

**CHAPTER 1**

**IS OEDIPUS ONLINE? SURFING THE PSYCHE**



C. J. Jadlocki, *Synapse*, 1999.

In which light do mental images appear?

—Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension*

## I COMPUTE, THEREFORE I AM

Descartes was perhaps the first to worry about virtual reality, as he sat musing in front of the fire, wondering if the hand before him were “his” hand, and if he himself might not be a figment of someone else’s dream. He proceeded to cogitate himself into existence; but can we post-postmoderns follow his lead? After all, the rules have changed: today, when the first hand transplant recipient is sitting in front of his fire in suburban New Jersey, contemplating the hand at the end of his arm, he knows that it grew on someone else’s arm, a convict executed for murder. And he knows that this very hand can now connect him to any number of screen identities via his palm pilot, in a new age version of the fireside chat. Not only do Descartes’s questions—about identity, certainty, phantom limbs—still have legs today, but these questions have become more compelling in the virtual age.

In a lecture at Columbia University in 1998, Slavoj Žižek coined a millennial aphorism that foregrounds the equivocal status of human being in the information age: “We are what we want, in cyberspace.” This neo-Cartesian provocation, which recasts ontological status as an effect of virtual desire, suggests why some bimillennials are still reading Freud: to discover if our “posthuman” society has succeeded in substituting interface for face-to-face.

That the public imagination is increasingly prone to virtual seduction is obvious from the proliferation of programs about cyberromance on the talk-show circuit (even in France, highbrow culture maven Bernard Pivot recently featured couples who are divorcing because of virtual adultery). Science fiction takes the erotic fascination with technology to its logical conclusion, inventing literal sex objects. (Is there a stunning replicant in your future—the Standard Pleasure Model of *Blade Runner*, or a muscled *Terminator*, programmed to please—or even to run for office?)

Popular publications such as *Wired* and *Online* warn the new cybermasses that it is rough out there in the virtual world, teeming with pornographers and con artists. In 1984, the cult film *Lawnmower Man* first raised the question of virtual violence: when the woman is raped in a virtual sex game, has a crime been committed? Today, as the number of potential virtual contacts grows exponentially, hyperspace is increasingly haunted by a free-floating angst about our own accessibility to Anyone, Out There.

The latest high-tech mischief by hackers involves setting up fake viruses, then putting out the word over the Internet that a vicious new strain is loose online, set to go off at midnight. Hypertension has even invaded romper space: on the children’s cable network, a child psychologist warns kids about the dangers of the

new frontier: “Above all, don’t give out information about who you ‘really’ are. Use good sense, as you would in any public place.”

“Any public place”—cyberspace seems to have acquired the density of matter in the public imagination. But the part of the body that inhabits the cranium seems very worried about the fate of the rest of it in the virtual age. Is gray matter itself in imminent danger of being outwitted by hardware? (The epic battle between chess master Kasparov and the steely intelligence of Big Blue is marked by human pathos: Big Blue is the reigning champion as of this writing, with Kasparov begging for a rematch.) Are we really witnessing the demise of social being, as suggested by dystopian thinkers like Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio? Even many former fans of the techno-revolution and the postmodern “decentered subject” (notably Jean-François Lyotard and the Baudrillard of the 1980s) now express concerns about the addictive immediacy of virtual gratification, suggesting that oedipal models of intersubjective interaction no longer speak to the narcissistic realities of the information age. To couch these issues in Lacanian terms, we could say that cultural theorists are commenting on an eclipse of Lacan’s symbolic order by the imaginary order, even while predicting dire political consequences of the ascendancy of the image. This hyperbolic atmosphere of alarm suggests one good reason to continue to consult Freud in the age of paranoia, as the ur-theorist of angst.

