

CHAPTER FOUR: STROKING KEYS

Thus far, I have analyzed popular, legal, literary and animated narratives that transform while purporting to translate high-speed telecommunications networks. Focused on containing and explaining the online subject, they deploy sexuality as a means to figure online contact. By analyzing these narratives, I have highlighted the fact that second-hand narratives about cyberspace play a more important role in its popularity and its place within the popular imaginary than first-hand experience or accounts.¹ As Newt Gingrich—arguing for the propagation of cyberspace propaganda as a means to renew America—states, the task of “reintegrat[ing] the scientific with the popular and reconnect[ing] the future to the present . . . is less a job for scientists, engineers, bureaucrats, and administrators and more a job for novelists, moviemakers, popularizers, and politicians” (190). This is not simply because, as I stated in Chapter Two, the Internet has been largely virtual, but also because one cannot directly “experience” cyberspace. These narratives make online experience legible by inaugurating and initiating “users.” Further, “racy” narratives about cybersex, about technologies more interactive and “real-time” than email and webpages (such as chat rooms and MUDs)

¹ Although I agree with David Hakken that the “Computer Revolution” has been largely rhetorical, I disagree with his belief that, in order to reveal the “truth” about cyberspace, one needs to evaluate the “real” status of computing. Although cyberspace ethnographies are extremely important, the impact of cyberspace cannot be reduced to “what people really do,” if such a thing were possible. This reduction overlooks the importance of cyberspace in the popular imaginary, and would be analogous to arguing that, in order to understand the impact of the colonies on empire, one must examine only colonial life.

play a significant role in theoretical, legal, and commercial discussions of the Internet, even though most people do not participate in such fora.

Reconnecting the future with the present, however, is a fundamentally conservative gesture. Gingrich misses the point when he uses this phrase to inspire novelists, moviemakers, popularizers, and politicians to produce sunny narratives about future technological utopias (that is, if he truly wants to open the future). Firstly, this connection is never a reconnection, since, by definition, the future is never connected to the present (there must be a gap between present and future in order for the present and future to exist as such).² Secondly, this attempt at connection seeks to seal the future: as I argue in the introduction, such a connection seeks to reduce the future to “you will.” Indeed, the narratives about the Internet studied thus far “reconnect the past with the future” by closing future technologies, by rendering the Internet into a looking glass, or into a magic ball, which tells us what we’ll want next.³ The reflective, desiring subject focuses these narratives. Concentrating on the glare of publicity enabled by these technologies, they focus on the reflection of the self.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which fiber optic networks exceed self-reflection. Focusing on cyberspace confessions that highlight real-time communications

² For Gingrich, reconnection means a return to the sunny science fiction of his boyhood. Gingrich’s idea of reconnection also wavers between admonishing gloomy writers and administrators for blinding the public to the “reality” of the future already guaranteed by science, and admonishing them for not properly inspiring scientists to build sunny futures.

³ *Newsweek*’s special issue describing new technologies, called *What You’ll Want Next* reveals the high-paced futures-focused economy of desire that surrounds technology. The desire for technology is insatiable and hysterical—no one technology can satiate the user. Rather, objects are substituted at break-neck speed.

and on psychoanalytic investigations of identification and sexuality, I argue that fiber optic networks enable symbolic as well as imaginary identification. Moreover, fiber optics networks as symbolic matrices re-map humanity and human interactions. They immerse users in dangerous liaisons that threaten to contaminate the self with the other: they inaugurate relations between users that threaten inter-*subjectivity*. Specifically, cyber-sex, like masochism, re-maps pleasure and sexuality in such a manner that makes the body unfindable to disciplinary power. At the same time, it does so by immersing the body in a completely findable disciplinary system. Cybersex also enables a powerful disidentification since “real-time” stands as a boundary between “casual” and “addicted” or “perverse” users, especially since “real-time” software programs such as video-chat are pioneered and popularized by the porn industry. So, even if most everyday uses of cyberspace are banal, the specter of real-time, and most particularly real-time sex, makes cyberspace sexy and dangerous—and gives its “casual” users a sense of ironic distance from cyberspace hype.

SMOKE AND MIRRORS?

Not surprisingly, the theoretical concept most useful for understanding the fiber optic narratives studied thus far is the Lacanian mirror stage. Prior to the mirror stage, the child imagines himself as forming a closed circuit with his mother.⁴ Once the infant,

⁴ According to Elizabeth Grosz, “the child forms a syncretic unity with the mother, and cannot distinguish between itself and its environment. It has no awareness of its own corporeal boundaries. It is *ubiquitous*, with no separation between itself and ‘objects,’ for it forms a ‘primal unity’ with its objects. It cannot recognize the absence of the mother (or breast)” (34).

“still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence,” jubilantly identifies with its mirror image, it enters into the imaginary, into the world of images and demand as opposed to nature and need. This stage is “*an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*” (Lacan 3). The assumption of this *imago*—a mirage that projects its later maturation and offers it a vision of future totality—introduces the fiction of the fragmented body, which simultaneously connects and constructs the past/present/future through the notion of lack.⁵ The mirror stage also prepares the child for its entry into the symbolic by “situat[ing] the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone” (Lacan 3). Thus, although the child will eventually enter into a relation based on *exchange* and determined by the social, the child in the mirror stage is in a “primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject” (3). The restoration language will offer the child will also be based on lack or void. For, in order for the *I* to function as a subject, as a shifter, it must remain empty. Through the mechanism of identification, the *I* is both constituted and emptied.⁶

⁵ According to Grosz:

From this time on, lack, gap, splitting will be its mode of being. It will attempt to fill its (impossible, unfillable) lack. Its recognition of lack signals an ontological rift with nature or the Real. This gap will propel it into seeking an identificatory image of its own stability and permanence (the imaginary), and eventually language (the symbolic) by which it hopes to fill the lack. The child loses the ‘pure plenitude’ of the Real and is now constituted within the imaginary (i.e. the order of images, representations, doubles, and others) in its specular identification. (35)

⁶ For more on this see Žižek’s *The Plague of Fantasies*, 140-3.

If the “previous” body seems physically fragmented, the self after the mirror stage develops as fragmented, since, through the mechanism of *identification*—the mechanism by which one becomes haunted by phantoms (the first phantom being the inverted projection of the child itself), the *I* comes to contain multitudes.

Jane Gallop calls the mirror stage “another version of the tragedy of Adam and Eve”:

The infant is “decisively projected” out of this joy [of identifying with its *imago*] into the anxious defensiveness of “history,” much as Adam and Eve are expelled from paradise into the world. Just as man and woman are already created but do not enter the human condition until expelled from Eden, so the child, although already born, does not become a self until the mirror stage. Both cases are two-part birth processes: once born into “nature,” the second time into “history.” When Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge, they anticipate mastery. But what they actually gain is a horrified recognition of their nakedness. This resembles the movement by which the infant, having assumed by anticipation a totalized, mastered body, then retroactively perceives his inadequacy (his “nakedness”). (85)

Theoretically, then, narratives of the Internet as mirror stage that I have analyzed in the previous three chapters mark the emergence of a new *I*, albeit one not yet able to communicate with others. That is, narratives that seek to close, or more precisely freeze, the possibilities of the Internet as a medium of disruptive contact, also enable the third birth of the “human”—first into nature, the second time into history, and the third time into networks.⁷ Hence the importance of these ancillary narratives about cyberspace:

⁷ I deliberately hold onto the notion human, as opposed to cyborg and post-human, for several reasons: one, the focus on cyborgs and prostheses emphasize the self at the cost of the other—prostheses invariably mean the extension of man; two, I want to emphasize the relationship between the pre- and post- Internet human. Rather than inaugurating a post-human, technology seems to re-define our “previous” state as less

rather than being mere hype, they *make* high-speed telecommunications networks cyberspace.

These narratives also retroactively construct the un-networked body as inadequate, as lacking. The difference between pessimistic and optimistic narratives about the Internet would seem to depend on which previous body is indexed. Pessimistic narratives concentrate on innocence lost after networks: in the *Time* article featured in Chapter One, Mary Veed refuses her children access to the Internet, even though this has become something that the children now believe they *need* in order to thrive. Post-Internet, these children are naked without it; however, some mothers believe it is better for their children to be nudists than to be embraced by technology. Optimistic narratives expose the ways in which the Internet can re-integrate, and re-clothe, the body fragmented by its entry into the social: MCI's *Only Words* commercial offers wholeness to those minorities who exist as flesh in real life, but whose inadequacies could not be addressed before the integrative powers of the Internet. Either way, the new subject is haunted by phantoms of cyberspace and offered an alienating armor. Cyberspace as mirror stage inaugurates a new recognition and a new alienation.

The mirror stage is a not retro-active event that is mapped onto the experience of high-speed telecommunications networks. Rather, it constitutes high-speed telecommunications networks as cyberspace or more properly as *virtual reality*. It is only through this mechanism of identification that the virtue of reality can be mirrored by computer networks in particular and by computer interfaces in general. There is no way

than human. That is, through the mirror of the Internet, the human continues its expansion to contain multitudes.

to experience computer networks now without software programs that simulate reality and there is no way period to access directly the bits that “really” constitute programs and communications. Software as ideology interpellates us as its users, and as *users*, distancing ourselves from the “addicted” user does not defy the ideology of virtual technologies.⁸ Rather, as Žižek has argued repeatedly in all his publications to date, ideology works through disidentification: the distance between our conceptions of ourselves and our conception of *the user*—our disidentification—is precisely what supports virtual ideology. Because we think we are not that (*addicted, jacked-in, nerd, otaku*), we imagine a safe distance between ourselves and our software that, in the end, supports virtual technologies more effectively than if we identified as its *users* (i.e., we buy the software, while bemoaning Microsoft’s monopoly and its cheesy advertisements; we consider the hype about the WWW ridiculous, but we nonetheless surf the web).

