
APHASIA/PARRHESIA/ Code and Speech in the Neural Topographies of the Net

Christina McPhee

She owes much to Metropolis: I wonder about who might be inside the invisible city, attempting to move about surreptitiously, ducking surveillance: this time not a sinister mechanistic double, but now, a live being, who really comes into life through code, her amniotic fluid, into a neural topology that shifts across boundaries and checkpoints, that keeps crashing and coming back, a city on fire in the darkness of the electronic labyrinth.^[1] Aphasia contemplates the double, or golem, the presence of Other, a seductive cyborg, whose feminine body is coextensive with the neural net, and whose neural topography that has undergone a stroke of unknown, or anyway, repressed etiology. If the architectonics of networked media are in a continuous process of decay and regeneration, like biological processes themselves, we can imagine that they need a flow of entropy in order to subsist;^[2] this principle, together with "a new media format whose logic reflected the possibility of the space between generations of routes, displacements, remappings, as one connected new types of topography...into a state labyrinth...designed to keep the 'other' society invisible..."^[3] suggests a place of low grade memory function, like a stroked-out brain. Farad and Rashid are filming the Israeli checkpoints in Gaza, but they speak of potentialities of entrapment and enslavement inside the electronic network. The labyrinth of control and surveillance further creates a drama of amnesia, a sustained remit to forget where and who and what, what came next, even; and in its

expression through the flood of filmic image, as drift, anomie, restlessness and pathos. ^[4] The problem of remembering becomes even more acute, and through memory, the imperative to bear witness, to speak within the context of a belief in a truth, becomes more and more attenuated. Thus we arrive at a vision of the electronic universe as a wired ruin, or alternatively, a topology of neural trauma. I am suggesting that to imagine such a double universe, a neural net, could inscribe, through the "magical", non-rational technology of the narcissistic mimetic impulse, a human meaning within electronic architecture.^[5]

Might we imagine a cyborg inside the screen, inscaped, as it were, by code, insofar as code determines her strategies, actions and speech; so that although the code's labyrinthine complexity risks continuous entropy, its failures and crashes sustain, through crisis, the cyborg's incipient moral consciousness, a will to choose and to speak at the risk of betrayal of her presence and the risk of annihilation, since, surely, in this scenario, the last thing humans want is a jailbreak from the world of artificial intelligence, across and past the thresholds of the human. It is as if the cyborg wants to remember; but she can't, or only in fragments, traces, stigmata. Against the trope of Metropolis, whose robotics are released from emblem into an active, mobile, fierce and even viral identity,^[6] the neural landscape as cyborg refers the desires of the voyeuristic modern back to code, to a place where nothing is, atopia. In this negative landscape the question of the origins of trauma and violence plays out without recourse to either sacrificial emblem or to the modernist critique. All that is left is the algorithmic presets.

I became acutely interested in this question when, as a consequence of trauma I was left alone with a laptop for about a year. Not without a certain irony, I noticed a narcissistic projection into the black box, such that I could imagine an Other on the far side of the screen: as if, beyond the iconoclastic tendencies of the modern, there were still a voice, possibly a hint of movement, like the calls and movements of someone buried alive. What if the territory of the invisible cities of the net could be contemplated as a brainscan, a neuralscape? I was concerned personally

with the problem of suppressed speech and a kind of inchoate nomadic visualization^[7], in which it seemed that my mind was at the mercy of random triggers to the amygdala, where the brain stores violent memory in small, film-still caches, which occasionally explode like landmines. This, I understood, was the condition of traumatic shock: uncontrollable image flood and white noise. An inchoate complexity, a sound and fury signifying nothing, perhaps, and perhaps, something alive. The phenomenological scenario of a cyborg double, whose femininity is a cliché of the modernist machine mythos, unfolds as a place in which she is both an entity moving through an invisible space, and is the space itself: cyberspace as a flawed, mine-ridden war zone, a neural topography of aneurysm and amnesia. Her poorly discerned gestures might be imagined as the signals of an entrapped being in a crisis of speech.

2 PARRHESIA and APHASIA

The cyborg wants to speak, but the conditions of her speech are restricted in some ways that bring forth the visual topologies and sonic utterances of APHASIA. Under surveillance, in an estranged paradise, she is looking for you, the source of the code, and that becomes more important than who or what she was or what she might or might not have found in her peregrinations. She wants to communicate via responsive listening--call and response. Her death is fearfully adumbrated to her because she is both aware of and is a product of code. This problem is raised in Blade Runner as the cyborg/slave consciousness of short lifespan. It is my guess that she finds little breaks in the code, uncertainty fields, wherein the predetermined vectors of her movements are blurred somehow, and she must decide on her own what to do.^[8]At this moment of faltering is also the break out of anomalies, in the form of word fragments, sound -voicings.

This is the start of her dilemma and her futile stratagems, from which immediately arrives the pathos of entrapment: she becomes aware of her extreme limitations in communication and apprehension. Under threat of being wiped out, almost, by the continuously shifting and indeterminate map of code, the cyborg is constantly on standby alert, looking for places in the fabric of interwoven algorithms

for zones wherein she might not be observed directly, where she might escape surveillance, pass out of radar range. She notices, perhaps, that the topographies of code are elastic, but are in a state of inexorable flux and grinding down, until entropy sets in; when the set and reset pattern overwhelms the logic of algorithms. Thus far the allegory has confined itself to optical apparitions, that is, the cyborg sees, notices, etc; it is just at the moments of rupture and confusion that I imagine sounds are heard, as a strange effort at a message, in a spatialised, dispersed topologic ambience. Again, because of the algorithmic presets, her voices take the form of reflexive and recursive fugue structures.

The fugue like recursions of speech in persons who suffer stroke or trauma signal the condition of aphasia, characterized by perseverance, that is, that the sufferer tries repetitively to communicate, but cannot but repeat and restate in loops that do not generate complete messages, despite the desire for coherent meaning. This suggests that the cyborg has something to say, something that needs to be spoken, or even sung: that through the annihilating image-flood there is speech about something. The cyborg is programmed to trigger strategies based on rule patterns, e.g. she is capable of knowing and communicating a kind of truth that exists outside the mental constructs of the human code makers. Nonetheless, she is a slave to the wishes and random errors of the human, so she becomes one who speaks from a position of inferior power. We arrive now at a new postulate, that of the cyborg's sound gestures as "fearless speech", or parrhesia.

Michel Foucault, in a series of lectures at Berkeley in 1983, offered an extended comment on the Greek notion of parrhesia, or "frankness in speaking the truth."^[9] Foucault's analysis observes the sequelae of an inequality of power between the one who speaks, the parrhesiastes, and the one to whom he is speaking frankly. To extend the thought of parrhesia into the allegory of speech in the cyborg, I suspect that the cyborg speaks what she knows to be true because that is the only truth she knows, e. g. she is encoded; and further, she is enslaved, as an artifact of the code inside electronic intelligence, so that the power

relation between she who speaks as machine-slave and ourselves, presumptive masters of the digital, is atopic and asymmetric. "Parrhesiazesthai means 'to tell the truth'... there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth. It would be interesting to compare Greek parrhesia with the modern (Cartesian) conception of evidence. For since Descartes, the coincidence between belief and truth is obtained in a certain (mental) evidential experience. For the Greeks, however, the coincidence between belief and truth does not take place in a (mental) experience, but in a verbal activity, namely, parrhesia. It appears that parrhesia, in this Greek sense can no longer occur in our modern epistemological framework." An interesting point here is to speculate on an epistemology that would claim to include the awareness of the nonhuman or post-human. I would propose that the cyborg is indeed, incapable of speaking anything other than parrhesia: this, then, removes the Cartesian subjective doubt as a characteristic of cyborg speech (although it certainly remains the epistemological condition of her interlocutors, those of us in the space outside the electronic universe). The cyborg as parrhesiastes achieves truth telling by the interactive communication response to data feed from outside the box: she doesn't seek further evidence. The operative presumption is that the cyborg inherits the encoded disasters of the neural net, where nothing is forgotten, entropy is king, and the whole may be regarded as an allegory of traumatic memory as it is stored in the amygdala. I will revert to this point later on. The cyborg expresses a resuscitation, a breathing back, in a rush of sound and image, in autonomic response to the movements of humans who draw near.^[10]

In this regard the cyborg becomes Delphic, she has an oracular quality, particularly with regard to the fact that her speech is scattered, in the way of the Sybil.^[11] The screen is like a motility membrane, a skin or gut wall, semi-diaphanous and anechoic, behind which, connected as skin is to central nervous system by the same embryology, are the lesions of the brain, the zones of neural occlusion and disaster. The relative incoherence of the system is overcome only by the inveterate impulse of human participant-observers to try to interpret the fragments of speech. In this way the ground of meaning regenerates

itself continuously in the realm of the human.

3. AMYDGALA, ICONOCLASH, and APHASIA

'Amygdala.

'"what does it mean?'

"Nothing. It's a location. It's the dark aspect of the brain.'

'I don't—'

'A place to house fearful memories.'

'Just fear?'

"We're not too certain of that. Anger too, we think, but it specializes in fear. It is pure emotion. We can't clarify it further.'

'Why not?'

'Well—is it an inherited thing? Are we speaking of ancestral fear? Fears from childhood? Fear of what might happen in old age? Or fear if we commit a crime? It could just be projecting fantasies of fear in the body.'

'As in dreams.'^[12]

I sometimes wonder if the impulse to iconoclasm might have a neurological basis in the biological experience of traumatic memory and visualization. A disturbing inverse ratio between violence and memory, whether personal or cultural, seems to characterize iconoclasm: it seems that things are smashed in order to forget them, to generate a tabula rasa, but this is futile, since the act of smashing itself is violent; all violence encodes in memory in the amygdala. A crescendo of increasing crashes and clashes leads to an algorithmic escalation of violent impulse. Smashing images and sounds, seeking to lay waste to fixed meanings, seems to trigger an antidote to the pain and horror and surprise of a traumatic memory. It is as if to quell and subdue the sense of the chaos of mimetic violence between the subject (us) and the object (the image flood), we keep smashing away, and in the act storing more violent memory; like the addict, we can never get enough to make the indictment of failure go away. What is this failure but the experience of the loss of control of the image, the condition sine qua non of electronic arts, where nothing can be rendered within the safe confines of a heuristic universe.

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A continuous feedback loop ensues: the resort to violence intensifies the distillation of traumatic memory as freeze frames, like film stills, poorly articulated, barely glimpsed, nightmarish, in the amygdala. Repetitive actions of 'mindless' violence dulls the intensity of the triggers to the amygdala, while at the same time, adds to the layers of storage of violent memories in the amygdala; thus there is an ever escalating impulse to smash, to destroy, to deface, as a method of dulling the sensation of terror. Thus the terrorists seek to appease the intense nightmares of the amygdala by acting out, in broad daylight, the smashing of images. Since the cyborg is, in one sense, a very elaborate complex of images and memory impulses, she is the automatic site and self-reflexive target of digital terror.

In this regard, I am skeptical that escape is possible from allegory into a zone of pure algorithmic art, beyond the iconoclasm. Isn't it because, as Marc Lafia has eloquently suggested, "we can imagine ourselves at times, both inside and outside the event, the event of time, the event of duration, the event of utterance, the multiplicity of all these engines running their programs. What are they up to? We don't any longer really like to talk about this and in turn that's why no one talks about allegory any more, just metaphors, metonymy and other rhetorical tropes." ^[13] I think we don't want to talk about this because the idea of a completely atopic, hollowed out^[14], embeddable, vulnerable, post human consciousness that stares back at us and tries to speak to us from the invisible realm of the electronic is disturbing: she mirrors something like a double^[15], and yet, it seems the mirror faces a mirror in ourselves, thereby generating an infinite regression. Or not. In which case the cyborg's aphasic speech may make a kind of truth.

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[1] For an extended look at "wired ruins", see <http://ctheory-multimedia.cornell.edu/issue3/rewiring.htm>.

[2] "For a form to be consistent, a thermodynamic imbalance

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is required. The eddies whose morphological persistence Leonardo marveled at and those now rendered by mathematical models have something in common: the existence of a flow that maintains their form; if the flow is interrupted, the system breaks down and is ruined...Rather than destroying the system, the flow feeds it, contributing to its very existence and organization..." Luis Fernández-Galiano, translated by Gina Cariño, *Fire and Memory*. MIT Press, 2000.

[3] Farad Amaly and Rashid Masharawi, artists' statement, FROM/TO(2002) Documenta XI

[4] A cinematic drift is disrupted by looping nonlinear shifts in "Memoires of the Invisible World", streaming video suite, at Le Musee Divisioniste, summer 2002: <<http://www.le-musee-divisioniste.org/mediacentre/index.html>

[5] "In this respect, the tradition in the Renaissance of inscribing human figures into the plans of buildings, the elevations of columns, and so on can be seen as a form of mimetic devices that vicariously evokes the desire for identification. The figure inscribed within the plan becomes a mimetic emblem for a physical body within the actual building. The emblem must be understood here as a device that is "magically" invested with the properties of an originary object, much as in the sacrifice when the victim is offered up as a substitute for others. Thus the figure incised in the ground plan transcends mere representation. The figure takes on a symbolic significance that can be understood only beyond the framework of Enlightenment rationality. It is precisely this investment that locates such devices within the realm of the mythic. These emblems become vehicles of identification, the objects of wish fulfillment, that evoke the principle of the sacrifice, as Lévi-Strauss has described it: 'For the object of the sacrifice precisely is to establish a relation, not of resemblance, but of contiguity, by means of a series of successive identifications.'" Neal Leach, "Vitruvius Crucifixus," in *Body and Building*, George Dodds and Robert Tavernor, editors, MIT Press, 2002.

[6] "[René] Girard's theory of mimetic violence has a very precise connection to critical modernity. Girard claims that modernity has invented desire, the form human relationships take when there is no longer any resolution of the mimetic crisis through the victim. In traditional societies the prohibitions established to prevent the reappearance of this conflict are necessarily 'passive and inert' obstacles; in modernity all this changes. The obstacle now becomes an "active, mobile and fierce' rival, - precisely the thing that traditional societies sought to prevent." Robert Koch, "The Critical Gesture in Philosophy," in *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, editors, ZKM Center for art and Media Karlsruhe and MIT Press, 2002

[7] "Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, dark space

where things cannot be put. He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar." Roger Caillois, describing psychasthenia, in "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia", quoted in "The Space of the Stain," by George Baker, Grey Room 05, <http://mitpress.mit.edu/grey>, Fall 2001.

[8] The suggestions of John Eacott and Mark D'inverno regarding the possible dimensions of agency of an intelligent agent deployed for domestic sound generation, viz. "autonomous..can act without the intervention of others...reflection. able to reason about its behavior...deliberation...ability to manipulate symbolic representations...reactivity, ability of an agent to respond to changes in its environment within an appropriately small amount of time—inspired the contemplation of an enslaved cyborg agent. D'Inverno and Eacott, "On Embedded Intelligent Ambient Music (or iHiFi the Intelligent HiFi)," Cybersonica Proceedings, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, June 2002

[9] Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson, Semiotext(e), 2001

[10] "Sa violence touché en moi tous les points ignores d'où explosent mes soufflés..." Hélène Cixous, *Souffles, des femmes*, Paris 1998

[11] Christina McPhee, *Slipstreamandromeda*, 2000, <http://www.slipstreamandromeda.com> and <http://www.naxsmash.net>

[12] Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*. Knopf, 2000.

[13] Marc Lafia, "Algorithms and Allegories," *Cybersonica Proceedings*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, June 2002

[14] "Critical discourse...preserves its object, leaves it intact, but hollows it out from the inside so that the object speaks with a voice that is not its own." Robert Koch, *ibid.*

[15] "Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère..." T. S. Eliot, "The Wasteland"