Still, we have seen that Freud-bashing is a popular sport for millennial intellectuals. Surprisingly, we find even Slavoj Žižek (“We are what we want, in cyberspace”) among the tragic chorus discrediting the oedipal drama as outmoded family romance. His card-carrying Lacanian credentials notwithstanding, Žižek has remarked (in the aforementioned seminar) that “what gets lost in virtual communication is the very opacity of the Other.” But this assertion is worth contesting, for the opacity of the Other (the Other stands for all our “others” in their radical estrangement and impenetrability) founds both Freud’s and Lacan’s accounts of human being. Lacan even considers the “self” (or rather *le moi*, the illusory self-image) as its own Other, a mirage-identity that appears to be known only thanks to a delusion, a “misrecognition” (*méconnaissance*). For Lacan, the illusory nature of self-knowledge is already manifest in the primal scene of the mirror stage, when the young human first identifies itself in its reflection, but only by comparing the image in the mirror to other human beings in its visual field. The child’s original sense of identity, paradoxically, arises in a field of multiple Others, and crystallizes thanks only to an illusion, since the perception of the self is a mere image reflected at a distance. For Lacan, distance from and delusion about the “self” are actually constitutive of subjectivity (that is why Lacan’s diagram of the process presents the subject as a barred figure [§] from whom the unconscious

dimension is always hidden). The field of Others in which a human subject emerges is equally opaque, only ever provisionally understood by a self-alienating approximation, by mentally imagining “oneself” in the Other’s place.

But Žižek and his fellow travelers have argued that in today’s society, there is a loss of this opaque dimension between self and Other, an overexposure or flattening that has consequences in the social order. Žižek even maintains that the elision of mystery in the show-all culture of transparency may produce a totalitarian structure in which the Other may become, in his words, “fully contextualized” or transparent, laid bare. It follows that the totalitarian social field is by definition paranoia-inducing, since it aims to enforce the complete transparency of all subjects to a single monitoring point of view, a global disciplinary vantage point.

The currency of this version of postsociety suggests the compelling nature of the phantasms aroused by the virtual in our day, where drive as desire is replaced by drive as circuitry, and performativity is the new criterion of success unencumbered by ethics. This would seem to be consistent with the convention in theory equating today’s “postmodern” zeitgeist with a modality of surface, as opposed to the emphasis on depth (including the “depth psychology” of Freud) that characterizes the bygone “modern” mode. But is it really true that the instant gratification offered by virtual reality contributes to a collapse of enabling distance between self and Other? Is real human interaction inevitably occluded in the glare of onscreen life?

The alarm being sounded by many cultural theorists today stresses the fragility of the human psyche vulnerable to programming by information networks. And the vulnerability of the mind is often considered a correlate to the frailty of the human body, subject to colonization by deadly viruses, invasive experiments, or techno-mechanization. This anxiety is manifest in myriad sci-fi films about epidemics, invasion by aliens, or a throng of creepy undead (in new age classics such as *Outbreak*, the *Alien* series—even Michael Jackson’s 1980s *Thriller* video, itself rendering homage to the 1950s cult classic *The Night of the Living Dead*). Such cultural artifacts have become classics because they elaborate a thematic of incursion or penetration that speaks to us all in today’s techno-environment. In the near-future setting of the classic *Alien*, the threat is gestated in the spaceship’s circuitry, and subsequently infiltrates the innards of its crew; while in *Jurassic Park* and its progeny, the archaeological past—representing the literal “return of the repressed” as fossilized information—becomes a deadly threat to the present, thanks to manipulation of dinosaur DNA. Of course the technological threat to human convention is real as well as phantasmal, judging from the reaction to the first cloned human embryos. In 2001, the *New York Times* featured a spooky article on the possibilities of cloning a replacement for a lost child; while the cable Science Channel today

routinely airs documentaries on cryogenics, the “science” of freezing corpses to be revived one day when a cure for death is available. A documentary on the Discovery Channel (*Weird Science*, 2000) has even chronicled experiments on primate head transplants, aimed at eventually giving quadriplegics a recycled body from a brain-dead donor. The new techno-science thus lends a whole new materiality to separation anxiety, and raises perplexing questions about where “one” is located in a body composed of mechanical, borrowed, and renewable parts.

To be sure, the “yuk factor” accompanying these developments contributes to the reactionary tenor of panic theory today. But perhaps these new technological symptoms, inspired by the search for immortality, are merely the newest reaction formations against loss, inspired by third-millennium versions of age-old separation anxiety. In any case, it is somewhat disheartening to see progressive psychoanalytic theorists like Žižek adopt gloomy “posthuman” diagnoses wholesale, lending credence to the notion of the inexorable eclipse of the Lacanian symbolic by the imaginary. According to such accounts of our hyperoptical era, there is no longer an oedipal resolution by which human subjects emerge into social being, as Freud described—just a sustained pre-oedipal absorption in self and screen, where the subject remains glued to the Mother Board. As compelling as this account may be, psychoanalytic theorists ought to know better. For this is giving up on the radical aspect of Freud’s discovery of the unconscious, as well as Lacan’s description of the symbolic order as an intersubjective social domain, the very predication of the human in and through language (with language broadly construed as all instances of cultural interchange).

No theorist has raised these issues in more spectacularly paranoid terms than Jean Baudrillard, whose work—from *Simulacra and Simulations* to *The Transparency of Evil*—has decried the post-oedipal era of information circulation, where the simulacrum (virtual image) is the new cultural currency.<sup>1</sup> For Baudrillard, the network of simulacra no longer conforms to the three Lacanian categories of human experience: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. Baudrillard argues, rather, that the “imaginary” and the “real” have now merged in the hyperreal. (This is a virtual image that no longer just represents an object, but actually replaces it. Baudrillard’s example is the transparent grid computer drawings of automobiles in commercials, where the auto is never shown.) Baudrillard’s first discussions of simulacra two decades ago now seem impressively ahead of their time, since today the whole World Wide Web could be considered an instance of Baudrillard’s hyperreal domain. And Baudrillard, like Žižek, seems to think that the symbolic order, as a function of opacity or maintained difference between subjects, is threatened by a pandemic of hypervisibility, where the flat screen incessantly displays an “ob-scene” array of fetish objects providing instant gratification with a click of the mouse.

Baudrillard goes even further: he argues that not only are we seeing the obsolescence of oedipal theories of interaction, with bodies now “reduced to control screens” (“The Ecstasy of Communication”), but we are also witnessing the obsolescence of all psychoanalytic object theory. Taking issue with Barthes’s characterization of the automobile as object of identification, Baudrillard notes the disappearance of “a subjective logic of possession and projection.” There are no more fantasies of power, where speed and image are linked to the object itself, says Baudrillard. For in our age, “the subject is a computer at the wheel, the vehicle a kind of capsule,” and the logic of possession has been replaced by “the logic of driving itself.” This suggests that old-fashioned Freudian object-related desire has lost its symbolic dimension, and with it, its enabling capacity of differentiation. The driver is “a computer at the wheel,” just as the astronaut is “a navigating device, a terminal screen.”<sup>2</sup> It would seem that for Baudrillard, we are indeed becoming cyborgs of sorts: we no longer identify with our objects of desire, we *meld* with them.

For all his histrionics, Baudrillard has a point. In this age of the global village, the joy of encounter with difference often seems to be replaced by the comfort of homogenized global ambiance, serving up Big Macs on Tiananmen Square, Thai food in Tallahassee. Deploying one of his favorite images, Baudrillard suggests that the mindlessness of our age is concomitant with a certain bodilessness: “the centrifugal force of our technologies has stripped us of all weight . . . freed of all density, all gravity, we are being dragged into an orbital motion.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this figure of the encapsulated astronaut is so captivating because of its thematic of monitored hypervisibility, which speaks to our own anxiety about surveillance: the astronaut’s every function is watched and broadcast. This figure also evokes a vacuous mentality impinging on identity, an “unbearable lightness of being.” Baudrillard argues that this absence of substance in today’s culture produces a vapid, flattened subject, incapable of creative projection. In his new order, the loss of space required for the deployment of metaphor is associated with the loss in space of human agency: “This realization of a living satellite in quotidian space [causes] what was projected psychologically and mentally, what used to be lived out on earth as metaphor [to be] henceforth projected onto reality, without any metaphor at all, in an absolute space which is that of dissimulation.”<sup>4</sup> Sleepwalker, spacewalker, computer nerd: whether we experience a collapse of space or a sense of boundless vacancy, we suffer an unmooring of self, without somatic coordinates.

Interestingly, this description of hyperreality, transcoded into Freudian terms, bears a resemblance to classic paranoid psychosis as described in Freud’s famous case study of the memoirs of Daniel Paul Schreber. Schreber elaborates a fantastic masochistic cosmology where he is penetrated by the “rays” of an amorous but

hostile deity, who turns him into a woman to serve His pleasure.<sup>5</sup> In his discussion of Schreber, Freud contends that the paranoid projects his own global vision of reality outward, constructing an absolute delusional system in place of the real world of others. Like Dr. Schreber a century ago, the space-age paranoid described by Baudrillard seems to live not so much in fantasy as in the hyperreal, substituted for the quotidian experience of “real life.”

As Lacan puts it, the paranoid no longer believes in the Other, which, along with its role as emblem of the radical alterity of others, also often designates the grounding of the symbolic social order founded on consensual pact and common belief as to what counts as reality. The paranoid believes in the Other of the Other, the final Authority behind the scenes of the system, the know-it-all whose totalitarian vision explains everything, beyond the shadow of a doubt.<sup>6</sup> Žižek’s twenty-first-century critique of hypervisible culture as *The Plague of Fantasies* follows Lacan in this regard. In Žižek’s new age scenario of totalitarian surveillance, it is little comfort that virtual Marxists are monitoring the playground of cyberspace, the new opiate of the people. (Marilouise and Arthur Kroker, for instance, worry about the exploitation of “virtual flesh,” and even discuss virtual surplus value, apparently soon to be measured in e-money.)<sup>7</sup> But does the emergent homogeneous global culture, transacted in bits and bytes, necessarily signal the advent of a totalitarian age?

Even theorists who have been relatively sanguine about postmodernity, such as Donna Haraway and Jean-François Lyotard, increasingly express anxiety about the loss of our mooring to material reality today. Lyotard’s famous early work on postmodernity (*The Postmodern Condition*), describing the new social order as a challenge to totalizing systems (the lack of belief in “metanarrative”), has given way to the chillier world of *The Inhuman*, deeply critical of postmodernity in its dehumanizing social effects.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Manuel De Landa points out the danger inherent in the “paranoid” reasoning of today’s computers, when the Pentagon uses them to stage doomsday scenarios of virtual war games.<sup>9</sup> Donna Haraway’s new age classic, the relatively upbeat “Manifesto for Cyborgs,” has also been followed by a more sinister ideological critique of biotech in cahoots with capitalism (*Modest Witness@Second Millennium*).<sup>10</sup> Even in the earlier pro-cyborg manifesto, Haraway already concedes the monstrous aspects of the new somatics, suggesting that we are all postmodern Frankensteins: “By the late 20th century, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in that, we are cyborgs. The cyborg gives us our ontology, our politics.” In the same essay, significantly—like Baudrillard, Žižek, Deleuze—she dismisses the oedipal paradigm, as representative of an outworn redemptive telos: “The cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history: the most promising monsters in cyborg worlds are

embodied in non-oedipal narratives with a different logic of repression, which we need to understand for our survival.”<sup>11</sup>

We could say that this “different logic of repression” invoked by Haraway is a matter not of depth but of surface—with a collapse of dimension—governed by the logic of the network, circuit, or single-surface Moebius loop. Her analysis owes a great deal to Michel Foucault’s concept of “discipline” as something systemic, more complicated than top-down repression. For the new conduits of energy that Haraway invokes—which can no longer quite be called “power,” since that term implies a struggle rather than a circuit—make their rounds along a looped itinerary, obedient only to the hydraulic logic of source and tributary.

Haraway taps into a more primal fear when she invokes the monstrosity of the cyborg, produced by a process of grafting which melds disparate elements into a piecemeal entity:

This cyborg is a creature in a postgender world; it has no truck with preoedipal symbolica or other seductions to organic wholeness through appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity. In a sense, the cyborg has no original story in the Western sense, a final irony since the cyborg is also the artful apocalyptic telos of the West’s escalating domination of abstract identification, a man in space.<sup>12</sup>

Like Baudrillard, Haraway launches us into orbit, and once again Oedipus does not have the right stuff to serve as astronaut.

### **No BODY SEES ME**

It is difficult simply to discount all this paranoid theorizing, however hyperbolic; for the human being has in fact been cut down to size in what scientists now call the visible universe, reflecting our scaled-down sense of capability. Our new age astronomy has even put Copernicus in his place: not only are suns more numerous than grains of sand, but our own little star is not even centrally located in the universe (“Location, location . . .”). This sense of diminished human importance may account for much of the phobic tone of popular cultural today. Consider, for instance, the ubiquitous trope of the astronaut lost in space. The lonely astronauts in classics such as *Silent Running* and 2001: *A Space Odyssey* find that their only surviving companions are cybernetic. Just as poignantly, an episode of the Eastern European *Red Shoe Diaries* stages a stylized ritual as doomed astronauts make love while dying in orbit; while in the 2003 film *Solaris*, the isolated astronaut falls in love with an alien entity disguised as his dead wife. And the very concept of cyberspace navigated by virtual astronauts, first popularized by William Gibson’s 1984 *Neuromancer*, also echoes a primal dread of the vacuum.

Freud would probably have argued that this new age panic attests to an ancestral phylogenetic fear, already manifest in the myths of Odysseus and Jason; and of course Jason's argonauts are directly referenced in the term "astronaut." But in the new mythology, the voyager is fitted with techno-trappings, embarking on interstellar travels through time or even hallucinatory trips through inner space induced by brain implants. In another version of this motif, the scientist has been reduced to molecular scale in order to undertake a harrowing nanotech mission within the patient's body (the premise of the 1950s classic *Fantastic Voyage* and its many comic follow-ups, such as *Osmosis Jones* in 2002). The terrifying thematic of being lost in space turns up everywhere, and the space may be outer, inner, inward, or wayward. In the 2001 film *Mission to Mars*, for instance, the spacewalk veers into nightmare (Tim Robbins overshoots the space capsule and sails into orbit around the Red Planet . . . for eternity). Our cultural productions constantly remind us that every astronaut risks flying off into space, slipping out of electronic reach, or severing the umbilical tether to the Mother Ship. The chilling image in *Mission to Mars*, where the doomed astronaut floats away, receding from view (doubtless a tribute to the similarly unforgettable image in Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*), plugs into an age-old terror of sailing off into a void, and arouses primal human separation anxiety. Once the cord to the Mother Ship is cut, the familiar human axial symmetry of absence followed by presence is lost.

This is the very rhythm that Freud observes in an infant's play, in the peekaboo here-gone, present-absent, yes-no rhythm that grounds human communication.<sup>13</sup> In the famous scene from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the toddler pronounces the words *fort!* and *da!* as he repeatedly casts away and retrieves a sort of yo-yo, reenacting the disappearance and reappearance of his mother. An intriguing parallel to the famous *fort-da* now occurs in cybernetics, where the same digital rhythm (absent-present, on-off) underwrites our informational code, comprised of 0's and 1's. In fact, the term "digital" itself is haunted by the specter of the bi-axial body and its members, our "digits" now occluded and retrieved in light-speed binary alternation. All twenty-first-century internauts share a new version of the phobia of failed retrieval: the terror of data loss (and, of course, lost digits or members recall an older "oedipal" fear). Like an astronaut who has missed his window, our data risk oblivion if our too-human digits miss a key, deleting the record. While data loss is a real problem, the terror it evokes suggests a deeper fantasy, and one which the virus hoaxers exploit to the fullest by launching rumors of impending data doom. Certainly we never feel so helpless as when our computer interrupts our operations to scold us ("This program has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down"). Insult added to injury, we are without appeal: we are offered but one choice, to hit the "OK" button consenting to our punishment.

Perhaps harder to take than data disappearance is the paralysis of words, “hung” in our full view but beyond retrieval—as frozen and inaccessible as the astronaut’s corpse in orbit. Witnessing this catastrophe, we have no choice but to cut our losses and return “home,” rebooting the computer without the data; and the experience of this truncation is traumatic indeed. This trauma, however, is nothing compared to the shock of sudden data death in a hard-disk crash, every bit as scary as that other “hard-disk crash” at Roswell, which continues to trouble the collective memory half a century later.

Weightlessness, paralysis, invasion, dismemberment, exposure—these specters haunt the millennial body. Indeed, if so many theorists frame their analyses in optical imagery, it is perhaps because our postsociety is more than a *Society of the Spectacle* (Guy Debord), or even a community of *World Spectators* (Kaja Silverman):<sup>14</sup> What we encounter now is not just visibility, but hypervisibility. It is an epidemic of what Baudrillard terms the ob-scene, and Žižek calls pornography: the all-seeing view that captures, freezes, and objectifies the viewer.<sup>15</sup>

One of the best-known theorists of optic phobia is Paul Virilio: in *Open Sky*, he criticizes a “paraoptics” that flattens depth and difference, facilitating mind control. Virilio characterizes absorption in the computer or television screen as hypnotic psychosis, causing “the interpretive delirium of the observer.”<sup>16</sup> It does seem that a mind-numbing flatness characterizes the scant intellectual (if heavily ideological) content broadcast these days “twenty-four/seven” as “live news.” And this is the age of reality TV, which has now spread to Europe: entertainment that chastises, derides, or spies on guests. “The Weakest Link” features a dominatrix schoolmarm figure who humiliates the contestants; “Survivor” maroons the contestants on an island and, in a new age *Lord of the Flies*, exposes just how low they will go to win (in the French version, the contestants are forced to eat “du rat”). Meanwhile, the wildly popular court of Judge Judy—another stern Phallic Mother—exposes feuding parties to a public dressing-down, and a whole parade of Jerry Springer clones feature talk-show exhibitionists eager to air their dirty linen to howls of opprobrium from onlookers, in a media parody of the all-American witch hunt.

Virilio’s work (*Open Sky*, *The Lost Dimension*, *The Information Bomb*), like the work of Baudrillard and Avital Ronell, compares the immediacy of visual gratification to a mind-numbing drug (“These quick fixes deprive us of the basis of reasoning”).<sup>17</sup> And Virilio, like Baudrillard, seems racked by nostalgia, a longing for a return to depth perspective, a unified Renaissance worldview moored in a single vanishing point at the horizon. But even the logic of line and point is outmoded: it has been called into question by the new nonlinear geometry.

Yet before perspective was challenged by the new sciences, it was challenged by Freud. For Freud’s discovery insists on the inevitable invisibility of some aspect

of reality. Psychoanalysis shows that the classical Cartesian *cogito*—the base of enlightenment and knowledge—always occludes “something” unconscious. (In his work on Freud [Discours, figure], Lyotard likens this “invisibility” to the “opacity of the designated”; when an object is viewed from any perspective, some of its faces are necessarily obscured.)<sup>18</sup>

Anticipating the new science, Freud challenges the possibility of a complete self-image or transparent rational identity, which is always in part illusory. Perhaps, then, the millennial obsession with hypervisibility as complete transparency is itself a denial of Freud’s discovery that no matter how much is shown, the full picture never emerges. The panic philosophers may just protest too much about the loss of opacity, denying the deeply troubling invisibilities postulated by the subject of psychoanalysis.

Nonetheless, something *has* happened culturally since Freud’s day, “in light of” new millennial scientific paradigms. In the late 1980s, Arthur Kroker and David Cook were already describing the “postmodern scene” as a number of cultural symptoms accompanied by body angst, such as dismemberment of the broadcast body in advertising, as well as the hygienic practice of “sex without secretions.”<sup>19</sup> It does seem that virtual sex has become popular precisely because it does not necessitate contact, as the ultimate safe sex. Paradoxically, however, sexual availability is increasing even as sexual contact is decreasing: sex is disseminated far and wide, with booming online dating and e-mail bride businesses, as well as hundreds of thousands of cyberporn sites. Online voyeurism has recently been further commercialized in a new version of the “reality” craze, in websites such as “Upskirting.com” designed to accommodate the virtual Peeping Tom (the cameramen lurk beneath urban street grates to photograph unsuspected miniskirted passersby, transmitting the images to paying cyberpeepers live, online).

Thus the body is increasingly offered up to unprecedented mass access, even as it is increasingly distanced from real contact. But we are also experiencing a symptomatic obsessive return of the real body, which refuses to be deleted: might this not account for popular trends like tattooing or body piercing, assuring the body’s material mooring by visible marks? It is as though the pixelated body may be both reclaimed and weighed down by mortification, its owner securing a kind of copyright identity on the body itself. A proliferation of articles in the new age press (*Re-search*, *Found Object*, *Atlantica*) have in fact commented on the primitivism of body art as “techno-paganism.” Moreover, theorists like Mark Dery (*Escape Velocity*) and Adam Parfrey (*Apocalypse Culture*) point out that the culture of “Cyberia” often foregrounds violence, as in the sadomasochistic performances of the hard-edged cyber culture continuing the 1980s punk aesthetic.<sup>20</sup> One performance artist of self-martyrdom (Stelarc) hangs suspended on meat hooks; the notorious video performance of Nine-Inch Nails (“Happiness,” banned on MTV) displays

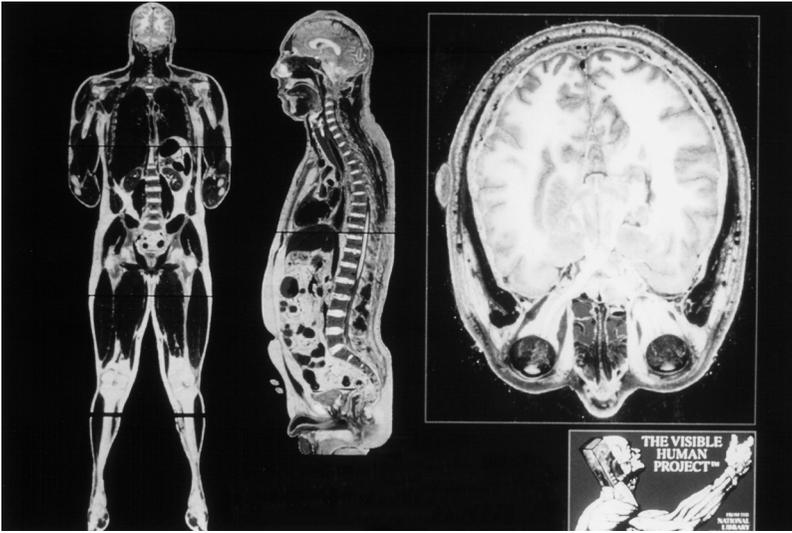
the erotics of torture; and in the spectacular concerts of Marilyn Manson (before the carnage at Columbine), the rocker arrived suspended on a burning cross. Even if spectacle is the domain of fantasy, the urban hyperreality of video rock/hip-hop culture, like the phenomenal popularity of camp TV, seems to attest to an underlying thirst not for fantasy but for reality: we can't get enough of it, even on hundreds of cable channels. And voyeurism is only one side of the coin, since in the popular imagination millennial subjects are not just onlookers but also objects of surveillance, often with sacrificial resonance. (Witness the fascination with the abductees who report being probed under glaring lights with steely implements, wielded by opaque-eyed aliens.)

#### GENESIS Y2K: LET THERE BE LIGHT

A particularly compelling illustration of the coincidence of hypervisibility, sacrifice, techno-science, cyborg culture, and virtuality is found in the case of the virtual cadaver Adam, created to train surgeons on screen. The real subject, once a live convict with a name, became EveryCorpse after execution, frozen in blue jelly, his body parts cut into 18,000 cross sections, like a big deli sandwich. Adam's parts were photographed slice-by-slice on slides, then computer-arranged. He is now on perpetual view at [VisibleHumanProject.edu](http://VisibleHumanProject.edu), his once private parts now very public. His organs may be examined in any combination, from any angle, and sliced up again and again with a virtual scalpel. