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Technologies and Utopias: The Cyberflâneur and the Experience of 'Being Online'

Maren Hartmann

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Abstract

The thesis examines the historical moment of the transition of the Internet from a technology to a cultural form with widespread social use. It is a moment that contains traces of the utopian dreams of the early users of the Internet at the point when it became a widely available, accessible everyday resource. I examine this moment of transition in terms of a vocabulary of use that sought to give expression to the then novel experience of being online. These conceptualisation of use are called user types and usually appear as metaphors.

The first two chapters begin with metaphor, presented both in theory and in practice. This is followed by an introduction to cybercultural studies and cyberfeminism, approaches which provide both inspiration and counterargument to the here presented approach. This framework is expanded in the fourth chapter, in which existing methodologies are outlined to introduce the virtual archaeology. This approach is inspired by the most important theoretical reference point for the thesis: Benjamin and his Arcades Project (and within that: cyberflânerie). Benjamin's project emphasises the analysis of fragments, which are juxtaposed to illuminate an otherwise invisible meaning. Similar structures are seen to exist online. These shape the particularity of the creation of meaning. Another important aspect of Benjamin is his emphasis on the city and the radical shift of modernity.

Each user type is seen to similarly express a reaction to the shock of the new, expressing particular utopian moments in Internet history. User types tell us something of the formation of discourses that complete the transformation of a technology from the technical into recognisable social and cultural identities. The user types analysed in detail are: the cyberflâneur, cyberflâneuse, webgrrl, cyberpunk, netizen, cybernaut and surfer. Their detailed analysis provides the second part of the thesis. The aspects referred to in the first part are all part of these analyses. Final reflections about the user types' role as specific communication tools, which shape the cultural form of the new medium, conclude the thesis.

Acknowledgments

No shop-windows. Strolling, something that nations with imagination love, is not possible in Brussels. There is nothing to see, and the streets are unusable. (Baudelaire, cited in Benjamin, 1997:50)

Despite Baudelaire's reservations concerning Brussels, I want to begin my thanks with this city. It was after all, unexpectedly, the place where this thesis found another home. It is a place where there is more to see than the eye at first suspects. Maybe now I can replace the virtual with actual *flânerie*.

The most important aspect within cities are the people therein. Without them, this thesis would not have been possible. These people I would like to thank most warmly – especially for their support throughout the last year.

First and foremost, I want to thank my supervisor Paddy Scannell. He made this thesis possible and gave invaluable support and advice throughout. Most importantly: he did not give up. My other supervisor, Richard Barbrook, also did more than his share to support both me and my ideas. Long live their differences!

My parents, Gerda and Hellmut Hartmann, and my siblings, Moritz and Rieke, I want to thank for their undying support and especially their recent hospitality.

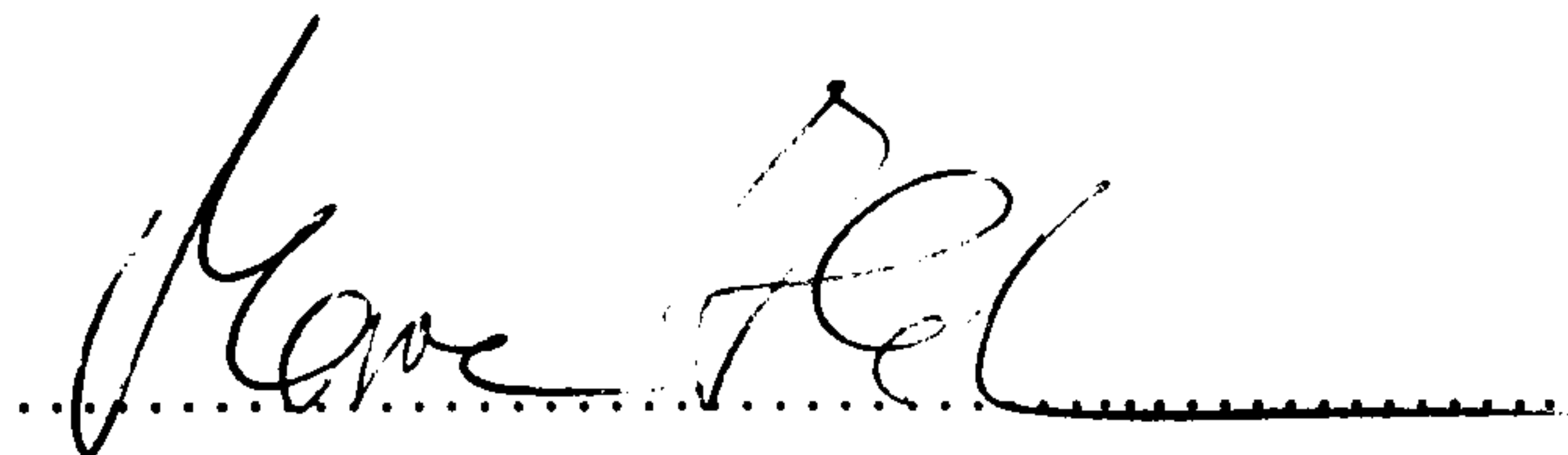
I especially want to thank those friends in diverse places (Berlin, Brighton and London in particular) – I hope you know who you are. Caroline, Jan and Patrick above all I thank for reading parts. Hope to see more of all of you in future!

In terms of institutions, the University of Westminster (and Mike Fisher in particular!), the research network EMTEL and the research centre SMIT deserve my gratitude.

Last, but by far not least, I want to thank Patrick. I'm hoping for many lightsaber-fights in the next kitchen(s), to less work and more luck. Thank you so much!

Author's Declaration

I, Maren Hartmann, hereby certify that all material in this thesis, which is not my own work, has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Maren Hartmann', is written over a horizontal dotted line.

(signature)

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Cyberspace is inhabited poetry ...to navigate through it is to become a leaf on the wind of a dream. (Novak, 1991)

The Internet is a city of darkness, a city where we each have our own tiny flashlights, and in the process of surfing illuminate only what we see in front of us. ... Human agency is required to make any sense of the Internet ... maps do not exist except momentarily in the minds of those who enact the process of walking down the street by linking across various documents and pages. (Weidemann, 2000)

To walk (flanieren) is a form of reading the street in which human faces, displays, shop windows, café terraces, streetcars, automobiles, trees become so many equally weighted letters, which together yield the words, sentences and pages of a book that is always new. To be walking in the right manner one cannot have anything too specific planned. (Hessel, 1984 [1929])

Introduction:

Approaching Cyberspace

I. Cyberspace Origins

... clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding ...

The image of the city in connection with masses of data is part of a longer and often quoted passage from William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. This 1984 science fiction novel has left more traces than its author or its contemporary readers suspected. Indeed, the passage that this quote is taken from has shaped cultural history. The passage begins with the term *cyberspace* and describes cyberspace as both a vast computer network and a "consensual hallucination" (Gibson, 1995a [1984]:67). Gibson's novel portrays a hallucinatory near-future infused with technologies. This near-future describes developments that still appear as science fiction, but tend not to stay fictional for long. In fact, part of what Gibson described some twenty years ago is now part of everyday life.

The term cyberspace has come to fill an existing void exactly because it managed to capture and portray these near-future developments in one single word. The term has come to signify developments in networked computing which have had a fundamental influence on social and cultural life; whose long-term impact, however, is still unknown. The term cyberspace has helped us to imagine, but also to explore, build and criticise this near-future, which has now arrived as the present.

A closely related concept is the Internet, a vast network of interconnected computer systems. Internet technology allows different computers to easily exchange and transmit data of diverse kinds.¹ While the term Internet has come to primarily signify the technical infrastructure, the term cyberspace is widely used to describe the related content. Cyberspace then consists of the applications and services, but especially also the *imaginations* and *practices* emerging in and around these computer networks.

Without Gibson's cyberspace, this thesis would not exist. Cyberspace, as a concept, is one of the guiding lights throughout the work. It is the *object of study*, but also part of the *conceptual-analytic framework*. Another piece of Gibson's writing additionally describes the object of study in more detail. This entails first hints also of the *methodology*. The piece I am referring to was published a

¹ The underlying technology of the Internet is the packet switching system TCP/IP.

few years after Gibson had written *Neuromancer*. Gibson here reflects on the unexpected success of the cyberspace concept and explained how he came to develop it:

[I] assembled [the] word cyberspace from small and readily available components of language. Neologic spasm: the primal act of pop poetics. Preceded any concept whatever. Slick and hollow – awaiting received meaning. All I did: folded words as taught. Now other words accrete in the interstices. (Gibson, 1991: 27)

Both detailed object of study and methodological reference sit in Gibson's reference to his *neologism* and to the creation of his new term from "readily available components of language". This composition prefigures my own concentration on *metaphors*, which shall serve as another guiding light in this thesis. Metaphors, like cyberspace, are indeed words made up from available components of language. In the context of the Internet and of cyberspace, metaphors often also serve as neologisms. A neologism is a recently coined word, a new addition to our existing vocabulary. It refers to either an invented word (or phrase) or the use of an old word in a new sense. Within the overall object of study – cyberspace – the more concrete research objects are a set of cyberspace metaphors and neologisms that define the user, and the Internet world as the user understands it. This new, metaphoric *vocabulary* emerges together with new technologies. The vocabulary helps to reflect on, but also to create and shape the new:

Cybernetic Neologisms. If – as the early Wittgenstein would have had it – the limits of our language are the limits of our world, these new technologies have expanded the ontological boundaries of our current language and a new lexicon is needed to describe the frontiers beyond. (Friedberg, 1993:145)

The question is whether these metaphors have really expanded the ontological boundaries of our current language – and thus of ourselves. And if they did indeed expand these boundaries, where did the shift occur?

II. Summary of Concerns

This thesis treats the Internet as a new technology with cyberspace as its *cultural form*. The emergence of this cultural form will be analysed in terms of the *vocabulary* chosen by its users to describe it. I am particularly interested in how the users' experience of *being online* is described. The analysis will therefore

concentrate on how *Internet users* have been framed. However, rather than the individual in front of the screen, it is the *imagined* and *constructed* user that I am focussing on. This constructed and imagined user can be found in diverse descriptions of 'being online'. This user is publicly portrayed in different discourses. These discourses include articulations by Internet users themselves, but also more general communication about Internet users and uses. This communication takes place online, i.e. in diverse sections of the Internet itself, as well as in the traditional media and in a growing body of academic publications.

I have chosen to analyse a particular set of articulations from this discourse: the emerging vocabulary of metaphors and neologisms relating to Internet users. These are used to give the new a name. This vocabulary allows further communication about the new technology. Indeed, it is the role of this vocabulary as a *communication tool* that is a major concern of the thesis. The underlying assumption is that an everyday conversation about the net can only take place when there is something to communicate about, that is to say when there is something to share (Bickenbach & Maye, 1997). Experiences of 'being online' are not always easy to share, especially not with those who lack either the experiences or the tools to communicate them.

Following my interest in Internet users, I concentrate on the creation of a user *typology*. A typology is a study of *types*, classified according to their attributes.² The users in this project are thus not empirical research objects as much as discursive constructs. In the context of the thesis then, a typology is a set of *discourses* that define particular types of net users or net usage. These user types express *identity positions* which constitute users as particular user types, albeit as constructed positions, as ways of conceptualising users. The user types represent *ideal types*, most often connected to a particular *vision* of what the online sphere is like or should be like. They are productive, in that they display usage patterns that might get laid down. The most familiar user type I explore here is the *surfer*. Others that will be presented in this thesis are the *webgrrl*, the *netizen*, the *cybernaut*, the *cyberpunk*, the *cyberflâneur* and the *cyberflâneuse*.

This exemplary selection of online user types is investigated in detail. For each of these metaphors an etymological explanation and a genealogy of the

² The user typology I develop differs clearly from most other user typologies. These kinds of typologies usually base their schemes on survey results. From the thus researched actual uses, some behaviours are drawn out as typical for a set of diversely labelled user types (see Hebecker, 2001). Thus the overall move is one of generalisation, not in-depth engagement. Much of this research is used as market research (and much of it is a replacement of the traditional 'social class' classification – see Nixon, 1996).

term (as it emerges online) are given. The emphasis is on the cultural history of each term, which is analysed in detail in each case. Each term is also studied in terms of its spatial and temporal arrangements. I am particularly interested in the way these types order a series of relationships to other people and to the overall net environment. Overall, these user metaphors provide an insight into the ways this new medium has been articulated and appropriated at a particular moment in time.

The user types I have chosen to research here can all be seen as *placeholders*. The placeholders mark out temporary forms of identity, and may always be replaced by other, more appropriate forms.³ In mathematics, a placeholder is used to show a pattern. The placeholder can thus create an emphasis, outlining something that might otherwise be overlooked, putting a *stress* on this particular something and thereby tending to bring it into being.

The terms in question can be considered primary placeholders for both the experience of 'being online' and the wider problematic with which my project is concerned. They all held in place, for the moment of the first popular uptake of the technology at least, a series of ways of thinking about the *social uses* of new technologies. As such they represent the search for an adequate vocabulary to describe individual Internet usage for a wider audience. The convergence of the social and individual uses takes place in these new cultural forms. Each user type performs the convergence in different ways.

The analyses of user types provide the major part of the thesis, since, despite the centrality of the user to accounts of new media, user types have not been analysed in detail anywhere else (although general metaphors have received some attention of course). The user typology I create here is thus an important addition to existing analyses.

III. Approach

Any research methodology is necessarily tied up with the nature of the medium in question. Since the Internet and particularly the web are still very new media, no established research methodologies had been developed when this research project began. In addition, the object of enquiry was not a fixed, but a

³ I will eventually show – via the introduction of the cyberflâneuse – that existing user types can be replaced with new ones. But this is indeed only a possible and not a necessary development.

constantly evolving entity, and as a consequence sometimes difficult to grasp. In these circumstances the methodology went through a number of 'trial and errors'. Methodology was thus an aspect of the thesis that became an integral part of the project as such.

The approach I finally developed I have labelled a *virtual archaeology*.⁴ This concept indicates that I am not engaging with users in a sociological or anthropological fashion, but rather as a (literary) historian of current times. Hence I concentrated on the analysis of the cultural histories and current uses of the selected user types. The focus is on communicative articulations, on discursive constructions, but not on directly interactive forms of communication. The differentiation I am introducing here is not meant as an absolute, but a relative differentiation. It needs to be made, however, because it is crucial to the virtual archaeology.

The underlying claim is that most webpages in this analysis are *more like* texts on paper than face-to-face interactions or other forms of direct engagement with a communicative other. For many early users the experience of cyberspace was an encounter that took place primarily on such a textual level. Therefore the concern is not with immediacy and interactions, but with something that precedes online interactions and follows them. The stress is on *textual user traces* (of a generic kind). *Tracing what is means to 'be online' is in this case tracing the statements that are made about it, not the 'being online' itself.* The actual user behind these statements is not necessarily present at the site where the analysis takes place. The communication takes place asynchronously. And it is a form of communication that is shared with an unknown number of other users. These traces are part of the general imaginary of the emerging cultural form. The analysed usage expresses something of the way in which being online is both experienced and understood and imagined.

The user types in general are a set of possible ways of articulating and interpreting the *utopian dialectic* between the 'what is' and the 'what it could be'. The cyberflâneur in particular brings the past and future together in exemplary ways in the present. This user type promised the stimulus to explore, historically, the relationship between the *shock of the new* and *utopias*. At times of radical change, the present is thought in terms of the future. A central question of the analysis here concerns what kind of future is constructed in the different

⁴ This is in reference to Shawn P. Wilbur's "archaeology of cyberspaces" (2000:45).

user types. The exploration of user types provided me with a way to engage with the transformation of a new technology into a *common social and cultural utility*.

It is necessarily the case that the terminology of any new experience is unstable and evolving. To recognise the impermanent and fragile character of the user types as the bearer of this project is to underline the essential problematic of any project that seeks to engage with new technologies, new social uses and new cultural forms. It is also to recognise the impermanence of the outcomes of this research.

The term archaeology as a name for the methodological approach entails another assumption. It assumes that parts can stand in for the whole; that smaller pieces convey larger meanings. This is one aspect of my methodology that is taken from Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (1999). Benjamin's selection of (sometimes) seemingly banal textual and other references is interpreted as a parallel to the web as such. Benjamin's fragments are torn from their original environment and put together anew, thus revealing the hidden meaning underneath, showing a new whole. Equally, cyberspace imaginaries can be appropriately constructed from these kinds of traces, since the Internet equally appears to us in fragments. There is no whole to grasp, no clearly visible order. There are always only 'addresses'. The *Arcades Project* displays a structural-conceptual framework which deals with a very similar *order* and *chaos* in particular ways. It thus offers itself as a reference point for the complexities of studying the web. It allows the description of the specificity of the web as a medium. This specificity is relevant in the context of my study of user types, since each user type entails a particular understanding of the medium.

Benjamin's analysis was characterized by a shift away from an analysis that concentrated primarily on the *real*, while at the same time seeking to reveal it. Social life is understood through its *dreamscape* expressions (Benjamin, 1999:456). The dreamscape masks the underlying reality, which needs to be uncovered via the analysis of that which covers it up. That is to say that the cultural form in question is formed at least as much through its social reality as through its utopian longings.

The analysis is in many ways a critical dialogue with early claims concerning cyberspace. In the ten-year period since its popular introduction in 1993, the new medium Internet has gone through a period of extreme hype as well as

extreme scepticism and disappointment. It has now reached a point of *relative* consolidation. The ten-year consolidation period provides the overall temporal frame for the analysis. It is a study of the moment when a new technology moves into general usage and becomes part of everyday life. This moment is a transitional moment, when utopian hopes are replaced by everyday applications. These hopes are expressed in the words used to communicate the experience of 'being online'. The thesis then is an attempt to account for the particular vocabulary used to express an implied future. Understanding the imagined future helps to understand the concerns of the present.

IV. Structure of the Thesis

The thesis has two major parts: it explores some of the ways in which the experience of being online was articulated at a particular moment in time. This exploration takes place through the analysis of a set of individual user types. Before this, the thesis sets out the theoretical concerns underpinning this exploration and their methodological justification.

Part one of the thesis then is both expository and exploratory. The task of the chapters in part one is a recombination of existing methodological and theoretical frameworks and the subsequent formulation of my own framework for my analysis. The first chapter summarises and explores conceptual frameworks that make claims concerning the relationship between the past and the constructions of a cultural present and future. I begin the exploration with a discussion of the theory of metaphor. The structure of metaphors suggests its own relationship between past and present as the summary of the two primary tendencies in metaphor theory underlines. This relationship is further explored with reference to Williams' *cultural form* on the one hand and Hobsbawm's *invention of tradition* on the other hand. The invention is extended to the construction of a cultural future and applied to the context of cyberspace.

In the second chapter metaphor is further explored. Here the emphasis is on the relationship of metaphors and computers. The chapter begins with the initial appearance of metaphor in the vicinity of computers, tracing the origins of the metaphor 'habit'. General Internet metaphors, such as cyberspace, are then taken as a second focus. This introduces the question of the analysis of such metaphors in cybercultural work. This latter part of the second chapter also serves as an introduction to cybercultural and cyberfeminist references, which make up the third chapter. Following on from the analysis of metaphor

in the context of the web, I outline what the initial claims and hopes concerning cyberspace were and how they have been presented theoretically. The same structure is applied to cyberfeminist works. Cyberfeminism, too, is introduced as the framework which some of the user types use as reference points.

The methodological thinking of the thesis draws on the general discussion of cybercultural theory but explores the specific research methods adopted by different theorists. I explain why my own methodology fits the particular focus within cyberspace textuality that I decided to analyse and the particular form of communication that I focus on, setting this approach in contrast to online ethnographies and other approaches stressing the moment of interaction. The discussion of methodology and approach finds an extension in the fifth chapter, i.e. in the exploration of Benjamin *Arcades Project* and Situationism and some first thoughts on flânerie. These are presented as analytical frameworks.

In the second part of the thesis is an analysis of a set of articulations of 'being online'. Here, I present a two-fold history for each user type. I first of all trace the point of emergence and consolidation of the chosen user types. Secondly, the original, earlier reference points for the terms in question (like the flâneur in the cyberflâneur) are analysed in their history and meaning as cultural constructs. I begin where I leave off in part one: with flânerie. This has been the brightest guiding light throughout the thesis as a whole: wandering in the midst of a stream of impressions.

PART I

1. Inventing the Future: Old, New and Metaphor

The main objects of research in this study are metaphors. Metaphors have primarily been a focus in literary studies and linguistics. They are not a prominent topic within media or cultural studies, which this thesis claims to be a part of.⁶ Metaphor's more recent move to become a focal point in cognitive theory has not brought a radical change to this chosen ignorance. This is not necessarily surprising, since metaphor was for a long time defined as a figure of speech, interpreted as part of the superfluous and the fanciful of language, but not much else. This is not of major interest to a research field such as cultural studies, which defines itself in having shifted academic interest to the everyday and to popular culture. This perception of metaphor as superfluous, however, fails to recognise the crucial role that metaphors can play in the process of the *adoption of the new*. It also ignores the idea that metaphor is actually crucial to communication in everyday life precisely because of its role in such adoption processes.

In recent years, however, a general shift in perception about metaphor can be detected. At least in cybercultural studies, this has now left its first traces. Cybercultural studies are those areas of media and cultural studies that focus on cyberspace, i.e. on the new media and their cultural formation. In this context, metaphors have in fact been recognised as important for understanding the appropriation of the new. In spite of this increasing recognition of metaphor not much actual research of the topic can yet be found. Neither are there many further engagements with metaphor theory as such. This chapter therefore begins with a brief outline of the major strands of metaphor theory. At the same time metaphor theory introduces the overall concern of the chapter: the relationship between the old and the new. Metaphor offers one pattern for establishing – and thus for understanding – this relationship. Other patterns with different emphases can be found in Raymond Williams' *cultural form* and Eric Hobsbawm's *invention of tradition*. Both of these concepts will be introduced in this chapter and used to illustrate several aspects of the new-old relationship.

⁶ This differs slightly in the U.S. American context, where media studies is sometimes taught in Rhetorics Departments or in combination with rhetorics. In other contexts, metaphor's main gateway into media and cultural studies has been semiotics.

1.1. Metaphor Theory

Etymologically, metaphors stem from 'meta', which denotes 'in the midst, beyond, after, behind, above, transcending' and 'phora' which is a form of 'to carry'. The term implies movement and spatiality. Metaphor can be understood as a transferral of sorts: metaphors transfer meaning from one field of meaning to another or from one context of use to another (see Busch, 1995). In metaphor, something is used in order to represent something else. The literal meaning is left behind, added to and thereby changed.

Metaphor: implied comparison achieved through a figurative use of words; the word is used not in its literal sense, but in one analogous to it. (HoRD, 1999)

The basis for this understanding of metaphor is Aristotle's conception thereof. Aristotle stressed that something was given a name that originally belonged to something else, i.e. something was expressed through something familiar (see Derrida, 1978:23). This reference between the already existing and the new is crucial in understanding metaphor.

More problematic is another aspect of the Aristotelian understanding of metaphor. Aristotle began with the assumption that only a limited number of pre-given terms for the objects in the world existed. This limitation provided a problem for the understanding of metaphor, since metaphor upset the balance between the number of pre-given terms and the number of objects. Despite this objection to metaphor Aristotle acknowledged that metaphors added an *aesthetic* component to language. But this aesthetic was appealing to Aristotle only on the artistic level. Hence he theorised metaphors in the context of poetry and similar artistic outputs. In his overall characterization, metaphors were primarily regarded as the exceptional of language or even the unnecessary. With this approach Aristotle defined metaphor as an additional part of language, which was outside of basic everyday use (Aristotle, 1991:1999).

Following this lead, metaphors were for a long time regarded as artificial and superficial, as the 'icing on the cake' in relation to normal discourse. This has led to the accusation of metaphors not being 'true' as they do not reflect 'reality'. In this conception metaphors are only a reference to the authentic original and were thus blamed for actively hiding reality (see: Kurz, 1988). In contrast, the mundane, everyday aspects of language were said to have clear-cut labelling-functions for the objects in the world and were thus seen as truthful, but not as metaphoric.

This Aristotelian view shaped metaphor theory for a long time.⁷ Eventually the 'words for objects in the world' idea began to be attacked and subsequently replaced. A first step was the replacement of 'objects' with 'concepts'. Another step was the substitution of the idea of clearly limited language patterns and single relationships between signifier and signified. With the shifts in emphasis in linguistics overall, alternative views of metaphor increasingly gained recognition. The most prominent strand of redefinition has moved from one extreme to the other in comparison to the earlier, Aristotelian views. In this move, the perception of metaphor as a rather specific and extraordinary item within language has now been replaced with the idea of metaphor as a *basis for language overall*.

This idea of metaphor as the basis for language overall can be found in metaphor theorisations that argue for the importance of metaphor for *cognition*. From the 1980s onwards, metaphor was described as important for the attainment of new conceptual structures. Especially thanks to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, metaphors have come to be regarded as crucial to our everyday understanding of the world (Trask, 1999:186). Lakoff and Johnson see metaphor as not just important in language, but also in thought and action (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:3). In their seminal book, *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson outline how our minds build abstract concepts with the help of metaphors. For these authors, metaphorical projections help to move pre-conceptual physical experiences into our abstract understanding. These physical experiences are crucial to our understanding of the world. They influence not only our perception of the physical world, but our thinking overall. Lakoff and Johnson outline for example how we tend to describe negative emotions or social decline in physical terms, i.e. with references to downward movements. Positive emotions, on the other hand, are closely related to expressions of an upward movement. Another much-cited example is the designation of conflict as war. With these examples Lakoff and Johnson aimed to show not only the close relationship between physical experiences and abstract thinking, but the infusion of our everyday language and thinking with

⁷ This continued reference to Aristotle has not gone un-criticised. The most explicit criticism was uttered by Jacques Derrida (1982), who nonetheless acknowledged that Aristotle was the first to approach metaphor *systematically*. Peter Berger, however, responded to the Derrida criticism that we can only recognise the huge development that the metaphor concept has recently gone through *against* this Aristotelian backdrop and claims that the antique origins have not been falsified but simply put into a more complex context (2001:71).

metaphors. They thereby automatically declare that in their eyes metaphors are far removed from the idea of the extraordinary of language.

Although their understanding of metaphor is much more far-reaching than any understanding based on the Aristotelian version, the basic construction of metaphor is generally seen in very similar terms. Lakoff and Johnson first of all state that meanings are created through comparisons. We understand and experience one type of thing in terms of another type (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:5). Their stress on embodied experiences as the basis for abstract understanding underlines the spatial aspects of metaphor. It might also explain why the conceptual structure of metaphor is equally spatial. The transferral of meaning within metaphor, for example, is usually described as a move from a source domain to a target domain. This transferral literally expands our space for thoughts.

New metaphors can create not only new understandings, but subsequently new realities (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:235). Still, they do not *necessarily* create something new, but often *illuminate the existing* instead. One advantage of metaphors is that no semantic resources beyond the already known vocabulary are necessary for this creation or illumination. Another advantage is that metaphors can be seen to create *second order understandings*. This means that metaphors allow a reflection about language itself, since they draw attention to language (Krippendorf, 1993).

Metaphors' power to broaden the scope of meaning is manifold. They create links and thereby exemplify certain hidden or new meanings. Metaphor's main purpose can be seen to create a tension between two seemingly incompatible meanings. This tension allows some new insight, creates a new meaning. This tension is in between 'is' and 'is not' (or 'could be'), between old and new, between existing and not-yet-existing or between dream and reality.

The role that is assigned to metaphors in this thesis is illustrated by John L. Austin, who adds another perspective. Although the kinds of words Austin actually refers to are not metaphors, they fulfil a similar function. They are words such as 'real' and 'like', which he calls *adjuster-words* (Austin, 1964:73). These words help to meet the requirements of the world upon the existing vocabulary. While this view also implies that our vocabulary has limits, this is not the same limit as that of words for objects. Rather it is a limit of our current understanding of the world. Austin's adjuster-words *broaden this understanding*. Metaphors work in very similar ways. They offer a *shift in perspective*. It is a shift

that is visible, but not so fundamental that the original is invisible. The new emerges from a recombination of existing and new ideas.⁸ Thus metaphors, too, are adjuster-words.

There is a parallel here to Walter Benjamin's literary and theoretical juxtapositions. They emerge out of his literary montage principle in which textual fragments are put together with other, unrelated textual fragments to create something new. These juxtapositions equally create a new perception from the existing, simply through re-combinations.

Another parallel between Benjamin's writings and the here presented metaphor theory is the stress on the everyday. Lakoff and Johnson as well as Austin and Benjamin do not necessarily see the need to differentiate between the everyday and the extraordinary; rather, the idea is that the everyday *is* the extraordinary. The everyday thus provides the whole range of complexity. It only needs to be recognised in its complexity. Benjamin uses the montage principle in order to provide such recognition.

Metaphor analysis works the other way round: it uncovers and takes apart the pieces that have been thrown together. This approach is also a way to not let meanings slip into the everyday forgetfulness too easily. Because the everyday might be the extraordinary, but it also covers up the real relationships. The same applies to the phase when technology moves into the sphere of the everyday. It becomes invisible or even obsolete. Thereafter technology is not recognised as technology anymore. This invisibility tends to establish and reinforce existing patterns of use. Any radical potential of either technology – or vocabulary – gets pushed to the side. Similarly, after a while metaphors are not recognised as metaphors anymore. With their gradual move into everyday vocabularies, they become dead metaphors.

In the here presented analysis the major emphasis is on the particular relationships that the metaphors in question develop. These are relationships not only between the two spheres of meaning that the metaphor negotiates between (the source and the target domain), but particularly between the existing and the new. This relationship is what makes their particularity as communication devices.

The establishment of such relationships between the existing and the new is obviously not limited to metaphors. The notion of an invented tradition, for

⁸ Austin's view of the need to view language in its ordinary everyday environment also underlines some of the points raised in the context of Lakoff and Johnson.

example, or the concept of the cultural form, also exhibit links between now and then. Indirectly they serve to link what is here now and what will be in future. Both concepts underline the creative aspects in the processes involved in the making of such links. Both concepts also show limitations of the very same processes.

1.2. Cultural Form

The particular relationships that get established in the idea of *cultural forms* are between technology and social need and, more importantly, between existing and currently evolving cultures. The concept of cultural forms is taken from Raymond Williams and was originally developed in relation to television. Williams assumes that the technology does not precede its social and cultural uses, but is shaped by them instead. He states that “technology would be seen ...as being looked for and developed with certain purposes and practices already in mind. ...these purposes and practices would be seen as direct: as known social needs, purposes and practices to which the technology is not marginal but central” (Williams, 1997 [1975]:14). He goes on to stress that the social need should not be mistaken for the *content* of the medium, which is a *consequence* of these developments (rather than a precondition). This content is labelled the *cultural form* of the technology.⁹ The surfacing of this cultural form is the process of transformation of an abstract technology to its social usage and applications. In the same sense I consider cyberspace as the cultural form of the Internet.

One of the most repeated claims concerning the socio-technical development of the Internet provides a valuable illustration here. This claim states that the Internet’s eventual use were new forms of communication amongst individuals and groups who and which did not have much to do with military aims. This development supposedly took place despite the Internet’s original development for military purposes and with military funding. In the context of Williams’ idea of cultural form this unexpected adoption could be and has been described as the social need behind the Internet’s development. This social need is a general need for a networked, non-hierarchical and

⁹ In a similar move, meanings often lag behind the vocabulary that already describes them. This can be seen when William Gibson assembled the word cyberspace without its meaning being readily available. Cyberspace, too, was “awaiting received meaning” (Gibson, 1991:27).

interactive medium, which then found its technical expression in the Internet. But, as will show, this social need can also be retrospectively constructed to fit the constructed histories.

In terms of the cultural forms, Williams differentiates between three different kinds: the *dominant* is the current mainstream culture, the *residual* represents the older forms of culture carried over into the new and the *emergent* describes the new cultural form. Only the emergent cultural form potentially represents a subculture. According to Williams, the emergent cultural form can challenge the dominant cultural form and thus lead to the creation of new meanings and significance. Often enough, however, the emergent cultural form is subsequently incorporated into the dominant culture (Williams, 1980:41).

Cyberspace in its diversity represents a tension between these different cultural forms. It is not simply an emergent cultural form, but combines elements of all. Some aspects or applications, however, tend to be more radically new than others. On the emergent side one can thus list applications such as chat-rooms or individual homepages or the more abstract claims concerning fluid identities. Tensions between the different cultural forms can be seen, for example, in behavioural rules such as netiquette. Netiquette are the 'do's and don'ts' of online communication. The rules are often caught in a negotiation process between existing (offline) understandings of politeness and different communicative frameworks in the online sphere. The emergence of these different cultural forms is part of a longer-term process. As with many media technologies, a highly active phase in the beginning, in which potential uses are intensely debated, is often followed by a phase in which much less reflection about actual and especially about potential uses takes place.¹⁰

This point, when the imagination and utopian ideas begin to fade from view, is the point when many crucial patterns of use only begin to emerge. The dynamic nature of technology adoption on the actual and ideological level is by far not at a standstill when the technology and the metaphors fade from view. One way to capture that moment is to analyse the vocabulary that has been used to describe the different cultural forms. While these words primarily *describe* the culture, they also *shape* it. This is by no means a straightforward or clearly visible process. The analysis of the vocabulary can deliver first hints about how the emergent, the residual and the dominant cultural forms relate to

¹⁰ This move into everyday life can be either an acceptance (and subsequent usage) of the technology or it can also be a rejection (and non-use) (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley, 1992; Silverstone & Haddon, 1996; Sørensen, 1994).

each other in cyberspace. More importantly, the analysis can show which aspects of the cultural forms are meant to stay. The concept of the cultural form helps to pinpoint the process of the move from utopia to ubiquity in technology use. The cultural form also underlines what kind of relationship between old and new gets established. It is important to grasp what social need finds its expression in what cultural form.

The relationships described thus far still lack an explicit link to the *future*. It is, however, impossible to consider the discourses surrounding cyberspace without a reference to the future, since it is generally sold as the point of access to the future. This is where the *invention of the future* comes in. This invention uses cultural forms to create itself.

1.3. Invention of the Future

As a possible extension of the concept of the cultural form, I want to briefly turn to another cultural theorist. The theorist is the historian Eric Hobsbawm. In his theory of the '*invention of tradition*' (1989), Hobsbawm showed how the construction of a *past* is linked to the social needs of the *present*. He argued that many traditions were often indeed rather recent in origin, although they appeared as old. These traditions have been set up and presented as old. Hobsbawm labelled many of these traditions as made-up, i.e. as fabricated.

'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. (Hobsbawm, 1989:1)

These inventions are seen as reactions to new situations, providing refuge in the old. Particularly in radical situations of change, in which the old is often attacked or destroyed, invented traditions provide stability. This is the reason why their inventive nature remains hidden. In Hobsbawm's description invented traditions are expressed via rituals and other formalities. His examples come from the nineteenth century, where radical social changes brought about gaps in the existing social structures. These were not filled quickly enough with new social forms. Therefore many invented traditions were created instead. Practical uses are usually not part of the invented traditions. Instead, the traditions exist to legitimise institutions and authority, to

socialise people into belief systems and/or to create cohesion amongst community members, i.e. to establish community. These are overlapping, not exclusionary types of traditions (Hobsbawm, 1985:9).

Drawing on Hobsbawm, I want to invert the concept of invention of tradition. I thus propose to think of the Internet as an *invention of the future* (which takes place via an *invention of history*). In the mid-1990s, Internet users needed to create their own rules of behaviour (such as netiquette). The Internet's emergence as a mass phenomenon was still only in its infancy, but the present was changing rapidly and the future seemed unsure. Thus users needed to invent a suitable history to tell the story of what they were actually creating. They thereby influenced the unfolding – and at the same time built a future. Stability was here created partly through the invention of a history (which included some traditions), but particularly through the extension of that history into a probable future. Rather than relying on the past only, this streak of social invention used the invented history to invent a future.

The reason for extending the invention to the future lies partly in the nature of the technology, which tends to invite future-claims. The current lack of alternative models for a desirable future also makes a difference. The invented future is another expression of the cultural form of the Internet. It serves to provide stability where there is not necessarily any.¹¹ The invented future potentially drives the development, but it also romanticises and exaggerates the supposed social need implied in the invention. The invention takes place primarily through the development of certain stories.

In the context of the Internet, this supposed social need is a key element of the stories told. Within the context of the invented history the main story-line is the military origin of the technology, which was subverted by the subsequent community spirit, which again was later threatened by commercial uses. The community spirit is supposedly the expression of the actual social need for networked, interactive communication. The claim about the commercial threat underlines this social need. Related to this story of social need are certain invented traditions: netiquette, for example, or the use of emoticons, the typed expressions that represent emotions, facial expressions or other objects via a

¹¹ The desire for stability could indeed be interpreted as an important social need behind the developments.

textual visualisations.¹² The invented future that is built on features like these is projected as an *extension* of the assumed original community spirit and as the subsequent formation of a better (virtual) world. The continuation of the invented traditions helps to extend the (partly) invented past into an invented future.

What I want to stress here is the degree of *malleability* in these cultural forms. The term invention should nonetheless not be misunderstood to imply that none of this history actually took place. The military funding, for example, provided an important part of the history of the Internet.¹³ My point is not to deny the relevance of such events, but to question the way they are presented as the *only possible* history. This is the artificial creation of a canonical story.¹⁴ This story reinforces the assumption that there is a particular kind of social need which led to particular kinds of cultural forms. There could, however, be other ones.

1.3.1. The Canonical Story

The idea of the canonical nature of the story of the Internet was summarised and questioned as follows in a debate that took place in a cyberculture-related email discussion group:

...then I thought about the tropes and narratives that so many of us use to illustrate our points... What do you use to illustrate your conceptualizations of the Net? ...I tend to use IRC and web stories gained from my experiences, but have used the more acceptedly historical examples from time to time, but what do you use? what stories make sense of the internet for you? if any? ...but surely there is a

¹² Emoticons seem to have first appeared in the early 1980s. These are made up from the available signs on most keyboards, avoiding most letters. Often, they represent faces of different kinds which then have certain expressions (e.g. the most famous, the smiley: :-)) or have other attributes added on (e.g. a person wearing glasses &-)). These have been universally used in many different applications.

¹³ To underline my point of malleability, I refer here to Rudolf Maresch and Florian Rötzer (2001), who list several alternative histories for early net history. One of these alternative ideas is the net as an expression of the 'information is free' hippie-attitude carried over from the 1960s. Another interpretation sees the net as the answer to a bureaucratic need in U.S. society at the time of its early development. Yet another sees the young inventors in their garages driving the developments. Another one could be that all these factors worked in combination. Most of these possibilities are, however, not widely discussed.

¹⁴ One alternative to the importance of the military history of the Internet has been to extend the overall timeline and to include research such as that of the mathematician Norbert Wiener in the 1940s and 1950s. Wiener's cybernetics, a theory of systems of communication as networked feedback systems, was indeed important for later computational developments. The cyber-prefix stems from this origin. I have chosen not to relate this history here, because this is a minority tendency and the details do not add much to my analysis.

broader set or are we already tending toward a set of canonical stories?¹⁵

My answer to the last question is a clear yes (although the ‘we’ in this quote refers to Internet researchers). One story in particular is being told everywhere and that is the military origin story. The following is a brief summary of these “more acceptedly historical examples” that make up that particular story.

In most narratives that fit the canonical line the beginning of the Internet is seen as 1967. In this year the Pentagon – or rather the ‘Advanced Research Projects Agency’ ARPA – asked a number of academic researchers in the U.S. to build a secure data network. This network should have “no central authority”. Furthermore, it should be “designed from the beginning to operate while in tatters” (Sterling, 1998). More concretely this meant that it should withstand potential attacks from the enemies in the Cold War. From this task and from the research projects that were funded accordingly, a network eventually emerged. The network consisted of nodes through which the information was sent in packets. This actually took place for the first time in 1969. The story continues thereafter with the unexpected uses that the net was soon put to (such as non-work emails and science fiction discussion lists). The story also states how non-military institutions were increasingly added to the growing net. Eventually, the story comes to the point of the launch of the first (web-)browser in 1992.¹⁶ After that, the commercialisation sets in.

Most of this canon is fed by the idea of progress. Thus the stories are told as linear and suggest inevitable stages of development (see e.g. Dempsey in Thomas & Wyatt, 1999:682). But the canonical story includes more than technical developments and social uses. It also makes many claims concerning the necessary attitudes. The following is one such example:

The Internet can be thought about in relation to its common protocols, as a physical collection of routers and circuits, as a set of shared resources, or even as an attitude about interconnecting and intercommunication. (RFC 1462, 1993:1)¹⁷

¹⁵ Email sent to the aoir-mailing list (www.aoir.org) on 21 Mar 2002 (author withheld)

¹⁶ The web browser had been made possible thanks to Tim Berners-Lee’s invention of the URL (Uniform Resource Locator), “a scheme for linking a document of any kind stored on any computer connected to the Internet” (Garfinkel, 1998).

¹⁷ RFCs are ‘requests for comments’, which were established in 1969 in order to give researchers a voice by sharing information about the net’s own design and operation, about protocols and standards. This was meant to establish a people-to-people network.

This specific mixture of the technological and the social has been described as the Internet's central characteristic. The mixture makes claims about similarities between the technical structure and the human interaction that takes place therein. The lack of a central authority and hierarchy within the technological set-up is assumed to be reflected in users and uses. The underlying utopian ideal is a free network, in which everyone can communicate with everyone else and is only limited by technical standards rather than social or political ones.¹⁸ Ultimately, however, social and political conventions return, even if this is not always immediately recognised:

In many ways the Internet is like a church: it has its council of elders, every member has an opinion about how things should work and you can either take part or not. It's your choice. The Internet has no president, chief operating officer, or Pope. (RFC 1462, 1993:5)

Despite the assumed lack of a central authority, the Internet requires a belief. This is clearly stated in the term 'church'. This church does not refer to any particular faith, but to a general belief in the medium. This belief is helped by the stories told about its origin, about its main purpose, about its future. It is the canonical story, which invents a future and builds on an invented history and invented traditions. Its assumed *continuation* provides the potential future, wherefore it creates some cultural forms to suit the overall invention.

The canonical story is a powerful and visionary story. What is important for me is that these inventions – as much as they are based on real events – re-tell only certain aspects of the historical development. And these aspects need a language in order to be communicated. This is where I return to metaphors. The canonical stories about the net influence what major terms are used to describe it – and vice versa. Many user metaphors have been employed to describe the development and the content of the technologies to the offline world. Some of these have been developed against the dominance of the canonical story, others in clear continuation of the general trend. They are often tools to further the canonical story. Thus they limit the scope of the social.

¹⁸ On top of this, everyone is in principle invited to contribute to the development of the technology via open source, publicly displayed codes.

1.4. Researching the Old and the New

The concepts of the cultural form and the invention of tradition have both served to locate the concerns of the study. They have also highlighted what the most important aspects of metaphor within the context of this study are. The point of interest are the relationships that can be found in the terms that are analysed.

To create these relationships requires the user to make a connection, to move beyond the immediately visible. The language used to describe the web relies on these associations. I aimed to show with the help of the invented future that these connections do not simply stem from coincidences. In many web discourses, for example, any history that does not fit the invented history is disregarded, especially when it suggests that the implied progress might not take place. Uncovering some of the implied connections both to the past and the future, to the dominant and residual cultural forms, tells us something about the present.

The next chapter gives a first overview of how metaphor has actually been applied in the context of computers and later networked computers. An overview concerning the analysis of metaphors in the Internet context will provide a first introduction of cybercultural theory as well. The following then are the first steps in the direction of uncovering the visible and invisible connections.

2. Inserting the Past:

Metaphors, Computers and Networks

Metaphors are in principle connection points between something existing and something new. Although, according to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors are often not recognised as metaphors, they shape our thinking. In their function to transport one context of thought onto another, they broaden our field of vision. Even in the original perception as the extraordinary of language, metaphors clearly serve to extend our scope of understanding. They do so through adding unexpected ways of thinking to the existing. It is a gradual, not a radical shift of meaning that takes place in metaphor. Thus metaphors have been used a lot in the context of the new, in order to adjust our existing world-view to the yet unknown. One important area of the new in recent history have been computers and thus “what happens in a computer can only be comprehended by metaphors; in fact, metaphors are used to design computers” (Lakoff, 1995:128). Metaphors have indeed found a very welcoming environment in the context of computers. They are used to design computers, to explain computers and to dream new environments. There is a history to this intricate connection, which began in the context of the design of computer interfaces. This history is briefly re-told here in order to locate the objects of study in this thesis in their historical context.

2.1. Metaphors in Interface Design

To enter the discursive space of the program is to enter the space of a set of variables and operators to which the programmer assigns names. To enact naming is simultaneously to possess the power of, and to render harmless, the complex of desire and fear that charge the signifiers in such a discourse; to enact naming within the highly charged world of surfaces that is cyberspace is to appropriate the surfaces, to incorporate the surfaces into one's own. (Stone, 1991:109)

Metaphors appeared in the vicinity of computers in the first instance through programming subcultures and interface designs.¹⁹ The computer interface is a

¹⁹ The first step in the design of a new language in relation to computers was the computer programmers' development of a new vocabulary. This consisted of half slang and half jargon (Guy Steele claims that slang is often the metaphorical extension of jargon (Steele, 1983:7). This vocabulary used a combination of words that were made anew and those that were taken from the programming experience itself. The vocabulary often had a subcultural twist to it. It generally serves to create a certain community.

common boundary between the computer and the computer user, across which data and information is communicated. The most well-known interface is the computer screen. The interface is thus “the face between the faces” (Poster, 1995:39). Although the interface is part of the process of hiding the real workings of the computer, it must at the same time appear to be transparent. Its interface nature needs to be hidden in order not to interfere in the process of interaction between the inside of the computer and the user. So the interface is both a boundary and a mediator.

Metaphors help to fulfil this paradoxical role. They are crucial in the mediating function of the interface. The interface should allow people’s complexities to combine with those of the machine. It should be exciting and invite users to explore the machine. In order to do so, metaphors are used to represent what is hidden behind the screen in accessible ways on the screen. Recognisable contexts and experiences from the outside are used as descriptions for the inside. Many metaphors in interface design represent an idea of *interaction* between the human and the computer. Especially the early interface metaphors shaped, but also eventually reflected people’s computer experience (Heims, 1991:191).

The overall trend to metaphor use began when the first graphical user interface (GUI) was developed at the research centre Xerox PARC in California in the early 1970s. Most modern general purpose GUIs are derived from this early interface system, which was used on a personal computer (in itself a new invention at the time). The Xerox GUI was the first interface to use the desktop metaphor.²⁰ The desktop is still a prevalent metaphor in personal computing today. Most users of personal computers thus find ‘files’, ‘folders’, an ‘address book’, a ‘mailbox’, a ‘trashcan’ and similar items visually displayed on their screens. Additional features of the early Xerox GUI were windows, menus, buttons, icons and pointing devices, but also the mouse. Therefore this kind of interface has also been called a WIMP (Windows, Icons, Mouse, Pointers) interface.²¹ Not very long after these ideas had been developed at Xerox PARC the computer manufacturer Apple picked them up. Apple also recognised the general importance of interface metaphors (Erickson, 1990:65). Apple’s greatest

²⁰ Sherry Turkle went as far as claiming that the desktop idea has been the most widely spread cultural initiation to virtual reality (Turkle, 1997a:276).

²¹ The mouse has also been interpreted more poetically as a metaphor for the subject in relation to computing, as the cursor tourist who never finds a home (Cubitt, 1998:85-90).

competitor – Microsoft – followed later with the Windows system. This system has a similar overall structure and is also highly metaphorical.²²

It is, however, not only in interface design that metaphors are crucial for computer use. Other questions immediately arise when computers and a new vocabulary meet. Should the descriptions of computers and their related technologies and applications, for example, tend to the organic, to the mechanic or the electronic? And is the widespread use of anthropomorphization of the objects appropriate? Even the computer overall gets treated as a person (Marshall, 1996:864; Wetzstein et al., 1995:83). Another blurring of a similar kind takes place when people's textual output – as seen on the computer – is taken as the person (Bassett & O'Riordan, 2002). More generally speaking, the different forms of online communication could be envisaged either as a kind of speech or a kind of writing (Connolly & Pemberton, 1996:6). All of these questions are different aspects of the analysis of metaphors of cyberspace, because most of these questions are answered through the use of metaphors.

The differentiation between *internal* and *external* metaphors is useful for the clarification of what exactly one is talking about in the analysis of metaphors in the context of computers. The *internal* metaphors are the visual metaphors, which are used to structure the information that is actually on the computer. The rhetorical metaphors, on the other hand, which describe the new technology as a *communication device* to the outside world, are labelled the *external* metaphors (Coblentz, 2001). The external metaphors, both in their function to describe the communication device and as a communication device in themselves, are the focus in the following analysis. Their origin, however, lies in the internal metaphors and the early GUI history.

The external metaphors take several forms. The most well known ones are of the kind that this thesis began with: they are metaphors that describe the computer network and related services overall. Cyberspace is an example for such general metaphors. They provide the metaphoric framework for the user types. Therefore a brief summary of the most important metaphors is given.

²² This is displayed visually as a window throughout the Microsoft product line. Windows also inspired Sherry Turkle to use the windows metaphor to describe how we think about the self online, i.e. as operating several windows (= 'identities') at the same time (1999:547).

2.2. General Metaphors

The Internet has been portrayed with a variety of images. Allusions are made to road systems ('the electronic superhighway'), Star Trek adventurers ('internauts in cyberspace'), and to a world community (the 'electronic global village'). (Kurland & Cearley, 1997:1)

In the beginning, many metaphors appeared in the online context. There was a range of meanings to choose from, all set to describe the new technologies. For the uninitiated, it seemed as if they needed to learn an entirely new language. But none of this was fixed. Instead, the vocabulary constantly develops. Some of the terms become obsolete almost as soon as they are created, some remain, while others might still emerge. They are placeholders, potentially to be replaced by other, more appropriate terms. But while the process is constantly in flux; the dynamics are not always the same. Most metaphors in the online context already had their moment. Whatever terms come next, they are not very likely to ever have the same impact, because the technologies, the discourses and the users have all moved on. The spectacular newness of it all is gone. Thus any analysis of this sort is a *snapshot* of a particular period in time. In this particular case it is the moment when the change to the everyday occurrence was beginning to take place.

The metaphoric frameworks of the user types are pre-given by metaphors that describe the *whole* of the online sphere. These metaphors, which I have called *general metaphors*, are fairly widely known in the Internet user community as well as the general public. They have been widely circulated not only online, but especially in the traditional media's reporting about the net. Some of these general metaphors have been analysed and reflected upon. The most common general metaphors were (and partly still are) the *net* and the *web*, *cyberspace*, the *information superhighway*, the *electronic frontier* and the *virtual city*. There are several others that will not feature any further (for example the *matrix*, the *library*, the *electronic village* or *marketplace*). Those that were not used either added no major new idea to the overview or they had not featured enough in the public debate. They thus failed in their role as communication tools.

Many of the general metaphors are in some way geographical or at least spatial (highway, village). They invite movement and action. Mostly the metaphors represent a new virtual geography. This is half science fiction, half existing world (e.g. cyberspace). Discovery and pioneering are major components of Internet metaphors. Not all of them emerged slowly out of the

existing computer cultures. Instead, some were created and “...millions of dollars have been made by taking care of how consistently these mental geographies ... are designed, named, metaphorized, and physically managed” (Benedikt, 1991:169). Not least for this reason, it is important not only to analyse the existing metaphors, but also to suggest potential alternatives.

The most technical of the general metaphors is the Internet or *net*. It implies a non-hierarchical structure, a network of networks, a set of nodes.²³ Non-hierarchical structures refer to the technology, but also to the envisaged engagement of people online. However, one can also be caught or lost in a net.²⁴ One’s agency can be limited in such a vast network. The *web* metaphor, the short term for the World Wide Web, is equally ‘catchy’: it also suggests that something can be caught up in it. Like the net, the web is in parts a technical term. The web refers to a specific Internet application. The web’s interface is the web browser, which is characterised by hypertext and hyperlinks. The web browser allows one to look at so-called webpages. These display texts and graphics and potentially other applications for the users’ information and entertainment. Both the web- and the net-term have established themselves as common descriptions of the online sphere. They are used more or less interchangeably, although the web is in principle more specific. Both terms are still in widespread use today.

Similarly, *cyberspace* has managed to remain a widely used general metaphor. In terms of its origins, the term cyberspace partly refers to *cybernetics*. Cybernetics is a theory and a discipline that was built primarily by the U.S. mathematician Norbert Wiener. Cybernetics is the science of communication and control in the animal and the machine or, more broadly speaking, the study of communication in organic, mechanic or electronic systems. It includes the idea of a feedback system. The cyber-term itself stems from Greek and implies a notion of steering, of guidance or governance. As ‘cyberspace’ it first appeared

²³ While earlier structures, like the telephone net, could also be described as non-hierarchical, the Internet adds a new dimension to this, because it splits the information up into packages and sends them along different routes so that it cannot easily be attacked even when parts of the network are down. Earlier structures were more vulnerable in this respect.

²⁴ This meaning of the term was used by *Lycos*, one of the more well-known web search engines. Lycos picked its name from a particular kind of spider, the *lycosa kochii*, which operates at night and actively pursues its prey (in contrast to some spiders that simply wait around for their prey) (Palmquist, 1996). This refers back to the spider-technology that search engines use to collect their data.

in William Gibson's science fiction novel *Neuromancer*.²⁵ Gibson himself does not associate much conscious construction with the terms he uses: "I'm just sort of writing from experience, and I've worked out a couple of science fictional metaphors to back it up" (Gibson, 2000). Cyberspace is the imagined future related to the new technologies. Cyberspace has also been widely framed as the cultural sphere that emerged with the new technology. In this cultural sphere, new identities and communities are seen to emerge. In all of these metaphors, from web to net to cyberspace, an attempt at systematisation, at structure is prevalent. The related imaginary in all of them is one of a general connectedness and information flow.

Quite a contrast to web, net and cyberspace, is another early general metaphor: the *information superhighway*. Today, this term is hardly ever used. In the beginning, i.e. in the early to mid-1990s, the opposite was true.²⁶ The ins and outs of the info-highway have been discussed extensively on- and offline (e.g. Bollmann, 1998b; Canzler et al., 1995, Kleinsteuber, 1996). Most of its critics agree that the term expresses a fundamental belief in technology as such and that it emphasises the *speed* of information transfer. The highway metaphor also presents a rather *linear* and *ordered* version of communication. One of the reasons for the term's widespread initial use was a push by policy and politics. This took first place in America, but soon spread elsewhere. The promoters of the concept included the then Vice President of the U.S.A., the Democrat Al Gore. Gore even claimed to have invented the term, building on the fact that his father had been instrumental in building the American highway system in the 1950s. Another reason for this particular metaphor's success is its status as a master metaphor.²⁷ More than most others, this metaphor was capable of triggering metaphoric add-ons such as 'on-ramps' and 'toll booths' (see Coblentz, 2001). The implied imaginary is limited to fairly clear-cut policy aims and to speedy arrivals at some undisclosed destination.

Another important and widely discussed general term of the early years is the *electronic (new, final) frontier*. It is also a term that is nowadays hardly used at all. The frontier thinking reflects the original dominance of the U.S.A. in the

²⁵ As David Bell states, the quote of Gibson with cyberspace described as a "consensual hallucination" is one of the two "key quotations from Gibson, recited like incantations in virtually every discussion of cyberspace..." (Bell, 2001:22) – including my own (see chpt.1).

²⁶ Newspapers ran front page headlines about the information superhighway, and in fact nearly 20,000 stories were printed (in the U.S.A.) in 1993-1994 using the words information highway or superhighway (Harris, 1996:2).

²⁷ The high tech lifestyle magazine *Wired* underlined the metaphoric nature of the term when it published an article on smart cars in February 1996 entitled *The Information Superhighway (This is not a metaphor)*.

online world. This term has been explained with the need of the American psyche to have a frontier to explore and settle in, linked to the lack of space for the further American expansion in the real world (e.g. Agentur Bilwet, 1994b). A strong point of this metaphor is thus the acknowledgement of the potential newness of the online sphere, i.e. of its unknown character, and the resulting stress on the potential for discovery. However, this frontier notion is based on a specifically American experience (and mythology) of a particular moment in time. Its nationalistic context furthered the term's use for a specific kind of American libertarian ideas, which found a new breeding ground in the online sphere.²⁸ The frontier idea has also been explored in relation to some of the difficulties associated with the original frontier and settlements (Healy, 1997:57). Hence the movement of discovery of the new territories for settlement at the same time implies the lawlessness that is associated with the pioneering days. This lawlessness is in clear contrast to the idea of the regulated highway. Another strong critique of the frontier idea has been provided by feminist orientations, which added the gender perspective as a problematic aspect of the term (Miller, 1995).²⁹ This criticism underlines that women's earlier experiences of the frontier mentality did not always support associations of the frontier with the notions of freedom and discovery.

Yet another important general Internet metaphor is the *virtual city*.³⁰ The city idea stems from early net days, when free-nets were still common. Free-nets were community networks that pre-dated the web. These free-nets were explicitly structured like cities and the different services were named after the appropriate buildings, such as post office or library (see Mitchell, 1995:126). The virtual city can thus imply as much as a whole new society in virtual space. And the city's attributes as a collective experience, as heterogeneous, as organised spatially and realised visually (Bolter, 1996) suggest a variety of culturally varied connections. The city is more concrete than the web or net, but less so than the highway or frontier. Its historical and current reference points are more diverse. Many people are familiar with the city, but it still allows a

²⁸ Libertarianism is here defined as a political philosophy of an extreme laissez-faire kind, which advocates only minimal state intervention.

²⁹ Laura Miller (1995) actually retraced the frontier history and outlined how the then prevalent misogyny has similarly been applied online. Her argument is that (cyber)space has been portrayed as 'feminine' and its 'discovery' has similar undertones. Miller also argues that the idea that 'women and children' in such 'settlements' imply the arrival of the much-hated law and thus a loss of quality of life is underlying the use of the term.

³⁰ Here again, virtual can be replaced with electronic, online, digital, etc. Thus there are the wired city, cybercity, online town, city of bits, digital city, global village, digital landscape, sprawl, site, electropolis, telepolis, cyberhood, cybertown and others.

range of imaginaries. The city thus seems to be an equally good master metaphor as the information superhighway, although it has not been used as that. Most importantly, the city is seen as a place of actual encounter, of meetings with strangers (see Noel, 1998). This is one of its main attractions, but it has also therefore been a problematic space for women. Debates around the character of the flâneuse underline these difficulties. City-space then is also a reference point that is not without its difficulties. Its structure, which suggests order and chaos, still creates various options for thematic and identity connections. It is also more 'lived in' than a web or a net. Its mixture of lived everyday reality and abstract, fluid space of constant change offers an appeal to a wide set of users. Users do not feature in most of the other general metaphors, but they are crucial to the life of a city.³¹ The Internet user, however, is key to the experience of being online. This was the reason to develop the concept of the user type.

2.3. User Types

Penetrating the screen involves a state change from the physical, biological space of the embodied viewer to the symbolic, metaphorical 'consensual hallucination' of cyberspace; a space that is a locus of intense desire for refigured embodiment. (Stone, 1991:109)

The user exists in a set of relationships to the interface and to the computer hidden behind the interface. Other users can play an important role in these relationships; the information provided also shapes how the user relates. With any move into the abstract sphere 'behind' the screen, users often draw on other forms of self-descriptions than those used in real life. This is the point where metaphors and neologisms come to play. Many of the thus created self-descriptions, however, would not be classified as user types, because they speak for the individual *only*. They are not meant to communicate anything but individual identity positions. User types, however, are more than individual expressions.

User types are publicly available articulations that express individual user identities with claims to generalisable identities. They invite other users to claim the same label and qualities for themselves. As such, they are difficult to

³¹ The frontier is an exception to the rule of lack of people in the imagination. The idea of this frontier is based on human settlement.

research in a traditional sociological or anthropological fashion. Direct engagements with the subjects who created the user types do not deliver the necessary level of analysis. Instead, the users that are described in user types are *read through* their readily found articulations. They are elements of wider discourses. The virtual archaeology implements this reading through tracing their occurrence, their use and cultural history. The contextualisation of the vocabulary within its specific cultural histories is missing entirely from most of the few analyses of user metaphors.

The categorisation of user type behaviours does not take place 'ex post facto'. In fact, what is here categorised as user types are not actual behaviours, but descriptions about 'being online' as created by users themselves. These descriptions are then provided to a wider public as potential generic descriptions of what 'being online' could mean. The users who create these terms are mostly privileged users and not necessarily representative for users in general. However, in the overall range of the selection, a wide range of uses and identities is offered.

In principle, the range of possible user metaphors is endless. In practice, there are several, but those that fulfil the criteria of making claims beyond the individual remain few.³² Within the pre-given general frameworks the user has sometimes appeared as the electronic frontier's pioneer or data cowboy. Otherwise he/she has been described by terms such as lurker, cracker, phreak, wizard, nerd, unix guru, techno-anarchist, whizz kid, avatar³³, digital artisan, data warrior, infobroker, data dandy³⁴, dweeb, newbie, geek or others (see also Helmers, 1994:17; Horn, 1998:30-46).

These terms were not chosen for further analysis, because their content is limited to the online sphere and to their level of technological knowledge. Instead, these terms describe these knowledge levels in a derogatory or laudatory fashion. Most importantly, most of these user types are used to describe others, but not to describe themselves or more general identity positions. The engagements implied are primarily with machines and

³² Names in online discussion groups and Multi-User-Domains (MUDs) are also expressions used to label users. The creativity has been vast, as examples of nicknames from LambdaMOO show: "Toon, Gemba, Gary_Severn, Ford, Frand, Li'ir, Maya, Rincewind, yduJ, funky, Grump, Foodslave, Arthur, EbbTide, Anathae, ..." (quoted by Curtis in Stefik, 1996:271). These expressions make no claims beyond the individual identity.

³³ An avatar is an icon or other kind of representation of a user in a shared virtual environment.

³⁴ The data dandy is a close relative of the cyberflâneur, but has been used less.

information, but do not say much about relationships to other people or about a more abstract understanding of the information sphere. Thus these terms display limited cultural histories. These limitations qualify them as user descriptions for limited circles only. What they lack is any claim to fulfil the role as communication devices. Their scope is too specific. The selected user types instead promised a wider scope each. Hobsbawm's community-establishment and authority-legitimisation are definitely part of this, even the socialisation into a belief system is apparent in some of them. Thus the cyberflâneur, cyberflâneuse, webgrrl, cyberpunk, netizen, cybernaut and surfer were chosen for their diversity of backgrounds and engagements.

In summary: user types describe different kinds of 'being online'. They do so in simple metaphors. These terms, created by users themselves, constitute users as particular types. User types represent 'ideal types', based on wish-fulfilment rather than straightforward experience. Each type abstracts from the individual user, but also attempts to create an experience that the individual user finds him- or herself represented in. Every user type classifies individual uses into broader categories. User types create a widely accessible image of the user within these virtual worlds. A user typology shows a range of different user types and compares them to each other.

Through their seemingly unpredictable wanderings in a virtual landscape of web http-addresses, the anonymous browser/surfer/lurker produces ways of using the computer network offered by the data industry and the Internet providers. These ways of using are the spatial stories inscribed on the hypertext by the consumers of the Net. (Sørenssen, 1998)

Most of the time, these spatial stories do not leave clearly visible traces – at least not of the kind that is simply readable for another user. Their metaphoric expressions are the most visible. The lack of user stories and their analyses hints at a discrepancy between the claims within general cyberculture discourses, where the user is central, and the cyberculture as such.

Several research projects have shown that the potential variety of language online is impressive (Jacobson, 1999). Research carried out in four chat-rooms for two weeks in 1994 (Bechar-Israeli, 1995), for example, picked out 260

nicknames that were then categorised into seven categories.³⁵ The same study also showed potential limitations of the variety, albeit in an overall discourse of diversity. This variety, if taken too far, can also lead to a lack of identification possibilities, since it implies individuality. Communication about the experience, however, requires a certain level of shared language or at least shared reference points.

2.4. Analysis of Cyberspace Metaphors

Awareness concerning online metaphors has increased in the last few years – and so has the analytical engagement with them. Most often the engagement is only a sideline in other explorations, but more extensive studies have also begun to be published (Bickenbach & Maye, 1997; Gozzi, 1999; Herman & Swiss, 2000; Neice, 1998; Ratzan, 1998; Sawhney, 1996; Thomas & Wyatt, 1999). While the engagements have become more explicit about the role of metaphor in cyberspace, many still fail to provide analyses of the metaphors as such and especially not of user metaphors. I will limit myself to highlighting the importance all the studies attach to metaphor analysis. This brief summary serves to introduce aspects of my own analysis: the stress on metaphor analysis as such and the analysis of concrete metaphors combined with the provision of alternatives. The quotations taken from these accounts shall serve to underline the powerful rhetoric at work in cyberculture research overall. Slightly more detail will be provided where the analysis dealt with concrete examples.

2.4.1. The General Approaches

The most basic claim is provided by Daniel Bell. He claims that the stories we tell about cyberspace and cyberculture are at the crossroads of different metaphors and kinds of knowledge. In his eyes, we need to analyse metaphors and how they interact with technologies and other material aspects, since the relationship between computers and metaphors is a *reciprocal shaping* (Bell, 2001:6-8). Andrew Herman and Thomas Swiss take the role of metaphor even further. They name the use of metaphor as the “core of the magical powers of rhetorics about the Web” (Herman & Swiss, 2000:3). For these authors, the *social*

³⁵ The seven categories are – in order of quantity of appearance – a) self-referential information (example given: shydude), b) technology, computer (e.g. Pentium), c) flora, fauna, objects (e.g. tiger), d) play with words, sounds or spelling (e.g. tamtam), e) own name or nickname (e.g. tom), f) literature, film, music, fairy tale, famous people (e.g. rainman), g) provocation (e.g. skinhead).

imagination is the addressee of this magic. A notion of power, i.e. the web's power as a cultural technology, is seen as the ultimate reason for engaging with metaphors.

Graham Thomas and Sally Wyatt (1999), in a more extensive engagement with metaphors in cyberspace, also underline the power aspect of metaphor use. Their interest is not with the magic though, but more with Bell's idea of reciprocal shaping. As Thomas and Wyatt point out, metaphors are used to describe the Internet in order to make it familiar to a diverse set of users (an argument they share with Bickenbach and Maye, 1997). On top of this, the "range of metaphors currently on offer reveals a great deal about how different actors perceive its current and future functions" (Thomas & Wyatt, 1999:695). Thomas and Wyatt claim that these metaphors, as normative and not only descriptive devices, do not merely illustrate, but shape the Internet. They clearly fulfil an important function within the communication in and around cyberspace.

This function is also expressed in the idea of *associations*. According to Matthias Bickenbach and Harun Maye (1997), the Internet has not become so widely accepted because it was technically efficient, but because its surrounding discourse created it as something desirable and useful. The creation as desirable and useful was done with the help of metaphors.³⁶ Although partly problematic in the way it is argued, Bickenbach and Maye's stress on the role of metaphors as a unifying element in the discourse about the unknown is highly relevant. The authors claim that metaphors can draw out sameness from the diverse practices in existence and thus enable us to talk *about* the Internet (Bickenbach & Maye, 1997:80). Metaphors thus offer connection points for everyone to join in. The metaphors that are applied to the Internet are not random occurrences. Rather, they have a central organising and expectation-structuring function (Bickenbach & Maye, 1997:82).³⁷

Harmeet Sawhney (1996) also underlines the aspect of expectations, when he points out that there are hardly any models left to predict the future of the technological descent. We *need* to predict this future, however, since we are constantly caught up in it. Our preference, claims Sawhney, is usually for a

³⁶ This argument seems to partly miss the point, because the technical possibilities were crucial in allowing certain uses that other media did not offer. More importantly though, the surrounding discourse cannot simply be described as having created the web as desirable. The opposite was equally true.

³⁷ These new thought models cannot easily replace older ones. As Volker Grassmuck (1995:53) suggested, the space of possibilities could actually bring about totally different solutions, if these older models did not block our vision.

precise model, but the complexity of the developments nowadays prevents this to be a realistic option (see also Heylighen, 1996). Therefore metaphors are not only useful devices, but they are, according to Sawhney, one of the only tools left to prophesise.³⁸ The emphasis in this thesis, inspired by Benjamin, is on the retrospective view. Thus the present and the future are not predicted, but derived from the existing. Metaphors provide a link between then and now and can be used to regard either past or future. More importantly, they come together in the present.

Last, but not least, David Neice (1998) outlines how metaphoric language works as an exclusion mechanism. Neice shares the underlying argument with Thomas and Wyatt in the sense that he sees metaphor as a communication device. In Neice's examples the communication tool metaphor is used to limit access to certain spheres of knowledge and experience (or magic). Hence participation in the digital world is restricted. Online subcultures, for example, require the learning of a system of terms, which again are often metaphoric.

In summary: most of these authors are concerned with the general role of metaphor in cyberspace. And most of them refer to the power that these expressions carry in defining the uses of the technologies. The Internet is made familiar via these metaphors. The new vocabulary can sometimes be exclusionary. According to some authors, the metaphors also offer a model of the future, a prophecy or even contain magic. Important is the reciprocal relationship between the technology and the metaphors: both influence each other. However, few examples of this magic and power are given in these texts. Therefore some engagements that actually refer more concretely to metaphors, are explored further. In contrast to my own analysis, the concentration in most of these is on the general metaphors rather than on user metaphors.³⁹

³⁸ While I agree with Sawhney's interpretation that we tend to look for future-predictions, I do not side with him on the idea of precision and models. Some predictions tend to be fuzzy, but equally convincing.

³⁹ A good impression of the potential range of metaphors is given by Lee Ratzan (1998). He did a large-scale user survey, in which he asked users to give their own metaphoric descriptions of the Internet. It is an interesting study about the variety, but at the same time the limitations of the range, since many of them turn out to be variations of the ever same terms (library, web, etc.).

2.4.2. The Development of Alternatives

Most of those authors, who actually concretely analyse existing metaphors, end up trying to develop alternative metaphors. So did I. The reason for this, as Raymond Gozzi explains, is that metaphors *obstruct* rather than explain or explore (Gozzi, 1999:xi). One of Gozzi's alternatives to established general metaphors such as cyberspace is the term 'chameleon' (Gozzi, 1999:147). This term, however, is an obstruction in itself (as much of Gozzi's book overall). First of all, it consists of only one already used word. Secondly, the actual chameleon offers no intuitively available link to the online sphere. Metaphors, however, which need long explanations, tend to remain obscure. Most of Gozzi's suggestions for alternatives, although sometimes based on valuable critiques of the projected content of the existing metaphors, tend to be too specific or obscure and thus are not real alternatives. Gozzi's analysis underlines though that a better understanding of the existing metaphors often emerged out of the development of alternatives.

Rena Tangens (1996) also developed an alternative to an existing terminology. She concentrated on the info highway metaphor. According to Tangens, the highway's advantages are common experiences. However, the highway's negative implications are not usually referred to in the metaphor.⁴⁰ Tangens' suggestion for an alternative metaphor is the 'global village well', which is supposed to combine the local and the global and refers back to an old concept from communication studies (Marshall McLuhan's 'global village'). While not as obscure as Gozzi's suggestion (and explored with more thoroughness), this metaphor also lacks any intuitive appeal. The way the metaphor is derived and the reasoning for it, are, however, convincing arguments.

Mark Stefik (1996) wrote the most-quoted book about metaphors and new technologies. He uses existing theoretical texts to mark his development of alternatives to current concepts. He first divides the web overall into four general metaphors: a) the digital library, b) electronic mail, c) the electronic marketplace and d) digital worlds. His analysis is very optimistic in terms of malleability of the terminology and his belief in the vocabulary's powers to transform. Like Gozzi and Tangens, Stefik stays primarily with the general metaphors. His main engagement with users is when he describes them as a set

⁴⁰ The advantages range from speed to connection, the disadvantages from the costs to danger and boredom.

of four *archetypes*, each of which is related to one of his general metaphors.⁴¹ The archetypes Stefik lists are a) the *keeper of knowledge* (as represented in his digital library metaphor), b) the *communicator* (reflected in the electronic mail metaphor), c) the *trader* (electronic marketplace) and d) the *adventurer* (digital worlds).⁴² Their direct relationship to the general metaphors limits their scope. Stefik does not think so. His overall understanding is summarised in his proclamation that we are “choosing what we want to be” in our shaping of the information infrastructure (Stefik, 1996:xxiv). Identities are seen to find their expression in metaphor. This metaphoric expression extends to the idea of the identity to be freely chosen. In Stefik’s range, which covers individual uses, but not overall identities, freedom of choice is lacking. The archetypes are too specific for general metaphors, but too broad for individual ones. They are useful thought-models, but not good communication tools.

2.5. Retrofitting Metaphors⁴³

Central to these enthusiastic and often mystifying reports from ‘cyberspace’ is the use of recurring metaphors (such as ‘cyberspace’) about and around the Internet – and as there seems to be place left for a few more metaphors, we could even name them ‘netaphors’. (Sørenssen, 1998)

I follow Sørenssen’s claim that there is space for more *netaphors*. Eventually, I myself added one to the existing list of metaphors. This was a process that emerged out of disagreement with some existing user types, but also as a marker of the possibility of the creation of such terms from the bottom up. This is not to say that the other user types I analyse are all created top-down. Some of the creators are indeed privileged Internet users and thus use privileged distribution channels. But the Internet principle, i.e. the possibility to create bottom-up, remains not only a possibility in principle, but is crucial to the variety of available identity positions. The creation is a characteristic of the

⁴¹ Sherry Turkle refers to the archetype concept in her work (Turkle, 1997a:259). Turkle outlines how archetypes were initially useful to introduce the idea of the fragmented self online.

⁴² Stefik imports the archetypes from Carl Gustav Jung’s psychoanalytic work and claims they “create visions of what we want to be – as individuals and societies” (Stefik, 1996:xxii). Traditional archetypes are the trickster, the child, the hero, God, the demon, the wise old man and the earth mother (Stefik, 1996:xxi).

⁴³ Metaphors describe the new via reference to the old. A similar concept in science fiction has been called *retrofitting*. It implies that old machinery is used and new parts are simply added on. Thus it is a combination of the new and the ‘very used’ (Bukatman, 1997:21).

research object, but also of the here researched medium. The Internet offers such a possibility to create and add metaphors (and much else). The further distribution and subsequent use of the concept, however, are not so easily controlled as its original creation. Thus the success of any creation is not guaranteed.

Metaphors in and around cyberspace abound. They are used, because they enable communication about the yet unknown. They refer to known frameworks but add new components to the known. Thus they contain the possibility of a change of perspective. Metaphors link and juxtapose aspects that were not linked beforehand. By referring to something beyond themselves, they create links that help to structure thinking. They point to new connections. As such, they are indeed suited to the web: they are in themselves hyperlinks, based between different experiences and understandings. The linguistic study of metaphor basically suggests this structure, but does not always deal with consequences of the powers of metaphors to create such links. Too many metaphor analyses stay within the metaphoric frame. Instead, if we regard metaphors as a medium in itself, we are less likely to fall into the trap of missing the specificity of each metaphor at a particular moment in time. The metaphor as a medium is metaphor as a tool, a means to achieve something (see also Bickenbach & Maye, 1997). My analysis concentrates on the metaphors themselves as well as on their role within wider social and cultural frameworks. In this sense analysing metaphors is a form of *critical analysis* (Sullivan & Porter, 1997:176). It reflects both on the role of the language as such (the second order understanding) and on the concepts and ideas inferred in this language.

The first social and cultural frameworks that are important for the here analysed metaphors are writings about cyberculture. The metaphors are part of cyberculture as such, but especially also of the discourses around them. The metaphors are the vehicle with which I analyse these wider discourses. A review of existing cyberculture literature thus was an important aspect of the thesis throughout. This ongoing review first set the project going. It later served to define what my focus was in comparison to others. User types relate closely to major topics in cyberculture.

3. Creating the Present:

Cybercultural Theory and Cyberfeminism

What cyberspace becomes will, to a great extent, depend upon what we call it. (Gunkel & Gunkel, 1997:133)

Rather than asking *whether* these metaphors construct meanings, the question here is *what* particular meanings of 'being online' they construct. These meaning-formations are seen as an important aspect of the overall development of the emerging cultural forms. This assessment is based on the assumption that the Internet vocabulary does indeed matter. Whether it matters to such "a great extent" as David and Ann Hetzel Gunkel claim, is, however, questionable.

The question of meaning-creation can be answered through the analysis of several sub-questions. The most important references here are the specific cultural histories of the user types. These histories let us ask about the uses and imaginations that are excluded from the current range, while they also explore the imaginations that have been created and promoted. They potentially display a change over time. The origin and spread of the user types are also part of the process of meaning-creation. Who is primarily addressed in these terms? And who uses them? What kind of behaviours, attitudes or understandings of the web are shown here? And how much is the individual identity indeed an identity position that is on offer for a wider set of users?

Metaphors are used to mediate between different spheres of meaning. The user types in particular are here defined as tools, as vehicles that bridge the gap between the experience and the public outside of the immediate experience. They are more approachable than the general metaphors, since they display connection points for individuals as users. These descriptions of 'being online' offer the public an image of the experience. And since this experience is described in terms that offer connections to experiences that are already known, the newness aspect appears as less frightening. The newness is indeed embedded in the already known.

My task is to give some answers to the questions posed in relation to these metaphors and to relate those answers back to the wider framework of language, new media and new cultural forms. Cyberfeminism has been singled out from several cyber-theories as the most relevant to my undertaking. This took place when it became clear that there was a lack of gender flexibility and lack of the female in the user type of the cyberflâneur and that this lack was not easily explained through technological or other limitations. I will thus provide a

rough sketch of cyberfeminism and its major concerns in this chapter. An important reason for referring to cyberfeminism in the context of this chapter is also its close relationship with the cybercultural topics and concerns that I will sketch out. There are large overlaps in terms of the major concerns and cybercultural topics.

The cyberfeminism focus will be introduced with the help of some references to feminism and language. This conceptual combination relates to the major concern of the thesis, i.e. the role of specific vocabularies in the formation of cultures. Much of the feminist history served as base for later cyberfeminism. To further unpack the issues contained therein, a brief exploration of some theoretical claims implied in cyberfeminism will be explored with the help of three theorists, Donna Haraway, Sherry Turkle and Sadie Plant.

The first major focus of this chapter is a summary of some of the major trends in cyberculture theorisation. Based on a broad literature review, I locate some recurring and prevalent issues within prominent cyberculture texts. The selection does not reflect the most recent concerns, but puts the greatest emphasis on the mid- to late 1990s. A brief summary of the major issues is presented in order to locate this particular project (and the cyberfeminist approaches) within the range of cyberspace analyses.

3.1. Cyberculture Theorisation

Internet or cyberspace research has by now entered its third phase (or generation). The first has been labelled 'popular cyberculture', the second 'cyberculture studies' and the third 'critical cyberculture studies' (Silver, 2003). In the second phase, major sub-strands began to form. Here, one can roughly distinguish the following: a) *the technological approach* (e.g. the Internet as the academic and military technology made human; interface designs; hackers and similar characters); b) *the political approach* (e.g. the information superhighway and e-democracy initially; the digital divide and e-government now); c) *the commercial approach* (e.g. e-commerce; communication possibilities for businesses and consumers alike) and d) *the cultural approach* (e.g. new forms of literature and communication; cyberspace as the all-encompassing metaphor

and notion for virtual identities and online communities).⁴⁴ The last approach provides the main focus, but traces of the others can also be found.

In order to provide an overview of the main foci in cybercultural studies especially in the mid-1990s, texts were chosen from several cyberculture readers.⁴⁵ The readers have been favoured over single authored texts. They reflect better some major tendencies in the theorisation of cyberspace. They also show the changes over the years more clearly. The selected readers are Michael Benedikt's (ed.) *Cyberspace: First Steps* (1991), Jon Dovey's (ed.) *Fractal Dreams* (1996), Stefan Bollmann and Christiane Heibach's (eds.) *Kursbuch Internet* (1996), Rob Shields' (ed.) *Cultures of Internet* (1996), Stefan Bollmann's (ed.) *Kursbuch Neue Medien* (1998a), David Bell's *An Introduction to Cybercultures* (2001)⁴⁶, David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy's (eds.) *The Cybercultures Reader* (2000) and Rudolf Maresch and Florian Rötzer's (eds.) *Cyberhypes* (2001). Other cyberculture texts feature throughout the thesis. From these books, a few topics have been chosen as representative for the wider debates. They reflect the initial theoretical trends in cyber-theory and major foci in research. Altogether six topics have been chosen.

These topics have been chosen with Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* in mind. Benjamin chose topics that presented – in his eyes at least – a major shift, often representative of modernity and the modern city. His choices were not the kind of texts that loudly pronounced their importance. They tended to be surface-expressions and often referred to something banal. Benjamin used quotations from many different sources and other material to illustrate the shift to modernity and the city. With the help of the surface expressions he showed the underlying dreams and the capitalist illusions. Similar shifts, which require one to read between the lines, have also been proclaimed in relation to the new technologies. The texts are meant to illustrate this cultural shift (and its limits) following Benjamin's patchwork-like fashion.

⁴⁴ In terms of the more textual perspectives within the cultural approach, *hypertext* was theorised as a new literary form and *narrative* has recently become a focus.

⁴⁵ The texts are covering most of the 1990s. They have been written primarily by academics. Most authors are either British, American or German. The texts have been widely read and they at least partly represent what has been seen as the seminal texts in relation to cyberculture in Germany and the UK.

⁴⁶ This is basically a retrospective introduction to *The Cybercultures Reader*.

3.1.1. Theme 1: Manifestos

The first topic are manifestos. These were declarations used in the early days to describe what cyberspace was 'supposed to be like' in the eyes of those who made the declarations. These are not simply dreams though, but dreams that are always in opposition: articulated against others, against existing systems, etc. They are also articulated with reality as a clear reference point. They are declarations of intention, stating what shall be done and how.

Here I briefly refer to two of these manifestos that have made Internet history. They are both widespread cybercultural texts that show not only the early beliefs, but also the libertarian twist that many of these beliefs carried in the United States where a lot of the early cyberspace material was produced. A belief in individual freedom was combined with an anti-regulation or even an anti-government stance in a fashion that was rarely found in Europe.

The first of the two is a 'classic' in terms of cyberspace texts: the 'Magna Carta of the knowledge age', published by Esther Dyson, George Gilder, George Keyworth and Alvin Toffler (1996).⁴⁷ Dyson in particular is still a prominent cyber-policy figure today. This Magna Carta was first published in 1994 and was supposed to be an open, i.e. changeable, document. It caused huge controversies in the net community at the time of its publication. Promoting third wave ideology⁴⁸, the knowledge-society and neo-liberal economic views, the authors saw the net as a renewed attempt at the American Dream. Not surprisingly, the term frontier is used:

The bioelectronic *frontier* is an appropriate metaphor for what is happening in cyberspace, calling to mind as it does the spirit of invention and discovery that led ancient mariners to explore the world, generations of pioneers to tame the American continent and, more recently, to man's first exploration of outer space. ...The Third Wave ...shapes new codes of behavior that move each organism and institution ...inexorably beyond standardization and centralization, as well as beyond the materialist's obsession with energy, money and control. (Dyson et al., 1996)

In their text, suffused with techno-utopian language, 'real life' is portrayed as being left behind. Instead the virtual is supposed to be embraced. Through its

⁴⁷ This text was written for the 'Progress and Freedom Foundation' (PFF), which calls itself a "market-oriented think tank that promotes innovative policy solutions for the digital age" (PFF, 2003). PFF had close links to the Republican politician Newt Gingrich at some point in time. These links were eventually stopped, because they were seen as slightly too close for an 'independent' think-tank.

⁴⁸ Third wave ideology proclaims that computing and information have become the third wave in terms of primary forms of 'production' – the first having been agriculture, the second the industrial revolution. This follows Alvin Toffler's ideas (1981).

reference to early British and American history, the Magna Carta evokes images of fights for independence, but also images of feudal times.⁴⁹ It is both culturally specific and problematic. American cultural specificity was generalised for the whole net. The aim was to preserve the Internet as an interference free zone, to further a particular kind of freedom. This is shared with the second text in this selection.

This text is another well-known manifesto: the *Declaration of independence of cyberspace*, published in 1996 by John Perry Barlow, also an illustrious figure within U.S. cyber-theory.⁵⁰ In this manifesto, Barlow declared cyberspace as independent from the industrial nations, without government or other kinds of regulation, outside of any jurisdiction:

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. (Barlow, 1996)

This independence was to be defended against all kinds of interferences. Barlow thus shares the anti-regulation stance of the Magna Carta. But he concentrates more on rights than on the economic aspects. He subscribes to a liberalist understanding of rights – at least for the online sphere.⁵¹ For him, the online world is free of prejudice and guided by the spirit rather than material values. The ruling powers should not interfere with it. But Barlow's version of freedom of thought and expression is too far removed from the 'real world'. No acknowledgement is made of potential offline difficulties or clashes between the two spheres or the actually existing intricate interrelationship between the two.⁵² It is thus a short-sighted form of independence, but typical for the early days of cyberspace.⁵³

⁴⁹ The Magna Carta was a 13th century document in England, which King John eventually signed and which granted certain liberties to the 'free men' in England. It was a supreme law and as such an important development (the claim goes that the English common law developed from it), but it granted rights only to a few powerful families. Nonetheless, when the Americans drafted their constitution, this was a document they clearly referred to. They regard it as an important part of their own history.

⁵⁰ Barlow is well-known because he used to be part of the band 'The Grateful Dead', then a farmer and now a 'cyber-pioneer'. He was one of the two founders of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), a civil rights organisation which tries to protect cyberspace from too much involvement of the U.S. government in terms of privacy etc. EFF has won a few court cases and thereby influenced U.S. law making in terms of the Internet. They have been important for making cyberspace and related issues more well-known.

⁵¹ Liberalist is here meant to refer to its American connotation of opposition to state interference. I do not claim, however, that Barlow promotes these views as his general political attitude. It refers to his view about the online sphere.

⁵² Richard Barbrook (1996) provides an extensive attack of Barlow's piece in which he accuses Barlow not only to have mis-read history, but to support the increasing

These manifestos were published and distributed online. They also made their way into other kinds of publications, which broadened their reach. The most well known and influential of these was the cyberspace magazine *Wired*, a much hyped publication, which was treated by many early enthusiasts as their mouthpiece.⁵⁴ *Wired* contributed hugely to an early particular reading of cyberspace. It confirmed, for a few years at least, a certain U.S. American dominance in those circles that tried to define what the web should be in future. Most of these ideas were linked to versions of libertarianism. They displaced existing ideological conflicts into the realm of the virtual, where they would supposedly be solved. They ignored any potential specificity of the new media and simply defined them as solutions. This is also reflected in their characteristic metaphors, especially the netizen and the surfer.

3.1.2. Theme 2: Dreamscape

In the dreamscape idea, dreaming is allowed to float freely and playfully. Most of the ideas expressed in the dreamscapes refer to something that goes beyond the social which the manifestos still concentrate on. The dreamscape reaches further in terms of the potential consequences of new technologies. The dreamscape is the most universal of the presented topics. It underlies the general approach to cyberspace expressed here – and shows why Benjamin's analysis is not dissimilar to uncovering such claims:

Dream houses of the collective: arcades, winter gardens, panoramas, factories, wax museums, casinos, railroad stations. ... Arcades are houses or passages having no outside – like the dream. (Benjamin, 1999:405-406)

... the contemporary debate on cyberspace and virtual reality is something of a consensual hallucination, too. (Robins, 1996:1)⁵⁵

The dreamscape idea takes the *visions* of the emerging cyberculture one step further and removes it entirely from its offline links. Instead the dreamscape

development of a 'virtual class' (in support of the theory of a digital divide) and to ignore that freedom of expression is also threatened by the market (and not just the state). Rather than too much state intervention, Barbrook claims, it is simply the wrong kind.

⁵³ It also clearly re-enforces the Cartesian split that cyberspace was meant to overcome.

⁵⁴ According to Stefan Kreml, the magazine made the people of the digital subculture into pop stars and declared a free market, a hedonistic lifestyle and techno-utopianism as its main aims (2001:193). This came to an end not only when the new media market collapsed in the late 1990s, but when many of the promised and predicted social and cultural aspects simply did not emerge.

⁵⁵ Robins refers here to the much quoted definition of cyberspace in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* novel, in which he speaks of a consensual hallucination.

refers to ideas that are truly imaginary, that emerge on the 'inside'. And it makes no immediate claims to changes in the offline world. The dreamscape is often implicit rather than explicit. Some early authors explicitly referred to cyberspace as a potential dreamscape and Novak calls it "a habitat for the imagination" (Novak, 1991:225). Benjamin described the early arcades as a habitat for the modern imagination. In a similar vein, the Internet can be labelled the habitat for late 20th century imagination.

The imaginary of the 19th century arcades implied a liberation, a dream of egalitarianism coming together in early versions of consumption. It also included an exotic Other, both in terms of foreign goods and local women (prostitutes). Anonymity coupled with social respectability of a self-created kind (the detective, for example) was mixed with a dawning recognition of the impending end of all these dreams.

Cyberspace, in the imaginary of the early nineties also provided a habitat a new era for egalitarian ideas. More importantly, it dreamt the dreams of liberation from the body and self. It also promised encounters with exotic others. The dreamscape mixed humans and machines as well as other colourful notions of how the mindscape could be enhanced. One aspect of these dreams is the idea of total *immersion* in the information sphere rather than just *access* to it. This was the initial hope for the further development of virtual technologies. It is also implied in the idea of changing identities. Not surprisingly, in these descriptions bio-technologies are difficult to distinguish from information and communication technologies. 'Imagining the unknown' is the motto.⁵⁶

Thus another, rather different theme is also part of the dreamscape: electronic democracy (or e-democracy). This notion comprises a set of different projects which all claim to further democracy in diverse combinations of online and offline politics. They are powerful declarations of a dreamscape of a particular kind. Equally born out of a disappointment with the existing reality as other dreamscape notions, these are projects with seemingly achievable aims. Their claims, however, are often equally radical in nature as other parts of the dreamscape. In terms of the user types, they find their most important expression in the netizen.

⁵⁶ A science fiction framework fits into the ideas of immersion and of discovery of the unknown. The European Space Agency (ESA) has now developed projects that will take science fiction imaginations serious as scientific tool (ITSF, 2000). The Massachusetts Institute for Technology (MIT), one of the most prestigious technology development (and theorisation) institutes, has also used science fiction writers. In communication with these writers, the MIT wanted to reflect upon the postulations about media technologies, which are part of the fiction (Jenkins, 2000).

According to some authors, computers do even more than that: they shift boundaries that have been hitherto taken for granted. Thus the body-technology debate covers similar ground as the dreamscape. It is a dominant one of the dreamscape aspects, but usually appears in more scientific terms.

3.1.3. Theme 3: Body and Technology

The boundary-shifts that are supposed to take place between nature, bodies and technologies, between what has been labelled the real and the virtual. Allucquère Roseanne Stone's *Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?: Boundary Stories about Virtual Cultures* (1991) is an early text, which shared the enthusiasm, but also raised doubts about the extent and the consequences of such boundary-shifts:

The boundaries between the subject, if not the body, and the 'rest of the world' are undergoing a radical refiguration, brought about in part through the mediation of technology (Stone, 1991:101)⁵⁷

The boundary shifts in Stone's text concern primarily identities, but also body-boundaries.⁵⁸ She claims radical changes in social conventions in relation to the new technologies. The given reason for the changes is that in the end people want to inhabit and live their fantasies, while this was previously impossible (Stone, 1991:98).⁵⁹ Stone differentiates between an increasingly physical body and an increasingly textual subject and defines bodies in cyberspace as 'borderland bodies', i.e. bodies that are physical and virtual at the same time (Stone, 1991:100).⁶⁰ She concludes, however, that life is still lived through bodies. Therefore there are limits to the merger of the 'real' and 'virtual' and limits also to the shift between nature and technology. Similarly Rob Shields (1996) argued that it is important to see computer-mediated communication as a process that involves *differentiated* bodies. He adds that a lot of the relationship between our body and the abstract (cyber)space is expressed in

⁵⁷ Stone herself is a male-to-female transsexual, and thus has a personal message when it comes to boundary-shifts.

⁵⁸ Stone's fieldwork to underline this point deals with phone sex workers and VR computer scientists.

⁵⁹ To trace some of the bodily 'double' existence ('real' and 'virtual'), Stone uses a history of 'technologies' (texts, early electronic communication, etc.) in relation to virtual communities and (dis)embodiment and case studies of today's virtuality (BBS, Habitat, etc.). Before these technologies were developed, the body was on public display and was the space where the individual was inscribed. According to Stone, writing and later technologies removed subjectivity from the body.

⁶⁰ In reference to Tomas (1991) and Turkle (1997a), we could call them *liminal* bodies.

language and this language creates limitations via its conventions (Shields, 1996:4-9).

These qualifications are important in the process of the development of actual boundary-shifts. Equally important to keep in mind as the primary message of many of the early writings are, however, the claims that the boundaries between bodies and technologies are radically shifting. Cyberfeminism underlines this point. The early claims were rather part of a general hype concerning new technologies.

3.1.4. Theme 4: Hype vs. Reality

The hype vs. reality idea refers to more recent ideas found in cyberculture texts. It is the expressive engagement with the shift from second to third generation research foci. It is thus the most self-reflective one of the here presented topics. Both Shields and Stone presented us with early forms of counter-attacks on the initial cyberspace hype. The manifestos, and especially the far-fetched claims of Barlow, were one expression of the hype. Another, earlier version can be seen in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, a seminal text in which Michael Benedikt outlined a long-lasting and far-reaching vision of cyberspace within a primarily spatial, architectural framework. Cyberspace, according to Benedikt, is a term that “gives a name to a new stage, a new and irresistible development in the elaboration of human culture and business under the sign of technology” (Benedikt, 1991:1). His version of cyberspace was a radical reformation of everything that existed until then and, as he freely admitted, did not yet exist at the time when he was writing about it.

Ten years after Benedikt, this vision was dismissed as a hype that never came true. Thus the cleverly titled *Cyberhypes* (Maresch & Rötzer, 2001) concerns itself not with the original promises of the net, but with the reality of use and production that has since emerged. The book analyses what governments have done, how and what borders are re-drawn, how far the gift-economy is a reality. The original claims are now measured against the actual uses (and abuses) of the net. As such this book is representative of a much wider trend: a shift from enthusiasm and far-reaching claims concerning the technologies’ potential to much more restrained and critical assessments. This goes hand in hand with what has been labelled the move from first to second or even third generation cyberspace theorisations (Miller & Slater, 2000; Silver, 2003; Ward, 2002). The emphasis has moved from the on-screen aspects to the off-screen or rather to a combination of the two.

The Benedikt kind of enthusiasm had already begun to fade earlier. By the mid-1990s, the general tone had started a shift to a much more critical, even cynical, questioning of initial far-reaching assumptions. Jon Dovey (1996), for example, claimed that his book was for people who did not believe in the hype. He related this to the language used:

One of the rhetorical characteristics of popular writing about New Media is a profusion of terms and claims that seek to transcend rather than define. So what exactly are we talking about here? (Dovey, 1996:xii)

Language was assigned a major role in the definition of new media and thus needed to be uncovered. Dovey and his authors were also hoping to contradict the hype and to uncover what lay behind it. One of the research topics that allowed a qualification of the hype through a thick description was research on virtual communities.

3.1.5. Theme 5: Communities

The most prominent (and hyped) author in the field of virtual communities is Howard Rheingold with his book of the same name (*The Virtual Community* – 1994). This book was first published in 1993 and analysed how an early electronic forum, the WELL, became a widespread and valued source for friendships and support. Rheingold described the development of the WELL in very positive terms and, crucially, used the idea of a ‘community’ to characterise the virtual forum and its users. This virtual community seemed to replace the otherwise growing lack of community spirit in ‘real life’. Rheingold’s book was widely read and cited – partly because it expressed a certain hope for what the new technologies might provide in social terms, and partly because it was seen as symptomatic of this hope. But Rheingold already stated in his book that real-life meetings had been crucial for the development of the community. This aspect, since it questions the extent of virtuality, has often been disregarded in summaries of the idea.

Nonetheless, from the beginning onwards Rheingold had many critics. Kevin Robins, for example, attacked the conservative streak in the virtual community idea. This longs for the kind of community that had supposedly existed in the past. Robins relates this longing for the non-existent past back to real-life problems. The danger is that “in the end, not an alternative society, but an alternative to society” (Robins, 1996:22) emerges. Instead, Robins asks us to reconsider cyberspace as real – in the sense that it should be seen to contain

“difference, asymmetry and conflict” (Robins, 1996:24) rather than community. The dissatisfaction with the existing world rather than the creation of another, virtual world should be the driving force. Robins stresses that we live in a real world with the need for ‘real life politics’ and that we should therefore resist the temptation for such utopian thinking. On the other hand, Rheingold never actually proposed to stop living in the ‘real’ world. Instead, his account of the WELL experience, although enthusiastic about the potential of new media for community-building always stressed the importance of a real-life component to the online experience. The virtual communities idea is clearly part of the overall hype and characterises a focal point of early cyberspace hopes, but it is also more concrete than most other claims and stems from actual individuals’ experiences. More problematic is the use of the term ‘community’. It is a concept with both a history and content that cannot simply be transferred to the online context. Plus the term was eventually used to signify too many, particularly commercial enterprises.

3.1.6. Theme 6: Identities

Similarly far-reaching claims were not only made for communities online, but also for individual identities. Identities were (and are) proclaimed to be fluid, flexible, uncoupled from not only bodies, but from social and cultural norms. The emergence of this claim in the context of new technologies was based on ideas for immersive virtual reality technologies, which allowed the building of fantasy environments.⁶¹ The fluid identities claim was also built on the experiences of people in MUDs and chat-rooms, where the technological interface enabled people to pretend to be someone (or something) else.

In the more extreme cases, identity as such has increasingly been regarded as a problematic category. This began with attacks on the Cartesian mind-body split and essentialist understandings of identity. In qualification of these claims, David Bell (2001) underlined that the flexibility of identity should not be overestimated. This is what many of the cyber-theorisations did originally.⁶² The still prevalent emphasis on textual communication in cyberspace

⁶¹ The same always also took place on the Internet, but for a long time in a much more text-based version, which required an immersion of the user’s mind.

⁶² Bell thus suggests a way to at least re-phrase identity-issues. Stuart Hall used the notion of ‘identification’ instead of identity and identification is defined as “points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (Hall in Bell, 2001:116). Other aspects of identities mentioned in this context are Giddens’ ‘project of the self’ and Butler’s performative projection of the self.

underlines the necessity to address these issues, since text in itself has its own limitations.

One could further argue (as Robins (1996) has done) that the creative potential in cyberspace does not need to be denied when one claims that there are limits to these fantasies. In the reconfiguration of the self, which does indeed take place on a constant basis, online identities are usually reconfigured as *banal* identities. Robins claims that the new identities are, at most, the mythic figures that we have known for centuries. Many cyberfeminists would disagree.

3.2. Feminism(s)⁶³

3.2.1. Feminism and Language

From the late 1970s onwards, most feminist approaches to language share the idea that language plays a major role in meaning-making and identity-creation. Thus language and the social are largely overlapping and are very important in feminist concerns. The primary initial focus of feminist engagements was to criticise how language had served as an instrument of patriarchy. The dividing question amongst feminists since then is the *extent* of these imbrications. Related to this is the recurring issue whether the political aim should be linguistic equality or more radical linguistic changes. Language was perceived as man-made, androcentric and sexist. This perception was closely coupled with women's experience of silence and exclusion.⁶⁴ Later the emphasis in feminist debates shifted to questions of representation and of linguistic gendering. This shift went hand in hand with the development of alternative, women-centred languages (Andermahr et al., 1997; Cameron, 1998).

Many of the initial approaches have since been substantially challenged by more recent feminist thinking. Especially so-called third wave feminism abandoned the concept of a single, collective female identity and instead promoted multiplicity and difference. The main claim is that gender identities, produced in language, are not stable, but changeable and that language is *performed* in order for someone to be perceived as gendered. This leaves less common ground for feminists to fight for and has thus been defined as

⁶³ The plural is meant to indicate that there are many different kinds of feminism. The differences are partly due to historical developments, others to content disagreements. For reasons of simplicity, I will refer to feminism throughout, but I am implying different approaches, subsuming different approaches under this heading.

⁶⁴ In second wave feminism, especially binary oppositions (such as male/female, public/private, etc.) were regarded as intrinsic to undermining the feminine.

problematic.⁶⁵ *Strategic essentialism*, the idea of “difference relative to partial sameness” (McConnell-Ginet, 1988:160), i.e. the strategic use of certain, more stable aspects of identity, has emerged as one possible answer.⁶⁶

The construction and performance of identity via language is particularly interesting (and problematic) when considered in the online context. Cyberspace is filled primarily through textual means and has even been described as an entirely “linguistic construction” (Cicognani, 1996). If we were to take this suggestion literally, language in the context of new media could be interpreted as a crucial aspect in shifting boundaries. These are boundaries in the context of identities and communities or bodies and machines. This kind of shift – since it would allow a fundamental change in social relations – is particularly appealing to feminists:

The potential of hypertext as a tool for cyborg feminist politics lies in its ability to confuse the boundaries of organism and machine, granting feminists the ability to create and signify their bodies and themselves, and in doing so creating new dimensions of social relations in the postmodern era. (Albright, 2001)

This is a powerful discourse of liberation from existing restraints. It is also highly problematic, not least in terms of the powers that it grants to the machines, but also in terms of the definition of common ground.

For some time now feminists have been considering the specific role of metaphor in language and discourse (most often specifically in feminist discourse). In these considerations a twofold assessment of metaphor in

⁶⁵ Even more far-reaching than most of the above understandings of the role of language is the psychoanalytic perception of language, especially Jacques Lacan's work. For Lacan (1981), language is *the* foundation for everything else. He sees a structural link between the constitution of the unconscious and language (most other approaches to language begin from the conscious). Thus we have no structured unconscious before language, the learning of a language makes us what we are. Or, to put it more poetically (as Lacan did), 'language speaks us': "... linguistics, whose model is the combinatory operation, functioning spontaneously, of itself, in a presubjective way – it is this linguistic structure that gives its status to the unconscious. It is this structure, in any case, that assures us that there is, beneath the term unconscious, something definable, accessible and objectifiable" (Lacan, 1979:20-21). Language shapes what can be known and recognised and what cannot. Language and meaning, but also culture, are seen as a system of differences and these differences are experienced as communicative rules. According to Lacan, people internalise these rules. They are the 'symbolic order' people adhere to (concepts which were also used by Louis Althusser (1972) to outline the notion of ideology). Lacan helped feminism in the sense that he underlined the socio-historical nature (rather than the biological) of the construction of meaning and thus also of identity. Problematic for feminists, however, is that, according to Lacan, women are signified as lack. The primarily French feminist movement *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) protested against this notion of the lack with a creative, feminist use of language. It developed the idea of 'writing women as bodies of text'.

⁶⁶ See also Butler/Benhabib-debate in Benhabib et al., 1995.

feminism emerged: on the one hand, it has often been used as a weapon *against* women and thus metaphors were declared as problematic. On the other hand, there is an understanding that metaphor can *empower*, because it can be used subversively, it can e.g. convey a different perspective through a slight shift in language. Thus no ultimate (feminist) assessment of metaphor as such emerges. Instead, one could add metaphor-use to those feminist approaches to reclaim language for women's own uses. This is only a preliminary and general answer to the question of the usefulness of metaphor in feminism. Especially Haraway's cyborg-concept is an important reference point here, because it could be seen as a *successful* feminist metaphor that enabled a diverse set of people to think a new relationship between technology and human beings. The reasons for its success will be suggested below and explored at a later stage.

3.2.2. Cyberfeminism?

Cyberfeminism emerged in the last decade and has the new technologies as its primary focus.⁶⁷ Its history is closely linked to the development of the web. This can be seen as a counter-movement to earlier feminist strands, such as eco-feminism, which was in principle anti-technological. Cyberfeminism's claims thus have to be seen in the light of recent technological and socio-cultural developments. On the theoretical side, however, cyberfeminists appropriated many existing (and less recent) theories for their aims. Cyberfeminism has also focussed to some extent on the role of language and metaphor in relation to the new media (e.g. Kember, 2003), but rarely explicitly or in any prolonged sense. The exception to this rule will be discussed later. First, however, I want to introduce cyberfeminism in general as well as some of its theoretical foundations.

VNS Matrix, a group of Australian new media artists, first used the term 'cyberfeminism' at the beginning of the 1990s. British academic Sadie Plant's initial use of the same term took place at about the same time, but independently from the Australian group. *VNS Matrix* made their cyberfeminist efforts first known through their *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century* (1991), which proclaimed that "we are the modern cunt – positive anti

⁶⁷ One initially useful, but problematic differentiation to outline feminism in relation to cyberspace, is the one made by Katie Ward between online feminism and online cyberfeminism. Only online cyberfeminism would actually engage with the technologies as such, while the other use the technology as a tool (see Bell, 2001:23).

reason – unbounded unleashed unforgiving...” (see Fig.1). Comparably provocative pieces of art and theory followed soon. The manifesto was first declared in Adelaide and Sydney, but soon spread further. *VNS Matrix* lasted as an artist group from 1991 to 1997 and consisted of mainly four (later three) female artists. Installations, events and public art works, produced not only with new media, but also photography, sound and video, were part of their range. They wanted to challenge the notion of domination and control, which until then had surrounded high-tech cultures. Their overall approach was very playful. This playfulness became one of the characteristics of cyberfeminism overall. Many cyberfeminists in the last ten years has followed in the footsteps of *VNS Matrix* in terms of mixing new art forms with a new, playful version of feminism.

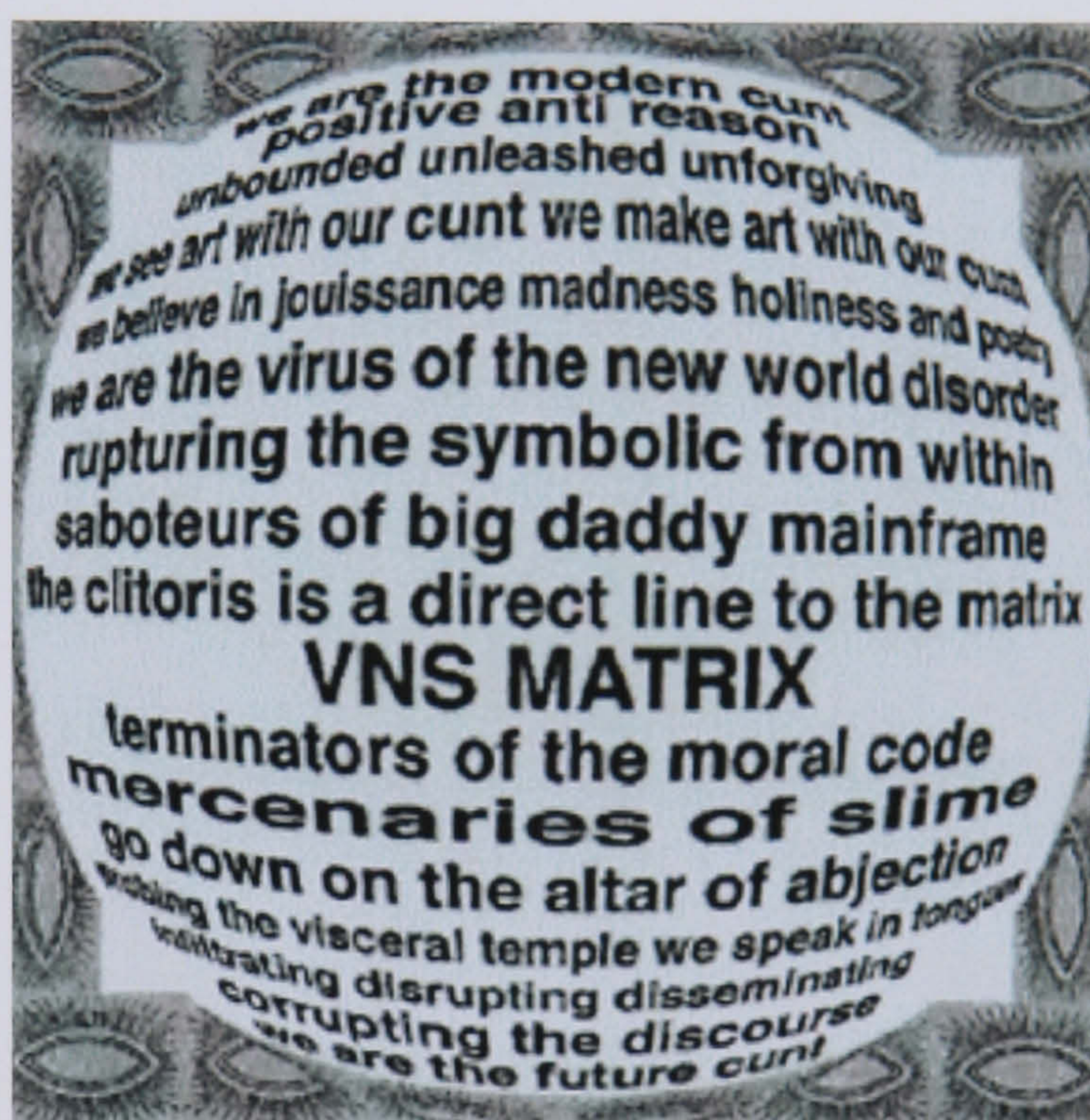


Fig.1: VNS Matrix: Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century⁶⁸

Cyberfeminism has been described as a new form of language and philosophy, which questions ideas of subject, identity and selfhood via technologies. The cyber-prefix suggests control (partially of the technologies) and therefore empowerment (see Fenton, 2001). Most of the cyberfeminists refer to the same theoretical issues as the cyberculture theories. They are concerned with notions

⁶⁸ Reads: “We are the modern cunt – positive anti reason – unbounded unleashed unforgiving – we see art with our cunt we make art with our cunt – we believe in jouissance madness holiness and poetry – we are the virus of the new world disorder – rupturing the symbolic from within – saboteurs of big daddy mainframe – the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix – VNS MATRIX – terminators of the moral codes – mercenaries of slime – go down on the altar of abjection – probing the visceral temple we speak in tongues – infiltrating disrupting disseminating – corrupting the discourse – we are the future cunt” (VNS Matrix, 1991)

of community, identity and especially technology-induced boundary-shifts. Cyberfeminism often radicalises these issues. In order to radicalise, much of the cyberfeminist work bases itself on a specific range of feminist authors, who mostly pre-date cyberfeminism and the emergence of the web.

I will briefly refer to three of these authors here. The work of all three of the authors emphasises the social, cultural and affective dimensions of computers. All three are concerned with the technologies' role in the creation of subjectivities, identities, and social networks. The three authors represent a 'canon' within cyberfeminism with which – and against which – cyberspace has been theorised from a feminist perspective.⁶⁹ They share a belief in the transformative power of technologies (which are not primarily media technologies). They differ, however, in the degree of this 'belief'.

3.3. Cyberfeminist Foundations

3.3.1. The Cyborg

As one of the first feminist authors, Donna Haraway wrote a socialist-feminist manifesto against technophobia amongst feminists. She thus wrote against earlier tendencies such as essentialism and separatism within feminism. Haraway's primary concern is with a shift in the actual physical boundaries between human beings and technology and between human and animal. She declares these physical boundaries to be disappearing and encourages women to tear them down. Haraway is a historian of science and currently a professor of the history of consciousness. She introduced one of the most powerful tropes of recent feminism when she created the *cyborg* in a text first published in 1985.⁷⁰ The cyborg is an ironic image, in between the machine and the organism, between social reality and fiction, a cybernetic organism (Haraway, 1991:149). It fuses technologies, to be precise communication and biotechnologies, which Haraway sees as important tools to reconstruct the body (Haraway, 1991:164). In the machine/human relationship, authorship is irrelevant, since it is not clear

⁶⁹ Judith Butler (1990; 1993) is another important theorist within this 'canon'. She outlines in her work the notion of the performative, which has also been taken up widely in relation to the new technologies (identity as performed and not pre-given fits in well with ideas of the extent of identity-formations online). Butler, however, does not deal directly with technologies and thus belongs to a different set of thoughts. Interesting is her framework, however, in relation to the different levels of performativity of the metaphors analysed here. I will return to this point later in the analysis.

⁷⁰ One of the very interesting things about this text is the response it triggered. The cyborg metaphor is now widely known and has brought about a huge number of responses.

who 'makes' and who is 'made'. Traditional dualisms are lost. The cyborg has thus been seen to overcome divisions amongst feminists through crossing borders of race, class, etc. It seems to have been such a useful trope for technological developments that it has since been adopted beyond the feminist circles that it was originally aimed at. But it has also been accused of being too abstract or too 'essentially female'.

The cyborg's hybrid nature is crucial to the concept. While it has often been described as a futuristic concept, Haraway insists that we already *are* cyborgs and what she calls for is the *pleasure in the confusion* of the boundaries between organic and machinic in the 'here and now'.⁷¹ One of the consequences of cyborgian imagination is a world without private-public distinction (since we all exist as networks) and without gender. Haraway emphasises that being female is not naturally one thing, that women are not bound into one group automatically (Haraway, 1991:150-155). Since there is no original wholeness for women, they can rewrite not only their histories, but also themselves. Haraway describes this as a combination of the "final abstraction" and "lived social reality". Language, like the rest, would also be a fragmented and diverse structure that does not lend itself to unification. Thus it does not fulfil the feminist dream of a common language, which is, for Haraway, in the end a totalising idea (Haraway, 1991:173). Nonetheless, Haraway ascribes power to metaphors:

Where to begin and where to be based are the fundamental questions in a world in which 'power is about whose metaphor brings worlds together' (...). Metaphors are tools and tropes. The point is to learn to remember what might have been otherwise, and might yet be, as a matter of embodied fact. (Haraway, 1997:39)

Her metaphor, the cyborg, has indeed become a unifying force, which united many women from diverse backgrounds in the same discourse. It represents a whole story about the relationship between bodies and machines and also about feminism and technology.

The cyborg has indeed been a very successful metaphor. Its success can potentially be explained in the fact that it has content to offer and is not just an empty signifier. On the other hand the content is open enough for diverse people to identify with. This combination of content and openness typifies this

⁷¹ Haraway ends her piece by wanting to be a cyborg rather than a goddess (Haraway, 1991:181).

metaphor. It could also be used as a user type, but its main declaration of machine-body merger is not necessarily applicable in the online context.

3.3.2. Network Technologies and Identity Play

Sherry Turkle's emphasis is slightly simpler or less far-reaching than Haraway's. Her engagement is with identities in relation to computers and thus also with boundary-shifts. Her claims are less far-reaching and founded on empirical rather than historical-theoretical research. Much of Turkle's often-quoted work actually predates the Internet. As a psychologist and social scientist, she was one of the first to write about *identity play* in relation to computers and new technologies (1985, 1995, 1997a). Her psychology background gives her a different focus than the other two here presented authors – less technological, more concerned with the individual and his/her psychology. Identity shifts and fragmented identities are a major focus in Turkle's work: topics, which are an inspiration for cyberfeminist thinking, but are also important in cyber-theory overall. Her uptake of notions such as desire, self, space and bodies in relation to computer technologies has played an important role in the shaping of and reflection about cyberculture.

For Turkle, the 'self' produced in computer-mediated communication is "multiple, fluid, and constituted in interaction with machine connections; it is made and transformed by language" (Turkle, 1997a:15) and an artificial self (idealised or otherwise fantasised) can knowingly and intentionally be created. Questions concerning the nature of the 'I', of the sense in life, of intelligence and intentionality are issues we can think through via the computer. A lot of this is done through 'role-play'. Within role-play, real-life situations are played out in a safe environment and with a potentially different outcome. This can help people to work through their emotions and other difficulties. Online, this role-playing is continuous and anonymous as well as invisible and thus full of possibilities that do not exist offline. Online gender-swapping exemplifies some of Turkle's claims. It is easier to swap genders online than offline, because one only needs a textual description to do so and not a whole array of clothes, make-up, etc.⁷² However, in order to keep up the gender-change over a longer period of time, more in-depth markers of gender are necessary and these are more difficult to create or maintain, even in the online context.

⁷² Turkle claims, by enabling people to 'feel' like the opposite gender while being online, a chance is created for everyone to discover that gender is constructed.

Despite these reservations, Turkle describes virtual identities as important evocative objects for thinking about the self: "... it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated" (Turkle, 1997a:257). Thus Turkle declares a boundary-shift that takes place with the help of new technologies, but she never lets go of the final boundary between the virtual and the 'real'. The technology is seen to enable a transformation, to enable fluidity and changeability. But it is not the technology as such that Turkle is concerned with.

Turkle also underlines that the language used to describe the whole process of identity-shifts in relation to technologies indeed shape popular understandings: "The ability of the Internet to change popular understandings of identity is heightened by the presence of these metaphors" (Turkle, 1997a: 264). She does not go into detail how this happens and/or how this potentially relates to the shifts in identities she describes overall. It simply underlines that Turkle sees metaphors as part of the overall boundary-shifting, transformative powers.

3.3.3. The Weaver as Programmer

Sadie Plant is the only self-proclaimed cyberfeminist amongst this selection. She claims that she has used cyberfeminism only

... as a descriptive term, and unfortunately I have acquired it as label. ... But I see it [cyberfeminism] as something much more interesting than only that: one of its potential uses is – not considering it as some kind of movement or anything – but as possible ways of looking back on the history of feminism and of 'women's lib', and try to tell a much more materialist and non-linear story about how that has happened. (Plant, 1998b)

As an early cyberfeminist Plant, especially in her book *Zeros & Ones* (1998a), creates cyberfeminism as a discourse that happily mixes psychoanalysis and cyberpunk with computer history and much more. Her boundary-shift is all-encompassing. For Plant, computers help to liberate women from patriarchal power structures, because in computers traditional gender roles are currently breaking down. Plant claims that "women have always been the machine parts for a very much male culture" (Plant, 1995b), but that cyberspace is a quintessentially liberating female space. Thus cyberfeminism for Plant is a feminist utopia coming to life. Plant's book can be described as a highly metaphorical (and controversial) account of the web. She claims that the web is the *matrix* – which suggests both mother and womb – and that in the web the merging of machines and humans (or rather females) takes place.

Plant claims that the ancient female task of weaving cloth already implied most of the networked computing that is emerging nowadays. According to Plant, an important element of the weaving machine was the potential for a simulation of memory and eventually for foresight. This was achieved primarily through a principle that is important for any learning process: the feedback mechanism. Rather than processing information in a linear way, weaving allowed the return and re-working of the information in a circular fashion and thus supposedly pre-empted cybernetics. Plant argues that in these weaving machines, control was, for the first time, not exercised as dominance, but simply as part of a general system of control and communication (which includes self-control). Plant, however, goes beyond simply telling a socio-historical story about technological development. In her account, these issues become far-reaching claims concerning the history of women and computers:

The computer emerges out of the history of weaving, the process so often said to be the quintessence of women's work. The loom is the vanguard site of software development. ...Woman ...weaves, as Irigaray comments, 'to sustain the disavowal of her sex'. ...This is the virtual reality which is also the absence of the penis and its power, but already more than void. (Plant, 1995a:46)

This psychoanalytically inspired rewriting of history ignores the fact that weaving was also an important element of early industrialisation and often a male domain. But rather than using this kind of history, Plant follows Sigmund Freud's reference to weaving. He interpreted weaving as one of the few potential contributions of women to the history of inventions.⁷³ In claiming such history, Plant unfortunately returns to an essentialism and techno-determinism that many feminist (and other social science) strands had hoped to leave behind.

3.4. Cyberfeminism(s) and Language

Feminism and linguistics both provided an early theorisation of the power of language in defining social life, identity and especially meaning. The engagement with language was always a political project, which often

⁷³ In Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation, he sees weaving as woman covering up her castration, her lack (the absence of the penis), because "nature herself would seem to have given the model which this achievement imitates by causing the growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the genitals. The step that remained to be taken lay in making the threads adhere to one another" (Freud, 1977:169).

developed and applied alternatives to the existing language patterns. In feminism this move meant to empower women. Cyberfeminist theories – or rather those that have been appropriated by cyberfeminism – equally attempt to practise alternative language patterns, although not always in explicit terms. What they lack is less the employment of creative language than the meta-engagement therewith. And, at least in the just-reviewed authors, language is often seen as one aspect of the performative flexibility in technologies and identities. This is a claim that my research questions.

The sociologist Nina Wakeford is one of the few to approach the subject of metaphor directly within cyberfeminism (another one is Miller, 1995). Wakeford claims that, in the context of new technologies, metaphors play an important role, since “metaphors which attempt to characterize electronic networks may encourage particular responses to these networks, and to women who use them” (Wakeford, 2000b:352).⁷⁴ Wakeford demands changes in the metaphors overall or at least that women be very conscious about the ones they use.⁷⁵ Metaphors are part of a wider identity-creation process, a ‘making public’ of one’s online presence. In her analysis, Wakeford refers to the metaphors of ‘home’ and of the ‘grrrl-resistance’, both of which are frequently used by women online. She provides on a smaller scale what this thesis offers overall: a critical analysis of on- (and off-)line language use and a reflection on its potential implications for the imagination of the online sphere. Our approaches share an overall understanding of the importance of online metaphors, in relation to the user. But Wakeford concentrates on women using the net, whereas I engage with a wider range of users and of terms.

Wakeford’s basic understanding and approach – a deconstruction and detailed content-analysis of existing metaphors – is shared. Hers, however, is an unusual approach within cyberculture research. Thus the next step to explore are the more common cyberculture research methods to further locate my approach.

⁷⁴ Wakeford here refers to the piece on the frontier metaphor by Laura Miller (1995).

⁷⁵ Wakeford partly employs Haraway, who also asks for a change of metaphors, to underline her own claim. The web itself as a metaphor is one example of a combination of the technological and the organic (Haraway’s claim) and also a term which allows to look beyond the individual performances online, but also for the relationships that are developed, because they add the necessary complexity.

4. Relating the Method:

A Virtual Archaeology

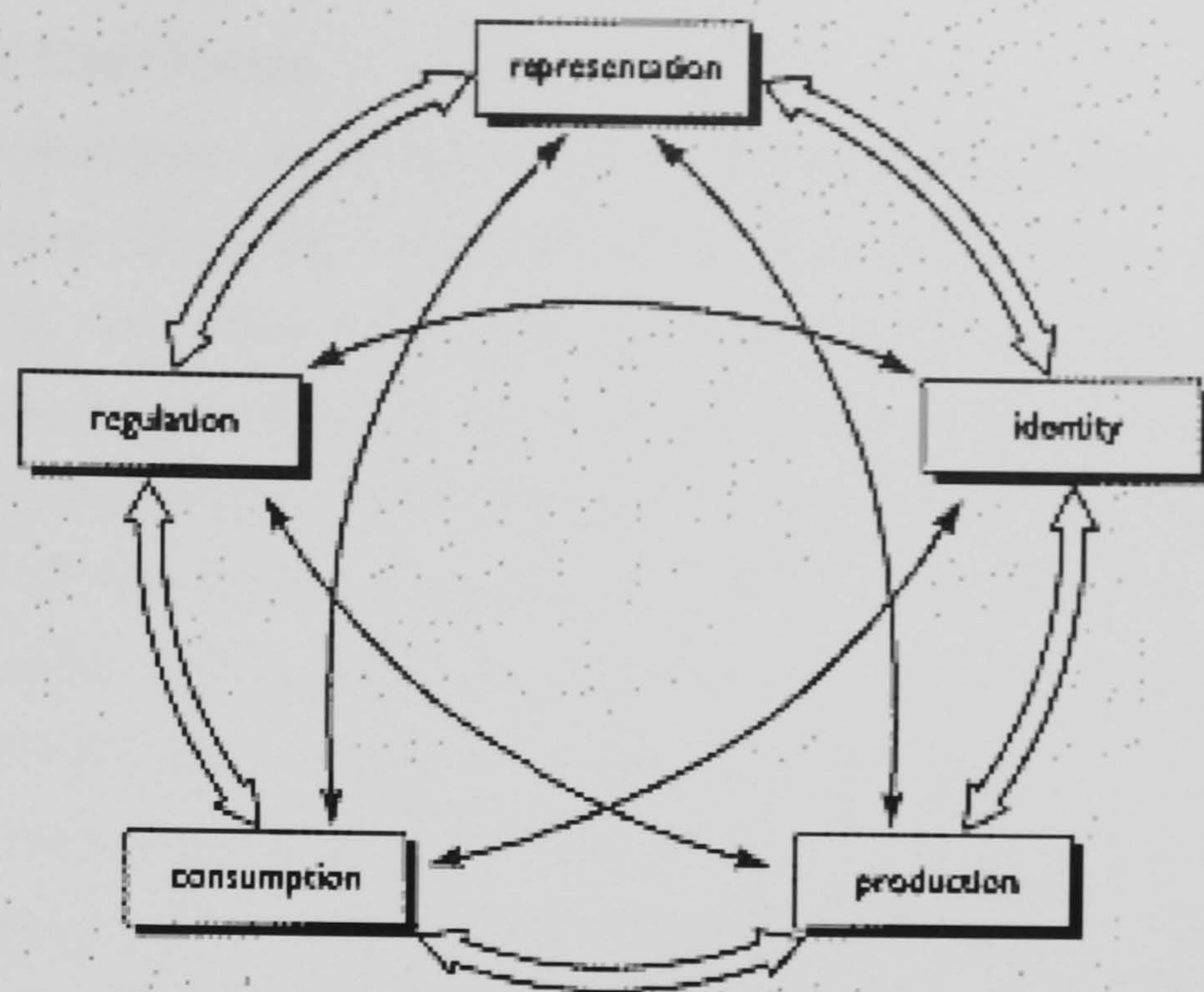
The last chapter served as an introduction to the field of cyberculture and its theorisation and research. In this chapter, this overview will be extended to include a review of some research methods employed by these approaches. To begin with, the cultural studies background, which most of the cybercultural research methods draw from, will further be introduced. This is simply to hint at the embeddedness of current approaches in longer-term theoretical-methodological developments. All of them contributed to the formation of the virtual archaeology approach, but none ultimately addressed the same questions. Thus the last part will be used to reintroduce the virtual archaeology.

4.1. Cultural Studies

As an analysis of cyberculture(s), the thesis has close links with cultural studies. In this particular case the emphasis lies on the alliance with media studies. Both fields of inquiry put a particular emphasis on questions concerning *culture* and *power*.⁷⁶ In terms of the object of study, cultural studies has always been characterised by an emphasis on the analysis of *popular culture*, since this was seen as one of the primary sites for power struggles to be fought out.

According to a cultural studies framework, culture can (and must) be analysed on many different levels. The *circuit of culture*, a frequently used model in cultural studies of recent years, pictures the range of these levels: *representation, identity, production, consumption* and *regulation* (see Fig.2). The levels of regulation and production have not always been as much a focus in cultural studies as the model suggests. They will only play a limited role in this study. The prime concentration in this thesis is instead on identity, on representation and partly on consumption. All of these are analysed via their expression in the websites, the vocabulary and the general discourses in question.

⁷⁶ Cultural studies emerged in the first instance from the UK, i.e. from the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), in the 1960s and especially the 1970s. Roughly (and inadequately) summarised, CCCS' engagement on the theoretical level concentrated in the beginning on notions such as *ideology* (associated here primarily with the ideas of Althusser) and *hegemony* (associated respectively with Gramsci). Later this broadened to wider notions of *power* and *discourse* (based partly on Foucault, but also on Hall, Laclau & Mouffe and others).



The circuit of culture

Fig.2: The circuit of culture⁷⁷

Cultural studies research methods vary widely. However, at least one general trend can be detected. Particularly in relation to consumption and identity (two of my prime concerns), a move has taken place from an emphasis on *textual analysis* to an emphasis on *cultural practice*.⁷⁸ A similar move can now be detected in cyberspace theorisations (Miller & Slater, 2000:1), where an emphasis is put on researching online life in connection with offline, everyday social practices, focussing on the *relationship* between on- and offline spheres (Sundén, 2001:215).⁷⁹ This has been labelled third-generation cyberspace research, since the first and second generations focused more exclusively on the online sphere itself.

⁷⁷ The image was found at <http://tiger.uic.edu/~kgbcomm/didact/images/0cultcrct.gif> (accessed 01/07/03), but the original is in Du Gay et al., 1997:3.

⁷⁸ One primary location for the struggle between these two approaches has been in audience studies. While in the beginning the diversity in the reception, consumption and interpretation of cultural texts themselves was stressed (a much-used term to describe this has been the 'active audience'), the media texts eventually began to play only a secondary role within a much wider frame of everyday practices. Here Hall's model of encoding-/decoding (1980) has been crucial, in that it opened up the possibility of dominant (hegemonic), negotiated and oppositional (counter-hegemonic) readings. Approaches have moved from a uses-and-gratifications idea to an understanding of ideology as power and to the idea of the sovereign audience.

⁷⁹ A similar differentiation takes place in Jonathan Sterne (1999), who distinguishes between a) studies of subjectivity, textuality and experience and b) studies that treat the Internet as one site of many in everyday life or a particular bit of cyberspace (which he calls episodic studies).

4.2. A Different User Focus

In this project, cyberspace is analysed via a user typology, which consists of different user types. Thus the emphasis remains with the online sphere and within the textual and does not make the move made in third generation research. The reasoning is that the kind of textuality analysed here not only justifies, but necessitates this choice. The user types are after all expressions of users and about users and thus expressions that shape users' experiences by suggesting particular subject positions in relation to cyberspace. By framing users' experiences in certain ways, these terms can be seen to be performative: they enact and thus create a certain relationship to cyberspace. They clearly suggest and explore some uses and ignore others. The analysis needs to show how and where exactly this is the case. Austin's adjuster-words come to mind here. User types adjust the existing world-view. They offer slight shifts of perspective (through the reference to the already-known) and sometimes promise a continued shift. But they all serve to adjust. The performative is partly limited by the pre-given meanings implied in the terms.

The analysis overall offers an analysis of 'discourses of the Internet' (Sterne, 1999:271). The agency of the user in relation to the technology (and to the creation and use of its content) is addressed here. My approach is concerned with users as they find themselves expressed and express themselves in texts online and in texts about the online sphere. They tend to speak for a generic version of the user that implies more than simply their own experience. These particular user-expressions are articulating a relationship to the technology and are also created via the technology. Usually they describe in very simple ways, i.e. in one word, how their 'being online' can or should be understood. The users I thereby engage with in my analysis are a mixture of projection and reality.

There are parallels in this analysis with aspects the social construction of technology (SCOT) approach, particularly the idea of 'technology as text'. One aspect of this is how users potentially understand and use technologies in quite different ways than anticipated by the designers (see Hine, 2000:7-8; Woolgar, 1991). Another, related approach is the idea of *scripts* (or scenarios), in which frameworks of action are defined by a combination of the technical objects, the actors and the space in which the action will take place (Akrich, 1992:208). In this kind of interpretation the designers are seen to construct images of future users, which subsequently influence the design. In my approach, the designers are users themselves and they only design, via description, what 'being online'

entails rather than designing the technologies themselves. This guidance of users is a form of 'fine-tuning' their experience, framing potential experiences.

4.3. New Medium?

While the above might begin to explain what the aim of the virtual archaeology is, it does not yet address the question of why this particular medium should indeed deserve the attention attributed here. It is not enough to say that it is a new medium in terms of its wider availability.

As Carolyn Marvin (1988) has analysed in detail for older technologies, the newness of so-called 'new technologies' is often primarily a cultural construction, which hints at general social concerns, but not necessarily at specific characteristics of the medium itself. Marvin does not deny the potential for radical social change in relation to technologies, but broadens the definition of communication to include technologies that one does not usually associate with communication as such. She bases this broadening of definitions on more general claims about the relationship between technologies, power-relationships and societal change overall.⁸⁰ Her analysis helps to problematise the general idea of new. She also underlines the complexities of the process of 'success' of some new technologies in comparison to others. Her analysis underlines that over-stressing newness, on the one hand, ignorance concerning many continuities that these technologies represent and, on the other hand, ignorance concerning the importance of wider societal concerns and discourses in the shaping process.

Keeping these reservations in mind, I want to hold on to a certain specificity of the so-called new media. For me, this newness is based on the ideas that a) the Internet allows combinations of applications and uses that were not available as such before⁸¹, b) it allows users to produce their own media (and thus potentially shift existing power-relations) more easily and c)

⁸⁰ Marvin also claims that electricians were early experts in these new technological systems, whose expertise was not limited to the technological, but greatly influenced the social and the cultural. A similar expertise has been seen in the computer programmers and the hackers and similar 'technical' experts in relation to computers. They also greatly influenced the (early) culture of the new technological spheres.

⁸¹ 'Convergence' is the buzzword, implying that these media are not purely broadcasting or purely communication media, but that they combine these various aspects in one medium plus add new aspects. The stress is on the possibility of synchronous and asynchronous communication, on the combination of one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many forms of communication and on the possibility to inform, entertain and communicate at the same time.

hypertext offers a new kind of textuality (which can also lead to new forms of engagement) (Ryan, 1999). Textuality online is characterised by intertextuality and non-linearity, by the use of multimedia, its global reach and the impermanent nature (see Wakeford, 2000a:33).⁸² This impermanent nature has also been described as a *textual ephemerality*.⁸³ This ephemerality has a great influence on the research method and subsequently also on the research outcome. Equally important is the underlying structure of the web, i.e. hypertext. This Internet is, as Mieke Bal put it “not primarily visual at all”. Instead its “hypertextual organisation presents it primarily as a textual form. It is qua text that it is fundamentally innovative” (Bal, 2003:10). These two points about ephemerality and hypertextual structure are crucial for bringing together the Benjamin framework, cyberculture and metaphoric structures. They are all, in various ways, attempts at dealing with and describing such phenomena.

More concretely, the specific objects of study in this thesis are the user types. These were located primarily on webpages. Webpages are one important expression of this new kinds of textuality. Websites are linked via hypertext. This feature allows immediate interlinkage between different webpages, different documents and many other links on the Internet. The webpages can carry text, graphics, sounds or other additional features. For a long time, the web had been widely ignored in the analyses of the Internet (PKI, 1998; Wakeford, 2000a:33). One reason for this was that the web appears to be boundless and is therefore not easily limited in terms of an analysis. Plus the ephemeral is difficult to account for. Additionally, for the ethnographer, as I will explore below, the web is too ‘silent’ in comparison with, for example, a newsgroup or a MUD.⁸⁴ An ethnographer would, for example, criticise that a purely textual analysis ignores the interpretations that go into the reading of the webpage. The textual analysis does not offer any engagement with the reception aspects that have been seen as important in (cyber-)cultural studies.

⁸² David Bell also summarised textual research approaches to cybercultures as either semiotic analyses, as considerations of intertextuality and/or as considerations of different reading positions in the meaning-making process (Bell, 2001:193).

⁸³ Daniel Chandler (1998), in his analysis of webpages, uses the themes, the formulaic structures, the technical features, the iconography and the modes of address to classify them. For my focus, this deals too little with language as such.

⁸⁴ A MUD is a Multi-User-Domain (originally ‘Dungeon’), which is a multi-user programme that allows role-playing. Originally MUDs were purely textual, while today they also exist with graphic and interactive interfaces. Many original MUDs built on adventure role-plays that existed outside of the web. The second largest group are social MUDs, in which the building of a ‘society’ is emphasised.

In this project, the textual analysis is seen to produce a different aspect of the user experience though, which is not covered in ethnography. Hence the focus remains on the text as such, on the readily found user expressions.

Other methods had been reviewed before the decision to stay within the textual was made. This review will be presented below. Since this kind of textual-discursive analysis is not the most common methodological choice for the study of cyberspace, I follow Nina Wakeford's advice to write about methodological difficulties. This is a move Wakeford describes as "a good sociological 'trick of the trade' (...)" (Wakeford, 2000a:38).

4.4. New Methods?

Studying the Internet is now a common topic of research in media and cultural studies (as well as many other disciplines), but it was much less so when I first started out six years ago. Then there were only some rather specific research projects to be found and equally specific (and thus limited) reflections on methodology. Since then, a rapid growth in online research has taken place and with it came a brief wave of literature about methods and methodologies for new media research (e.g. Gräf & Krajewski, 1997; Hakken, 1999; Hine, 2000; Jones, 1999; Miller & Slater, 2000).⁸⁵

One first observation from reading the Internet research literature is that the range of applications that the Internet offers makes it impossible to research 'the' Internet. Thanks to the scope of uses, the investigations have to be very selective in terms of what and how they research and should be careful when making claims about overall developments (Harris, 1996:33). The fact that it is an evolving medium has not helped its exploration. Therefore Internet research can always only be a snapshot of developments (Jones, 1999:6-7). In Jones' edited collection on the topic, some authors advanced existing approaches, others tried these and found them insufficient for online research. The special problems that arose in either case were mostly seen to carry possibilities. Most authors state that the adequacy of existing theoretical approaches has to be questioned, because the new media are – as the old – places for articulations of power, but in potentially new dimensions (Escobar, 1996:119).

⁸⁵ I roughly differentiate between methods as the tools for research and methodology as an exploration of how the research methods relate to the research topic at hand.

As Nina Wakeford (2000a) summarised, no new standard technique for studying the web has as yet been developed. Thus a mixture of existing and emerging methodologies is being used and applied online. Lorenz Gräf and Markus Krajewski (1997) further outlined that existing sociological research has been challenged in more ways than one. They claimed that the new media create new communities, which research should be interested in and which also potentially influence the way the society as a whole is developing. The authors also claim that new media open up new ways of doing and presenting research and that new kinds of empirical research can be done online (Gräf & Krajewski, 1997:9). Not all of these challenges have yet been taken up by researchers, but a variety of approaches began to emerge early on.

Based on an analysis of existing research projects, Michael Bosnjak et al. (1998) listed different kinds of online research methods and thereby provided an overview over the most common approaches. They differentiated between reactive and non-reactive approaches: reactive ones are questionnaires (e.g. web, email), online-interviews (e.g. IRC/chat, virtual worlds), experiments in the web (Bosnjak et al., 1998:11-12). On the non-reactive side Bosnjak and colleagues listed user-tracking (e.g. server-log analysis) and observations (e.g. IRC/chat, newsgroups, mailing lists, virtual worlds).⁸⁶

At about the same time, Bernard Batinic et al. argued that it made sense for quantitative approaches to concentrate exclusively on research performed online. This meant a concentration on the accessible users, since the numbers of Internet users in the population overall was still limited (Batinic et al., 1997:196-197).⁸⁷ The number of Internet users has since changed quite rapidly and the argument is beginning to make less sense, at least for quantitative research. On top of that, one of the problems with using the already existing Internet users has been that usually the more active amongst the overall users answered questionnaires or similar enquiries. Thus this kind of research examines a particular user kind in more detail rather than providing an insight into general use. It also tended to ignore the increasingly important non-user (Wyatt, 1999).

Christine Hine (2000), on the other hand, went back further in time and

⁸⁶ The topics of the research projects they analysed were mostly online-use, media effects (e.g. the relationship to other media; personal contacts) and commercial aspects (e.g. e-commerce). A second block dealt with topics concerning research methods and the smallest block was about software-related themes (Bosnjak et al., 1998:11-12).

⁸⁷ Another important aspect is that many people with access do not necessarily use the Internet.

outlined how Internet research has progressed from an initial condemnation of the limitations (in comparison to face-to-face communication) of computer-mediated communication (CMC) to an acknowledgement of the communicative possibilities that CMC offered (such as the use of para-language signs or the unfinished, fluid nature of the texts). This acknowledgement of the unique possibilities stems from research that outlined how special kinds of communities actually formed online (showing that new kinds of relationships were possible in the new cultural sphere). Most of this was researched via online observations. The same method was used in researching the other big research topic: online identity play.

These two – communities and identities – have been the major areas of interest for Internet researchers. In terms of research methods, direct engagements with users, i.e. reactive approaches, dominate the field. For finding out more about the actual users, most of these approaches offer interesting engagements. Server-logs or observations in chat programmes all try to describe and analyse what users *do* while they are online, how they interact, etc. The most widespread qualitative accounts amongst these are the ethnographic approaches. They deserve a closer look simply because it helped in the clarification of what this project was *not* providing.

4.5. Ethnography Online

Ethnography stems primarily from social and cultural *anthropology*. It originally denoted the study of an ethnic group and always implied particular research methods, especially *fieldwork* research. Fieldwork, however, is a disputed category. In general terms, the term fieldwork describes an extended period of time amongst the subjects whom the researcher is meant to research. He/she tries to enter into the culture of a particular group or community by sharing their lives. Subsequently the researcher produces an account from the 'inside' not only of what kind of activities take place, but especially of how meaning-making works in this group. He/she thereby describes the *culture* of the group under observation (finding out about rules, values, etc.). Many ethnographers (on- and offline) would aim to describe in as much detail as possible the particular group of people that is to be researched, while also reflecting upon the role of the researcher. They would try not to treat the site as bounded or isolated from the rest of social life and – as much as possible – to use people's own categories to describe their experience.

A much quoted description of the ethnographic immersion came from the ethnographers Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, when they stated that the ethnographer participates “in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned” (1983:2). This kind of ethnography shares much with *participant observation*, a concept first introduced in psychology, which also describes the participation of the researcher in a group (as a member of the group) and the subsequent reporting of the experience.

One of the major criticisms of ethnography has always been the cultural distance between the researcher and the researched. This was one of the reasons for the excitement about ethnography online, where this distance potentially disappears. To illustrate this hope, I will quote from one early example of a so-called ethnographic approach of the online sphere, which describes the use of ethnography online as follows:

As a regular ForumNet⁸⁸ user, I conducted field research in the role of active participant. I hope that as a familiar name and personality, I eased the ‘strangeness’ of the research situation for the participants. ForumNet has the capability of storing a verbatim log of interaction which takes place therein. I will examine a series of such logs reflecting group discussions which I have participated in, observed, or been supplied with by fellow users. The object of this search will be to locate evidence of a social environment created and sustained through interaction. (Simon, 1991)

Already a ‘user amongst users’, researchers felt they could immerse themselves in the online spaces on the same level as the other participants. Christine Hine’s (2000) online ethnography similarly argues for a study that can remain primarily online. She took the case of Louise Woodward, a British au-pair girl in the United States, who had been accused of killing the child in her care, and analysed several websites and newsgroup discussions that were devoted to this case.⁸⁹ Hine also posted to related newsgroups and interviewed some people who created the websites and/or were involved with the campaigns around the case. Engaging with the events *as they were happening* and going beyond the purely textual readings of the websites, i.e. *immersing herself in the actual events*,

⁸⁸ ForumNet was an experimental chat server hosted at the University of Kentucky for some time in the late 1980s, beginning 1990s.

⁸⁹ Louise Woodward was later released on the grounds of accidental death. The case had wide media coverage in the UK at the time of the trial in a U.S. court. But the case also made law and Internet history, because the judge made his verdict first available online.

seemed to Hine the most significant reason for calling this kind of engagement an ethnography.

Observation and interviews, as can be seen in the two examples, are the most common methods applied during the period of immersion that fieldwork requires. The translation into an online research method is seemingly easily made. An explanation for the preference of this approach can be found, for example, in David Bell's (2001) statement that the 'fieldwork site' is rather easily accessible online. Another aspect is the above-explored notion of 'sameness', of assimilation into the foreign environment. Many researchers feel that in many online spheres they can be similarly engaged as the other users: "a cyborg amongst cyborgs" (Braun, 1994:29 – my translation). This is clearly easier online than in most other social settings, because many of the traditional social markers (gender, race, but also class, sexuality and others) can be more easily ignored or masked. Silent observation is also possible online in ways that were not possible elsewhere.

The potential for unacknowledged observation obviously poses many ethical questions. These ethical questions have also been (and still are) widely discussed (see e.g. Bassett & O'Riordan, 2002). Where explicit consent is asked for, the need to acknowledge one's position as a researcher seems the favoured approach to the dilemma thus far. On the other hand, the online space is often treated as a site that is publicly observable and where therefore no consent is needed (Harris, 1996:34) and/or where this kind of acknowledgement is seen to disturb the 'naturalness' of the setting and to lead to an undesired change of behaviours.

Online ethnography projects range from those that treat the net as a separate world that can be researched entirely online (as e.g. Hine suggests) to claims for a more mixed approach. The mixed approach calls for a *multi-sited ethnography*, where online and offline research is combined. This combination has also been called a *grounded approach*, which is supposed to lead to a more holistic understanding of the net. This mixed approach is used (and defended) by Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2000) in their work on Trinidad and Trinidadians online. In this project, the authors combined fieldwork in Trinidad itself (and other places where Trinidadians lived) with online fieldwork. Their claim is that only the interweaving of these two approaches will manage to deliver an adequate picture of what role these technologies play in everyday life, in identity formation and similar issues. However, they were in a unique position to interweave different levels of analysis, because Trinidad was a place

they had already done research in the past, where they had contacts, which they knew a lot about, etc. In practice, the interweaving is often more difficult to achieve. It has been the aim of many third generation cyberculture research projects.

Ethnography is rather widespread as a research methodology for the online sphere. The use of the term ethnography for online research has been attacked for ignoring the real notions of anthropological research. Hugh Mackay, for example, claims that many of the current versions of online ethnography are primarily qualitative interviews and lack research into the *context of use* (Mackay, 2002). And exactly those points listed as positive aspects of online ethnography (immersion amongst the same kind; prolonged observation without great obstacles; etc.) have also been interpreted as a problem. Since the sameness of the participants and the researcher is often artificially created, for example, the openness of traditional anthropology about the researchers' role and the importance of self-reflection seem to go amiss. More importantly though, anthropology is supposed to research a whole way of life (by living it) and online research covers only very small aspects of people's lives and does not allow any real immersion in their lives overall.

To summarise: online ethnography is problematic, because the researchers' immersion in specific online cultures is often artificial and an immersion in people's overall life is not taking place. Instead, very limited sub-sections of life are the focus. On the other hand, online ethnography can offer a cheap and easy way to immerse oneself into certain cultural spheres and to follow them closely. The researchers can stay immersed easily (often coupled with easy ways to document the interactions) and potentially become accepted as an equal amongst participants. Interactions can be followed while they take place. All of these are plusses of online ethnographies. Ethnographies primarily provide a good description and analysis of *human interaction* in all shapes and forms.

Rather than any of the disadvantages listed above, this emphasis on interaction is the primary reason for my choice *not* to use this method. In principle I share the interest in Internet users and in their articulations. However, I did not want to research direct interactions. Thus also the rejection of many of the other methods listed above. Instead, the focal point in this study are the discourses users create about 'being online'. User types create the theoretical possibility of particular kinds of online interactions. This focus

shares the perspective of someone coming from the outside to the whole discourse in and around cyberspace. It is a non-immersed viewpoint that concentrates on the implications of the terms in use, on what meanings the vocabulary itself conveys. These discourses talk about a generic and not an individual user and refer to the imaginary rather than the 'real'. David Hakken, a new media ethnographer, also insists on the importance of *imaginations*, which at least partly find an expression in the rhetoric.

Any new way to be human is difficult to name before it is fully here, but cyberspace seems to be accepted as a provisional label for the virtual space where the new life way is being explored/created, especially by youth. It's helpful to have a name for the space where its patterns are first manifest. (Hakken, 1999:226)

The potentially provisional nature of such labels is not to be taken for granted. Instead, the question of stability of such imaginations is one of the questions asked in this project. The method used to explore these has been called a *virtual archaeology*.

4.6. Virtual Archaeology

The virtual archaeology is in many ways an extension of the *archaeology of cyberspaces* in Shawn P. Wilbur's sense, i.e. the unearthing of potential roots (cultural and etymological) of some Internet-related terms (1997:5-6). While Wilbur took the term 'virtual community' and traced both its origin as a frequently used term and further looked at examples of such communities, my concentration lies on a range of lesser-known terms and on their comparison. The principle, however, is quite similar. The *archaeology* refers to the idea that the expressions would be readily found (rather than invented and asked for), but also that they still needed to be found, i.e. 'unearthed', in the first place. They needed to be uncovered in order to trace their origins, their meanings, etc.

It is an archaeology of a particular kind. The primary focus of the thesis is the textual side of the web (in contrast to the visual or interactive and communicative sides), wherefore I focussed on user expressions. The cultural and etymological roots of the terms in question were then used to trace some of the original concepts that formed the basis for the later formation of the currently emerging cyberspace *culture*. It is a *virtual* archaeology, because its focus is the online sphere. What I found were terms that shape the general

discourses surrounding the emergence of a new technology; discourses that aid the development of the technology to a cultural form.

The words 'online', 'interactive', 'Internet' and 'Data highway' have by now become something like linguistic *Leit-fossils* of our times. (Tangens, 1996:355 – my translation and emphasis)⁹⁰

In performing a virtual archaeology one expects to find some fossils – in this case of a metaphorical nature. The Internet and its language expressions are the spheres to be 'unearthed'. It is thus an analysis of the expressions readily found online, the metaphors.⁹¹ The other texts traced are those within which these terms appear. These writings offer revealing reflections concerning the imaginary that cyberspace represents.

This particular virtual archaeology has the user as its focus. The crucial difference to an online ethnography is my concern with a *reconstruction*.⁹² It is a reconstruction of particular ideas about 'being online' as they were distributed at a certain point in Internet history. This reconstruction concentrates on ideas as they were found online, as any user at the time could have come across them – accidentally or by choice. It is thus a reconstruction of a specific user experience without the direct involvement of the user. For this project, I was not interested in individual user reactions to these ideas, but rather wanted to *map* a range of user types as they were available to any user at that time. For the same reasons the emphasis is not on interaction, but simply on readily found information or existing asynchronous, one-to-many communication.⁹³ The narratives implied in many of these user expressions produce and reinforce particular versions of the online-offline relationship and of user engagements in general. They thus also account for these aspects of use that ethnographies concentrate on, but deliver and analyse these from a different angle.

Before any of these aspects can be analysed, the websites for the analysis have to be found first – and selected from a wide range of possible options.

⁹⁰ Leitbild, the term that this refers to, is a German term which combines the ideas of leading and images. It is used to describe widespread social ideas about the technological future. The information superhighway was one such 'Leitbild'.

⁹¹ This study was originally supposed to consist of interviews (on- and offline), an online questionnaire and a content analysis of selected websites. The trial-run of the questionnaire suggested very limited responses and thus eventually the plan was changed.

⁹² One of the most important foci in Walter Benjamin, the provider of my general theoretical framework, has also been described as reconstruction (Gilloch, 2002:4).

⁹³ The textual has by far not been disregarded in online ethnographies: rather a new concentration on *textual communication* emerged, since language becomes part of the shared practices and common culture through which the environment is made meaningful amongst participants (Hine, 2000:19). Emoticons, local codes and jokes, for example, contribute to community-formation.

Most of the sites were found with the help of search engines. In the process of reviewing both the search method and situationist literature, I decided to give my approach to the searching a new name: a *search based on situationist principles*. I here returned to the flâneur, who was also collecting information 'just as it appeared'. Like someone walking through an unknown city and randomly collecting impressions, focussing on little details, this online search was guided by whatever came my way, to then jump to the next unexpected piece of information (in some sense what 'surfing' originally implied). The 'situationist search principles' added a system to this floating, while at the same time stressing randomness. This principle thereby explores the nature of the web as a medium and helped to explore cyberspace as a 'social space'. It also helped to think the search in new ways. The next chapter will present the detailed explanation to this principle.

5. Wandering the (Virtual) City:

Flânerie, the Arcades and Situationism

Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city; ... Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the fiction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself. ...but the born-again *flâneur* is a stubborn creature, less interested in texture and fabric, ..., than in noticing *everything*. ... Graffiti is the only constant on these fantastic journeys; random codices, part sign, part language. (Sinclair, 1997:4)

The author Iain Sinclair wandered through London not too long ago as the born-again *flâneur*. On his way, he picked up graffiti and used it as his interpretative tool to read the city. He aimed at finding a meaning underneath the immediately visible city space. At about the same time, across the Atlantic, the graduate student Nick Melczarek also walked through real city space. He walked in New Orleans and other U.S. American towns. He called himself a *boulevardier/flâneur* and collected website addresses from “billboards, magazine covers, paper bookmarks, television screens, radio stations and other items (in shop windows, on café tables, posted on walls, wherever)” (Melczarek, 1998). Melczarek’s interpretative tools to read the city were sequences of letters appearing on diverse screens. These letters make up the addresses of virtual spaces.⁹³ They lead to websites.

I follow both Sinclair’s and Melczarek’s lead and attempt to take them one step further. I also strolled through so-called ‘spaces’, picked up signs and used them to read meanings. But the spaces and signs I encountered were mostly ‘virtual’, not based as such in ‘real space’. I followed Franz Hessel, a contemporary of Benjamin and a theorist of the Berlin-*flâneur* of the 1920s, who described the act of ‘*flânerie*’ – to walk the streets aimlessly, to wander about in the city, to stroll – as a form of *reading the streets*. For Hessel, “human faces, displays, shop windows, cafe terraces, streetcars, automobiles, trees become so many equally weighted letters which together yield the words, sentences, and pages of a book that is always new” (German original in Hessel, 1984:145, translation from Weigel, 1996:88). I read cyberspace as such a text, a text in the sense that Hessel seems to imply: as an *imaginary* and a collection of ever-

⁹³ Cities are *read* in Situationism (another parallel to *flânerie*) – they are regarded as poetry. And if language changes our perception of the city, because it directly relates to our perceptions overall, then language additions to the city can make a difference. Graffiti in particular is the most visible expression thereof: “Graffiti became regarded as a sign of the ‘primitive’ energy of the everyday life of the ‘masses’” (Sadler, 1998:97).

changing images, similar to the city and its *dreamscape* aspects. Hence cyberspace is not a book 'as we know it', but rather a *text* 'that is always new'. This text is in a constant process of re-writing and there is thus a need to add additional and potentially alternative 'pages' to it. The 'reading' of cyberspace presented in this thesis is supposed to be a contribution to the *further* imagination of cyberspace. The primary aim then is to analyse some existing language elements that name the online world(s) and its 'inhabitants', but also to point towards new terms: to take a virtual walk around the textual cyberspace and as a conscious presence offer something new.

Cyberspace presents something quite different from the traditional book-structure and storyline and thus every term placed therein also needs to be found and read differently. This difference will be explored in this chapter, in which I set out to explore some aspects of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and later of Situationism (and begin to hint at notions of *flânerie*), all in relation to the methodology of the research project as well as to its epistemological principles. All these explorations are extensions of the *virtual archaeology*. I will trace these different aspects step by step. I will begin with some words on *flânerie*, the movement that characterises the user type, which remained the driving force behind the thesis throughout. *Flânerie* is also – as the movement that represents the mode for 'taking in the (web)sites' – a link between the *Arcades Project*, Situationism and the web. *Flânerie* is my (brief) *passage* to modernity and the city, i.e. it provides the transition between the now of the web and the then of the city. *Flânerie* will further be explored in the context of the arcades (called *Passagen* in German) and the particular approaches that Benjamin and the Situationists represent. Thus I will return to the *flâneur* in more detail in the following chapter.

pas·sage *n.* 1. The act or process of passing, especially: a. A movement from one place to another, as by going by, through, over, or across; transit or migration. b. The process of elapsing: ... c. The process of passing from one condition or stage to another; transition: ... 2. A journey, ... 4. The right, permission, or power to come and go freely: ... 5. ... b. A corridor. ... (AH Dictionary, 2002)

5.1. Flânerie

The flâneur is a 19th century figure, both literary and real. He⁹⁴ was wandering the emerging city space, taking in new social formations. He has thus been read as *the* figure of modernity. He was also signified by a particular attitude to both his surroundings and people around him. The flâneur thus suggests not only the walk as such, but especially the why and how of a rather particular kind of walk in a rather particular environment. He begins to explain the environment as such.

Walter Benjamin, a well-known German 20th century literary critic and cultural theorist, has provided the most thorough philosophical analysis of this figure and has in many ways been read as a flâneur himself. The same has been said about Charles Baudelaire, a French 19th century poet, who provided the literary base for the flâneur.⁹⁵ At the same time Baudelaire provides one of Benjamin's most important inspirations for the *Arcades Project*. It is Benjamin's largest, but also an unfinished writing project. Here the flâneur found his theoretical home.

Flânerie is important for my project not only in the form of the (cyber)flâneur, but, more importantly, as an 'approach to cyberspace'. This is first of all thanks to the initial reference of flânerie as 'an appropriation of city space'. In this interpretation, the city and the web are information spheres that share certain characteristics. Both are also inhabited structures that escape final control. They have their main thoroughfares and minor pathways, but they also 'contain' people and cultures and commercial aspects. Equally, they invite subversions of given structural elements. Overall, the city and the web are living and constantly evolving information structures. And they both open up dreams and ideas that go beyond the immediately available, visible or readable sphere. This approach to cyberspace is also based on the particular *movement* through city-space that flânerie implies: a specific kind of leisurely walk. What counts in this movement is the ground-view and the detail rather than the all-knowing view from above.⁹⁶ What counts as well is the *immersion*, the possibility of getting lost:

⁹⁴ The flâneur was primarily male, as will be discussed in the cyberflâneuse chapter.

⁹⁵ Baudelaire himself saw a contemporary artist, Constantin Guys, as the perfect example of the flâneur. This will be explored in chapter 6.

⁹⁶ This walk on the ground was described by Michel de Certeau (1988) as a form of potential resistance to the pre-given social and political conventions and structures.

Not to find one's way about in a city is of little interest. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires practice. ... I learned this art late in life: it fulfilled the dreams whose first traces were the labyrinths on the blotters of my exercise books. (Benjamin, 1987:23)⁹⁷

Benjamin constantly returns to the idea of getting lost and repeatedly compares the city with the labyrinths in nature. The asphalt can be botanised. The arcades, however, provided a spectacle which was unrivalled in nature. They combined it all: the fascination of the getting lost, the crowd of people, the displays of capitalism and consumerism at its most mesmerising moment and much more. The arcades then were the quintessence of modernity – at least for Benjamin.

5.2. The Arcades Project

Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* provides the primary theoretical underpinning of the thesis overall, but also delivers an explanation for the methodological choice. The *virtual archaeology* outlined before is a direct result of this underpinning, since it copies Benjamin's uncovering of recent history. The argument for an archaeology further refers to the structure and epistemological grounding of the *Arcades Project*. The *Arcades Project* overall displays a 'drift' in the writings themselves (and not simply in the city walk). Benjamin describes seemingly random places, thoughts and situations. He refuses a traditional line of argument or narrative.

This drift is used here to continue with the characterisation of the online sphere as an information sphere that cannot be 'captured' simply systematically.⁹⁸ Thus the emphasis is on how this drift might be implemented as a research methodology. It results in a particular collection and organisation of material. And it makes claims about the information sphere that is described in this process, especially in terms of structure.

⁹⁷ "Sich in einer Stadt nicht zurechtfinden heißt nicht viel. In einer Stadt sich aber zu verirren, wie man in einem Walde sich verirrt, braucht Schulung. ... Diese Kunst habe ich spät erlernt; sie hat den Traum erfüllt, von dem die ersten Spuren Labyrinth auf den Löschblättern meiner Hefte waren."

⁹⁸ In an earlier draft of the thesis, I had added a longer description of my attempts at a systematic approach to 'capture' cyberspace (both in terms of the selection of the terms for the analysis as well as for the 'completeness' of information about each term). This was omitted in this version, because the systematic attempt itself does not reveal much – what is much more important is simply that it indeed did not reveal much. The systematic approach only brought a very limited selection of terms and information about each.

The *Arcades Project* is by far Benjamin's most ambitious, but also unfinished writing project. He began the undertaking in the late 1920s, but it was still incomplete by the time he committed suicide in 1940. It was research that Benjamin carried out throughout the whole period, albeit with some interruptions. The project focuses on 19th century Paris. One important focal point within the overall geography of Paris were the Parisian arcades. The arcades are glass-covered 'streets' that were lined on the inside with small shops and cafés. They were passageways between other streets, leading from one to the other. They were constructed from steel and glass. These structures created an overall impression of a sparkling fantasy world. The arcades had first appeared in the late 18th century and saw their boom in the 19th century, especially in France. The arcades were part of the Restoration and were mostly built during the decade and a half that followed 1822 (Benjamin, 1997:157). Approximately thirty of them were constructed in Paris alone in the first half of the 19th century (Featherstone, 1998:912-913).

... the illustrated Paris Guide ...from 1852 ...'The arcades, a new invention of industrial luxury, are glass-covered, marbled hallways through entire masses of houses ...so that such an arcade represents a city, a small world of its own, in which the potential shopper can find everything he needs. They will provide a narrow, but secure thoroughway for anyone seeking cover from a surprising rainfall...' (Benjamin, 1989:83)⁹⁹

The arcades allowed a flight not only from the weather, but also from the increasing traffic at the time.¹⁰⁰ They provided an undisturbed and yet a public space. They were places of transition in which movement itself became an event (Geist, 1983:3). This transition partly included the characters one could find there (characters on the margins of society, such as prostitutes) and the nature of transaction that served as its main function: consumption. The arcades were after all an expression of the expansion of capitalism, or, as Benjamin named it "the temple of commodity capital" (Benjamin, 1989:86). Benjamin explained that the street consisted of both traffic and exchange of commodities, while the arcade concentrated solely on the latter. The arcades are usually situated

⁹⁹ All quotes that have been translated by me will subsequently be displayed in English in the main text, with the original appearing in the footnote. The original is here: "...der illustrierte Pariser Führer, ...vom Jahre 1852 ... '...Diese Passagen, eine neuere Erfindung des industriellen Luxus, sind glasgedeckte, marmorgetäfelte Gänge durch ganze Häusermassen, ..., so daß eine solche Passage eine Stadt, eine Welt im Kleinen ist [Flaneur], in der der Kauflustige alles finden wird, dessen er benötigt. Sie sind bei plötzlichen Regengüssen der Zufluchtsort aller Überraschten'"

between other buildings – they have no outside walls, but huge glass- and iron-roof constructions (see Fig.1).

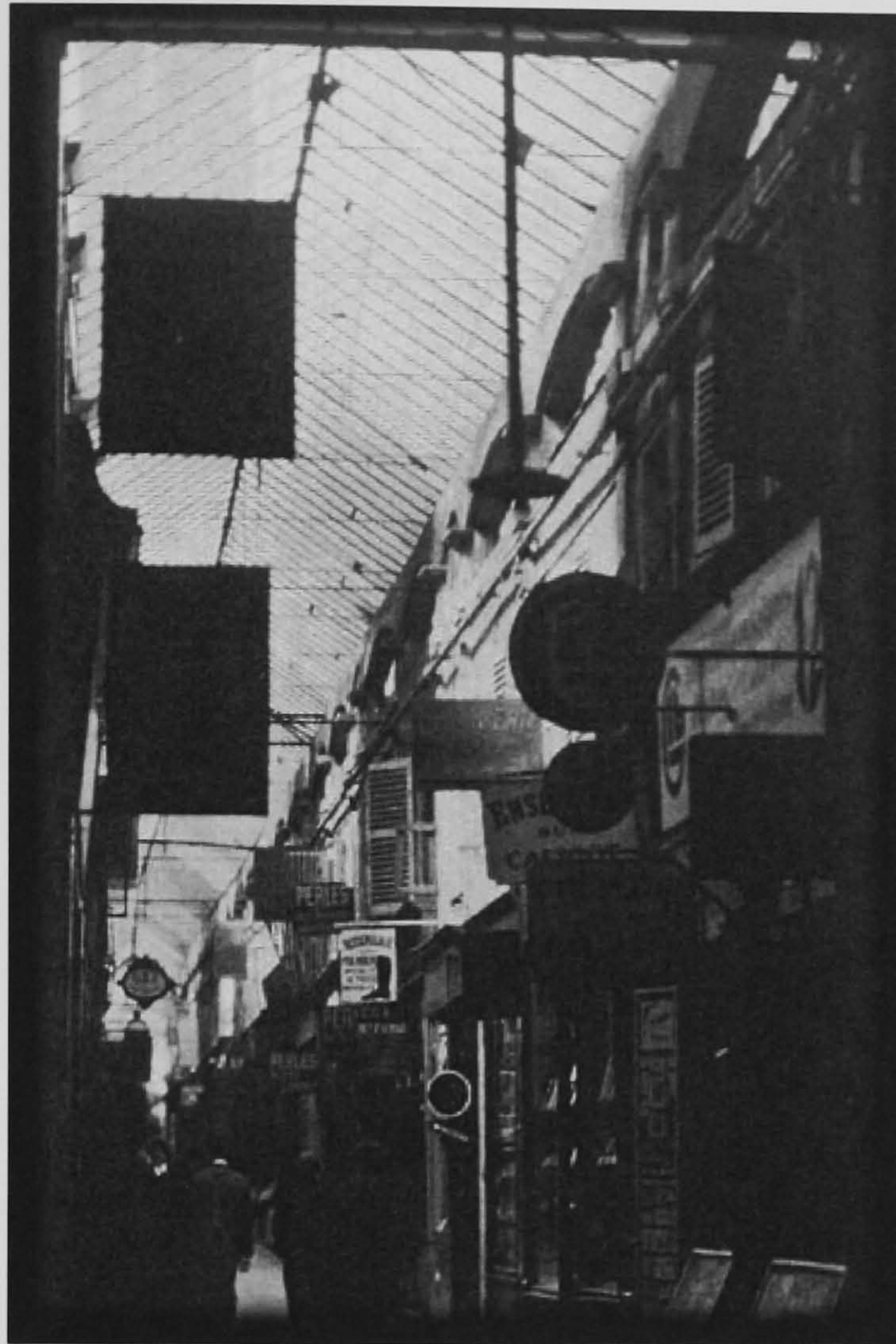


Fig. 3: Passage Choiseul, 19th century Paris, photograph of unknown origin

Benjamin thought the arcades to be the most important form of architecture of their time. In the *Arcades Project* he linked them with many social and cultural phenomena, small and grand, that he saw as typical of that century and of modernity (Eiland & McLaughlin, 1999:ix). The arcades served him as a world in miniature. He (re)presented this world to us in an unusual form: in fragments. This form is only partly the result of careful planning. The other reason for the unfinished nature of his project is that only parts of the project were ever published during Benjamin's lifetime. These are seen as outlines rather than as finished parts of the whole. Thus the *Arcades Project* – or rather what remains of it – is to a large extent an array of notes on many related subjects, which has been described as an encyclopaedic project (Leslie, 2002). The piece is a unique historical document, but also a rather unusual literary piece.

¹⁰⁰ Sidewalks were only brought in to a larger extent by Baron Haussmann in the mid- to late 19th century.

5.2.1. The Montage Principle

The most important legacy, apart from the documents and the comments that Benjamin collected and composed himself, is the structure he gave his notes and the collected papers. In so-called 'convolutes', thirty-six altogether, he arranged his material according to specific topics. These topics include the 'flâneur' and the 'arcades', but also 'Baudelaire', 'photography', 'social movement' and others. The structure was meticulously constructed, numbered, alphabetically indexed and filled with material. The structure thus makes the piece – it comments upon itself, it itself tells a story. It takes the form of a fascinating and revealing patchwork. This patchwork generates meaning both from the juxtaposition with other textual fragments and from the content of any particular fragment. These fragments can be quotes, Benjamin's comments or sometimes an image. Benjamin borrowed the structure of his literary form from the architectural form he was writing about: in the arcades, too, the elements are simply bolted together.

Others commenting on it and Benjamin himself called this principle of work *montage*. This principle, in which existing pieces are taken and put together with other pieces in order to create something new, was used increasingly in art and film at the time when Benjamin wrote the *Arcades Project*. Thus Benjamin's style has been described as "writing like film" (Bolz, 1999:127). The idea of the film suggests a 'surface reading', in which the information becomes a new social text about the everyday world of modernity. Montage contrasts the individual elements for a new effect. In Benjamin, the writing style tries to adapt to the phenomenon, i.e. he described in citations the modern, fluid, fragmented city.

This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage. ... Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. (Benjamin, 1999: 458-460)

To write history thus means to *cite* history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context. (Benjamin, 1999:476)

This is a clear contrast to many ideas within cultural studies and equally within third generation cyberspace research. In these approaches an analysis of context is propagated and the embeddedness of the research (and even the researcher) in the environment from which it emerges is suggested. To concentrate on the texts as such and to tear there from the context – the here proposed method –

presupposes a very different understanding of how meaning is created. Juxtaposition, texts, fragments are key terms. In relation to the Internet, the Benjamin-inspired methodological approach suggests that the nature of the medium that is being researched has to be replicated in the methodology in order to adequately understand the medium.

In order to describe the phenomena he is focussing on, Benjamin lets the “language of images” speak (Tiedemann in Benjamin, 1999:934).¹⁰¹ These surface expressions carry both the promise and the deception which is so intriguing to him. Benjamin has thus been interpreted as reading *social phenomena* as if they were *natural*, the point that is also suggested in the botanising of the asphalt.¹⁰² Snapshots of these phenomena are provided in the language of images. The snapshot is a new method for the display of social life that is also typical for modern life. Benjamin thus challenges methodology ‘as we know it’. Instead, he offers a form of engagement that is the result of a direct immersion inside the object of analysis. This immersion is similarly present in Hessel’s concept of reading the city like a book. Both can be seen as an interpretation that is immersed and distant at the same time. One is inside of it, but not part of it (as the flâneur). Hessel’s is a kind of ‘second degree writing’, i.e. a reading of the city as writing. This is supposed to stimulate ‘actual’ writing (see Weigel, 1996). Benjamin is also reading all kinds of elements as texts, juxtaposing and re-arranging them in the process. To apply this combination of the existing in a juxtaposition to philosophy (or, in some sense, literary theory) was, to say the least, unusual. This is one reason why the *Arcades Project* has – in retrospect – been interpreted as a *new literary form*.

5.2.2. The Literary Form of the Arcades Project

There is an ongoing debate on whether the finished *Arcades Project* would have differed much from the unfinished work that remains. Some authors go as far as asking whether the existing can be seen as a unified piece at all and declare the nature of the text as ambiguous (Buck-Morss, 1983:211; also see Spencer, 2000). Only those who take the existing text as similar in style as to what the final product would have been, usually opt for the interpretation as a new literary form, a “complex and dynamic totality” (Rollason, 2002). This new

¹⁰¹ And this is where Benjamin differs immensely from the Situationists’ complaint that the visual has taken over.

¹⁰² Susan Buck-Morss relates this to the fact that people like Benjamin grew up in the city and knew nothing else, thus to them the city appears as nature itself (1983:213).

literary form then offers itself to be compared to hypertext.

One author, who has provided this comparison is Mike Featherstone, who reads a notion into flânerie into the 'hypertext' *Arcades Project*. The flâneur is here seen as a moving figure that is constantly invaded by new impressions. Featherstone is interested in the flâneur as a method for reading as well as writing texts. The "text is a city" in Benjamin's graphic and fragmented texts (Featherstone, 1998:910) and the city can be read as a text. In parallel to this, cyberspace can be read as data text, because it provides an architectural and human interactional frame. Featherstone bases this notion partly on the idea that the new medium will become increasingly three-dimensional and space-like. It is thus "more active and more mobile" than other media and therefore interactive and immersive (Featherstone, 1998:911). In the end, this method is less interesting to Featherstone than what the consequences the new media – read as city – have for the nature of contemporary public life. Featherstone basically tries to see how far the fragmented and fluid nature of contemporary media in parallel to the experience of the city in other times, can still create a notion of public life. He concludes that with the help of aspects of the flâneur, an ambivalent engagement is indeed possible. This is based on the idea of reading city as text and vice versa.

That which is written is like a city, to which the words are a thousand gateways. (Benjamin quoted in Frisby, 1994:100)

Methods are needed which will not only rely on relatively inchoate metaphors to capture the electronic data architecture, but also methods which endeavour to capture some of the substantive (...) and experiential qualities of the emergent cyberspace city of bits. (Featherstone, 1998:910)

I propose that one such method can be to follow Benjamin's montage principle, the juxtaposition of fragments, both found and created, used to show what is underneath. Benjamin himself wanted to find the present through the past, which was meant to be revealed in the ruins of its existence, in the remainders of its former glory. The glory to be uncovered were the temples of consumption, in which the commodities were fetishes. Living labour disappears in the displayed object. Benjamin takes away that layer and shows the commodity for what it is. Norbert Bolz (1994:11) claims that Benjamin's work emancipates us from modernity, because it manages to create mourning. One mourns exactly the dreams that the past contained.

Because of the montage approach and the fragmented structure, Benjamin's *Arcades Project* writings have repeatedly been described as early hypertexts, as the Featherstone reference already implied (see also McBride, 2002; Sloterdijk, 1993:60-61; Welsh, 1996). When it first emerged, hypertext was one of the web's major features. Hypertext had already existed in other computer programmes (most famously Apple Hypercard), but it only became widely known through the widespread uptake of the web. The hypertext function allows the user to add highlights to parts of the text, which, when clicked, immediately lead to another document. This document is usually in some way related to the term or whatever was originally highlighted. Like active footnotes, this cross-referencing encourages a radical – and radically new – (re)structuring of texts (and can include non-textual features). Originally, it was believed, hypertext could even lead to a radical new approach to sharing knowledge and to writing in general (Landow, 1994). These expectations have by now been slightly reduced, since many actual uses of the medium have not fulfilled expectations.

Hypertext exploits some of the features of textuality that traditional forms of writing tend to conceal (to state it quickly, a degree of non-linearity...) or even repress (the order of the Book), but these features do not automatically make it the deconstructionist's dream come true. (Bennington, 2003)

The “‘arcade-like’ construction of Benjamin's text” (Rollason, 2002) has been seen to have predated and prefigured the current architecture of the Internet. Full meaning only emerges when the links of the networks are used to locate the fragments (or websites) in relation to others. The potential for hypertext's challenge to traditional notions of textuality is still there.

Benjamin's way of archiving and collecting texts and quotations from other people (as well as any sort of text and image he regarded as relevant to specific contexts) makes it initially very difficult to get a sense of his complete project. He linked texts in ways that were very unusual at the time and still remain unusual in academic and other writing today. He was using other people's work in order to re-assemble it in new contexts, which then led to the creation of an entirely new context and content. Thus the comparison to hypertext makes sense. Both ideally create something new through the new connection to and combination of something other.

This structure of the *Arcades Project* makes it similar to the web, but also to the *analysis* of the web. If this structure is indeed underlying the web, then any

attempt at understanding the web needs to find a way to recreate this structure. I take from this the fragmented nature of the 'city as web' and the importance small parts can have in the whole. The research method is a way of putting fragments together so that they create something larger than themselves, as in panoramic literature. When describing and analysing webpages (that have been collected in a combination of randomness and system) and juxtaposing their content, then maybe one can claim to be following a similar approach. This is not to say that my own project is in any way structured like the *Arcades Project*.¹⁰³ But as in the 'physiologies', the little pamphlets that described individual character types in the emerging city sphere of Paris of the beginning 19th century (e.g. the flâneur) and which Benjamin uses as part of his encounters with the Paris of the time, in the thesis online user types are taken to stand in for the bigger picture, for some general tendencies. This is therefore a form of *physiognomic analysis*: from the detail, the whole is derived. This kind of analysis is both intuitive and tangible.

5.2.3. Order and Chaos

Benjamin achieved yet some other emphasis through the particular system of ordering his material and the later re-combination thereof. Besides the literary form it is particularly the hidden level of representation that is fascinating and revealing in Benjamin's unfinished piece. What his order – in combination with the content – underlines, is the constant struggle in the modern city between order and disorder, chaos and structure. Benjamin's system of ordering does not work without the imaginary extension of the reader, but even then it does not provide a complete and settled answer. Despite the extensive structure of ordering, one is always left with a feeling of randomness, of unexpected encounters and juxtapositions in reading Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. The piece invites its reader to jump from one section to another, to return to something read earlier, to re-read. It also invites the reader to enter into something that is not actually spelt out explicitly: other dimensions of the dream. While the suggestion of the dream is common in literature, it is less common in philosophy and social science. Attempting to read this level of meaning is not only based on the psychoanalytic influences that were prevalent during Benjamin's lifetime, but finds an expression particularly in Benjamin's writing

¹⁰³ One of the reasons for this is also the format of the thesis, which requires the author to fulfil certain academic criteria.

style.¹⁰⁴ More importantly, this structure implies the overarching topic of his *Arcades Project*: the (modern) city.

The city emerged in this form at the beginning of the 19th century. It grew unexpectedly; it was inhabited by numerous people and diverse social classes; it was increasingly industrialised and thus an expression of growing capitalism; it became a place whose structure and architecture was evolving more rapidly than its inhabitants could think. This kind of city – Paris is one emblematic expression thereof – grew into chaos on the one hand and into an increasing structuring process on the other. The structural elements refer to the architecture, but also to the social. All kinds of structures to regulate the growing masses of people were established in the 19th century (and many were simply ignored by the people they were meant to regulate). Patterns emerged and changed and flows of information and goods and other aspects moved daily through the city. In the end, any city is not ultimately ‘controllable’, especially not on the level of small encounters and everyday life. But more abstract structures nonetheless aid to limit the chaos, to guide it into certain directions. Its architecture is an important element therein. This constant exchange between chaos (or disorder) and order, between structure and agency, was held in place by the idea of the city. Now, on yet another level, it is held in place by the web. The web has to provide a similar counterbalancing act and moves between these dialectical poles. The city and the web are thus both productive spaces, spaces that produce knowledge (Lefebvre, 1991a, 1991b). Both also keep the chaos contained and offer manifold dreams.

5.2.4. The Phantasmagoric

To set up, within the actual city of Paris, Paris the dream city – as an aggregate of all the building plans, street layouts, park projects, and street-name systems that were never developed. (Benjamin, 1999:410)

An important aspect of Benjamin’s work is that he read many of the features of the emerging city via the myths that were built around them, via the expression of dream images that he found in things like pamphlets or advertisements or stories. It is a matter of deriving knowledge about social life via its dream expressions, via the *phantasmagoric*, the ambiguous level where the dream and the waking hours meet. The phantasmagoria is a common form of vision, which

¹⁰⁴ Whether the structure of the text and the writing style was ever intended to remain thus, we will never know – nor did Benjamin seem to know.

appears in a crowd of phantoms. These phantoms usually appear at the time of falling asleep (see Leslie, 2002). For Benjamin, the awakening from the dream is the aim. In order to see itself properly, the world needs to wake up and see the dreams for what they are:

Forge ahead with the whetted axe of reason, looking neither right nor left so as to not succumb to the horror that beckons from deep in the primeval forest. Every ground must at some point have been made arable by reason, must have been cleared of the undergrowth of delusion and myth. (Benjamin, 1999:456-457)

Only in the awakening from the dreamscape (of the world about itself) can the consciousness be reformed (Marx in Benjamin, 1999:456), can the horror of the nightmare of the real be overcome. Thus it is important to show the dreamscape for what it is. Otherwise nothing new can ever come of it and the nightmare will continue.

The tradition of all dead generations weighs like an Alp on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be ... creating something that did not exist before, ... they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language. (Marx, 1869:115)

Uncovering implies that one goes beyond the artificial recreation of the past, but instead analyses the driving forces behind it. Benjamin's form of analysis, his version of a 'Marxist' analysis of culture is the *dream analysis*. It is a social dream, a shared dream that Benjamin uncovers. His is a particular reading of Marx, i.e. a Marxist analysis through commodity, not through labour. In comparison to many other cultural theorists, Benjamin least corrects or adds to Marxist theory. Nonetheless his own perspective is seen to be most at odds with Marx. This is partly based on his 'unscientific' methods and especially because he claims that the bourgeois individual can become fully aware of his or her part in the ongoing processes. Benjamin shows how the illusion is repeatedly reiterated and reinforced, but he also stresses the potential for the 'profane illumination' in which this illusion is uncovered. Flânerie is one way to potentially achieve this illumination. The illumination idea explains Benjamin's interest in the commodification of society, which he wants to uncover through unusual ways. His analysis is a materialist one, but in a different sense to traditional Marxism. His material is more ephemeral, dealing with the figures

in between, with the phantasmagoric, with those aspects that are implied in the material.¹⁰⁵

Benjamin's 'dream interpretation' is also a clear reference to psychoanalysis, which emerged as a new 'science' in the beginning of the 20th century. Benjamin is very much part of his times, but also makes it his aim to reflect on his contemporary social life via the reference to earlier times. He thus reads a range of diverse texts as historical documents. Benjamin describes a dreamy, imaginary aspect, when he refers to the flâneur and his surroundings as part of this dreamscape. We supposedly relive the life of our ancestors in the arcades: "'Flanieren' is the rhythm of slumber" (Benjamin, 1989:162).¹⁰⁶ Desires and reality become one and the same. Figures on the threshold are expressed in this 'in-between', between dream and awakening, between realism and idealism. The 'I' becomes one with the city that was before the object of its gaze (Köhn, 1989:211). The flâneur is a similar dream-image that refers us back to the real. And metaphor fulfils a similar function – it also bridges the real and an ideal (a not-yet existent) and thus helps to reflect on the real. The flâneur and related ideas are presented in a meticulous structure that shows ways of dealing with, but also describing the order-disorder tension that characterises everything else is. The methodology relates to the above-explored montage idea. All this underlines the complexity of the urban experience in the 19th century – and potentially of the web-experience now.

5.3. The Arcades and the Web

The terms that I research are the *passage* to another world. This other world is cyberspace. This transitional nature is expressed in the potential fleetingness of the user typology in question, i.e. of the role of the types as placeholders, and in the 'in between' nature of the terms as such. They are 'in between' the fugitive and the stable, 'in between' cyberspace and the 'real world', in between order and disorder. Their (metaphoric) structure keeps these different poles in place and at the same keeps the looming communication chaos at bay. This chaos stems from the lack of communication devices to communicate about the new.

¹⁰⁵ It underlines Benjamin's part within the Frankfurt School, where he was always a figure slightly on the margins. He was in principle concerned with very similar issues, i.e. the analysis of culture from a Marxist perspective, but used an unusual approach of pursuing these issues.

¹⁰⁶ "Flanieren ist die Rhythmik dieses Schlummers." – Flanieren is the German expression for the verb (in French 'flâner').

The user types express particular versions of information access and retrieval and are thus passages into the wider world of cyberspace. They are entry points to the larger complexities. Like the arcades – ‘les passages’ in French and ‘die Passagen’ in German – this passage signifies security and a temporary relief from the bigger picture:

Passage is the preferred term ... because it expresses the sense of passing through and the interconnectedness of the *passage* to the boulevard, crossing the boulevard to the next *passage*. (Fenton, 2001)

The arcades were also caught in between different societal trends. They were the initial expressions of capitalist consumerism, but were soon to be topped in glamour and size by the department stores. They were placeholders for what was yet to come. As foremost expressions of the dreamscape, they stood for the ‘not (yet) real’, for the utopian longings. The commodity promises the fulfilment of these longings, but can never deliver the fulfilment. The arcades hold in place a temporary meaning, one that is not fixed, but is to be filled in by the user (or rather the consumer). The language has to convey this possibility of replacement. Metaphors are one way of a gradual replacement, i.e. of allowing a continual process of renewal, a suggestion of the new and a replacement of the old.

... it is this capacity to intuit resemblances, to think in metaphors which makes the ... reading of the city not merely a decoding of what is ‘out there’ but at the same time a creative act – as all reading should be. (Cardinal in Fenton, 2001)

Metaphors can take the user/consumer one step beyond what is already there. But the placeholders here, the user types, also signify another ‘passage’. This is a certain ‘rite of passage’ of the users, particularly of the early Internet days. Rites of passage are performed to get a person or a group transformed from one social stage to another.¹⁰⁷ One belonged, for example, to the early Internet ‘in-group’ partly by being able to ‘talk the talk’.¹⁰⁸ This moment of the early days,

¹⁰⁷ Tomas (2000) differentiates three phases in the rite of passage: a) the separation and symbolic behaviour to signify impending change, b) the liminal period where the location (and time) is outside of society and c) the ‘decontamination’ period, i.e. the slow reintegration. Urry (1992:10), similarly differentiates between a) the social and spatial separation, b) the liminality in an “anti-structure ... out of time and place”, where the transgression is experienced and c) the reintegration, usually with a higher social status.

¹⁰⁸ Cyberspace has also repeatedly been interpreted as such a rite of passage in even more complex terms. Referring to William Gibson’s novels, David Tomas (2000), for example, describes the exit to and from a parallel virtual reality (as one potentially experiences in terms of accessing cyberspace), as a passage into the *liminal* worlds through which the human world is made problematic, but at the same time, an alternative is offered – at least

however, might turn out to be more than temporary. I locate the user types in this fleeting stability and will try to see how far they came to disappear or how far they were meant to stay.

Flânerie was the first parallel between 19th century Paris, 20th century any-city and 21st century web. It implies a distanced yet engaged version of taking in the information sphere. Situationist wanderings, the kind of city-appropriation of the 20th century art movement of the same name, have also often been read as flânerie. The particularities of this approach are further explored in the concept of the *dérive*, which I proclaim could provide an interesting approach to cyberspace. This concept extends the just-explored structures and approaches that Benjamin provides. It further develops the order-disorder tension. Overall, it helps to emphasise some aspects of the Benjamin approach. To introduce the *dérive*, I will first of all locate it in the general framework of Situationism.

5.4. The Situationists

Situationism refers to a group of 20th century conceptual artists called the 'Situationist International' or SI. This group was based around the philosopher and artist Guy Debord and included a number of other contemporary thinkers. It was founded in 1957 in Northern Italy. The founders came primarily from two previously existing artists' groups, the 'Lettrist International' and the 'Imagist Bauhaus'. A journal, regular meetings and larger congregations followed in the years after the foundation (McDonough, 2002). Another part of the Situationists' repertoire were events in art galleries and museums (Andreotti & Costa, 1996). Situationism had its first prime site of action in France, but it soon spread to the whole of Europe, when new groups were set up during the 1960s. In the situationist group around Guy Debord, many of the original members were eventually replaced with others, while Debord remained the core. Partly through their events and partly through their publications (Debord, 1995; 1983; 1980; 1958; Edition Nautilus, 1995; Knabb, 1981), but especially through some student activities, the Situationists are said to have helped prepare the French student revolts of 1968 in which they

for a period of time. Sherry Turkle (1997a) also labels the in-between the virtual and the 'real' as a *liminal* moment, as a rite of passage where new cultural experiences are formed.

themselves were partly involved. The group itself finally dissolved in 1972, but several artists have since claimed to follow in its footsteps.¹⁰⁹

Taking inspirations from Karl Marx and Henri Lefebvre, the Situationists tried to apply a social critique to the societal situation of the post-second world war period especially in France. The Situationists, like Benjamin, concentrated on the city and looked at the production of space therein and related this to the emergence of a consumer society. Debord, in his seminal piece *The Society of the Spectacle* ([1967] 1995), describes and attacks processes of commodification, and he does so (like Benjamin) creatively and poetically. His main claim is that everything – education, politics, arts – is in the process of becoming one huge spectacle. Society is depoliticised, because everything is ‘only’ representation, as vision becomes the primary sense. The Situationists developed Lefebvre’s critique of everyday life (1991a) further and also took some inspiration from earlier radical art movements such as the Dadaists and especially the Surrealists. For the Situationists, critique had to become a transformation of everyday life and this was meant to take place in the form of subversion.

Thus the Situationists did not remain simply theoretical, they added a practical dimension to their claims. Life overall was supposed to become art. Everyday life was to be aestheticized. ‘Radical situations’ should be constructed. The Situationists encouraged individuals to produce their own culture in order to contravene the general societal tendencies. They themselves were committed to bring revolutionary elements, which they thought had been abandoned, back into the avant-garde. This was to be implemented through offensive actions. The Situationists developed two primary principles, or aesthetic strategies, for these actions: a) the *détournement* (diversion, embezzlement) and b) the *dérive* (drift). The *détournement* was a form of ‘creative vandalism’ (Hussey, 1999:30), which meant that existing bourgeois cultural forms were taken up and changed slightly in order to show them for what they really were, to reveal new meanings. ‘Cutting up and reassembling’ was the motto here.¹¹⁰ The system was to be ruptured from within (Bonnett, 1999:25), because there was no alternative outside of the system. The existing culture was thus used to subvert itself.

¹⁰⁹ Debord himself took his own life in 1994 (Hussey, 2002).

¹¹⁰ This re-assemblage is a form of cultural resistance that was to be used a lot by different subcultural movements in the years to follow.

5.4.1. The Dérive

What inspired me first to think of the (re)search principles implicit in this project as being based on situationist principles (and to later link this to cyberspace overall) was not the *détournement*, but the *dérive* or drift.¹¹¹

... to *dérive* was to notice the way in which certain areas, streets, or buildings resonate with states of mind, inclinations, and desires, and to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed. (Plant, 1992, quoted in Evans, 2001)

The *dérive* is an aimless wandering – and is thus clearly related to *flânerie* – but the wandering takes place according to specific systems.¹¹² This is well described in the project of taking the map of London and following it strictly, while actually walking through mountainous German countryside (Situationistische Internationale, 1980:68/69). The concentration of the Situationists, however, lay primarily on city space (Sadler, 1998). Thus their version of the *dérive* was to develop a system and follow it throughout the city (e.g. follow each first street to the right and then each second one to the left). The city was seen as a centre for possibilities and meanings, it was seen as a landscape (as in Benjamin and Marx), but also as a playing field. The Situationists were interested in the absurdity of such spaces and encounters.¹¹³

The *dérive* is a “technique of transient passage through changing ambiances” (Debord, 1958:50). ‘Letting go’ is the basis, but at the same time giving more than usual attention to the surroundings, letting encounters take place. In order to start the *dérive*, for example, conversations were sometimes begun with a passer-by. One needs to get lost in order to understand, but not in an unsystematic manner. The ‘getting lost’ is meant in a social rather than a topographic sense: one should become homeless, marginal and drop one’s usual motives and actions (as Benjamin did when he made the city his forest).

¹¹¹ The *dérive* can also be said to have its origin in Thomas de Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1856). This piece, which was first published 1821, describes opium as a divine experience, but also extensively revels in intoxicated walks through London. Some of these rambles led through great distances and experiences were illustrated with words such as: “sometimes in my attempts to steer homewards, upon nautical principles, by fixing my eye on the pole-star, and seeking ambitiously for a north-west passage, instead of circumnavigating all the capes and headlands I had doubled my outward voyage, I came suddenly upon such noddly problems of alleys, such enigmatical entries, and such sphynx’s riddles of streets without thoroughfares,...”. The vivid nature of de Quincey’s descriptions as well as his movement – a drifting into unknown parts of the city – do indeed suggest potential parallels to the *dérive*. Debord used hashish and wine to achieve a form of intoxication.

¹¹² The Surrealists had wandered, too, but put more emphasis on desire and dreams.

The general idea was to add everyday behaviours in places and at times where they would appear absurd.¹¹⁴

... the element of chance is less determinant than one might think: from the *dérive* point of view, cities have a psychogeographical relief, with constant currents, fixed points and vortices which strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones. (Debord, 1958:50)

The Situationists were partly interested in the interaction, in the relationship between the city architecture and its inhabitants. In combination with the psychogeographical relief, this engagement with the environment adds structure to the walk. The 'theory' behind the *dérive* is *psychogeography* (a situationist neologism). Psychogeography is the study of the influences of the geographical environment on human emotions and behaviour. The *dérive* is aimed at *studying a terrain* on the one hand, and *emotional disorientation* on the other. They can also be found in 'being online'.

5.4.2. The *Dérive* Online: The Situationist Search Principle

Mine is not the only attempt to apply Situationist principles to the Internet. A new generation of self-proclaimed Situationists exists online. Amongst these, the *Virtual Psychogeographic Association* (VPA, 2002) is a prominent UK example with both a website and a mailing list. It debates the links between the ideas of Debord and his followers in relation to the online world. The association also provides a random disturbance of their own website, which displays illegible code rather than legible text. Thus a small 'détournement' takes place. Some of the postings to the mailing list contain traces of a form of self-obsessed immersion, but also show a possible version of the *dérive* as applied online:

The derive I've taken is unmapped....unplanned....a starting point is chosen at random....or what can be considered random. ...the thought/word enters the brain ...fingers type the letters www.(your name here) ...and I'm transported ...instant ...a link provides the terminus for jumping into the ether ...again, unmapped ...and again ...again....ad infinitum if you like ...the derive could extend forever if one had the stamina, the support, the TIME, the SUGAR to do so....¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Here they differ from Benjamin, who was interested in uncovering the dreamscape as such, and from the flâneur, who wavers between building and uncovering the dreamscape.

¹¹⁴ In the *dérive*, the desired subversion is taking place by, for example, "slipping by night into houses undergoing demolition, hitchhiking non-stop and without destination through Paris during a transportation strike in the name of adding to the confusion, wandering in subterranean catacombs forbidden to the public..." (Debord, 1958:53).

¹¹⁵ Mailing to vpalist@eGroups.com on 19 May 1999. Email address known, but not added here for reasons of anonymity.

can this online derive be recorded with the URL's to each link followed? what becomes of the on-line derive report when URL's are our only record? Is a record necessary? will the spirit of such a drift be rendered impotent once recorded?¹¹⁶

The online *dérive* as imagined here is indeed the combination of randomness and system, as are, for me, the web and the cyberflâneur. The system lies in whatever term one chooses to begin with, whatever thought is followed. The system is also in the technology. The randomness is equally based in the technology, but also in not planning the movement, not restricting oneself to any one particular path. The same combination is in the idea of following each hyperlink and recording this movement. Again, randomness and structure come together.

Dérives should ideally take place in small groups. This leads to a different understanding of the surroundings. But if it has to, the *dérive* can also take place as a solitary activity.¹¹⁷ Related to this is another point of reference for the web in relation to the *dérive*: the idea of the 'possible rendezvous' as the starting point in which the wanderer might meet someone in order to set off on their wanderings together. The *emotional disorientation* is the potential discovery of the new, also in relation to these encounters with people. It is an *engaged* version of strolling. The *study of the terrain* can already be seen in the beginning. The starting point is always randomly chosen, but is set as a particular point in the city. The *dérive* begins with a familiarisation of this point until the explorer begins to wander off systematically in a pre-defined fashion. The movement (and thus also the search) online shows parallel features. Unless the online-search has a very clear-cut aim (for example, a particular website address from which no further link is followed), it is a 'systematic wander with random elements'. If one uses a search engine and types in a search term, then one also takes a well-defined starting point that can then lead to unexpected results, but follows certain principles to provide the information. The original *dérives* have been read as "pedestrian speech acts" (Sadler, 1998:98). They were utterances that added to the city, performing the city. Now the utterances found online and the way they are found add to the net and perform the online worlds.

It is mostly the randomness of the encounter (which the Situationists

¹¹⁶ Mailing to vpalist@eGroups.com on 20 May 1999. Different author (also known).

¹¹⁷ The average *dérive* takes a day, but it can last up to several months, when the differentiation between different stages of the *dérive* becomes rather difficult. The *dérive* can also take the form of a static-*dérive* – in the train station – or in front of the screen.

systematised by prescribing certain ways one had to move through the city) that signifies the ideas of the Situationists and their radical ways of capturing the encountered city or information space (often artistically, sometimes intellectually). And it is the engagement with the environment (although often absurd) that Situationists adds in comparison to the flâneur. The combination of structure and randomness is the most important aspect of the online *dérive*.¹¹⁸ It underlines the structure that not only the city, but the web offers. Using an approach that replicates this structure helps to fully take in what is on offer.

But limitations concerning the extent of this engagement exist as well. They stem both from the user side (the versions of 'being online') as well as the technology: one does not simply go 'anywhere' when one spends time online. The psychological starting point of the searching person, for example, and other social and cultural factors, such as current societal debates, play a role. On top of that, the information providers limit the possible sites and content. Access adds another limitation. The search engines play an important role in this respect. They limit, they guide, they surprise. To some extent, search engines embody technologically what the situationist search principle tries to implement on an individual, human level. There is one major difference though: the situationist search engages especially with the environment and partly with fellow human beings. The engagement with the environment – in the shift from the city to cyberspace – becomes an engagement with the *content* of the websites. This engagement subsequently leads to a different path, a choice of 'where to next'. The search engine has no such feature – it is simply programmed to follow certain criteria in its ordering of the material. And it is equally limited in finding links or making sense (nor does it find everything by far). The search engine thus becomes a tool in the search based on situationist principles rather than its executive. The *dérive*, while acknowledging such limitations, encourages the development of new strategies to discover the space. On the other hand it issues warnings concerning illusions: too much dreaming is not what the Situationists promoted.

Not everyone who makes the link between the web and the *dérive* interprets the link with the same emphasis on structure:

¹¹⁸ In some discussions about Artificial Intelligence, consciousness has been defined as 'an imposition of pattern on randomness'. This debate takes me too far away from my original point, but would be interesting to develop further.

Obviously, surfing the web can be an example of the Debordian derive, in which one abstracts oneself from the cares of everyday life and seeks adventure, novelty, and the unexpected on the Internet. Such 'cruising' is equivalent to the activity of the urban flâneur, celebrated by Walter Benjamin, in which one drifts through [sic] the hypertexts of cyberworld, clicking from one destination and spectacle to another, sometimes merely observing and sometimes participating in more interactive endeavor. (Best & Kellner, 1999)

Steve Best and Douglas Kellner link hacking and other subversive uses of the web to the 'interactive participation' claim.¹¹⁹ This ignores most other, more 'mundane' (and widespread) uses of the web, such as chatting, e-commerce, information searches, etc. The interesting question is whether the claim to the parallel between the older cultural referent and 'being online' would also hold up in these contexts of use. Another question that remains unanswered is why the uses listed should be labelled as 'situationist'. Thus not every mention of the possible link between Situationism and flânerie actually engage with the specificity of the medium in question. For the further exploration of the *dérive*, I myself now return briefly to flânerie. As in Best and Kellner, the equation between the two is often ignoring some crucial differences.

5.4.3. Flânerie vs. Dérive?

Flânerie and *dérive*, as has already become clear, share several aspects, but also differ in a few other, rather crucial ways. They share the general movement (a leisurely walk) and thus partly the appropriation of the information space (usually city, now potentially the web). On top of that, both kinds of wanderings are concerned with the marginal, with impressions that lie underneath the immediately obvious. The Situationists are artists (for whom their everyday life becomes an art form) and share these attributes to some extent with potential flâneurs. Flânerie and Situationism are both models of engagement, albeit of different kinds.

The potential engagement with a passer-by creates one difference between Situationist and flâneur. This engagement in conversation (even if it was with absurd questions about the environment) shows a different concern with social life than the flâneur displays. He is an abstracted single figure, who needs social

¹¹⁹ They list cases, which have been referred to repeatedly as examples of subversive political uses, such as the Zapatistas movement's use of the web (to stimulate support for its offline activities) and the McLibel case (a court case in Britain between two individuals and the Hamburger giant McDonald's that created very bad publicity for McDonald's and where the web served as an information and dissemination point). Both cases were seen as

life, but aims at not involving himself directly. The flâneur is interested in what to make of the encounters, in a kind of vision 'beyond the immediate situation', while the Situationists use the moment they are in. They create a web of associations right there and then.

According to Simon Sadler, another difference between flânerie and the *dérive* is in the 'state of mind' of the drifter – in the *dérive*, the subject is intoxicated, thus the city becomes blurry and the necessary distance is lost (see Hussey, 1999:31).¹²⁰ The engagement with the surroundings is thus not straightforward, but it exists. The assumption that the Situationist's intoxication constitutes a clear difference to the flâneur implicitly suggests a more clear-cut relationship of the flâneur to his environment. This I do not agree with. Instead, the flâneur, too, has his moments of intoxication. One major difference, however, lies in the source of intoxication and in the appearances, which the flâneur tries hard to keep up. In the flâneur, the narcotic is the crowd and the commodity itself. The crowd consists of potential customers. The commodity appeals to everyone-as-someone (while in fact, it appeals to no-one-in-particular). This appeal, which Benjamin calls 'empathy', is what intoxicates the flâneur (Benjamin, 1997:55). Thus, there is also a lack of distance, which the flâneur, however, will always try to regain.¹²¹ The flâneur cannot allow himself to engage properly or in a prolonged manner, because this would question his nature.

A more important difference between flânerie and the *dérive* than the intoxication as such is the prevailing assumption that the flâneur will use his intoxication productively. Flânerie has always in the end been read as an important and somewhat respectable occupation. This is not the case in terms of the wanderings of the Situationists. The situationist wanderer is much further disillusioned and thus rebellious than the flâneur. For the situationist wanderer, consumption is in no way attractive, while the flâneur could not live without this backdrop (even if he himself does not consume). A major difference is that the flâneur mourns where the situationist wanderer rebels. One difference then is in the underlying politics. The flâneur has little to show in terms of direct political aims (this is not to say that Benjamin himself has no political aims. The

a strong example of the power of the web for such causes and for successfully bridging the online/offline gap.

¹²⁰ Possibly a reference to de Quincey's opium consumption.

¹²¹ Empathy of this kind (but also in general) is often interpreted as a 'female' quality, which the flâneur, as will be discussed in chapter 6, always battled with. The Situationist wanderer does not seem to have that problem.

dérive, however, is at least in principle an attempt to reconstruct the city in the interests of the proletariat.

There is a difference in terms of the engagement implied in these different kinds of wanderings. Situationism takes the environment into consideration, while it also attempts to rebel and shock, ultimately assuming that the environment is already lost. The flâneur, on the other hand, also assumes a loss of the environment as he knows it (and in his very specific way also protests against it, although in much more subtle ways), but he also lives in constant non-engagement. The flâneur half-heartedly comes to terms with the changes, hoping (and bitterly failing) to preserve the fleetingness in its current form (a contradiction in itself) and thus to halt further developments. The situationist wanderer, on the other hand, wants to change things *via* his/her walking. The major difference then is that the Situationist needs to use surroundings and people for his encounter of the city, which the flâneur avoids, while the flâneur himself uses them for his later (re)production of the city. This kind of output is not the focus of the Situationists. Ephemerality is core for both, but for the Situationists it is the ephemeral *inside* of themselves and for the flâneur it is the ephemeral *outside* of himself.

5.5. Understanding Cyberspace – Via the Dérive

A reference to the Situationists walking the streets in similar ways to the flâneur was the original trigger for engaging with their ideas. But beyond the ‘walking the city’ reference, some situationist texts seemed to suggest a more far-reaching use of their ideas: the possibility to *understand* cyberspace differently. This notion is based on the *structure* and *organisation* of cyberspace (and relates to the idea of movement, but also orientation). This understanding is also present in the flâneur, but less explicitly and with a different emphasis. It is both a reiteration and an extension of the structure mentioned in relation to the parallel between the *Arcades Project* and the web.

The structure and organisation of cyberspace that seemed to be suggested in situationist texts is a particular combination of clarity and chaos, in which orientation can best take place through a combination of *system* and *randomness*. This mirrors not only the way information is found online, but also how knowledge is produced on the net and how social structures develop. It is a reflection on a potential ‘nature’ of the Internet and also, implicitly, on its

newness, i.e. its specificity as a medium. The *search based on situationist principles*, as the methodological twist that Situationism offered to me, is defined as this system-randomness approach. Methodologically, it provided the basis for a search mechanism for the websites for the analysis. They needed to be found in a combination of system and randomness. And it underlines what is specific about Benjamin's literary form. The *dérive* brings the approach even closer to the city and thus offers the methodological approach more clearly.

The Situationist should not be mistaken for a potential user type. It lacks first of all a name, since only the act – the *dérive* – can be named and not the actor (unless one chooses the general term 'Situationist'). It also lacks the principle of the individually identifiable identity. In the *dérive*, the emphasis is on the approach and sometimes on the group, but not on the individual. The individual disappears behind the act. Hence the *dérive* remains primarily a search principle.

Claiming to develop a method that is at least partly based on 'situationist principles', I have to break with some of the aspects of the *dérive*, especially in terms of the later reworking. My undertaking is after all an academic one. Situationism was never meant to produce knowledge (at least not primarily) and thus "... written descriptions can be no more than passwords to this great game" (Debord, 1958:53). For me though, the written descriptions are not only the beginning, they are also the end of this game – they are *the* game.

5.6. Outlook

James Donald has described 'the city' as a historically specific mode of seeing (1995:192). This can be reformulated to ask whether maybe 'the' net is also a historically specific mode of seeing. However, seeing is taken less literally than in Donald and understood as a way of life, an approach to information, communication and interaction. Thus far, the potential specificity has been described as its structure, which suggests certain ways of meaning-creation.

Sometimes, such assumptions are directly implemented as online projects. The so-called e-arcades project, for example, tries to actually implement what this chapter conceptually developed. E-arcades is a project that took the idea of Benjamin's texts as early hypertexts and copied the principle. It thus uses the hypertext technology to newly connect diverse quotes.

Inspired by Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, *e-Arcades* is an excursion of association among quotations concerning technology. Borrowing Benjamin's methodology of juxtaposing quotes, *e-Arcades* grasps at an understanding of the effect of our technologies on how we think as well as live. Enter. (E-Arcade, 2003)

The project is highly visual. It surprises through the random display of fragments from theoretical pieces from several authors. It thus juxtaposes textual bits and thereby creates new connections. In its structure, however, it does not differ much from other hypertextual websites. The selection of fragments is not clearly related to anything in particular. It thus appears like the beginning of a potentially challenging project rather than its actual implementation.

To reiterate: both of the concepts and theories introduced in this chapter, Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and the situationist *dérive*, first of all relate to and extend the idea of the flâneur. The arcades and the *dérive* also achieve the status of methodological and theoretical frameworks, because they actually offer more than simply this exploration of the flâneur concept. They each offer approaches to accessing and thus understanding the city and to potentially do so at times of upheaval, of radical change. The ways they engage with the city show similarities, but also differences, both of which have been briefly explored above. Accessing the city is relevant, because we can abstract from the city to other spaces with similar features. Thus parallels can (and have) been drawn between the city and cyberspace. These parallels are the basis for the claim that Benjamin and the situationist *dérive* provided the methodological and theoretical underpinning for this thesis .

To be more precise: the situationist *dérive* has been introduced here to speak primarily about how one can access cyberspace 'according to its nature'. This implies that I see the specificity of the new medium in its structure, i.e. as a non-hierarchical, complex and fluid network of uncountable and rather different nodes. I assume that one should try to acknowledge this structure in the way one accesses cyberspace in order to use the medium to its full capacity. This suggestion includes both users and researchers alike (and especially those researchers that attempt to understand use). The randomness-structure and order-disorder approaches that I read into the *dérive* and Benjamin serves to underline the possibility of access to the medium that acknowledges its specificity. To re-create the medium's structure at least partly in the research approach is another aim. This is the methodological emphasis.

The *Arcades Project* provides the more theoretical emphasis. It creates a similar understanding of the potential nature of cyberspace as the *dérive*. Benjamin, too, refers to city-space and presents a text which is networked in non-hierarchical nodes and builds on the juxtaposition of different nodes. But it also adds an emphasis on the literary nature of the city or rather its literary-philosophical re-creation. Benjamin lets the city emerge once again and brings out aspects that would not have necessarily been directly visible to the city-stroller at the time described. Thus my emphasis on the textual and on the relationship between the written descriptions of information spaces finds a justification here. More importantly though, the organisation of Benjamin's text hints at structures that can equally be seen on the web. And this opens up questions about how to research this sphere. The *Arcades Project* itself gives a partial answer in the sense of letting the impressions speak for themselves, but arranging them so that other elements and meanings become visible. This is aided by the situationist *dérive* and its order-randomness principle. The latter shows how to adequately access cyberspace and find information and communication, while the former underlines the overall counterbalance between order and chaos that this kind of research needs to try to detect, but also to reflect in its own structure.

These are not the only theoretical moments that have underpinned this project. Diverse approaches to the relationship between the old and the new and the emphasis on metaphor in particular should not be forgotten here. Wandering the city and the web fulfil very similar functions of relationship creation:

Metaphor is the dreamwork of language, and, like all dreamwork, its interpretation reflects as much on the interpreter as on the originator.
(Davidson, 1980:29)

What interests me is why metaphors are used in the online context to articulate the dreamscape. Metaphors are versatile tools, projection spaces, which allow quite diverse sets of uses. These include the expression of myths, dreams and desires, both personal and societal.¹²² But these expressions need to be uncovered in order to understand what role the tools play. The web vocabulary

¹²² In the beginning, most metaphors (and thus discourses) found online were societal dreams more than individual ones: enhanced or new forms of democracy, new forms of community, etc. More recently, the web has been moving on to commercial expressions on the one hand, but also to more personal, individualised metaphors on the other hand.

has both diversified and solidified since the early days. It partly reflects, and, to a lesser extent, also creates changes.

To further illustrate how the Benjamin-Situationism framework presented in this chapter and the other conceptual underpinnings belong together in a complex web of relationships, I want to present two quotes. Relationships between city-spaces and movements, between metaphors and new technologies can be found in these references. The first of the two 'link-providers' is Michel de Certeau, the theorist who wrote one of the seminal texts on movement and resistance within the city in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. He claims therein that the term metaphor already contains city-space and movement:

In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called metaphorai. To go to work or come home, one takes a 'metaphor' – a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories. (de Certeau, 1984:115)

Metaphors in themselves are 'little stories' and thus spatial trajectories in an abstract sense. They have a linking, an *organising function*. At the same time, they produce meaning. The spatial is an important aspect of this meaning-creation. The space primarily referred to is city-space.

But not only de Certeau makes the connection between city and metaphor. The philosopher Jacques Derrida, too, described metaphors in the city-context. At the same time, he hinted at the metaphorical nature of aspects of our identities:

Metaphor circulates in the city, it conveys us like its inhabitants, along all sorts of passages, with intersections, red lights, one-way streets, crossroads or crossings, patrolled zones and speed limits. We are in a certain way – metaphorically of course, and as concerns the mode of habitation – the content and the tenor of this vehicle; passengers, comprehended and displaced by metaphor. (Derrida, 1978:6)

Derrida makes a more explicit reference to those metaphors that express identities, which are those that mostly interest me. At the same time, Derrida's idea suggests a passivity of the human being expressed in the metaphor, while there is more scope for action, but less for individual identity de Certeau's conceptualisation. Despite these differences, both authors – in their rather poetic ways – illustrate an understanding of the close link between identity positions, metaphoric language, movement, the city, the passage and vehicles. All of these can be found in this thesis – and particularly in the flâneur, the

focus of the next chapter. This user type is an exemplary expression of many aspects that Benjamin tried to capture in the *Arcades Project*. In the cyberflâneur, many of these aspects are repeated, but some of them are more extreme than the original or entirely new. The cyberflâneur user type thus needs to be seen in the context of the original concept of flânerie. This also helps to draw out points that differ substantially in the other user types.

5.7. Summary of Part I

The Internet as a research topic has been the most challenging aspect of this thesis. One difficulty that emerged was the discovery of an adequate research strategy and methodology. Eventually, a set of answers to this difficulty transpired. The conceptual framework presented thus far outlines the answers. Part II of the thesis will explore these in their applied form, i.e. in the analysis of user types.

Broadly speaking, the eventual methodological choice was a historical and literary approach. I decided to concentrate on a utopian moment that has already passed. Benjamin in his *Arcades Project* represented a similar utopian moment in history and thus delivered some potential starting points for my analysis. As it turned out, Benjamin's particular textual structure is actually an important element of the overall answer to the methodological challenge. This was outlined in this last chapter. Related answers are the situationist *dérive* and flânerie, both of which broaden the Benjamin emphasis on structure, movement, perception and environment.

The actual objects of analysis are user types – and particularly the cyberflâneur and cyberflâneuse. The user types' role as communication tools was an important aspect of this project, since communication of the unshared experience is crucial when a new medium is introduced. This analysis of user types automatically led to an engagement with metaphors, since most user types consist of simple metaphoric structures. To introduce this metaphor-analysis, some metaphor theories were presented in chapter 1. They range from the original Aristotelian perception of metaphor as the extraordinary in language to the more recent idea of metaphor as the basis of all thinking. Metaphors usually create a relationship between the existing and the new, i.e. the unknown. Thus other conceptualisations of this relationship between the old and the new – in the context of new media – were also briefly reflected on in

this chapter. These conceptualisations range from the invention of the future to the emergence of the cultural form.

In chapter 2, these conceptual aspects were then applied to general Internet metaphors. It was shown how these Internet metaphors are historically embedded and how they have been theorised. This served to introduce the specificity of my own analysis vis-à-vis existing Internet metaphor analyses. This contextualisation of the here presented approach was further extended in chapter 3. This chapter introduced the major topics in and around cyberspace of the early days, particularly the hopes attaches to the emerging cultural sphere (such as for new communities, expressed in manifestos, etc.). The relevance of these topics to this study, but also their relevance to the study of cyberspace overall, was briefly reflected upon. These aspects were then explored in more detail in the context of cyberfeminism, embedded in a very brief reflection about the relationship between feminism and language. Via summaries of the major points within three important theorists within cyberfeminism (Haraway, Turkle and Plant), the issues of identity online and the human-machine relationship emerged as primary issues. They are shared with cyberspace concerns overall, but embedded in a different political agenda and theoretical framework. The location of these dominant issues later helped to select the user types for the analysis, since most of the user types pick up on these issues in some way.

This study, too, is a study of cyberspace and its cultural formation and thus provides a potential contribution to the emerging field of cybercultural studies. Summaries of existing works help to draw out the specificity of this approach. Similarly, the aim in chapter 4 (research methodologies) was to outline the this approach with reference to the summaries and brief analyses of other existing methodologies (and online ethnography in particular). The chosen methodology was described as a virtual archaeology. Last, but not least, the most important act of embedding and defining took place in this last chapter. Here, the methodological and theoretical underpinning found its most appropriate expression. This will be continued in the analysis of the cyberflâneur and -flâneuse.

The aim of Part II of the thesis then is to show a particular set of examples of the (metaphoric) vocabulary online: the user types. The analysis locates them in their wider contexts of meaning and in partial juxtaposition (both to each other and to their contexts). The individual finds an expression in these user types,

but not primarily as an individual rather than as a type (preferably not as a stereotype). The user types describe what 'being online' can mean in a generalisable way. They open up the possibility to communicate about the experience in ways that can be understood by others, users and non-users alike.

The definition of this possibility in the vocabulary has consequences. It limits or expands what users imagine as possible in this new social sphere. This limitation and expansion will be shown through the detailed analyses of different online user types. They are each analysed in terms of their etymological roots, their 'cultural baggage' and their (re)appearance online.¹²³

The selection of user types for closer analysis was based on several criteria. These were referred to in the initial exploration of user types in chapter 2. They were also expressed in the cyberculture summaries. The initial user type was the cyberflâneur. The engagement with the flâneur eventually led to the question of the lack of a female counterpart. The symptomatic absence or invisibility of women and their femininity online was addressed in this figure. This was theoretically underlined through texts about the flâneuse. As a user type that was developed rather than readily found, the cyberflâneuse has a special position in the range of the here analysed user types. This creation was also done to underline the fact that indeed such concepts *can* be developed. This possibility has an influence on the understanding of the nature of user types.

The other user types were chosen both randomly and systematically, in an adoption of the situationist principles. One selection criterion was that the terms should be more than individual identification patterns. The surfer, as the only widely known user type, appeared as the first necessary addition to the list due to its widespread and unquestioned nature. The netizen was chosen for its claims concerning the role of the new media in relation to democracy. This refers back to cyberculture issues of manifestos and dreamscape and the social claims implied in both.

Spatial aspects, on the other hand, had played a major role in defining the cyberflâneur and his wider importance for understanding cyberspace. Thus an alternative spatial user type was deemed necessary in order to compare the

¹²³ The structure could have been different. Claiming to be inspired by Benjamin and referring to montage and juxtaposition and web-like structures seems to suggest a much less linear undertaking than what I provide in Part 2 of this thesis. My primary argument here is the format of the thesis. The traditional forms are not easily ignored without running the risk of rejection simply on those grounds. Another reason not to follow that path was a doubt about 'imitation'. To imitate Benjamin is not only an impossibility, but it would also take away the attention of the reader from the content to the form of what I

versions of spatiality implied. This led to the eventual inclusion of the cybernaut. This cybernaut shares the science fiction aspects with another user type – the cyberpunk. He is the one who most clearly represents the idea of a subculture. In this particular case, this emerged from a specific subset of science fiction literature. He thus already had a life ‘outside of the web’ as a literary figure (something that he shares with the flâneur, albeit without the cyber-prefix).

Just as the lack of the female in the cyberflâneur had led to the development of the cyberflâneuse, the lack of the female in the (cyber)punk (or rather: her problematic existence within cyberpunk) led to a search for similar subcultures that were more pro-actively female. This resulted in the selection of the webgrrl. Her subcultural capital is linked most clearly to questions of identity and indirectly later to the commercialisation of the web in recent years.

There was no abundance of user metaphors in the first place. I scanned many terms, but this selection covers the widest possible range of meanings, origins and of different understandings of cyberspace. The engagements with cyberculture implied in the terms differ widely. This has consequences for the way other users are imagined and how user types overall are (or are not) addressed. Another, less relevant search criterion was to look for a choice of different genres of the sites, which range from individual homepages to commercial websites.

In terms of their weighting, the cyberflâneur has prominence over every other user type. More space has been given to this chapter, because the cyberflâneur was the original research object, but also because it turned out to be the one that captures best the structure that is seen to be highly relevant in understanding the web as a new medium. The (cyber)flâneur’s relationship to a specific historical and specific utopian moment is one of the explanations for the continuous attention that the figure received in this thesis. Additionally, the development of the cyberflâneuse only makes sense in the context of the overall cultural history and reception of the flâneur. The next step now is to actually explore the cyberflâneur in detail. This is the first step in a move onto the virtual archaeological field-(web)sites and to uncover the treasures that can be found on this particular ‘walk’.

PART II

6. (Cyber)Flâneur:

Digital Cities and Unforeseen Encounters

6.1. The Flâneur: The Cultural Figure

Main Entry: fla·neur; Pronunciation: flä-'n&r; Function: noun; Etymology: French flâneur; Date: 1854: an idle man-about-town (Merriam-Webster, 1998)

...the primary traits of the *flâneur*, namely, the detachment from the ordinary social world, the attachment to Paris and the real, if indirect, association to art. (Ferguson, 1994a:26)

The *flâneur* is a stroller through the city; an artist; a dandy; an idler; a detective and thus a decipherer of modern urban space, its inhabitants and its underlying meaning. He roamed anonymously through the streets of 19th century Paris and mingled with the crowds without actually being part of them. The real social type seems to have disappeared in the second half of the 19th century, but the figure has made numerous re-appearances as a literary and philosophical construct ever since.

The flâneur has often been framed as *the* cultural figure of modernity. Even at the time of its early occurrence, flânerie, the act of leisurely walking the city, was described as the “highest expression of modern civilisation” (Anon., 1831:96-97).¹²⁴ Amidst the confusion of the changing world that was brought about by the rise of modern life, the flâneur was seen as a man-about-town, a gentleman with a sense for the ‘true’ character of the crowd and especially for the meaning of the city. He was recognisable not only through his dress-code, but because of the attitude (see Fig.4). To ‘flâner’ was to roam the streets aimlessly and anonymously, mingling with the crowds without actually being part of them.¹²⁵ The flâneur’s place was mainly Paris, his heyday was during the first half of the 19th century. The cyberflâneur, on the other hand, is a 21st century figure, which or who roams the abstract spheres of cyberspace today.

¹²⁴ “*Flânerie* = la plus haute expression de la civilisation moderne.”

¹²⁵ In German and French the term exists both as a noun, ‘Flâneur’, as well as a verb: ‘flanieren’ in German, ‘flâner’ in French. Both, the noun and the verb, are used in German media and literature, but less so in colloquial language use. The term appears to be known outside of the French- and German-speaking countries primarily in intellectual circles.



Fig.4: Edouard Manet, Antonin Proust, ca.1877

The flâneur thrived especially outside of his 'real-life' existence: he has often been considered to be more of a *motif* in literature and philosophy than a historical figure and as such had an important influence on our understanding of the modern city, albeit via an *imaginary*.

The notion of *flânerie* is essentially a literary gloss: it is uneasily tied to any sociological reality. It is a marriage of several elements including the practices associated with specific sites – the arcades and the galleries, 'les passages' of Paris – and the literary imagination of Paris as a metropolis. ...*Flânerie* was therefore always as much mythic as it was actual. It has something of the quality of oral tradition and bizarre urban myth (...). (Shields, 1994:62)

This particular imaginary was an enchantment with dreams that were created in the consumption spaces of the city (Donald, 1995:83). The enchantment was also always a form of resistance to these developments. The flâneur was always part of the myth, but also the tool to uncover it. He has been proclaimed as at

the same time both 'real' and *imaginary*.¹²⁶ He is a key figure in Benjamin's *Arcades Project* as both a part of the dreamscape, but at the same time also as the dreamscape's discoverer, as part of the creation and destruction both. As such, the flâneur can be labelled, as the concepts myth and motif also suggest, a *metaphor* and a *discursive construct*.

The *flâneur* is the metaphoric figure originally brought into being by Baudelaire as the spectator and depicter of modern life... (Jenks, 1995:145-146)

As a metaphor, the flâneur represents a particular combination of engagement and detachment, especially in times of radical social and cultural changes, but he also displays the image of someone who knows how to handle these changes. The cyberflâneur is not only a recent reappearance of the flâneur-metaphor, but – in its reference to cyberspace – offers an additional metaphoric layer.

The cyberflâneur will feature primarily in the later parts of this chapter, while the original 19th century flâneur-concept will be introduced first. This is a systematic uncovering of layers of meaning in a rather linear fashion that does not necessarily agree with the original concept. The nature of a thesis and the diversity of interpretations of the concept, however, forced me to follow such a fashion. Nonetheless, even in this introduction, I am already entering the sphere of reconstruction and (re-)definition of the original ideas. We are, after all, dealing with a heavily disputed discursive construct. This is enhanced by the metaphoric nature of the construct or, as Graeme Gilloch puts the emphasis slightly differently, its *afterlife*-character:

Benjamin's writings on the flaneur must be understood precisely as a critical intervention in or indeed as the inception of, the afterlife of this figure. The flaneur is resurrected and recast. Benjamin's preoccupation is grounded in contemporary interests rather than historical curiosity. (Gilloch, 1999:104)

This afterlife is the focus not only of Benjamin, but of many writings on the flâneur and on Benjamin himself. I see my own intervention as a similar (re-)construction. It is a way of understanding current cyberspace culture – and its imagined meanings – through the references to the emergence of the modern

¹²⁶ While this *afterlife* gained increasing importance over the years, the question of the extent of his real-life existence seems to have become somewhat obsolete. This debate was primarily kept alive in the discussions around the existence of the flâneuse.

city and the flâneur within it. At the same time, my aim is to evaluate how far this parallel is a useful one and why it has been used in the cyberspace context. I will draw on a number of the countless academic and other flâneur-interpretations in order to sketch and problematise both the original figure and the more recent version. Mine is an enquiry into the usage of the older cultural figure for describing the new. In this I am guided by the idea of the flâneur as “an analytic form, a narrative device, an attitude towards knowledge and its social context” (Jenks, 1995:148).

6.2. The Flâneur Origin

6.2.1. The Authors

The original *flâneur* first appeared in the beginning of the 19th century, both as a real and a literary figure. He was further developed as an important metaphor for modernity by the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and again revived through Walter Benjamin’s (1892-1940) (re)construction of the figure in the early 20th century. At times, both these authors have themselves been described as flâneurs (see e.g. Benjamin, 1999:230).

Baudelaire created the flâneur in clear reference to the illustrator Constantin Guys (1802-92), who he interpreted as capable of grasping the *fleeting* moments that modernity and city-life had brought with them in his drawings. Guy’s motifs were momentary encounters with people and with the city overall. Baudelaire portrayed Guy as someone moving fluidly through social life, which was also constantly moving. The resulting flâneur in Baudelaire immediately banned this social life onto paper. Modern city-life inspired Baudelaire himself to write poems with modernity and the city as its content in an attempt to capture the fleetingness. His definition for the role of modern art was to stabilise the fugitive, to fight the battle between the loss of stability and its recreation. The artist became the hero in this battle (Benjamin, 1997:70-71). The tension between order and chaos is crucial to the *utopian dialectics*. The flâneur, as he represents both change and continuity, has been portrayed as a core instrument for grasping the dialectics.

While Baudelaire used Guys, Benjamin used Baudelaire (who he saw as a bohemian dandy and philosopher) to reconstruct the figure of the flâneur. Benjamin’s flâneur is more ambiguous and manifold than Baudelaire’s. This flâneur sees the meaning of the city (and the crowd) amidst all the confusion of the changing world, i.e. industrialisation and urbanisation. Capturing the

fleetingness has become a form of *reading the city* that is closed to most of its inhabitants, but not to the flâneur. This meaning of the city is never grasped easily. The dialectical aspect of the flâneur's reading of the city can be seen, for example, when he finds his home in the arcades, the new places of consumption. Here, the figure is brutally confronted with the world of capitalism as well as with a first hint of his own eventual ruin. But the flâneur manages to not only ignore the brutality, but also to show it to others. He also does not shy away from the dreamscape, from the fascination with the here fulfilled desires, but he does not ultimately give in to them either. He never actually consumes, although he constantly takes in the sights. And he sees a meaning underneath it all that is hidden to others. At least for a particular moment in time, the flâneur appears to be the embodiment of the 'right way' of dealing with the 'shock of the new' of modernity. This 'right way' suggests a specific *perceptive attitude*. To this, I will return below.

6.2.2. The Places

Paris was simply *the* home of the flâneur. Other authors and other cities also played a role in the creation of this figure, but he was nonetheless in the first instance at home in the French capital. In London, he appeared in the form of the dandy (Stein, 1985:11).¹²⁷ Charles Dickens' stories also provided a similar character, as did Edgar Allen Poe's 'man of the crowd'. A few decades later, Franz Hessel's flâneur filled the gap in Berlin.¹²⁸ Here, however, the flâneur was

¹²⁷ Baudelaire believes that there is a clear difference between the dandy and the flâneur, because the former is ambivalent and at least partly insensitive, which the flâneur is not (Baudelaire, 1964:9). The dandy lives his life as an aesthetic adventure. He is dressed elegantly (but never in a way that could attract too much attention), he is original and anti-romantic, he is ironic and stoic, but mentally agile (see: Gnüg, 1988; Stein, 1985; Pine, 1988). The dandy can also be an oppositional character by being arrogant through which he assumes a certain air of elegance as well as knowledge which diminishes the importance of others around him. His contempt for the masses is part of his being (Featherstone, 1992:269). The English dandy was personified by George (Beau) Brummell, well-known for his friendship to the Prince of Wales (later George IV.), his wit and particularly his dress-sense (Fashion Biographies, 2002). One reason for the lack of a flâneur in London until late in the 19th century is the fact that 19th century London was less infused with public life in general and public life of pleasure in particular (Wilson, 1991:56). On the whole, the dangers and horrors of the growing cities were stressed in literature about London at the time more than in literature about other cities (Nava, 1996:42). Ellen Moers (1960), on the other hand, claims that the dandy was originally a French imitation of the English aristocrat, which was subsequently taken up by the British at the end of the 19th century (1870s-1890s). The dandy reappears in cyberspace as the *data dandy* (Agentur Bilwet, 1994a). But just like his predecessor, his main aim has been described as showing off – now with information rather than clothes and wit. His selective approach is supposed to cover up the lack of content online, impressing other users with his appearance, since they cannot see what lies behind. Just like the cyberflâneur, he uses the mass to differentiate himself.

¹²⁸ Through his writings on the flâneur, Hessel inspired Benjamin's own reflections.

seen as suspicious, because strolling was 'suspected wrongdoing', since one was supposed to be on one's way to somewhere (Hessel, 1984:9).¹²⁹ Rather than a thoughtful wanderer, the flâneur thus became a "werewolf in the social wilderness", as he was always on the run (Benjamin, 1989:526).¹³⁰

Baudelaire, Benjamin and other contemporary writers were the inventors of the flâneur on the literary and theoretical level. Other reflections of the kind have followed since, especially in the last decades. An overall booming interest in Benjamin's writings (and only recently available translations of some of his works) partly explains this boom, but the ability to create the above-mentioned *afterlife* for the figure seems the more important quality for the continued interest. The flâneur can be read as a metaphor for multiple aspects of society; generally interpretable in diverse ways, but not without pre-given, suggested meanings. Thus the flâneur is usually used to reflect about current times.¹³¹

6.2.3. The Texts

Popular texts that described the flâneur always existed besides the literary-theoretical writings. At the same time, the more popular texts often provided inspiration for the literary-theoretical writings. Some of the popular texts also belonged to the literary field, such as travelogues or memoirs; others were newspaper-articles, private letters, pamphlets and similar everyday-writings. Even a newspaper with the title 'Le Flaneur' existed in 1848 (see Fig.5). Wider recognition culminated in an actual reference to the term by the Académie française in 1879 (Ferguson, 1994a:32), albeit in a derogatory fashion. The reference was indicating the imminent decline: flânerie was "wasting one's time on trifles" (Ferguson, 1994b: 112-113).¹³² The range and diversity of texts suggests an existence of the figure outside of the written word alone, but also creates a tension between the different levels of the figure's existence, i.e. between the actual 19th century strollers in Paris and their literary re-workings.

¹²⁹ In his remarks about Franz Hessel's *Strolling in Berlin* (1984), Benjamin states that the close scrutiny of a city is usually done by strangers rather than its original inhabitants and that the city is a mnemotechnical device for the inhabitant which recreates its own as well as the person's individual history.

¹³⁰ "... die Züge des unstet in einer sozialen Wildnis schweifenden Werwolfs annimmt".

Benjamin also adds Berlin's 'boy on the street corner' to this city comparison and claims that the Parisian flâneur stands halfway between the other two (Benjamin, 1997:129).

¹³¹ One important strand has been the flâneuse, a female version of the figure. Reflections and debates concerning the flâneuse are summarised in the cyberflâneuse chapter and related back to the original figure.

¹³² An online dictionary, which cites a dictionary from 1898, (mis-)reads the flâneur as "a loungeur, a gossip" (<http://www.barthley.net/81/6538.html> – accessed 27/05/02). It provides an interesting contrast to the usual picture – maybe this was the new version of the flâneur at the end of the 19th century, the one who had lost trace of its/his origins.

describe landscapes, parts of town and other parts of life in the same manner. The descriptions in these booklets were presented mostly in a humorous, but also in a socially critical manner. The characters were put forward as *types*, of which the flâneur was one. One can thus speak of a *typology* of bourgeois and city characters that was sketched in this literature.

This is one parallel between the context of the cyberflâneur and the context of the original flâneur, i.e. between the typology of (imaginary) Internet user types presented in this thesis and the typology of bourgeois city-characters presented in the physiologies. The physiologies were a particular attempt at trying to stop the unstoppable flow of characters flooding the city, it was an attempt to make something readable that simply was not readable. Similarly, Internet user types emerged at the point when the Internet was suddenly beginning to grow immensely in terms of user numbers, when those who knew and those who were new began to mingle and feel overwhelmed. Thus Internet user types suggest certain generic uses and attitudes to guide users through the fluidity of cyberspace and stabilise it by giving the mass of users labels that make them identifiable, but still hide the individual.

The descriptions in the physiologies were very visual description, i.e. many details about their appearance were presented. This went hand in hand with the new emphasis on the *visual* that had become prevalent in the 19th century. Georg Simmel (1908) commented on the fact that in the metropolis we mostly *see* other people, but do not *hear* them. Benjamin used this as a possible interpretation of the increase of physiologies at the time: he claimed that they “assured people that everyone was, unencumbered by any factual knowledge, able to make out the profession, the character, the background, and the life-style of passers-by. ...If that sort of thing could be done, then, to be sure, life in the big city was not nearly so disquieting as it probably seemed to people” (Benjamin, 1997:39). The reassurance was that the impressions remained interpretable, even if only on the surface. This is also an expression of the marketplace, where the individual is primarily seen as appearance and as type. The analogy would be that Internet users moved into the sphere of types at the point in time when the Internet itself moved to the marketplace and users became marketable segments of an overall population, figures for identification, but not for individual identities. Plus the web is a more surface-oriented part of the Internet, than, for example, discussion groups. For the time being, this is a question rather than an assumption.

At this point, I want to briefly return to Benjamin and his *Arcades Project* as well as to the relationship between the literary forms and the city. Important to note in relation to the *Arcades Project* is the central role that the flâneur has played therein, both in the preserved notes that comprise the current book-version, but also especially in the structure and content of the short exposés that outline the plans for the overall piece. Baron Haussmann features prominently in these, as does Baudelaire, but also the arcades, phantasmagorias and, as a central figure, the flâneur. The literary form that Benjamin himself created in ordering his material has already been described as an early hypertext. The overall array of texts within which the flâneur appears, and particularly the physiologies, also imply a networked complexity of the city and its array of characters and events. The flâneur is thus a multi-layered, complex figure, which is not easily labelled or 'caught' – despite his aim to stabilise the fugitive, despite trying to bring some order into the general chaos. The city is always his connection point, but also the structure he finds himself in.

6.3. Flâneur History: Modernity

... the middle of the century, ... the bloom of flânerie was taking place in the same epoch. (Benjamin, 1989:527)¹³⁵

Consumerism, property development and speculation, accelerating urbanisation, a nascent leisure industry, new communication and transport facilities and other manifestations of economic growth all proliferated in the 1850s to create a modernising ethos of an uncompromisingly capitalist kind. Central to this, both physically and metaphorically, was the reconstruction of Paris, ... (Hobbs, 1998:2)

While the 'real-life' flâneur existed in France from the beginning of the 19th century onwards, the height of his fashion coincided with the July Monarchy (1830-1848), a period which has also been labelled the 'bourgeois monarchy' (Tombs, 1996:354-376). After the revolutionary uprising of 1848-1851 failed, the flâneur returned once more, but at that point he himself was already the indication his own imminent decline. His disengagement – a core element of his being – had kept him from participating in the revolution and would also keep him from adapting to the changes that could no further be resisted. At this point he could no longer fulfil his purpose, which was:

¹³⁵ "... Jahrhundertmitte ...die Blütezeit der Flânerie in dieselbe Epoche fällt."

... looking for that quality which you must allow me to call 'modernity';... He makes it his fashion to extract from history whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory. (Baudelaire, 1964:12)

He could no longer distil the eternal, because on the flâneur's return after 1851, Paris had started to change irrevocably. No pretence was left that things could return to what they used to be (a pretence that the flâneur rebelled against, but also upheld). Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann changed the transitory nature of the city and this did not become the flâneur. Haussmann, who had been invited to change the city by Napoleon III, had accelerated change, so that *speed* became a prime characteristic of this era. Straight and large roads were created to let troops pass more quickly through the city, but also to impress the people with glamorous façades and to fight the spread of diseases. The lasting impression, however, was that life overall was starting to speed up. Travelling, for example, was made faster as railroads were built. Even memory was made more 'effective' as the visual capturing of it changed, i.e. the first photographs appeared.

The flâneur in part resisted this trend (and partly even before it had become apparent). For a short period of time, at about 1840, he was seen in the arcades with a turtle on a leash. This was the pace he wanted the world, especially technical progress, to keep (Benjamin, 1997:129).¹³⁶ He kept 'taking in' time rather than giving it off, loading it "like a battery loads power" (Benjamin, 1989:164).¹³⁷ This particular movement and its speed (and the fact that movement in general characterises the flâneur) is something to keep in mind (and to return to) in relation to the cyberflâneur type. As an expression of the flâneur's *resistance to modernity*, it is an important feature of his and an expression of his overall ambivalence.

6.4. The Flâneur Attitude: Resistance and Ambivalence

6.4.1. The Flâneur and the Crowd

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of

¹³⁶ The fashionable answer to this is Nerval parading lobsters on a leash in the Jardin de Tuileries (Prendergast, 1992:180).

¹³⁷ "Zeit laden, wie eine Batterie Kraft lädt: der Flaneur."

movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; ... (Baudelaire, 1964:9)

The mass in Baudelaire. It is a veil for the flâneur: it is the newest drug of the lonesome. – Secondly, it wipes out any sign of the single person: it is the newest asylum for the banned. – Finally, it is, in the labyrinth of the city, the newest and most unknown labyrinth. (Benjamin, 1989:559)¹³⁸

The formerly unknown mass of people that suddenly flooded the 19th century city provided a veil between the social reality of the urban space and the flâneur: “Because of it [the veil], horrors have an enchanting effect upon him” (Benjamin, 1997:59-60). And, as Benjamin adds, intoxicated by the mass, the flâneur does not “see through the social aura which is crystallised in the crowd” (Benjamin, 1997:66). This is partly because he adds elements to this experience. Through its later transformation into art or poetry or other writings, social reality is turned into an *artistically enhanced meaning*, but also the only ‘true’ meaning available.

It is to him [the flâneur], aimlessly strolling through the crowds in the big cities in contrast to their hurried, purposeful activity, that things reveal themselves in their secret meaning: ‘The true picture of the past flits by’ (*Philosophy of History*) and only the flâneur who idly strolls by receives the message. (Arendt, 1992:18)¹³⁹

Only the flâneur can see the crowd for what it ‘really is’. The fleetingness of the impressions is essential for the flâneur’s perception. Women, for example, are included in this as the passing beauty – necessary for his gaze, but to remain at a distance. The flâneur needed the crowd for his reading of the city, but at the same time he could never have been a part of them.¹⁴⁰ His whole being is about disengagement in combination with an ability to see beyond the surface. Both of these attributes are mutually dependent on each other. The disengagement of the flâneur was not yet as clearly present in Baudelaire. Instead, in Baudelaire the mass is still described as something that lets the flâneur be part of it and

¹³⁸ “Die Masse bei Baudelaire. Sie legt sich als Schleier vor den Flaneur: sie ist das neueste Rauschmittel des Vereinsamten. – Sie verwischt, zweitens, alle Spuren des Einzelnen: sie ist das neueste Asyl des Geächteten. – Sie ist, endlich, im Labyrinth der Stadt das neueste und unerforschlichste Labyrinth.”

¹³⁹ Benjamin himself has described the ‘Angel of History’ as always looking back, not facing the future. Thus the past is what we need to consider.

¹⁴⁰ Neither does he engage with the consumerist objects laid out before him. They are necessary for his perception, as objects for his gaze, but not as something to occupy himself with on an equal footing. People overall were not only beginning to understand themselves as part of a *mass*, but of a mass of *consumers*. The notion of mass was for the first time based on abundance rather than lack. Being in the mass started to also include the spectacle. All of this the flâneur does not partake in (Benjamin, 1989:93).

that the flâneur enjoys. In Benjamin, the mass becomes the dividing line between the city and the flâneur (while it at the same time protects him and enhances his perception). Here, ambiguity and ambivalence are beginning to rule. The crowd exists as a space for the flâneur's projections, but he is also a space for their projection. According to Benjamin (and Baudelaire), the flâneur uses the individuals within the crowd to identify with in order to understand his surroundings differently.

Empathy is the nature of the intoxication to which the *flâneur* abandons himself in the crowd. 'The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else as he sees fit. Like a roving soul in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes...' [Baudelaire] (Benjamin, 1997:55)

On first sight, this 'entering someone' (a possible identification with someone) seems a slight contradiction to the assumed distance of the flâneur. However, his engagement is at the fantastic rather than the 'real' level, i.e. one can argue that he does not properly see the individuals *as such* when he 'identifies' with them, but that he only uses them to pursue his creative career, uses them as *types* to describe and understand the city. The general tone of interpretations of the flâneur-figure underlines this impression and suggests a problematic public figure whose relationship to the crowd is an uneasy one.¹⁴¹

... flânerie is a sociability of Ones.(...) This is the life of watching the world go by, not ever exchanging a word acknowledging the presence of an Other. (Shields, 1994:77)

Instead, the flâneur's obsession is the city (Ferguson, 1994a:33). And the cyberflâneur is similarly possessed by cyberspace: "The emergence of computer culture from the intoxication of the strolling [= 'flanieren']" (Idensen & Krohn, 1997).¹⁴² But the cyberflâneur is also intoxicated with himself and his exaggerated self-image. The original flâneur 'achieved' the intoxication via the empathy with people as types.¹⁴³ Wavering between distance and involvement,

¹⁴¹ Read more positively, the flâneur's anonymity enables him to communicate in ways otherwise not possible (Schlese & Wagner, 1994:20). And he is simply looking for something more than himself, he is "an 'I' with an insatiable appetite for the 'non-I' at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive" (Baudelaire, 1964:9-10). Overall, Baudelaire's reading the figure is a more positive one than Benjamin's (and also than my own).

¹⁴² "Die Entstehung der Computerkultur aus dem Rausch des Flanierens."

¹⁴³ The flâneur reached another kind of intoxication whenever he was in a state of bodily exhaustion – tired, hungry and worn-out, but especially in denial of all these bodily needs – so that he ultimately collapsed in his room (Benjamin, 1989:525). It shows the extent of his identification with the city and a certain level of self-denial.

the flâneur is not totally removed from the flâneuse position. The (male) flâneur gets the label 'feminine', because aimless, goal-free strolling in combination with passive observation is perceived as feminine (Weigel, 1996:88-89). The leisurely entertainment which this behaviour represents, in combination with the close relationship to consumption and the fact that the flâneur is hardly ever seen properly, add to this ambivalent image.¹⁴⁴ Maybe for this reason, the flâneur tries very hard to distance himself from femininity. He stresses his male gaze, especially in relation to prostitutes, but also in relation to the commodity – he looks, but does not buy. He needs the display of goods and services, but he does not use them. He thus makes sure that he differs from the flâneuse, but shows resemblances nonetheless. Even the flâneur's movement expresses ambiguity: he is always already half-way out again when he has only just entered. He moves in and out of the mass of people and thus gets never totally lost in the crowd. This movement expresses doubt, which is articulated in another Benjamin reference:

The underlying indecision of the flâneur. Just like waiting seems to be the real type of being of the contemplative non-mover, having doubts seems to be the flâneur's state. ...Movement with the feeling of doubts ... (Benjamin, 1989:535-536)¹⁴⁵

The flâneur wavers between the role as a spectator and the role of the participant, between involvement and detachment (Featherstone, 1998:913), in a dialectic form of (dis-)engagement and thus also in a form of utopian dialectics. Exactly through these ambivalences, he stimulates the imagination of others. The flâneur as artist goes one step further: through art his recognition of the nature of the crowd can be used purposefully, i.e. to shock people out of their complacency. All of the above described are constitutive or part of the *dreamscape* that the flâneur (in combination with the city) embodies, but also uncovers.

Ferguson reminds us of a remaining danger, however, because the flâneur, in his disengagement, is potentially suspended from social responsibilities. He is disengaged, not interested (Ferguson, 1994a:26). The flâneur – always seen as the one who can understand the city better – does not engage himself with its inhabitants (see also Hartmann, 2000). But what

¹⁴⁴ His feminine aspects might be one reason why there was no flâneuse for a long time.

¹⁴⁵ "Die eigentliche Unschlüssigkeit des Flanierenden. Wie das Warten der eigentliche Zustand des unbeweglich Kontemplativen so scheint das Zweifeln der des Flanierenden zu sein. ... Beschwingtheit mit dem Gefühl des Zweifels..."

undiscovered meanings does one find when one has no real engagement with the subjects who one claims to understand better than they themselves? Or is the flâneur after all purely a projection of those who want to engage in a disengaged manner?

6.4.2. The Flâneur and his Occupation

The leisurely walk in the city could tempt one to mistake the flâneur for the tourist. The tourist, however, cannot be a real flâneur because he lacks the intimate knowledge of the city, which is a precondition for flânerie.¹⁴⁶ The author of the Berlin-flâneur, Hessel, took on the role of the flâneur. In this role, he actually got on a bus for a tourist tour, but he clearly differentiated between what he saw or rather *how* he saw it from what/how the tourists saw the city. His is a different perception that is enhanced through new means of viewing the already known, viewing the everyday experience from a different angle. He shares with the tourist the *appearance* of leisure, but not ultimately its enactment:

Let the many attend to their daily affairs; the man of leisure can indulge in the perambulations of the flâneur only if as such he is already out of place. He is as much out of place in an atmosphere of complete leisure as in the feverish turmoil of the city. (Benjamin, 1997:129)

From the outside, the flâneur is simply seen as the wandering figure, taking in the sights. However, he is more complex than that.¹⁴⁷ The 'intelligence of seeing' is after all what makes him what he is.

But even the flâneur eventually found himself under too much social pressure to have an occupation. The flâneur therefore added to the general confusion about his figure by taking on many guises. It is not quite clear whether his 'audience' simply imagined him with these occupations or whether

¹⁴⁶ Nonetheless, more recently the tourist has repeatedly been interpreted as a flâneur. Eeva Jokinen and Soile Veijla go as far as describing the tourist-/flâneur as *the* metaphor for the (post-)modern condition (Jokinen & Veijla, 1997:23). The equation of the flâneur with the postmodern condition is an indication of the state he is in at this moment in time. He has lost his ground entirely (and thus the stability he never had). As the tourist he loses the intimate knowledge of the banal everyday life and thus he cannot decipher the dreamscape. If he has lost his power to decipher, however, he has been turned into simply another label, available to anyone at any time.

¹⁴⁷ There are other, similar characters which could easily be mistaken for flâneurs: "The *badaud* is the gawker, who sees but without intelligence (there are in fact two sorts of *badaud* - the *badaud étranger*, the tourist, who sees only once and who therefore lacks all intimate knowledge of the city, and the *badaud indigène*, who sees routinely but passively); the *musard*, who sees nothing, who sniffs the city, but does not know how to 'savour' it; the *batteur de pavé* is the lowest of the low, the parasite or street hustler (close to the category of the *mendiant*)." (Prendergast, 1992:135)

he actually pursued them, since the flâneur generally was supposed to be 'looked at' rather than 'spoken to'.¹⁴⁸ He was a *space to project onto*. In terms of occupations, the flâneur has been described as the connoisseur, the physiologist, the artist, the intellectual, the small lawyer's assistant. He was seen as a journalist¹⁴⁹, more recently, a sociologist.¹⁵⁰ His outward 'laziness' was supposedly just covering up intense other activities of the mind.¹⁵¹ Hidden behind the façade of the uninvolved was the attentiveness of the observer or the perpetrator (Benjamin, 1989:554).¹⁵² In the end, this hidden occupation was not enough: growing capitalism needed people to be productive in an outwardly visible sense. Benjamin claims that the flâneur fully understood this version of the exchange value, because the flâneur "takes the term 'to buy' itself for a walk"¹⁵³ and eventually became a commodity himself – in his last incarnation as the sandwich-man, i.e. the one who carries around advertising attached to his body. This, however, was also the flâneur's final degradation (Benjamin, 1989:562).

The flâneur was also ambivalent on the level of changes. He usually held on to the old while not entirely rejecting the new. He thus remained an in-between.¹⁵⁴ This he partly achieved by ignoring or shutting out social reality, as was already visible in the (dis-)engagement. For the flâneur everything –

¹⁴⁸ Richard Sennett even claims that only in watching (of a particular kind) one can truly understand the flâneur (Sennett, 1986:212-213). For me the question is rather whether anyone can ever truly understand the flâneur.

¹⁴⁹ The journalist gains the air of the fantastic (Benjamin, 1989a:559-560).

¹⁵⁰ Referring to Frisby, Gilloch summarises: "The flâneur becomes an image of the (proto-) sociologist..." (Gilloch, 1999:106). Similarly, Tester declares Benjamin to be the sociologist in his descriptions of flânerie (Tester, 1994:89).

¹⁵¹ In the most extreme, the flâneur has been compared to the savage (or the earlier mentioned werewolf). Like the savage, he has to find clues in the 'wilderness' (of Paris) in order to read the space, the threatened surroundings of his former glory.

¹⁵² The detective became more common, especially in terms of fiction, at the time that Baudelaire was developing the flâneur idea. Baudelaire had also translated Poe, one of the first authors of the detective story (Priestman, 1990:36). Sylvia Stöbe (1999) sees a change from the totally disengaged flâneur to the flâneur with an aim or a task (the detective, the artist, etc.), which she sees as a degradation – flânerie becomes a tool rather than an aim in itself.

¹⁵³ "... führt den Begriff der Käuflichkeit selber spazieren."

¹⁵⁴ Baudelaire was also inspired by Edgar Ellen Poe's writings, some of which he had translated into French. In *The Man of the Crowd*, Poe describes a convalescent (himself?) who sits in a café, letting the world pass by until he is so taken in by a certain face, that he gets up and runs after it, disappearing into the crowd. "I was surprised, however, to find, upon his having made the circuit of the square, that he turned and retraced his steps. Still more was I astonished to see him repeat the same walk several times – ... 'This old man,' I said at length, 'is the type and the genius of the deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd.'" (Poe, 1982:478-481). This 'man of the crowd' is the ur-version of the flâneur, but is very uncomfortable in his own company (Benjamin, 1997:48). He is afraid of the evening, because everything closes down and everyone disappears. His whole secret is his longing to be within, but not with. He thus appears psychotic and rather 'empty' in his approaches. The flâneur has lost some of that fear.

including the city's inhabitants – became a spectacle in this “looking-glass city” and a “City of Mirrors” (Buck-Morss, 1989:81-82), but one that only he understood. On yet another level the city itself is dialectical for the flâneur: on the one hand, it is landscape, on the other it is his living-room (Benjamin, 1989:525) and he is also “the totally suspicious” (as we saw in the Berlin-reference) and “the totally disappearing” (Benjamin, 1989:529), bridging the gap between being the invisible and the most visible.¹⁵⁵ He needed his surroundings like a mirror to assure himself of his own existence.

6.5. Decline of the Flâneur?

The flâneur seemed to have eventually left the streets of Paris. It appeared to have been a figure of a certain time and was expected not to return. One reason for its supposed decline was seen in the change of the role of women in public life. They began to move more freely through the city and the department stores in the second half of the 19th century, so that some claimed that the flâneuse had arrived (see debate in next chapter). The flâneuse is thus mentioned as either the reason or at least a symptom of the flâneur's decline.¹⁵⁶ Other reasons mentioned are increasing traffic on the one hand and increasing commercialisation on the other hand. The commercialisation eventually led to the take-over of the department store from the arcades.¹⁵⁷

... the department store, which made use of *flânerie* itself in order to sell goods. The department store was the *flâneur's* final coup. As *flâneurs*, the intelligentsia came into the market place. As they thought, to observe it – but in reality it was already to find a buyer. (Benjamin, 1997:170-171)

No longer can the flâneur resist the forces of capitalism and modernity. The idea of a ‘disengaged engagement’, which the flâneur seemed to embody, is here destroyed. It is replaced by a pragmatism concerning the need to sell one's ideas, which would not sit too happily with the original flâneur concept. The decline seems clear.

Concepts such as the afterlife (Gilloch, 1999) and the idea of the flâneur as

¹⁵⁵ “Dialektik der flânerie: einerseits der Mann, der sich von allem und allen angesehen fühlt, der Verdächtige schlechthin, andererseits der völlig Unauffindbare, Geborgene. Vermutlich ist es eben diese Dialektik, die ‘Der Mann der Menge’ entwickelt.”

¹⁵⁶ Where the flâneuse is described as the reason for his decline, she simply replaced and annihilated the flâneur (Ferguson, 1994a:27).

¹⁵⁷ The first department store was opened in 1852 (Schaper, 1988:17).

a possible mode of being-in-the-world (see Buck-Morss below) or the idea of the flâneur as primarily a *discursive construct*, all question the decline claim. Therefore even the question whether the flâneur was actually as exemplary for the experience of urbanity within modernity as has been claimed (see Wilson, 1992), remains not only unanswered, but potentially should re-focus on the now instead. Whatever the original concept suggests, is it still relevant for our current experiences? Some of the recent theorisations seem to suggest that the flâneur is highly relevant in relation to different media technologies, from mobile phones to televisions:

Today, the users of walkmans and cellular phones, like Baudelaire's stroller, transport their private sphere with them. They are in an anonymous crowd, listening to the music they like; they are absent from their home or office yet in potential telecommunication with the whole world. (Flichy, 1995:168)

It was Adorno who pointed to the station-switching behaviour of the radio listener as a kind of aural flânerie. (Buck-Morss, 1989:345)¹⁵⁸

Baudrillard tied the *flâneur* to the armchair in front of the TV set. (Bauman, 1992:154)

If the station-switching of the radio listener did already 'contain' flânerie, albeit of an aural kind, then television and its more recent development of channel-hopping or zapping seem to come even closer to the original idea of flânerie.¹⁵⁹ Television and computers include the visual (the window-on-the-world). This corresponds with the increasing importance of the visual in the context of modernity. In comparison, radio and its lack of imagery seem on first sight an odd version of flânerie (while mobile telephony or *phonerie*¹⁶⁰ – in allowing the stroll in the city – seem on first sight a return to the origin). It is, however, the station-switching, the *fleetingness*, which expresses a main aspect of flânerie. Thus whether the impression is aural or visual – or indeed textual – makes a difference, but it is not crucial. In this view, the concept of flânerie can be transferred from its original meaning and medium to other surroundings, because it is based in the perceptive attitude of the user/viewer/listener/stroller. Thus mobile telephony, in switching the attention from the

¹⁵⁸ Susan Buck-Morss provides no reference for this claim. I have followed it up, but have not been able to find this reference until now. I contacted Buck-Morss herself, but her reply has not provided the desired result either.

¹⁵⁹ TV zapping is one origin of the surfer-terminology.

¹⁶⁰ Robert Luke (2001) coined this term and also speaks of the *phoneur*, while Lucy Kimbell (2001) speaks of *cellular flânerie*.

surroundings to an aural sphere, and usually a one-to-one communication, is not per se an expression of *flânerie*.¹⁶¹

The transfer-potential of *flânerie* was similarly interpreted and anticipated by Susan Buck-Morss, who claimed traces of *flânerie* not just in radio, but in other activities related to aspects of mass society, ranging from advertising to sex magazines (Buck-Morss, 1986:105).¹⁶² She suggested an abstraction from the original, when she stated that the *actually* strolling *flâneur* had disappeared (and with it the utopian longing attached to it), while the *concept* of the *flâneur* was embodied mainly in the *perceptive attitude* and was therefore still 'alive'. According to Buck-Morss, this perceptive attitude was enhanced through the emergence of mass communication, which showed us our own "consumerist mode of being-in-the-world" (Buck-Morss, 1989:344-345), replicating the *flâneur*, who had been allowed to 'look, but don't touch'.

I only partially agree with this interpretation. The perceptive attitude as the core of the *flâneur*-concept is also my argument. However, I still regard the spatial aspect, i.e. the structure of the accessed impressions (information or communication), as crucial. Thus the references to the city and the related versions of knowledge-acquisition, i.e. juxtapositions and montage-principle, are all important here. These kinds of perceptive combinations are, however, not entirely caught in the concept of the *consumerist* mode. Montage still needs the user to be actively engaged in meaning-making. The perceptive attitude, which is constantly on the move between different impressions and levels of involvement, needs the user to combine and create their own meanings. It is a replication, rather, of the artistic mode in the original *flâneur*, i.e. the need to produce art or poetry or theory from whatever is distilled from the fragmented, fluid environment. This kind of consumption, albeit based on a variety of offers, remains within the 'dialectics of creation' (rather than 'dialectics of seeing', as Buck-Morss calls it). Only here can he move between engagement and disengagement, between structure and agency and thus embody the utopian

¹⁶¹ The engagement with the actual city surroundings becomes increasingly more feeble, if not outright dangerous. The concentration is entirely on the virtual headspace. The engagement tends to be with one other person rather than something larger. Thus the cellular *flânerie* concept is interesting in terms of the invasion of what used to be private (a one-to-one conversation) into the public sphere (compare Sussex Technology Group, 2001). The original *flâneur* also blurred this divide, but on a more abstract level, when he made the city his living-room.

¹⁶² Although Buck-Morss wrote her main texts before the Internet became widespread, Elizabeth Wilson reads her as having extended this to even more 'up-to-date' media *flâneurs*. Next to the radio listener (station-switching) is the TV viewer (programme-switching), but also the Internet surfer (website-hopping) and even the tourist on package tours (attraction-hopping) (Wilson, 2001:91).

dialectics. Without this normative claim, the flâneur loses out to the forces he was originally dialectically engaged with.

Another, related difference between the versions of flânerie listed as new, it seems to me, is that radio and TV 'flâneurs' are never inside the medium, while the original flâneur was *immersed* in the city (no matter how ambivalent his immersion was). While the cyberflâneur is still in front of a screen (which all the user types try to negotiate and make accessible), he can also be seen to be part of the medium, because he has at least the possibility to create content for/within the medium. And in the case of the cyberflâneur, this productivity is indeed visible.

Hence I side with the idea that the flâneur concept – despite all its problematic aspects – should be revised rather than declared as 'in decline' or dead. A similar point is made by the British sociologist Mike Featherstone, when he asks for a revision of the decline theory and prefers instead to simply allow changes to the figure. In order to allow this, certain developments, such as feminisation, massification, democratisation, should not be seen as removed from the earlier concept (Featherstone, 1998:914-915). Similar to Gilloch's stress on the afterlife of Benjamin's ideas, Featherstone's emphasis on a potential adaptation of the concept actually underlines its importance. To remove it from the role as a purely historical concept is to recognise the concept as relevant today. My own re-definition would not be Featherstone's 'electronic flâneur', which consists of an extension of certain aspects of the original flâneur (Featherstone, 1998:919-923). Instead, my own re-working of the original concept led me to create the *cyberflâneuse*, a concept that combines a kind of feminisation and other redefinitions – all with the help of and against the original concept, but also in contrast to the cyberflâneur. Thus this particular extension of the original, the cyberflâneur, will be introduced next.

6.6. Flâneur Today: The Cyberflâneur?

The flâneur, once a cultural figure of the 19th century, has returned as cyberflâneur or electronic flâneur. ...The cyberflâneur steers through the new rooms as the cyberpunk through the data worlds, but he [the

cyberflâneur] has the countenance, the elegance and the intellectual sharpness of the flâneur. (Sopro International, 1999)¹⁶³

This electronic flâneur, otherwise also described as a *flâneur in cyberspace*, a *fast-forward flâneur*, a *keyboard flâneur*, a *net-flâneur*, a *virtual flâneur*, an *online flâneur* or a *postmodern flâneur*, has been used by some web-users to describe their own or other people's online behaviour and experiences.¹⁶⁴ The cyberflâneur was particularly prominent particularly in the mid-1990s. As one of the latest versions of the afterlife of the flâneur, the cyberflâneur is often promoted as an expression of the simple equation between the city and the online sphere: "What the city and the street were to the Flâneur, the Internet and the Superhighway have become to the Cyberflâneur" (Goldate, 1997). The concept identifies its authors as having a certain *attitude towards* and a certain *understanding of* cyberspace: "he [the cyberflâneur] claims to be knowledgeable and distanced" (Porombka, 1997) or, as quoted above, intellectually sharp.¹⁶⁵

On first sight, the cyberflâneur appears to be an *exaggerated* image of the flâneur, extending some of the more prominent features and taking them onto another, sometimes bizarre, level. On second sight, the cyberflâneur appears to *lose* some of the ambiguity that still characterised the original flâneur. This is a problematic move. Thus the cyberflâneur conveys the image of someone who is able not only to deal with the shock of the new, i.e. to use it constructively, but he has the air of someone who simply knows better than the rest. Again, he is not part of the crowd, but has an ambivalent relationship to it. He cannot be without the crowd, but he will not be one of them. Stephan Porombka's (1997) claim that the electronic version of the flâneur is now a *cult figure* instead of a *cultural figure* pinpoints the problem. A cyberflâneur is generally perceived as someone who has not been hypnotised by the new media but who is able to *reflect* despite being a constant stroller within the virtual spaces. The idea of the cyberflâneur promoting himself as capable of this reflection is a first hint of the loss of ambiguity.

Today, the cyberflâneur-concept is not new anymore. The flâneur has inhabited virtual space for a long time, at least since 1994 (see Idensen & Krohn, 1994;

¹⁶³ "Der Flaneur, einst eine Kulturfigur im 19. Jahrhundert, ist als Cyberflaneur oder als elektronischer Flaneur zurückgekehrt. ...Der Cyberflaneur steuert durch die neuen Räume wie der Cyberpunk durch die Datenwelten, hat aber die Contenance, die Eleganz und die intellektuelle Schärfe des Flaneurs."

¹⁶⁴ For reasons of simplicity, I will refer to this user type primarily as cyberflâneur throughout. This is the term as I first ever encountered it.

¹⁶⁵ "...vor allem gibt er sich abgeklärt, abgebrüht und distanziert. "

Porombka, 1997). Although he still exists, his heyday has been in 1997 and 1998. The cyberflâneur has not necessarily captured the general imagination. It is not a widely used user type. Debates around it have, however, been fierce. To try to find some reasons for the strong reaction is one of the tasks of this chapter. The question is important because the cyberflâneur has also stubbornly refused to budge; it has not simply begun to disappear as other user types do. This is here explained with the concept's ability to summarise important aspects of the online sphere as an emerging cultural form.

Although I argue against a simple equation of city space and online sphere, I do consider the city context a key to understanding cyberspace in general and the cyberflâneur concept in particular. It is the structure of the city as well as its encouragement of encounters that interests me. This is the particular dynamic of the city that has been captured so well in the flâneur figure and Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. This is further related to the textual structures underlying the cyberflâneur conceptualisation. Similar aspects to those discussed in relation to both the flâneur and Benjamin's work in general, will here be reconsidered within the new, virtual context. Prominent in all this is the question of firstly the relationship of the user type to the medium and secondly the imagination of the medium contained in the user type.

First I summarise some major texts in which the cyberflâneur appears. The examples were chosen from the most prominent cyberflâneur-texts, i.e. those that were repeatedly referred to in other texts and that kept re-appearing in a number of different online (and offline) searches. Since the number of the texts found was limited, it can be assumed that this is a fairly representative summary of contents.¹⁶⁶

6.6.1. Some Cyberflâneur References

A couple of preliminary remarks about the position these texts were written from: the main texts come from a set of authors who all appear to have a particular use for the new medium in their working lives (as topic and/or as tool). They range from an architect to artists to academics, but additionally show a clear affinity with the new technologies. Thus the authors are part of an information elite. Some of the texts have appeared in books, but most of them

¹⁶⁶ As should have already become clear in the Methodology chapter, these kinds of social science research categories are not always simply transferable to the online sphere. A representative sample of websites is a particularly tricky question, but once a similar set of sites is found whenever a new search is attempted allows the conclusion that a certain level has been reached.

stem from websites only. In their general appearance these sites are fairly similar and do not differ radically in appearance from the site that has been analysed in more detail (see section 6.6.2). Their differences can primarily be found in the degree of rejection or embrace of the cyberflâneur concept and particularly in the extent of their reference to the original concept.

One site that stands out is that of the German net artists and net-authors Heiko Idensen and Matthias Krohn. In 1994 they were amongst the earliest users of the concept of flânerie in the online context. On their site they state rather poetically that “the screen winks at the flâneur” and that computer culture emerges “from the intoxication of the flânerie. Screen as streets and homes ...of the crowd?” (Idensen & Krohn, 1997).¹⁶⁷ Idensen and Krohn’s brief, but playful use of the flânerie-concept for online use and user did not spread far. It is embedded in an artistic piece, which plays with ideas of movement, reading, computer interfaces, creativity and escape. This piece is the result of an email-exchange between the two authors, which partly explains the fragmentary nature of the piece. The authors then organised their data according to a certain logic of associative thinking. This reflects their idea of how information online is gathered and exchanged, i.e. how one moves online between different fragments of texts. What Idensen and Krohn thus provide is a literary form of net art. They produce highly hyperlinked, fragmented and associative texts, which have the net-use and literary associations as their topic. Idensen and Krohn’s use of the cyberflâneur-concept differs substantially from most others in so far as they actually try to *implement* the *practice* that they associate with online flânerie. I will return to their implementation in more detail.

Lucy Kimbell from the UK, another artist who works with new technologies, has also been crucial in creating the association of online art with flânerie. She is the one of the few women I traced who has published on the topic of the cyberflâneur.¹⁶⁸ Kimbell differs from Idensen and Krohn in the sense that she does not engage the flâneur for her artistic work directly, but uses the concept for theoretical reflections instead. Comparatively speaking, her use of the flâneur, at least in her original text, is not very experimental or artistic. She does

¹⁶⁷ “... der Bildschirm blinzelt zum Flaneur. ...Die Entstehung der Computerkultur aus dem Rausch des Flanierens. Bildschirme als Straßen und Wohnungen ..., der Menge?”

¹⁶⁸ Roseanne Alluquère Stone (1995) is the only other explicit user to mention the ‘fast forward’ flâneur. But – in contrast to Kimbell – Stone has used the term only offline and only as self-description without explanation or analysis.

not directly engage many of the possibilities that the medium offers (for example interactive elements). Instead, Kimbell remains on the textual level. The first flâneur-essay of hers was entitled *Cyberspace and subjectivity: the MOO as the home of the post-modern flâneur* (1997). This text was distributed relatively widely online and fairly often referenced. In this essay Kimbell claims that:

...the flâneur slips easily into discourses about cyberspace. The same evanescent character who wandered through the Parisian boulevards of the French poet Charles Baudelaire, and from there can be glimpsed sauntering across the pages of many a critical text, now has a new space through which to roam, the virtual chat rooms, meeting places and cafes of the Internet. (Kimbell, 1997)

A similar tone can be found in William Mitchell's references to the flâneur-concept. Mitchell not only is Professor of Architecture, but also the Academic Head of Media Arts and Sciences at the MIT, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the U.S. The MIT is a renowned pool for the creation and theorisation of new technologies. Mitchell's identity as an electronic flâneur was distributed widely through his book (and website) *City of Bits* (1995). He was one of the first users of the electronic flâneur label, which he employed as a *self-description*: "My name is wjm@mit.edu (though I have many aliases) and I am an electronic flâneur. I hang out on the network" (Mitchell, 1995:7).¹⁶⁹ In his clear identification with the concept, Mitchell is rather an exception. It is an identity that is backed up by knowledge about the literary origin in Baudelaire, even if this is only given away in a footnote (Mitchell, 1995:175). On the surface, Mitchell only associates a diverse range of online actions with flânerie, as for example checking e-mails and news services. Any further explanation of the relationship of these actions to the cyberflânerie is lacking. Instead, his concern with the flâneur is primarily embedded in an overall concern about architecture in the online context and about the comparison between the net and cities:

The online environment of the future will increasingly resemble traditional cities in their variety of distinct places, in the extent and complexity of the 'street networks' and 'transportation system' linking these places, in their capacity to engage our sense, and in their social and cultural richness. (Mitchell, 1995:121)

Overall, Mitchell shows a rather optimistic assessment of the role of new media in bringing about radical social changes in the near future. In terms of his

¹⁶⁹ Mitchell has been quoted much as 'electronic flâneur' and the term became more widely used in relation to the new technologies thanks to this quote (e.g. Hubrich, 1998).

acceptance of such potential changes, he is sweeping. Partly because of this identity-claim, but also because of the widespread publicity for his book, he is in many ways *the* architect of the electronic flâneur. Some other authors, such as Goldate, aided this widespread distribution:

The Cyberflâneur 'strolls' through information space, taking in the virtual architecture and remaining anonymous. ...If the Flâneur was a 'decipherer of urban and visual texts' ...then the Cyberflâneur is a decipherer of Virtual Reality and Hypertexts (Goldate, 1997)

Steven Goldate is another early user of the cyberflâneur-concept (and one of the most referenced, apart from Mitchell). Goldate shares Mitchell's sweeping belief in the Internet as a social force and embeds his idea of the flâneur within this belief. His article 'The 'Cyberflâneur' – Spaces and Places on the Internet' (1997) first appeared in the Australian art magazine *Art Monthly*, but then was put online, where it spread more widely. Goldate, an Australian ceramic artist, uses a fairly simplistic equation to frame the cyberflâneur. He begins, like Mitchell, with a clear differentiation of cyberspace to otherwise experienced space and claims that cyberspace is like no other space we know. Despite this beginning, he somehow ends up with merely equating the web sphere and city space and assuming a process of replacement. The visual, for example, has supposedly been replaced by hypertext; the museum has become a virtual museum. In Goldate's version, the features of the original flâneur have not been replaced or changed, but simply exaggerated. Thus Goldate does not fully exploit his apparent knowledge of the original concept. Instead, the original feature of anonymity becomes the most important feature of the cyberflâneur: "Poignant is here the Internet figure of the 'lurker', defined as someone who reads newsgroup or Listserv messages without responding to them, thus remaining unnoticed" (Goldate, 1997). Goldate uses the word 'voyeur' to describe the cyberflâneur and describes him as the voyeur who 'knows all'. The consequences of the implied anonymity are not questioned. Through claiming this unspecified and generalised behaviour for the cyberflâneur, the figure loses its specificity. Goldate's cyberflâneur simply wants to be unnoticed. This cyberflâneur goes one step further than Mitchell's, whose electronic flâneur was still very much on display. The conflict between participation and observation, as seen in the original concept, is entirely lost in either approach. So are most other aspects of his ambiguity. Goldate does not state that he himself is a flâneur, but he definitely reinforces the concept. Despite his own artistic roots, Goldate shows no inclination to use the flâneur directly for his art.

Much more ambiguous in their assessment of the concept are two German critics: Florian Rötzer, a new media theorist, and Stephan Porombka, an academic who works in the field of (new) German literature. Rötzer, for example, desires a permanent departure from this fascinating figure of modernity. The particular mixture of similarities and differences between the old and the new concept makes the new one particularly despicable in his eyes. For Rötzer, one difference between the two – and one I do not entirely agree with – is the speed of their movement. While the original flâneur was known for his turtle walk and the therein implied slowness, Rötzer's net-version is only concerned with fast speed.¹⁷⁰ His cyberflâneur has no patience left, because he has grown up with all possible technologies and fears nothing more than a possible slowness of the net.

...never really settles, always afraid to miss something, driven by the desire to meet the new and foreign and from the inability to be by himself. In this the flâneur is similar to the zapper, who runs through the media offerings... (Rötzer, 1997a)¹⁷¹

On a more positive note, Rötzer acknowledges that the cyberflâneur has the knowledge about dark and hidden, but also "extravagant and innovative" spaces in common with the original flâneur. Rötzer's net flâneur thus experiences much of cyberspace that the rest of the users will never get to know. This flâneur knows the net rather well, since he constantly speeds through it, but he cannot rest and actually engage with what is on offer. It is assumed that in the web he does not have to reveal himself and thus can keep his privacy. This anonymity protects him and offers him the space to be – yet again – a voyeur (Rötzer, 1997a). Thus Rötzer's net flâneur shares some aspects with Goldate's version, but is described in a much more critical light.

Porombka's is an even more severe criticism of the concept. He suggests that the cyberflâneur covers up an existing lack: always on the run, the figure remains merely a fetish (1997). Rötzer's idea of speed had suggested a similar desire not to stand still and reflect. This is a desire to cover up emptiness. The flâneur becomes a fetish, because all the aspects which others are afraid of, the flâneur embraces and claims to enjoy. This can be loneliness, for example. Thus

¹⁷⁰ Speed is also a main focus of another flâneur-recreation, where the cyberflâneur is seen as letting his 'fingers do the walking'. Again the speed with which he moves is used to differentiate him from the rest (Sopro International, 1998).

¹⁷¹ "... sich auch nirgendwo niederläßt, getrieben von der Angst, etwas zu verpassen, von der Lust stets auf Neues und Fremdes zu stoßen, und von dem Ungenügen, es bei sich selbst auszuhalten. Darin eben gleicht der Flâneur dem Zapper, der durch die Medienangebote eilt."

he seems to be the solution to everyone's anxieties.¹⁷² Hence, Porombka claims, the electronic flâneur considers himself to be the *focal point of the net*. He has been sold as the tool for *self-reflection* of computer culture and is, in replication of the original flâneur, a *utopian focus*:

He takes his existential crisis as the basis for a utopian form of existence, the perfect embodiment of which he presents himself as. (Porombka, 1997)¹⁷³

Porombka's emphasis is on what he considers to be the negative part of the image of the original flâneur, which he sees even more clearly applied in the electronic flâneur. This negative part is the exaggerated image that the user of the term is creating of him- or herself. This self-description does not admit to the limitations of the (online) worlds.

The figure of the flâneur serves as a costume, a fetish which one uses in order to imagine incredible powers. Powers, which one needs in order to deal with threatening situations ...we have to investigate one of the identity models in the net culture with which megalomania gets cultivated there. (Porombka, 1997)¹⁷⁴

Underlying Porombka's assessment is an image of the net as a threat. This is an important reference point for a comparison of this user type to others. In my interpretation, Porombka's version becomes an exaggeration of the original concept that would in the end lead to the concept's overall annihilation. The original ambivalence simply disappears, to a great extent because it was not included in Porombka's understanding of the original. In one regard at least, Porombka's cyberflâneur develops a new ambiguity instead: he builds up a new relationship to the crowd. The idea of being totally hidden disappears. Instead, this electronic flâneur lets himself be admired. A fetish is something to look at (and not touch!), something that one will never get to know, but it is also something that needs to be recognisable at least.

In these texts of Rötzer and Porombka, the cyberflâneur appears as a very problematic, but also a fascinating figure. This is in clear contrast to Mitchell, Goldate, Kimbell and even Idensen and Krohn, who all seem to consider the

¹⁷² Porombka claims this embrace of what other people are afraid of for both, flâneur and cyberflâneur.

¹⁷³ "Seine Existenzkrise macht er zur Grundlage einer utopischen Existenzform, als deren gelungene Verkörperung er sich präsentiert."

¹⁷⁴ "Die Figur des Flaneurs dient als Hülle, als ein Fetisch, den man überstreift, um sich immense Kräfte zu imaginieren – Kräfte, die man braucht, um in bedrohlichen Verhältnissen zurechtzukommen. ...es gilt ...eins der Identitätsmodelle der Netzkultur zu untersuchen, mit denen dort der Größenwahn kultiviert wird."

concept an appropriate and useful one for imagining what it means to be online. In order to more extensively explore the complexity of the cyberflâneur figure, some of the thus far only indicated aspects and authors remain to be referred to in more detail.

The particular mixture of authors has been chosen partly because of the prominence of their texts and because of the representativeness of the selection. The texts cover a range of different aspects and emphases. Clearly, the above-summarised are not the only examples of writings about the cyberflâneur or at least of the verb 'flâner' / 'flanieren' applied to the online sphere.¹⁷⁵ Most other texts, however, do not add anything new.

In any of these textual references to the cyberflâneur, the lack of casual, popular usages of the concept is striking. Instead, the figure appears most often in cyberspace *theorisations*, whether displayed online or in other academic publications. Most of these contain a more or less prolonged engagement with the concept itself. Thus the figure only marginally appears in mailinglists or email discussion groups. He appears even less in the traditional media's description of the online sphere and/or its users. Nor are most of the more pronounced cyberflâneur webpages greatly interlinked with other webpages. In principle, this confirms the online flâneur's faithfulness to his roots. Interlinking could after all imply an engagement that compromises his self-sufficiency. In practice, however, this contradicts the Benjaminian text-structures and maybe the general patterns of interaction of the flâneur. Thus the lack of links, as the example of Idensen and Krohn underlines, is not necessarily fitting for the figure. One fairly typical example for cyberflâneur-sites overall, a webpage that presents Lucy Kimbell's cyberflâneur-text, shall serve as an illustration of some of these claims.

6.6.2. A Cyberflâneur Website

This particular webpage (see Fig.6) concentrates on Lucy Kimbell's main text about the cyberflâneur.¹⁷⁶ This text is a primarily theoretical engagement. This is typical for the cyberflâneur-webpages, whose primary feature tends to be a text

¹⁷⁵ Featherstone, for example, provides a rather critical engagement with the original concept in a move which promotes neither adoption nor rejection, but an adaptation of the original concept. It is too early to explore this point here, thus references to his work can be found throughout. Other authors also underpin the here presented discussion, but with less prominence.

¹⁷⁶ Overall, Kimbell's page shows many similarities with the cyberflâneuse-page that will be referred to in the next chapter.

about the concept. These texts are not necessarily based on websites that are dedicated to the flâneur (in contrast to, for example, the webgrrl-pages). Over the years, Kimbell's text was shown in different formats on several different sites (most of which have since disappeared). One of them is the below shown rhizome.org, a site which is a portal to new media art. Her page is one of many examples of new media art and new media theory displayed on this site. It has been there for a few years now and can still be accessed today.

This webpage is clearly focussed on the textual. It displays only one small image. The image appears to display either a small extract of a network or as a piece of thread, thus hinting at the structure of the medium. The webpage overall is split into frames. The right-hand side is used for a 'community' that is related to the rhizome-site. Community here implies membership in rhizome (the site is publicly accessible only on a first level, but one needs to register for access to anything beyond this level. Access is granted upon payment of a small membership fee). And community implies the visibility of who else is online. The left-hand side and the contents bar above Kimbell's text are related to general topics of the rhizome.org-site. The options range from viewing 'fresh art' or submitting artwork (or texts) or browsing the database or reading about the management of the database to seeing job opportunities and events listed or reading more about rhizome.org. The intra-linkage rate on this site is quite high and it also offers hyperlinks to other sites. Kimbell's text itself also offers hyperlinks, both at the end and as reference points in the beginning. Included in the design of the actual text-part is a reply-button. This is an option to publicly react to the displayed text. However, no reply has been registered for Kimbell's text since it was originally posted in 1998.

Following the design of the site overall, the page is organised in a clearly structured and aesthetically appealing manner and appears expertly executed. The current version of the page has not changed fundamentally in comparison to its earlier versions (in 1998).¹⁷⁷ The community-aspect seems new, but the rest has not changed fundamentally. As a non-profit organisation aimed at furthering digital art, rhizome.org focuses both on the medium itself and on the specific versions of expression possible within this medium. All this is clearly visible on this site. This is, however, not specific to the cyberflâneur topic only. Instead, the environment from which most of the cyberflâneur-texts stem, i.e. the rather well equipped technological-artistic elite for whom the new

¹⁷⁷ I used an Internet archive to trace earlier versions.

technologies play a major role, is typical for such a thematic focus and for the range of potential engagements with the site (from reading to communication to submission of art work).

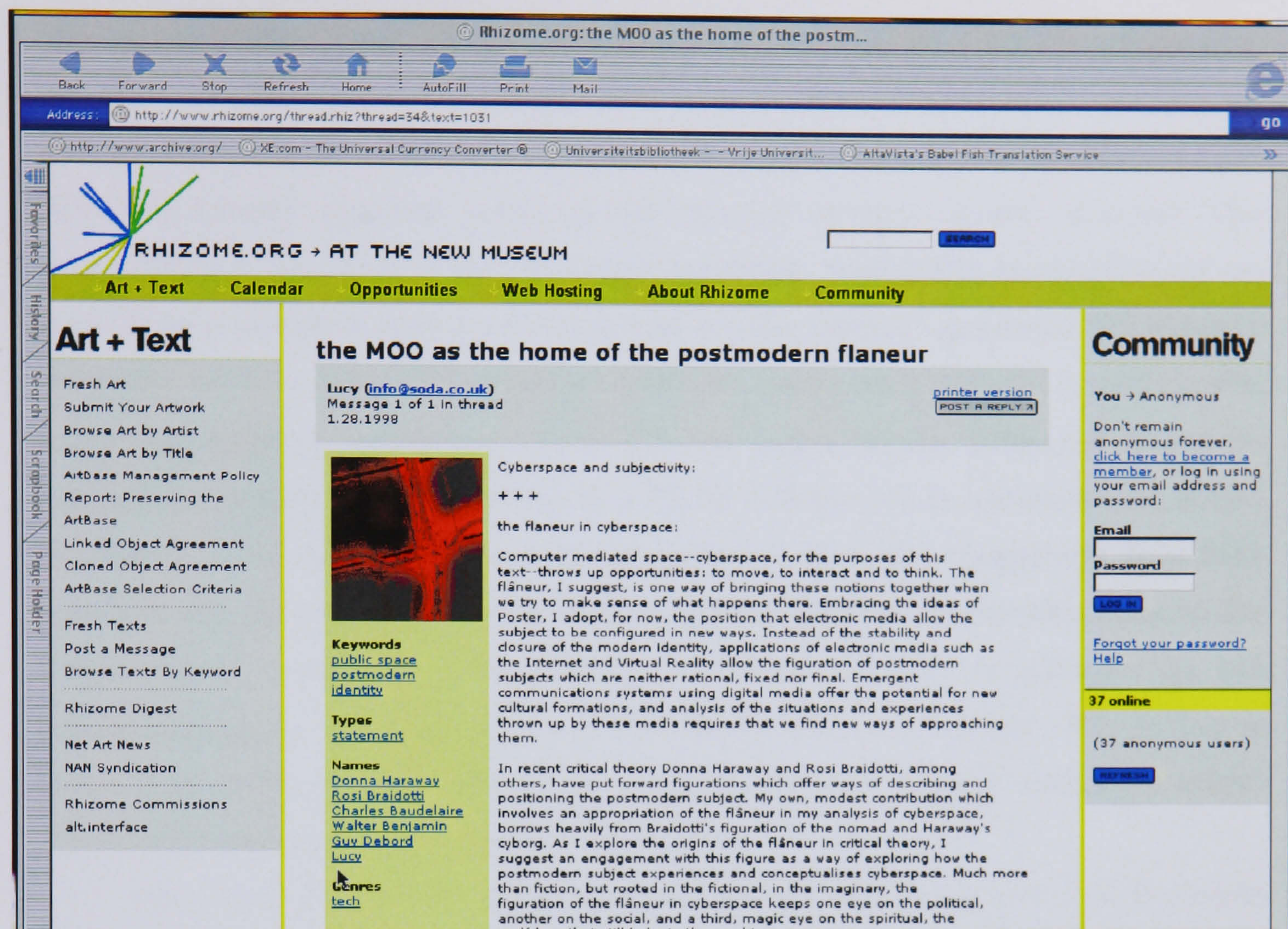


Fig.6: www.rhizome.org/thread.rhiz?thread=34&text=1031
(accessed 17/10/03)

The major change to earlier sites of a similar kind (and to earlier versions of this site itself) is the professionalism of the design and the fee-payment for accessing anything beyond the first level. Research suggests that this was only introduced on this particular site after the organisation had already been online for a while. The emphasis has shifted from pure sharing to a slightly more cost-aware use of the Internet. This shift to some form of payment is a rather common occurrence amongst many Internet-sites that need to financially sustain themselves. For a medium that built some of its philosophy on its general accessibility, this is a problematic, but potentially inevitable development. Here, a compromise has been found in which the fees are kept low and there is free access one day a week. This at least avoids the ultimate fate of the original flâneur, who ended as a living billboard.

In terms of the content, Kimbell draws from a variety of sources to substantiate her main argument. These range from Benjamin and the Situationists to

Mitchell and MUDs. Her claim is that being online can be equated with taking a virtual stroll, to *flâner*. Kimbell claims that the *flâneur* can now roam online as an extension of the earlier concept. The city framework is moved to the online context and new possibilities of connection are added, but not much else. Kimbell wants to take the cyberflâneur into another dimension, widening his stakes, letting him roam in new spaces and new discourses. In this process, Kimbell simply ignores some of the crucial aspects of the original. The cyberflâneur becomes a free-floating signifier. Kimbell's concentration on MUDs as a possible online environment for the *flâneur* questions the concept entirely. MUDs, role-playing games that run either on a bulletin board system or on an Internet server, are rather specific applications, primarily based on sociality. Lurking also takes place in a MUD, but the *aim* is communication and exchange. The different levels of engagement and disengagement that take place in the city and that are exemplified by the *flâneur* cannot take place to the same extent in MUDs. The *flâneur* was after all still recognised by his environment as someone who has the ability to read the city. The lurker is simply invisible and the other MUD-players directly engage with each other. Thus cyberflânerie cannot easily take place.

Her claim is based on rather anecdotal kinds of references to MUD events and communications and to the diversity of the practices of users (her reference point for the post-modernity claims). Overall, Kimbell does not address the problematic of the *flâneur*'s ambiguities (or gender aspects). And she does not address her own contradiction when she states that the cyberflâneur will only be privileged once she/he knows how to write her/his own code. The requirement of technological knowledge would be a clear limit to fluidity and flexibility (and especially equality), but it is not recognised as such.

Overall, Kimbell's cyberflâneur webpage within the rhizome.org context offers a somewhat traditional textual exploration of the concept within a clearly structured and varied website. This site offers possibilities that are specific to the medium (connecting to an online community, displaying different formats of new media art, linking to similar information, etc.), but at the same time it does not experiment too much with the site-structure or page-presentation. Kimbell's text itself offers the exploration of an assumed parallel between the original and the new *flâneur*, underpinned by theoretical references and actual examples of online exchanges. The overall idea of post-modern fluidity of identities that she promotes is clearly in line with early trends in cyberspace-

theorisations as they were explored earlier in the thesis. Kimbell herself, however, does not investigate the identity-fluidity claim in enough detail to establish its relevance in relation to the re-appearance of the flâneur in the online context. The textual and spatial order implied in the cyberflâneur-concept offer more material to actually explore the specificity of the Internet-medium than Kimbell's claim.

This text was not Kimbell's last use of the flâneur concept in relation to her artistic work. First she developed a wearable interface, the Vibrating Internal Pager (VIP), which should be used while on the move. According to some documentation, the archetype for the mobile user on which this development was based was the flâneur (see Locke, 2001). The VIP flâneur, however, is very much open to encounters and engagements. As such, this flâneur is a clear contrast to most other flâneur-conceptions. Kimbell also organised a workshop about 'cellular flânerie' at the Tate Modern in London (Kimbell, 2001). In this instance the artistic engagement was used to offer consultancy services for mobile phone operators. However, as Kimbell herself remarks in the summary of the cellular flânerie event, "the problematic aspects of the term [flânerie] ...cannot be applied straightforwardly to the cellular networks" (Kimbell, 2001). Nonetheless it can be used to inform cellular operators. The flâneur's resistance – or at least ambivalence – concerning commercialization is here ignored. This is a reflection of Kimbell's work overall, which often playfully crosses the boundaries between art and the commercial world. Buck-Morss' argument that the 'consumerist being-in-the-world' is the main surviving characteristic of the flâneur fits here. My claim that the flâneur's main characteristic is his ability to reflect and create clearly differs from Kimbell's concept.

6.7. The Spatial and Textual (Dis-)Order

6.7.1. 'Walking Past'

The Net negates geometry. While it does have a definite topology of computational nodes and radiating boulevards for bits, and while the locations of the nodes and links can be plotted on plans to produce surprisingly Haussmann-like diagrams, it is fundamentally and profoundly *antispatial*. (Mitchell, 1995:8)

To think in anti-spatial terms is not as easily put into practice as it is proclaimed. Thus most of the cyberflâneur-conceptualisations stick to

traditional markers of city-space in their descriptions of the online sphere (the street, the building, etc.). Imagination can be limited by these traditional descriptions. We might not be able to think a non-space, but to fill this void with an already rather meaningful space such as the city's nitty-gritty details can be problematic. The first step away from that is the use of the city's more abstract attributes.

The original flâneur concept itself has the interplay between inside and outside (e.g. in the arcades) as a major focus and also engages constantly on the imaginary level. This then is not a simplistic version of city-space. Most cyberflâneur-interpretations, however, tend not to acknowledge the dialectics between order and chaos which the flâneur embodies (and thus tries to contain). Instead, there is often a pretence that because of the programming needed to build a computer that the rest is equally calculable and logical:

Cybercafés enable casual surfing – they provide the postmodern flâneur with more avenues to stroll down, this time constructed from the cold crystalline perfection of logically-ordered data. (Hill, 1998)

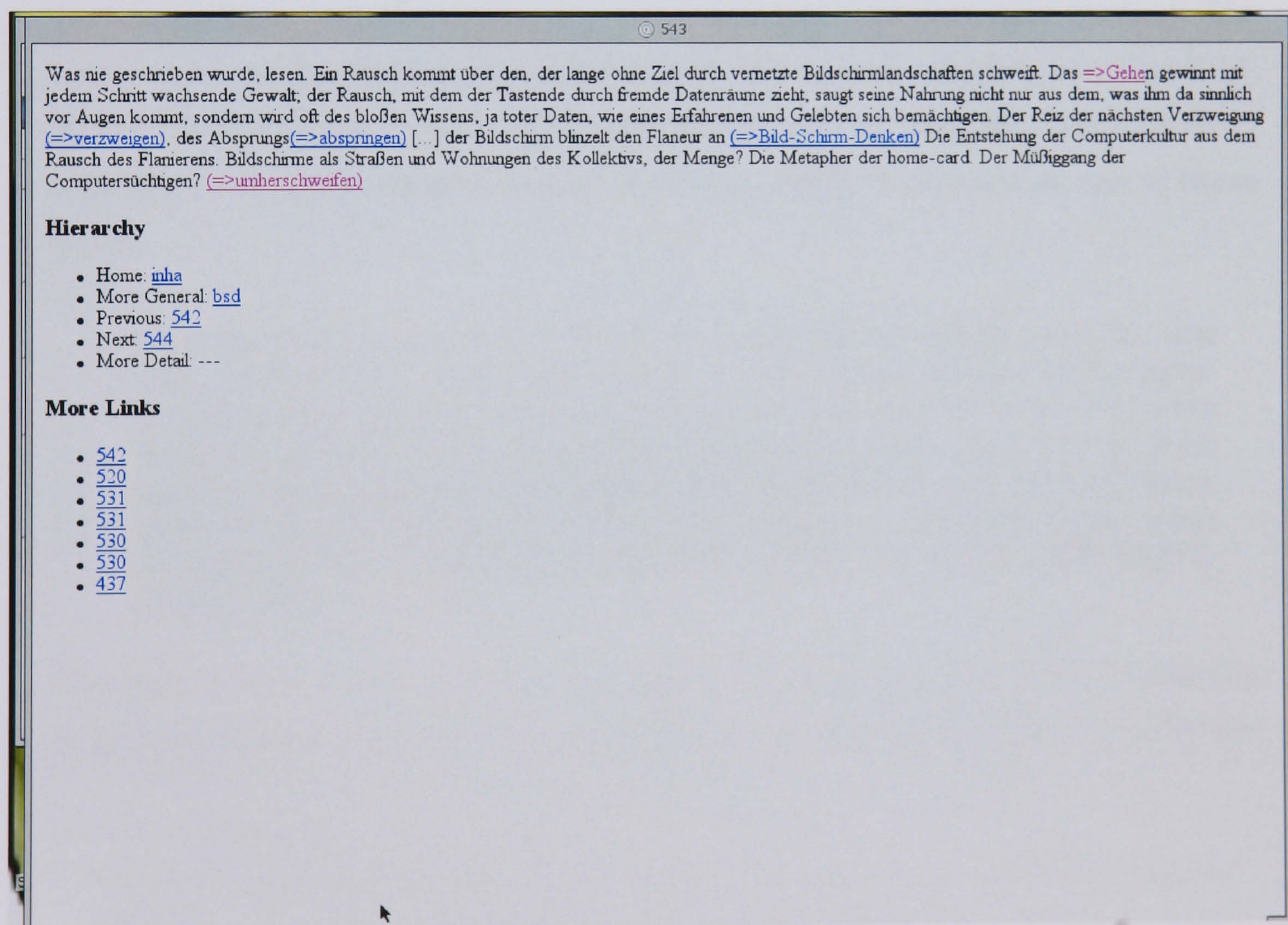


Fig.7: www.hyperdis.de/pool/543_063.htm (accessed 17/10/03)

Heiko Idensen and Matthias Krohn are an exception here: they *experiment* with the structures that are implied in the online sphere. They also compare the city and the information sphere that is opened up in cyberspace, but in slightly

more complex ways. They acknowledge that these ideas have consequences for our conception of knowledge creation and interactions. They locate *flânerie*, in the sense of aimless strolling, as the action of the user in this particular context. In their comparison between city and cyberspace, Idensen and Krohn claim that both imply “heterogeneous objects arranged on a simultaneous interface”. Here, we have the city, but in an abstraction that can indeed be diversely applied to the online sphere. Further, Idensen and Krohn claim that the city-metaphor has helped to create the best *interactive* systems yet, because the “reader/viewer/user” is encouraged to actively *engage*.¹⁷⁸ This engagement produces meanings. So once again we return to the question of engagement.

Idensen and Krohn’s text actually tries to implement and perform what it otherwise speaks about. Thus the authors use fragments of texts only and then hyperlink them extensively (also visible in their webpage-design – see Fig.7). Each term is linked to a small paragraph, which again has links to other paragraphs, all displayed on individual webpages. Other links are offered in the form of numbers or abbreviations arranged according to a certain hierarchy. Text fragments from literature are cited, but put into this new context. The terms used as the basis for associations in their piece, which is entitled *Bild-Schirm-Denken* (‘screen-thinking’)¹⁷⁹, are terms such as ‘project’, ‘cite’, ‘arrive’, ‘transfer’ and many others (Idensen & Krohn, 1997). ‘Flanieren’ is one of these terms.

To read what was never written. An intoxication comes over the one who glides for a long time through networked screen landscapes. Walking gains power with every step. The intoxication, with which the touching person moves through foreign data space, does not suck its nurture from whatever his senses put in front of his eyes, but will often feed of pure knowledge, even dead data, as if they were lived experience. The attraction of the next corner, the jump... (Idensen & Krohn, 1997)¹⁸⁰

Through the particular arrangement online, the data becomes lived experience or at least a close approximation thereof. Here, Idensen and Krohn underline

¹⁷⁸ In this engagement the user kills off the author/text/reader and sender/receiver distinction.

¹⁷⁹ This is a play with words in German and thus difficult to translate. It can be read either simply as ‘screen-thinking’ or ‘image-interface-thoughts’ or similar combinations.

¹⁸⁰ “Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen. Ein Rausch kommt über den, der lange ohne Ziel durch vernetzte Bildschirmlandschaften schweift. Das Gehen gewinnt mit jedem Schritt wachsende Gewalt; der Rausch, mit dem der Tastende durch fremde Datenräume zieht, saugt seine Nahrung nicht nur aus dem, was ihm da sinnlich vor Augen kommt, sondern wird oft des bloßen Wissens, ja toter Daten, wie eines Erfahrenen und Gelebten sich bemächtigen. Der Reiz der nächsten Verzweigung, des Absprungs...”

the importance of the inter-relationship between the information provided, the way it is presented and accessed, and the actual meaning thereby suggested. They claim that the technological structure can fundamentally change the information through its offer of interaction with data or other people.

For Idensen and Krohn the cyberflâneur *walks* through memory space. While doing so, he walks *past* something, past many things in fact, as one does while walking in actual space. This *walking past*, as a movement of the mind as much as a physical movement, is for Idensen and Krohn the most important feature of movement in the city. It is usually lost when the movement of thoughts is traced through mapping it (Idensen & Krohn, 1997). Their 'walking past' is a mnemotechnical device, in which one collects fragments that come one's way, but that are difficult to locate otherwise. *Memories* are thus important constructs for electronic flânerie. It is this movement through networked data space in combination with the later output that makes up online flânerie. It includes the search for traces and clues, recognition, simultaneity, sudden reversal, flight and overlaps. Other features are careless roaming, insights, parallel events, time compression and expansion, escape lines, new views. It allows travelling on the grand scale: "Today's flâneurs and nomads move in the electronic net: sitting in front of the screen, the monitor is their departure and arrival terminal" (Idensen & Krohn, 1997).¹⁸¹

In the online flânerie concept, Idensen and Krohn try to recreate a mapping that does not freeze the data incurred in 'walking past' into dead data. Thus they try to stabilise the fugitive without destroying it – as Baudelaire attempted to in his poems and Benjamin seemed to suggest in his 'hyperlinked' *Arcades Project*. Benjamin, in the fragmentary nature of his writing and his montage principle, suggests a structure that is both inter- and intra-linked extensively. The structure thus allows connections that stimulate new thoughts as well as lets the existing data speak. A text like Idensen and Krohn's is equally interlinked. Their experimentation with the actual application of the concept and their engagement with Benjamin substantiate their reference to the flâneur. Their attempt at not freezing the data does not necessarily lead to success, but the attempt itself is important.

¹⁸¹ "Heutige Flaneure und Nomaden agieren im elektronischen Netz: sitzend vor den Bildschirmen, dient ihnen der Monitor als Ankunfts- und Abflugterminal."

Mike Featherstone (1998) also provides a substantial connection between space and text in his cyberflâneur construction. In chapter 5, I already began to explore how Featherstone reads the flâneur as a method for reading cyberspace as text in parallel with the city as text. Flânerie is portrayed as a form of stimulating the imagination through the constant flow of new impressions. According to Featherstone, the media, especially the new media, provides this stimulation. Overall, there is a clear parallel to Idensen and Krohn's 'walking past'. For Featherstone, however, the difference between the electronic flâneur and the original flâneur is that the electronic flâneur can jump from one street or city to another street or city at any moment in time (Featherstone, 1998:921). This is thanks to the hyperlinked structure of the medium. Thus there is an addition not only of speed, but of intensity and connectedness. Idensen and Krohn had put their emphasis more on the similarities between the two when read in abstraction.

Idensen and Krohn also add to the characteristics of the cyberflâneur the preservation of the stimulation. This preservation makes it simultaneously accessible beyond the individual experience. The crucial difference that emerges is that between electronic flânerie as a personal encounter of the web on the one hand and as a translatable, publicly accessible experience on the other hand. Only the latter would justify the idea of a *user type*, because only the latter is the tool that can stimulate discussions based on the shared vocabulary. With their stress on the accessibility of the experience beyond the moment of its occurrence, Idensen and Krohn follow closely in Benjamin's footsteps and clearly negotiate between order and chaos. Impressions alone, without the possibility of translating this experience, have the potential to be overwhelming. Thus one crucial aspect of the ideal-type electronic flâneur is the communication of the experience. Another, which Featherstone stresses, is the imaginary that Featherstone describes. It is also crucial to the concept.

6.7.2. Structure and Speed

To further underline how Idensen and Krohn's text supports their idea of electronic flânerie, I briefly want to compare it to Mitchell's text, which can be seen both in his book as well as on the website that represents the book. The relatively large number of hyperlinks provided on this webpage follows a clear hierarchy and order. The pages thus end up presenting an impression of linearity that is not necessarily representative of the city or the web or some of the claims in Mitchell's text. The linearity has its origin in the overall structure

of Mitchell's book, which consists primarily of dichotomies: his chapters are subdivided into pairs such as 'Nervous system – Bodynet', 'Face-to-face – Interface', 'Eyes – Television'.¹⁸² In these couples, bits of existing, but seemingly outdated, mostly non-technological entities are paired with their up-to-date, technological equivalent of the present. This linear text-structure does not allow associative links such as Idensen and Krohn's attempt to create. Too much structure or systematic ordering does, however, contravene the general idea of *flânerie* online or offline. Order and chaos must both be present in order to enable encounters, but also contain it all within acceptable limits. Ideally, associations *and* structures merge. To create such an associative text is a challenge, but – as Benjamin's texts show – one that can very much enhance the text, especially when it clearly says something about its topic at the same time.¹⁸³ Unfortunately we will never know whether Benjamin would have kept the structure in the final publication of the *Arcades Project*.

Another important aspect in this context is *speed*. An increased speed has been described as one characteristic of the cyberflâneur (see Featherstone, 1998:921; Rötzer, 1997a).¹⁸⁴ My claim is that slowness – as a direct copy of the turtle walk – could characterise the cyberflâneur instead. This slowness idea is based on the original flâneur concept in combination with the online structure. Slowness in this context expresses a *resistance* to constant connectedness and increasing fluidity. The slowness was crucial to the original flâneur, because his surroundings were speeding up. Insisting on slowness for the cyberflâneur is not a general denial of the possibility of speed online, but rather a normative claim concerning the attributes of a cyberflâneur. It would be stressing the links to the original where they are crucial. The slowness is emphasised in order to allow the actual perception of the environment and thus also the creative communication thereof. This is to avoid an eventual emptiness of the concept.

¹⁸² In his section entitled 'Voyeurism – Engagement', Mitchell simply states that technology will increasingly become 'better' – in the sense of the ability to translate and imitate rather complex processes – and thus will increasingly give the impression that the technological sphere is 'just like' the 'real world' and equals face-to-face interactions. This move supposedly allows a shift from spectatorship to involvement – one can be "an inhabitant, a participant" (Mitchell, 1995: 19-20). The involvement is thus not with potentially new forms of connection, but simply with an extension of the existing. This applies both to content and form.

¹⁸³ I myself shied away from a non-linear and associative structure in this piece. This is partly thanks to the requirements of a PhD, partly because it is difficult to get right.

¹⁸⁴ A resonance of this can also be found in Norbert Bolz's claim that Benjamin created a notion in the flâneur-concept, which corresponds to the aesthetics of the new media: the realisation that idleness is hard work (1994:11).

So far, most of the here discussed characteristics of the cyberflâneur had to do with structures and texts. The gap that still needs to be filled is a reference to the cyberflâneur's encounters with other users.

6.8. Relationship to Others

The cyberflâneur's anonymity is a prevalent topic in reflections about him. Mitchell proclaimed a move from voyeurism to engagement, the latter of which Kimbell also clearly subscribes to. Goldate, on the other hand, returned to absolute voyeurism – of the kind of 'knowing more'. This stance was attacked by Porombka (in his interpretation the cyberflâneur puts on his role only as a façade, knowing quite well that he knows nothing). Rötzer's cyberflâneur-version, on the other hand, knows more than his environment and returns to hiding away. Rötzer claims that this public-private divide is the major difference between the cyberflâneur and the original flâneur, because the net enables the cyberflâneur to stay a hidden observer to an extent that the original could never have been. He holds on to a form of privacy which the original had already lost.

... the flaneur ...re-appears in the digital city of cyberspace, where one does not need to mingle – he is an aseptic virtual body, someone who watches others, while clicking through the virtual spaces or as someone who enjoys to encounter strangers from a distance and without risk, communicating with people who he would probably never meet in real life. (Rötzer, 1997b)¹⁸⁵

The original flâneur's eternal tension between the visible and invisible has disappeared. Instead, the cyberflâneur can take information without having to give any. He needs the people and the rest to feed his curiosity and creativity, but they are not allowed to need him. As the original flâneur before him, the cyberflâneur cannot be alone. He himself does not suffice. He needs other people in order to see his reflection, but he does not have any interest in them as individuals. The constant need to move is compensation for this inability to engage – and the people become pieces to add to his memories.

¹⁸⁵ "... der Flaneur ... taucht [er] in der vermischungslosen digitalen Stadt des Cyberspace wieder auf – als aseptischer virtueller Körper, als Beobachter, der sich durch die virtuellen Orte hindurchklickt, oder als jemand, der es genießt, aus der Distanz und ohne Risiko fremden Menschen zu begegnen und mit ihnen zu kommunizieren, die er im wirklichen Leben vielleicht niemals kennenlernen wird."

The shock of the unexpected encounters with the unknown was the most fruitful, but also potentially dangerous aspect of the emerging city spaces. The danger came from their potential threat to the subject's integrity (Boyer, 1996:195). The cyberflâneur does not risk this kind of threat. This figure avoids the encounter with others. Nonetheless, he also needs the unexpected and unknown, at least to consume their presence. Like the original flâneur, the cyberflâneur seeks these *confrontations*, while he at the same time tries not to let them become *exchanges*. He now personifies the fleeting image. He thereby embodies a rather problematic approach to the public aspects of the Internet, since he only consumes the presence of other people, but does not allow the same in return. He could in principle compensate this through creative acts, but he rarely does.¹⁸⁶ Instead, his attitude implies that he is better than those he observes and that only he can truly understand the intricacies of the space and information provided – without the need to account for this claim. The original flâneur claimed to use his perceptive attitude to create an artistic or intellectual output, which other people could afterwards consume for themselves. An indeed, poetry, artwork and theory all followed from flânerie. For most versions of the cyberflâneur, this output is hardly an issue anymore. Even those who still produce their impressions do not necessarily care about an audience. He sees himself as the only one who is important: "He works on the perfection of his own existence; every step that he takes, is a necessary step for the building and stabilisation of his own identity" (Porombka, 1997).¹⁸⁷ Therefore the online crowds simply do not recognise the cyberflâneur anymore. The original flâneur was labelled as a flâneur by others and thus appeared in many different texts. The electronic flâneur, on the other hand, needs to call *himself* a cyberflâneur in order to be recognised. In this naming process, the figure has become both more outspoken and conceited.

¹⁸⁶ The resulting creation would be Rötzer's 'magic' in which the dying exotic is recreated by the cyberflâneur via the everyday and banal. Rötzer hints that "maybe this is the last attempt to save someone who is already drowning..." (Rötzer, 1997a).

¹⁸⁷ "Er arbeitet an der Perfektionierung seiner eigenen Existenz; jeder Schritt, den er setzt, ist ein notwendiger Schritt für den Aufbau und die Stabilisierung seiner eigenen Identität."

6.9. Summary

The cyberflâneur is a tricky user type. He has been accused of only existing as his own total idealisation¹⁸⁸, dreaming of his own powers ('Only I can see the unusual'). This version of the flâneur has again a veil between him and the social reality of the surrounding virtual spaces, but he does neither see nor acknowledge this veil. Sometimes he uses it to hide behind. Nonetheless, he is still interpreted as a figure offering a focus in a world where everything is beginning to break into fragments. He embodies a focal point of utopian thinking.¹⁸⁹ His most popular feature is his ability to create visions in other people, which they themselves could not develop on their own. He serves as a projection-screen for their desires.¹⁹⁰

The cyberflâneur is someone who thinks too much of himself, but only in order to protect himself from his own insecurity concerning the new technologies. His fears are covered by his exaggerated self-image. He thus becomes a figure of identification for those who suffer similar fears as he does, but he also attracts those who want to pretend they have no fears. They choose to see only his self-image. The original flâneur offered more ambiguity and insecurity than most authors seem ready to admit. The same also applies to the cyberflâneur. Some readings (or uses) of the user type magnify it, leaving out ambiguities, and thus make it more extreme than the figure itself necessarily suggests. Many engage with a simplified surface only.

6.9.1. Dialectics Once Again

Benjamin shows that flânerie was not just an urban custom, but that it also supplied the terms of an attitude; or, as we might say nowadays, it was not just a social practice, but a practice generating, and in turn inflected by, a discourse with ideological claims to its object, the city. (Prendergast, 1992:134)

The cultural figure of the flâneur was described as the one who was able to deal with the radical changes that modernity brought about, because he developed a particular relationship to his surroundings. This relationship represents the dialectics between being seen and being invisible, between landscape and

¹⁸⁸ Jenks even describes the flâneur as slightly despicable (since he thought so highly of himself, but also because he is difficult to pin down), but nonetheless fascinating (especially in his irony – Jenks, 1995:146-147).

¹⁸⁹ And if it should turn out that he is an illusion after all, he might become a symbol of the oppression offered by the new technologies instead (Porombka, 1997).

¹⁹⁰ The cyberflâneur also uses the online crowd to project his own desires, but he does not do it on an individual basis and so differs substantially.

living-room and especially between involvement and disengagement. The flâneur is also representative of the tension between order and chaos. All this taken together creates a particular utopian dialectics.

In the cyberflâneur, it is primarily the tension between involvement and disengagement, which recognisably characterises this figure. He is dependent on other people's online presence (which can also be in the form of information provision). He wants to browse through whatever they provide without acknowledging his own presence, while he also needs their recognition. Thus he is far more than a simple lurker:

What is important about this group ...is that the experiences they captured while floating through the urban spaces were taken to be *the* definitive experiences of these places. (Featherstone, 1992:279)

This experience is presented as enlightened and authentic, i.e. as *the* online experience. This is a replication of the flâneur, whose experience was described as *the* definitive city experience in modernity. The cyberflâneur theorists explored in this chapter, themselves representatives of the group of artists and intellectuals Featherstone is referring to, suggest a similar absolutism in their understanding of the online experience. In this way they make ideological claims about cyberspace. As the original flâneur, the cyberflâneur suggests that it is not necessary for him to explain himself, because whoever has the appropriate knowledge would understand him without explanations. The cyberflâneur legitimises only his own authority.

Another problematic aspect of the cyberflâneur in comparison to the flâneur is the idea of the lack of output, of communication of the experience to the rest of the world. The original flâneur was an artist, a poet or a painter or an intellectual (like Benjamin), who would somehow translate the experience of flânerie into a piece of art or writing. Although the cyberflâneur descriptions presented above represent an online output, it does not become clear what the output beyond the meta-engagement with the cyberflâneur would look like. Some of the authors and artists are widely visible online beyond their cyberflâneur-texts, but then usually without any reference to the cyberflâneur. The expectation, however, to simply be recognised as an online flâneur by others, does not work as easily as the visible presence in the city did. Finding the necessary combination of visibility and invisibility, of self-professed online flânerie and general output is not an easy path to follow.

Featherstone also declares the need for the online flâneur to be half-way between involvement, engagement and detachment, because he should always already be half-recording his impressions for potential later re-working (Featherstone, 1998:913).¹⁹¹ Thus the cyberflâneur offered the necessary distance to the seductions of the online sphere, while also offering unknown insights into the online sphere. Featherstone concludes from the half-way state between involvement, engagement and detachment that the flâneur is not visible as a distinguishable social type. I disagree and instead regard this kind of ambivalence as a crucial characteristic of this type.

Overall, Featherstone interprets the flâneur as a forerunner for a specifically modern experience of the environment, that of *distraction* (Featherstone, 1998:915). Being taken away from oneself and from the here and now to alternative versions of the self and alternative settings is characteristic both of flânerie and media consumption. The dreamscape is thus opened up, but the cyberflâneur is not meant to immerse himself in it entirely.

The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the flâneur, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. (Benjamin, 1996:216)

Losing yourself in the crowd, he [Baudelaire] knew, could mean losing your *self*, cutting adrift from the familiar co-ordinates of identity and community. *Flânerie* therefore requires a certain distance. (Donald, 1995:80)

It is a thin line between an immersion that leads to an enlightened experience of the sphere and the loss of control. The cyberflâneur's illumination is not of the kind of entirely losing oneself. In that sense the figure clearly differs from that of the *dérive*. The cyberflâneur is a distant observer of his own environment, but he is never threatened with not knowing where or who he is. This dialectic balancing-act has been attacked elsewhere. Chris Jenks, for example, although not in direct reference to the cyberflâneur, declares that "today's *flâneur* requires engagement with the crowd" (1995:153; see also Stavrides, 2001). He goes on to claim that the flâneur today should let go of the attitude he has shown thus far and instead reveal the meanings hidden in our current society. However, it is exactly *that attitude* of the cyberflâneur which is revealing in

¹⁹¹ Porombka (1997) similarly declares that the electronic flâneur is the epitome of the individual lurker, who reproduces the knowledge gained in research papers, books and articles. I find the idea of the *lurker* a problematic one, since he is first of all defined via his non-engagement and such output is in my interpretation an engagement. The output remains a core issue.

relation to cyberspace. The hidden meanings of cyberspace are revealed when this environment is perceived as problematic and is not entirely embraced, but is also engaged with in diverse and exciting ways.

The fact that the cyberflâneur – despite his only recent creation – already exists more as his own *afterlife* than as an actual user type and identity position is telling.¹⁹² It suggests that the figure offers engagement patterns on a theoretical level, but is not too attractive as a user label to identify with. It is not a universally adoptable user type. In comparison to the other user metaphors, the cyberflâneur looks on first sight like a more European concept.¹⁹³ Underneath it all, he contains elements of an American idealisation of the European city past. But the cyberflâneur is first and foremost an expression of a different conception of space and information-structures than most other user types. In the sea or in outer space, information is endless. In the city, it is contained. The city implies a certain order and extreme human intervention. The agglomeration of humans is exactly what makes the city at least as dangerous as the other two. The city comes across as structured and chaotic at the same time. The flâneur exemplifies this connection and the cyberflâneur can in principle do the same. In practice this is not always the case.

6.10. Outlook

The issue of the identity of the city, and of identities within it, constituted a veritable nineteenth-century obsession. (Prendergast, 1992:2)

The issue of online identity similarly constituted a late twentieth-century obsession. Technology is supposed to open new worlds or rather to make access to all parts of the old world much easier. One of the available online identities is the cyberflâneur. He is clearly based on the flâneur, a cultural figure of 19th century Paris. This figure has always been more projection than actuality. In principle, the flâneur roamed the streets of the emerging modern cities in specific ways. This cultural construct has now made a re-appearance in the online worlds. His appearances are not numerous, but the surrounding

¹⁹² Mitchell claimed to be one, while the rest mostly reflected on what the concept could mean.

¹⁹³ This is underlined by the comparatively widespread use amongst German users.

debates are fairly heated. What exactly he represents is questionable, partly because he is based on a concept that itself was always open to interpretation.

The flâneur has always been an unusual combination of celebration of the emerging city environment on the one hand and fear thereof on the other hand. What he offers in particular is a concentration on space and on text and their relationship. What he also offers is a manifold ambiguity and ambivalence to his overall environment, himself and, most importantly, his fellow human beings. And he offers an output that built on all this. These aspects can all also be found in the cyberflâneur, albeit to differing degrees. In many of the descriptions of this user type, a lack of ambiguity and creativity leads to an emptying out of the figure – or an exaggeration, which tends to have a similar effect. In the end, only a close reading of the original offers something that is specific enough in the online context to be worthy holding on to.

There can be alternative figures, like the cyberflâneuse, which build on the concept. The possibilities of such a concept will be explored in the next chapter. Later I will turn to other user types, which take us away from the Benjamin concentration. Instead, they offer insights into aspects of the online imaginary that have been left out in the cyberflâneur concept. But first I will introduce the one user type that has not been found online, but has been constructed from existing offline pieces. The cyberflâneuse is my own contribution to the existing range of user types. Why such a construction should be necessary is one aspect to be discussed next.

7. Cyberflâneuse: A Call Into Existence

The user type that is introduced in this chapter has a very different standing in comparison to the other user types. This user type, the cyberflâneuse, is thus far a non-existent concept. All the other user types were readily found, but the cyberflâneuse is an *invention*.¹⁹⁴ As part of the process of invention, the cyberflâneuse clearly relates to and builds on one other, already existing user type: the cyberflâneur. In doing so, the cyberflâneuse also builds on the figure of the flâneur and, even more importantly, the figure of the *flâneuse*.

The concept of the flâneuse has only recently been discovered and developed. This took place from the 1980s onwards, primarily in feminist discourses (Bowlby, 1992; Buck-Morss, 1986; Ferguson, 1994a/1994b; Wilson, 1992; Wolff, 1990). This feminist research forms the basis of this chapter. It covers different academic fields, primarily art history, literary theory and general cultural studies. I will systematically highlight those aspects of the different flâneuse conceptualisations that help to position the flâneuse in relation to the flâneur and that have proven useful in order to extend the positioning vis-à-vis the cyberflâneur.

The initial reason for the development of the cyberflâneuse concept was the lack of the female in the cyberflâneur, but also in the user types overall.¹⁹⁵ This lack of the female was a characteristic particularly of the early days of cyberspace, but it remains an issue until this day. Cyberspace is not simply free of the discrimination mechanisms that have established themselves in so-called real life over long periods of time. Thus “who can possibly believe that age, race, or gender do not matter in cyberspace?” (Wilding, 1998) remains an open question.

Both female-gendered user types analysed in this thesis, i.e. the webgrrl and the cyberflâneuse, defy the gender problem in cyberspace. Both user types actively pursue alternatives to existing patterns. For example, the user types that are not gendered female in their vocabulary tend to assume a degree of

¹⁹⁴ Verena Kuni, artist and cyberfeminist, entitled her article “The flâneuse in the data net” (1999 – the original title is: ‘Die Flaneurin im Datennetz. Wege und Fragen zum Cyberfeminismus’), but unfortunately the flâneuse does not appear directly in the text (the indirect reference is in a critique of the data dandy, who is described as misogynist – Kuni, 1999:470).

¹⁹⁵ They are not necessarily ‘male’ in the linguistic sense, but definitely in the general understanding of the term (example: the cyberpunk). In English language is not gendered in the way that it is in French and German, where most of these terms carry a definite gender.

neutrality, i.e. they convey the impression that the identities offered are open to any gender. This displays an ignorance concerning the *implicit* genderedness of most user types. It also does not address the remaining dominance of the male identified. The development of the cyberflâneuse is meant to challenge this. It thus picks up some cyberfeminist ideas concerning the need for pro-active changes. In its concern with a clearly female gendered trope, however, it also makes the claim that the performative is still in need of (and thus limited by) actual, gendered histories.

In more general terms, the cyberflâneuse user type expresses a *potential for change*. This type underlines that user types can be changed or even created, but also that user types are far from free-floating signifiers. The process, however, does not stop with the signification. In order to become a successful user type, a minimum level of distribution and discussion needs to be achieved. The user type needs to become part of the general discourse about the net. Otherwise, no communication beyond individual communication is possible and the metaphor fails as a tool. In terms of the cyberflâneuse, only her existence can be announced thus far. The further distribution (beyond some conference presentations) is still outstanding. However, this lack of distribution does not diminish the point made here, which is to show that such an invention is not only possible, but also necessary. It is necessary, because it offers a vital alternative to existing concepts.

I begin the development of the cyberflâneuse-concept with the flâneuse. This figure, herself a partial invention, has a rather particular history. The flâneur is always present in this history as a point of reference in comparison. This history also points to the flâneuse's potential future in cyberspace. Overall, I am aiming to provide an answer to James Donald's provocative question: "To put it bluntly, why on earth should any woman *want* to be a *flâneur*?" (Donald, 1999:112; emphasis in original), changed to: 'Why on earth (and in cyberspace) should *anyone* want to be a *cyberflâneuse*?'

7.1. The Flâneuse

7.1.1. The Flâneur and the Female

The term flâneuse did not exist in the first half of the 19th century – and neither did the flâneuse herself.¹⁹⁶ Flânerie was first and foremost, as the flâneur-term already indicates, a male pursuit. This perception extends to the flâneur texts themselves, which allowed women only as objects of the gaze and which otherwise objected to the female presence in the city. Thus the most important flâneur-descriptions actually tended state an active discouragement concerning female flânerie. Louis Huart, for example, gave advice to new flâneurs in his *Physiologie de Flâneur* (1841), one of the small character descriptions so popular at the time. There he said that the flâneur should try to avoid strolling with friends and that taking a woman, even a pretty one, was the gravest sin of all. Women just did not understand how to *flâner*.

‘Flâneries taken in the company of a woman are even more to be avoided.’
‘What! Even with a pretty woman, you’re telling me?’
‘Yes, sir; and especially with a pretty woman! For women do not understand flâneries and stoppings-off, except in front of the hats in the fashion shops and the seamstresses’ bonnets – when it isn’t in front of the cashmere things and other trifles, the mere sight of which sends a shiver through any husband, or any other young Frenchman carrying out a roughly comparable job.’ (translation from Bowlby, 1992:31; original in Huart, 1841:115)

For the flâneur, the female is only meant to be the passing beauty, the fleeting image of a woman who could invoke an eternal, albeit fantastic love.¹⁹⁷ In the end, even the loved woman cannot be anything other than an imagination, part of the overall dreamscape of the city. Love is a projection that cannot risk actual exposure to the object of desire: “The delight of the city-dweller is not so much love at first sight as love at last sight” (Benjamin, 1997:45). But there cannot be flânerie entirely without women either. Women have to be there as the objects. A proper flâneur needs to gaze at beautiful women (Huart, 1841:120). At the time of the flâneur, however, not many women were available to be gazed at. City-spaces were utterly problematic for women.

¹⁹⁶ In the late 19th century, the flâneuse appears as a *chaise longue*, a long chair (Ferguson, 1994a:33). This can still be found today on a site for camping equipment: “Flâneuse – Chaise longue in Batyline canvas, ...” <http://www.lafuma.fr/Inter/plcamping.htm> (accessed 16/07/01)

¹⁹⁷ Baudelaire’s poem ‘A Une Passante’ is often quoted as a case in point.

7.1.2. Women in Public Life

The women who actually tried to discover the city for themselves in the 19th century were clearly not invited or expected to do so. But circumstances and attitudes were beginning to change. However, women experienced not only an increasing freedom, but also increasing harassment and new dependencies.¹⁹⁸ Their growing presence in the city and in public life in general could be (and has been) read as female flânerie, but it generally does not contain the flâneur's freedom of movement and of expression. Plus the female displays different forms of engagement. The question behind the nature of this flânerie remains.

It is only thanks to feminist enquiries over the last twenty years that the figure of the flâneuse has entered the research field at all. The reconstruction of female histories has brought about a number of ideas and claims concerning the flâneuse. Roughly speaking, a twofold response to the apparent lack of the female in the original flâneur emerged over the years. Or rather: the search for the flâneuse took place primarily on two levels: firstly on the level of actual presence (as well as participation) and secondly on the level of representation. The actual presence question asks whether and how women had *participated in public life* at the height of the flâneur-fashion. A sub-set of related questions asks what kind of women made appearances in public, what activities they followed while in public, at what point in time they first emerged, etc. All of these questions focus on the flâneuse as a real life character and on the *actual* discrimination of women's presence. The second, equally fundamental question concerns the *representation* of women in public life in the 19th century.¹⁹⁹ A clear lack of female characters in literature, newspapers and other forms of contemporary communication and popular culture was the origin of this question. A *discursive* discrimination appeared to take place, which extended the already existing actual discrimination. The lack of discursive representation includes a lack of *theoretical* presence, i.e. the representation of women in history, in literary and art theory and similar fields (Nava, 1996; Pollock, 1988).

¹⁹⁸ Paris, for example, had an abundance of girls outside of the societal margins, who were generally called 'grisettes' (Wilson, 1991:51). The grisette was the only female character I was able to trace in a *Physiologue*. The grisettes, however, did not have the freedom of the flâneur. They might have left their former roles as chambermaids or other dependent jobs behind, but instead they now were the mistresses of the bohemians, the artists and writers. They were not prostitutes as such, but still depended on their bodies (and men) to sustain themselves.

¹⁹⁹ Similarly, the lack of the female online can be detected on two levels: on the one hand in women actually having access to new technologies and on the other hand being represented and representing themselves online.

All of the questions about the presence of women in public life in the 19th century come together in the figure of the *flâneuse*. This question of the existence of the *flâneuse* drives most of the feminist engagements with the figure. The outcome has been a variety of answers. An overview is given below.

Many of the differences between interpretations concerning the *flâneuse* are not based on theoretical differences, but can be explained through other factors. One important aspect of the discussion is, for example, whether the emphasis lies on the beginning or the end of the 19th century. The kind of occupation of the female in question (as artist, entertainer, etc.) also plays a role as to what extent she was part of public life. Related to this is another important aspect, i.e. the social class of the women in question. In general, the absence of women that was detected was the absence of *bourgeois* women.

This has been criticised as an over-generalisation of the experience of a certain set of women. Thus there are those who argue for a recognition of other women's presences in public space to be read as *flânerie* (see e.g. Buck-Morss, 1986). Those women who were not necessarily in respected positions mostly served as prostitutes or actress-entertainers or similar professions. They were of a different social class than the *flâneur*. Similarly, only marginal women, such as "the prostitute, the widow, the old lady, the lesbian, the murder victim, and the passing unknown woman" (Wolff, 1990:41-42), were found in the literature of the time.²⁰⁰

The counter-argument to including such characters as female *flâneurs* is the assumption that only bourgeois women could at least in principle afford to waste their time on such 'trifles' as an aimless stroll. Bourgeois women, however, are generally assumed to have had a difficult time entering the streets in such a fashion, especially on their own. Janet Wolff, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson and others thus tend to dismiss the idea of the *flâneuse* on the level of lived, corporeal experience. Wolff, for example, claims that women were subject to sanctions and negative connotations in public spaces and thus could not stroll. She developed the concept of the *invisible flâneuse* and states that:

The public sphere, then, despite the presence of some women in certain contained areas of it, was a masculine domain. And insofar as the experience of 'the modern' occurred mainly in the public sphere, it was primarily men's experience. (Wolff, 1990:35)

²⁰⁰ Wolff is referring to Baudelaire's texts here and claims that the women in his texts are never equal to the poet. Instead, they are the objects of his stroll.

With this claim, Wolff stands in opposition to other feminist authors. Elizabeth Wilson, Mica Nava and others, for example, claim an increase in allowed spaces even for so-called respectable women.

One of the most significant changes that took place during this period was a rapid expansion of what counted as respectable, or at least acceptable, public space for unaccompanied women. The category included the great exhibitions, galleries, libraries, restaurants, tearooms, hotels and department stores. (Nava, 1996:43).

It also included ladies-only dining rooms, public conveniences with female attendants, railway station buffets and so forth. At least a gradual shift can be detected in most of these historical accounts, the interpretations of the immediate consequences, however, vary.

And even where the actual presence of women in public spaces was increasing, discrimination continued to take place on other levels. Hence the acceptable *conduct* of women in public places was a widely debated issue. The discussion sometimes took place only implicitly, as in discussions about prostitution and its negative influence on the city's physical and mental health (Harsin, 1985; Schülting, 1999). The general conclusion from these discussions tended to blame women in public space for the downfall of the cities. It was stressed that bourgeois women had to remain respectable and this respectability did not include exposure in public (Pollock, 1988:69). Respectable women were saved from the increasing dangers by being kept at home. Yet most of it was the danger concerning the *reputation* rather than actual dangers (Nord, 1995). The domestic sphere was created as a new bourgeois haven. Outside, the public sphere continued for a while without major female participation – more radical changes in women's position only occurred in the late 19th century. The need for the discourse of the bourgeois haven, however, already pointed to the fact that women were winning ground.

If the aim were indeed to find parallels to the fairly narrowly defined activities and attitudes of the flâneur, i.e. the leisurely stroll that includes the objectifying gaze, I side with Chris Jenks' idea that "the *flâneuse* is surely invisible, as are her tales of the city" (Jenks, 1995:150). Broadening the scope of flânerie to potentially include the female is one version of reclaiming spaces, especially discursive spaces. This is an important process of discontinuing the earlier discrimination. I see my construction as part of this process. My task, however, is not the broadening of 19th century approaches, but the creation of a

contemporary cyberflâneuse. This is based on the claims of how and where female flânerie in the 19th century might have taken place. The first – and in my eyes most extreme – version thereof is the idea of the prostitute as flâneuse.

7.1.3. Prostitution

For a great part of the 19th century, prostitutes were the main group of women in the public realm. One of their French names, *filles publique*, the public girls, expresses this aspect of their appearance. Susan Buck-Morss uses the prostitutes' widespread presence and visibility to declare prostitution as the female flânerie of the 19th century (1986:119). The strolling of the prostitute, however, had none of the artistic freedom that it had for the flâneur. Plus prostitution kept reinforcing the restrictions for other female uses of the streets and other public places. It was first of all described as making the streets unsafe. Secondly, prostitution marked a frontier to those spaces of femininity that contained sexualised female bodies that were sold by and to male power (Pollock, 1988:79). Thus women of different classes were separated through invisible borders, real as well as imaginary borders (Gleber, 1997:81). And the prostitutes represented part of these borders.



Fig.8: Edgar Degas, The client, monotype, ca. 1879

The prostitute is surely a strolling female in public space with many possibilities to observe the life in public places. But the prostitute does simply not fulfil the criteria of distance that allow her to objectify and remain uninvolved. Nor is the prostitute a protest against increasing commodification. Instead, she is its ultimate expression. For Benjamin the prostitute is the embodiment of the transformation of the 'world of things' (Buck-Morss, 1986:120). As a prostitute, the female was already part of the commodity-sphere before this began to expand immensely. As the 'streetwalker', who sells rather than consumes, she is always a commodity herself (Bruno, 1993:51). This was the reason why any loitering, strolling woman is at risk of being interpreted as a prostitute. And while the prostitute is allowed to gaze, her gaze is not aimless. It is a perfunctory gaze that is on the lookout for potential customers.

This kind of *flâneuse* was part of the image of the city that the *flâneur* so depended on for his gaze. This 'man of pleasure' embodies men's mastery over women in terms of the visual (Wilson, 1992:97-98). The *flâneur's* perception and his leisurely attitude do not feature in figures such as the prostitute. Instead, the most extreme form of the male gaze, in which the gaze is combined with the powers of growing capitalism, is the gaze that looks for the prostitute. Objectification finds its most extreme expression in it. The female, in the role of the prostitute, is the subject made object and thus, in my eyes, does not qualify as a *flâneuse*.

7.1.4. Disguise

For the bourgeois woman there was for a long time only one version of enjoying an unchaperoned stroll through the city: by becoming a copy of the male *flâneur*. This took place through disguise.²⁰¹ Only when a woman avoided any direct (male) gaze could she become an acceptable version of the female *flâneur*. She avoided the gaze through becoming invisible: the disguise misled the gaze. The author George Sand (see Fig.9), the lady Delphine de Gerardin and others were famous examples of this tactic (Ferguson, 1994b:241; Nord, 1995:240-241; Wilson, 1991:52; Wolff, 1990:41). In principle, the sexual divisions did not allow women to stroll aimlessly and engage in the fleeting encounter. But under disguise, a woman could be a *flâneur=she*. Disguise had its limitations

²⁰¹ The only accounts I found were of male disguise, i.e. pretending to be a male of the same class as that which the woman came from (usually bourgeois). I have not come across examples of disguise based on class or occupation.

and could not be used by anyone at any time, but it was a temporary and performative solution that also managed to question existing boundaries.



Fig.9: George Sand –
www.ahninnen.de/george_sand.html (accessed 12/11/03)

Some women – many of them writers – aimed for emancipation. This included the gaze. Under disguise, they could at least temporarily become observers, because it allowed them to move from object to subject. These strategies do not make a *flâneuse*, but they nonetheless enable women to take in the city (Nord, 1995:184). According to Sally Munt, who backs up her argument through literary references, this applies especially to cross-dressing lesbians. For Munt, lesbian *flânerie* in disguise “signifies a mobilised female sexuality in control, not out of control” (Munt, 1995:121). This sexuality threatens existing power-structures. Since her sex cannot easily be determined, the cross-dressing *flâneuse* is visible and invisible at the same time. In this ambivalence she resembles the *flâneur*, who was always *visible*, but not necessarily *present*. But limitations remain in this version of female *flânerie*. This figure is still a *flâneur=she* only. Her play with identities and sexuality is boundary-pushing, but it is not a *flâneuse*. The *flâneuse* was found in other areas of life.²⁰²

²⁰² The introduction of possibilities of gender-bending online has also unsettled existing heterosexual norms more in principle than in practice (despite such claims as Turkle’s).

7.1.5. “Les flaneurs du mal(l)”: Consumption²⁰³

A wider range of women eventually found their entry-point into the realm of public life in consumption. The timeframe for this development is the mid- to late-19th century. The newly developed department stores became an area of movement for women. Here they needed neither an occupation (such as prostitution) nor a disguise. The department store was the niche within the (quasi) public sphere, where women's entry was approved and even encouraged: a shopping wife counted as a sign of the husband's good standing. Especially middle class women found this a space to transgress earlier boundaries. It was an anonymous public space, which allowed unsupervised social encounters. It allowed the pleasures of fantasy and expertise at the same time. It made women not only more independent, but allowed them to look as well as to be looked at. New pleasures and powers were created (Nava, 1996:53).

This female strolling, however, should not simply be equated with the male flâneur. Shopping is not an occupation that is totally aimless. The flâneur, although surrounded by consumption in the arcades, never actually engages in consumption himself. The flâneuse, however, does. This flâneuse, i.e. female shopper in the 19th century department store, very differently handles the issue of engagement and disengagement, which is so characteristic for the flâneur. Hence, in her pursuits of shopping, the female does not show the same self-sufficiency that the flâneur embodies. She is unfit for flânerie, because she actually engages with the objects. She consumes and thereby takes in her environment in *detail* rather than as a whole. When she shops, she compromises the detachment, the aesthetic distance that is so crucial for the flâneur and his supremacy. As soon as she desires the objects in front of her – a desire which is crucial to the act of shopping – she proves to be unfit for flânerie. And even worse, she shows a willingness to join in the crowd (Ferguson, 1994a:27-31). This female engagement covers both, objects and subjects. The department stores opened up new worlds for females, which was supported by the stores' claim of an educational value of the displays. They took great efforts to provide exotic images from other countries as a backdrop for their products. But the opening up of the female world went beyond the objects. In the department

²⁰³ This was the title of an article by Anne Friedberg (1991), who therein described the later emerging shopping malls as the haunts for female flânerie. Her argument is partly based on the fact that she interprets cinema-going as a version of female flânerie and that this often took place within the environment of the shopping mall.

store, women were allowed to experience a substitute society. In philanthropy, bourgeois women were allowed to experience actual society.

7.1.6. Philanthropy

Female philanthropic work also developed widely in the 19th century. Here, an even more engaged version of the female gaze was developed. Women started to observe other people's lives that they had not come in contact with before then. In their charity pursuits, the women were confronted with social classes that had otherwise been taboo for them. Their voluntary work with the poor and the sick asked them to engage. In philanthropic work, identification is necessary for its success. The emphatic engagement does not allow objectification. Once again, this clearly differentiates this form of engagement from that of the flâneur. No flâneur-like veil should interfere with the interaction between the philanthropist and social reality. As a new form of engagement with the city-environment and particularly with the city's inhabitants, philanthropy widened women's horizons. This results in a very different perception of one's environment.

7.1.7. Art

Another occupation that justified the presence of women in public places in the 19th century was their role as artists, especially Impressionists. The Impressionists were one of the first identifiable groups of painters who had a visible number of women amongst them. They were also the ones who no longer painted only landscapes and its permanent aspects, but the fleeting images of modern life, including cities (Smith, 1995:7-11). At first, many of the art works by female Impressionists depicted rooms at home or private gardens and verandas (Pollock, 1988:56).²⁰⁴ At this point, their art suggested a remaining restriction of available spaces for women. But by and by they also painted the theatre, boating in the park, promenading and similar activities. Their artistic exploration of spaces was increasingly moving into the public realm.²⁰⁵ This artistic output was depicting, but also furthering an opening up of spaces for women. Hence the 19th century female artist has been widely described as the flâneuse.

²⁰⁴ Examples of female Impressionist artists were Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt.

²⁰⁵ See, for example, <http://www.abcgallery.com/> (accessed 2/09/02)



Fig.10: Berthe Morisot, View of Paris from the Trocadero, 1872

The male Impressionists' paintings, on the other hand, often offered a perspective that was made for a spectator *as flâneur*. They depicted women for the male gaze and thus stripped the female of her freedom (as can be seen in Fig.8). In contrast to this, the female Impressionist gaze pushed slowly into newly allowed spaces (see Fig.10). They also depicted women, but not as objects of the gaze. These alternative views were slowly gaining importance.

Crucial for my conceptualisation of the cyberflâneuse is the assumption that the emerging female gaze implied identification with the subject rather than the male's objectification of the subject (Pallier in Huffmann & Jahrman, 1998). This is based across the range of the here-discussed engagements, i.e. it applies to consumption, philanthropy and art. Identification with the subject does not strip it of its freedom in the same fashion as objectification of the subject does.

7.1.8. Flâneuse?

Flânerie was not a female pursuit at the time when the flâneur first appeared. According to most sources, the only female really visible in the streets in the early 19th century was the prostitute. She was allowed to stroll, because she needed to be looked at. Otherwise working class women were partly visible, but far removed from casual strolling. Equally, women in male disguise began to appear and conquer the male terrain. Disguise, however, qualifies as a *flâneur=she* identity, not as a flâneuse. Changes, it seems, came about from the mid-19th century onwards and the female began to increasingly roam public places on her own. The department store opened up as a place for consumption; entertainment became accessible to women more widely; parks and other places were more open. This was reflected in the work of female artists and

philanthropists. As one of the first anonymous public spaces for respectable women, the department stores allowed hitherto unknown transgressions. The flâneuse's philanthropic work took these female advances into the public sphere into a different direction. The philanthropy offered females the chance to identify and engage with subjects that they would otherwise not meet. Thus both, objects and subjects, are the focus of the newly gained forms of engagement in public spaces of the 19th century. Much later, shopping malls replaced the department stores and female pursuits moved there. This is also where cinemas then were housed – another space where the female gaze, crucial to the flâneuse, began to flourish (Bruno, 1993; Friedberg, 1991; Gleber, 1999).²⁰⁶

The growing female gaze was a form of empowerment, but it did not carry the same power as the male gaze. The flâneuse's gaze was still limited to specific spaces. It was also limited in its openness (thus the disguise of femininity). And it was limited in its power to objectify. This limitation of the gaze is *in principle* problematic. Not least, because the objectifying gaze is crucial to the flâneur, this choice should also be open to the flâneuse.²⁰⁷ However, the flâneuse's engagement is also her greatest asset. Via the engagement, she enters layers of the environment that would forever have been closed to someone performing the flânerie that is based on the example of the flâneur. Thus, this flâneuse discovers the city in her own way.

7.2. The Cyberflâneuse?

The flâneur needed the female (especially the prostitute) for his gaze, but otherwise discouraged female strolling. In contrast to this, the cyberflâneur does not have a clear-cut concern with gender. Rather, the user type tends to ignore the issue and subsumes it instead under the heading of fluid, changeable online personalities. The male gendered term, however, remains. Roseanne Alluquère Stone, for example, describes herself as an online flâneur and not a

²⁰⁶ The appropriation of characters and objects in interaction with a screen is again only a partial appropriation of the perceptive attitude of the flâneur, since, as others have pointed out, there will always be a return to the real which does crudely contradict the just experienced.

²⁰⁷ The flâneur had wavered between involvement and disengagement. In his aimlessness, his stroll had been read as a feminine engagement with the city. In return, he tried hard to affirm his masculinity in terms of a male gaze. This implied disengagement with consumption. The flâneur only consumed the sight of the city and of the people therein, but he did not let go of his distance.

flâneuse: “I live a good part of my life in cyberspace, surfing the nets, frequently feeling like a fast-forward flaneur” (Stone, 1995:37). She refers to the older referent, the flâneur, and thereby suggests a distance to her environment that the cyberflâneuse would try to avoid. Stone is a *cyberflâneur=she*, which assumes a boundary-pushing multi-genderedness. The claim to more flexibility in gender terms is contradicted by the lack of the cyberflâneuse. This lack replicates the earlier lack of the flâneuse. An initial absence of women online is here made worse through a discursive discrimination. The *cyberflâneur=she*, however, is the only trace of female flânerie online so far. The fate of the cyberflâneuse does not differ substantially from that of the flâneuse. Thus the proclaimed need to create the cyberflâneuse.

7.2.1. Flâneuse Attributes Online

The online sphere reveals continuities or at least parallels with a number of the issues that the flâneuse debate raised. Many of the areas in which the flâneuse was detected are again relevant in an online context. Areas of discrimination also find certain overlaps. These differences and commonalities are important stepping-stones in the development of the cyberflâneuse concept. More important, however, is the concept that builds on these. Therefore I will only briefly mention where the earlier concept of the flâneuse can be seen to have found an online equivalent and where major differences are visible.

As in the emerging cities of modernity, production and consumption were important drivers of the development of the web. Although they only feature on the margins of the canonical story concerning web development, these commercial interests were present as soon as a widespread uptake of the technology was in sight thanks to the web interface and applications.²⁰⁸ The parallel development had been the more widespread uptake of the personal computer that began in the 1980s. Commercialisation might have been the declared enemy of early Internet hypes, such as virtual community and electronic democracy, but it also became one of the driving factors behind further technological development. The resulting applications range from design features to security and payment aspects. Commercial interests were

²⁰⁸ But as also in 19th century Paris, where Haussmann had built the boulevards partly to let the military move through more quickly in case of political unrest, the canonical story points to the fact that military funding played at least a role in the early development of the Internet.

also behind the increasing use of the web by different social actors, because commercialisation speeded up the process of distribution. All this only began when restrictions on the commercial use of the Internet were officially lifted in 1991. This is also the year when the web was launched. The telecommunications providers were the first to exploit the spread of the Internet in the early 1990s, but other businesses followed soon (from 1994 onwards it was possible to order the first pizza online and the first online bank opened its 'doors' – see Zakon, 1999).

While the general uptake was quite remarkable after the introduction of the web, female users lagged massively behind. Thus there were no female user types to be found to begin with. The imagination, rarely articulated yet in those terms, extended only to the male. The actual and the discursive discrimination are again clearly intertwined. For a few years after the initial introduction of the web, the user gender gap continued to exist very visibly.²⁰⁹ This also applied to the general perception of the web and its users. It was then the push towards commercialisation, which brought a change in mainstream perception. Consumption was the first area where women were actively pursued as users. The female buying power was missing. Thus, as potential customers, women suddenly became an interesting target group. But online consumption, especially if removed from the pleasures of public encounters, does not have the same liberating potential as it arguably had in the 19th century department stores. Instead, what is still seen as a feminine pursuit has been removed from visibility once again. For an individual, shopping can provide pleasures and options for identity whether the shopping is performed online or offline. But the perception of the shopper as one of many disappears. Plus the additional pleasures of the gaze that engages is caged in at home. This is not to say the recognition of familiar behavioural patterns cannot be empowering. But in case of e-commerce, women were not primarily encouraged to try out the new medium as an information and communication technology. Instead, only that aspect of the potential cyberflâneuse which most contradicted the idea of female (online) flânerie as similar to that of the flâneur, i.e. participation in capitalism, is featured. The aimless passing by does not feature here. Thus I chose not adopt online consumption as a major aspect of the cyberflâneuse. It is,

²⁰⁹ Internet use statistics from different parts of the world underline that the gender gap has nearly closed in the Western countries amongst the younger population, but that it continues to exist in the older population and definitely in other countries of the world as well.

however, not a desire she needs to negate. Engagement as her primary feature does not exclude engagement with the objects on offer. They are simply not the primary focus of her online encounters.

The even more explicit expression of commodification, in which the human herself becomes a commodity, i.e. prostitution, again found a home online. Or rather: sex-related sites, often of a business nature, were equally one of the initial drivers of the further development of web applications. Numbers differ, but research suggests that sex-related sites belong to some of the most accessed sites.²¹⁰ In fact, diverse services related to sex have been a crucial part of the attraction of online services from day one. These services loomed at least at large in the general discourse concerning the new technologies. Much media hype was built around sensationalist scare-stories concerning children's accidental access to such material, for example. Thus the line of the discursive lack of representation of alternative female relationships to the web was largely suppressed by such stories. All the more exists a need to develop alternative concepts – such as the webgrrl and also the cyberflâneuse. Online the flâneur's gaze has turned into harassment for some female gendered. This can be unwanted offers in chat rooms, information on websites that degrade women, and even a virtual rape, as discussed elsewhere. Thus this at least semi-public space online is not an entirely discrimination-free space to roam for women. Finding some other occupation than simple online access is again an often used strategy for women to make themselves feel at home.

One of the occupations for women to visibly display an identity online has been as artists. Artists in general were some of the early users of the online applications. Artists tend to transgress existing boundaries, wherefore the early embrace of the new does not come as a surprise. The new technologies were immediately attractive to some who were on the look-out for new tools to create their art. Others began to develop new kinds of art: electronic art. Amongst them are a great number of female artists, some of whom call themselves cyberfeminists. The motifs they discover for their artwork and the topics again try to push boundaries, as the *VNS Matrix* example has shown. The focus now is less on a discovery of public spaces for women, but still on trying to deal with the fleeting nature of encounters, this time of online encounters.

²¹⁰ User research does not necessarily confirm this, but this can be explained via the need of the interviewee to control the image created in the interview situation and the general societal morals with regard to this particular topic.

Amongst these artists, one finds no cyberflâneuse, but at least a self-declared *post-modern flâneur* roaming online: Lucy Kimbell. She is the British artist who works with new technologies and whose cyberflânerie was referred to in the chapter on the cyberflâneur. In Kimbell's account, as in Stone's, the femaleness of the user type is only added on, in the sense of the *cyberflâneur=she*. Gender is supposed to be played with. These appearances of the *cyberflâneur=she* underline that in general disguise is a mechanism of both self-protection and playfulness online. It is a tactic used by both sexes (especially in MUDs and MOOs and IRC). Some people claim that it helps them to experience the other gender's point of view, others stress that it serves as a protection from harassment (McRae, 1997; Stivale, 1997; Turkle, 1995). The need for protection applies more to women.

Kimbell, on the other hand, stresses the playfulness. She thus claims that the core element of the cyberflâneur is the power to disguise him-/herself, i.e. to stay anonymous and to change identities. This tactic, however, is that of the original *flâneuse*. She was albeit limited gender-wise to a female-to-male transformation and was lacking the extent of playfulness assumed as pre-given now. Kimbell herself uses a range of different labels for different versions of online-flânerie. Only one of these is gendered: the lesbian flâneur (in reference to Munt). Overall, the *cyberflâneur=she* is less a repetition of the (sexual) ambiguity that disguise represented before than a neutralisation. It is an androgynous version of being online. Thus Kimbell's flâneur labels range from the analytic flâneur, the mobile and the Parisian flâneur to the ironic flâneur.

Kimbell's description of the *cyberflâneur=she* also asks for technological knowledge, without which, according to Kimbell, the cyberflâneur could not survive. Until she acquires this knowledge, she is on an equal footing with the other online participants; with the technological knowledge she supersedes the others by creating her own online spaces (Kimbell, 1997). Thus the *cyberflâneur=she* contains the possibility of real change, but remains very technological. Her speciality is less the encounter of others online than her own perfection.

There is one aspect of the original lives of bourgeois women in the 19th century that has been read as adding to their scope in public life, which can less easily be found online: philanthropy. Otherwise at least traces of the earlier lives are visible: sometimes in quite a new fashion (art e.g.), sometimes only thinly-disguised, but providing rather similar patterns as to earlier (e.g. harassment). Overall, however, many mechanisms to deal with slightly

problematic encounters within the newly formed public sphere have emerged. There is no simple acceptance of exclusion mechanisms and possibilities to create their own spaces are manifold. The cyberflâneuse is only one such possibilities and not the most playful one. She is a figure of identification for those who feel that there should be a possibility for female gendered flânerie online. It is a more subtle protest than that of the (original) webgrrls, for example. The here presented version of what the cyberflâneuse could be is not the only one possible. It is an extension of the criticisms of the original flâneur concept that were implied in most flâneuse conceptualisations. The first step in building this would be to offer a webpage. Since the cyberflâneuse does not exist yet, the below presented webpage in what on first sight seems a close appropriation: the contemporary flâneuse.

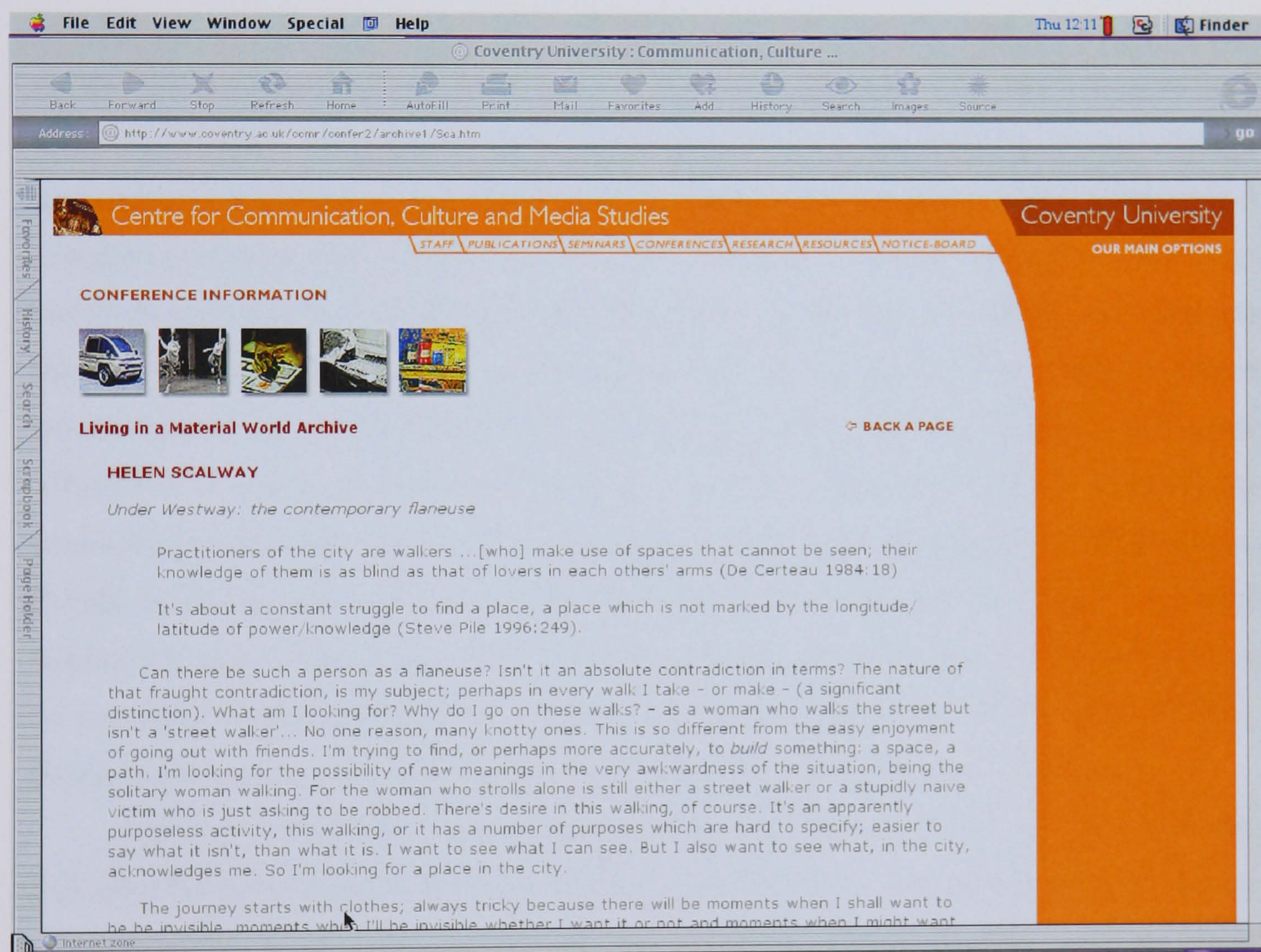
7.3. Cyberflâneuse Website

The cyberflâneuse remains thus far a construct, a possibility only. She is not yet a fully-fledged user type. Thus there is no webpage to be found.²¹¹ The page that nonetheless has been chosen as an example is a version of what a cyberflâneuse webpage *might* look like. It offers a textual approach on the one hand and highly self-reflective content on the other hand. The concentration lies on the *contemporary flâneuse*. Helen Scalway (2001), the author of the presented text, moves around in London of today and in her text reflects on this experience. In her walk, she tries to negotiate actual rather than virtual city spaces.

The webpage of Scalway's flâneuse-paper (see Fig.11) interestingly shares many features of the cyberflâneur-webpage (see chapter 6, Fig.6). The white background and emphasis of the textual plus clearly-organised links (here primarily intra-links) are common to both. The text-emphasis is underlined by the size of the graphics, which nonetheless contain some eye-catching design features (again similar to the cyberflâneur page). The major information provider behind the site, however, is different in Scalway's case to the cyberflâneur: it is a university department (Coventry University's Centre for Communication, Culture and Media Studies). Her actual piece is a paper that

²¹¹ I had originally designed a webpage for the project overall, which also contained a part on the cyberflâneuse. This has not been updated for a while though and could not be seen as representing the concept adequately. Plus, it seemed superfluous to outline my concept once and then to analyse a website where I present the concept.

was presented at a conference hosted by this department. The eye-catching design consists of images that are supposed to illustrate the centre's focus on material cultures (these encompass a car, part of a painting, dance and other engagements with visual culture and/or ICTs). The images are rather small and are also visible on other pages of the overall site. They are not specific to Scalway's paper nor are any other graphics on that site. The rest consists of a standardised design for the university department, which is fairly up-to-date and stylish (in bright orange). Hyperlinks are offered primarily to other information about the centre (staff, research, etc.) or to the university overall. No hyperlinks are embedded directly in Scalway's text.



**Fig.11: www.coventry.ac.uk/ccmr/confer2/archive1/Sca.htm
(accessed 15/08/2002)**

Overall, this page is on first sight fairly representative image of a potential cyberflâneuse as derived from the cyberflâneur, because it emphasises the textual. For the actual creation of a cyberflâneuse, however, this textual emphasis would not suffice. The cyberflâneuse would need to integrate some features that stress the interactive potential of the medium and an put an emphasis on communication.

Overall, the design of the site appears more professional than many sites did in the beginning of the web. One can see, for example, that professional designers have been paid to design the site. It is a fairly new site and has nothing directly to do with the cyberflâneuse as such, apart from again representing a certain social elite (university researchers). Otherwise it is a fairly simple site and does not necessarily show any radical shift from earlier sites. It focuses the attention of the user on the text, without using many other web-features. The site does neither contribute much to Scalway's text nor does it interfere with it or distract from it.

Scalway's text reflects her own attempt at becoming a flâneuse in the London of today. Her aim is first of all to walk in the city and also to create a space for looking. Ultimately, Scalway wants to engage with her environment and thus doubts whether flânerie, as exemplified by Baudelaire, is actually the appropriate framework for her stroll. She seems to think that engagement is a counter-concept to the flâneur idea, but she does want to engage in the city-stroll. Scalway's text indicates that although much has changed for a female stroller in the city of today, much has remained the same. The ability to move undisturbed is increased by any legitimate reason to be on the streets (or whatever is perceived as legitimate at a certain time and space). Disguising oneself carefully still helps. Overall, dangers and respectability are still an issue. While walking around allows one to take in the environment without actually taking up space, one has to be careful not to stand in the way. The appearance of seeming occupied creates a certain level of safety for the female stroller. Being inconspicuous is the first tactic for anyone who attempts flânerie.

Scalway's intention is to rescue the act of 'walking the city' for women, but also to save them from their role as consumers – her ultimate aim is that women shall "walk the city as citizens". Scalway's concept also implies a far-reaching emptying out of the flâneur of most of its original meanings. The leisurely city-stroll, however, remains. Interestingly, self-reflection differentiates this female stroller from a male one. And this is one important aspect of the engagement I want the cyberflâneuse to take on. The aim is still to view and take in the environment, but the distance to the surrounding objects and subjects should never be too great.

7.4. Re-Defining the (Cyber-)Flâneuse

The question of how far the flâneuse would need to enjoy exactly the same freedom as the flâneur to use the flânerie-label or how far she could or should be radically different is here clearly answered in favour of difference. The flâneuse conceptualisations underline this point, even if often based on historical necessity rather than desired outcome. If the flâneuse should be a liberating ideal, a utopian focus, then surely she needs to be substantially different from the flâneur. This applied also to my construction of the *cyberflâneuse*. The cyberflâneuse is neither the flâneur nor the cyberflâneur or simply a female version of either of those. Instead, the cyberflâneuse opens up the possibility to radically redefine what was once the original concept. Her major feature, as hinted at, is engagement instead of distance or even constant ambivalence.

When Scalway, for example, finds that she is not represented in the city, that she is not part of its dreamscape, that it does not offer her an identity (apart from that of a consumer), she finds alternative ways of making herself part:

In fact my partial exclusion as a subject from the controlling perspective both enjoins on me and enables me to seek a much more bodily and complex relationship with my surroundings. (Scalway, 2001)

Her tacit and fragmentary experience of the city, the one based on the chaos on the ground rather than an all-encompassing view allows her an engagement with her surroundings that the flâneur denied himself. While Scalway stresses the embodied nature of this experience, my stress is simply on the engagement. Another major difference in the cyberflâneuse is the fact that Scalway's engagement still takes place primarily on a private level. The cyberflâneuse, however, in the end needs to become outspoken about her presence. Even more than the original flâneur, she needs to be seen. This is not for her own sake, but to increase the possibilities for exchange. The emphasis is on the cyberflâneuse's *attitude*. This attitude differentiates her not only from the cyberflâneur, but from most of the other user types as well. The cyberflâneuse's particular way of perceiving and dealing with the online world are geared to social reality and to contact with others.

The advantage of the invention of the user type is the possibility to make such claims. These attributes will always appear as normative. I provide a user type that is normative, but also flexible and adaptable. The normative is necessary in order to create a basis for communication. This is what user types

should ideally provide: a piece of projection space for ideas of what being online could mean.

This does not mean that the bearer of the label cyberflâneuse necessarily needs to be female. In the cyberflâneuse, gender is not pre-determined. The cyberflâneuse puts an emphasis on gender and on the gendered history of the flâneur-concept, but its user does not need to be female or even identify as female. Her creation is about the newly found attributes concerning a particular kind of appropriation of cultural space rather than necessarily about male/female notions. These essentialist differentiations are not necessary, because they would not lead to the eventual abolishment of the original problem of discrimination. The point is a differentiation between (cyber)flâneur and (cyber)flâneuse.²¹² In the end, women and men should be able to be both, flâneur *and* flâneuse online. The femaleness of the term is necessary in order to avoid a repeat of the *discursive marginalisation*. There is thus a hint of strategic essentialism in the cyberflâneuse, but with an openness to both male and female identification.

In constantly proclaiming her identity, the cyberflâneuse takes inspiration from the webgrrl. She differs in the emphasis on the structure of the information space as well. She has not found an answer to how one can imagine cyberspace, but with her city-reference and the Benjamin framework she provides a hint. She considers hypertext and interlinked information and communication crucial to her understanding of the online sphere. Thus there is an emphasis on structure and an attempt to deal with cyberspace overall and not just her personal history and feminist issues (the webgrrl's focus).

The cyberflâneuse's creation is important precisely because the cyberflâneur exists and needs a counter-part. One needs to create her as having a radically different perceptive attitude. The 'distance', the detachment needs to be replaced with engagement. The cyberflâneuse would therefore have to be a pursuing character – someone who does not only lurk, but who acts and takes a viewpoint concerning her surroundings rather than using the mass as a veil to project onto and hide behind.²¹³ She would face social reality. There should be no self-delusionary 'grandeur'. Instead, self-reflection rules. She would identify with others online when necessary; she would not objectify subjects and not

²¹² Similar to my own argument, Scalway's counter-flâneuse does not need to be female.

²¹³ This viewpoint can contain both 'rational' and 'emotional' elements.

'subjectify' objects. She would not identify with the technology as such and could therefore not be a cyborg. Neither would she be a post-modern, constantly changing subjectivity. She would move through cyberspace, but in an engaged and engaging way. She would very consciously choose to become a cyberflâneuse and proclaim herself as such.

This is such a far-reaching transformation of the original flâneur-concept that it could lead to the question of whether there is anything left of the original flâneur-attributes. What is left is a form of taking possession of space, a *perceptive attitude* towards the newly emerging: a heightened awareness. This perception is first of all achieved on the visual level, i.e. via the gaze. The cyberflâneuse is one possible extension of a form of mobile spectatorship, which is not necessarily female, but definitely inclusive of the female in terms of the discourse. Thus it contributes to the formation of a possible female subjectivity (see also Russell, 2000), but also of subject positions in general. The other important aspect of flânerie imported by the cyberflâneuse is an engagement with the overall environment, i.e. an engagement that moves beyond the individual. It does this on two levels: first of all, it includes a general reflection on cyberspace as a social space, as a communication and information structure (as Scalway does for the city). Secondly, it tries to offer an identity which can be identified with by others, but also communicated about.

Most importantly, I do think that the ambiguity presented by Elizabeth Wilson should be answered with clarity.

Yet the ambiguity of the flâneur is as striking as ever. It is still uncertain whether she or he is simply strolling, loitering and looking (window shopping) or whether these activities must be transformed into a representation – journalism, film, novel – in order to qualify as *flânerie*. Women are especially caught in this ambiguity. (Wilson, 2001:91)

In the cyberflâneuse, the answer is clear: output is important. This does not need to be a completed product, such a novel. But it should be a publication of her self-reflective experience of being online. Some weblogs fulfil this function at the moment. These are web-based, publicly accessible personal diaries or at least commented lists of hyperlinks. Some of them clearly reflect on the use of the medium, often in relation to the author's identity. What they sometimes lack is the visible communication with others. This meaning-making, by oneself and in an exchange with other people, gives structure to the endless online sphere in an account of the order and chaos online.

I ask again: 'why on earth (and in cyberspace) should *anyone* want to be a *cyberflâneuse*?' Women (and whoever else wants to use cyber(-city)-space) could instead look for entirely new versions of virtual city spaces and their appropriation, especially since the term *cyberflâneuse* does not even exist properly. The answer is that she offers a tool for communication and identification that does not exist in this combination yet. The behaviours surely do exist, but the term brings together a unique set of histories and possibilities. The particular kind of engagement is crucial. The *cyberflâneuse* names herself in a female category and thereby refers to a whole array of behavioural possibilities that have arisen from the *flâneuse*'s history and in defiance of the *cyberflâneur*.

This creation generally contradicts some of the claims (or hopes) expressed in early cyber-theory. The creation of such a normative subject position, which allows some changes, but prescribes other basic attitudes is not necessarily a good advertisement for identity-flexibility and technologically-enforced opening up of new definitions of the self. But it is not that different from a lot of cyber-practice in this way. This practice, as second generation research of the last few years has shown, is more complex and problematic and stuck in existing identity patterns (especially on the gender level) than was originally hoped for. This is not to say that transgressive and boundary-pushing activities and identifications are not taking place. It is simply to underline that the technology per se does not necessarily open up these possibilities. The *cyberflâneuse* takes one step back and offers instead an identity position which contains some stability via its norms and ideals. This stability, it seems, is necessary for many users online in order to hold on to something amidst the chaotic flow that seems on offer. Then the *cyberflâneuse* could stroll freely in the online sphere.

8. Webgrrl:

Grrl-Power, Now – But Don't Forget Your Password!

A Webgrrl is a woman with a website or a member of the cool international networking group that meets both online and in the real world. (Girls' Online Resources, 2001)

Being a *webgrrl* – or simply a *grrl* or *gurl*, a *cybergrrl*, *netgrrl*, *nerdgrrl*, *fatgrrl*, *generationgrrl* – is primarily about women (or girls) networking on- and offline.²¹⁴ The sites where these grrls appear are mostly clearly gendered sites, addressing a specifically female audience. The grrl-part is taken from the riotgrrl-movement, a music subculture of a particular time. Thanks to this reference point, there is some overlap with the cyberpunk user type in the webgrrl. The even greater overlap, however, is with the cyberflâneuse. Like the cyberflâneuse, the webgrrl was also a creation with an outspoken user type identity. It was promoted widely with reference to this identity and subsequently spread far. The webgrrl is an unusual user type thanks to this identity-claim.

The webgrrl – or webgrrls – emerged in the early days of the web. Their appearance is definitely linked to the moment when Internet-use became more widespread. Today, the webgrrls' online presence is still clearly visible, but their heyday has passed. Their presence, as some others, has suffered from the process of normalisation surrounding web-use. In this particular case commercialisation has also played a major role. There are thus two different kinds of webgrrl-sites to be found: on the one hand those of the webgrrls.com network of webgrrls and on the other hand a diverse set of individual grrl-pages. The webgrrls.com network was crucial in spreading the original idea of the webgrrl far and in making it visible. This network is also seen to have left the origins of the webgrrls – the riotgrrls – most clearly behind. Thanks to their prominence, the emphasis in my own online analysis has been with the webgrrls.com network. Alternative sites will also be referred to, but in less detailed terms. Through a fairly extensive treatment of the riotgrrl history in this chapter, the alternative sites are nonetheless indirectly analysed, since they have a tendency to explicitly build on these origins. The webgrrls.com network is characterised rather through suppressing these origins.

²¹⁴ There are different versions of spelling. Sometimes it is grrrl, but I will use grrl for reasons of simplicity.

8.1. Webgrrls: Purpose and Characteristics

Most of the clearly labelled webgrrl-sites are about the creation of a knowledgeable female online community. Many of these self-help pages for women are dealing with different aspects of questions of identity. Most webgrrls also share a professional or personal interest in new technologies and in the ability to deal with them effectively. The diverse versions of the prefixation of the term, as in web-/cyber-/nerd-, are an indication of this common denominator. The webgrrls have also been defined as a cyberfeminist movement. They definitely share with cyberfeminism the desire to use the technologies, but also to subvert and to use humorous interventions in order to divert discriminations. Thus the webgrrl-sites' promoters are grrls not only in reference to the earlier riotgrrl-movement. They also want to defy potential male searches for girls online while still holding on to a distinct female identification:

Because women make up a minority of the Internet's users and Web developers, finding sites that are for women and not about women can lead to some offensive discoveries ...Thus, 'a very practical reason grrrls/geeks/nerds use these codewords in titles of our site is to make it clear that we're not naked and waiting for a hot chat with you!' (DeLoach, 1996)

The term webgrrl addresses the question of women as victims by refusing to take on this role. Women are using a specific vocabulary to designate their space in cyberspace and to be actively online without being harassed. The vocabulary serves thus to protect, but also to demonstrate strength and presence. The language enables a female online presence that does not need to disguise itself; that says that women do not have to act like victims. Instead grrls "...enjoy their femininity and kick ass at the same time" (Sinclair in Wakeford, 1997:61). Thus the grrls have been widely celebrated as positive statements of female online presence (e.g. Ward, 2001).

The term webgrrl is generally used to signify an identity, a specific type of use and the membership of a specific user-group. The users of this term display a consciousness concerning the cultural roots and a strong perception of the *choice* of their online identities. Their use of the webgrrl terminology is not accidental or done in passing. Most users repeatedly pronounce themselves to be grrls. The very conscious and active politics inscribed in the term webgrrl immediately differentiate her from other user types. The naming is used in defiance and with a clear message. Thus the webgrrls state from the outset that

there is *content* in this *concept*. Although they do not use the term user type, they perceive themselves to be one. This is unusual.

The most prominent group of webgrrls, the webgrrls.com, even had an *International Webgrrls Day* and originally issued a mission statement. In contrast, other self-proclaimed webgrrls were equally explicit about not being a movement (DeLoach, 1996). This again reflects the most visible division between the two major webgrrl-strands: some tried to channel it into a movement and others held on to individual identification with the concept. Despite these differences, many overlaps can be detected. The primary content of webgrrl-sites is a concentration on *gender-consciousness*. The core is *networking* and the emphasis is on helping each other out. The webgrrls often fulfil mentoring functions for each other and educate each other in terms of new technologies:

Webgrrls has lifted the veil of mystery (fear & intimidation!) that had precluded me from pursuing new media in the past. (Webgrrls, 1999c)²¹⁵

The networking can take place virtually as well as in real life. The stress on face-to-face meetings is high up on the agenda. The close-knit interrelationship between the real and the virtual is made very explicit. This is another aspect that is unusual about this user type. Overall, the webgrrls' approach to feminism is playful. A debate on domestic violence and another on the newest boy-band are displayed right next to each other. The webgrrls do not declare their sites as women-only zones, but simply want to exclude searches for the sexualised notion of girls and concentrate on educating each other.

8.2. Webgrrl Origins

8.2.1. Guerilla Girls and Riotgrrls

The origins of the grrls online can be found both in the guerrilla girls, who began in the mid-1980s, and in the riotgrrls of the early 1990s.²¹⁶ The guerrilla girls are a group of female artists who decided to bring feminist issues into the art world. In order to do so, they decided to stay anonymous and take on the

²¹⁵ In an interesting sideline, it should be noted that the original flâneur needed the veil that the mass provided him with in order to gain his particular version of access to the city. The cyberflâneuse, however, is in line with the webgrrl in desiring to lift rather than to create veils.

²¹⁶ It has been said that the webgrrls are to cyberspace what the guerrilla girls were to art and the riotgrrls to music (De Loach, 1996).

names of dead female artists instead. Whenever the guerrilla girls appear in public, they wear gorilla masks. Over the years, they have produced “posters, stickers, books, printed projects, and actions that expose sexism and racism in politics, the art world, film and the culture at large” (Guerrilla Girls, 2003). With humour, they try to address the discriminations that take place in the art world. The guerrilla girls are still going strong. In the context of the webgrrl-analysis, they signify a general trend in feminism that took place from the 1980s onwards. This is a trend to try to use humour, but at the same time shock people into an awareness concerning feminist issues in specific cultural areas. They thus paved the way for both the riotgrrls and later the webgrrls. My concentration is, however, on the riotgrrl history. This is not only because of a greater public awareness concerning the riotgrrls and the obvious reference to grrls, but primarily because on most grrl-sites the historical reference – if they state one – is to the riotgrrls.

8.2.2. Riotgrrl History

The riotgrrls were a movement, or at least a “loose-knit affiliation” (Plastic, 2001). They were part of the early 1990s music subculture, especially grunge. Riotgrrls originally signified a number of all-girl bands. Originally from the U.S., the idea of riotgrrls quickly spread to the UK as well. Most sources agree that the riotgrrls were formed in 1991 in Olympia, Washington and parallel in Washington, D.C. The opening event of the weeklong International Pop Underground Convention (IPU) in Olympia was declared a ‘Girl Day’ and titled “Love Rock Revolution Girl Style Now”. This unusual coming-together of all-female bands was later interpreted as the beginning of the riotgrrls. Another important marker of the development of the riotgrrl movement was a letter that appeared in the aftermath of the Mount Pleasant riots, which took place in Washington, D.C. at about the same time. The riots had been caused by a racial shooting incident. A letter discussing the incident was distributed amongst people who were involved in female bands. The letter contained the sentence: “We need to start a girl riot”. This girl riot idea eventually became riotgrrl (Emplive, 2003).

Overall, the riotgrrl bands and other riotgrrls took a slightly aggressive stance and used punk and grunge in the name of feminism and revolution. This revolution was meant to be of an everyday kind, questioning especially patriarchy, but also capitalism (White, 1992:397). The riotgrrls, like the guerrilla girls, tried to use provocative, but humorous slogans to catch the attention.

Thus fairly early on, “Hips, Lips, Tits, Power!” became a riotgrrl catchphrase (O’Brien, 1995:171). One of the targets for their attacks was the music industry itself. Many earlier music (sub-)cultures had not always made explicit space for women. If they did allow women, it was mainly as fans, groupies and girlfriends. On the other hand, popular music since the 1960s had also allowed women to transgress many boundaries that were hitherto un-surmountable. The tension between these extremes intensified in the riotgrrl-movement. For many participants it felt like liberation. They nonetheless encountered many hurdles, not least from the problematic media portrayal. In the beginning, however, they were celebrated widely and the concentration still lay primarily on their music.

Music was after all the base for the original riotgrrls. *Bikini Kill* and *Huggy Bear* were important bands, but there were many others (Emplive, 2003). Some individual band members, such as Kathleen Hanna (the singer of *Bikini Kill*), were celebrated as role models (Raphael, 1995:11-12; 124). In the early days of the movement, too much seemed to depend on individual personalities and specific bands, but eventually the riotgrrls overall gained momentum. At that point their messages moved to the forefront. Subsequently they managed to attract more women who were not primarily interested in their music, but in their message.

8.2.3. Riotgrrl Music

In terms of both their music and other media articulations, word-games and cut-up sentences ruled. This was in clear reference to punk styles, which the situationist *détournement* had prefigured. Their music was mostly fairly traditional punk and grunge, i.e. self-made, simple, aggressive music. This re-combination of existing elements and lack of deference to music conventions was criticised as bad music. But the riotgrrls were more interested in the fact that the simplicity of their music encouraged other girls to pick up guitars and make music themselves. Music making served as a form of empowerment. The ‘anyone can do it’ approach ruled.

Riot Grrrl is foremost about process, not product; it’s about the empowerment that comes from ‘getting up and doing it’, and the inspiration audience members draw from witnessing this spectacle of self-liberation. (Reynolds & Press, 1995:327-328)

The content of the music and the overall gesture were more important than the quality of the music as such. In terms of the content, the riotgrrls very much

pursued a form of pro-girl identity politics. This mostly went hand in hand with a separatist philosophy. Separatism was not necessarily seen as a final solution, but rather as a temporary tactic, as a form of strategic essentialism. More than making music, the whole point of the riotgrrls was about speaking out. This is the reason why the riotgrrls have been called a grassroots level revolution. This is exemplified in the *Riot Grrrl Convention*, which was held in Washington, D.C. in the summer of 1992. Here, women were asked to “contribute their skills, energy, anger, creativity and curiosity” (see Fig.12).



Fig.12: Riot Grrrl Convention Poster

www.emplive.com/explore/riot_grrrl/message.asp (accessed 16/11/03)

8.2.4. Riotgrrrl Messages

If femininity and adolescence are a contradiction, as Mary Celeste Kearney declared (Kearney, 1998), there is a need to deal with the double challenge. This challenge is partly answered in the discovery that meanings can be challenged, negotiated and partly constructed. This is what the riotgrrls seemed to suggest. As a distinctly female subculture, riotgrrls wanted to challenge pre-existing conventions of gender, sexuality and other traditional stereotypes (Negus, 1996:12). Thus victimhood was not only articulated, but actively dealt with and defied. The topics were a contrast to traditional perceptions of the problems or desires of young people. They radicalised more traditional notions of female

teenage fandom, where boys had served as the focus for articulating desires (Reynolds & Press, 1995:323). Instead, the riotgrrls wrote and sang about issues such as domestic violence, incest and rape. They generally articulated issues of abuse, be they personal or societal (such as racism). Other topics were the consequences of and reactions to such abuse. Thus suicide was an issue, but also possible versions of self-defence. Overall, the body was a major focus. Anorexia as well as so-called 'fat oppression' and other socially induced health issues were widely discussed and written about. The general aim of the riotgrrl movement was resistance, a call for action (Kearney, 1998:156). They combined theory with action and simultaneously created of a safe space for a particularly vulnerable group.

The movement never officially 'died', but their heyday had been in the first half of the 1990s. Not much has been heard from them since, unless one perceives the webgrrls as the logic extension. However, the riotgrrl style and partly also their provocations have left their traces in music and youth subcultures that have emerged since. One of the reasons for their widespread recognition has also been one of their worst enemies: their media portrayal.

8.2.5. Riotgrrls: The Media Portrayal

Much has been made of the riotgrrls' relationship to the mainstream media. They were initially media darlings, young and exotic enough to be featured a lot. Particularly after July 1992, when the journalist Emily White published an article featuring them in the *L.A. Weekly*, the riotgrrls were a hot topic. This article triggered a whole load of other articles as well as radio and TV coverage (primarily in the U.S. and the UK). Exactly this media coverage led to a later bust between the movement and the media. The event that led to the bust triggered some renewed media coverage in 1993 (see *Rolling Stone* article in Fig.13). The actual event was a television show to which the band *Huggy Bear* had been invited to perform. While in the studio, they discovered that some topless fashion models (called 'Barbi Twins') were to be interviewed in the same show. Outraged, since this was a clear affront concerning their most important politics, the band heckled the presenter in front of the running cameras and was subsequently thrown out (Raphael, 1995:147).



Fig. 13: Media portrayal of riotgrrls – www.emplive.com/explore/riot_grrrl/media.asp (accessed 29/10/03)

While this event made riotgrrls more famous, they reacted first of all with a media ban. They did not want to be compromised repeatedly. Thus they decided not to give any more interviews. However, despite (or partly because of) this media blackout, the media continued to build up a riotgrrl-image. As a consequence, it was increasingly difficult for the riotgrrls to get away from all the attention and even more difficult to correct the images that were being formed. Bands were played against each other (see Fig.13) and too often the whole movement was reduced to something 'rather cute'.

One element in this media portrayal that had gone wrong was their name. At least initially the term riotgrrls helped to spread their ideas and seemed to express them well, since the female can be visible without referring back to existing stereotypes. More concretely, the riotgrrl term had its origins not only in the events that caused the movement's formation, but also referred back to the female black liberation movement. In that movement 'guurls' had been asked to revolt and the drawn-out sound – the 'grrrrrowl' – was heard as the growling sound of anger and resistance.

Of course naming is important but it should never remain the same. But it attempts, via the explosivity of its name, to link up riot = upturn, girl = gender. It was the coolest thing and now the name's a stigma. (Huggy Bear in Raphael, 1995:151)

Despite the appropriateness of the term, it was eventually regarded as a curse. The term's meaning was by then determined by forces that were often outside of the control of the riotgrrls themselves:

...some refused to use the term to describe themselves, because it had so rapidly become a freefloating signifier circulating through media hyperspace. (Reynolds and Press, 1995:324)

The name, however, could not easily be changed without losing an entire network of references and history. Thus the name remained, but other tactics for dealing with the media were developed. One of these was the production of their own media, primarily in the form of fanzines. This helped them to keep at least partial control and to avoid suspected misrepresentation (Raphael, 1995:148). Music subcultures had been producing fanzines for a long time before the riotgrrls came along, but rarely ever had there been fanzines that were so clearly gendered and highly productive.



Fig.14: Examples of riotgrrls fanzines, beginning 1990s

The fanzines were full of declarations of intent and definitions (Reynolds & Press, 1995:325). They did indeed produce what they consumed; they chose not to rely at all on the mainstream media. And they allowed themselves to be the focus of their own media production. They also developed their own, recognisable style (see Fig.14). Some of the aesthetics of webgrrl-websites are similar in style.

8.3. From Riot to Web?

Self-made media are also an important reference point for the cyberspace replicas of the riotgrrls: the webgrrls. The online presence of grrls can be seen to be a continuation of the idea of the creation of their own media voice. The claim that everyone can fairly easily and cheaply produce their own website is a major difference between the web and earlier media forms.²¹⁷ The web fits in with the D.I.Y. approach to production and consumption, which the riotgrrls had picked up from punk. In this sense it is hardly surprising that some self-proclaimed grrls also took up the new media challenge and/or that the women who were initially interested in creating their own online information spaces have used the grrl-label. Other, more explicit references are also made to the political claims of the riotgrrls. Here, however, we have to differentiate between the two different directions that the webgrrls eventually split up into: the webgrrls.com, an international webgrrls-organisation, and the others. The others are a set of more diverse, mostly individual sites that are not part of this organisation, but use the grrl-label somewhere on their site. They can be found under diverse names, such as geekgrrls, fatgrrls or others. Despite the same origins and early history, the two groups have gone through rather different developments. These reflect different aspects of the overall development of the web and thus also of the cyberculture topics I identified. I begin with the history that could be labelled 'the commercial story'.

8.3.1. History of Webgrrls.com

The webgrrls overall are seen to have originated from an international group of webgrrls that now runs under the name webgrrls.com. The development of this group is closely linked with the name Aliza Sherman, the founder of webgrrls.com. It all began with Sherman's personal site, in which she called herself (and the site) cybergrrl. This site, in which she advertised her own web-business, went online in the beginning of 1995 and soon grew into something much larger than originally anticipated. The site still exists, but it is now no longer her personal site. Instead, it is an established commercial enterprise. The original cybergrrl-site was partly motivated by Sherman's search for like-minded women. She tried to find women who were also setting up their own web-companies, but this search turned out to be difficult. She then started to

²¹⁷ Media such as the fanzines, which were also easily and cheaply produced, underline the qualifications that are necessary when one deals with such claims. This, however, does not deny the power of the new technologies for the creation of subcultural media products.

search for online-links to women with similar projects. And these links she made public on her cybergrrl-website. In reference to her own cybergrrl-name, she called the links 'the webgrrls', since the links presented a web of other grrls working with new media. Hence the cybergrrl and the webgrrls were established. No direct mention was made of the riotgrrls, but of networking women and of empowering technology.

Soon after, i.e. in April 1995, the first face-to-face meeting of Sherman and five other so-called webgrrls took place in New York City. The meeting happened in a cybercafé and most of the women present were professionally working with computers.²¹⁸ More meetings were to take place throughout the next two years after that, growing exponentially throughout. Another growth that took place was that of the number of webgrrl chapters. The chapters are local groups of webgrrls, which form a part of the larger network. Soon chapters opened up across the U.S. as well as internationally. Eventually, some 30,000 women were officially part of webgrrls.com. In 1997, the first *International Webgrrls Day* used Internet technologies to link webgrrl chapters all over the world in discussions and in celebrations (Webgrrls, 1999a). On the official webgrrl-website, only one more *International Webgrrls Day* is listed for 1998, but nothing of the kind since then.

The webgrrl website is part of a larger commercial group (all originated by Sherman), which owns several sites. The webgrrls.com site is defined as the *networking* site or "the women's techknowledge connection". The same company also owns cybergrrls.com. This site is defined as *content and community* or "inspiring, informing & celebrating women".²¹⁹ Last, but not least, the portal site femina.com is also part of the same company. Femina.com stands for *search* or "sites for, by and about women" (Cybergrrl, 2002).

The Sherman-webgrrls, as I will call them for reason of clarity, originally started out with a similar mission as others webgrrls. They even declared this mission in a mission statement:

²¹⁸ This was not to remain the last webgrrl-meeting. Instead, the meetings became a regular habit in 1995 and grew steadily in terms of numbers of attendees (at some stage the New York webgrrl chapter alone had 2500 members and the meetings were attended by several hundred women). This seems to have stopped eventually, but numbers for later years are difficult to find.

²¹⁹ The cybergrrl-site is split into 'fun', 'views' and 'tech' and has mailing lists and opinion polls. Despite being called the community site, it does not offer actual links other than qua content.

Webgrrl International provides a forum for women in or interested in new media and technology to network, exchange job and business leads, form strategic alliances, mentor and teach, intern and learn the skills to help women success in an increasingly technical workplace and world" (Webgrrls, 1999a)

They wanted to create a network of women working with new technologies and to teach those who did not yet know. However, from the first day onwards, the Sherman-webgrrls also had a business-orientation. The site began as a non-profit, charity organisation, but today is a for-profit organisation. Everyone who officially wants to join the webgrrls as an individual or a company has to pay a membership-fee. This gives the Sherman-webgrrls access to a job-bank, which caters especially for jobs in marketing, business development and advertising. Apart from jobs, technical advice and networking with others are the main other issues on the site.

Technical know-how is also what Lucy Kimbell recommended the *cyberflâneur=she* to gain if she wanted to differentiate herself from others online. The need to gain technical know-how is in both cases addressed at female users, but in the webgrrl the idea is partly about gaining this know-how with the help of like-minded women. Technological skills for the use of new technologies were in the mid-1990s as common as playing instruments was for riotgrrls in the beginning 1990s: not very. The overall networking and sharing knowledge aim is thus the same as that of the riotgrrls, but the way to achieve this (and the ulterior motive behind it) differs. In the end, most webgrrls are interested in their businesses.

All this has been outlined in order to underline how streamlined the webgrrls.com have become. While it is an important move to offer help to women working in the technology field, the original sharing impetus has mostly disappeared. Most of the networking done today on that site is with other commercial enterprises, i.e. the network has become not only a commercial enterprise, but serves functional purposes. This case is not unusual: many similar social and cultural movements simply run their course and people move on to others foci. Another reason is the fact that the movement simply grew too big to sustain the initial impetus. A more specific reason for the change of the webgrrls is an Internet-specific reason: the crash of the dot.com bubble in the late 1990s. The expansion of the cybergrrl-empire stopped soon after. Consolidation of the existing sites and services became the

main aim. By that point any charity status was long gone and the idea of sharing had changed its meaning.

What might sound like a negative assessment is not meant as a general judgement on this development or on the use of the web as a business opportunity. The assessment instead stems from the perspective of the webgrrl as a user type. And as a user type, the webgrrl(s) refers to a certain ideal of networking which sits uncomfortably with commercial interests. Overall, this development is equally a reflection on the early Internet hype in contrast to more recent developments. The first promoted ideals, of which the virtual community idea clearly applies to the webgrrls, have been questioned through the overall move towards commercial interests. These often limit access to certain kinds of information. They also tend to pick up on existing concepts, such as the virtual community idea, and use these to promote their products. Throughout the history of the net (and its theorisation), the negotiation between offline and online relationships has been crucial and complex. Thus the move from six women meeting in a cybercafé to several thousand being connected in the name of webgrrl.com is an empowering, but also a problematic move.

In terms of the international webgrrls-group, this has led to a trend to dissolution, i.e. the network is simply losing members. One example is the group in the U.S. city of Buffalo. A mass defection from the organisation took place there not too long ago. The original founders of the local webgrrls-chapter, a group of 15 to 20 women, all left. Instead, these women then started a new group, a non-profit organisation. The webgrrls-organisation was not meeting their needs in a way they felt a local group could (Drury, 2002). Ironically, one of the most celebrated aspects of the webgrrls-movement is here declared as the core problem of the organisation: the global networking structure. The expertise that the global network offered has empowered women locally to start their own.

The phenomenal growth and enthusiasm of the early days has gone. As a business and as individuals pursuing web-related careers, the webgrrls still exist. As a community though, as was originally envisaged, the webgrrls have become less relevant. The trend to localisation also reflects a general development of the web which some of the other user types share. It can be described as a move from idealism to pragmatism. As with all the attributes described in my analysis, this is not an absolute move that applies to all webgrrls (or riotgrrls for that matter). There are a variety of webgrrl sites online, but general *tendencies* are what I am concerned with and localisation is

an important one of these trends. In order to further exemplify the webgrrls-history, I now turn to the webgrrls.com webpage in more detail.

8.3.2. The Webgrrl Website

The focus of this analysis is the webgrrls.com website. It belongs to the professionally organised kind of webgrrl-sites. In this case, professionalisation clearly implies commercialisation. The commercial aspects are visible in several ways, one of which is the restriction of use of whatever is offered on the site. Thus, nowadays the name webgrrls can only be used when so authorized: "The Webgrrls logo and name are the property of Aliza Sherman, a.k.a. 'Cybergrrl', and are used with permission" (Webgrrls, 1999b). The webgrrls-name-sign thus displays a 'registered trademark' sign. Another immediately visible feature is that this webgrrls site is not the only page that opens when the URL is accessed. Instead, extra browser windows open. In my encounter with these, they displayed advertisements for money credit, a telecom wireless service, a diet patch and online smileys. Another place for advertisements is at the bottom of the initial webgrrls-page (or rather the bottom of the screen). Parts of the site, such as the jobbank, are only accessible to webgrrls-members. One can register for membership online, but there is a fee to be paid.

Once one moves beyond the initial advertising-bombardment, the site has an array of features. It is difficult to say anything more concrete about the content, because much of it is barred unless one becomes a member. The variety is seemingly diverse: features range from opinion polls to 'webgrrl of the week' and 'wisdom'. The largest feature on the first page is a list of 'latest tech, business, career, women's news' with hyperlinks to articles and stories. Most of these articles are links to other, mostly commercial websites or have been posted by members. Content-wise they are fairly technical or related to business-matters. The same applies to the content of the discussion groups offered on the site and other links. The technological tutorials and tools are well presented and useful for anyone who wants to programme websites. Everything is geared towards women who work in the technological end of the new media field.

The webgrrl user type features clearly and is explained in a specific history section as well as through the mission statement and similar features. Five colours (black, dark blue, green, yellow and white) dominate the design of the site. It also features the webgrrls logo, but in relatively small form. This logo is the face of a bespectacled female cartoon-character, which is connected

through some round, earth-shaped links to an invisible network. This logo is visible throughout all sub-pages, i.e. it is a recognisable feature of the site overall.

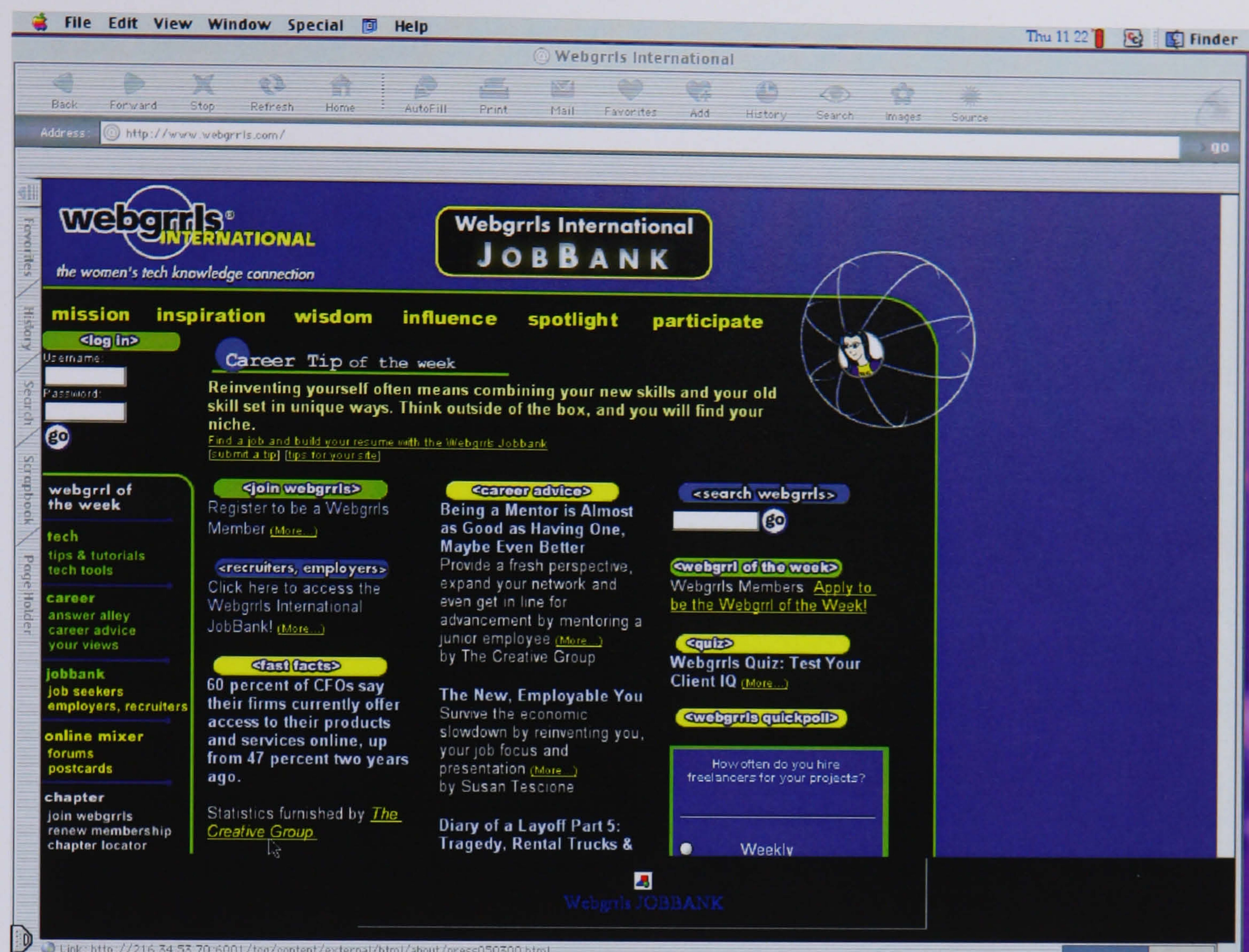


Fig.15: www.webgrrls.com (accessed 15/08/02)

Earlier versions of the site (from 1997 onwards) had similar content, but were much simpler in terms of their design. There were no frames or ads, for example. The site primarily stated what the webgrrls were, how one could find a webgrrls chapter close by and gave some business tips. The user was also encouraged to send in information about herself. Thus the change that has occurred over the years, although not drastic, has fundamentally altered the feeling of the site. The networking features, in the first issues of the site the primary features, have gone to the background. Individual answers to individual questions have come to the forefront instead. Answers often have to be paid for. The advertising features are very dominant and underline the fact that profit is now a primary aim of the site.²²⁰ The riotgrrl-origin is present only in the idea of a general female empowerment, but not in terms of other content-

²²⁰ The cybergrrls-site, although run by the same company, has not had such a radical shift. Its primary topics, which are less business-oriented and more about health, culture and other aspects of everyday life, might be the reason for the less intrusive design.

details. The general riotgrrl-approach of the playful and provocative is not present. But the webgrrls.com are not the only grrls online.

8.3.3. Other Online-Grrls

Surfergrrrls, however, are us: the hot-chix, out-there, in the water, on the board, standin' up and gettin' wet. We are rad, we are bad, and we are on the boards (or modems) with the best of the boys. ...We actively negotiate what it means to be grrrls with computers... (Gilbert & Kile, 1996:6)

These surfergrrrls, taken from a 1996-book, shall serve as a brief introduction to the other side of the webgrrl-story. Although Sherman's sites are probably the most renowned (and have helped the term webgrrl to become widely recognised), there were and are many others sites out there. Most of these are more subcultural and slightly closer to the riotgrrl-roots than the webgrrls.com. Laurel Gilbert and Crystal Kile's book *Surfergrrrls – Look, Ethel! An Internet Guide For Us!* (1996) is an exemplary expression for these sites, but also for the 1995-1997 period in which the grrls were still known to growl.²²¹

Gilbert and Kile begin their book with a list of reasons for writing it. The authors claim that "so much of the way we think about the Internet has been determined by 'manly' metaphors (the frontier, the highway) and by cyberpunk (we dig it, but it's not really a female-friendly vision in a lot of ways)..." (Gilbert & Kile, 1996:4).²²² Typical for the webgrrl user type in general, the surfergrrrls acknowledge the power of the metaphoric vocabulary that has been used to describe the Internet. Thus their own intervention is an attempt at changing the existing picture. Their criticism includes the cyberpunk genre, which they see as problematic for females. Overall, the authors underline a main point of this thesis: metaphors open up new worlds but therefore also always rule out or at least push aside alternative imaginations. Certain metaphors dominate within the general discourses concerning the present as well as the future of

²²¹ The book provides an Internet glossary, an Internet history, a history of women and computing, a 'how-to' guide in terms of the technology, a list of terms, questions, interviews and a lot of other information. In their 'surfergrrrl scout merit badges' (Gilbert & Kile, 1996:100), one of the highly rated badges is the 'netizen'. Here, the netizen is a phase in the development to the cyborggrrrl (the highest badge) and represents an awareness concerning relevant online issues about equality, laws, etc. Sometimes, the attributes of the different user types overlap and decisions concerning the naming become strategic decisions of emphasis.

²²² Gilbert and Kile come back to the importance of – in this case women's – metaphors later in the book. They consider the 'web' to be a good metaphor, while also providing their readers with an overview of other general metaphors. In some of their interviews, Gilbert and Kile include the appropriateness of certain metaphors as a question and thereby underline the importance they grant them.

cyberspace. The webgrrl is the success story of one that started as an alternative – and has partly been adopted into the canonical story. This uptake, however, applies more to the webgrrls.com than the others grrls online.

The other grrls, represented by Gilbert and Kile, extends the earlier grrl-timeline. These authors clearly refer to the riotgrrls as their origin and see the surfergrrrls, webgrrls, etc. simply as a timely extension of this loose affiliation. Overall, Gilbert and Kile interpret the success of grrl-sites as based on the encouragement that is provided through seeing people like themselves provide online spaces. The potential identification with the people behind the websites (rather than simply the attitudes implied in the term) plays a crucial role in this process of identity choices. The attempts at personalisation allow an actual interaction and thus also a feeling of a like-minded community. This is often underpinned, as the webgrrls.com example has shown also, through real-life meetings. The community-idea is a major difference to other user types as is the stress on face-to-face meetings with the like-minded.

Most webgrrl-sites contain a definition of what webgrrls stand for or at least some reference to the webgrrls' history. Personal histories and/or personal interpretations of the webgrrl identity add flavour to these references. Many grrl-sites also used to have 'grrl' in their URL or domain name. This has changed slightly by now, due to the fact most grrl-URLs are now taken. In reference to their riotgrrl-roots, some sites are primarily e-zines or at least make reference to relevant e-zines.²²³ Music often plays an important role on the grrl-sites.²²⁴ Favourite links, favourite stories, favourite songs and other favourites often find their way onto the grrl-sites.

Many grrl-sites can also still be recognised simply by their design. This design is playful, with explicit colours and specific graphics. A certain style of webgrrl-logo keeps re-appearing. This is, as in the webgrrls.com example, often a cartoon-character of a girl or woman. These characters show similarities with the designs of the early riotgrrl-fanzines. Not surprisingly, the webgrrls have been described as a parody of the concept of virtual female equivalent of male superheroes (Blair & Takayoshi, 2002). Some of the imagery does indeed suggest this superheroine parody, which can be seen to underline the playful display of one's shortcomings in combination with an empowerment discourse.

²²³ E-zines are online ('electronic') versions of fanzines, the self-made fan magazines. See, for example, <http://www.ampnet.co.uk/> (accessed 21/11/02).

²²⁴ For example <http://www.cybergrrlz.com> (accessed 14/10/98).

The riotgrrl-roots are definitely still visible in many, but by far not all grrl-sites. Outside of the webgrrl-flagship (webgrrls.com) the riotgrrls have survived. A website using the name riotgrrl.com, which advertises cosmetics and leads straight to the web-auction site e-bay, is content-wise rather an exception. Amongst the others many are individual sites with personal weblogs. Others, such indiegrrl.com or grrlsurvivors.org, clearly follow the ideas of riotgrrl. One is a site for female performers to support each other and the other provides help for women or girls who have been abused or raped. A sign of the flexibility of interpretation and use is the rightgrrl.com-site. Young women who are in their own words “conservative & pro-life” have put up this site. Their use of the grrl-vocabulary is supposed to underline that one can be a young and independent woman with different political views than those voiced by most other grrls. It also underscores that they understood the partial self-irony that is contained in the term.

8.4. Webgrrls in Theory

The webgrrls – here as the generic term and not the dot.com website – provide different challenges to traditional feminism(s). They have been described as either the new generation feminists, i.e. the ‘young ones’ (Kellner, 1999:108). This finds its expression in their playfulness, in their affinity with technology, in their D.I.Y. approach to matters of culture, in the mixture of what has been perceived as female (or feminine) and male behaviours. They have also been described as a version of post-feminism. The post-feminism idea, however, is problematic in this context. The webgrrl-sites tend to gloss over their differences and celebrate commonality amidst diversity. Accusations concerning their actual lack of diversity, even if coming from the rightgrrl-section, do not altogether surprise.²²⁵ However, although they tend to speak for ‘us webgrrls’, they cannot be easily described as a one-voice practice either. At least in principle they embrace diversity. And they do partly return to the feminist motto that *the personal is political* and publicly display personal issues.²²⁶ But they do indeed find a common ground in claims for common roots and concerns (ranging from abuse to business matters). One way the webgrrls

²²⁵ “Unlike many of our liberal feminist “sisters,” we here at Rightgrrl believe there are as many female points of view as there are female sizes and shapes.” (see <http://www.rightgrrl.com/whatwethink.html> - accessed 19/11/03)

²²⁶ This display is also what the riotgrrls did in their fanzines, songs and interviews, but the *potential* audience for the webgrrls is of a different scale.

achieve this identity-creation is through reference to the riotgrrl history and their role as suppressed, but self-confident women. Another common aspect is the claim that knowledge of technology (and even setting up your own business) is crucial aspects of being a webgrrl. Here, the webgrrls.com and the others overlap. I would want to describe their claims to a webgrrl-identity, often with clear reference to the riotgrrls, as a form of strategic essentialism. The commonality is put forward in order to find a common aim to fight for and in order to have a voice.

Thus my overall assessment of the role of the webgrrls remains ambivalent. In their need to find common grounds to fight from, they sometimes push the desired diversity too far to the side. Thus I do not entirely agree with Katie Ward's analysis of the webgrrl-phenomenon. Ward (2001) sees the webgrrls' self-narrative creation and subsequent participation in a potentially wider political forum as a contribution to a feminised reflexive modernity. Using Anthony Giddens' idea of the self-project, of which gender and sexuality have been declared an important part, Ward analysed women's statements. They spoke about the webgrrl sites and the networking as well as some of the information that is provided on the sites themselves. In the analysis of the material, Ward concludes that traditional stereotypes are questioned in the webgrrl movement and that alternative communication networks are created.²²⁷ Overall, she claims, the webgrrls are trying to change women's position in society. She is not alone with this claim. I conclude from my analysis of the sites that this is only partially the case or that at least part of the movement today has to be seen as pragmatic rather than idealistic. Most of the self-projects articulated at least in the webgrrls.com are about business gains. My results do not exclude the potential formation of communication networks or the potential for questioning established positions, but it implies a diversification of the webgrrls. This diversification is caught with the problem of losing the common ground. Without that, however, the desired changes will not need a grrl-label.

²²⁷ In reference to Valerie Frissen and Hermineke van Bockxmeer (2001), Ward emphasises that new communication platforms such as the web can create new insecurities and uncertainties, but on the other hand can create empowerment and solidarity. Thus a certain ambiguity remains.

8.5. Webgrrls Today

When seen outside of the context of their origin (and despite all origin claims), the webgrrls.com organisation of webgrrls signifies the continued and successful creation of a particular online network for women. Even if it is less radical than any potential riotgrrl original, it seems to work for technology and business-purposes and thus presents a form of empowerment. Hence the webgrrl has been a powerful and useful trope online. Women are encouraged to make the technology and the language their own. This applies equally (and more) to all the other online grrls. As a forum for alternative discussions on diverse and often sensitive issues and as an offer of easily accessible resources and networks of like-minded, the grrls, in their 'in your face' proclamations of their identities have been a very visible user type which offers multiple points of connection for others.

It is remarkable that there are still many webgrrls present online, with up-to-date sites. They were also there in the beginning, but they have remained a presence more than most other user types. The webgrrl is also the most self-conscious user type (apart from the cyberflâneuse). The user type explains itself, names itself publicly (even in the address space) and does not simply apply a name. It is a chosen identity and often a group identity (the webgrrls). The group references is rare, otherwise it applies primarily to the netizens and partly to surfers. The one aspect that the webgrrl user type does not address at all is the idea of cyberspace as a space. There is no city- or outer space reference or anything of the kind. Instead, this user type refers to concrete histories, ideas, people and places. It is the most earth-bound of the user types. That might also be an explanation for its success.

A last, but not least very relevant point about the webgrrl user type is its management of this concrete history. The signifier in the webgrrl is not empty or open, it is fairly closed and filled with pre-given meanings. In the case of the cyberflâneur, this appears as one of the reasons why it is not a widespread user type. And the success of the surfer is partly explained through its emptiness. The webgrrl, however, is successful and filled. It has been filled in a relatively personal way, however, with real-life stories (which is also one of the major differences to the otherwise not dissimilar cyberpunk). So this is another outcome that explains how user types can open up channels for connectivity: by offering pre-given meanings that nonetheless, through their rather personal nature, allow individual identification that also implies a community-belonging. The cyberpunk, the next user type in line, does not provide this at

all, but is also a rather meaning-ful(1) concept. The webgrrl.com herself has partly lost the individual identification part along the way.

9. Cyberpunk: Rebel with Many Causes

What is a cyberpunk? Suggesting punk, a radical youth subculture of the 1970s and 1980s, the cyberpunk does not on first sight appear as an all-encompassing user type. Instead it suggests a specific subcultural approach, which would appeal to a limited audience. This suggestion, however, is not quite true. The cyberpunk is fairly widespread. The cyberpunk is also the one user type in this selection that has a definite relationship with cyberspace. To begin with, this is simply because the cyberpunk shares the cyber-prefix with cyberspace.²²⁸ More importantly, the same authors who invented and initially spread the term cyberspace also created the cyberpunk. Cyberspace has left the literary roots behind, but the cyberpunk is still a primary expression of this literature. Cyberpunk overall always tried to present itself as a form of social criticism of the future.

The quote below, although based on a sub-set of cyberpunks, the cypherpunks, shall serve to further introduce the general impression that cyberpunks created.²²⁹

Something in the whole cypherpunk presentation invited scepticism. The name they'd given themselves: punks. Their self-promotion. Their manifestos posted on the Web. The whole hip-boy-rebel thing. The idea that they could outsmart anyone: global superpowers, international law enforcement, giant transnational corporations – they hated any and all authority and no one was safe from their brilliant cypherpunkdom. And they were having too much fun making everyone deeply nervous. (Ullman, 1997:37-38)²³⁰

There is a problematic aspect of this description, although it otherwise represents a fairly accurate general perception of cyberpunks, cypherpunks and similar characters: the cyberpunk is not necessarily as clearly a person as here described. Most webgrrls do show their real-life personas and some cyberpunks

²²⁸ Cyberflâneur and cyberflâneuse share this as well, but not as exclusively. They can equally be found as electronic flâneur, net-flâneur, etc. This does not apply to the cyberpunk.

²²⁹ The reference actually refers to another group: the cypherpunks. These were an informal group of people interested in privacy and cryptography, who primarily met in a particular mailing list. The term was used as a pun to describe cyberpunks who used cryptography, the encoding and decoding of messages into otherwise unreadable material. The cypherpunks appeared more clearly as an identifiable group of people, who published manifestos and generally engaged politically in relation to online rights issues.

²³⁰ Cypherpunks are playing with the cyberpunk-terminology in typical hacker-ways.

do. Many of them, however, remain obscure. This is partly related to the history of the concept.

9.1. Cyberpunk History

The nervousness created by the cyber- and cypherpunks only came when they had began to focus their attention on networked computers. But the life of the cyberpunk began a few years earlier. It existed nearly a decade before the web was developed. The cyberpunk is therefore, in comparison to most other user types, old. This history also underlines that the cyberpunk is not simply an Internet- or web-related term or user type. Instead, the cyberpunk's roots are in fiction. In this respect, the cyberpunk reinforces the notion of the *literary origin* of some user types. The literary origin was already expressed in the cyberflâneur and the cyberflâneuse and traces can be found in the cybernaut. The most important name in relation to the cyberpunk's own literary origin is the author William Gibson. Gibson's accidental coinage of *cyberspace*, the name for the emerging cultural sphere that develops in relation to the new technologies, has stuck. This moment in 1984 when Gibson published *Neuromancer* has been considered one of the defining moments for the imagination of the networked computer sphere. But this book was also considered one of the defining novels of the cyberpunk genre.

In order to understand the cyberpunk user type, one must study first of all the origin of cyberpunk in literature. Derived from that are some important aspects of the cyberpunk, both in terms of content and style. In contrast to the cyberflâneur, there is no real 'before' and 'after' in the cyberpunk: the cyberpunk literature and the cyberpunk user type have no clear boundaries between them. They are intertwined. There is, however, a cultural reference point that is older than the cyberpunk of any kind: the punk itself. I will begin with this point of origin, before moving on to a very brief introduction of the literary genre. This will open up an engagement with the most important aspects in cyberpunk overall and with some examples of the cyberpunk user type. A final point in this chapter will be the comparison with other user types.

9.1.1. Cyberpunk Origin: Punk

I felt like a punk who'd gone out to buy a switchblade and come home with a small neutron bomb. (Gibson, 1993:207)

Most cyberpunk authors are not punks themselves. Having grown up with the youth culture does not necessarily mean that they actively participated. But punk is never far away in cyberpunk. Punk is the *attitude* implicit in the cyberpunk characters, but also the attitude of most of the authors. More explicit references to punk, however, have disappeared in the literature itself. This applies especially to the rather large field of theorisations *about* cyberpunk. The authors reflecting on cyberpunk tend to concentrate on the cyber-aspects of the terminology. One exception to this is George McKay (1999), who addresses the relationship between the punk and cyberpunk. His main concern is whether cyberpunk is a label that combines 'all and nothing' or whether it has a more explicit relationship with the (music-)subculture of punk. He thus begins with a look at the origins of punk itself.



Fig.16: Punks - www.geocities.com/ocknroll/punk1.html (accessed 17/11/03)

According to McKay, the American origin of the word punk referred to a "lowlife, minor criminal" (McKay, 1999:52) before it became adopted for the punk rock context.²³¹ Punk happily adopted the mischief implied in the term. Punk is a late 1970s phenomenon and first and foremost a musical genre, closely related to a specific subcultural style.²³² Both, the musical genre and the subculture, rely heavily on an anti-consumerist, do-it-yourself attitude.

²³¹ This is confirmed in etymological research, which however adds the prostitute as a potential meaning.

²³² Some would claim that punk extended quite some time into the 1980s. This partly depends on the cultural-geographic boundaries within which the analysis places itself. The U.S. American version of punk is quite different to the UK version, which provided the most explicit (and long-lasting) media image of punk. In the UK, punk is also related to an anti-Thatcher image, which only emerged fully in the 1980s.

According to this philosophy, everyone is capable of playing an instrument. This is reflected in the much-used quote: "This is a chord. This is another. This is a third. Now form a band!" which was displayed in one of the punk fanzines at the time (quoted in McKay, 1999:53). It was part of the intended message that the resulting sounds were sometimes equivalent to this attitude, i.e. not necessarily pleasant to listen to. The punks' dancing styles fitted the music: they included robot-like movements and sometimes violence.

The dress code was similarly recycled, cheap and provocative. The clothes were torn. Added to them were well-known applications that were taken out of their usual context (such as safety-pins, Mercedes stars, chains of different kinds). These sometimes-brutal fashion attributes were meant to disrupt the prevailing conception of order and beauty. The same applied to the punks' favourite house animals: rats. These were usually carried around in public, mostly on the shoulders of their owners. Another distinct stylistic feature was the hair, which was usually bleached and coloured and stuck out into all sorts of directions.

All of these subcultural styles and attitudes found an expression in the fanzines that the punks themselves produced. These were the forerunners of the riotgrrl fanzines. The general attitude to life as expressed in the punk fanzines and their music was one more of despair than of hope: 'no future' was an often-used phrase. This attitude was also expressed in anarchic streak that underlay punk and was hyped by punk. An exemplary song for this is the *Sex Pistols'* 'Anarchy in the UK'. A significant rise in youth unemployment and the threat of nuclear bombs were reasons for such attitudes. In the UK context, punk reacted to this in more political ways. The Situationists' *détournement*, i.e. their form of creative vandalism, in which existing cultural forms are cut up and reassembled, is clearly a predecessor of the punks' combination of attitude and style. In the *détournement*, the montage of cultural forms is meant to bring out the ruptures in the system. Punk was aiming at the same outcome.

The riotgrrls partly picked up where punk had left off. They followed in their footsteps not only musically, but especially in their general attitude. Punk, however, was still a rather male, potentially misogynistic subculture. The riotgrrls tried to challenge this legacy. Their fight became more political and pro-active. The relationship between cyberpunk and the webgrrls does not simply repeat the punk-riotgrrl pattern, because the webgrrl displays different attitudes than the riotgrrl and the same applies to the cyberpunk. The

cyberpunk makes references to the punk-attitude and -style, but is much more than a simple copycat.

9.1.2. Hackers as Cyberpunks?

The cyberpunk does not only have a close relative in the older referent, the punk, but equally in the hacker. Especially the traditional media used the term cyberpunk to talk about *hacking*. Hacking is here understood as illegal computer access and break-ins. Cyberpunk and hacking created headline news, but the portrayal also negatively labelled both (Rucker et al., 1992:64). The media helped to create the idea that cyberspace had “its outlaw hackers and phreaks and posses of lawmen chasing them.” This led to a “burgeoning mythology of transgression and retribution” (Mitchell, 1995:23), but the media never addressed its own role in the myth making. Overall, this portrayal made the cyberpunk-phenomenon more easily accessible, but it also added a sensational streak. And it distorted the image of cyberpunk, although there are indeed parallels between hacking and cyberpunk.²³³

The shared parallel, however, is different to the media-portrayal. The illegality is only one minor aspect of hacking.²³⁴ Instead, hacking is an attitude to the world overall and to technology in particular. It is first of all curiosity, a need to comprehend how things work. And it is also not only the taking apart or accessing it, but also particularly the way this is done: ideally in an elegant way, smooth, quick, efficient, without too much destruction. The person described as a hacker is not just a computer wizard, but is seen to subscribe to the hacker ethic and ideology in the wider sense. This code states that information is good if shared and that information should be free. The curiosity and the desire to master the technology as well as the underlying ideology – all this the hacker shares with the cyberpunk.²³⁵

²³³ The term ‘hacker’ itself originally emerged in the 1960s, in the vicinity of the MIT Lab for Artificial Intelligence (amongst others). It was adopted from earlier youth subcultures that dealt with technology tinkering (NHD, 2001). At the MIT the term connoted highly skilful as well as playful computer programming. It seems that the term’s negative associations – unauthorised access and use of other people’s systems – only came much later (Taylor, 1999:xii).

²³⁴ To be correct, one should call the illegal behaviour cracking, not hacking, but this differentiation is rarely made in the media. Breaking into computers illegally can be part of a hack, but it is never its sole purpose and it is not the only way to hack. The computer security industry has a love-/hate-relationship with hackers (see Taylor, 1999). First of all, the hackers are the industry’s worst enemy and nightmare. But they also often point to the flaws in the systems (without abusing them) that otherwise could have caused greater damage.

²³⁵ More recently, the media and academia have picked up on yet another related phenomenon: so-called hacktivism or cyber-activism. This usually signifies a combination

Vice versa, the cyberpunk has given hacking an edge that it did not otherwise have. It made hacking sexy. It stylised something that was otherwise not stylish. Hackers can be interpreted in this context as the real-life versions of the cyberpunk user type. This is not to say that every hacker would call himself a cyberpunk when online. Nor is it to suggest that their attributes and attitudes entirely overlap. But the extent of the overlap that exists underscores the undeniable link. The hacker, however, is based in real-life actions and appears online in terms of his hacks, his actions, but not as an identifiable user type. The term hacker has also been used as a description of other people's qualities, which could not be used for individual identification:

It is better to be described as a hacker by others than to describe oneself that way. Hackers consider themselves something of an elite (a meritocracy based on ability), though one to which new members are gladly welcome. (NHD, 2001)

One final area of differences between cyberpunk and hacker is in terms of gender. Despite all kinds of efforts by cyberfeminists to challenge this, hacker cultures remain primarily male. The cyberpunk, however, is more complex and ambivalent in this respect as well as in some others. This is partly thanks to its literary origins.

9.1.3. The Literary Genre

Originally cyberpunk was not only a literary genre, but at the same time a literary movement. This movement encompassed different authors within the science fiction genre. In 1983 the term cyberpunk first emerged to describe a particular sub-section of this genre. The origin claims first note the publication of a short story by the author Bruce Bethke, entitled *Cyberpunk*. Not much later, an article in the *Washington Post* by the writer Gardner Dozois followed. Dozois used the term cyberpunk to describe the "bizarre, hard-edged, high-tech SF emerging in the eighties". The term stuck – and so did the attributes. Cyberpunk has since been described as the antithesis to the utopian science fiction visions of the mid-20th century. It is the kind of science fiction that protests against a future vision typified by *Star Trek*. More importantly in our context, the literature of cyberpunk was a fictional forecast of the later Internet-

of online and offline activities that are highly political. In the UK, June 18th 1999 brought the hacktivism phenomenon to the forefront. On this date, a large demonstration in the City of London (which had partly been organised online) was combined with online hacker activities. It is not clear whether this is a politicisation of hackers or an increasing technologization of political activists.

evolution. And this kind of forecast took place within the setting of a realistic near-future style. Suddenly this kind of science fiction appeared less fictitious. This new literary genre first spread in the U.S. and in Canada. Later, many cyberpunk novels were translated into other languages than English. Cyberpunk soon moved from a purely literary genre into films and games. In the ten-year period between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, it became increasingly recognised as an important subculture of its times.

The term cyberpunk was not a chosen label, but it has since been regarded as rather appropriate:

This movement was quickly recognized and given many labels: Radical Hard SF, the Outlaw Technologists, the Eighties Wave, the Neuromantics, the Mirrorshades Group. But of all the labels pasted on and peeled throughout the early Eighties, one has stuck: cyberpunk. (Sterling, 1988)

The term combines words – and thus spheres – that were formerly separate, i.e. it integrates technology and music underground (Sterling, 1991:345). In terms of this music subculture origin, the cyberpunk has overlaps with the webgrrls. Both, however, later left these origins behind and even existed in partial denial of these roots. Andrew Ross detects another kind of denial when he states that any claims of cyberpunk to be founded on *futuristic* principles, with no reference to the past, are simply inappropriate (Ross, 1991:145). Different levels of denial and lack of reference to their own past on the one hand and the general relationship between the invention of the future and the present on the other hand occur and shape these user types. These tensions are an important outcome of my overall analysis of user types. The relationship between the past, the present and the future is diversely displayed in the different user types and thus they display different versions of utopian dialectics: the tension between the different imaginations. The cyberpunk represents the near-future, a future that looks as if it will start tomorrow morning.

9.1.4. Topics in Cyberpunk Literature

Most cyberpunk fiction shares some common themes. Number one is the concept of the global datanet. The synergy of man and machine plays a role in a lot of cyberpunk fiction, which is why it has been partially embraced by cyberfeminism. The process of synergy is not portrayed uncritically in cyberpunk, but ambivalently. Less ambiguity is displayed in relation to the other big topic: corporate power. This is tied in with the theme of urbanity and

urban decay. All of these are well summarised in the quote below. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay managed uniquely to capture and at the same time caricature the main topics in cyberpunk, but also to display its literary structure:

formulaic tales ...in which a self-destructive but sensitive young protagonist with an (implant/ prosthesis/ technical talent) that makes the evil (megacorporations/ police states/ criminal underworlds) pursue him through (wasted urban landscapes/ elite luxury enclaves/ eccentric space stations) full of grotesque (haircuts/ clothes/ self-mutilations/ rock music/ sexual hobbies/ designer drugs/ teletechtronic gadgets/ nasty new weapons/ exteriorized hallucinations) representing the (mores/ fashions) of modern civilization in terminal decline, ultimately hooks up with rebellious and tough-talking (youth/ artificial intelligence/ rock cults) who offer the alternative, not of (community/ socialism/ traditional values/ transcendental vision), but of supreme, life-affirming *hipness*, going with the flow which now flows in the machine, against the spectre of world-subverting (artificial intelligence/ multinational corporate web/ evil genius). (in Tabbi, 1995:217)

The genre is expressed as a combination of technological and social explorations. On the surface it looks primarily like a combination of pop underground and technological wizardry, but there is more to it than that. The combination is embedded in a certain subcultural attitude, which implies specific attitudes to technology, particular types of music, a particular overall style, but also certain political ideas. Stylistically, reproduction and bricolage are widely used. Other themes, as hinted at by Csicsery-Ronay, are drugs, cyborgian lifestyles, music and fights. Film noir and Japanese anime films were an inspiration for the literature as well as the subsequent films. Futuristic cities always play a major role in any of these (see Fig.17).

An important aspect in cyberpunk is the union of human and machine. Boundaries are questioned when intelligent machines are implanted into human bodies and when machines become increasingly humanly. It is no longer clear where one ends and the other one begins. Cyberpunks are often immersed in digitally created simulations. Such technological trends are not simply taken up and celebrated by cyberpunk, but portrayed as problematic. Cyberpunk usually depicts ambivalence towards computers (Dery, 1996:75). In these reflections, cyberpunk predated major themes in the early cyberspace theorisations and developed in parallel with feminist thinking about such issues. The main ambivalence is always between empowerment and disempowerment. Thus the same technologies that are used by the powers that the cyberpunk fights against are also by the cyberpunks themselves.

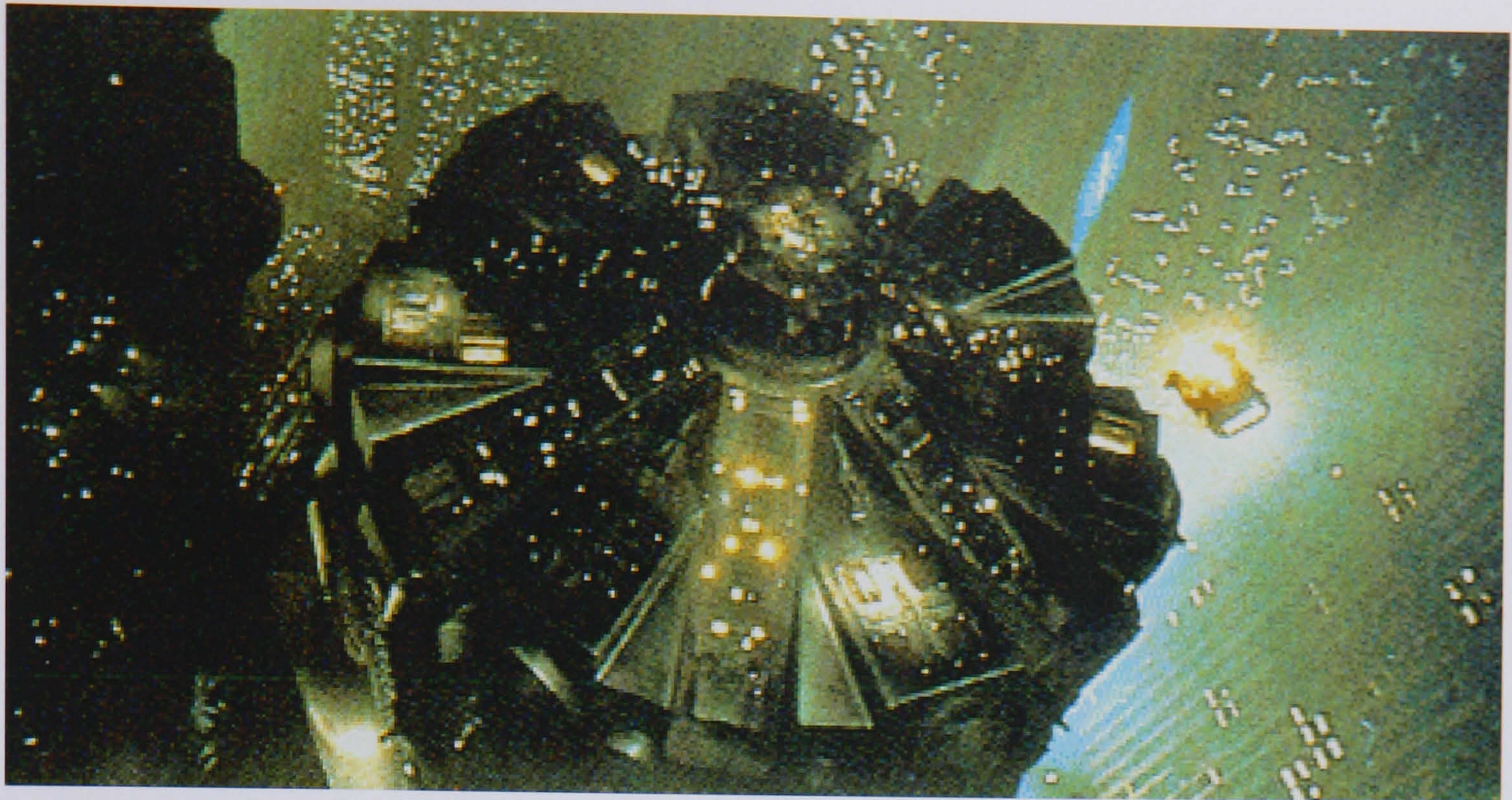


Fig.17: Blade Runner, film, 1982

On a more abstract level, the cyberpunks use technologies to subvert ideologies. These ideologies are of a global capitalist nature. Multinational corporations rule the world in most cyberpunk fiction. Cyberpunks oppose these and fight against them, but also convey the message that the systems are potentially too powerful. Thus cyberpunks are mostly portrayed as marginalized people.

Tied in with corporate power is the theme of urban decay. The sky is always grey in the world of cyberpunk, like the colour of a dead channel on television (Gibson, 1995a:9). The cyberpunk is mostly surrounded by dystopian city-structures. Endless skyscrapers and a lot of high-tech glitz joined together with destruction, chaos and decay. William Gibson, for example, described the *Sprawl* in some of his books. This is an all-encompassing megalopolis spanning the entire East Coast of the United States. It is the current state-of-play, but in a hyperbolised form. It is no wonder then that in this fictional environment, frequent robberies and murders take place, the electricity fails and rubbish spreads, while at the same time very sophisticated machines broaden the capacities of minds and bodies.

The cyberpunk, like the flâneur, is privileging the street. Amongst other reasons, this is a place where the female does not meet him on equal grounds. Instead, the female is used for his inspiration: as a fantasy. Here again, he shows traits of the flâneur. The cyberpunk is mostly on a mission to save someone and/or something. Here the female is often presented as a possible victim. In contract to the flâneur, the cyberpunk actually engages with some of

these women, but he still gazes at them as well. Overall, the cyberpunk has a very ambivalent relationship to the other sex.

In comparison to earlier science fiction, cyberpunk builds on character development and atmosphere, but particularly on style. As a literary genre, cyberpunk draws from a range of sources. The combination of different genres (detective, horror and love story, for example) comes together in the narratives. The many intertextual references that these texts offer add to the overall impression. This kind of combination has paved the way for an interpretation of cyberpunk as a postmodern literary genre. Gibson, on the other hand, claimed in an interview that cyberpunk was postmodern science fiction simply because it was engaging with the *now*, importing current times into the books.²³⁶ Through this import the near-future is created in cyberpunk. This is underscored by the notion of cyberpunk reflecting their author's very own experience of youth cultures and technologies.

The authors of cyberpunk fiction grew up with youth cultures in a different way than any generation before them had. Youth cultures had become the norm. They also became more radical and visible, as the arrival of punk underlined. The same applies to the technological developments depicted in cyberpunk. In comparison to earlier generations, this generation of science fiction writers grew up in a world that already contained many of the technologies that used to be only science fiction. The texts present a future of a continually changing present which cannot be held in place. The cyberpunk in part resists this trend, but is also its exemplary expression. Again, there is a parallel to the flâneur.

9.1.5. Consumption

The idea of consumption is one aspect that has not been considered much in cyberpunk theorisations. Consumption, however, underlies the whole relationship to technology in cyberpunk. The body is sold in order to buy technical enhancements for oneself. Consumption is part of the resistance, but also of the domination of corporate and other powers: "'I like to consume,' she said, 'because if you don't, it consumes you'" (Marcus, 1993:77). Consumption becomes a matter of self-defence. Nonetheless this emphasis on consumption has led to the accusation that cyberpunks are all bohemians, who buy into

²³⁶ He states this in an interview in the 'Cyberpunk' video documentary (1990).

consumerism on a big scale, while outwardly propagating a counterculture (see Johnson, 1996).

This accusation cannot be easily dismissed, because the relationship is simply ambivalent. The cyberpunk, unlike the flâneur or cyberflâneur, cannot dismiss consumption. Even more than the prostitute in Benjamin's city reconstruction, the cyberpunk (female, but also male) personifies commodification and the triumph of capitalism, since they do not simply sell their bodies, but implant the commodities into themselves. At the same time, the cyberpunk tries to constantly renegotiate his position and use his power to fight the extreme ends of capitalism. But for him, a rather dystopian version of the dreamscape rules his world and it is not clear whether there is a way out.

In terms of the environment, however, there is an interesting return to traditional shopping environments: the shopping mall is a place that is relevant for the cyberpunk, male or female.²³⁷ This reflects the early cyberpunk authors' contemporary environment: the 1980s were the age of excessive consumption and a recognisable growth in shopping malls. Their cultural importance has since become ubiquitous, but in cyberpunk it is still at the forefront.

For me, the best thing about cyberpunk is that it taught me how to enjoy shopping malls, which used to terrify me. Now I just pretend that the whole thing is two miles below the Moon's surface, and that half the people's right-brains have been eaten by roboticized steel rats. And suddenly it's *interesting* again. (Rucker in Ross, 1991:146)

The mall, like the arcades, is a concentrated place for consumption. It, too, has no exterior (even when it is not built between other buildings), but usually is built to look inside itself. In the mall, one can feel at home although one is in public. Cyberpunk adds the edge of the technology and the decay. If the arcades contained the dreamscape, the malls in cyberpunk show us the nightmare of the future.

In terms of the inevitability of consumption, cyberpunk was prepared for the developments that eventually befell the Internet, when its number of users began to rise. With it came commercial interests, but also the cries of those who thought they were losing well-protected virtual communities. The cyberpunk

²³⁷ In Europe, shopping malls tend to be large agglomerations of shops built on the outskirts of cities and villages, only accessible by car. The U.S. has the same kind of mall, but also features inner city malls, the enclosed space in the middle of town. This is only now a growing phenomenon in Europe. According to Ross, hackers also shop: "teenage hackers resemble an alienated shopping culture deprived of purchasing opportunities more than a terrorist network" (Ross, 1991:90).

does not promise any such ideal. E-commerce is not a threat. Instead, this figure immediately points to the interrelationship between technologies and consumption. This is already a nascent idea within the *Benjamin Arcades Project* framework. This project emphasised the problematic, but fascinating framework that an increasing commercialisation brought with it. The cyberpunk has taken this to the extreme. It is not as if all ambivalence has been lost. Especially in the role of the female in cyberpunk and her relationship to consumption and technology and her role as an object for consumption underlines the tension emerging from it. But the awaking from the dream (or nightmare) is not an option anymore in cyberpunk. Instead, it has all become one big nightmare.

9.1.6. Resistance?

The nightmare does not end there. Cyberpunk, clothed in the anarchic outfit of the punk, suggests resistance. But the cyberpunk thus far has not taken the issue of regaining control far enough. Actually, there is only a slight notion of resistance. Despite the bleak future, the heroes/heroines are not necessarily beaten by the system. The point is that cyberpunk calls everyone to use technology before it is used on oneself (Ross, 1991:162). The fight is to control technology rather than be controlled by it. This is where cyberpunk does not give in. But this fight is motivated by survival, not ideals. The only ideal is the mastery of the technology, which is idealised. The fight expands to anyone or anything interfering with that control. Not by accident, the cyberpunk has been seen to promote a libertarian ideal, in which privacy comes first (Mizrach, 2002). The resistance than is built on individualism, on mastery of the technology and defying interference. Again, the sound of adolescent male fantasies rings true.

9.2. The Cyberpunk Website

In the website chosen for closer analysis of the cyberpunk user type, gender is an important aspect. Although created by a self-identified male, the site's most visible feature is the image of a woman. The chosen visual identity is thus not a direct reflection of self-image, but expresses general issues concerning cyberpunk instead. In this respect, the site-owner is representative of the application of the cyberpunk-label online. Overall, the chosen cyberpunk website can be described as fairly representative for cyberpunk sites in general.

This is despite the fact that references to cyberpunk on the web are rather diverse and also despite the fact that this is a fairly recent site (it first went online in 2000 and has not changed much since its first appearance). However, the emphasis on graphics and on hyper- and intra-links in the 'cyberpunk2020' site does convey a certain attitude behind the design that is not unusual in cyberpunk (see Fig.18). The site is up-to-date in terms of its features and slightly more professional than earlier sites (mid-1990s) often were, but the basic structure or design does not differ fundamentally from earlier sites. It is designed in frames, i.e. on the left hand one finds some bullet points for hyperlinks to the archive, while the rest of the site mostly displays current features in the form of hyperlinks.

One individual, Karsten, about whom more information is displayed once we click on a certain hyperlink, has designed the site. This is thus a personal homepage, but one that tries to serve an existing community of cyberpunk fans and players. One of the reasons for making the site (according to its author) is the author's games-obsession and the desire to share this obsession. In this respect, he could also have labelled himself a cybernaut. But then again he does not use the label cyberpunk to describe himself directly. Instead, he uses it to label his interests and thus indirectly himself. The major game featured on this site is equally called cyberpunk2020. It is a role-playing game set in the near future, in which corporate corruption plays a major role, computers are increasingly ubiquitous and the law exists to be circumvented.

For reason of sharing information about the game, the website has several online communication and interaction features. An archive, featured articles, references, a search option and an opinion poll are all on offer on this site. One can give feedback or get more information about the author or get some help. There is no visible reflection about the nature of the web or even much on the philosophy of cyberpunk on this site. Instead, the site concentrates on cyberpunk-inspired games and cyberpunk-imagery. It is a specialist site, which seems to serve the particular community well (as one can read in their discussion forum). It does not add self-reflection. Here the cyberpunk site in question does not differ much from the surfer or cybernaut, but from the others. In the cyberflâneur the literary references lead to a need to explain the earlier concept. It does not have that effect in the cyberpunk. The cyberpunk is also a rather visual user type. It is a subcultural label that is used like a dress-code to express belonging, but not necessarily self-reflexive identity.

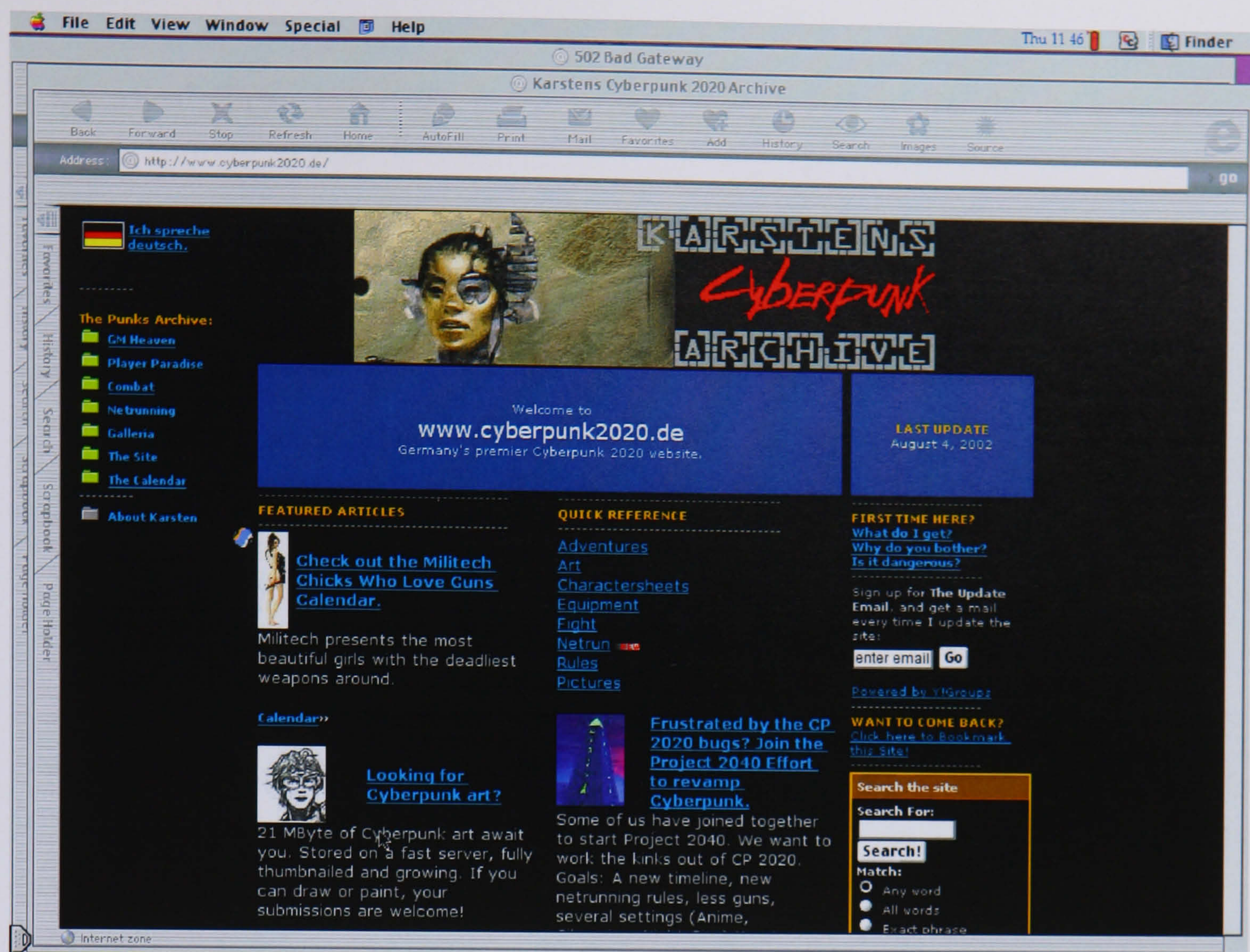


Fig.18: www.cyberpunk2020.de (accessed 15/04/02)

The site is designed primarily in black, with the writing standing out in light blue. The primary image is one of a female cyberpunk's head. She is detectable as a cyberpunk creature because of the machinic, metallic extensions on her head. The primary hyperlinks on the site are several links to game-related issues, cyberpunk art and the 'Militech Chicks Who Love Guns' calendar. Following these hyperlinks, a sexualised combination of women and new technologies appear in several images. This conforms to the stereotype of cyberpunk as an adolescent male fantasy. The potentially liberating notion of technology and power for gender-roles is not reflected here at all.

9.3. Gender in Cyberpunk

Cyberpunk is questioned concerning its relationship to gender, because it makes claims to be a revolutionary literary and subcultural strand.²³⁸ However, "one barely needs to scratch the surface of the cyberpunk genre, no matter how maturely sketched out, to expose a baroque edifice of adolescent male

²³⁸ The differentiation between the cyberpunk user type and the cyberpunk genre blurs at this stage, because in most of these attributes, the user type simply adopts the genre's stance. Thus the analysis does not suffer much.

fantasies” (Ross, 1991:145).²³⁹ The fantasies displayed in cyberpunk do indeed often contain traces of male adolescence, but they have also been read as empowering for women. Hence the overall picture is more complex than the Andrew Ross seems to state.

9.3.1. Authors and Characters

The starting point for many enquiries into gender in cyberpunk begins simply with the cyberpunk genre and the number of female cyberpunk authors. Thomas Foster (1997), representative for most answers, only comes up with one: Pat Cadigan. She is the token author, covering up the void that is both actually there and is also imagined. That is to say: there are more authors than this one, but the suppression of the existing authors reinforces the lack of authors that is actually there. As the cyberflâneuse debate has underlined, an imaginary ignorance towards the presence of female artistic expressions enhances the discrimination, because it becomes a *discursive* as well as an *actual* discrimination.

The same applies to the protagonists in cyberpunk. More often than not, they are male. Female characters and especially strong female characters exist, but they are far and few in between (see Nixon, 1992). Usually the strong female character is a ‘razorgirl’, a survivalist type. This character does not only sport the necessary technological enhancements, but also uses martial arts and other weapons to defend herself as well as to attack. These razorgirls are often a form of ‘super-males’ rather than supermodels. But they are also supermodels, sporting a stereotypical femininity at least in their looks.

One famous example of such a razorgirl is *Molly Millions*, a character from several Gibson stories and books. In this character, some of the problematic aspects of the convergence of human and machine can be seen. Molly features retractable metal blades under her fingertips, as well as a digital data display in her field of vision. While this gives her an advantage in fights, she also had to earn the money to acquire these technologies by selling her body. Through her implants, Molly changes her level of participation in street culture. She now participates in an ultimately rather male fashion:

As a street samurai, Molly no longer participates in the economy of sexuality; she has reinterpreted what it is to be a woman on the streets,

²³⁹ Ross describes cyberpunk as a ‘Bildungsroman’ (Ross, 1991:150), i.e. he introduces the thought that the (adolescent) heroes will grow up in front of the readers’ eyes.

to be a working girl. (Leblanc, 1991)

She is now at least as tough as the guys around her, but she had to prostitute herself to achieve this. And Molly does not even stop selling her body after she achieved to have the implants. She simply sells herself in new ways after the operation, i.e. she has switched from selling sexuality to becoming a messenger and street fighter. She is now one of the boys. Selling bodies is not gender-limited here. In this respect, the male cyberpunk is at least as active as the female. A male character in one of the same Gibson-novel that Molly features in, also sells his body in order to achieve the buying power for the ultimate implant, but in his case it tends to be the head that he rents out rather than his sexual organs (Gibson, 2002).

9.3.2. Female Cyberpunks Fight Back

The razorgirl version of female power is problematic, because the female characters “preserve their strong status as ‘free women’ at a heavy cost: the incapacity to establish human relationships in a milieu of loveless cruelty, sexual slavery, and addictions to power and wealth that fix women in subjugatory thrall” (Ross, 1991:159). Ross himself supposes that the use of “intuitive-female values” is important in the power-struggle between the male and female cyberpunk heroes. This has a vague sound of essentialism that does not become the identity-claims otherwise made in relation to cyberculture and cyberpunk. But Ross’ analysis of the general description of the world in cyberpunk is not far off the mark. This is the overall experience in cyberpunk, which gets experienced on an even more intense level by the women in the stories. Especially the female characters have often been subjected to bodily and other abuse in the past and also keep suffering throughout the stories.

One scenario that has emerged with remarkable frequency in cyberpunk is that of the cybernetic woman who seeks revenge for the emotional and sexual abuse she suffered as a child or young woman. She is simultaneously one of the most compelling and one of the most problematic figures in cyberpunk, for her appeal on a feminist level is frequently undermined by her conventional patriarchal presentation. (Springer, 2000:342)

The escape from the physical body is consequently a common trope in cyberpunk, but gets an extra twist if read in this light. The female cyberpunk uses the possibility to change her physical body, the reminder of this abuse, instead of making displaying the scars. In comparison, the kind of webgrl who

refers to riotgrrl-roots makes her existing body the issue. The major difference here is that the webgrrl tries to fight the past through solidarity and community, while the cyberpunk (male and female) is an individual fighter.

9.3.3. Bodies and Technologies

Eventually the cyberpunk of either sex moves beyond the body. He/she technologizes the body and consequently removes it from its traditional boundaries. But these boundary-shifts do not prevent abuse. Rather the machines can cause abuse. Thus the main character in Cadigan's short story *Rock On*, Gina, a machine-human, is abused bodily because a music group wants the machine she embodies.²⁴⁰ The technology did not save her from abuse, but caused it.

Abuse of female characters continues, even from the hands of the characters in cyberpunk themselves. The more radical shift in relation to the revision of gender in cyberpunk takes place in literature than, for example, in films (Leblanc, 1991). What is visible instead is a dominance of transgender models. Transgender has been a problematically received category within feminism, since it has been seen to aspire to categories that others were trying to overthrow. The accusation has been that gender changes enable new thinking and question the 'natural given' genderedness, but they do not always radically challenge gender categories as such. Besides, these boundary-shifts have not led to a radical enough change in behaviours and attitudes. Cyberpunk heroes are overall perceived as less masculine than traditional heroes. So they 'jack in', not off. The matrix that they jack into is characterised as feminine, as a mysterious, deep dark hole of technologically led sphere. They become part of this system. Reminiscent of earlier images of technology as a threatening female sexuality,²⁴¹ the symbolic violation remains vivid. Thus cyberpunks are sometimes "metaphoric rapists" (Nixon, 1992:229). Since I claim that the metaphors in the online context partly create a possible future and influence the way we approach the new technologies, metaphoric rape is a far-reaching accusation. But underlying this assumption of metaphoric rape is the idea of the networked space, the matrix or cyberspace, as a female space. It is

²⁴⁰ In *Rock On*, humans become living synthesizers and are therefore called 'rock'n'roll sinners' (from 'synner'). Through this notion the author Pat Cadigan addresses questions of music and new technologies, which is a rare occurrence despite the *cyberpunk* label. Cyborgism, futuristic machines, large corporations, but also the well-known violation of female bodies (Gina's boss appears like a pimp) are the other topics mixed in here.

²⁴¹ In the film *Metropolis*, for example (see Springer, 1999).

the same problematic idea which Sadie Plant subscribed to. It generates an essentialist understanding of technology that I do not agree with. Thus I also find the metaphoric rape too strong as an idea. The threat that exudes from cyberpunk is often that of the overall world picture depicted therein as well as a slight hunch that not much has changed behind the façade of radical difference. For this, however, the cyberpunk is not particularly to blame. Instead, I side with Judith Squires and her feminist approach to cyberculture, in which she states that “one of cyberpunk’s strongest features is its rich thesaurus of metaphors linking the organic and the electronic” (1996:200). Thus the language of cyberpunk pushes boundaries. These are boundaries first of all of language, but also of the imagination.

Another counter-argument against the idea of the metaphoric rape in cyberpunk is a historical one. This claim stems from the early 1990s. From the same time, stories about online harassments and reality-checks found widespread distribution in cybercultural references. The disturbance reported by the discovery that woman for a longer period of time a man had posed as a disabled in a discussion list (in Stone, 1991) or the often-told story about a virtual rape (Dibbell, 1993), were in principle discussion about our understandings of the real and the virtual, about our understandings of the relationship between the self and the technology and the identities therein performed. These definitions and understandings are not fixed in stone, they are still open to change, but the expectations have changed over the years. A process, if you so want, of ‘normalisation’ has taken place. Nowadays even non-users can be quite cynical about how ‘real’ they expect the online sphere to be.

In cyberpunk, the original promise still runs wild, although it is clouded in the overall dystopian atmosphere. As in many early cybercultural writings (but pre-empting these), the technology in cyberpunk is promising not only enhanced bodies, but also a flight from the restraints of the body overall. In this respect cyberpunk is a fictional reflection and implementation of feminist concepts such as the cyborg or Plant’s version of the matrix, but it is at the same time a persiflage of these. It is caught in a loop of no escape.

9.4. Cyberpunk Forever?

The cyberpunk has been around for a long time, but slowly his original stance is losing out. With the increasing normalisation of technologies and cyberspace,

its original impetus gets lost. Not only are the technologies less threatening, but much of cyberpunk feels nowadays so very real indeed, while the overall attitude of the cyberpunk, who sees an enemy everywhere, seems slightly quaint. Then again, the cyberpunk user type, as the other user types, has been and still is simply a placeholder, as Timothy Leary outlined early on (first published in 1991):

Cyberpunk is... a risky term. Like all linguistic innovations, it must be used with a tolerant sense of high-tech humour. It's a stop gap, transitional meaning-grenade thrown over the language barricades to describe the resourceful, skilful individual who accesses and steers knowledge/ communication technology towards his/her own private goals. (Leary as quoted in Bell, 2001:24)

What remains is a placeholder that is still in place, but fading. Leary's summary of the individualism coupled with the techno-knowledge was the overarching theme in both the literature and the user type. Despite the individualism, it has not been used much as a single identity ('I am a cyberpunk'), but instead it is a label to hide behind. Despite its relatively widespread use and its continued presence, as a user type the cyberpunk has not been successful. It seems to simply offer a colourful, vivid image with little actual content. It never quite managed to leave the potential contradiction between anti-authoritarianism of some online interactions and the military-industrial-entertainment background of the new technologies behind:

[Cyberpunk] speaks the antiauthoritarian language of the sixties, replete with visions of 'street-level anarchy' and rapacious multinationals, even as it celebrates the ingenuity of the military-industrial-entertainment complex that enables the 'integration of technology and ...counterculture'. (Sterling, 1993:99)

Neither the cyberpunk genre nor the cyberpunk user type ultimately solves this contradiction. However, the cyberpunk does not offer a solution anyhow. Instead, this user type is generally setting an example for a life with ambiguity, torn between a fight against the technologies' unwanted consequences and the desire to use them for his/her own purposes. With ambivalence as a major feature, the cyberpunk himself has repeatedly been either celebrated or scorned. As a genre, cyberpunk therefore made this ambivalence into a major feature.

The cyberpunk is not dissimilar to Benjamin's and the cyberflâneur's utopian dialectics. He is torn between hope and despair, between knowledge about the technologies in question and a continuing fascination with them. Like the

cyberflâneur, the cyberpunk sees beyond the dream. He is not in need to wake up: he is already wide-awake. But the cyberpunk also fulfils what I claim the cyberflâneur does not yet fulfil: the idea of speed, of constant interconnections. While the cyberflâneur still takes in the (web-)sites, the cyberpunk *is* everywhere. He is jacked into the system, i.e. he has become a part of the system. In this sense, the cyberpunk is the extension of the cyberflâneur into a world that is either the ultimate expression of postmodernism or already one step beyond. The only choice left is the choice to fight.

The next necessary step in the development has been summarised in the emerging genre that has been called postcyberpunk. The effects of computers are still central here as is the near-future, but the dystopian atmosphere and the emphasis on implants is gone. Instead, biotechnologies have come to the forefront. Most importantly, an involvement with society has returned. This is also a reflection of the normalisation process described elsewhere. The worst nightmare has simply not taken place.

The genre of postcyberpunk thus calls for the same thing as I called for in my creation of the cyberflâneuse, i.e. a return to an engagement with issues and people. The webgrrls also propagated this notion of community. They want to fight current developments just as much as the cyberpunk does, but they fight as a group. The webgrrl immediately shows a similarly sinister understanding of what is taking place, but also holds on to the notion of tech-knowledge as crucial.

Shared between the cyberpunk and the cyberflâneur as well as the cyberflâneuse is the emphasis on the city- environment. While the one portrays its bloom, the other portrays its decay, but the possibilities implied in the city feature in all of these user types as an important framework for imagining cyberspace. The surfer's shared point of reference is the youth subculture as the origin (shared also with the webgrrl). They cover different periods in history (the surfer the late 50s and early 60s, the punk the late 70s, early 80s and the riotgrrls the early 90s). These different times mean different levels of politicisation and different relationships to music (a driving force in punk; an add-on in the surfer; a sign of emancipation in the riotgrrl). The surfer and the cyberpunk share the desire to 'master' (technology or waves). This distinguishes them from both female user types, but it is shared with the *cyberflâneur=she*.

Returning once more to the idea of the fight: for the cyberpunk – both in parallel, but also in stark contrast to the netizen – the government does not exist anymore, only corporations do. For the netizen, however, democracy remains as *the* reference point and a traditional form of citizenship, despite all kinds of claims to post-nationalism. The lack of governments is also what divides the cyberpunk from the cybernaut, since the cybernaut practices science fictional dreams of governments. This is science fiction of the grand kind in contrast to the dystopian, but realistic near-future kind of science fiction on a more personal scale. Utopia is not driving the cyberpunk.

10. Netizen:

Democracy Twice Removed

In the following user type analysis I engage with one of the more prominent visions of those that were hyped extensively in the beginning of the popular uptake of the Internet: *electronic democracy (e-democracy)*. Despite the initial hype, e-democracy is also one of the more enduring ideas. It is also an often-used policy concept. E-democracy promotes the idea that, with the help of new technologies, existing democracies can be enhanced and/or new, virtual democracies can be developed. Thus the use of the term e-democracy is twofold: on the one hand it refers to concrete government projects (focussing on transparency; putting citizen and government information online; introducing e-voting; etc.) and on the other hand it promotes the rather abstract notion of online democracies (separate forms or aspects of democracies created online). Both uses have brought with them new versions of the *citizen*: the *digital citizen* on the one hand and the *netizen* on the other. My focus, for reasons to be explored below, is on the netizen. I will begin the analysis of this user type by briefly exploring the differences between the two concepts below. The first step is to define the netizen more precisely.

10.1. Defining the Netizen

10.1.1. The Netizen's Origin

Welcome to the 21st Century. You are a Netizen (a Net Citizen), and you exist as a citizen of the world thanks to the global connectivity that the Net makes possible. You consider everyone your compatriot. You physically live in one country but you are in contact with much of the world via the global computer network. ... We are seeing a revitalization of society. ... A new, more democratic world is becoming possible. ... Net society differs from off-line society by welcoming intellectual activity. (Hauben & Hauben, 1997:3-4)

In the mid-1990s, the two net theoreticians Ronda and Michael Hauben were not the first people to indulge in visions of a new democratic sphere emerging online. Especially Michael Hauben²⁴² was the primary advocate of one particular concept within this vision: the *netizen*. The netizen is described as a

²⁴² Michael Hauben died suddenly in June 2001 (Ronda Hauben, his mother and co-author of the netizen-book, sent an email announcing his death to the AoIR-mailing list on 28/06/01).

“resident or inhabitant of the net. [from net (abbrev. Internet) and citizen (OE citisein, OF citeain)]” (Netizen Australia, 2001). According to Hauben, the term derived from newsgroups named “net.citizen”, which he describes as newsgroups that treated the net as a new social institution. Hauben claimed to have invented the term²⁴³, but also delivered the corresponding expectation:

Netizens are Net Citizens who utilize the Net from their home, workplace, school, library, etc. These people are among those who populate the Net, and make it a resource of human beings. The netizens participate to help make the Net both an intellectual and a social resource. (Hauben, 1995)

Hauben was a highly active and idealistic promoter of the term. In response to an accusation of dictating the term’s meaning, he eventually called himself “a discoverer and popularizer” rather than the “owner” (Hauben, 2001). As with most of these terms, originality and invention is difficult to prove, but Hauben has been widely credited with coining the concept. Therefore the fact that this is one of the more theorised user type concepts, is not purely accidental: Hauben also made sure that the netizen got mentioned and explained repeatedly.²⁴⁴ He sent several texts to many different newsgroups, published in newsletters, kept a website with texts up-to-date and eventually published a book about the netizen (in co-authorship with his mother). He thus prevented the user type to become an open signifier such as the surfer or the cybernaut. The netizen instead is filled with clear-cut ideas and expectations. I will return to this point in the general discussion about the origin and spread of user types.

Hauben’s netizen promotes issues such as the formation of online community networks and working together for an electronic worldwide democracy. This netizen is not just anyone who is online. Hauben himself explained that two different interpretations of the netizen are in general use: one is simply to describe anyone who is online and the other one is his own definition, which aims at more engagement (Hauben & Hauben, 1997:x-xi). As a netizen in the engaged version, one has to become actively involved in the development of the net as a political and social sphere. This involvement is primarily online and not offline. This online focus is underlined by the debates

²⁴³ Together with his mother, Ronda Hauben, he has written a book – *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* – and has published extensively in newsgroups, websites, etc.

²⁴⁴ Since Micheal Hauben’s death, his parents (Ronda and Jay Hauben) have taken over the ‘promotion’ of the concept. They travel to conferences (e.g. AoIR in Maastricht, October 2002) and hold workshops there, where they refer to the concept and its supposed usefulness.

around another concept: the digital citizen.

10.1.2. The Digital Citizen

In his emphasis on the online involvement in his definition of the netizen, Hauben clearly differed from *Wired*, the California-based new media magazine (and website). Hauben even accused the magazine of misuse of the term (Hauben, 2001). *Wired*, however, is not just any magazine. Its first issue had appeared in spring 1993. It was originally welcomed as *the* mouthpiece of some early network enthusiasts, because it approached the web from diverse angles and thus attracted a wide-ranging readership. *Wired's* style and design, but also the topics were seen as innovative and new (Krempl, 2001).²⁴⁵ Its critics, however, claimed that it was propagating a neoliberal agenda that did not necessarily fit many of the ideals of other network enthusiasts.

The magazine still exists today, but by now *Wired* is much derided and the readership has shrunk considerably. Hauben's criticism took place at the time when *Wired* was still at its peak and when it ran a column entitled 'the netizen'. This column was first introduced in 1996 to cover the impact of network technology on the U.S. elections of the same year.²⁴⁶ Initially, *Wired* claimed that netizenship took place entirely online and that anyone online was in principle a netizen. However, *Wired* (or rather Jon Katz, the author responsible for the specific coverage) eventually shifted its position. Katz moved from the 'anyone-online-as-netizen'-claim to announcing that the – by then newly labelled – *digital citizen*²⁴⁷ was actually someone who is not only active *online*, but who displays a clear interest in *offline* politics.²⁴⁸ This change of heart was based on a survey of Internet users that had partly contradicted Katz' earlier assumptions. The survey had revealed a widespread interest in offline politics, which was at least as large as their interest in online life. The online-offline relationship and the level of engagement were differently interpreted than Katz had thought.

²⁴⁵ Stefan Krempl (2001) describes *Wired* as a driving force behind the whole Internet-hype, which actually made Internet-entrepreneurs and artists into pop stars.

²⁴⁶ Despite disappointment with the election online, Katz nonetheless concluded that there was an emerging digital nation, seen as an important social force, removed from traditional politics.

²⁴⁷ In this debate, they started with the term netizen and later shifted to digital citizen. For ease of distinction, I will not follow *Wired's* eventual blurring of the two terms, but use them to describe these two distinct concepts.

²⁴⁸ Caution also needs to be applied to the way that interest in politics was 'measured' in the survey. Inconclusive categories included questions such as 'How much confidence do you have in democracy?' and whether the interviewees voted in elections (Katz, 1997:72).

Despite such definitional change, the *digital citizen* of Katz and *Wired* remains a surface concept. It bases the citizenship idea on being informed rather than being involved. Hence a simple proclamation of interest in politics and some online presence serve to qualify someone as a digital citizen. Ideally, the digital citizen would be the political actor of the first kind in Douglas Kellner's warning that one should:

...distinguish between political actors who use the Internet and new technologies to promote specific political goals and struggles, thus articulating a relation between the cybersphere and social life, and those who limit their politics to cyberspace itself. Such cyberpolitics either focus narrowly on the politics of technology and the Internet, or make Internet discussion an end in itself, cut off from real-life political movements and struggle. (Kellner, 1999:104)

Both the definitional vagueness of *Wired* and Kellner's warning serve to underline the point I make about Hauben's netizen. Following Kellner, I will use the two terms, netizen and digital citizen, to distinguish the two rather different concepts. The distinction is between *digital citizens* who are primarily concerned with offline politics and use the Internet as a tool for enhancing these, and *netizens* who are interested primarily in online politics. Netizens would like to build an e-democracy online, while digital citizens see the net only as an addition to their offline lives and understand e-democracy to mean better services.²⁴⁹ This differentiation between netizens and digital citizens is often blurred in the debates surrounding e-democracy projects and thus replicates an existing lack of distinction between the different visions underlying different e-democracy ideas. Although the distinction between netizen and digital citizen is an artificial one, it helps to clarify the implications suggested in the concepts. These two concepts carry very distinct visions of the future of the Internet as well as of citizenship overall. Their practices differ widely. The digital citizen does not further concern me, because his identity is not expressed as an online identity. More importantly, however, the more extreme concept underlying the netizen has ruled the online imagination.

10.1.3. The Netizen's Citizenship Roots

The netizen concept usually contains no acknowledgment of the ideas of citizenship implied therein. While the term netizen clearly refers to the citizen,

²⁴⁹ This is a similar distinction to the one mentioned in the Methodology chapter, where Ward (2001) distinguishes between online feminism and online cyberfeminism (in Bell, 2001:23).

its general use (and Hauben's in particular) tends to not engage with citizenship concept(s). Instead, Hauben and others take a particular version of citizenship for granted and simply extend it to the net's inhabitants. This is the notion of the citizen as underlying currently existing versions of liberal democracies.²⁵⁰ The only major change is the global connectivity implied in netizenship, since it is meant to apply to anyone who is actively engaged online rather than to someone who is a legal citizen of a particular nation state. But even this fundamental shift in the citizenship concept (a concept which – in the version here referred to – is built on the sovereignty of the nation state) is not properly explored or used. Instead, the netizen is “a citizen of the world thanks to the global connectivity that the Net makes possible” (Hauben & Hauben, 1997:3). This lack of acknowledgement and exploration of the implied citizenship concept is the further focus of this chapter, since it limits the potential of netizenship. This will be explored via the history of citizenship and further notes on netizenship itself.

10.2. Citizenship

10.2.1. Citizenship: History

Citizenship is no subculture or specific ability, not even an attitude. Thus it differs substantially as a reference point for the development of a user type. Instead, many people simply *are* citizens of a particular nation-state.²⁵¹ They are citizens all their lives. For those who are born and live as citizens of one nation, citizenship often remains a rather abstract concept. The rights or responsibilities are usually only questioned in crisis-situations. The exact preconditions for acquiring the citizenship status and further implications are normally only known to those, who aspire to *become* citizens somewhere.

Most generally speaking, citizenship establishes the relationship between people and the state. The history of citizenship is not a recent one. In fact, our current understanding of citizenship goes back to practices in the city-states of

²⁵⁰ There is not one possible answer to question of location of the beginning of ideas of citizenship. One can go back as far as Hobbes or Locke if one is simply looking for a contractual relationship between individual and state and/or an acknowledgement of the need to protect the individual's freedom (Doom, 1986). I have chosen to ignore these early theorisations and instead concentrate on those that are implicit in the netizen concept. This is the modern version, post-French Revolution, which explicitly addresses the citizen as a foundation for the modern state.

²⁵¹ In the UK, a constitutional monarchy, people are not citizens, but subjects. To be a citizen, one must, depending on local laws, either have been born in the territory or have specific blood relations there. Otherwise one can become naturalised as a citizen.

Greece in the 6th century B.C. (the term citizen refers to 'city-inhabitant'). Here, eligible citizens met regularly in a sovereign assembly to debate and decide on major issues of state (and also to vote for certain representatives to take care of the everyday running). Women, immigrants or slaves were, however, not regarded as citizens. At the time, essentialist and dualistic differentiations between the rational and the emotional, between public and private, etc. were used to justify this exclusion. The dualisms have since weakened (and have been questioned entirely by 20th century postmodern ideas). However, they still played a role when the basis for modern citizenship ideas was laid in liberal ideas in 17th and 18th century Europe and particularly in the French Revolution. Based on the idea of equality of all people, the concept of a social contract between the rulers and the ruled was eventually put forward and citizenship became more formally established. Despite this far-reaching principle, in practice citizens still meant 'men of property'. Even when political participation was broadened in the 19th century, women were still excluded from voting. Only in the 20th century universal suffrage was increasingly implemented. Thus all adults who are official citizens of a given (nation-)state can not only vote, but they have rights and responsibilities as citizens.

Citizenship may be defined as that set of practices (juridical, political, economic and cultural) which define a person as a competent member of society, and which as a consequence shape the flow resources to persons and social groups. (Turner, 1993:2)

10.2.2. Citizenship: Rights & Responsibilities

Primary duties of the citizen include the duty to pay taxes, obedience to the law and participation in civil government. The primary duty for the citizen in relation to his/her political rights in particular is the need to inform him-/herself and to vote. Only the well-informed citizen can make well-informed decisions in the democratic process. In theoretical terms and only until recently, the rights have been fought over more extensively than the duties. Following T.H. Marshall, citizenship rights can be divided into the three following sections: a) civil (legal) rights, b) political rights and c) social and economic rights. All these developed in different periods over the last three centuries. Marshall has been important, because he emphasised the necessity for social and economic rights, which helped to raise issues of class differences and access to resources. These rights are primarily associated with the emergence of the

welfare state.²⁵² Related to this is necessarily a legal and institutional framework, which secures the upkeep of these primary rights.²⁵³ The outer framework allows for the necessary flexibility to implement changes over time without threatening the primary rights. While these sets of rights (and the duties) have been heavily disputed for some time now²⁵⁴, they still underlie the netizen idea.

10.2.3. Citizenship: Status and Practice Differentiation

To explore the citizenship context further: generally speaking, a differentiation needs to be made between the *status* and the *practice* of citizenship, i.e. between *being* and *doing* (Prior et al., 1995:5). Others have described this as the difference between *formal* and *substantive* aspects of citizenship. The formal aspect is defined primarily as membership in a nation-state (Marshall & Bottomore, 1992:66). The status of the citizen – if granted – allows equal access to the rights of the citizen and states that the citizen is generally entitled to protection by the government.²⁵⁵ In return, the citizen is expected to show a general allegiance to the government. In terms of practices, this can take many forms and the citizen has to accept and implement certain duties (abide the laws, pay the taxes, etc.). These duties have become increasingly relevant in recent political debates. They are also important in discussions about *participation* in democracy. One question is how far citizens can be made to participate (obligatory voting is only one example). The distinction between *informed* and *active* citizens, i.e. between those who simply ‘consume information’ and those who engage in other ways (Allen, 1995), reflects this problem.

One of the reasons why all these questions are rather abstract is that citizenship is in principle a hermeneutic problem, which is permanently open to discussion

²⁵² These rights are explored in more detail by Graham Murdock and Peter Golding. Civil rights are part of the civil society idea, which includes issues such as freedom of speech, but also freedom of movement and of property-ownership. Political rights, on the other hand, are about political power, i.e. about elections, holding office, jury membership, etc. Last, but not least, social rights try to secure a basic standard of living, particularly in a welfare state. The latter also includes access to media and ICTs (Murdock & Golding, 1989:181-182).

²⁵³ This framework usually consists of the parliament, the courts, the welfare offices, etc. as well as the laws, policies and guidelines, which govern these bodies and citizens' lives.

²⁵⁴ See, for example, Marshall & Bottomore, 1992; Murdock & Golding, 1989; Prior et al., 1995; Turner, 1993.

²⁵⁵ Government protection, especially in relation to physical bodies, has often failed women. This is one of the reasons for online encounters to have been initially experienced as liberating in terms of gender-restrictions.

and re-interpretation.²⁵⁶ On the other hand, citizenship is a daily practice both on the sides of the government and the sides of the citizens. Citizenship is to a great extent defined by laws and executed by governments and other ruling bodies, but it is also a daily practice, which constantly interprets the meanings of citizenship. In this sense, it is a concept with definitions, with written rules, a restricted framework that is also lived, i.e. practised and performed in everyday life plus discussed on a more theoretical level. Ideally, all these aspects would feed into the wider debate and especially into re-definitions of citizenship, such as netizenship. The complexity of such concepts cannot be adequately dealt with without at least a partial acknowledgement thereof. In the next section, I therefore want to briefly open up some of the more recent debates on citizenship. These debates, while only hinted at here, are highly relevant for thinking about the relevance and the content of netizenship as found thus far.

10.2.4. Citizenship: New Theoretical Challenges

In recent decades, a wider trend, which asks for a re-thinking and potential re-definition of citizenship, has emerged. Especially increasing globalisation tendencies and a general crisis of the welfare state have induced this re-think. The tendencies have led to a question-mark behind the nation-state and therefore also behind citizenship as it currently exists. The new technologies are part of these changes and thus in themselves question existing understandings of citizenship, but they are not the main driver for the overall changes. They could, however, provide important tools in the delivery of some of the proposed changes in citizenship.

Existing approaches have, for example, questioned whether the existing formal aspects of citizenship are a necessary precondition for citizenship.²⁵⁷ Alternative versions of citizenship often stress self-governance and/or identity-politics. More radical approaches define citizenship as simply one aspect of multiple, fluid, ever-changing identities that are diversely performed and enacted differently on a daily basis. The complexity of such claims makes them difficult to grasp in terms of more concrete consequences. Slightly more careful

²⁵⁶ As outlined by Alejandro: "... different and conflicting understandings of citizenship. They see the citizen as a legal construction aimed at order (Montesquieu); as a productive member who always obeys the law (Kant); as an active participant in a constant search of communality (Rousseau); as a divided self caught between isolation and shared goals (Tocqueville); or else a self divided between abstract freedom and concrete oppression (Marx)" (Alejandro, 1993:13).

²⁵⁷ Some have started to replace one set of formal requirements with another or add a new set to the existing ones, like e.g. in the supra-national political community EU, the European Union.

approaches attest a shift of balances in what they claim has always been a hybridity of status and the performative enactment of citizenship (Lepofsky & Fraser, 2003:127-128). Generally speaking, there is a renewed interest in civic participation issues (and thus in notions of civil society) and in the citizen-imaginary. Both of these can take several forms. Enacting netizenship could be one of these forms. The problem with netizenship as promoted by Hauben and others is its removal from everyday life beyond the screen. Most of the above challenges to existing citizenship concepts include an emphasis on the performative, on the practices rather than the status of the citizen. These practices can include the online, but should not be exclusively located there.

Allucquère Rosanne Stone's ideas are suggestive here. According to Stone, not enough emphasis has been given to the interplay between an abstract notion of the citizen, what she calls the *discursive body*, and the actual, physical body. She calls the interplay between the abstract and the physical body 'warranting': "the production and maintenance of this link between a discursive space and a physical space" (Stone, 1995:40). This approach would allow the status of the citizen (i.e. a formal recognition of rights and responsibilities) to remain important, but it would include the practices more clearly and shift the general focus. Stone's argument is part of a debate around new technologies, which tries to overcome some of the problematic aspects of earlier citizenship concepts and ultimately merges the digital citizen and the netizen, but also the offline citizen. Being a netizen is thus part of the discursive body and something that is in flux. This challenges one of the fundamental aspects of citizenship as understood for a long time: its normative character.

10.3. Netizenship

Hauben's netizen has seemingly overcome the need for formal aspects of citizenship. While online, the netizen ceases to be a citizen of any particular nation, but instead has the whole of cyberspace as his/her 'home':

The word citizen suggests a geographic or national definition of social membership. The word Netizen reflects the new non-geographically based social membership. (Hauben, 1995)²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ Alexander Halavais (2000) measured the distribution of the 'nationalities' of the hyperlinks on websites and found them to be self-referential in a national sense, i.e. most hyperlinks referred to sites in the same country as the website's country of origin. This clearly contradicts the image of the *world wide web* and shows another limit to global distribution.

Membership of the netizenship-'community' seems fairly inclusive, but the practices online can suggest otherwise.²⁵⁹ Hauben's earlier quoted definition of the netizen as someone who actively engages online is already another, half-formalised kind of exclusion. Another one, so my argument goes, is the insistence on citizenship frameworks that are outdated, limited, inappropriate for the net-environment and culturally too specific.

The cultural specificity is based, for example, on the emphasis on civil rights, as understood in primarily the U.S. American context. Hauben's declared source, for example, for the *Declaration of the Rights of the Netizens* is the U.S. American *Declaration of Independence* (1776).²⁶⁰ It also is a reminder of the *First Amendment*²⁶¹, because he talks about the "Freedom of Electronic Expression to promote the exchange of knowledge without fear of reprisal" (Hauben & Hauben, 1997). These kinds of 'rights' have been widely declared online without acknowledging the implications and the liberal traditions on which they are based. The manifestos discussed in Part 1 are very similar in style and intention and all stem from U.S. sources. For a challenge to existing citizenship concepts, they do not address. The inherent contradiction between the rules for the potentially nation-less space to be based on a very culturally and even legally specific understanding of the notions of citizenship do not seem to trouble the netizen-promoters.

10.3.1. Netizenship: Rights and Responsibilities Online?

One other tendency in citizenship debates that has also been taken up in relation to the new media is the idea of *global citizenship* based human rights. First of all a global discourse on human rights has emerged thanks to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.²⁶² One step further along the same lines,

²⁵⁹ Julian Dibbell's (1993) much quoted 'Rape in Cyberspace...', for example, clearly outlines the problem of a non-defined inclusiveness, which is based on trust. The discussions about 'punishment' that emerged after an offence had been committed 'virtually' showed the limits of the tolerance and the difficulty of acting as a virtual group. Inclusion and exclusion as well as common values threatened the online community.

²⁶⁰ Hauben also declared to have been influenced by the French 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen' (1789), by Thomas Paine, Jean Jacques Rousseau and some net-specific writings.

²⁶¹ "The First Amendment mandates that 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.' The Constitution is the highest law of the land" (Cavazos & Morin, 1994:67). Reference to it, for example, on the Electronic Frontier Foundation website (<http://www.eff.org/> - accessed 09/07/01).

²⁶² Wolfgang Kleinwächter hinted at such an idea in terms of the first Internet election, when he described ICANN, the domain name assignation body, as a body which could

one could argue that global citizenship (in terms of its performative aspects) is already a pragmatic reality. Online life comes into it in the sense other kinds of networking can indeed take place, that one aspect of the performative could take place online.

One example of the technology overruling the nation-state can be seen in Graham Barwell and Kate Bowles' research (2000) about a legal case in Canada, in which media coverage concerning one particular court case was banned, but proved impossible to ban internationally. Instead, the information was provided by the media across the border in the U.S. and distributed via the net (and subsequently other media) back into Canada (Barwell & Bowles, 2000:709). The authors describe this as the emergence of online *moral clusters*: moral debates based around specific issues in existence for a limited period of time, extending the rights of access to information and to expression beyond national borders.

Hacktivism, i.e. the use of the net for the organisation of a combination of online and offline political resistance, crosses similar boundaries. As a part of the transnational civil society movements of recent years, they use the net to organise themselves, but also to create net-specific confrontations and events. Again, these are aspects of what can be described as the *performance* of citizenship.²⁶³ The performance questions existing boundaries. In terms of the user types, boundary-shifts are much more visible in someone like the cyberpunk:

... the AI [Artificial Intelligence] had limited Swiss citizenship, but a corporation owns the software and mainframe that house this 'citizen' and allow it to function. The construct then replies, 'That's a good one... Like, I own your brain and what you know, but your thoughts have Swiss citizenship' (...). In cyberpunk fiction, cultural identity is ... defined ... [as] never fully owning oneself, ... (Foster, 1999:224)

Thomas Foster's summary of the complications of citizenship for Artificial Intelligence in cyberpunk underlines the complications that still remain or rather that are ahead. There is, however, at least an acknowledgement here of the complex relations possible (and potentially necessary under these new conditions). Ignoring the essential inter-relationship between the online and the

eventually become "something like the 'United Nations of the Information Age'" (Kleinwächter, 2000:2).

²⁶³ As a reminder that many of the here described tendencies have predecessors: the suffragettes have also been labelled as an early example of transnational citizenship performances (Green, 1997).

offline worlds is the kind of trap that netizenship – as currently envisaged – falls into. In order to underline the claims further, the next step in the analysis is the description of a netizen-website.

10.3.2. Netizen Practice: The Website

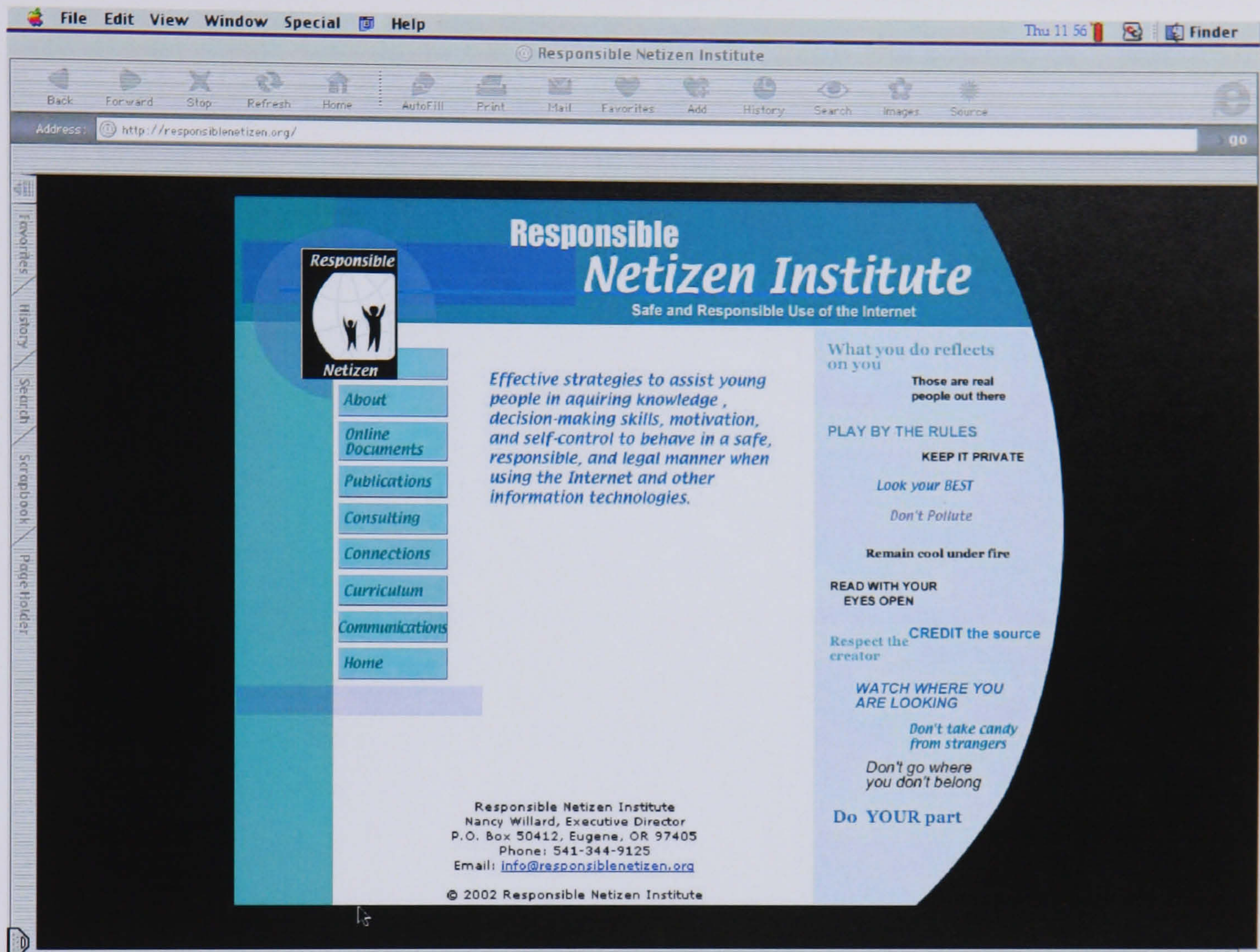


Fig.19: responsiblenetizen.org (accessed 15/08/02)

The here displayed netizen-website is rather explicit in its aims, i.e. it shows immediately that *rules and regulations for Internet use* are its primary focus. The normative elements of citizenship dominate this site. As such it is not an unusual netizen-representation. In the end, however, this site is a business site, i.e. the 'Responsible Netizen Institute' (which seems to consist primarily of one person) is a research and consultancy firm. Some of its advice, however, comes for free. This can be accessed in the online documents section, which is one of the hyperlinks offered on the site (mostly intra-links which lead to other parts of the same site).

The overall design is fairly simple and 'neutral'. While there is a black background, this only frames the actual centre of the site. This again is white with blue writing. The only image on the site is the logo, which shows the graphic and an abstract illustration of two people with raised or waving arms in

front of the round shape of the world. In general, it is difficult to portray a citizen (and subsequently a netizen), because the concept lives from its inclusive nature which implies it should be applicable to all. The rest of the site consists of the already mentioned intra-hyperlinks (to publications, consultancy, connections, curriculum, etc.) as well as some eye-catching phrases about online behaviour rules. Examples for such rules are 'credit the source' or 'read with your eyes open'. There is no direct relation to wider citizenship issues. Instead, this is a repetition of netiquette-rules, those rules that were set up as 'how to behave online' guides (and thus to create a feeling of a community of shared values). But apart from the content, the general connection between 'netizenship' and responsibilities remains prevalent.

Apart from these rules and hyperlinks, only the physical address of the research institute and a general description of its aims – "Effective strategies to assist young people in acquiring knowledge, decision-making skills, motivation, and self-control to behave in a safe, responsible, and legal manner when using the Internet and other information technologies" – feature on the site. Most of its features have a textual emphasis and are straightforward, not playful. As such, they can be regarded as fairly representative of the netizen-sites, since many of these sites concentrate on ideas of democracy, rights and responsibilities. No direct link is made to the relationship between citizenship and netizenship. Content-wise, an interesting feature of this particular site is the emphasis not on the rights of the responsible netizen, but on his/her duties. It is a liberal understanding of the web as social sphere in the sense that primary responsibility is seen to lie with the user (or, in the case of young people, with the parents).

The site can be described as 'neutral', i.e. it tries to push its content to the forefront and not some design or advertising features. It does not offer much in terms of links to other sites. Neither does it say anything about a potential involvement of those netizens who access the site. Thus the idea of participation and interaction – one of the major features of the netizen-idea – is not present. The primary aim is self-protection from the harmful content. In the promotion of self-reliance it repeats some tendencies in current political debates around citizenship, i.e. the trend to emphasise the responsibilities rather than the rights. It does not offer either a radical challenge to existing citizenship (only a weakening) nor does it offer an identity as a netizen.

10.4. Citizenship & Netizenship: Identity

The idea of citizenship as performing sphere that transforms the abstraction 'the people' into individuated political subjects and participating citizens lurks within both classical and contemporary perceptions of citizenship. But many theorists, ...fail to translate the spheres of enactment through which a participatory polity can be realized. (Joseph, 1999:15)

Citizenship has always been viewed as constitutive of identity, albeit for a long time as the *collective* rather than any *individual* identity.²⁶⁴ This collective identity was primarily the national identity and does not immediately offer much for a *subjective* identity. This is due to the universalising nature of these concepts which tend to deny the individual experience. It is also due to the relative abstract nature of the status of a citizen and the prolonged ignorance concerning the practices of lived citizenship in everyday lives within the theorisation of citizenship.

For the individual, the rights and responsibilities are part of the sense of the self and help to constitute it, but nonetheless they are not automatically or necessarily experienced as important aspects of his/her identity. Quite the opposite, the lack of experience of congruence between the supposed inner nature (our subjective experience of ourselves) and the external reality (the citizenship norms) evokes the modern idea of the self as both incomplete and divided (Donald, 1996:179). This incongruence is experienced as negative. There is a need for the incorporation of the individual experience of the citizens rather than for the regulation of an abstract body of the citizens. Stone's aforementioned process of 'warranting' defines the bridge between these two major elements, i.e. the "collection of physical and performative aspects", the *culturally intelligible body*, and the "collection of virtual attributes which, taken together, compose a structure of meaning and intention for the first part" (Stone, 1995:40), produced through discourse. They are interlinked via the warranting process. Together, these two constitute the socially apprehensible body. In this context the abstraction loses its distancing effect. In the netizen, as it has been defined predominantly, the collection of physical and performative

²⁶⁴ Jürgen Habermas opened up an interesting alternative to the traditional version of national identity, which he called 'constitutional patriotism'. It implies a desire to identify with the political order as well as the principles of what he calls - in reference to the German legal system - the 'Basic Law' (Habermas, 1989:256-257). Many U.S. American civil liberties activists, as mentioned above, enact a similar notion when they identify with the Bill of Rights, particularly the First Amendment, but the respect for others implied in these identifications is not always enacted. And, at least in the U.S. version, it does not seem to exclude a more traditional form of nationalism.

aspects is still disregarded. Warranting is not taking place. Instead, what has slightly changed is the power of definition concerning the virtual attributes in the netizen. Here, the individual has gained agency.

Single body and single discursive identity do not necessarily go together on a one-to-one basis in virtual technologies. In principle, the performative allows for multiple parts of the subjective to be played out. Obviously, this is not removed from the institutional and legal framework that citizenship notions have provided so far, but it does not stop there. The warranting, as has just been outlined, creates a link between an imagined, discursive and an actual, physical body, between the performed as well as the rhetorically produced person (Joseph, 1999:19). If we take the emphasis on the practices more seriously, the concepts of participatory politics serve as a base for netizenship, but also a point of conflict for these constructions. One does not simply switch to participation. It is this tension, which needs to be used constructively. As an internal tension, it is experienced as part of the overall identity, which needs to be expressed in the interplay with others (but not primarily with the demands of citizenship). A purely individualised person does not finally enter into the performance of citizenship.²⁶⁵ Language is one instrument that is meant to negotiate between these two conflicting sides. It helps to perform the warranting and can ease the tensions by stressing playful aspects. Thus terms such as netizen emerge.

Major politics tend to rule over such aspects. An example by Hans Klein, underlines this point: "...issues of affordability, access, parody, critique, and privacy are unlikely to arise in a debate between, say, Deutsche Telekom, France Telecom, and the International Chamber of Commerce" (Klein, 2000). They would not encourage non-commercial, critical gTLDs²⁶⁶ such as '.sucks', which consumer organisations recently called for (Kleinwächter, 2000:5). A

²⁶⁵ James Tully describes game-playing (as theorised by Hannah Arendt and Johan Huizinga) as a new direction of thinking about the political and the people. Citizen identity is formed in the game and not in the simple assignation of rights and duties or similar constructions (Tully, 1999:170). Tully's analysis serves to stress the importance of the performative and also links it to the machines. Everyday routines and obligations are the oppressive (but necessary) factor in citizenship, while freedom lies within the playful, the unusual. This framework allows for rules to be established, but also challenged, because they are not rules in the normative sense. They only provide a framework and can be changed while the game progresses. The idea is not one of consensus though, but of challenge and change. Citizens thus share a dialogue concerning power relations, which is partly expressed in the rules of the debate (Tully, 1999:170).

²⁶⁶ Generic Top Level Domains: they are part of the domain name structure of website addresses.

similar issue is the question of trademarks. Protest, like, for example, 'www.mcdonalds.sucks' should be allowed under these laws if the non-commercial side is to be taken seriously and scope for the performative to be allowed. This underlines that even if in principle performative enactments of netizenship are open to anyone, there are many ways of shutting the unwanted Other out. When it comes to such questions, cyberspace is as real as 'the real world'.

10.5. Outlook

The current version of the netizen is too uninvolved in the actual physical world and would need to be conceptually reconfigured if it were to say something meaningful about citizenship. Only a combination of the digital citizen with the netizen, but also the actual citizen, would fulfil the expectations. An acknowledgement of the implied history would be the first step:

Hence, in appraising the threats to democracy or democratic potential of new technologies and technopolitics, one must be clear concerning what normative concept of democracy one is assuming or advancing, and recognise that democracy itself, as well as everything else, changes with the implementation of new technologies, especially ones as momentous as new computer and multimedia technology. (Kellner, 1999:102)

Until now, the netizen has been used to signify well-implemented notions of citizenship and to apply them to the online world. As has been shown with the help of brief explorations of the history and practice of citizenship, the netizen is a problematic concept thanks to these implied, but unacknowledged references. A clearer incorporation of the vast theoretical debate concerning citizenship could be the first step to a reformed and enlarged netizenship concept. The danger is always that the switch would be from one normative concept to the next while the whole challenge to citizenship is based on performativity and not normativity. Nonetheless, one vision for netizenship following from the above analysis could be global human rights, applied to, interpreted and performed by physical bodies and their discursive selves. These would need to be enforced by supranational ruling bodies, which encourage self-governance. In this case, netizenship is a complex web of relations and experiences, lived and imagined. Some of the projects mentioned already perform such netizenship.

Quite in contrast to the surfer or cybernaut, the netizen concept is not what I have chosen to call an open or even empty signifier, a concept I will explore further in the next two chapters. For the moment, it is necessary to stress that the netizen concept is filled with many explanations and ideas. These ideas, however, mostly build on yet another concept, i.e. the citizen. The citizen concept has its own limitations. These limitations, however, are not generally acknowledged in the netizen explorations. The unacknowledged history then is the attribute that is shared with the surfer and cybernaut and which differentiates these user types from the rest.

The netizen is primarily a name rather than a practice for the time being. However, this terminology is significant insofar as that the Internet is as yet an emerging cultural, social, economic and political sphere and still offers quite some scope for shaping processes. Using any one of these user types is one way of shaping this process. The netizen is a political concept, which however does not use its potential to shape thinking about actual political questions around globalisation and its consequences for citizenship. The term could actually open up certain aspects of citizenship. Its promotion by one scholar in particular, who concentrated too much on the online sphere as such and hence repeated the mistakes of the early cyber-enthusiasts, has not helped the concept to develop. This can still change, but the general standstill in terms of user terms would need active reinforcement behind it. The cybernaut, the next user type to be analysed, is also a political concept – but only passively. Its role is partly to be apolitical, although the references for his user type stem from politically highly charged times.

11. Cybernaut:

The Moon Is Not Far Enough

This chapter is about space – outer space, to be precise. It is an engagement with space travel as a major utopian focus of the 20th century (especially the 1950s and 1960s). This slightly outdated utopian focus reappears in the user type of the *cybernaut*, which suggests the astronaut via its word origin. It also has been read differently, i.e. as a combination of science fiction fandom and computer knowledge, but this will not be the major focus here. Instead, I consider both these aspects to be implicit aspects of the astronaut reference. My emphasis is rather on the spatiality, morality and engagement that are potentially implied in the astronaut-cybernaut. I consider this to be a more fruitful starting point to compare different sets of utopias implied in different user terms. My approach begins with the spatial and the utopian dialectics implied in the concept. I will then move on to the history of space travel in order to show the reference points for my claims. These will subsequently be compared to the cybernaut concept and practice.

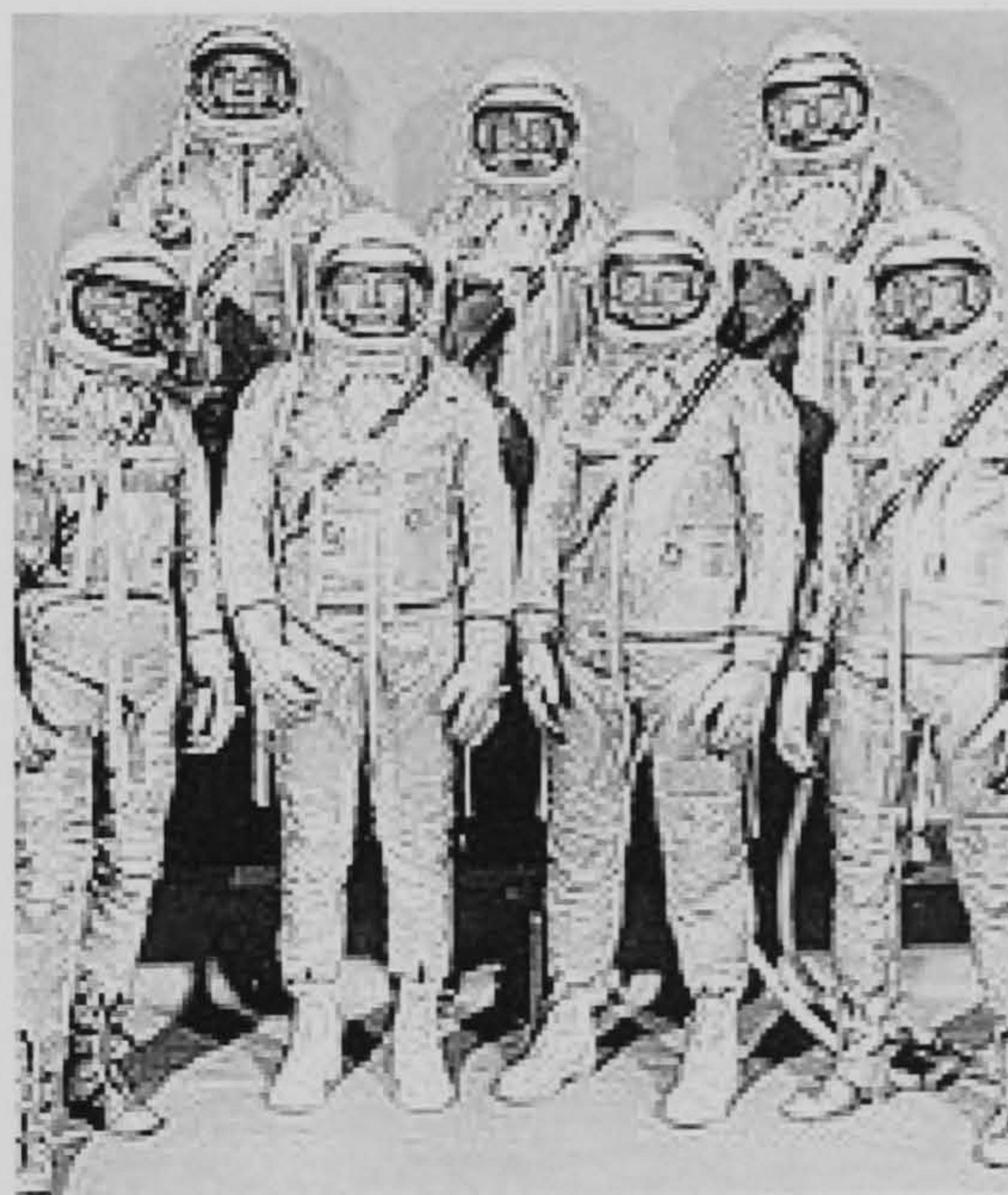


Fig.20: NASA Group 1 (Mercury Astronauts) - April, 1959
www.spaceline.org/astronaut.html (accessed 30/11/03)

11.1. The Spatial

...the astronaut will travel in a room ...cybernauts will be able to travel in their armchairs as simple televiewers, discovering a surrogate world that will have emerged from information energy. (Virilio, 1995a:154-155)

Are cybernauts simple extensions of television viewers? On first sight nothing seems to point to this (apart from the Virilio quote). In terms of its word-

structure, the term 'cybernaut' suggests the astronaut and/or cosmonaut (and most recently the Taikonaut)²⁶⁷, the representatives of space travel.²⁶⁸ In replication of the astronaut theme, the cybernaut can also be seen to refer to a nautical theme, to navigation and ships.²⁶⁹ Outer space was to be travelled as the seafarers travelled the unknown seas. Now the cybernaut has come to replace the earlier adventurers. What remains is the navigation of unknown space.

The spatial in space travel is highly complex. Outer space is both non- and hyperspace. In this sense it is similar to cyberspace. Outer space's endlessness challenges known explanations and makes it difficult to refer to it as we would to other physical spaces. It is simply not tangible. Even our perception of time becomes extremely challenged in outer space, when light-years make it (as yet) impossible to travel to many of the universe's furthest corners. Humans have continuously tried to create a grid to apply to space. Outer space should be 'mappable'. And there are many attempts to map it. It is one of the most closely observed 'spaces' in the universe. Nonetheless, space travel was originally less about a movement from one place to another (as a usually movement on the map would suggest) than a travel on a trajectory. The movement itself was crucial.²⁷⁰ Paradoxically, no other movement is probably ever mapped as clearly as space travel. Every minute of this movement into the unmappable is planned ahead, outlined and trained for.

Space is one of the crucial aspects of our thinking, of our understanding of and approach to the world. The importance of space explains at least partly the widespread use of the term cyber-'space'. The relevance of space for our consciousness is also a claim in the metaphor theorisation of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who stated that our understanding of the world is first of all based in our physical (and thus spatial) experience of it. They also explain –

²⁶⁷ Taikonaut is the Chinese term for astronaut or cosmonaut. The first Taikonaut went up into space on October 15th, 2003. According to one website, the term Taikonaut was first created online both by someone posting to discussion groups and someone else (the claimant himself) creating a website with the same title (see Go Taikonauts, 2003). Such claims are obviously problematic if not compared to other claims, but the idea of initial distribution of the term online underlines an interesting belief in the medium.

²⁶⁸ One online dictionary defines the cybernaut as a "cyberspace navigator; a person who travels in cyberspace" - <http://www.computeruser.com/resources/dictionary/> (accessed 3/11/03).

²⁶⁹ When the Mercury programme was originally launched, the then American President Kennedy proclaimed space to be the new ocean and asked the nation to 'sail upon it' (Allen, 1984:25). Here one can detect a parallel to existing browser names.

²⁷⁰ Gagarin circled the Earth once (in a sub-orbital flight). The ones that followed mostly increased the distance they travelled, the number of orbits, the time spent in space, but they were still following more or less the same *path*. Initially, arrival was the key component.

through these physical reference points in our consciousness – the structure of metaphors as spatial: a meaning is carried from one object or idea to another. The space that is implied in the user type of the *cybernaut*, however, is a rather more abstract space (as I will explore below): it is outer space. In outer space, our knowledge and experience of physical space is disturbed, since outer space is simultaneously the ultimate space and a non-space.

Thanks to its somewhat abstract nature, outer space has been the focus of projections, of individual and collective imaginations, for centuries. Space travel has made these projections more concrete, but also more ideologically charged. How far these earlier ideologies are acknowledged (or changed) in the cybernaut user type is the question that guides this chapter. I begin from the standpoint that our understanding of astronauts is intrinsically linked to the history of the early astronauts in the 1960s. Only few of us have fundamentally updated their ideas about space flight to more recent versions. This user type thus potentially points to another utopia: an invented future, which is now in the past. If these 1950s-1960s ideas were indeed the pre-given references and ideologies implied in the cybernaut, they would have implications. These implications involve the role of the user in relation to the online context as well as more general moral attitudes. This user-online relationship is here configured as a *primarily spatial* relationship. The cybernaut represents thus – on first sight – the most spatial metaphor of the overall selection.²⁷¹ This spatiality is the primary expression for the utopian dialectics in the cybernaut: dialectics between the definite escape and the given limitations (as expressed in space and morality).

Just as the astronaut broke free of the reality of his native world in landing on the moon, the cybernaut momentarily leaves the reality of mundane space-time and inserts himself into the *cybernetic straitjacket* of the virtual-reality environment control program. (Virilio, 1995b)

The aim is to escape the 'here and now', but the outcome is not unlimited. Rather, the terms we use to describe what 'being online' means already limit us. Therefore what interests me here is to explore further how far the first astronauts actually broke free of their "mundane space-time" reality or how far they were already in a 'straitjacket' (albeit of a different kind), i.e. a limitation of possibilities of movement and engagement. I begin with the assumption that to

²⁷¹ The cybernaut does not have the same range of terms as the electronic flâneur. It is mostly cybernaut, only rarely a 'usenaut' (e.g. Wetzstein et al., 1995:83) or an 'internaut' (Kurland, 1997:1).

break free is equally the aim of the cybernaut user type and thus search to see whether he/she experiences a 'straitjacket'. I will further explore the utopian dialectics first before engaging in a more systematic historical account of both concepts.

11.2. Outer Space and Cyberspace

The utopian aspects of space exploration have been the subject of many writings from diverse backgrounds. Vivian Sobchack makes sense of the utopian longing expressed in space travel from a psychoanalytically inspired point of view:

By space travel, I was referring to the passage across known and marked boundaries that give identity to the world and to ourselves – as Earth and space, as inside and outside, as self and other, as male and female. (Sobchack, 1990:113-114)

Constance Penley takes up the point of identity and claims that both the actual movement of 'going into space' as well as its science fictional representation have become an important metaphor for sense-making and place-finding in relation to science and technology (Penley, 1997:4-5). Both of these authors point to the importance of boundary-maintenance and boundary-shifts. These topics keep recurring not simply in relation to space travel, but, as we have seen, with renewed force in relation to the new technologies. The boundary-push achieved by space-travel, it appears, was ultimately a very limited one. And this is due only partly to the disappointment with actual space travel than to the discursive boundaries that were put up around it from the beginning. 'Going into space' in principle contained the possibility of imagining worlds that go far beyond whatever we knew. Space travel offered itself for utopian (and dystopian) imaginations in a broad sense, but only some were actually developed. The same seems to take place in relation to cyberspace.

Jodi Dean equally relates and compares the two 'spaces'. She contradicts Penley's claims that NASA still offers utopian meanings in popular culture (in the U.S.). According to Dean these positive connotations have instead moved to the networked ICTs, while space travel has become perfunctory (Dean, 1998:68). I want to argue for an in-between these two points of view.²⁷² While

²⁷² The positive associations with NASA that both Penley and Dean refer to, were preceded by huge anxieties concerning the space race being won by the Soviet superpower in the

(networked) computers have replaced some of space travel's power of association, they have also given space travel narratives a new platform and thereby reinvigorated its utopian function.²⁷³ Especially where outer space and cyberspace merge, the utopian imaginary of space travel has lost none of its power. It is, however, of an individual rather than a collective kind. And by now both utopian imaginaries have lost out. Dean's claims still stem from a time when the bubble had not burst. By now, even the Internet is often treated in a perfunctory manner. The next utopia is needed.

And it is the *science fictional* yearning which cyberspace expresses much better than the *actual* space travel imaginations. Science fiction does not (immediately) have to let itself be measured against 'real life' (which tends to not live up to such claims). But the boundary is increasingly weakening here as well. A much-quoted example is that of the American science fiction series *Star Trek*, which has served as a reference point for scientific advancements.²⁷⁴ Nowadays, these mutual influences are increasingly acknowledged and encouraged. Several projects have taken this into consideration, as, for example, the European Space Agency's and the MIT's invitations to science fiction writers to develop ideas for further scientific advancements show. Others are widening the scope to include other forms of art:

The main objective of the ITSF Study is to review past and present SF literature, artwork and films in order to identify and assess innovative technologies and concepts described which could be possibly developed further for space applications. (ITSF, 2000)

This explains the cybernaut's ambivalence between the science fiction fan and the space flight reference. It also explains why many of the early user types (especially those with more explicit utopian characteristics) have become much less prevalent. So-called 'real life' has caught up with the visions. The most important aspect of this vision is, to speak with Jodi Dean, to "... break the

1950s (the Soviets did indeed not only put the first satellite, the first dog and the first man into space, but progressed to the first orbital flight and the first walk in space. On a less triumphant note, they can also claim to have 'produced' the first ever space victim: Komarov was the first man to be killed during a space flight. He died in 1967 while flying the Soyuz 1 (Hooper, 1985:33/34)). One can thus view the 1960s positive associations as an (over)reaction to these earlier suffered concerns.

²⁷³ Plus NASA and the actual technical development that preceded cyberspace are intricately linked through NASA's investments in this field (Virilio, 1995a:153).

²⁷⁴ *Star Trek* is also mentioned in terms of role-models, i.e. Lt. Uhura, a *Star Trek* character served as a role model for Mae Jemison, the first female African-American astronaut (Penley, 1997:18). And the Russian cosmonauts share the fascination, both with the science fiction machines and the characters within these narratives (Grechko in Golovanov, 1986b:42).

confines of an earth(l)y body, eclipse time and space, discover what's out there, get new information" (Dean, 1998:69). These are shared concerns of space-travel and cyberspace, as Virilio's earlier quote also indicated. But Dean also claims that today there is not enough stress on the escape from Earth. According to her, the early space travel carried a notion of agency that cyberspace simply does not deliver. This claim is problematic in the sense that the here-promoted notion of agency highly constructed is (and ideologically charged). It appears to me rather as a romanticisation of early space travel. I also want to suggest that it is wrong to deny cyberspace the escape-aspects, since there is a large stress on agency online (which does not necessarily say that there is agency as such). Both the escape and its limitations, I think, are expressed precisely in terms like the cybernaut.

11.3. Space Flight

11.3.1. The Term 'Astronaut'

The term *astronaut* has poetically been translated from Latin as "sailor in the stars" (Trotman, 1998:32), more mundanely it is considered to imply 'navigating the universe'. For the last century, or at least its latter half, 'astronaut' has meant the person travelling in outer space, usually on a rocket-fuelled spacecraft. The cosmonaut is the Russian version of the astronaut. Both, astronauts and cosmonauts, have often been seen as explorers, reinforcing the nautical aspect of the term. Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space ever, explains:

The basic idea behind the word cosmonaut is the same as behind the words 'Arctic explorer'. So you have a pilot-cosmonaut – a profession which has to be learnt, for which there are particular health and other physical requirements. Space will never be conquered without pilot-cosmonauts. (Gagarin in Golovanov, 1978:315)

By now, astronauts have become professions in the real sense, i.e. their personalities hide behind their functions. Thus when we speak of astronauts today, we think of the past, not of the present or the future (Allen, 1984:216). Back then, the professional aspect that Gagarin mentions were not stressed. Instead, dangerous and adventurous aspects of space travel were promoted and each astronaut (and cosmonaut) was celebrated as a hero. Thus Neil Armstrong's famous words upon taking the first ever step on the moon, that it is "one small step for a man. One giant leap for mankind" (Armstrong in

Deutsch, 1980:5), still resonate with the importance that this new discovery was afforded in humanity's history.

11.3.2. History of Space Flight

Flying into space, both in reality and in the imaginary, has always been a flight into the unknown, and bringing the unknown one step closer to Earth.²⁷⁵ Indeed, the first attempts at space flight can be seen to have broken a different kind of barrier than just distance: the psychological barrier of flying into the unknown – since no one knew what to expect out there (Eliseyev in Golovanov, 1986b:36-37).²⁷⁶ Despite a lot of attention towards just about any aspect of the astronaut's well-being, it was not until recently, however, that it was acknowledged that the psychological obstacles in the astronaut/cosmonaut need to be overcome as well, especially if permanent human presence in the lower orbit is to remain a viable objective (see, for example, Atkinson & Shafritz, 1985; Santy, 1994). At the time, this was simply taken for granted.

The particular cultural framework of early space flight was provided by the two superpowers U.S.A. and Soviet-Union, caught in the Cold War that began to explore in the post-war period. Both progressed primarily in view of the other, also in terms of the 'space race':

In the twentieth century, two distinctly different technologies emerged: the digital computer and the liquid-fuelled rocket. ...Both the Soviet Union and the United States believed that technological leadership was the key to demonstrating ideological superiority. (Armstrong's foreword to Shepard & Slayton, 1995:1)

The U.S. won in terms of the digital computer, but not in terms of space travel (in the early days).²⁷⁷ However, the cultural imagination managed to overrule

²⁷⁵ Taking this step onto the moon seems to have sealed the idea of survival, of the potential for settling beyond planet Earth. Space travel is ultimately about *life* in the unknown. This refers not only to territories, unknown planetary systems, the potential human inhabitation of other planets or space itself, but also to space's potentially existing inhabitants: alien creatures of many different sorts. Recently, fascination with Mars has grown immensely, when potential water was discovered and the prospect of life on Mars was seen to be much more likely. The Space Frontier Foundation, for example, promotes humans going everywhere, where it makes sense, especially Mars (SFF, 2002).

²⁷⁶ Part of the American reasoning for their astronauts' heroism was patriotism. NASA has been portrayed as "an investment in America's future. As explorers, pioneers, and innovators we boldly expand frontiers in air and space to inspire and serve America and to benefit the quality of life on Earth" (NASA, 2000). More specific definitions of this benefit often remain undisclosed.

²⁷⁷ In a matter of showing the connections between different aspects of cultural development, it is important to note that ARPA, the agency that was crucial to the initial development of Internet technology, was launched within the U.S. Department of Defense in 1957 in response to the Soviet launch of Sputnik, the first artificial earth satellite.

some of the early triumphs of the Soviets.²⁷⁸ These consisted first of all in providing the first person in space – Yuri Gagarin, who orbited the earth on April the 12th, 1961. They continued for a while with further explorations, but began to lag behind when the U.S. managed to put the first men on the moon. Nonetheless, since Gagarin's flight symbolized the technological power of the Soviet Union, the need for an American response was immense and immediate. Therefore, not even a month after Gagarin's flight, Alan Shepard became the first American (!) in space.

11.3.3. Ideology, Heroism and the Limits

The American spirit had needed the Shepard booster. He was part of a wider move, brought in to restore America's moral energies. These were the men from the *Project Mercury*, the first Americans in space. The chosen ones had to be 'as average as possible'²⁷⁹, thus they were rural, white, Protestant, hard-working 'guys'. They became heroes before they even began their training (Allen, 1984:25-26). The ideological machine on the other side worked equally well. Gagarin was not only the first man in space, he was also the culmination of the Soviet effort to also score points in this particular aspect of the race. Thus Gagarin was declared to be "the son of his people" and to have "followed the morality of Soviet society in every way" (which partly meant that "he was a convinced Leninist") (Golovanov, 1986a:14).

But the Americans used yet another weapon in this ideological fight. Thus Shepard was marketed as the *better astronaut* than Gagarin. Gagarin was depicted as having had no control over his ship whatsoever, while Shepard was framed as a much more autonomous pilot. According to most accounts since,

²⁷⁸ Jodi Dean outlines that the 'story-telling' is the location where the differences between the superpowers actually took place. The Soviet triumph was initially so great exactly because they had kept their advances a secret and Gagarin's flight took the whole world by surprise. The Soviets did, however, promise to share their achievements in this field with the "whole of mankind" (Golovanov, 1986b:46). This did not happen. They sent their first astronaut around the world, but kept most of the others and especially their knowledge to themselves. The U.S.A. made itself out to be a better democracy via its sharing of the knowledge acquired in space flights. Their astronauts had to talk, because, as President Kennedy outlined in a speech in 1961: "We go into space because whatever mankind must undertake, free men must fully share" (in Dean, 1998:72). It is the freedom of speech which supposedly differentiated one superpower from the other. The fact, however, that the Americans astronauts talked more does not necessarily indicate that they actually shared their knowledge.

²⁷⁹ This idealisation of the 'next door neighbour' was repeated again in the celebrated first lay woman on board, Christa McAuliffe, who tragically died in the Challenger explosion (Penley, 1997:24ff.). It has also entered filmic space. Sobchack describes the science fiction film astronaut as "cool, rational, competent, unimaginative, male, and sexless" (Sobchack, 1990:107).

neither of them had any control over either the spacecraft or even their own body while in space (see Wolfe, 1979):

... the Mercury pilots were so superfluous to the piloting of their capsules that many test pilots were unwilling to give up the likes of an X-15 to volunteer for a ride in a mere 'tin can.' Confined to a space suit, strapped to a form-fitting chair, Shepard viewed the 'measureless horizons of space' by squinting through a periscope. (Smith, 1983:201)

In order not to make the astronauts feel like "spam in a (tin) can", they were even provided with manual controls that were not strictly necessary for the actual flight (Atkinson & Shafritz, 1985:28; Santy, 1994:48). The American dream of the lonely cowboy who wins against all odds, totally in control of the situation, was still the dominant image even where hardly any 'steering' was involved. Actually, their main tasks were observing, checking, recording and serving as a potential back-up to the system. It did not help that a chimpanzee rode the same kind of rocket before men did (Wajcman, 1991:142; Wolfe, 1979).²⁸⁰ Soon, the astronauts demanded controls for their rockets and the conflict between the role of 'passenger' and 'pilot' emerged. The portrayal of the astronauts, however, stressed that they had "freedom in space", while the communist cosmonauts did not (Dean, 1998:91). Plus NASA portrayed itself as providing full information to the world about the flights' outcomes and contrasted this with communist secrecy.

In the end, the actual early astronauts and cosmonauts were strangely bodiless entities.²⁸¹ They were packed into incredibly large space suits, tied into technology with not much space to manoeuvre.²⁸² The 'hero in adventure' rhetoric surrounding the technologies was quite different to the actual experience thereof.

²⁸⁰ The Situationists saw a perversion in the portrayal of the astronauts as heroes, although they were simply catapulted into a trajectory. Eduardo Rothe described them as 'sexless super-bureaucratized neuters'. The Situationists saw space travel as one of the areas of common culture that they could eventually seize and subvert, imagined in a space-version of Marxist power of the workers (Rothe, 1981).

²⁸¹ The astronaut's and cosmonaut's bodies are totally controlled, they are used for scientific purposes. But these purposes are hidden. The bodies have been used as test beds, while the astronauts were portrayed as bodiless. Mission Control's "control machinery ... monitors the biological functions of the bodies of the crew members" (Deutsch, 1980:60). The body here does not function as a body any longer: "As signs, asexual astronauts give concrete form and presence in both culture and film to this public - if unspoken - disaffiliation of rational technological enterprise from human biological activity" (Sobchack, 1990:108). Astronauts are not only clean-shaven and patriotic; they do not have human bodily functions left, they are part of the machine - they have become cyborgs, human-machine entities, but with little control.

²⁸² In parallel, early virtual reality technology also strapped the human body into the technology with little possibility of movement, but linked to powerful computers (Manovich, 1998).

Unlike earlier explorers, the explorers of space will remain removed from the worlds they traverse, encapsulated in space suits and space vehicles, supported by a human pyramid of earth-bound technicians; their struggles will be with mechanical malfunctions rather than hostile environments; the stories they will tell will likely be of technical achievements more than human striving. (Weber, 1985:xiii)

Even the Situationists' picked up on this problematic role of the men strapped into their capsules, orbiting around the earth. They called the astronauts 'satellites' (Rothe, 1981 [1969]:291). One could also call them 'instruments' – instruments to measure the flights' success, instruments to increase the nationalistic feelings. They were not expected to do much more than survive, apart from to record and check the instruments (Golovanow, 1978:100).

... a 'duties analysis' of what was expected of the astronaut: 1. To survive; ... 2. To perform; that is, to demonstrate man's capacity to act usefully under conditions of space flight. 3. To serve as a backup for the automatic controls and instrumentation; that is, to add reliability to the system. 4. To serve as a scientific observer; ...5. To serve as an engineering observer... (Atkinson & Shafritz, 1985:31)²⁸³

The early astronauts and cosmonauts were airplane pilots by training.²⁸⁴ In the spacecrafts, however, little of their piloting skills were actually required. Instead, they were passive parts of the machines. They appealed to the world in general, but also particularly to their respective home audiences on a different level. As people who could 'be your next door neighbour', but who nonetheless did not hesitate to serve their country in a mission that had an at least uncertain outcome, they were the ideal citizens. They were tapping into (and especially shaping) the collective consciousness, combining the long-term dreams of mankind (interestingly shared between the two cultures) and the more immediate needs of the current ideologies. In the cybernaut, we find yet another 'selective memory', i.e. only the longer-term dreams of humanity are tapped into while the other ideological and technological restrictions, as hinted at by the history of space-flight, are simply ignored. These restrictions, however, make up rather problematic reference points for the cybernaut.²⁸⁵

²⁸³ The astronauts were expected to do sequence monitoring, systems management, attitude control and research observations - they were primarily recording what was going on (see Santy, 1994:10).

²⁸⁴ While the Soviet Union always regarded its space operations as part of the military, NASA was formed as a civilian body (to differentiate it from the Soviet programme). However, the supposedly necessary flying expertise was only found in military personnel. NASA therefore found itself incorporating what it had initially tried to get away from.

²⁸⁵ In reflecting on the moral code, I limit myself to the U.S. example. This is simply because it is much better documented in languages accessible to me (and probably more researched per se). My research on Gagarin, however, supports the impression that he and

11.4. The Cybernaut

Cyberspace takes the idea of 'travel for the trajectory's sake' even further than space travel. The emphasis is on a trajectory without an immediate aim – plus no physical space or place is directly involved. The movement is now entirely virtual, created in people's minds with the help of the machine (what remains are the codes that actually travel the networks). Travelling into cyberspace is a similar journey into the unknown (although this is often the undiscovered on a personal rather than a general level of nature and humanity). This unknown can in principle take on any shape or form. The related imagination, however, has often not left the physical constraints behind. Cyberspace and outer space are both non-spaces, albeit to differing degrees. They need to be spatialised in thought, because otherwise they are difficult to think. Outer space is unthinkable, because it is an experience that only very few people will actually ever go through, because it is endless; because it consists of materials we are not used to, etc. Cyberspace is unthinkable, because in 'real space' it is a large networks of cables and computer nodes; because most actions appear only on screen; because anything that happens is coded in binary codes.

The early astronauts and cosmonauts were passengers, strapped to their seats, squinting through tiny holes. They were steered by far-away forces. The emphasis was on the visual (since the other senses disappear), but even the visual was highly limited. Cyberspace seems to repeat some of these disappointments. The cybernaut is again potentially helpless, but also not engaging very much, because:

technological developments have contributed enormously to the pacification of experience in space, to the loss of attentiveness, that is to say, to what is other in space and time ...The technological construction of such 'sealed spaces' has allowed us to manage and control what we have come to think of as our 'interface' with reality ...travels through virtual space ... the ultimate sealed space. (Robins, 1999b:167)

I want to claim that this 'sealed space' idea (Robins was talking about the car) applies to the new technologies equally well. The cybernaut still seems equally confined to his/her seat and machine as his/her predecessors. No direct movement is part of this term, only an indirect one (as part of a machine). Thus there is no verb attached either, although movement is one of the defining features of this type.

his colleagues also had to represent the 'normal' Soviet citizen, the clean-shaven and ideologically pure 'man from next door'.

11.4.1. The Cybernaut in Practice

From a wanderer in cyberspace²⁸⁶, a veteran Internet user²⁸⁷, an insidious character²⁸⁸ to the self-reliant 'pilot', who is no less than a "new model of human being and a new social order" (Leary, 1991), the cybernaut is many and none.²⁸⁹ The term existed before any of the other terms here analysed: a filmic reference to the cybernaut goes back to 1967.²⁹⁰ No origin claim has been made other than that its creation was inspired by Wiener's cybernetics research (as most other terms with the cyber-prefix). The cybernaut is sometimes used when academics want to be playful. It is also the only user type (of the here presented range) that is used as an adjective, such as in "the cybernautic imagination" (Wertheim, 1999:19).

The above-presented interpretation that the term refers to space flight is not the only possible explanation for its use. The term 'cybernaut' has also been used (and read) as a description of people who combine science fiction fandom with computer knowledge (or, to put the emphasis the other way round: computer freaks, who have a certain affinity with science-fiction) (Meueler, 1997; Uriostegui, 1996; Wetzstein et al., 1995:14). The space travel reference is here a science fiction reference. This aspect makes the cybernaut a close associate of the cyberpunk.

Mine, as has become clear above, is a slightly more literal reading of the term. My first reason for this is that it makes the term more concrete (and thus researchable). But I also think that the spatiality implied in the term is important for our understanding of cyberspace. Last, but not least I am interested in the utopian dialectics that are more prevalent in this reading of the term. The earlier endeavour, space flight, tried to make sense of what it means to be human at a particular time in our cultural and political history. This question is currently *en vogue* again, especially in relation to technologies. The shared dream is that of freeing oneself from physical constraints.

In its reference to space flight, the cybernaut-type is articulated as spatial in several ways: in its function of making cyber-'space' spatially accessible; in its historical reference to outer space discoveries, but also in its dialectical

²⁸⁶ See http://www.technos.net/tq_04/tq_03/1lewissb.htm (accessed 12/11/02)

²⁸⁷ See <http://www.localonline.net/glossary.htm> (accessed 12/11/02)

²⁸⁸ See <http://www.dysan.net/RPG/Dee3.txt> (accessed 24/10/02)

²⁸⁹ Leary uses the cybernaut-label as more or less interchangeable with the cyberpunk term.

²⁹⁰ The film reference is an episode of the British TV series 'The Avengers'. Episode 17, filmed in 1967, was named 'The return of the cybernauts'. The cybernauts in the film were crude automatons.

stance between the *real* and the *imaginary*. The cybernaut user type thus organises our thoughts around uncharted spaces. This applies to all user types to some extent, but not to the same degree as in this one. There are, as stated, potential parallels with space travel (or rather: with discourses of early space travel). The two figures tell particular stories about specific relationships. These relationships are the astronaut's version of 'accessing' (outer) space on the one hand and the cybernaut's version of 'accessing' (cyber)space on the other hand. Both narratives also tell the story of the relationship between the body and the vehicle (spacecraft/networked computer) that takes the astro-cybernaut into uncharted space. In these narratives, the seemingly unreachable is tackled thanks to heroic human endeavours (technological and scientific mastery) and endless curiosity. This, at least, is the story.

My main claim in relation to this user type is that the tension between the *discourse* surrounding early space travel and the *actual experience* of it, is a useful point of comparison for approaching cyberspace. Cyberspace's surrounding discourse is 'misleading' in a similar fashion to what the surrounding discourse was doing in the outer space context.²⁹¹ Thus the metaphor of space travel is maybe equally applied to cyberspace to cover up the *gap* between discourse and experience. This gap is a crucial characteristic of user types. But while other user types share the gap, none has it to the same extent as the cybernaut. Only the cybernaut is based on a concept that was already more projection than reality when it first appeared (the flâneur was at least never described as primarily a real social type – quite the opposite). The utopian longing is articulated particularly via references to the final frontier and science fictional modes. The more mundane actual space travel became, the greater the need for a science-fictional cyber-counterpart.

Not much happened to fill this gap, however. The cybernaut, although an existing user types (and not, as the cyberflâneuse, primarily a creation by me), is not necessarily filled with much – neither quantitatively, nor qualitatively. Not many sites or discussion groups make use of the term and those that do, do not fill it with content (neither directly, nor indirectly). As the diversity of interpretations already indicated, it can be many things – and often it is only a name and not much more. Thus the cybernaut is only filled through the history described above and through its lack. It was chosen partly because of this lack. I

²⁹¹ 'Misleading' in this context refers to the idea that it does not attempt to accurately describe the astronaut's experience, but takes this experience to illustrate very different points indeed (as, for example, the technological superiority over the other superpower).

went on another search for the concept in order to underline my point. And I found it – in several variants, even with a few explanations (never prolonged). But the term applies, as I already said, to anything and nothing, anyone and no one. In fact, it is even compared to the surfer. The one major difference seems to be the lack of distribution of the cybernaut concept, at least in offline references. Otherwise it covers anything from an open source software company to earth science teacher resources, a site about the TV series ‘The Avengers’ (since this is where the term first appeared). It also is the name of a band, a game and a film. It is generally explained as a synonym for an Internet user. And one reference goes as far as calling it “An electronic astronaut. Avid Net surfers are cybernauts; however, anyone deeply involved in communications networks, online services, and computers in general can assume this handle” (TechWeb, 2003). The specificity of the term is limited. The website I will explore below shall further serve to underline this point. It is, thanks to the lack of specificity in the term, only representative of the cybernaut in the sense that it cannot be representative.

11.4.2. The Cybernaut Website

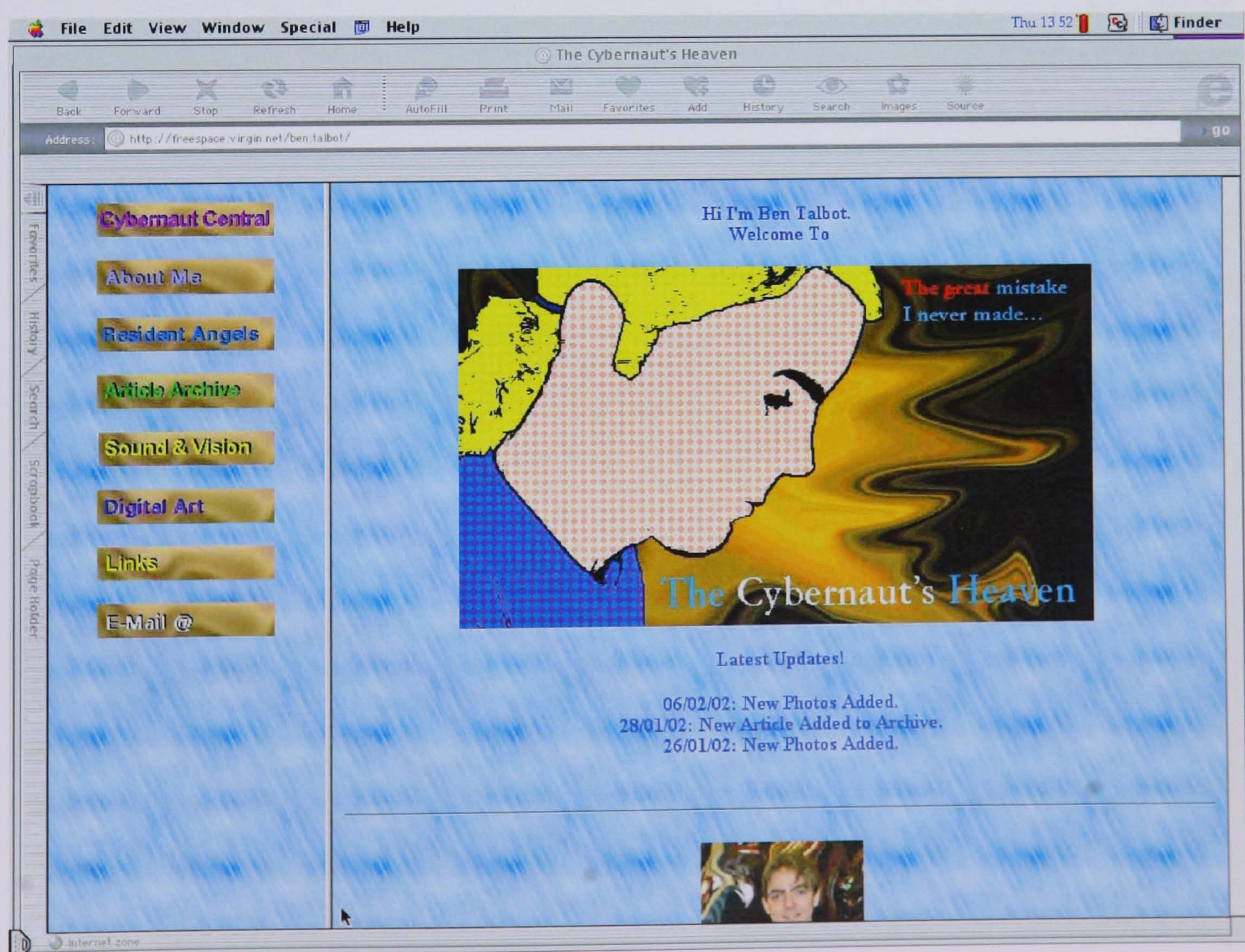


Fig.21: freespace.virgin.net/ben.talbot/ (accessed 15/08/02)

This cybernaut webpage is a personal homepage of a young man from the UK – not too long ago a student, now lost in cyberspace (his site has only been updated once since he graduated from university in 2001). Most of what one gets to see on his site is personal – pictures of friends and colleagues, a self-description, some game-review articles he wrote for a student newspaper, some bits of video (again of himself and friends), some self-made digital art. The site does not explain or explore the concept of the cybernaut, but the design has a slight air- or ‘heaven’-like feeling to it (the background is a sketchy light blue and his friends’ pictures are called ‘resident angels’). Thus there is a small reference to the space-exploration theme that I see in the cybernaut. A better reference is probably the science fiction fandom, which in this cybernaut’s case refers to gaming and provides quite a few external links from his site.

Overall, the site tries to create a rather personal information sphere and at the same time seems to want to create some ‘cyber’-feeling. Its creator wants to convey the idea that he knows a bit about the Internet and related technologies. The design is slightly playful, but nonetheless fairly clear-cut. The author uses frames and primarily links amongst his own pages rather than to others (apart from the links-section). The page overall is representative of a slight ‘professionalisation’ in personal homepages over the years (this page clearly goes beyond the ‘Hello, fellow surfer. This is my name. This is my hobby’ type of page), but the self-referential nature of personal homepages remains the primary function. This is also visible in the main graphic design feature, which is a photograph-like, pop art image of the website-creator’s face (a reminder of Roy Lichtenstein’s paintings). Overall, the cybernaut term suggests a general level of knowledge of cybercultures and related science fiction, which is reflected in his hobbies and his area of studies. The explicit relations to space that the user type suggests are at least underlying the site’s look.

11.5. The Astronaut as Cybernaut?

The detected lack of references to the early space flight history in the cybernaut user term leads me to the concept of the (relatively) empty signifier (see also debate in surfer chapter). This is a user type that does not – depending on the interpretative stance – fill itself or close itself via clear-cut references to a cultural history or theory. Instead, despite the term, which always points into a certain direction, this kind of user type is open for associations – to be filled in with other, more or often less related meanings and practices. In the surfer, this

kind of emptiness led to a widespread uptake (this at least is my argument). Here, in the cybernaut, however, the lack of signification did not have the same effect as in the surfer. Instead, the cybernaut is less visible than other user types. Especially offline, he hardly features. Online, as explored above, meanings vary widely. The cybernaut is any user or at most an avid user. Despite a potentially crucial difference, i.e. that one enters the machine only virtually and is not literally strapped to the seat, the cybernaut has not managed to either distance itself from its problematic past – or to make more of it. He could have offered a vision of an inverse cyborg, the promotion of giving oneself up to the machine.

The spectre of the autonomous machine haunts cyberspace as it did the space fiction that preceded it, but now the machine is itself a space to enter and explore, and one that may enter and explore us, rather than an external and externalisable threat.... (Cubitt, 1998:83)

The machine, however, is still treated as a tool rather than a sphere. This is despite the fact that cyberspace is perceived as spatial, as the term already suggests, and the machine has supposedly moved on to become an exploration space in itself. But the information architecture, which is attempting to justify this suggestion, remains hidden. The actual experience of being online is often perceived as flat and contains many linear movements rather than an immersion. All this can change, but has not changed radically in the last few years. What suggests spatiality is the narrative that surrounds this space as well the narratives that emerge online. The communication media let one traverse time and distance. They dissolve certain barriers and push 'frontiers'. But new barriers and frontiers are erected as well.²⁹² Just like space travel was used to enhance nationalistic images, cyberspace creates new barriers and clusters that might seem attractive to the ones inside, but can be rather exclusive. In 1994, all this still seemed rather distant and images of revelations were ripe:

With virtual reality, outerspace has become cyberspace and within that space, each of us becomes, as it were, an astronaut of inner space, a cybernaut floating in the wide expanse of the digital, electronic ocean. (Romanyshyn, 1994)

Floating was the astronaut of the first hour rarely, just as he was officially a pilot, but unofficially no steering was taking place. Instead, he was heroic primarily in his submission to a technical kind of fate. Equally, the cybernaut is

²⁹² See the debate of Lockard's claim concerning an emerging 'Internet nationalism' (Lockard, 2000:180 ff.) in the netizen section.

not steering. Again, submission to the space is asked for. Cyberspace narratives should instead learn from outer space narratives and thus from history. In paraphrasing Arthur C. Clarke, I will claim that cyberspace “is a much tougher and more hostile place than we imagined” (see Clarke, 1993:12). Thus more imagination is necessary to deal with it.²⁹³

The unmappable of space reflects Benjamin’s attempts at mapping the fluid and emerging (even if in retrospect). The city might be more contained from a purely geographical point of view, but, especially at the point of its first explosion, it was fluid, changeable, never the same. Benjamin’s fascination with Baudelaire lay partly in his ability to ‘stabilise the fugitive’, even if only momentarily. In some sense, this is also what the narrative of early space flight tried to do – to contain it within national borders despite its universal nature, to use it to underline certain ideals. Boundaries were built (and actually existed on the technological front) in order to keep it all contained. Online, a similar process is taking place (and partly needs to take place). Structures to make the unmappable mappable are used everywhere. Search engines are only one expression thereof. Shared identities are another sign. The cybernaut, as it is offered to use now, has no identity to share and is thus not helpful in ordering the chaos, in structuring the seemingly random. It could have been a user type that explored the spatial from a different angle, however, and tried to use some aspects of the astronaut. To use the less dominant ones, it would have needed filling up. In principle, it offers much for the imagination. The same cannot be said for the next user type, the surfer, although he shares the emptiness in signification with the cybernaut. He is also primarily an American concept and shares the same time-frame of original emergence. He was a more oppositional character, however – an attribute which has gone entirely lost in the online version.

²⁹³ Smith once claimed that those, who did not become astronauts themselves, could instead become *jargonauts*. He referred to the Apollo 11 press kits, which contained 250 pages of acronyms and charts and which NASA had given to journalists. These 250 pages did not, however, outline the project’s social significance (Smith, 1983:203-204). Thus what applied in the 1950s and 1960s, still applies now. The jargon rules the image. The net’s purpose or social significance is too often obscured.

12. Surfer: Life as Waves

surf: to move from place to place on the Internet searching for topics of interest. Web surfing has become a favorite pastime for many Internet users. (Webopedia, 1999b)

Surfing – to ride the waves of the sea on a board – is the ultimate sporting activity: it combines an outdoor activity in the sun with youth and stylishness as well as a slightly adventurous spirit.²⁹⁴ It also provides a community of the like-minded. But the term ‘surfing’ has received an additional layer of meaning in the last ten years: it has become the most pervasive metaphor for ‘being online’, for accessing the information space ‘behind’ and on the computer screen, for ‘moving through’ cyberspace. Both, the activity, *surfing*, and the person pursuing the activity, the *surfer*, have become commonplace descriptions for online activities. The terms are used by businesses, the media and anyone else on- as well as offline. In the sense of the virtual literary archaeology, not much effort is needed to find the surfer (the problem is rather its ubiquity) and neither is there much beneath the surface once one begins to dig (at least not on the level of direct explanations or explorations of the concept).

Nonetheless (or potentially because of this), surfing seems to have triggered the right associative button: it is the most widespread user type, used unquestioningly by an array of people. The metaphor works. This is despite the fact that, for example, the idea of speed and freedom of movement implied in the surfing metaphor is often killed by the download time of some websites (Dean, 1998:133).²⁹⁵ Many other potential ‘disappointments’ could lie one’s way if one expected fulfilment of the immediate associations that surfing triggers: immediacy, youth, fun, beach, sun and many more, but also danger and competition. These associations are difficult to match in the online experience, especially considering the fact that the most commonly used online application is email. But not many of the online surfers have actually ever been on a ‘real’ surfboard, i.e. surfing online can only become the equivalent of a *fantasy* experience. Online surfing thus engages with a specific imaginary, one that has its roots somewhere in 1960s youth cultures and 1980s computer cultures. The

²⁹⁴ The term surfing refers two kinds: windsurfing as well as bodysurfing. I will not differentiate here between the two, because the difference does not affect my arguments.

²⁹⁵ This, however, has changed for people with high-speed access, which is becoming more commonplace.

imaginary that the surfer engages with is definitely a collective rather than an individual consciousness:

When the cyberspace cadets started in with their 'surfing the Web' stuff, the collective unconscious was unlocked in some big way. Suddenly it's clear that everybody in the world (virtually) wants to be a surfer – or understands that there are surfers. (Kampion & Brown, 1997:175)

This collective unconscious is a much more accessible one than for most of the other user types. It played a major role in embedding this user type clearly in the everyday references to the online sphere. Since this process is not necessarily directly related to the water surfing that it claims as its origin, some further analysis of the relationship between the original meaning and the current application of the term is necessary. The claim for the necessity to understand this relationship better follows on from some of the puzzlement that original water surfers have expressed upon seeing their sport used to describe the online sphere. For example, Drew Kampion and Bruce Brown, the authors who claim this unlocking of the collective unconscious (with which I agree and which is supported by my study) are actually (water) surfers. It is from this perspective that they claim that the connection between surfing and the web is rather obscure:

Surfing the Web: A recent search of 'surf' using the Yahoo!-brand Web browser came up with 25 categories and 1,163 Websites using the word *surf* in some form. ...Several hundreds of the sites are actually connected with riding waves. But it's mind-boggling, isn't it? The biggest technological shift in some time, and the descriptive technical language is ...surf talk. Let's go surfin'! Click-click. (Kampion & Brown, 1997:177)

As part of my archaeological undertaking, I wanted to dig a bit beyond that immediate surface and thus began with briefly exploring the history of 'real-life' surfing. The above-displayed surprise at the use of the word surfing for 'being online' suggests that this connection between 'riding the waves' and 'clicking on a hyperlink' is not necessarily directly derived from surfing as such.

12.1. Brief History of (Water) Surfing

Surfing as a sport became more widely known in the late 1950s, beginning 1960s (coinciding with the emergence of the astronauts, but at the other end of the scale of social acceptability). This was the time surfing took its first steps

into the arena of popular culture rather than remaining an obscure and fairly specialised sport. It has since spread to become known and pursued worldwide.²⁹⁶ However, surfing has a history which is much older than the 1960s. Surfing is actually an ancient pursuit in Polynesian culture. It has been described as an essential part of the identity of people from these islands and especially from Hawaii, the central Pacific island renowned for its natural beauty. According to historians of the islands, surfing must have been a very old pursuit indeed.²⁹⁷ It was deeply embedded in everyday life, but also in religion and in the lives of the royalty.

Ignoring the central role surfing played in local life, it was nearly destroyed by the 18th century colonisers of the islands. The initial contact between colonisers and Southern Pacific cultures was in 1778, when Captain Cook entered the islands with his boats and crew. Their entry brought first of all unknown diseases and a general upheaval for existing local structures and pursuits. Later in this process of colonisation new political, social and cultural structures were implemented. The final threat to surfing seems to have come from the arrival of missionaries and their attempts to convert many of the native population to Christianity. This newly implemented culture and religion found the surfing of the islanders a rather strange and unsuitable activity. Especially the Calvinistic attitude, which viewed pure enjoyment with suspicion, did not agree with the sport (Pearson, 1979:32).²⁹⁸ The colonisers therefore discouraged surfing. In spite of this, pockets of the sport remained over all these years.

Thanks to these remaining pockets, surfing was picked up by tourists of the islands (mostly Americans) decades later. One famous advocate of the sport was the author Jack London²⁹⁹, who visited Hawaii in 1907, and tried surfing there for the first time. His subsequent publication of the experience,³⁰⁰ and his involvement in the establishment of a surfing beach club, helped to spread the news beyond the Waikiki shores (the most famous beach in Hawaii). In the

²⁹⁶ Worldwide is limited (there are definite hot spots for the real pursuit of the sport) by the obvious cultural-economic boundaries, but also by the need for the 'right' waves.

²⁹⁷ Anthropologist estimate that it was thousands of years old (Crawford, 2002). For the early history, also see Kampion & Brown, 1998; Young, 1983.

²⁹⁸ In her history of surfing in California, Caren Crawford (2002) claims that it was a distinctive feature of Californian surf culture an identity based on surfing was privileged over an identity based on working. Although Crawford also writes about the Polynesian roots of the culture overall, she does not seem to see Californian anti-work attitudes as a logical consequence of the origins of the culture.

²⁹⁹ London is mostly known for his book 'The Sea Wolf'.

³⁰⁰ In 'The Cruise of the Snark' (see Pearson, 1979) and/or in an article, entitled 'A Royal Sport', published in an American magazine (Crawford, 2002).

same year, an Irish-Hawaiian, George Freeth, was invited to demonstrate surfing in California (his stunts were part of a show that was promoting the further building of the railways). This triggered the first wave of surf-fashion in what is today regarded as one of its home-regions. In a different home-country of surfing, Australia, it took until 1913 for surfing to take off. This happened when Duke Kahanamoku (an Olympian swimming champion and surfer from Hawaii) performed surfing stunts on Australian beaches. This immediately triggered widespread interest and copy-cat behaviours.³⁰¹

The real surfing wave did not explode until the 1950s, however (Crawford, 2002). The two world wars and subsequent economic and social recovery periods were the primary reason for this. For a long time, there was simply no surfing population available. This changed in the 1950s (at least in California), when a relatively affluent, but also potentially disenchanted youth began to look for alternatives and surfing offered itself as one.³⁰² The resistance expressed in surfing, although often glorified, was built primarily on the desire to follow a certain lifestyle rather than to build a conscious and politicised opposition. The lifestyle was resistant to the dominant work ethic, but that is where the opposition ended. The final kick in the popularisation of the sport came when films were made about it, displaying it as a romantic subculture and when commercialisation entered (competitions were introduced, advertisers came in, etc.). This, however, was also the end of any claim to an oppositional subculture. Instead, romantic individualism prevailed.

Even today, surfing remains closely linked to California, but also to Hawaii and Australia. This is to a great extent based on geographical reasons, since the best surfing waves can be found in these places. But the cultural history of surfing also plays a role. These places – all in their different ways – have embedded themselves on the fantasy-level, successfully building up mythical elements around surfing and their particular regions. Part of that process has been the continued commercialisation of the sport, which builds on limited elements of these cultural histories and attempts to create a subculture around it. As part of this one can find certain music, certain dress styles and design-aesthetics. In the latter, the Polynesian roots of the culture are most visible (see Fig.22).

³⁰¹ This pre-history seems widely accepted. I could trace no alternative claims.

³⁰² Another, much simpler reason for the eventual uptake of surfing was the material, which had been developed in the war, which was used to develop lighter and more accessible kinds of surfboards.



**Fig.22: Surfboard and Surfing shorts (model Aloha style) –
www.lazicka.com/ & www.blueplanetsurf.com/
 (accessed 28/10/03)**

Thus within current spin-offs of the original surf culture, the Polynesian roots of the sport are partly celebrated, but also exploited. However, in the popular uptake of the sport, they appear widely ignored. A more in-depth version of the early Polynesian history of the sport is known only to knowledgeable surfing enthusiasts, but is not directly referred to in most surfing references. This ignorance even turns to a form of 'denial' when it comes to the web-surfer.

No more explicit reference, not even in the design is made to the history of surfing in the web-surfer. Instead, the web surfer has hardly any content at all, as will be shown below. My claim is that its important role in the canonical story of the web (and its widespread nature amongst web users of all kinds) lies exactly in this lack of signification. This makes the user type changeable and more easily transferable. This would suggest that a relatively empty signification (which allows multiple extensions or substitutions of meaning) is a precondition for the success of a user type (and is not specific to the surfer). This can only be analysed in a comparison with the other user types. And, as the cybernaut user type analysis has already shown, there is no *necessary relationship* between the empty signification and user type success.

Thus one of the yet unanswered questions is whether there is anything in the above-summarised history that suggests such a denial in the web context. This was partly the case in the cybernaut, but did not seem to be the reason for its lack of content after all. For the time being, I will thus concentrate on further exploring the (web) surfer as such. The first step here is a reference to the surfer's context of use and the origin of the term.

12.2. Online Surfing

I had a dream that I was swimming in there where the files are. I think I had the dream after I heard the expression 'to information surf' on the Internet. (Burt in Turkle, 1997a:43)

It feels like we're surfing the crest of the invading program... (Gibson, 1993:200)

Is it safe to *surf* the Net?³⁰³

... Where Every *Surfer* Wants To Be: ... three women and a website³⁰⁴

It's Net curtains for cyberspace pioneers: ... unveiled a 'free' package to *surf* the Net, ...³⁰⁵

Internet sites will have to be specially adapted to present information in a way that will be clear to a listener rather than a casual Internet *surfer*.³⁰⁶

All 659 MPs were surveyed, and 206 responded, ... Of the responding MPs, ...; 178 *surf* the Net, ...³⁰⁷

The latest ... has a feature ... that leads Web *surfers* to sites ...³⁰⁸

The more that people use the Internet, the more they tend to feel depressed and lonely, according to a two-year study on the social and psychological effects of *surfing* in cyberspace.³⁰⁹

In the mid- to late 1990s, the surfer was everywhere. Every other user, every business, every portal site seemed to use this descriptive term (for example in concepts such as the 'Surfer of the month').³¹⁰ Self-help examples for building new homepages included the line "Hello fellow Internet surfer!"³¹¹ as a standard opening (and thus it got replicated manifold across the web). In the offline discourse (ranging from traditional media to advertisers and self-help books), the surfer was the most used term to refer to 'being online' and related behaviours. The list of surfer-references is endless.³¹² And this applies not only

³⁰³ *The Guardian*, 23 July 1998 – the italics in the following quotes were added by me.

³⁰⁴ *The Independent on Sunday*, 6 December 1998

³⁰⁵ *The Observer*, 4 October 1998

³⁰⁶ *Financial Times*, 18 March 1999

³⁰⁷ *The Guardian*, 1 October 1998

³⁰⁸ *The Guardian*, 15 October 1998

³⁰⁹ *The Guardian*, 31 August 1998

³¹⁰ For example the Austrian Telecom at <http://www.wagenhofer.co.at/telecom/dienst/products/services/homepage.html> (accessed 09/02/99) or the promotion by Agfa, which puts pictures taken on their film onto the website in a 'surfer's gallery' at <http://www.agfanet.com/en/cafe/gallery/> (accessed 16/07/01) and 'Surfer's Picks' at http://uk.dir.yahoo.com/Entertainment/Cool_Links/Surfers_Picks/ (accessed 16/07/01)

³¹¹ <http://build.tripod.com/hpstudio/quickpage/index.html> (accessed 28/04/99)

³¹² To add just a couple more: 'Surfer Central' is a software to keep track of all one's addresses. There is also an AIDS help site, the are sites which offer 'safer surfing - stop the hackers!' and there is an offer for a high speed modem called 'power surfer'.

to the English-speaking world.³¹³ And while the height of the use of the term was indeed in the 1990s, its use has not ceased much since and no other term has been found to replace this success.

12.2.1. The Expression 'Online Surfing'

The term 'surf' goes back to the old English expression 'sough', which refers to a murmuring or rustling sound that is usually made by the wind, often in connection with water. 'Surf' itself did not originally refer to the sport, but to the lines of foamy waves that break on a seashore or reef (Handley & Crowcroft, 1995:vii) or simply to breaking waves. In practice, not every beach has the right 'surf' to surf and thus surfing can only take place on certain beaches and under certain conditions (thus the above-mentioned geographical limitations to surfing). Online these restrictions should not apply, since surfing is portrayed as an overall (and easy) approach to the medium. Nonetheless, as I will discuss later, cultural restrictions are relevant.

The term 'surfing' as applied to online movement and to information retrieval has its roots less in nature's waves, however, than in television viewing behaviours. The 'surf' idiom was originally used for the activity of rapidly flipping through TV channels, which is closely linked to the invention of the remote control. The channel changing behaviour was widely read as a shift in the attitude to media content, which coincided with a general shift in the reading of audience behaviours by media studies scholars. Thus, while some frowned upon it as a loss of concentration and attention, more people interpreted it as a liberation from pre-given structures and an increase in choice and variation. The image of the remote control and channel-surfing behaviour still exists, but the term itself has mostly disappeared. It has now been taken over by online surfing, but, as Jonathan Sterne states: "surfing the web and channel surfing share the same metaphor for a reason" (Sterne, 1999:277). The behavioural attribute, i.e. the just-mentioned limited attention span afforded to the object on the screen (TV or computer), is interpreted as the shared reason. Surfing is meant to be aimless, random access to multiple and fluid impressions rather than an in-depth engagement.

An earlier version of the web surfing term as applied in the online context was the idea of 'information surfing'. This expression was meant to describe a

³¹³ The German telecom internet service, for example, used the term 'surf board' for the introduction to thematically arranged information online. <http://www.dtag.de/aktuell/surfbrett/right.htm> (accessed 24/03/99)

way of dealing with the beginning information overload (the 'wave of information' coming one's way). The surfer would be the one who has learned to use this constructively rather than let it 'roll over' him/her (see Saffo, 1989). Despite these indirect origin claims, both in TV viewing and information overloads (and, as I will explore later, in hacker culture), there also exists a by now canonized tale about the origin of the web-surfing term. This is described as if it had been a straight-forward 'invention'.

12.2.2. Origin Claims

Jean Amour Polly (1994a/1994b), a librarian (and now best-selling author) who does not otherwise feature much in the 'Internet pioneer' stories, runs a website which she calls the 'netmom' site. On this site Polly states that she was the first to have introduced the term surfing for 'being online'. This was in 1992, when she used the term in an article for the American publication *Wilson Library Bulletin*. Polly's article was supposed to describe net use specifically for librarians and in looking for a title for the article, she

... weighed many possible metaphors. I wanted something that expressed the fun I had using the Internet, as well as hit on the skill, and yes, endurance necessary to use it well. I also needed something that would evoke a sense of randomness, chaos, and even danger. I wanted something fishy, net-like, nautical. (Polly, 1994a)

She found her answer on a library-mousepad that had a wave and a surfer as well as the title 'Information Surfer' pictured on it (see Fig.23). This underlines the above claim that information surfing preceded (and helped create) web surfing.



Fig.23: 'Information surfing' mousepad – www.netmom.com/about/birth.shtml (accessed 29/10/03)

In her article, tellingly entitled 'Surfing the Internet', Polly basically delivered a hands-on guide to Internet resources available at the time.³¹⁴ She does not explicitly refer to the term 'surfing' in the text itself, but starts with a travelogue:

Today I'll travel to Minnesota, Texas, California, Cleveland ...I'm not frantically packing, and I won't pick up any frequent flyer mileage. In fact, I'm sipping cocoa at my Macintosh. My trips will be electronic ...I'll be using the Internet ...which lets me skip like a stone across oceans and continents...

I downloaded some ...software ...Then I checked a few databases for information ...and scanned today's news stories. I looked at the weather forecast... (Polly, 1994b)

Her fascination is with the vastness of the information accessible 'at your fingertip'. It is interesting to compare this to another passage describing the phenomenon of 'being-online', William Mitchell as an *electronic flâneur*.

The keyboard is my café. Each morning I turn to some nearby machine ... to log into electronic mail. I click on an icon to open an 'inbox' filled with messages from round the world – replies to technical questions, queries for me to answer, drafts of papers, submissions of student work, appointments, travel and meeting arrangements, bits of business, greetings, reminders ...[a] glance at the latest weather report. (Mitchell, 1997)

12.2.3. Actions, Attitudes and User Types

Mitchell and Polly share not only an interest in the weather, they also share the world-wide aspect of their information and communication patterns, the relaxed atmosphere of either café or home-office and, most importantly, the multi-tasking communication aspects. And although Mitchell's account is slightly more widely publicised and referred to, the basic message of the two accounts does not differ much. Instead, Mitchell and Polly engage in very similar online behaviours, according to their descriptions above.³¹⁵ On second

³¹⁴ Polly's article itself was never distributed very widely on paper, because another article in the same issue of the bulletin was banned and therefore most of the already printed issues were destroyed. But when Polly put her article on her ftp-space in the same year, it supposedly proved to be very popular. The following quotes are from the revised version of the 1993 origin.

³¹⁵ A parallel can be drawn to other media in their early days. Especially radio brought a new awareness of a 'doubling up' of being: the here and now of the listeners was 'invaded' by the here and now of the event that was being broadcast. The whole world suddenly seemed to enter people's living-room. Their personal lives continued, but were partly interwoven with another, official schedule. They did not share the same place, but aspects of their time (Scannell, 1996). These experiences sound rather similar to those described by Polly and Mitchell, but a major difference lies in the possibility of this new medium to be

sight, however, Mitchell – first of all with his flâneur reference – clearly appeals to a different audience. Polly delivers a *hands-on guide* to the Internet, while Mitchell develops an overall *philosophy* about it. Thus the difference between them is the underlying *attitude* expressed in the whole of their texts, but also in the choice of user type. The applications that both authors use and their actual online *behaviours*, however, do not differ greatly. Neither do these behaviours seem to matter much in relation to the choice of either of the user types (at least in these particular cases). The related offline terms (surfer and flâneur) present us with a much more clear-cut relationship between behaviours/activities and attitudes.

Consequently, Polly's actions do not fit the disorganised search that is suggested in this surfing definition:

The term surfing is generally used to describe a rather undirected type of Web browsing in which the user jumps from page to page rather whimsically, as opposed to specifically searching for specific information. (Webopedia, 1999b)

Polly's own online visits sound very structured and aimed instead. This gap between her own online behaviour and the general understanding of what 'surfing' originally implied (an understanding for which the above quote is representative and which is supported by the channel-surfing origin) did not prevent Polly's claim to have been the inventor of the term to be canonized. This canonization was not least substantiated by a reference in the highly acclaimed *Hobbes' Internet Timeline*, an online source about early web history. For 1992, it states that the term "'surfing the Internet' is coined by Jean Armour Polly" (Zakon, 1999). The *Internet Timeline* (here version 4.2.) itself is referred to in many other sites, most of which claim some authority on the culture of the net. The site is also hosted by the *Internet Society*, which is one of the self-regulatory bodies of the web (and where Polly sits on the Board of Trustees!). With such prominent support behind her, alternative origin claims for the surfing term – such as the one quoted below (which does not even question her claim) – do not stand much of a chance to be recognised.

...aside from Jean Armour Polly's claims ...I have always associated the term [surfing] with 'mis-use' as I was under the understanding that

folks had used the term 'cerfing' in relation to Vinton Cerf's work (at CNRI) in the mid-80's on 'wandering agents' (knowbots and spiders)³¹⁶

My point overall is not to question the truthfulness of Polly's claims (although earlier uses of the term clearly existed, as she herself admits, but hers was supposedly the first on paper)³¹⁷, but to show the gap that exists between the claim to invention and the recognition of what the term might mean. The randomness has been lost somewhere between the original idea and the end of her article. And this is symptomatic of the use of the term overall. Another aspect gone missing in the process (acknowledged in 'cerfing') is the more technological side of the web.

12.2.4. Technology

In comparison to the other user types, it is striking that no web-, cyber- or other such prefix is usually used for the surfer (sometimes 'net surfing' or 'web surfing' is added, but this addition is not necessary for the general recognition of the term).³¹⁸ The lack of a prefix does not only underline a certain ubiquity of the term, it also lessens the links with technology. One does not need to acknowledge the Internet or cyberspace (or even a computer) in stating one's intention to 'surf'.³¹⁹ Again, the meaning of the term is as little pre-determined as possible and can be filled in instead. The surfer-type's versatility lies also in the fact that the surfer is one of the only terms in this range of user types, which can be used as a verb, as in 'to surf the web'.³²⁰ This is an important element for the spread of the user type, because it makes it into more flexible master-metaphor. On the other hand it emphasises the movement implied in the term – a point to which I will return.

One could also suspect that the technological reference in the surfer term was superfluous, because the Silicon Valley computer programmers and developers applied the term to themselves. This could help to leave the geeky image behind and instead adopt the attributes of adventure, sports and a

³¹⁶ Quoted from an email to the air-I list on May 12th, 2003 – author's name withheld.

³¹⁷ In the most recent version of her website, Polly acknowledges that she has since "discovered earlier uses of the same metaphor on USENET".

³¹⁸ In a wider sense of the word, the surfing terminology relates to other expressions such as the browser-names *Netscape Navigator* and *Microsoft Explorer*.

³¹⁹ One could suspect an expression of the domestication of technology here, which would subscribe to the idea that the Internet is simply not perceived as *technology* anymore. However, the very early use of the term without prefix contradicts this idea and underlines that the technology reference was simply never added.

³²⁰ The other ones are the cyberflâneur and cyberflâneuse.

slightly rebellious lifestyle.³²¹ This, however, could not be confirmed other than in the general claim that hackers had used the term originally and dropped it when it became more mainstream (see Taylor, 1999). It would generally fit with the impression of the surfer as having a “Can-do attitude of the Californian individualist”. In the web surfer this attitude implies the ‘Californian Ideology’, which simultaneously advocates a utopia both of the electronic agora (by the new Left) and of the electronic marketplace (by the new Right) (Barbrook & Cameron, 1995), a mixture of an alternative “do-it-yourself” culture (the hippies, the original surfers) and entrepreneurship (Silicon Valley). The same combination of entrepreneur and DIY (but less of the political attitude) is also visible in the website example that was chosen for a closer analysis.

12.2.5. The Surfer Website

The below-shown surfer-site is not ‘representative’ of surfer-sites in general, simply because there are too many websites that use the surfing terminology and they tend to be rather diverse in both design and content. The site below was selected, because it is one of the few sites to actually graphically feature the surfer and to explicitly title itself the ‘cyber surfer’ website (such prominent display of the concept is rare). Graphically, the ‘cyber surfer’ is the site’s main feature. The ‘cyber surfer’ image of a traditional body surfer standing on a keyboard (rather than a surfboard) is displayed in bright colours against a background of black (an aesthetic parallel to the cyberpunk site). The prominence of the surfing terminology suggested a potential engagement with the concept of web surfing as such. This, however, is not the case here.

When opened, the site plays music and shows moving graphics (the ‘cyber surfer’ surfs into the picture). This takes a while before it all settles down. The structure of the site is fairly straightforward, i.e. the user is expected to scroll down in order to find a list of links. The cyber surfer site is a professional site that offers web design and related services (although also rather obscure services, such as family genealogy). The hyperlinks are partly intra-references, partly links to other websites, but all of them are supposed to feature the (unusual combination of) services of the site. The primary aim of this site

³²¹ Geeks refers here (in a kind of persiflage) to people who have ‘nothing better to do’ than programming. They are mostly male, speaking a language only other geeks can understand. With glasses, unwashed and living a totally different daily rhythm (and basically in another world), the computer programmer’s image had no subcultural credentials for a long time. Neither did it have the recognition of the rest of the population. Thus re-naming was maybe an act of re-labelling.

appears to be to get the user to go further, i.e. to access the individual services on the other webpages. The texts displayed on the website are thus limited, they only give a brief description of what is available on the next pages. Despite its general twist as a professional site and its fairly straightforward structure, the site still has an amateur-feel to it. The 'cyber surfer' is not reflected upon, but simply used as a logo, which underlines the general impression, i.e. that the surfer description is used primarily in passing. It rarely includes the kind of reflection that, for example, the cyberflâneur or the webgrrl feature.

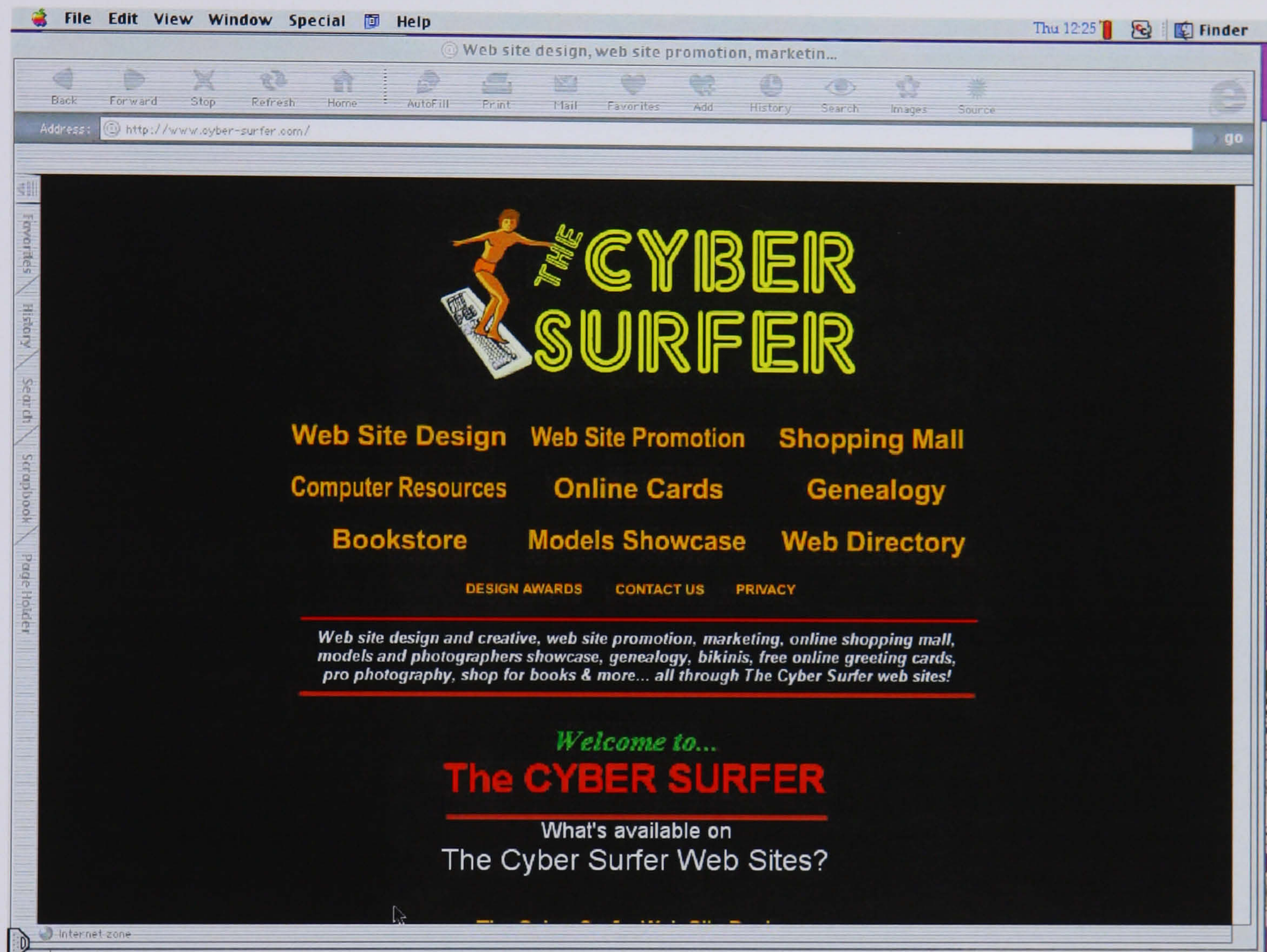


Fig.24: www.cyber-surfer.com (accessed 15/08/02)

An earlier version of the site looked rather similar, but additionally offered links to web awards, web writers' associations and the Microsoft Windows 'media player'. The removal of these links in the later version points to the fact that the Internet has become more widespread and commonplace. The explicit reference to these kinds of associations and awards is not necessarily seen as an informative attribute anymore. Rather, such references tend to take away the concentration from the site itself. Knowledge and expertise concerning web design are now more implicit (i.e. visible in the design itself rather than some award) than in the early days. One other aspect that has emerged over the years is a resistance to the term 'surfing' used for 'being online'.

12.3. Subculture & Resistance

The surfer might be the most widespread user type, but it has not been entirely without opposition. The most obvious came from actual surfers, as those who were referred above and others, who proclaimed online (!): “Surfboards, NOT keyboards”.³²² Another kind of resistance came from those who had used the term initially: the hackers. Although they had adopted the user type early on, many have since stopped using it. The term’s move to the mainstream (supposedly in the mid-1990s) did not entice them to use it any further (Umec, 2003). A more pro-active resistance could be found yet again elsewhere, as in the form of satirical mis-uses of the term: *smurfing*³²³:

This system is designed expressly for those of you out there who are sick of the ‘surf’ metaphor for the net, and the Web in particular. Only here can you express the utter disgust you feel at this metaphor, and by association all the other annoying hip and trendy metaphors. How is that, you ask? By Smurfing the Web!³²⁴

Smurfing signifies the use of a language creation machine. It translates webpages and links into ‘smurf jargon’. This makes most texts simply unreadable – and thus has the same effect as a number current psychogeography sites, some of which tend to produce a random, nonsensical combination of letters (e.g. VPA, 2002). This element of ‘resistance’ also underlines once more that *flânerie* and the *dérive* differ. But even the kind of protest of the smurf-kind partly hits at the wrong aim, because it underlines the metaphors’ persistence (and importance that is attached to their sheer existence). It also marks the term as a significant part of the emerging culture. but, in the case of the web surfer at least, as rather the opposite of a subculture:

A subculture is in part defined by its language ...It’s a language that is always stretching, for at least three reasons: to describe new territory, for subtribal differentiation and due to outside influence. (Kampion & Brown, 1997:184)

At the language level as described here, the user types and Internet metaphors in general can be seen to create a subculture, because users also describe a new territory, use the language to differentiate it- and themselves and react to outside pressures. The original surfers were a subculture also beyond the

³²² <http://www.sdsc.edu/surf/toc.html> (accessed 16/07/01)

³²³ Smurfing is elsewhere described as a “network security breach in which a network connected to the Internet is swamped ...” – <http://webopedia.internet.com/TERM/s/smurf.html> (accessed 26/05/99)

³²⁴ <http://websmurfer.devnull.net> (accessed 18/05/99)

language level. It is primarily the *lifestyle* that distinguishes this subculture from the mainstream and from other subcultures, but also an underlying *attitude* of reading surfing as the 'ultimate metaphor for life'. Any situation in life is compared to a wave, which one can only react to when it is actually there. The implication is that neither planning ahead, nor any retrospective action is possible (or necessary) (Kampion & Brown, 1997:175). As has been seen above, the resulting lifestyle includes a resistance to the average working attitude, but not necessarily as a fundamental expression of resistance rather than as a necessary consequence of the sport (which always comes first). As a group, surfers perform certain rituals and often develop a kind of tribal hierarchy. The development of distinctive language elements is part of this. Other symbolic elements also help to distinguish them internally and externally. For a long time, the sport and the rituals was performed primarily by men. This has recently begun to be challenged, but remains prevalent (Martin, 2000).

The web surfer terminology is 'neutral', i.e. undefined enough to be inclusive of both sexes (nor does it ask any great technical knowledge – here it also differs from the original surfing). What on- and offline surfing share is the notion of the leisure activity (which does not necessarily become an overall lifestyle for the web surfer). As outlined earlier, the web surfer has been rejected by existing subcultures (such as the hackers) and has not established itself as a distinct one. All these aspects, however, do not imply that the surfer is all-inclusive – quite the opposite:

The potential limitation of this metaphor [surfing] in terms of culturally and geographically diverse identities was clarified for me during an Internet training course in London with African women and women of African descent. In a group discussion one of the participants commented on 'surfing' as one of the unsuitable words for their use of electronic networks, and promotion of such technologies amongst others. '*Who goes surfing in Africa?*', she asked. (Wakeford, 1997:54)

Overall, not many users of the web surfer term go water surfing either. But the point here is a bit different. It refers to a potential, based somewhere between the actual and the imaginary. Surfing is available to most of those people in the Western worlds as at least a possibility, as something they could *choose* to do. This adds another layer then to the – until now argued – empty signification of the surfer user type. Thus far, the lack of actual experience of the reference point and the lack of reflection about either the implied history or other attributes has been argued to be this particular metaphor's strong point. Here, now, we are confronted with another possible interpretation: that we can

choose to ignore certain levels of signification, only as long as we have a basic understanding of some of the implied attributes (in the surfer's case of a leisure lifestyle, a beach life and a generally carefree existence). This is then a reminder that these references are not easily culturally transferable, but discriminatory instead.

This supports another point I would like to make in relation to user types overall: the cultural histories of the terms in use are highly relevant and should be displayed in order to allow wide accessibility of the concepts and communication about the visions implied therein. With an empty signifier, such communication does not work – no imaginary can be either developed or criticised and instead, straightforward actions are read into the term. An all-inclusive user type will never exist, but such thick description can provide a better communication about – and through – the terms in question.³²⁵ In that case a criticism like the one quoted above, i.e. that surfing does not trigger the right associative reactions in Africa, could be used more constructively and contrasted with the implied attitude and attributes of 'being online'.

12.4. Summary

Surfing is mastering the unknown, but in relative safety, i.e. either close to the beach or already on the click to the next site. Important is thus the *movement*, both in terms of the possibility of the terminology and the movement as such. Movement is an important feature of the term 'surfer', since it is used frequently as a verb to describe 'being online'. And it partly confirms Lakoff and Johnson's claim that we accommodate abstract thoughts by describing them in physical terms. The most important lesson to be learned from surfing – even if the keyboard is not a surfboard – would be to 'let go'. In 'real life' surfing, one needs to move *with* and not *against* the waves. One usually has to avoid direct confrontation with the wave, but approach it tactically, i.e. to some extent become part of the wave. This *submission to the flow* (an undirected "riding the wave") is where the Internet surfing in the hypertext structures found its inspiration and potential identification, but which has since been disregarded in the use of the term.

³²⁵ A similar point was raised by Hunt & Doherty (1995) when they claim that thanks to cultural differences we can never hope to create a metaphor, which is "equally accessible (...) across cultures". Their suggestion is to keep questioning existing metaphors and to keep developing new ones.

This (partly) fits in with the point where the Benjamin and the Situationism framework meet, i.e. on the idea of letting oneself flow through the city. What is present in the surfer is the randomness – but what is missing is the system. There is no ulterior motive, no engagement – it is all about skill and flow. Thus something is lacking: a level of sociality. Surfers often appear in groups and live in camps, etc., but the actual act is a solitary one. They come together over certain issues (the right wave to surf); they suggest the community, but no real depth. Thus the emphasis of the web surfer is not on the interactive aspects of the web, but simply on the information side, but even here it is more about the overall impression (the flow) than an engagement. A real engagement with the content does not seem to be a priority. Nor is there much engagement with the technology and its actual possibilities. Surfing remains a reference to beach-culture, i.e. a non-technological environment. Not adding a prefix adds to this illusion. Nonetheless, the surfer is careless and lives a fun life without responsibilities – it does not become clear what kind of information he needs for that kind of life, but playfulness plays a role.

On a different level of abstraction, Bjørn Sørenssen argues that the surfer's success might also be explained through the reference to postmodern connotations such as “ephemeral, superficial and transitory” (Sørenssen, 1998). I agree on the level of attraction, of suggested meaning. Contingency and ephemerality are indeed important aspects of the web. This applies more to the related dreamscape than to the actual content of most surfer-related sites. Here, only the superficial remains as an attribute. Instead, the user of the surfer user type chooses an identity that is none. This is to say that one is relatively free to associate many different attributes. Today, even the fast change from one impression to the next, from one website to the next, is not necessarily implied anymore. The ‘signification emptiness’ is even necessary for the widespread use of term, for it to have become a synonym for ‘being online’. But the signifier is not entirely empty. Some last hint of the possibility to flee from everyday life is one morsel left to bring users together in the imaginary and it also presents the idea of an aesthetically pleasing, youthful, slightly flippant kind of engagement (although even the earlier suggested implication of a limited attention-span suggested in the term has disappeared). This is still the most important difference to most of the other user types – but especially the cyberflâneur. Here we have the gentleman in the city on the one hand and the sportsperson in nature on the other hand. We also have a slight generation conflict (older vs. young). Plus the cyberflâneur promotes its earlier history (often only partially,

but at least he wants to imply that he knows), while the surfer is very happy to suppress any knowledge of even the existence of an early history (this, however, is mostly an extension of the growth and commercialisation (which included a 'Californisation') of the sports that also implied a level of suppression of Polynesian history). Overall, the surfer is clearly not European. The implied imaginary, however, can also be adopted in Europe (while it does potentially not work for Africa – unless the term is embedded in the history and thus differently opened up).

What is most underestimated aspect of the term (and one that Polly mentioned in her reasons for choosing it) is the implied *endurance*. It is a transferral of energy from the wave to the body of the surfer. This is also the hope attached to the online surfer. Some knowledge gain or fun or other kind of experience. A certain stamina is asked for when entering the online sphere. And as every sport suggests, a certain learning curve can be expected if one sticks with the Internet for a while (see Ratzan, 1998). Immediate satisfaction is not guaranteed. Then, however, very little is guaranteed in the surfer apart from the freedom to jump freely between different webpages without the need to linger or engage. The surfer managed to hold on to at least one dream: the dream of individual freedom. This freedom is, however, limited by waiting for the right wave... or website.

PART III

13. Conclusion:

The Death of Technotopias

Like Gibson's bridge, the Internet was settled, colonised, inhabited, navigated, surfed, and linked, by the practices of its users. ... Early Net users were 'walking' a world into being, producing through their textual practices, new geographical spaces – albeit imaginary ones. (Bassett & Wilbert, 1999:185)

I will end as I began: with a reference to William Gibson's writings and the therein-implied cultural history. Gibson's *cyberspace* has been a crucial term in building the Internet into what it is today. As Caroline Bassett and Chris Wilbert point out, *textual references* such as Gibson's are central to the imaginary that constitutes cyberspace. These authors also point to the vital role that *users* have played and are playing in this process of creation. The 'walks' of the users have left their traces, and this thesis set out to map them. It, too, focussed on users and textual references.

To begin with, cyberspace was defined as the *cultural form* of the Internet, the new medium that came into public view in the mid-1990s. The Internet is a network of networks, which connects diverse computers all over the world. It enables these computers and their users to communicate and exchange information in manifold ways. In analysing this medium and its cultural form, the thesis placed itself in the fields of media and cultural studies and the newly emerging field of cybercultural studies. In the eventually chosen research methodology, however, the thesis differentiated itself from some of the more prominent strands within these fields. This methodology is the basis for the originality of the thesis as a whole, but it also became its main challenge. It turned out that the planned undertaking was more complex than anticipated. The thesis was therefore explorative in nature.

The nature of the complexity lay in the *object* as well as the *method of enquiry*. The methodological approach was entitled a *virtual archaeology*. An archaeological enquiry points to the piecing together of fragments in order to complete and create the overall picture. The objects for analysis were readily found textual fragments appealing to a wider (Internet) audience. I chose to engage with *conceptualisations of use* rather than actual use and users. These conceptualisations could be found in particular discourses, which were,

however, only emerging at the time. Additionally, these discourses were appearing both on the academic and the popular level, online as well as offline.

An important assumption in this thesis was that these discourses are a central aspect of the emergence of this (and any) new medium. One claim of these discourses in particular – i.e. that of the crucial role of the *user* in the formation of the new medium – was taken as a starting point for the analysis. This focus was chosen, because most discourses (and their analyses) appeared not to move beyond the continuous reassurance that users were core elements of the new formation.³²⁶ Actual explorations of users and user discourses did not seem to exist, unless they centred on individual users. The concentration on the individual experience, however, does not fulfil the same communicative function as that of generic, generalizable user conceptualisations. These serve as *communication tools*. They suggest patterns of use that can, at least in principle, apply to anyone who chooses to adopt the label. These constructions of use I have called *user types*. They are often initiated by individuals who thus give their own experience of ‘being online’ a name. But the vocabulary is constructed in a way that invites other users with similar uses (or at least similar expectations or imaginations of use) to adopt the same term. This vocabulary usually consists of metaphors.

The metaphoric nature of the expressions was outlined in the first two chapters of the thesis. As particular textual structures, metaphors establish a specific relationship between the current and an earlier framework, i.e. between old and new. The new sphere is explored in its newness via references to the already known:

We are contemplating the arising shape of a new world, a world that must, in a multitude of ways, begin, at least, as both an extension and a transcription of the world as we know it and have built it thus far. ...the varieties of cyberspace they imagine ... do not yet exist. Indeed, the very definition of cyberspace may well be in their hands (or yours, dear reader). (Benedikt, 1991:23)

How far this definition of cyberspace really depended on the users, as Michael Benedikt suggested, was one of the underlying questions addressed in this thesis. Other questions were asked about the shape of the arising new world and the different user-roles that were put forward in the diverse discourses.

³²⁶ Instead, cyberculture research focussed first on far-reaching claims without much actual engagement with the online sphere, to then move on to individual users and their experiences.

The thesis overall provided a typology of user types that describes the suggested user roles. The typology analyses each user type in terms of its history and use. The types were chosen to represent a whole range of origins, histories and underlying ideas. Some of the early cyberculture ideas about communities, identities and boundary-shifts, as presented in the third chapter of the thesis, equally characterise different user types.

13.1. User Type Summary

The shared underlying emphasis in the user types is *change*. Attitudes and reactions to change, concepts of change and diverse visions that accompany the idea of transformation and discovery all play a role. This principal topic, briefly summarised here, serves at the same time to recapitulate the user types as a whole and to emphasise the relationships between the user types, the gaps and emergent features as well as the new possibilities implied in user types. As an artificial and normative creation, the cyberflâneuse already picked up on some of these possibilities and features. She is in many ways the answer to the identified gaps. Key words in this context are engagement and environment.

The most well-known user type, the surfer, provides the idea of speed, endurance and a constant flow of information, but no need for prolonged engagements. Other users do not necessarily feature in the (web) surfer's world. Instead, the emphasis is on activities, maybe lifestyle, but not on communication or even information. The suggested environment is a vast, unknown sphere that one can only engage with on the surface. In defining the information sphere as the sea, the surfer widely ignores the Internet as a medium. The surfer is an empty signifier in that it does not guide the imagination. Instead, it allows multiple connections of meaning. This is one of the reasons for its success. Another reason is that the surfer offers the removal of 'being online' from an average, everyday context. Instead, it suggests fun. No commitment to medium, the environment or to other users is necessary.

The cybernaut, despite a touch of science fiction, does not promise any such thing as fun, although as a user type he is the closest relative of the surfer. Here, too, an engagement with others is missing and the information that is being engaged with is portrayed as another vast and abstract unknown sphere that needs to be conquered. But while the surfer's lifestyle still suggests some resistance to the norm, the cybernaut is the ideal (white, male) citizen. The

difference between the two is a difference between mainstream and subculture. The cybernaut, like the astronaut before him, is the adventurer without a visible personality. History suggests a certain willingness to be passively strapped into the seat of the massive machine, while being outwardly celebrated as a hero.

The surfer and the cybernaut both underline the difficulty of the question of *space* in user types. In their vastness and abstraction, outer space as well as the sea could both have provided an interesting parallel to cyberspace. The fact that in neither case the environment is made explicit in the user type descriptions, points to the need to reduce such abstraction to something that can be related to our everyday understandings. Additional structures, histories or reference points would have been needed. The surfer at least remains close to the shore and thus seems to provide the necessary reassurance. For this and other reasons, the cybernaut remains an empty signifier without a large uptake or any signs of innovative use.

The *netizen* is quite the opposite in terms of signification: it is filled with content. The available content, however, is highly prescriptive and thus restricts potential users too much. The netizen simply has too much of what the cybernaut lacks. Instead, the netizen states exactly what any netizen has to do: to be an active participant in online politics. The definition of the netizen includes limited and outdated citizenship notions, although these are only implicit, not made explicit. Like the citizen, the netizen is too general and does not address the individual. Neither does the netizen explore the medium as such or suggest uses beyond the pre-given e-democracy framework. The netizen stands out in this selection of user types. There is no major similarity with any of the others. The netizen differs already through the very active promotion by one person in particular, without whom the concept would not exist in its current form. Nonetheless, the netizen remains highly impersonal, although other users are in principle clearly recognised as important for cyberspace and netizenship. The other users, however, are also seen in their role as abstract netizens only and not as individuals. There is no explicit space in the netizen.

The *cyberpunk* offers much more individualised politics and thus more scope for identity-creation. He is a fighter against the existing system, because this system oppresses him. He is a loner in the dystopian science fictional city of the near-future. The environment is crucial in this user type. As the most science fictional user type apart from the cybernaut, the cyberpunk is the only one that shows traces of the technology-body boundary shift. The cyberpunk

offers social criticism of a potential future by encouraging everyone to use the technologies, but also to critically engage with them. This user type offers diverse enough content to seemingly allow both identity-creation and variance, but it is too science fictional and potentially too 'boy-ish' for a broader uptake.

The *webgrrl* is the closest relative of the cyberpunk, both in terms of the appearance and the subcultural (music) roots. The resistance to existing systems is also shared. These two user types pursue the most radical changes, although both are also, in different ways, corrupted by consumerism. In the *webgrrl*, this takes place on the original 'webgrrl.com' site, which has a functional orientation (i.e. to advise women in new media businesses), asks for a membership fee and loses sight of earlier aims. In the cyberpunk, the corruption takes place on the level of the literary figure, which sells its body in order to be able to buy more technology implants. While the cyberpunk resists the system as such, the *webgrrl*, at least in her more radical version, aims for the fulfilment of certain feminist ideas. In both, bodies plays a role. Most of the *webgrrl* webpages actually explain the concept of the *webgrrl* and often refer to similar webpages, thus the concept is consciously used as a self-description. The major difference to the cyberpunk is the *webgrrl*'s lack of environment. Instead, her emphasis is on encounters with others and on the offline world.

Uncommon amongst the user types seems to be a *combination* of explicit environment and emphasis of encounters with other users. Only the *cyberflâneuse* is an exception here. She has taken over the idea of the city as the reference point for imaginations of the web sphere from the *cyberflâneur*. The city is a dynamic and adaptable concept, which provides the idea of a solid structure that nonetheless is changing and changeable and constantly evolving. It implies a history, but equally allows newness. It suggests boundaries, although it can never be contained. The city implies multiple routines and manifold movements. It combines order and randomness. It helps to understand cyberspace in its specificity as a medium and thus also in its newness. Therefore the movement implied in cyberflânerie is crucial.³²⁷ The movement is in the dealings with the fluidity and structure of the information sphere. The *cyberflâneuse* in her role as overcoming earlier shortcomings, combines the concrete space – the city – with the emphasis on relationships. These relationships can, but do not have to extend to the offline world. The

³²⁷ Next to the surfer, *cyberflâneur* and *cyberflâneuse* are the only other figures which have a verb attached – albeit only in German and French. This might partly explain why the figure has received considerable attention in the German-speaking online context.

combination of environment and encounter stresses the role of the new technology as a communication tool, but also stresses the possibility for new meanings, new connections. Both are seen to be crucial for our understanding of the web.

The cyberflâneuse is the only user type that has been *invented*. The creation took place to show that – and how – such development can take place. As such, the cyberflâneuse is both an extension of and an opposition to the other here presented user types. This concept is more normative than any of the others, simply because it has not moved far beyond the thesis. The overall metaphoric framework is fitting in the cyberflâneuse, since she offers a new perspective on the existing world, but not a radical break therewith. She does not offer the ultimate solution to the question of output in cyberflânerie, which asks whether one needs to put forward a creative output (in the form of websites, articles, etc.), but she offers a hint that this is not irrelevant. Some of the complexity and ambiguity of the flâneur and also of Benjamin's approach are consciously lost in this figure.

The cyberflâneur is also embedded in the city. He, too, needs the others. Especially the particular combination of an assumed better understanding of the surroundings and an outward distance to the environment is noticeable in the (cyber)flâneur portrayals. The cyberflâneur is described as in control. His attitude is portrayed as 'knowing better'. Underneath, the cyberflâneur needs other users in order to see his own reflection. Often his apparent disinterest is only the façade that hides a more complex relationship to the environment. This is not always acknowledged in the descriptions of the figure.

In the here presented interpretation the cyberflâneur is instead seen to represent *utopian dialectics*: the ambivalence in the dealings with the radically new. As an expression of ultimate indeterminacy and ambiguity, plus given its capacity to elicit a particular structural relationship to and of the web, the cyberflâneur is both problematic and highly suggestive. Especially the suggestive aspects, however, have not been fully developed in current versions of the figure. The cyberflâneur user type (as presented in most texts) is more limited than the figure could be.³²⁸ This limitation does not stem from a lack of historical references, but from a lack of recognition and acknowledgement of

³²⁸ While this applies to most user types, it is more disturbing here, as there has actually been quite an extensive engagement with the figure.

the ambiguity of this figure.³²⁹

13.1.1. User Types: An Outlook

In general, the outcome of the analyses of the user types do not necessarily surprise. The roles suggested in the vocabulary are not necessarily fulfilled. Although the analyses reveal a depth of meaning that is not immediately visible, most uses do not offer much that is actually new. The most surprising outcome then is exactly in this lack of radical content. While all user types deal with or promote change, most do not push the boundaries very far. They thus contradict many of the early hopes for cyberspace and its uses – and especially of their own hopes expressed in the terms.

What I have mapped is the *process of normalisation* of a new medium. User types are here exemplary for the medium overall. They show both the longing for a different world created through new technologies, but also the knowledge of the already implied disappointment of this longing. This utopian idea is not specific to this new technology. In fact, any new technology usually carries a utopian moment in the beginning of its application. However, every utopian moment also carries something specific concerning the technology in question and concerning the timing of its inception. In the case of the user types, the specificity is twofold: on the one hand it features in the utopian moments implied in user types overall and on the other hand the specificity is implied in Benjamin and cyberflânerie.

Overall, the user types suggest longings that are not entirely new: the flight from the existing everyday life; the longing for an environment more suitable for women; the idea of the discovery of spaces elsewhere; the building of a more democratic world; the ability to enhance one's body; etc. The primary change is in the extent of the desired changes. The user types show that to think radically new about identities and social relations, to think about new ways of connecting, is at least very difficult. Thus also the use of metaphors: these textual fragments reassure, they hold on the old at least to some extent. Most of these terms suggest a more gradual approach to change – all apart from the Benjamin-inspired ones.

³²⁹ The most illuminating exploration of the cyberflâneur concept was actually the earliest: that of Idensen and Krohn. These authors used the concept to creatively think through the web as a (textual) structure and at the same time to experiment with their own textual structure.

Cyberflânerie can be seen to represent ideas that are more specific to the medium as such and thus reach further in their utopian longing. The specific utopian elements are the textual structures implied in Benjamin and cyberflânerie and their consequences for meaning creation. The idea of the virtual city partly supports new encounters. The structure underlines that indeed new levels and versions of connectivity are possible in this medium. This can lead to new forms of communication. The underlying utopia is a very broad social utopia, in which structures and relationships overall are meant to change. It is an attempt at thinking in a structured, but non-linear way. It is – at least in the cyberflâneuse – an attempt at stressing the engagement with environment and users alike.

13.2. The Benjamin Framework

The imaginary loomed large in the Benjamin framework that provided the theoretical-methodological underpinning of the thesis. An important aspect of the in-depth analysis is the way Benjamin used montage and juxtapositions to let the objects of analysis speak in new ways. Benjamin's textual structures in their resemblance of the hypertext world of the web has been crucial in understanding both the (cyber)flâneur and the potential relevance of the *Arcades Project* for grasping the web as a new medium. This structure in Benjamin has been described as a new literary form.³³⁰ It works via a re-combination of textual fragments, which has consequences for the creation of meaning. Benjamin's is a physiognomic analysis, where the whole is derived from the detail. His framework implies an analysis of everyday objects and lets these *speak for themselves*. The emphasis is on the banal. This is related to something larger than itself and thereby implies the *dreamscape*, the social utopia. Benjamin was interested in the interconnections (the 'hyperlinks') between parts of architecture, literature, and popular and other histories. The interconnections were revealed through the re-combination of snippets from all of them, ordered according to certain principles and topics. Benjamin's approach is unusual, because it is an evocative approach. This achievement is based on the fragmentary structure of his project as well as his unusual ordering system. The recombination and re-ordering of these pieces (plus the

³³⁰ Benjamin himself referred to Baudelaire and described his version of flânerie as the *poetics of the new*.

addition of comments of his own) creates new meanings. The analysis achieves depth via the re-arrangement of surface expressions, via the ordering system. The underlying desires and dreams are read through the juxtaposition of the objects.

The here applied research principle has been inspired by the fragmented, but systematic manner of Benjamin's work. Benjamin's – at times bizarre – classification method could in no way be copied in a project like this. Rather, the inspiration was on a meta-level, i.e. in terms of the overall approach to the objects of research. The here analysed user types are nothing like Benjamin's fragments, but they are also banal snippets of something looming larger than itself. And they are textual fragments that create utopian ideas and relate everyday experiences at the same time. User types express a particular utopian moment in early cyberspace history. Thus their analysis and re-combination reveals something that would otherwise remain at least partly hidden. One of the aspects revealed through this analysis is the structure that makes up the web. An interpretation of the web as a similar structure as that of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* has consequences for our understanding of the web and our discourses about it.³³¹

The first aspect of this understanding is the acceptance of the infinity of the possible interconnections, coupled with a recognition of the users' involvement in making the connections and creating the meanings. The user's agency is part of a dialectical relationship between the disorder that looms large underneath it all and the attempt to keep the chaos at bay. Another expression of the order-disorder tension is the city-framework. As a crucial space for human encounters, it provides a structure with which to think and multiple interconnections.³³² It combines movement and stability in ways that resemble the web.

All this has been useful in trying to understand the specificity of the new medium – and in understanding its uses and its imaginaries. The specificity, I claim, is exactly in its structure and in the consequences this structure has on our reading of its content. Benjamin offers order amidst chaos. Particularly in

³³¹ Some of these structural points also relate to the metaphor structure of the user types in question. The metaphors, similar to hypertext, offer re-connection possibilities and structure. It is a similar shift of emphasis – albeit with less potential for surprise – as in hypertext. The structure is also both an extension of the existing and the opening up of something new.

³³² Metaphor, too, is an expression of the tension between the already familiar and the unknown, between the threat and the security. User types in principle all negotiate between these poles. Their individual analyses, however, have shown that not all user types actually offer a way to deal with this tension.

trying to not let the text cover up the complexity of the city, his project is illuminating. The same applies to the flâneur within the project. The figure underlines that such structures need immersion and some distance at the same time. While the extent of their distance is problematic in both flâneur and cyberflâneur, an attempt has been made to reconcile distance and involvement in the artificial creation of the cyberflâneuse.

Despite such inspirational power, much of the Benjamin framework – and thus also of the web-structures – has remained rather abstract. Benjamin's work itself, although very fascinating and illuminating, is at times impenetrable for an outsider. To re-apply his arrangements to the new technologies – even if just on a meta-level or as a research principle – is problematic. And the cyberflâneur does not always work too well as a communication tool in practice (which can be seen in the dominance of monologues rather than dialogues about this figure). The theoretical gain then has been greater than the practical application of the concepts developed in this thesis. Nonetheless, the Benjamin inspiration was illuminative. His method of ordering material in order to discover some less obvious meanings, remains crucial. A possible extension of this project would now be to arrange the researched material itself in a more 'Benjaminian' matter, i.e. to be more radical in terms of the use of his approach.

The same fascination coupled with a problem of abstraction applied to the use of the situationist framework. The user types were meant to be found according to what I labelled *situationist principles*. These principles were also developed for their appropriateness in relation to the fluid nature of the new medium. The situationist principles refer primarily to the *dérive*. This implies an approach to the information sphere that is *random* and *systematic* at the same time. It is an extension of flânerie, but it emphasises the structural elements of city-encounters more clearly than the flânerie concept does. The situationist principles suggest a movement and search through the information sphere that is based on a randomness-system approach. Certain pre-established criteria provide the system or structure. This can be a specific number of hyperlinks that should be followed or certain thematic criteria. The later selection concentrates on the subjects and objects that come one's way. Here, no selection criteria are applied. This is the randomness factor. The situationist system is not closed – it allows changes and surprises and thereby tries to adapt to the flow of the information sphere. The situationist principles represent another version of

holding on to the *ephemeral* without destroying it. They encourage to try out new search principles online and not to rely on the obvious.

Both Situationism and Benjamin – albeit in rather different ways – engaged with capitalism and consumer societies. Both approaches also developed ideas to creatively protest against certain tendencies. The *dérive* is one such protest, *flânerie* another. But the original (male) *flâneur* was potentially overwhelmed by the extent and the form of consumerism that came about in the second half of the nineteenth century. In Benjamin's description, the *flâneur*'s non-involvement was compromised when he ended up carrying commodification on his body. He, who had always been so ambivalent about commodification, became a commodity himself: a walking advertising board. References to this loss of ambivalence are embedded, however, in an equally ambivalent understanding of consumption in Benjamin overall.

The *Arcades Project*, in its dialectical imagery, points to both the oppression and the liberation that the emerging consumerism entailed (see Rollason, 2002). The oppression is in the ideology of consumption, while the idea of liberation is based on a utopia of plenty. This utopian dialectic underlines that the masses shared not only the exploitation, but also the illusions of the social utopia, which hoped for the development of a new world (or at least for the temporary transgression of the existing). Benjamin saw in these temporary transitions – profane illuminations – the possibility to lift the veil, to reveal what was underneath the dreamscape.³³³ He believed that recognition of the illusion was possible for the individual. His literary style was meant as an aid in this process of discovery. Thus Benjamin's writings tried to acknowledge the fascination that drew the consumers in while taking consumption apart at the same time.

13.3. The Commercial Side of the Web

Warnings concerning the rise of consumerism online have been less differentiated than Benjamin's approach. Instead, the possible development of the web into a commercial enterprise has been described as a great threat – especially to early cyberculture. In the canonical story, the Internet was portrayed as a medium that had been primarily shaped by its users, who again

³³³ Featherstone traces Benjamin's understanding of the arcades as the dreamworlds to notions of the carnivalesque. This is based on the turn in production to excess, to surplus rather than scarcity (Featherstone, 1991:21-24).

had managed to turn the pre-given military purpose into something fundamentally different (such as virtual communities of interest, playful versions of new democracies, etc.). The gift economy was added to this story as the underlying economic principle of the web. The gift economy is built on the idea of a free exchange of information. It assumes that everyone contributes whatever they can give (in terms of their expertise or skills) and will in return profit from other users' expertise (either in a direct or a long-term exchange). Commercialisation is obviously seen as a threat to this system, since the underlying economic principle – and many related attitudes – fundamentally differs.

But commercialisation is also simply an expression of the normalisation and routinization of cyberspace and cyberculture. As soon as a wider audience can be reached, most media become interesting for commercial enterprises – both as products and as platforms for diverse promotions. The same is currently happening with the web. Despite the late-90s disappointment about the crash of the new economy, the web has clearly seen a rise in commercial applications in recent years. The crash had killed the original hype around e-commerce and slowed down the already problematic uptake. Since then, however, the numbers of commercial interactions and of consumers engaging in some form of commercial engagement online has risen continuously. Not all of it actually uses the possibilities of the medium.

On many shopping sites, neither the practices nor the audiences for these services differ substantially from well-rehearsed patterns. The same applies to portals. These are sites that offer a whole range of different links and services.³³⁴ Shopping portals in particular copy the shopping mall principle: one can choose brands, product ranges or particular shops or chains, all from within one portal site. The hyperlinked site then leads to offers on other websites. Even the 'added values' that a normal shopping mall offered in comparison to a high street shopping experience are replicated online. Instead of post-offices or ice-rinks, downloads and games are on offer (Carter, 2003:27).

Other online sites, however, go even further and explore new avenues for consumption online. Here the structures that have been described as specific to the medium, come to play. Peer-to-peer based commercial websites or website elements, for example, offer in principle new relations between consumers,

³³⁴ For example www.shopping24.ch (accessed 06/07/03). The surfer-site, too, was an example of a simple portal-site.

objects, seller and especially other consumers (Carter, 2003:24). The emphasis is on connectivity. Personalisation or direct cont(r)acts between consumers are leading the way. Mechanisms such as 'other customers who bought this ... also bought the following...' try to attract further consumption. Suggested is the belonging to a virtual peer-group (a 'taste-community' based on 'personality types' derived from consumption patterns). Other sites are based on direct interactions between consumers: the site only offers the platform and certain rules for interaction. Virtual communities of a new kind are suggested here.

Rather than online shopping portals, this stress on personalisation and connectivity are the actual points of comparison for cyberflânerie. Although portals are the obvious parallel to the department stores that offered liberating experiences to some 19th century women, they offer no medium-specific newness. Instead, the newness lies exactly in the peer-to-peer exchanges. They, in fact, return to the gift economy idea. The 'taste-communities' and similar such services are the perfect backdrop for online flânerie, because they do not negate the utopian dialectics. They clearly imply a social utopia, even if they are not concerned about a way to uncover the dreamscape. Last, but not least, the encounters with others – crucial at least to the (cyber)flâneuse conception – seem to go amiss in shopping portals, but are core to peer-to-peer exchanges.

These claims are not meant to be used to deny that the overall trend to commercialisation (rather than the shopping portals in particular) poses a problem to user types in general. This general trend, as much as it might be an expression of normalisation on the one hand and contain new elements on the other hand, overall tends to suppress the many forms of the imaginary.

This implies at least a partial answer to the question of the role of the users in the definition of cyberspace. I want to hold on to the claim that these discourses shape the cultural form of the emerging medium, but there are many elements that shape both the Internet and cyberspace – and the discourses are just one part. Trends such as commercialisation, for example, cannot be fundamentally changed by individual users. And the user types originate usually in individual user's ideas about 'being online'. This also underlines that the here presented user types have not entirely fulfilled their role as communication tools. They often remain too much on the individual level, while they should initiate communication about uses as such – and therefore about the shape of the technological utopia.

13.4. Technotopia?

...here are many confusions haunting cyberspace. Primarily the confusions can be located at the level of metaphors which are invoked to characterise the nature of cyberspace. (McBeath and Webb, 1997:249)

These metaphoric ghosts are dangerous. Any analyst might fall into the trap of reiterating them and thus continuing the confusion. It is, however, difficult to think cyberspace otherwise. The metaphors are crucial at opening up a new space to think. They juxtapose the existing and the not yet quite existing and thus offer the chance for a change of direction. But often enough the shift that is offered is not taken up and not even recognised. Instead, the online sphere, even when it tries to formulate a future, time and again talks the tongues of the past (Lockard, 2000:180). To radically think the future, one needs to partly let go of this past. Pressing the future into a canonical story imposes similar limitations. Cyberspace discourses, at least of the early years, were often caught in the trap of either reiterating these tongues of the past or articulating a *techno-utopian futurism* in which the progressive gets caught up in the reactionary (Johnson in Dovey, 1996). These 'technotopian' versions of futurism (also present in cyberpunk) totally ignore the past (Ross, 1991:145). This is one step too far in the other direction.

Thus there is scope for more awareness: the more both users and Internet developers are aware of the vocabulary-cyberspace connections, the more they could find suitable metaphors for appropriating the information sphere. The more users develop their own metaphors, the more space for pushing the boundaries of cyberspace in the direction of the users' ideas and desires would grow. There is more scope for metaphors overall and for the different uses of metaphors. In some sense, I ask for a return to Aristotle: to see metaphors in their role as extraordinary expressions that serve to illuminate new aspects. In their actual integration into the everyday vocabulary, metaphors tend to be overlooked after a while. They become dead metaphors (and thus underline the conceptual approach to metaphor). The here presented metaphors are exactly on this way to be forgotten. There might thus be a need to draw more attention to them, since these metaphors help to understand – and shape – the new. It is the wrong moment in Internet history to let user types fade into oblivion.

In this thesis, I presented a typology of user types. Similar to the physiologies, the small pamphlets describing characters that one could meet in the city of the

19th century, this typology tries to hold in place something that is in principle in flux. Just as the physiologies had a reassuring function, telling the citizens of the emerging cities that they could easily recognise types of people in their ever-growing and fluid environments, the user types are there to enable communication about Internet use. User types are used to construct uses and users. These constructions, I claim, are crucial for the development of the web overall, since they serve as tools to communicate about the experience of the web. They reveal something of both the real and imaginary character of cyberspace. As such they work in part to normalise this experience as ordinary, while expressing, however slightly, the hopes and aspirations of an imagined, utopian possibility. The cyberflâneur (and its imagined female equivalent) most poignantly expresses this tension between the actual and the possible. The flâneur in the 19th century is now thought of as a crucial metaphoric expression of the encounter with modernity, the shock of the new. At the end of the 20th century the encounter with the new virtual world of cyberspace has already gone through, in less than a decade, the transition from the new and unknown to the routine and everyday. In that time the moment of the cyberflâneur has come and gone. It is a transitional figure, which serves to reveal that moment when a new technology passes from its initial restricted application to widespread social uptake and cultural normalisation. That has been the larger concern of thesis for which the particular metaphor of the cyberflâneur has served both as an exemplary user type and as a methodological inspiration and clue. Maybe the cyberflâneuse, more comfortable in a commercial environment, represents the first of the next generation user types.

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