CHAPTER 4

HYBRID, VIRTUAL-CYBERSPACE BODIES –
THE BODIES OF URBAN INDIA

Through the static of mediation and sensory bombardment, the body hovers below us as an obstacle to our virtual realities. What is the impact of artificial systems on the body? Is it a purely technical revolution or does the interface between body and the machine transform our environment, radicalizing our critical consciousness? In order to attempt to address technology's relationship to the body, elements of visual media produced over a range of time need to be assessed. The answers to the above questions regarding our future as bodies living in simulated spaces are embedded in the non-verbal data that we have produced with the technology of our time.

The artist's role has shifted from image-maker to editor. The distancing of the screen has happened and the transfiguration of the body as image. The global village is now inhabited, and art has become increasingly more ephemeral, cosmic and illusory. The youth of India and elsewhere in the world has changed into remote control artists, clad in cybersurf gear, who sit stoic some 8-16 hours per day, immobile in front of a screen, save the quick twirl of an orbit mouse? Our Gen-X youth is oblivious to the everyday, interested only in paranormal hyper-reality. The sense of corporeal loss due to our interaction with machines is a by-product of image reproduction.

This coalescence of virtual space and bodies forms a televisual body. Turetzky alerts us to the fusion of the body and the machine-our extended extremities for data collection. His interpretation of the montage of images that enter via aural and visual sensation is enabled through an invisible interface.
The digital revolution, which converted our analogue monotheistic reality into a digital pluralistic universe, yielded the global network. The bombardment of electronic transmissions has not only consumed the work of art but also of our bodies, ourselves. In a mouse click sounds, images and text download to our desktops and feed us mediated information. Our bodies are slumped into chairs motionless, offering minimal input into transactions. Estrangement, remoteness, and pluralistic individuality land us each into our own cubicles staring blankly at a monitor while surfing the web. There is a global initiative to homogenize cultural consumption and yield a universal matrix.

What of the body that dangles below cyberspace. A space that affords room for the other and denounces the authority of pre-established voices without the restrictions of the body. The increasing ephemerality of works constructed of projections, illusions and holograms reflect our own image of ourselves. However, visual thinking has expanded with the advent of the hyper-real. Email has just replaced the letter, word-processing the page, and CD-ROM the book and record, and iTV (interactive web broadcast) has replaced TV. We are no longer the one projecting the gaze onto the object; we have become the object projected upon. The tool is an active agent in the rendering of an image. It analyzes our data for us, offers options and responds to our decisions. Our power is then choice; we are editors of a prescribed subset. Our access to different subsets is defined by economic standing and technical ability. The deadened social space has been transformed into a cyberculture. The empowerment to be in touch remotely and instantaneously has also built relationships with other "bodies’.

The Web is our new landscape and the spill over of simulacra into our physical surroundings is immense. One could argue that the psychedelic drug culture of the generation prior has been replaced with hypnotic digital culture today. The escape into alternative realms of psychological existence is still the goal. This dematerialization creates similar destabilization of accepted
constructs. The computer processes data equivocally and the boundaries between people, places and things have collapsed. Our market is a cache of hybridization and our rules of aesthetics have been bent, compounded and transformed. It is an endless return with no exit. However, the question that remains for the next, is a notion of freedom, has technology freed us or put us in to chains of mechanization.

The body writes itself in immersive space as a dynamic event in the act of unfolding. This is the body in the space of the text performing the text, in real time, and enacting, not movement as theatre, but movement as performance. That is to say, this is not movement for an audience, but a dynamic and personal act that a browser performs. Performance is a form that has been favoured by many feminist artists, in part at least no doubt because gender is so readily foregrounded and problematized in the body of the performer. As a dynamic and transitory art form, performance is ethereal, existing both inside and outside of time and space, inside and outside of representation and the real, inside and outside remembering. Constructing a 'second time,' the time of re-turn or re-visitation to the same material that is not a repetition.

Hence body is an Interface, according to Hayles; the body is the mediator between technology and discourse. It does this by birthing new experiential frameworks that are boundary markers for the creation of corresponding discursive systems. These transformances of the body are all about emergence, social networks, agencies, hybridities and complexity as ordering principles. Entropy is transformed through our hybridized interactions with data and information in space-time into complexity. There is a hybridization created in the body culture globally due to excessive dependency of media and virtual environments. Indian body dynamism is subjected to this change of body hybridity and the performance dynamism has changed a lot in recent performances which we can see in Theatre performances.
4.1 Human computer interaction—Technological revolution with body in Theatre spaces

As a way of envisioning futuristically appropriate player experiences, on the emergence of participatory virtual environments as a metamaterial phenomena resulting from the confluence of aleatory, tribal playspaces and human-computer interaction (HCI).

Computers are everywhere in the theatre. They run lighting boards, sound systems, and enable scenographic projections. It is, however, out of the ordinary to invite a computer to collaborate as a creative theatre partner. HCI is a discipline concerned with the design, evaluation, and implementation of interactive computing systems for human use and with the study of the major phenomena surrounding them.

Interactive theatre is a playful endeavor and changes the dynamics of the performer/spectator relationship by putting responsibility on everyone to become more active participants, with or without digital intervention.

The concept of “embodiment” is important to recognize, especially as it pertains to input and output symmetries of control and display, or participatory “interaction” in digital media.

One of the ways that these constraints and resistance can be overcome is by moving away from real-space as a theatrical environment and relocating the aleatory, tribal playspace, along with the characters, and actions of the random, non-linear narrative, into the original HCI domain of the computer. It means bypassing the diffidence of assembled audiences by allowing humans to interact with other humans via their computers in privately accessed but still-aleatory rituals. These new terrains are virtual worlds such as Second Life where the rich space of HCI is charged with the potential for embodied performances within non-linear structural and aesthetic ecologies.
The contemporary Indian Theatre has unique productions which thematize issues of gender, sexuality, and changing social relations in a world of neo-liberalist globalization. The plays are particularly known for the ways in which the actors, who keep a Brechtian, distance from the characters, impersonated and share some directorial privileges (sample theoretical discourses in stylized multi-media settings (SHOW IMAGE). In the critical reception of Pollesch’s theatre, this “discursivity” is usually cast as a move away from narrative, that is: as deconstructing, or even radically undoing, plot as a hierarchical organization and explanation of events, coherence, and closure.

In particular Indian contemporary performance plays are interested in the ways in which these global changes affect technologies of subjectivity.

Referencing Homi Bhabha, the resulting genre “hybrid” wins its cultural power exactly through the productive, non-harmonizing, negotiation of its divergent elements.

4.2 Net browsing –virtual world

Let us examine how the virtual world communication which has become a inevitable part of modern life around the world, and how it affects the inner mechanism of a body, which in turn effects the performance and performer.

Much real-world communication is nonverbal, consisting of physical actions such as gestures, facial expressions, vocal tone, etc. Many social signals, especially, are communicated this way: subtle (or not so subtle) expressions of approval, status recognition, comprehension, etc. Unlike the written word, which is deliberately produced and passes through much conscious filtering, nonverbal expressions are often made subconsciously, often revealing a great deal about their maker’s ideas and opinions.
Expression has many social roles. It is an integral part of speech, conveying cues about turn-taking and attention (it communicates emotion, both real and feigned; it is the fundamental channel for social communication, signalling agreement, doubt, sympathy, etc.

This sort of expressive gesture is missing from today’s text-based on-line environments. A number of researchers have studied the social effects of this lack, as well as some innovative attempts to reintroduce social cues. The remedying of this situation is a very active research area, both in the creation of facial and gestural interfaces and in the perception of gestural input.

A growing number of studies of faces and facial expression in computer environments provide very useful insights into how these reactions are transferred to the computer environment looked at viewer's responses to computer interfaces with simulated, human-like faces. They found that people responded to a facial interface in a more socialized way: they attributed personality to the face and presented themselves more positively in interactions with a facial rather than text display. This is consistent with findings that people very easily and ``incurably'' apply social norms and rules to their interactions with computers.

These experiments also point out the importance of evaluating all of the effects of a face in the interface. A face, even a simple cartoon face, will convey numerous cues, about its emotional state or attentiveness, etc., even if none were meant. If the goal is to have an interface that can, say, convey a set of emotional states, or turn-taking cues, a facial image may be the solution, but it will also affect the character of the interaction in other, complex ways.

Do further analogies exist between trends in science to contextualize the emergence of this new paradigm in the landscape of the theatre? Does interactive digital theatre, like Theatresports and Forum, have the power to
transform a user group into a new discipline within theatre or is it entirely within the realm of new media? In that light, how might it compare with the previous media phenomenon of broadcast television or cinema?

Can theatre get over its professional insecurities and think of its legacy in terms other than as a cumulative history of real-space events? Even in its current state of infancy, interactive digital theatre and digital video games draw heavily upon the influences of theatre. In theory, they may well enhance the culture and creativity of theatre in ways that are just making themselves known. Virtual worlds can provide a lively and exciting playspace for aleatory, tribal, liminoid spaces. Spontaneously created scripts can be acted out by embodied characters who have, piloting their actions and decisions, humans at their computers setting action objectives. The humans at their computers may also move those resolution-generating practices into networks of trust to evolve knowledge and promote social change. One thing that is certain: the revolution has already begun in the Indian Theatre explorations with digital spaces and human body interactions.

References


Turetzky, Philip (1993), "Televisual Bodies

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