The current primacy of the Internet as mirror, however, does not mean that we must resign ourselves to being frozen the moment *before* contact with others. Rather, we must take the promise of the window seriously and see what comes through the looking glass. In other words, we should take into consideration all the possible configurations of fiber optics, rather than freeze in the glare of publicity or dismiss the computer screen as only narcissistic. The key is not to bemoan the loss of humanity inaugurated by

⁸ In many ways, software is ideology par excellence. There is no way of accessing digital reality without software, and most users are not aware of the ways in which software programs restrict their experiences through the functions and choices they offer. Moreover, software is always changing and being updated—like successful ideology, it never rests. Lastly, the choice of operating system software—Windows, Mac O/S or UNIX—is constructed as a momentous decision that subsequently defines the use.

networks, nor to celebrate networks as enabling the emancipation of the mind from the body, but rather to investigate the ways in which networks re-map the human and human-to-human connection. The point is not that now the body is lost, but rather that the body as human body was always constituted by identifications that lay outside the “natural.”⁹ The point is to interrogate this new wired *imago*.

LOOK WHO’S TALKING NOW

So, what *comes* after the mirror stage? Does jacking-in continue the psychoanalytic drama? Will the jacked-in *I* be objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and will language restore to it, in the universal, its function as subject? To begin answering these questions, I read two cyberspace confessions—Cleo Odzer’s *Virtual Spaces: Sex and the Cyber Citizen* and Julian Dibell’s *my tiny life: crime and passion in a virtual world*—alongside Paul Virilio’s analysis of cyberspace in *Open Sky* and Slavoj Zizek’s in *The Plague of Fantasies*. These texts represent four poles in debates over cyberspace and cybersex. Odzer’s text portrays cybersex as a means for sexual liberation and self-therapy; Virilio’s portrays cybersex as a new form of AIDS: an information-based disease that effectively destroys love and sex. Zizek, opposing Virilio’s notion of cybersex as masturbatory, argues that cyberspace causes the Other to become unbearably close—it suspends the Other in the Real, instead of allowing it to become a bearable

⁹ By arguing for the necessity of taking the window of cyberspace seriously, I am disagreeing with those such as Mark Lajoie who argue that the best way to resist the virtual screen is by focussing on the “real” window (Lajoie 168).

representation. Dibell examines cyberspace as a medium that enables meaningful and pseudonymical relations between persons (epitomized by cybersex). These four views cover the bases of analyses of cyberspace and enable us to develop a theory of the “game” of cybersex.

Cyberspace confessions, written by authors who have made—or who claim to have made—some long-term commitment to living online, reveal intimate details of the life on the other side of the screen.¹⁰ Through the relay of intimate (cybersexual) secrets, these confessions profess faith in cyberspace: they seek to establish cyberspace as a “true” world and to convert the reader to a user. As Paul de Man argues:

to confess is to overcome guilt and shame in the name of truth; it is an epistemological use of language in which ethical values of good and evil are superseded by values of truth and falsehood, one of the implications being that vices such as concupiscence, envy, greed, and the like are vices primarily because they compel one to lie. By stating things as they are, the economy of ethical balance is restored and redemption can start in the clarified atmosphere of a truth that does not hesitate to reveal the crime in all its horror. (279)

Through their revelations, these confessions supercede “real” ethical values in order to establish a new virtual economy of ethical balance—a new virtual economy in which passion, as Dibell’s subtitle alludes, substitutes for punishment.¹¹ The confession, then,

¹⁰ Mark Dery calls this form the “cyberspace memoir.” But memoir does not account for the ways in which these texts act as professions of faith in cyberspace. Further, they offer numerous intimate details that belie the traditional formality of a memoir, and engage the reader in an often claustrophobic relation between confessor and confessee. Lastly, they participate in the general mode of sexual confession outlined by Foucault in *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*.

¹¹ Although I expand on the importance of passion later in this chapter, I want to mark its link to punishment. Etymologically, passion is derived from *passium* (L. suffering), but gained popularity (along with its derivatives such as passionate) during the Middle Ages, when it became synonymous with Christ’s

is an ideal narrative form for cyberspace, since the very overcoming of shame constitutive of confession is also constitutive of cyberspace. Cyberspace is a realm in which shameful acts, such as cybersex, take place, but seemingly without the stigma of shame and without punishment as we now understand the term.

These authors simultaneously reveal, excuse, and establish themselves through their confession, as well as establish the referentiality and reality of cyberspace. They establish cyberspace as extraverbal since a confession “includes an extraverbal moment: even if we confess that we *said* something (as opposed to *did*), the verification of this verbal event, the decision about the truth or falsehood of its occurrence, is not verbal but factual” (de Man 281). The privileged extraverbal event—whose reference is also constituted by this confession—is cybersex. That is, the existence of this thing called cybersex (which is usually figured as the most extreme form of social contact enabled by high speed telecommunications networks) both grounds and is grounded by the cyberspace confession. Cyber community in general and cybersex in particular establish the procreativity of virtual life: they establish as extraverbal—as factual—an “existence” that can only be verbal, or more precisely written. Thus, through a textual medium—through words—these writers argue for the referentiality if not the reality of the textual universe of cyberspace. Through words, they seek to establish cyberspace as a symbolic matrix—as a societal world established in and through language—that restores the universal and inaugurates the online subject.

or a martyr’s suffering. The move from punishment to passion, then, marks a movement towards a self-willed pain, which is often an unjust punishment that gains significance because of its injustice.

This view of cybersex as passionate, as constitutive of community—as enabling “real” connection as opposed to imaginary identification with the inverted and projected self—argues against the more popular and conservative view of cybersex as a form of alienating auto-eroticism. Most forcefully, Paul Virilio, in *Open Sky*, argues that cybersex is the perverse preference of the virtual over the real:

To prefer the virtual being—at some remove—to the real being—close-up is to take the shadow for the substance, to prefer the metaphor, the clone to a substantial being who gets in your way, who is literally on your hands, a flesh-and-blood being whose only fault is to be there, here and now, and not somewhere else...What was till now still ‘vital’ copulation, suddenly becomes optional, turning into the practice of remote-control masturbation. (103-4)

A strict separation between image and body, text and flesh underlies Virilio’s analysis.

According to Virilio, since cybersex does not physically engage another, it is a practice of remote-control masturbation that makes the vital accidental. It inverts the procreative binaries of virtual/real and shadow/substance. As the word “clone” implies, cybersex only mimics contact: the online individual engages an image of him or herself in the guise of an other, rather than a messy and substantial other. The individual “makes love” to an inferior copy.

Most starkly, Virilio proclaims that, as the consequence of such a perversity:

Sex no longer exists; it has been replaced by fear.

Fear of the other, of the dissimilar, has won out over sexual attraction. After the struggle against the gravity of weighty bodies and all the research done on techniques of levitation and weightlessness, there begins a similar war on that universal attraction that enables the species to survive: genetic engineering, artificial fertilization and so on are all permutations of the same assault on the living being. (113)

Not only are representation and flesh separate for Virilio, representations enable *safer* contact than its flesh-and-blood counterpart: sex has been replaced by fear because representations do not transfer an other’s messy dissimilarity. As well, virtual sex is part

of the general technological trend that has enabled us to supplement and supplant the universal and the natural. If once the laws of gravity enforced universal attraction, weightless bodies have cut ties so that fear rather than gravity prevails. Siding with the Roman Catholic Church, Virilio sees cybersex as the “universal condom” that ends productive intercourse and responsible (meaning fertile) interactions between men and women.

Denouncing such interactive practices as a catastrophe for love, the Roman contingent noted that the sex industry now offers lovers ‘*an illusory and artificial space, an easy way out of people’s inability to deal with each other responsibly*’, and that the best of all possible worlds of the remote consummation of sex with one or mo

However, it is precisely because cybersex does not transmit STDs that Virilio posits it as the most dangerous STD: “if the *virtual pleasure* of sexual telepresence were eventually to outstrip the *real pleasure* of embodied love, as is probable, soon the only societies left to ensure the continuation of the human race will be those that are underdeveloped and, worse, ‘media’-deprived” (109). Virilio thus moves from seeing cybersex as enforcing artificial reproductive techniques to abolishing reproduction altogether, except in those areas untouched by media. This gloomy—and racist—outlook makes cybersex the new catastrophic venereal disease that poisons and destroys through its *lack* of contact.¹³ Against those who praise cybersex as an AIDS-free form of sexual pleasure, Virilio posits cybersex as the new AIDS.¹⁴ Virilio’s argument against cybersex,

ways. The passions, jealousies, obsessions, needs are no less strong than their real-life counterparts because they trigger the same internal emotional states” (4). The internal emotional states provoked in cyberspace are displaced mirror-images, are transferences: Odzer explicates her online reactions in terms of “her historic self,” which she is only able to discern through her online reactions. If one was to read reductively, Odzer’s point would be that cybersex is a form of self-therapy: “with the help of my academic background, I began to realize that my emotional responses, my historic traumas, my insecurities, and other assorted ‘monsters’ were being revealed to me through the computer medium” (118).¹⁵ That is, cyberspace sidesteps the need for an analyst to provoke transferences. By reducing everything to past experiences (it can only reveal historic traumas, insecurities and monsters, rather than produce trauma, insecurity and monsters), Odzer sequesters the cyberspace encounter to the “safe” space of the analyst’s couch. Cyberspace also reveals the truth of the self through external texts: “the special thing about cyber lust, because it’s presented through text, is that you can observe it as an isolated thing, as if you were holding an object in your hand: ‘This is my lust. And here’s what it looks like’” (57). However, as Odzer also notes, cyber lust is never simply her lust: “you’re plugged right into the fantasy part of your brain, but now someone else

¹⁵ For more on the relationship between therapy and cyberspace, see Sherry Turkle’s *Life on the Screen*, in which she argues that cyberspace sometimes allows people to “work through” their problems online through transference.

is interacting with it” (3). What she looks at, then, is not *her* lust, but rather the textual remains of a lustful encounter between herself and another.¹⁶

This retroactive erasure of the other sustains Odzer’s narrative of cyberspace as cheap therapy. Odzer writes, “frequently, online interactions hit a nerve that makes me behave in irrational ways. I have to recognize the reaction as something within me, especially since the person who ‘caused’ the reaction is someone I’ve never met, whose voice I’ve never heard, and whose age or sex I can’t verify” (8). Thus, the belief that irrational interactions cannot be endemic to cyberspace underlies Odzer’s other-erasure. She *has* to recognize that the cause lies within herself because she assumes that an unseen other could not provoke such responses. Like Virilio, she assumes that representations as clones cannot disrupt/compromise the subject. Unlike Virilio, Odzer sees the ways in which the online other—through its representations—can compromise the self, which is why she always anchors her reactions within cyberspace to outside reality (even if this outside is only herself):

Part of all relationships exists only in our minds, and this is what is undeniable in cyber passion—when we don’t know what our love object looks like, have never heard his or her voice, can’t be sure of age or even gender, then we realize that the emotions come from within ourselves. That passion that arises from net sex exists within us.

We can learn much about the psychology of our species from this new world. Beyond that, it is fun, it is engaging, it is pleasurable.

Welcome to the sex world of the new millennium.

¹⁶ As Odzer notes at the beginning of her narrative (after she offers the reader an account of an online S/M encounter), “as erotic as what you just read was, it was only paper, and a dim evocation of the real thing—the real virtual thing, that is” (3). The importance of “being there” is less in terms of the moment, but more in terms of time lag. Read continuously as a description, the encounter loses the suspense and waiting essential to the cybersex encounter.

Cyberspace brings you face-to-face with who you are at your root (or “/root” as we say in computer lingo). (4-5)

Her definition of passion denies the link between passion and passive—namely that both invoke the notion of being acted upon. At “root” is always another version of the same. At root in *Virtual Spaces* is a theory of cyber-relationships as the hysterical substitution of objects.¹⁷

Odzer employs the rubric of “mismatched Thai women/Western men pairings” that she categorizes as “delusional” in order to explain cyber-relationships (155). Relating the story between Dudley and Sow, a man unable to speak Thai and a woman unable to speak English, she deduces that “the infatuations Western men develop[] for Thai bar girls...exist[] in [their] head[s]” (158). Without the ability to communicate, she argues that these men fill in the blanks so that these Thai women become everything they desire. Recalling her own days in Ko Samet as “a pampered leisure-class person” who “wallowed in luxury toys [read boys] of the tourist” (236), she argues that “vacationers think of Ko Samet as a fantasy world, not a real one. Going online and vacations offer the same suspension of reality: “western men play with the same nonchalance we play with our cyber lovers” (239). In Odzer’s cyberspace, the consequences are personal—self-enlightenment—and socially no more powerful than a vacation. In Odzer’s cyberspace—like MCI’s—*there are only Western men*: every cybercitizen is given the privilege of playing with their lovers. Cyberspace enables everyone to become a subject, rather than a representation; just as Ko Samet inverted the “normal” relationship between

¹⁷ Odzer’s hysterical substitution of technologies and people in her pursuit of cybersex structures her book. She starts with hotchat and Jeremy, then moves to the Palace and her many “visual” lovers.

West and Thai by pairing Western women with Thai boys, cyberspace allows “others” to become privileged selves. Cyberspace enables you to indulge in fantasy, allows you to create your own other. Odzer makes the following analogy to VR: “seeing a faceless name on your computer screen leads you to fill in the visual blanks with the sexiest, most gorgeous hunk you can think up...the cyber lover possesses all the characteristics, physical and mental, of your ideal mate, with few checks on your imagination” (159).¹⁸

However, as Odzer also makes clear, she does not fill in the visual blanks in her cybersex relationships, but rather becomes obsessed with a *name*. Odzer admits that, “the need for love, the obsessive attachment to some name on the screen, jealousy, illogical rage—all these were far scarier than realizing I was a net junkie” (120). Thus, cybersex is *not* without fear or obsession. It carries the fear of obsession with others. In order for this *personal* obsession to be overwhelming, blanks must remain in place, rather than being filled. Or to be more precise, the other must resist representation. As Zizek argues with respect to phone sex:

the very narrowness of the communication band (our partner is accessible to us only in the guise of a disembodied and, as such, all-pervasive voice) elevates the Other, our partner, into a spectral entity whose voice directly penetrates our interior. When (and if) we finally encounter our phone-sex partner in real life, the effect is often precisely what Michel Chion called *déacousmatisation*: the Other loses his spectral quality, he turns into an ordinary worldly being towards whom we can maintain a normal distance. In short, we pass from the spectral Real to reality, from the obscene ethereal *presence* of the Other to the Other who is simply an object of *representation*. (155)

¹⁸ However, Thai-Western relationships and cyberspace relationships are not completely analogous.

Whereas Thai-Western relationships face a language barrier that make verbal communications difficult, cyberspace relationships face as physical barrier that makes face-to-face contact difficult.

Rather than the other being remote and unknowable, the other is too close and *present*. In order for Odzer to maintain a normal distance, she makes herself and her lust an object of representation, since she cannot make the Other one. Her narcissism—which translates as an obsessive attachment to her “historical self”—is precisely what enables her “descent” into cybersex to be solitary.

Odzer, however, does not tether everything to reality and to her own passions. Cybersex does not correspond to real life and, in her descriptions of cybersex, she argues for a gap between reality and virtuality:

MOO sex is more interactive than hot chat. It's rich with imagery, involving more brain and less genitals. You can take off clothes, lie on furniture, and your actions reflect and adjust to that of your partner's. It's also less orgasm-oriented, though it is ultra-sensuous. The great masters of MOO sex, the ones who've been at it a long time, don't have pauses in their dialogue. The long pauses in hot chat indicate someone's hands are busy elsewhere. Sometimes people do reach climax in MOO sex and there may be pauses, but for the most part, the action is played out on cyber bodies, not real ones. It may seem odd to role-play with a *cyber* orgasm as a goal, instead of a *physical* one. Hundreds of MOOers, though, will attest to the satisfaction of this “completion,” in this cerebral rather than corporal way. (41-2)

What makes cybersex “good” is not a physical orgasm, but rather the ability to reflect and adjust to her partner. The emphasis is not placed on the culmination of pleasure, but rather the motions towards pleasure. What Odzer's accoabq Odze

new sexual practice that does not depend on ejaculation, but rather offers pleasure outside of sex and the genitals:

What interests the practitioners of S & M is that the relationship is at the same time regulated and open. . . . This mixture of rules and openness has the effect of intensifying sexual relations by introducing a perpetual novelty, a perpetual tension and a perpetual uncertainty which the simple consummation of the act lacks. The idea is also to make use of every part of the body as a sexual instrument. (“Interview” 20)

S/M and cybersex introduce a perpetual novelty, tension and uncertainty that defy the “completeness” of orgasm. Cybersex necessarily involves tension and uncertainty—you must wait for your partner’s next response; there is no way of avoiding delay. Moreover, given the unreliability of networks, you are always in danger of losing your connection, of being disconnected. Cybersex also remaps pleasures so that actual orgasms get in the way. Describing hot chat, Odzer writes that:

The verbal format repeated itself like a trashy novel. When ardor grew, words contracted to long ahhhhhs, or oooohs, or ummmmmms. While one hand masturbated, the other—usually the less dexterous—typed. When I found myself faking orgasms in order to log off gracefully, I decided hot chat had lost its appeal. (18)

Departing from her usual “repetition and reality is good” mode, Odzer condemns hot chat for its lack of interactivity—for its lack of reflection and adjustment to the other. She condemns it because it allows for masturbation. Although she may later reflect that her enjoyment from cybersex was caused by some earlier episode, Odzer insists that the give-and-take between self and other is what makes cybersex good—and indeed addictive.¹⁹ Odzer also insists the cybersex is about experimentation, about “doing” things that she

¹⁹ When Odzer first tries cybersex on *The Palace*—a visual MUD—she finds it unpleasurable because the images do not fit each other correctly (see chapter 3 “Sex at the Palace”).

would not try in real life. Indeed, the moment she marks as her sexual liberation is when she strips naked before a camera for her cyber-lover in Great Britain. Cybersex is about exposure and pleasure in exposure.

According to Žižek, cybersex is about too much exposure, about overwhelming contact with the spectral other: Žižek views cyberspace as a claustrophobic symbolic matrix. “Interposing itself between ‘real life’ and ‘mere imagination’” (*Plague* 140), cyberspace enables both imaginary and symbolic identifications:

the most concise definition of symbolic identification is that it consists in assuming a mask which is more real and binding than the true face beneath it ... The VR persona thus offers a case of imaginary deception in so far as it externalizes-displays a false image of myself (a timid man playing a hero in MUD...) and a symbolic deception in so far as it expresses the truth about myself in the guise of a game (by playfully adopting an aggressive persona, I disclose my true aggressivity). (*Plague* 139)

Because “we are not directly dealing with reality, but not with ‘mere words’ either (since our words do have real effects),” we are in the realm of the symbolic in which we express truths about ourselves in the structure of a fiction (*Plague* 140). Moreover, cyberspace is a symbolic “double” of reality: “the prospect of the accomplished digitization of all information (all books, movies, data . . . computerized and instantly accessible) promises the almost perfect materialization of the big Other: out there in the machine, ‘everything will be written’, a complete symbolic redoubling of reality will take place” (*Plague* 164).

Unlike the “original” symbolic matrix, virtual reality, according to Žižek, destroys the gap between symbolic surface texture and underlying fantasy, and thus threatens to foreclose the Real.²⁰

Here, Žižek's logic gets a little confusing because he conflates different forms of computerization: hypertext (or the filling in of gaps in narratives that are not particular to cyberspace such as "choose your own ending" stories) and real-time communications. According to Žižek, hypertext fills in the gaps or voids within canonic texts (Žižek offers the relationship between Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as an example of hypertext). By filling in the void, two things happen: first, the Master-Signifier disappears—the elasticity enabled by computer revisionism means that there is no final version; second, since the implicit fantasies that support the symbolic texture are exposed, the real presence of the Other is suspended. With the suspension of the Master-Signifier, choice disappears.²¹ Coinciding with this decline of the Master is the

gap between fantasy and explicit symbolic structure in terms of ideology. Offering the example of Robert Altman's *MASH*, he argues that "For all their mockery of authority, practical jokes and sexual escapades, the members of the *MASH* crew *perform their job exemplarily*, and thus present absolutely no threat to the smooth running of the military machine. In other words, the cliché which regards *MASH* as an anti-militarist film, depicting the horrors of the meaningless military slaughter which can be endured only through a healthy measure of cynicism, practical jokes, laughing at pompous official rituals, and so on, misses the point—this very distance *is* ideology" (*Plague* 20).

²¹ Žižek writes, "What happens then, in the situation of the decline of the Master, when the subject himself is constantly bombarded with the request to give a sign of what he wants? The exact opposite of what one would expect: it is when there is no one there to tell you what you really want, when all the burden of the choice is on you, that the big Other dominates you completely, and the choice effectively disappears—is replaced by its mere semblance" (*Plague* 153). With the decline of the Master, subjects are caught in "saving the appearance," caught in the same position as those members of the Stalinist government who, realizing the impotence of Stalin, agreed to be sacrificed in order to retain the semblance of the Master. Or, when a hypertext story incessantly asks its subjects to "choose"—i.e., treats the subject as one who knows

obliteration of the Beyond. The constant filling in of the gaps takes place not only at the level of content, but also at the level of global structure. Cyberspace denies us the concept of a “dark thing” or beyond that is impenetrable, since everything can be theoretically brought to light (i.e., the whole world can be connected so that there exists no unexplored territory). According to Žižek, “the moment the function of the dark spot which keeps open the space for something for which there is no place in our reality is suspended, we lose our very ‘sense of reality’” (*Plague* 163). Žižek here takes science as the primogenitor for global communications networks: since science seeks to close off the Beyond, it threatens our very sense of reality.²²

By filling in the gaps, cyberspace also subjects its subjects to the Real of the other—it “suspends the presence of the Other in the massive weight of the Real: neighbours and foreigners are all equal in their spectral screen presence” (*Plague* 154). However, according to Žižek, the reality of the Other (the other as partner in a properly intersubjective relationship) depends on gaps in the text. Without these gaps that separate fantasy from explicit symbolic structure, we get “a pre-symbolic ‘impossible’ relation to an Other which is the *real* Other, the Other as *Thing*, and not yet the Other located within the field of intersubjectivity” (*Plague* 10). This filling in of the gaps thus coincides with gaps in contact enabled by textual communications:

what s/he really wants—the question invariably invokes desire. The constant bombardment of questions “creates the need for the object of choice” (*Plague* 153).

²² Here, Žižek seems to be disagreeing with Heidegger’s notion of the shadow which simultaneously accompanies the light brought about by scientific inquiry (see the conclusion of “The Age of the World Picture”).

the commonplace according to which the problem with cyberspace is that reality is virtualized, so that instead of the flesh-and-blood presence of the Other we get a digitalized spectral apparition, *misses the point*: what brings about the ‘loss of reality’ in cyberspace is not its emptiness (the fact that it is lacking with respect to the fullness of the real presence) but, on the contrary, its very excessive fullness (the potential abolition of the dimension of symbolic virtuality). (*Plague* 155)

Virtual reality, then, is precisely its opposite. Rather than mirroring/containing the virtue of reality, it prevents reality and virtuality—and the danger of cyberspace stems from this pre-symbolic relation, from the inability to distance self from other. The excessive fullness of hypertext, combined with the gaps endemic to real-time communications and fused with the increasing publication of private fantasies (i.e., cybersex as text), makes cyberspace unbearable. Thus, cyberspace is devastating because:

it potentially fills in the gap, the distance between the subject’s public symbolic identity and its phantasmic background: fantasies are increasingly immediately externalized in the public symbolic space; the sphere of intimacy is more and more directly socialized. The inherent violence of cybersex lies not in the potentially violent content of sexual fantasies played out on the screen, but in the very formal fact of seeing my innermost fantasies being directly imposed on me from without. A painful and disturbing scene from David Lynch’s *Wild at Heart* (Willem Dafoe invading the private space of Laura Dern, touching her intimate parts, forcing her to say “Fuck me!”, and after she finally does so, replying “No, thanks, I don’t have time today, but on another occasion I would do it gladly”) perfectly illustrates the obscene violence of cybersex in which, although (or, rather, precisely because) “nothing really happens in our bodily reality”, the phantasmic intimate kernel of our being is laid bare in a much more direct way, making us totally vulnerable and helpless. (*Plague* 164)

Because cyberspace fills the distance between public and fantasmatic, because it makes one’s fantasies appear from without, cyberspace disintegrates our usual protections.²³

Although I agree with Zizek’s conclusion that cybersex and cyberspace leave us far more

²³ I take up the question of whether or not the analogy between *Wild at Heart* and cyberspace is valid (i.e. whether or not “nothing really happens in our bodily reality”) later in the chapter when I discuss the relation between the body and cybersex.

vulnerable than has heretofore been theorized, I find his argument not only confusing but also curiously unrigorous, given the constant emphasis in his other work on the symptom rather than universal possibility.

As opposed to his other analyses, Žižek's argument regarding cyberspace relies on the *potential* and the *possible*—the universal possibility—rather than on the symptom, on what lies unactualized and unactualizable.²⁴ He speaks of the potential filling in of the gaps, the prospect of overwhelming free choice, the possibility of filling the void. What Žižek avoids through reference to the potential are the ways in which the voids are never fully filled—the ways in which voids are displaced rather than filled. He also fails to consider the ways in which new interactive realms such as MOOs develop new rules and forced choices, rather than completely suspend the subject in the netherworld of overwhelmingly free and thus not-free choice. That is, although in a MOO you can create any description of yourself, you are also forced to choose a gender (one of seven, yes, but you still must choose). As well, people freely ignore each other's descriptions of themselves, if not their dialogue and their interactions. In order to read someone's description in a MOO, you type "look description" and the description briefly scrolls on your screen. What "sticks" in people's minds then, is not the description, but rather your *name* and your dialogue. Further, rather than filling the gap between "a subject's public symbolic identity and its phantasmic background," cyberspace can further this gap. Many people, rather than using cyberspace as a medium for self-revelation and experimentation, use it (email and webpages in particular) as another public fora. Even in "real-time" communications such as MOOs, as I argue later in this chapter, the gap is

²⁴ Indeed, his chapter on cyberspace is riddled with ellipses, almost as an acknowledgement of these gaps.

still maintained. In addition, the phenomenon of “default settings,” much of which are invisible to the casual user, constrain choice and redefine the “forced choice.”²⁵

To be clear, I am not arguing that the Other does not invade us in more pervasive ways than before, nor am I saying that new media does not present us with more “arresting” choices. I am arguing that virtual reality, precisely because it is *virtual*, does not close the Real. If anything, it inaugurates a symbolic matrix that disavows the role of the *name of the father*, and that dreams of returning to a pure union between *imaginary* (m)other and self.

DIGIT-AL LIFE?

So what exactly *is* virtual reality? Unlike its portrayals in films such as *Lawnmower Man*, which featured headgear, datagloves and datasuits, popular virtual technologies are fairly low-tech: interactive video games, text and image-based real time chat and real-time video chat. Odzer and Dibell both discuss as virtual reality MUDs, MOOs, or MUSHs (M*s)—textual interfaces to databases that offer users a limited set of commands that let them speak, describe their actions, interact with objects and set their description and gender. M*s do not resemble in any way VR’s imaginary progenitors in *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash*: whereas VR’s progenitors offer visions of image-based communications, M*s enable textual interactions. These technologies share the same

²⁵ Also, rather than being deprived of passivity, VR offers a new passivity—the undertheorized yet increasingly popular phenomenon of lurking (viewing the dialogue without participating). Lastly, cyberspace does not symbolically double the “real” universe of text—it is not only that cyberspace exists as a separate sphere in which texts exist that have no counterpart to physical texts, but also that that every text in physical space does not have its counterpart in digital space.

name because they offer the users a semblance of a physical environment: M*s offer descriptions of spaces that users are then free to imagine, or not. Spawned from role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons (MUD first stood for Multi-User Dungeon), M*s developed first as interactive role-playing games. Although M*s are certainly not the most technologically developed or most popular form of “virtual reality,” they have been privileged by theorists of cyberspace as the first rigorous type of VR.²⁶ They also give users more freedom of expression than chat rooms or image-based chats such as the Palace.²⁷ As well, in opposition to non

database will replace the original description with a new one corresponding to the room located in the direction she chose. When the new description scrolls across the user's screen it lists not only the fixed features of the room but all its contents at the moment—including things (tools, toys, weapons) and other users (each represented as a "character" over which the user has sole control)...

LambdaMOOers are allowed a broad freedom to create—they can describe their characters any way they like, they can make rooms of their own and decorate them to taste, and they can build new objects almost at will (14-15).

Users log onto LambdaMOO via a telnet connection and are confronted with text that rapidly fills their screen. They can control their gender and description, "look" at other players, speak, emote (i.e. describe actions and emotions), lurk (watch the text fly by without participating), and move in directions constrained by the architecture of the room they are in. Entering a MOO—especially a MOO which is inhabited by several characters—can be confusing because multiple conversations are going on at the same time and because of the lag between the time you press enter and the time your response appears on everyone else's screen. Further, as you write a response, text continues to scroll, often making your response belated if not irrelevant. Even if there are only two of you "talking," the conversation is disjointed:

look quizno

Quizno

Not particularly eye-catching, he has the kind of face you'd forget about once you turned your head. Except possibly the eyes. They are greyish-blue, and wander the room casually, taking in what they can. They meet yours for a moment and a slight grin graces his face, then something new catches his attention. After you look away, you remember the eyes, and blond hair... if you care to remember anything at all.

Coming from where the summers are hot and the scorpions eat cats and small children.

He is awake, but has been staring off into space for 18 minutes.

Carrying:

Bill Clinton Action Figure

Quizno waves to you.

:waves at quizno and wonders about the bill clinton action figure

Periwinkle_Guest waves at quizno and wonders about the bill clinton action figure

Quizno says, "I don't know how I got it."
"scorpions eat small children?"
You say, "scorpions eat small children?"
Quizno says, "They might"
:muses that anything is possible.
Periwinkle_Guest muses that anything is possible. (see appendix C for a full transcript).

This interchange between Quizno and myself reveals the repetition and lag endemic to MOO conversations.²⁹ It is not simply that you type a response that everyone else then sees, but also that you yourself see your response—several seconds later—thread into the text running on your screen. The fact that you are a persona online stems structurally from the fact that you read your own text as you would lines in an interactive screenplay, as well as thematically from the fact that you create your own description. Further, your description, rather than simply describing yourself, becomes subject to conversation and can become a “tour” rather than simply a description. Quizno’s description, for instance, describes *your* actions as you look at him, thus manipulating your reactions—or offering you cues. You are not in control of your actions. Often these differences in conversational structure are glossed over in confessions, since they are difficult to make sense of and are repetitive.

Dibell’s narrative cleverly offers the readers an approximation of M* narration style by reversing “real life” and the M* narrative styles. Real life conversations and episodes are rendered as though they took place in a M*, whereas M* exchanges are

²⁹ This is a transcript of a MOO session using a MUD browser, such as MUDDweller. Had this been a telnet session, Quizno’s words would have interrupted my own and the transcript would be virtually unreadable.

related in a straightforward literary style.³⁰ For instance, the confession begins with Dibell travelling to Palo Alto in order to view the LambdaMOO server (the computer that contains the database):

The Low-Humming Room is Full of Bone-White Boxes
You are in a quiet, low-lit room full of stacked
metal boxes, their surfaces mostly white, like
old bones, studded here and there with pale
green-yellow pinpoint lights that flicker on and
off. The boxes are computers, twenty-five of them
of so: collectively they hum a damped and hissing
drone. There is carpeting beneath your feet - -
thin, cooperate, and clean. There is an exit to
the south.

You see The_Server here.
Pavel and The_Author are here.

Pavel shrugs.

Pavel says, "Well, there it is. Not much to look at,
really." (5)

This passage mimics the text you would be presented with, if you were to enter a room in a M*: you are offered a description of the room, a list of objects you can interact with (The_Server) and a list of other characters present (Pavel and The_Author). As you enter the room, the others would see the words "The_Reader enters the Low-Humming Room" on their screens. In other words, you are offered a scenario, a running list of characters and the stage set-up. The predominant link between RL and VR in LambdaMOO is architectural: you cannot "change" the room (unless you are its owner) and you can only

³⁰ In fact, the narrative style harkens back to the eighteenth-century English novel. The front cover reads as follows: *my tiny life: crime and passion in a virtual world (being the true account of the case of the infamous Mr. Bungle and of the Author's journey, in consequence thereof, to the heart of a half-real world called LambdaMOO)*.

leave the room in prescribed descriptions (e.g., you can only exit south). This link is not “natural” to the database, but rather programmed. Rather than signaling the explosion of free choice, as Zizek argues, cyberspace offers forced choices that are constrained by the notion of virtual reality (here architecture).

What is interesting about Dibell’s description—and all the descriptions within his book—is that it is written from the reader’s point-of-view. In order for us to “see” these descriptions in the manner that Dibell writes them, we would have to be characters who never speak, but who type commands such as “look Pavel.”³¹ That is, the readers “lurk” in these episodes in the same manner that they lurk when they read a book—the action unfolds through the act of reading (again, another “programmed” link between RL and VR). In contrast to these RL scenes (which are few in number), the MOO episodes are written in Times New Roman and follow “normal” narrative conventions between the reader and author, while still following the pattern of directly addressing and involving the reader in lurk mode. For instance, Dibell writes, “Call me Dr. Bombay” (11).

Further, real life chapters are written in the table of contents with capital letters and marked by places and dates (PALO ALTO, OCTOBER 1994; NEW YORK CITY, JULY 1994). Episodes on the MUD, on the other hand, are given “real” chapter titles, “A Rape in Cyberspace (Or TINYSOCIETY, and How to Make One).” This reversal of the virtual/reality binary mirrors the reversal occurring Dibell’s during a six-month period in which he spends more and more of his waking time on the MOO and starts having

³¹ Dibell does, however, take out the repetition in commands. Instead of seeing “look Pavel” twice, we get the command only once.

dreams about the MOO. When the author retreats from the MOO to reality at the end, the order is reversed—a signal, perhaps, that the universe is right once more.

The book begins and ends with the “Real” behind LambdaMOO—The_Server, which turns out to be nothing, yet everything. Bytes cannot be symbolized, and yet they support all symbolization.³² The Real marks the end points of Dibell’s narrative (he returns to the Palo Alto episode at the end of his narration). Between these returns lie the symbolic. After his disappointing trip to Palo Alto, in which he photographs The_Server, Dibell begins his narrative:

The_Author will have to start all over then. He will have to try and find another way of representing what the camera failed to show. He’ll have to go back to the night it all began for him and trace his steps from there (8).

Thus the Real starts the journey, but starts it falsely in two ways: one, The_Server does not explicate LambdaMOO; two, Dibell conceived of this book after writing an article on the Bungle virtual rape affair for the *Village Voice*—so again the Real is a cause that can only be determined after the fact. Indeed, the question that “begins” Dibell’s journey (according to his chapter/revision of the virtual rape) is: How can people take VR

³² As Žižek argues, bytes are the Real in the sense that: “we are never submerged in the play of appearances without an ‘indivisible remainder’. Postmodernism focuses on the mystery of what Turkle calls the ‘emergence’ and Deleuze elaborated as the ‘sense-event’: the emergence of the pure appearance which cannot be reduced to the simple effect of its bodily causes; none the less, this emergence is the effect of the digital Real” (Plague 132). Like the real Real, the digital Real “resists symbolization, dialecticization, persisting in its place, always returning to it” (Žižek, *Sublime*, 161). Moreover, the Real can break through the screen now and then in order to effect a system crash (although even the system crash is represented by a blue screen of death, or a never moving hourglass).s

(virtual rape/reality) seriously? Confused by the furor over the virtual rape, he seeks out Mr. Bungle in order to ask him, “why?” Failing to contact him—and admitting that such an encounter would not offer sufficient answers—Dibell decides to immerse himself in the virtual environment and discover the meaning behind LambdaMOO.

The meaning he discovers is passion. Sex, love and violation suture Dibell’s text, both in terms of linking together the various virtual episodes and in terms of linking his RL and VR existences. In order to make his narrative consistent, Dibell provides universal questions of love/sex/commitment: will Dibell marry real-life live-in girlfriend Jessica? Will he finally have cybersex (where by cybersex he means electronic sex with a stranger)? The following logic links together his real-life and virtual-life crises: Jessica, who initially has a character on LambdaMOO, moves in with Dibell and leaves LambdaMOO. Dibell finally forgoes the role of lurker: when he has cybersex with S*, he decides to marry Jessica. According to Dibell, he leaves LambdaMOO for love (and not because the Architecture Review Board refuses to give him more disk quota).³³ Thus, through the most banal ’90s love story—will he or won’t he commit—Dibell weaves together a story about virtual violation and virtual democracy, crime and passion, personal and private enlightenment. Sex seems at the core of everything: the system of petitions that enables “democratic” governance results from the virtual rape episode; the

³³ Although I deal with the Master later in this chapter, Dibell leaves precisely because the ARB refuses him more quota (he adds on love as a more compelling reason). He spends weeks getting ready for the review meeting—talking to others, deleting his morphs and generally trying to please. When he is refused (his work deemed unworthy), he leaves because the power of the Law against the contract has been established once more.

decision to reduce wizards to technical assistants stems from the Schmoo wars in which Finn the rebel programmer creates a species of being solely dedicated to cybersex; the banishment of the anarchist HortonWho is partly due to ill-will after a cyber-breakup.

However, Dibell's narrative does not reduce virtual reality to soap opera. Rather, cybersex and cyber-passion ensure a gap between fantasy, virtual reality, reality and meaning. Relaying the virtual rape, he argues that:

while the *facts* attached to any event born of a MUD's strange, ethereal universe may march in straight, tandem lines separated neatly into the virtual and the real, its meaning lies always in that gap. You learn this axiom early in your life as a player, and it's of no small relevance to the Bungle case that you often learn it between the sheets, so to speak. Netsex, tinysex, virtual sex—however you name it, in real-life reality it's nothing more than a phone fuck stripped of even the vestigial physicality of the voice. And yet, as many a wide-eyed newbie can tell you, it's possibly the headiest experience the very heady world of MUDs has to offer. (16)

Meaning lies in the gap between reality and virtuality, fact and fiction, and cybersex inaugurates the online social subject by introducing such a gap. If the imaginary identification with one's persona initiates the process of identification by which the human begins to view itself as lacking, cybersex offers re-connection and the possibility of mastery—or at the very least compensation for this lack. Cybersex establishes community by convincing the user that cyberspace is a symbolic matrix. (Thus the cyberspace confessions that do not rely on cybersex rely on community). Hence cybersex enables online reproduction. According to Dibell,

A newbie's first taste of MUD sex is often also the first time she or he surrenders wholly to the quirky terms of MUDdish ontology, recognizing in a full-bodied way that what happens inside a MUD-made world is neither exactly real nor exactly make-believe, but nonetheless profoundly, compellingly, and emotionally *true*. (17)

MUD sex is a moment of *ontology*, of *to be*, but also a moment of epistemology. It is a moment of identification, a moment of surrender that offers its own *jouissance*. As Dibell narrates in terms of his own experiences, “I have never felt so embodied in VR than I did during those ninety minutes with S*” (262). Moreover, it marks a moment in which reference to “real” genital sexuality is foregone: “To start with then: All that stuff you’ve heard about ‘one-handed typing’? Forget it... [it was] a series of intermittent, gusty arousals, each cued to the appearance of a new emote from S*...It turned out to be the simple possibility that sometimes the act of representation itself can be erotic” (Dibell 262). The eroticism of the act of representation, or more properly the act of *exchanging* representations—the *jouissance* offered by the immersion into the symbolic—is exactly what is offered by cybersex. Opposing Odzer’s notion of cybersex as sexual liberation—as a means by which one exceeds rules and regulations to explore one’s true sexuality—Dibell argues that cybersex immerses one in representation.

Rather than “filling in the gaps,” cybersex works by maintaining the gap between fantasy and external symbolic words. In order for cybersex to be a moment of ontology, the person must no longer believe that M*s are mere games (absolute separation between reality and virtuality), while at the same time refusing to equate reality and virtuality (orgasm of the cyber-body—if there is such a thing—instead of the real body). *Passion* is intimately linked with passivity, in the sense of being open to another. One becomes passionate about cyberspace or on cyberspace the moment that one becomes involved in a passion play that establishes representation and fantasy, while at the same time denying both a strict separation and a correspondence between representation and reality. Moreover, one feels most embodied online when the body reacts to words online.

Cybersex establishes a relation between the body, fingers, and words that defies the mind/body split, while at the same time refusing to map description onto physical reality. Further, in terms of language, what is *not* representable makes cybersex cybersex (the gaps in conversation, the anxiety and heightened sense of arousal brought about by suspense as one waits for the next emote or talk). Lag-time generates the *plateaus* that make cybersex pleasurable. Thus, it is not that the body does not matter, for “gusty arousals” brand the body in VR. Nor is it that the virtual and the real coincide, for one can describe an orgasm online that does not correspond to one’s actual situation. Cybersex offers an enjoyment that disengages the symbolic as representative of the physical, while at the same time, linking the two together.

Another moment of ontology, a moment that feels *true*, is the moment Dibell dons the persona of Samantha.³⁴ Dibell, like many MOO participants, has different morphs (identities or descriptions). However, his first female morph—Samantha—feels real to him in a way that no other morph did before. Comparing Samantha to his other morphs, he writes:

Samantha—well, Samantha fit that body so closely I couldn’t really detect the place where she began and the body ended. Nor did I very much want to. For here was the second surprise about being Samantha: it felt delicious. It felt soft, and graceful, and sexually alluring. It felt receptive, and charming, and poised,

³⁴ For more on gender and “passing,” see Allucquere Roseanne Stone’s *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*; Sherry Turkle’s *Life on the Screen*; the LambdaMOO archive at <ftp://parc.xerox.com/pub/MOO/Papers>; Jodi O’Brien’s “Changing the Subject”; Kaley Davis’ and Theresa M. Senft’s “Modem Butterfly, Reconsidered.” See also Alan Turing’s “Computing Machinery and Intelligence”—Turing first introduces the concept of a “turing test” in a game in which people/computers guess a person’s gender.

and several other ideally “feminine” things I’d thought myself too sophisticated to imagine as the defining aspects of a woman’s inner life. . . . “I feel pretty!” I declared, to the bemused Sebastiano, to the unhearing robot monkey, and to the warm night breezes I swear I felt caressing the smooth skin of Samantha’s outstretched arms. (127-8)

As Samantha, Dibell feels receptive, he feels open to others and to others’ desires. He feels alluring and attractive. He embodies desire. Like Schreber, he indulges in fantasies of what it would be like to be woman during copulation (Dibell subsequently crafts another female morph designed specifically for his foray into cybersex). Reflecting on his experience, Dibell writes that “it remained unclear what she was to me: a man’s fantasies of femininity turned loose, or a taste of the disembodied cultural voice that speaks inside a woman’s head, that tells her how a woman acts, and how a woman feels” (151). Dibell’s references to oral sensations like “taste” and “delicious” imply that the mode of male-to-female online passing have everything to do with oral incorporation—with wearing the skin of another, and through this reverse cannibalistic gesture, receiving the pleasure of merging with the other, of identifying as and with the other.³⁵ It also gives the illusion of stealing the pleasure of the *other*—of identifying as the other in order to gain the pleasure that the other usually enjoys, or is imagined to enjoy.

³⁵Margaret Morse argues that VR employs a logic of oral incorporation: “In this reversible logic, in which subject and object are not clearly differentiated, rather than being eaten one can try to *become the other* by ‘getting into someone else’s skin.’ That is, the cannibalistic fantasy of introjection has a counterpart in the reverse gesture, that of covering oneself with the other as a means of self-transformation” (165). For more on this conception of identification, see Diana Fuss’s chapter on oral incorporations in *Identification Papers*, entitled “Oral Incorporations: *The Silence of the Lambs*.”

This pleasure-seeking leads many men to take on female identities. For instance, Niacin, a man with many female morphs, focuses on sex with male-presenting characters.

He does so out of a desire to receive male desire:

“I wanted to *be* what I represented as much as possible,” he later explained, and hence his private knowledge of the falsity of his representations proved “more of an annoyance than anything else.” Niacin would frankly rather not have known that the men projecting their desires onto his projections were being bamboozled—if anything he would have preferred to be just as caught up in the illusion as they were. But if this was the only way he was going to experience how it felt to be on the receiving end of a man’s desire for a woman, then bamboozle he must. For it was that experience, finally, and none other, that he wanted most from his secret incursions into the sex lives of other men. (Dibell 136)

Niacin traps men with descriptions of their desire, or more correctly his own (the attention his female morphs generate seem to reinforce the fact that only a man knows what a man desires). Moreover, many males who pass as females do so because they enjoy the attention they receive as females—they enjoy being the object of another’s desire and, as such, engaged in a way they are not as males. If “living” online can be a lonely experience (there are no guarantees that others will engage you in conversation), being female plugs you into an economy of desire.³⁶

Importantly, Niacin is also trapped by his descriptions and his activities. He and exu (a female) participate in an especially absorbing cyber-relationship in which they create morphs for each other. They eventually break off this relationship because of its intensity: “‘For some reason,’ said exu, ‘interacting through the fictions got [us] into these weird, core selves that were almost unbearable. Like the more fictional we were, the closer to some wordless reality we got’” (146). Arguably, the more fictional they

³⁶ For the benefits of male-to-female passing, see Turkle’s *Life on the Screen*.

became, the closer they got to experiencing the symbolic as symbolic—the closer they got to experiencing the structure of fiction that maintains communications as such. Thus, Dibell argues that many men pass in order to experience gender as such, in order to understand or live the mask of femininity, and that many women pass in order to experience life without a mask.³⁷

The violence of Mr. Bungle, then, stems from his failure to respect the gaps that structure online communications. Mr. Bungle is an online sociopath because he still clings to the view that the virtual and physical are completely separate. Explaining his actions, Mr. Bungle claims that:

“I engaged in a bit of psychological device that is called thought-polarization, the fact that this is not RL simply added to heighten the affect of the device. It was purely a sequence of events with no consequence on my RL existence.”

They might have known. Stilted though its diction was, the gist of the answer was simple, and something many in the room had already surmised. Mr. Bungle was a psycho. Not, perhaps, in real life—but then in real life it’s possible for reasonable people to assume, as Bungle clearly did, that what transpires between word-costumed characters within the boundaries of a make-believe world is, if not mere play, then at most some kind of emotional laboratory experiment. Inside the MOO, however, such thinking marked a person as one of two basically subcompetent types. The first was the newbie, in which case the confusion was understandable, since there were few MOOers who had not, upon their first visits as anonymous “guest” characters, mistaken the place for a vast playpen in which they might act out their wildest fantasies without fear of censure. Only with time and the acquisition of a fixed character did players tend to make the critical passage from anonymity to pseudonymity, developing the concern for their character’s reputation that marks the attainment of virtual adulthood. But while Mr. Bungle hadn’t been around as long as most MOOers, he’d been around long enough to leave his newbie status behind, and his

³⁷ Dibell writes:

And if therefore it made some sense, paradoxically, to think of *Spivak* and *either* and the other disgendered options as characteristically female choices, then what of Niacin’s headlong plunge into tinyfemininity? Might it not be argued by a similar logic that he was chasing an experience only a man could really find intriguing? By which I mean, of course, not so much the experience of inhabiting the opposite gender as that of consciously inhabiting gender at all—an experience somewhat more alien to men than women, after all, in a culture that still hasn’t quite decided whether “man” is a synonym for people in general or just the ones with penises. (139)

delusional statement therefore placed him among the second type: the sociopath. (Dibell 23)

Whereas in real life the schizophrenic is the person who cannot distinguish words for things, in VR the sociopath is the person who cannot recognize that words are things. Thus, the projection of one's fantasies into public space, the increasing explicitness of fantasy, rather than marking VR as Zizek argues, marks its transgression. That is, in the move from anonymity to pseudonymity—the constitutive event of VR as symbolic matrix—rules and forced choices re-appear. Although rules can be transgressed, and the move from anonymity to pseudonymity is not inevitable, cyberspace, in order to work as a symbolic space, must re-inscribe the distance between fantasy and symbolic expression. This is not to say that participants do not make public their private fantasies (high-speed telecommunications networks are, after all, fundamentally public). It is to say that the intimacy of cyberspace usually takes place within a consensual, or contract-based, interchange based on persuasion and instruction, and constructed so that it still preserves gaps in communication and in the symbolic matrix while at the same time exposing its users. Measures such as “paging” and “whispering” (sending messages that can only be seen on your addressee's screen) are ways of trying to inscribe privacy within this public realm, but do so only by conflating privacy with secrecy. Importantly, these methods fail to protect their users—either participant can “save” the session and thus have an electronic record of the interchange that they can forward to others at their indiscretion.

In contrast to “normal” interactions, Mr. Bungle's transgression is explicitly *sadistic*—it is a demonstrative use of language (a thought experiment) that denies the relationship between speaker and audience. As Gilles Deleuze argues, the sadist:

is interested in ... demonstrat[ing] that reasoning itself is a form of violence, and that he is on the side of violence, however calm and logical he may be. He is not even attempting to prove anything to anyone, but to perform a demonstration related essentially to the solitude and omnipotence of its author ... the point of the exercise is to show that the demonstration is identical to violence. It follows that the reasoning does not have to be shared by the person to whom it is addressed any more than pleasure is meant to be shared by the object from which it is derived. The acts of violence inflicted on the victims are a mere reflection of a higher form of violence to which the demonstration testifies. Whether he is among his accomplices or among his victims, each libertine, while engaged in reasoning, is caught in the hermetic circle of his own solitude and uniqueness—even if the argumentation is the same for all the libertines. In every respect, as we shall see, the sadistic “instructor” stands in contrast to the masochistic “educator.” (18-9)

Mr. Bungle completely ignores his audience in his pursuit of “thought polarization.” He instructs them; he shows them the fragility of their online symbolic universe, and reveals their vulnerability. He makes them perform violent acts on themselves and on each other through voodoo dolls—he takes away their agency and makes them part of his demonstration. Thus, it makes sense that his crime was viewed as an act of incivility: “where virtual reality and its conventions would have us believe that exu and Moondreamer were brutally raped in their own living room, here was the victim exu scolding Mr. Bungle for a breach of ‘civility’” (Dibell, 16). However, a breach of civility—as Dibell points out—is far more than a moment of impoliteness, for the problem driving LambdaMOO’s moves towards self regulation is: how is LambdaMOO a civil society? This “sexual” violation, in which one’s representation was taken over by another, plunges LambdaMOO’s society into crisis: How does one punish such a crime?

The governing structure of LambdaMOO is based on a rather odd relationship between “wizards” and non-wizards. M*s derive from Dungeons and Dragons in which wizards (usually players who have reached a certain level of gaming savvy) control the game, make decisions and perform other actions based on their “magical” powers. On

most game-playing M*s, and quite a few that are not, wizards have ultimate and non-negotiable power. They can “toad” players and otherwise act as despots or benevolent dictators.³⁸ After a summer of unrest on LambdaMOO, Pavel Curtis proclaimed that wizards were no longer to act as despots, but rather shall act as technological helpmates who could inflict punishment at the bequest of others.³⁹ Initially, however, this New Directive had no definite form: it was unclear as to when wizards could act and how the citizenry could form self-rule. After the virtual rape, the players started a dialogue about toading Mr. Bungle that culminated in a highly inefficient but emotionally charged evening of discussion and persuasion.⁴⁰ As a result of this conversation, a wizard was “persuaded” to toad Mr. Bungle (although the act itself was solitary, and thus not a victory for the citizenry). Subsequently, a system of petitions, ballots and arbitration was set in place.

Importantly, this system of petitions, ballots and arbitration has far from satisfied all LambdaMOOers. During Dibell’s six-month immersion in LambdaMOO, he chronicles several challenges to this system, many stemming from “Minnie,” an active LambdaMOO character who sees the current order as tyrannical. As Dibell points out, annoyances, such as constant petitions from Minnie to dismantle the system of arbitration, are constitutive of LambdaMOOs democratic experiment. That is,

³⁸ Toading is analogous to banishment. Once a character has been toaded, his description and objects are deleted from the database and he is not allowed to request another character. An obvious work-around is requesting a character from a different email account.

³⁹ See Dibell’s chapter six, “The Schmoo Wars.”

⁴⁰ See Dibell’s chapter one, “A Rape in Cyberspace.”

LambdaMOO is not a utopia in which conflict disappears in the face of rational discussion. Rather because, like in all democratic systems, “the locus of power becomes *an empty place*” (Lefort 17), there is continual conflict and negotiation. Dibell pinpoints the moment that the “toad Minnie” petition is foiled as the moment in which LambdaMOO “grows up”: the moment in which it becomes mature enough to allow discontent and annoyance for the sake of an open system of governance. However, is this system really open? To what extent do the wizards still control? As many note, Curtis still has the power to turn off the switch.

This relationship between wizards and non-wizards resembles the relationship between Master and Slave in S/M, where the master “responds” to the slaves’ requests. Like masochism, it is also based on a contract—the guest must agree to a contract before s/he can log on, and entering LambdaMOO and the SexRooms requires one to agree to various conditions (see appendix D). Also as in masochism, “imperative and descriptive function of language transcends itself ... toward a dialectical, mythical and persuasive function” (23). This function of language as moving beyond imperative and description is evident in M*s users of myths, persuasion and instruction. Moreover, there is a thematic as well as structural similarity to masochism. As Odzer notes, “the sexual component of cyber life is undeniable and so is the sexual progression we net citizens—the average Joes and Janes—seem to be undergoing. The BDSM [bondage-domination-sadism-masochism] trend is too commonplace and out in the open to ignore” (200). BDSM, in fact, seems to be an important mode of cybersexual interactions.⁴¹ Lastly, if

⁴¹ BDSM is a popular category within pornography websites. In a search I conducted on “pornography” sites on Excite (8/15/99), all sites but one listed in the top 30 contained a BDSM category, usually within

femininity and masochism are intimately related, as Deutsch, Bonaparte, and Reich argue, would not male-to-female gender crossing not also invoke masochism?⁴²

But why masochism? And how does this relate, if at all, to the question of the decline of the Master that Zizek pins as a consequence of cyberspace?

COMING UNDONE

In retrospect, parallels between masochism and cyberspace abound. Masochism and online interactions depend equally on scenarios, contracts, costumes and myths.⁴³

the “stories” section or within the “fetish” category (for exemplary sites see <http://www.xxxpornographypictures.com> and <http://www.karaxxxx.com>). Excite’s own entertainment section contained two BDSM listings, one within “fetishes,” and the other within “premium adult sites.” A site as mainstream as Penthouse.com also features a “strongbox” section that contains images too raw for print publication. The image advertising this section is a woman dressed in leather and chains (<http://www.penthouse.com>). Further, when you try to leave the penthouse site, you are pushed into a new window featuring five other Penthouse-sponsored sites. Two of these sites, “Penthouse Variations” (<http://www.varionsmag.com>) and “Mistress Ruby” (<http://www.mistressruby.com>), feature S/M. In terms of “chat,” in a survey of Yahoo’s adult chat sites conducted on the same day, the BDSM category ranked 6th in number of chat rooms (369). However, the two top ranking categories, “encounters” and “fetish” also contained BDSM chat rooms (<http://www.yahoo.com>). The most popular BDSM chat room was a masochist site dedicated to “cuckolding.” Lastly, LambdaMOOs own “generic’ SexRooms are equipped with S/M paraphernalia.

⁴² Deutsch, in fact, defines femininity through masochism: “femininity, by which I mean the feminine, passive-masochistic disposition in the mental life of women” (412). Bonaparte argues that “Nevertheless, some homeopathic dose of masochism remains needful for acceptance of even the most erotogenic feminine penetration” (444).

⁴³ See Smirnoff, Deleuze, Zizek, Bersani (91).

Similarly, suspense, *not* coming and the re-mapping of pleasure in new ways link masochism to cybersex.⁴⁴ Moreover, S/M as a game—as a sphere in which the “normal” ideas of crime and punishment are suspended, a sphere in which consequence does not work as it should—offers yet another bond. Lastly, the status of S/M as literary—as grounded in literature, specifically the literature of de Sade and Sacher-Masoch—tie cyberspace and S/M together as textual experiences that, at the same time, cannot be reduced to simple and safe interactions. Sadie Plant, in fact, argues that “‘SM orgasm’ [is] an intensity uncoupled from genital sex and engaged only with the dismantling of selves. This is the cybersexuality to which all sexuality tends: a matter of careful engineering, the setting of scenes, the perfection of touch; the engineering of communication” (32). Sharon McRae more cautiously argues that “Bersani’s discussion of masochism might be one useful model for the kind of intensity that some individuals experience during virtual sex” (84). This is not to say that cyberspace is another manifestation of masochism, or that masochism is a form of cyberspace. It is to say that the similarities between cybersex and masochism, between cyberspace and masochistic rituals, and the prevalence of BDSM on the net are not accidental. Rather, they point to

⁴⁴ Deleuze argues that masochistic sexuality is a disavowal of sexuality: “the masochistic process of disavowal is so extensive that it affects sexual pleasure itself; pleasure is postponed for as long as possible and is thus disavowed. The masochist is therefore able to deny the reality of pleasure at the very point of experiencing it, in order to identify with the ‘new sexless man’” (33).

ways in which masochism and real-time fiber optic communications seek to re-map pleasure and bodies and to re-map human interactions.⁴⁵

So what does the confluence of masochism and cyberspace enable?⁴⁶ What relation between self and other does masochism imply? At the risk of being reductive,

⁴⁵ There are, of course, significant differences between masochism and cybersex. However, masochism cannot be cordoned off as “real” and cybersex as virtual, especially given that masochism takes its name from the literary works of Sacher-Masoch and that important psychoanalytic studies, such as Freud’s “A Child is Being Beaten” privilege masochistic fantasies that have no “real” counterpart.

⁴⁶ One could interpret the confluence of masochism and cyberspace, as an online attempt to reconstruct the lost Master. With the “postmodern” loss of master narratives and the Master-Signifier, individuals (who are as Lyotard puts it “nodes” in the networks) seek to recreate the Master in their interactions. Such a simplistic interpretation, however, fails to account for the ways in which masochism works both to establish and de-establish the master. Masochists not only submit to their masters, they also seduce their masters and set the (contractual) terms for their submission. According to Victor Smirnoff, masochism is about the *granting* of power:

The masochist is not seeking to be killed or destroyed, but to be branded. Not by the absolute power of the other, but by the fictitious power that he has bestowed on the executioner: a power that the victim has, by way of contract, forced on the executioner, who can exercise it only at the victim’s order.

Masochism is a defiance. It is expressed through the masochist’s apparently passive behaviour, by his compliance with the inflicted pain and humiliation, by his claims of being enslaved and used. In fact, the masochist knows that his position is simply the result of his own power: the power of endowing the executioner with the obligation of playing the role of a master, when indeed he is only a slave, a creation of the masochist’s desire. (69)

In Smirnoff’s construction of masochism as defiance, the masochist always retains control. However, if the common understanding of masochism as the complete submission of the slave to the master places too much power in the hands of the Master, Smirnoff’s definition places too much power in the chains of the slave, disavowing the fact that things often go out of control, that once one is a slave one *is* a slave. S/M is perhaps structured as a game, but like cyberspace, it is a game that comes with no guarantees and that exceeds the logic of real/fantasy. One can always receive unexpected/unwanted rope burn.

masochism enables *jouissance* from a position of suffering or subjection. Masochism implies a pleasure in becoming undone. Although the psychoanalytic and non-psychoanalytic interpretations of masochism vary wildly, they all seem to agree that the *enjoyment* of the masochist defines masochism as such.⁴⁷ It is not only that, as Victor Smirnoff argues, “the essential phenomena of masochism may well be not in the suffering but in the position of the masochist in the masochistic relationship,” but also that the masochist *enjoys* this position (63). It is this enjoyment that makes masochism seem so incomprehensible, that seemingly makes it defy rationality and evolution.⁴⁸ Rather than following the pleasure principle, masochism stems from the Death Drive; it is pleasure that seeks to rip apart the subject.⁴⁹ Also, masochism implies a relationship between self and other in which the self seeks to destroy the distance between self and other.

⁴⁷ Pleasure in physical pain is not considered to be the founding characteristic precisely because of masochism’s literary character and because of moral masochism, which does not need physical pain in order to engender pleasure. Moral masochism also shows that a loving relationship between tormentor and masochist is not necessary, since the moral masochist will turn his cheek whenever he can. See Freud’s definition of the three types of masochism (erotogenic, feminine and moral) in “The Economic Problem of Masochism.”

⁴⁸ For more on the problem of masochism, see Freud’s “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Feminine masochism—as opposed to other categories of masochism—has been linked to biological necessity (see Bonaparte’s “Some Biopsychical Aspects of Sado-Masochism”).

⁴⁹ According to Freud in “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” masochism is the residue of the Death drive: if the drive towards destruction is normally projected outwards in order for the organism to survive, the remainder of this drive which attacks itself is what has not been adequately projected outwards.

Annie Reich, Gilles Deleuze, and Leo Bersani all argue that masochism marks a desire to destroy the boundaries between self and other. Annie Reich, analyzing masochistic women, writes that:

We might also understand this union [sexual intercourse between masochist and the unworthy male] with the great and mighty as the magic fusion with the mother. It is like relapsing to a time in which the ego is about to be formed and when the boundaries between the ego and the outer world were still blurred and only painfully experienced in moments of frustration and tension (427)

This union attempts to return to the state before the mirror stage in which self and other were just barely distinguishable, if at all. This union stems, according to Reich, from the inability of the masochistic woman to maintain a healthy relationship to objects/others (431). This union, though, also signals a failure of Oedipal sexuality: the masochist, unwilling or unable to distinguish self from other, desires completeness and communication without the injunctions of the *name-of-the father*. Does the jacked-in subject, then, similarly seek to fuse with the other to which s/he is temporarily attached via fiber optic cables that bind? Could it be that the physical indistinguishability between the text of the other and the self (the typed text on the screen is the same no matter who types it) leads the self to desire no distinguishability between typer and typee, while still allowing for communication, while still, that is, within a symbolic matrix?

The repudiation of the Oedipal father and the remapping of the symbolic order endemic to masochism offer interesting theoretical possibilities for understanding alternative symbolic matrices. According to Deleuze:

The masochist experiences the symbolic order as an intermaternal order in which the mother represents the law under certain prescribed conditions; she generates the symbolism through which the masochist expresses himself. It is not a case of identification with the mother, as is mistakenly believed. The threefold division of the mother literally expels the father from the masochistic universe. (63-4)

Within the masochistic universe, the law and genital sexuality represented by the father are repudiated and warded off by the contract, since “the function of the masochistic contract is to invest the mother-image with the symbolic power of the law” (76). In other words, the “certain prescribed conditions” to which Deleuze refers are conditions prescribed by a contract:

In opposition to the institutional superego he [the masochist] now establishes the contractual partnership between the ego and the oral mother. Intermediate between the first mother and the third mother, or lover, the oral mother functions as an image of death, holding up to the ego the cold mirror of its twofold rejection. But death can only be imagined as a second birth, a parthenogenesis from which the ego reemerges, liberated from the superego as well as from sexuality. (130-1)

For Deleuze, masochism inaugurates a “new man,” a new subject outside the rigors of the law, and this new man is born of the mother alone.

The *enjoyment* of masochism comes through zealously following the law.

Deleuze argues that the masochist is not only re-born through the mother, but also extracts the pleasure that has been sequestered by the law: “the very law which forbids the satisfaction of a desire under threat of subsequent punishment is converted into one which demands the punishment first and then order that the satisfaction of the desire should necessarily follow upon the punishment” (88-9). Suffering is not the cause of pleasure itself but the necessary precondition for achieving it (89). Only by taking the punishment, then, can the pleasure—the *jouissance*—be extracted from the law. This partnership between mother and child works together to destabilize the “normal” means of reaching the symbolic (the Oedipus complex). Thus masochism is an attempt at self-destruction that seeks to obliterate *lack* and that seeks to enjoy what s/he had to give up in order to join the symbolic in the first place. However, rather than simply allowing a

return to the former state of identification with the mother, it is also a means of entering into the social, but, instead of exchange (exchange of the mother), here the symbolic matrix relies on a contractual agreement. It represents the never-reached but best conclusion to the prisoner's dilemma—if both partners say nothing and work together, they both win.

Later, Deleuze, with Felix Guattari, would argue that the masochist is a body without organs. Elaborating the masochistic refusal of *lack* (lack of the phallic mother), they would argue that the masochist unties pleasure and desire (where desire is based on lack):

The masochist's suffering is the price he must pay, not to achieve pleasure, but to untie the pseudobond between desire and pleasure as an extrinsic measure. Pleasure is in no way something that can be attained only by a detour through suffering; it is something that must be delayed as long as possible because it interrupts the continuous process of positive desire. There is, in fact, a joy that is immanent to desire as though desire were filled by itself and its contemplations, a joy that implies no lack or impossibility and is not measured by pleasure since it is what distributes intensities of pleasure and prevents them from being suffused by anxiety, shame, and guilt. In short, the masochist uses suffering as a way of constituting a body without organs and bringing forth a plane of consistency of desire. (166)

The masochist, then, paradoxically destroys the notion of the human as an *organism* by denying the integrity of the organic body and thus remapping fullness onto the body.

Masochists through their pain engage pleasure without anxiety, shame and guilt, as do jacked-in subjects. Their pain brings about a consistency of desire.

Leo Bersani explores further the potential for masochism to undo the organism, while at the same time maintaining some form of connection between bodies. Looking at gay S/M relationships, he argues that masochism marks “the human subject's potential for a *jouissance* in which the subject is momentarily undone” (Bersani 100). As Leo

Bersani argues, masochism allows for a sexual self-shattering. Speaking of the *jouissance* “that transforms sadism into masochism,” he argues that this *jouissance* is a form of “self-shattering” in that it disrupts the ego’s coherence and dissolves its boundaries (101). Although skeptical of claims that S/M undoes power by playing with power, he muses that “we may also conclude that perhaps inherent in the very exercise of power is the temptation of its renunciation—as if the excitement of a hyperbolic self-assertion, of an unthwarted mastery over the world and, more precisely, brutalization of the other, were inseparable from an impulse of self-dissolution” (96). Working from the hypothesis that the best resistance to disciplinary power is a “counter-productivity,” Bersani argues that:

Masochistic *jouissance* is hardly a political corrective to the sadistic use of power, although the self-shattering I believe to be inherent in that *jouissance*, although it is the result of surrender to the master, also makes the subject unfindable as an object of discipline. Psychoanalysis challenges us to imagine *a nonsuicidal disappearance of the subject*—or, in other terms, to dissociate masochism from the death drive. ... in still other terms, can a masochistic surrender operate as effective (even powerful) resistance to coercive designs? (99)

The promise of masochism, as a counter-productive sexuality, is the promise to make the body “unfindable” to disciplinary power. This is also the promise of the cyber-body. Against Stone and Turkle, I argue that the “fragmented” cyber-body does not imply a subject dominated by Multiple Personality Disorder, but rather a body that is shattered to the extent that it cannot formulate the personalities necessary to be multiple. Cyber-sexuality as posited by cyber-theorists/citizens, or as posited by engineering (the relentless connections between male-to-female connectors), denies the boundaries between self and other, not so the net becomes an extension of the self, but rather so that

the net overwhelms the self. The net turns the self into fibers that contain the same materials as before, but is not immediately recognizable or separable.

However, the fact that these M*s are operated by corporations interested in building better computers and interested in using these interactions as a play/experiment ground show that, if these technologies allow the remains of the self to remain unfindable to disciplinary power, they do so only by immersing these shards in a system that is profoundly findable and examinable. Like masochism, fiber optic networks promises counter-productivity through surrender to the master. They promise unfindability only within a system of perfect visibility. This is the paradox that structures sexuality in the age of fiber optics, that structures online contact. Without one, you cannot have the other.

TYING IT TOGETHER

To return to the question of fiber optic networks, fiber optics' transformation of windows and glass offers a key metaphor for the transformation of the self and the symbolic enabled by networks. Fiber optics takes glass—that which in the past maintained a discrete window between self and other, that which enabled the subject—and transforms it into a flexible, unrecognizable cable, while still allowing light to flow. Through an engineering “miracle,” it makes new use of light and enlightenment, so that the light that flows can more tightly bind. Sexuality in the age of fiber optics resolutely refuses a mind/body split. There is no bodiless mind in cybersex, but rather, through the digits and the words of another, lines of sensation wash over the sedentary yet digitally active physical form. Cybersex merges body and text through fibers that bind. One can

no longer “look out the window” any more than one can look through a fiber optic cable, but this glass aperture exposes and floods the home, threatening to erase the distinction between home and garden, suburb and city.

However, as much as fiber optics work to connect users, they also allow for a powerful disidentification. The fact that the jacked-in subject works as an “I am not that” also perpetuates notions of “safe” contact. Not all forms of the Internet allow for this type of sexuality. The more “normal” forms such as email and WWW do not require such interactions, but rather nicely rely on pornography and masturbation, although those who do “date” through email similarly note that relationships occur much faster online than in person. Regardless, it is through the notion of *meeting* in cyberspace, with all the difficulties of location that it implies, that a revolutionary notion of merging can take place. Perhaps someday theorists will promote face-to-face communication as a safe replacement for cybersexual relations. Perhaps.

Fiber optics—the use of light and glass in a way not initially intuitive or “correct,” glass that carries light that cannot be seen, and glass that is as fibrous as a rope—inaugurate a new form of communication that similarly make the human manipulable and fibrous. The key lies not in content—not in information—but rather in a unique combination of glass and light, used in ways that are not conventional or expected that make the relation between the human and its former manifestations difficult, yet possible. It is from this flexible model of the material and the ineffable, of the solid and the liquid that a model for the new human comes. It is through a heating process that makes materials flow and harden in new ways that a new window opens, while, at the same time, the functionality of the window seems to disappear.

The possibilities opened up by fiber optic networks are not simply liberatory. As I have argued in chapters two and three, they do not represent a utopian public sphere nor a frontier for the mind. Rather, they fulfill certain promises (no visible markers of race, no referentiality), by also transforming the meaning or end of these promises. They highlight what these promises could never deliver, what these promises glossed over, namely the dependence of the body on flesh, democracy on pornography, and bodilessness on representation. Moreover, the self-shattering they do seem to offer as a means to escape disciplinary power is itself inscribed in a system that keeps perfect track of these shards. This is not to say that the possibility of escape and shattering is a sham, or delusory. This is to say that, if the question that faced Foucault and others at the beginning of the eighties was: how to escape disciplinary power without reverting to regulatory power?, the question that faces us is: how to transform the binary between self-shattering/perfect visibility? That is, “counter-productive” sexualities, while marking the promise of fiber optic networks, also mark a moment complete immersion, also mark a moment of complete publicity. Again, in the age of fiber optics, publicity is experienced as sexuality, and, as I have argued in this chapter, sexuality marks both a resistance to disciplinary power—a moment when power seems to be subverted and its *jouissance* stolen—and a moment in which the subject dissolves into a stream of an overwhelming search light. A moment in which those effectively in the dark, those not connected, seem irrevocably lacking, seem condemned to fall from the map entirely. A moment in which privacy seems to recede into cryptography, into secrecy.