo man tries to stop her from escaping with the PCID. She is airlifted to an emergency room.

Across town the successful Managing Director of a chemical bank collapses during a marathon with a heart attack. He is rushed to the same emergency room.

Once inside the medical institution, their experiences are very different. She has no medical insurance and is therefore offered pain relief but denied expensive life-saving surgery. Meanwhile, in the plush surroundings of a private room, the city

gent learns that he needs a heart transplant. The young woman dies as a result of not having surgery and her heart is donated to the head of the chemical bank. But he gets more than he bargains for — inside the donated heart is the PCID implant that she bought on credit and which ultimately cost her her life. The chip containing her downloaded personality activates once inside the man's body. His dreams become filled with images of a stranger — a young dark haired woman. When he returns to work after convalescing, he starts receiving email from an unknown woman and a love affair begins...

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a voyeur as “a person who derives gratification from surreptitiously watching sexual acts or objects; a Peeping Tom; a person who takes a morbid interest in sordid sights.” For Lacan, voyeurism is defined through scopophilia and includes both exhibitionism and voyeurism. These individuals, for Lacanians, thereby tend to be classified as clinical perverts. Within this school of thought the structure of perversion is viewed as predominately male. Only in exceptional cases could a female be classified as a true pervert. However, voyeuristic behaviour can be experienced by all to differing degrees. The French term *volonte-de-jouissance*, meaning “will to enjoy,” is often used to describe perversion. The individual's enjoyment is derived from the fantasy of a supposed “other” watching, coupled with the fantasy that they are the instrument of the “other's” supposed enjoyment. The pervert is the person who attempts to take sexual pleasure to the limit in order to achieve the ultimate *jouissance*.

In *The Internal Organs of a Cyborg* the notion of the surreptitious watcher (voyeur) is taken to the extreme. The female protagonist leaves the confines of the “meat” or flesh body and exists after death in the form of her personality, which has been downloaded onto a microchip. This chip, complete with the latest high-tech cloaking device (which renders it invisible to scanning technologies), had been inserted into her heart prior to her death. Once inside the city gent, her silicon personality is activated with interesting repercussions as “she” starts to send biochemical messages to the host organism. (Fig. 2)

For Lacan we are who we are through identifications with others, be they mother, father, brother or lover. An individual's identity is formed in relation to the “other.” We look with our eyes at another but the gaze is not owned by ourselves. It becomes the exclusive property of the other, and how we imagine they might gaze at us. If we are to take seriously the Lacanian notion of the gaze in this scenario, the microchip stands for the look, and is all the more perfect for not being influenced by the distortion of the eyes. She is literally “seeing blind” directly experiencing the bodily sensations of the other.

By capitalising on the science fiction cliché of being able to transfer human personality onto a microchip, the narrative produces a scenario in which the female character becomes the ultimate unseen watcher. From within the male character she “watches” his every move. While this watching is not literal (she has no eyes), it is nevertheless absolute; she can “feel” her subject, monitor his cellular changes and chemical shifts, access his thoughts and brain waves. It is commonly assumed that the voyeur is primarily interested in sexualising the act of watching the external body. The focus of this project replaces the typical 20:20 vision of the voyeur's gaze with one that takes them inside the body, offering the interior of the “meat” as the sexualised landscape rather than the exterior. This “interior” encompasses not only the internal organs but also the innermost thoughts of the character.

The female character begins to explore her prime voyeuristic position and gets sexual enjoyment from it. She is without body and has only “eyes,” which are supplied via the microchip — this is the pervert's dream par excellence. The sexualisation of the “eyes” can be described as an “erogenising” of a particular zone. In this scenario the subject is engaging in a fantasy of the other's gaze in order to achieve sexual gratification which is voyeuristic. Voyeurism involves the eyes and the gaze, which, for Lacan, operate in distinct ways. “Looking” is from the individual's subjective position, while the gaze is that which looks back at the individual. Who is it that she fantasises is experiencing this weird situation? What “other” is she becoming an instrument of enjoyment for? The gaze then becomes an “object,” and this “object” is outside of the subject and therefore occupies a

separate position.

The gaze becomes the object of the act of looking, the property of the other. It watches the subject from a position that is rooted in the individual's fantasy. Sexual gratification through the scopical drive is a condition for the clinical pervert to obtain sexual pleasure. We can all occupy the perverse voyeuristic position, and this is true especially of the female hysteric. The scopical drive is deemed perverse in that the individual is the instrument of the "other's" gratification. For Lacan, the voyeur is not only watching, then, but is, in their mind's eye, also being watched.

The thrill of voyeurism is in part knowing that you are unseen while being at the risk of discovery. In the case of our female protagonist, the risk of discovery is almost eliminated by the fact that she is so effectively hidden. She is literally inside the male character's own heart, so how can she be discovered? The narrative presents us with the "embodiment" of the male within the object of the gaze. By communicating to the city gent via email, the female character reinstates the danger of discovery as she toys with him. (Fig. 3)

Users can follow the online love affair between the city gent and his mysterious email correspondent. It emerges that these messages to him are none other than the female "voice within," sent by the silicon personality of the ghetto girl. As their love affair develops the city gent embarks on a series of clandestine meetings in the virtual spaces of online chat groups. Here he discovers the joys of MUD sex and text based foreplay. This correspondence is voyeuristic on both sides. Neither can see the other, and the fact that that they are unseen contributes to their sexual arousal.

The female character's sexual fulfilment of her drive is achieved in this internal environment. Drives are, however, very different from instincts, and this is the main differentiation for Freud between the sexuality of animals and humans. All drives are sexual drives and are based on repetition, excess and destruction. Formation of the drives is based on experiences particular to each individual. Lacan states that the aim of the drive is not to reach a particular goal but to keep trying to achieve the desired conclusion. Enjoyment is based on the repetition of the drive on a particular circular journey. We discover that she has been involved in drug trials for many years to the point of being addicted. It is interesting to try and formulate how this drug and cybernetic surgery might be a method of satisfying her drives.

The main aim of everybody's drives is to cross the limits of the pleasure principle, to reach a perceived paradise; the place that promises ultimate pleasure, and defence against displeasure. Maybe our female character has used advanced technological surgery as a way to reach this level. By experiencing embodiment like no other before her, by being at one with the other's gaze, she is the embodied voyeur without eyes, in a kind of narcissistic heaven. This is the ultimate sexual union that we all strive for, beyond the body, a place of instant pleasures and completeness. For Lacan, when an individual transgresses the pleasure principle, they are faced with the object of their desire. This can have very dangerous effects for the individual involved, as the ultimate aim of the drive is destruction, death. This type of confrontation with *jouissance* can often end with a traumatic experience, even a psychotic episode. The narrative ends, or splits, at a suitably pivotal moment (a typical "cliffhanger" situation) where our female protagonist is face to face with *jouissance*, and could be in danger of psychosis. Watch the website for the next installment!

As well as mapping the voyeurism and exhibitionism of fictitious characters, the interactive qualities of the CD-ROM almost invite the user to satisfy their own perverse voyeuristic urges almost at will. Once they have located links to the email correspondence or other personal effects, they can return to view them whenever they like. In addition, the CD-ROM links to a website which functions in part as a collection of homepages for the female character. Via the homepages we begin to discover more intimate details about her life, we see the clothes she used to wear, the brands she liked, the places where she used to drink, the clubs she used to frequent. We see her as an individual, not as the cyborg without "meat" which is

exemplified in the second interface made of medical images. (Fig. 4) For those of us that have them, our homepages are a means of expressing our innate exhibitionism, and the female character's site is no exception. The website also plays on the user's perverse voyeuristic drive by offering them an arena in which, not only to watch unseen, but to express their exhibitionism. They can engage in exhibitionism by adding to the email correspondence or by sending in self-portraits and stories, thus displaying themselves to the voyeuristic gaze of future users.

The character's attempts to exceed and control the limits of her biological boundaries while "with flesh" become evident as the narrative exposes her use of performance enhancing drugs. We discover areas of the CD-ROM where we hear her answer phone messages, telling of her experiences of surgery. We read her autopsy report, which logs the devices found inside her and lists the scars which mark areas of her body that have been cut open. These are just a few examples of ways in which the body's flesh boundary — skin and muscle — are broken. Audio and animations are used to map a corresponding transgression of gender and social boundaries. Lacan sees problems relating to the boundaries of the body as universal. He attempts to explain this in various versions of the Mirror Stage. In the early stages of a child's development, the child has to master its own motor functions to enter the human world of space and movement. For this mastery to occur, the child has to identify with another individual. In this way the identity of the developing child is trapped in the image of an "other," outside of the boundaries of its own body.

The control of one's body is only ever illusory and the ego is only ever founded on a wholeness which does not exist. This identification involves the child's identity being trapped in an image that is fundamentally alien to itself. This level of identification is called the register of the imaginary, and attempts to show the importance of the visual field in human development. When this process happens, the individual's ego is formed, based on this alienation process. However, this process leaves the individual "covering" a lack of completeness in themselves through the conception of the ego. In other words, the ego functions as an agency of deception by telling the individual that they are whole and complete.

For Lacan, the human goes through life constantly oscillating between their image, which is alien to themselves, and their real body which is uncoordinated and in pieces. Many symptoms are in response to this oscillation between two camps. The ego is constantly threatened by the early memory of a sense of fragmentation, expressed in images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment and combustion of the body. Could our female character's obsession with technological implants be an expression of this type — an attempt to unite the image, which is alienating, and the real body, which is in pieces?

In contemporary western medicine, technology is harnessed in response to our paranoid and fractured self, and used to control the fragmented, decaying and aging body and to make it whole. Lacanians would see such a use of technology as a predominantly "male" response. The female protagonist in the CD-ROM has been engaged in surgical intervention and enhancement from an early age. It is as if her imaginary register had overcome her ego and she had seen herself as intrinsically fragmented from childhood. The photostory alludes to an upbringing centred around her involvement in medical trials. (Fig. 5) Maybe the experience of seeing herself defined by so many test results and slivers of images of her innards made it impossible for her ego to succeed in covering up her fragmentation. The result was a sense of paranoia and a fracturing of her sense of body and psyche. Her ongoing obsession with exploring her fragmented self, as evident in her continued participation in drug trials and implant surgery as an adult, is her ego's attempt to make herself whole again.

The physical fragmentation, the literal breaking of the body through injury, is shown in the CD-ROM operating room scenes. Here the surgeon functions as a kind of "agent" for the ego, putting the body back together again. In the process of so-called "invasive" surgery, the surgical team breaches the boundary of the patient's body. Part of the research undertaken as part of the production of *The Internal Organs of a Cyborg* involved audio interviews with surgeons, some of whom were

engaged in medical research for implant technologies. One surgeon described a rite of passage which he felt was essential to his exemplary performance as a surgeon. The process of scrubbing up and gowning translated him from the location of consultant (conversing with the patient in a office and discussing medical procedures in an atmosphere that was often highly emotionally charged) to the location of the operating theatre where he described the necessity of seeing the patient “as metal, or stone, or wood; the body like a mechanical device that needs repair.” This Dr. drew attention to the importance of the surgical sheet as a framing or screening device that obscured the defining features of the patient, making it easier for him to see them as “other.” He described regular moments of slippage when he looked down in the middle of a mastectomy and recalled a previous conversation in the consulting room. In that moment the patient’s body ceased to be meat, stone or wood and the patient was no longer fragmented. His description of these slippages are reminiscent of the mirror stage. It is as if the surgeon deliberately employed alienation in order to be able to surgically invade the body, but his ego struggled against this fragmentation and succeeded in making him see the patient as whole and complete. When this happened he saw the patient as an individual and felt he “was mutilating some poor woman’s body.” At these times he literally took a step away from the operating table, for a brief moment, and distanced himself in order to be able to carry out his surgery.

The slippage described by the surgeon draws attention to the intimacy between a medical team and a patient and the way in which alienation and fragmentation can be an essential element of surgical performance. In the CD-ROM, scenes allude to the strangely intimate touching that occurs between doctor and patient, in particular the sanctioned and “bounded” touching between strangers in the operating theatre, where the surgeon becomes the medical voyeur. (Fig. 6) The surgeon is the watcher that the patient cannot see as they are under anaesthesia. (Fig. 7)

Imaging technologies take the medical-expert-as-voyeur a step further. Body scanners and heart monitors survey and capture images of the body’s most intimate zones and display them for the gaze of the laboratory technicians who watch the scans, x-rays and microscopic slides unseen by the patient. Images of fragmented patients’ bodies are classified by numbers rather than names. Depersonalisation becoming synonymous with patient confidentiality. The patient (especially as described anonymously in medical trials) is reduced to their disease and subsequent physiological and psychological response to drugs and surgery. The medical industry forms a voyeuristic circuit in which the depersonalised body is central. This depersonalised representation of the cyborg body forms the basis of a second scrolling image on the CD-ROM. A whole female body is laid out complete, and sliced for our perusal (Fig. 8) but less than 5% of it can be seen at any one time as we scroll around, constrained by the parameters of the computer screen. (Fig. 4) The CD-ROM depends on our egocentric need to see the whole body, it is almost guaranteed that we will want to scroll around and explore the distributed body, represented via scans, x-rays and slices, in an attempt to make the body complete.

Earlier, we asked who the female character imagined was watching her as she indulged in her voyeuristic gaze. The answer lies in the backstory, in the high profile position of men in the medical industry. From her childhood she associated surgical procedures with positive attention from surgeons and research scientists — they were the nearest she got to father figures, often monitoring complex implants for weeks on end and engaging the girl in long conversations as they monitored her psychological state. She was perpetually the object of their gaze, and grew accustomed to gazing at her own body as she watched the MRIs, x-rays and endoscopies of herself. Her obsessional narcissistic desire to be watched may have been fulfilled prior to her death: the last implant that she had was part of a trial to develop nanotechnology for medical use. She swallowed a minute robot, a nanosurgeon, which was programmed to respond to physiological trauma and to repair internal injury and perform microscopic surgery. (Fig. 9) By swallowing the surgeon she has embodied and consumed the phallic gaze of the medical profession, while providing herself with a constant unseen watcher, a substitute father who will respond to all her internal physical needs and who will be ever vigilant.

Our female character may have found her own solutions to the difficult position that the ego occupies. She has become embodied by her male host and has discarded the real body, which is fragmented. She is able to achieve sexual gratification through her unique voyeuristic position. By making her “eyes” the erogenous zone, she positions the gaze as an object. She may be one of those rare cases of the female pervert, the scopophilic or the hysteric, that plays at the pervert’s game in an attempt to find answers to the fundamental questions of hysteria. What is a woman? How do I know if I am a man or a woman?

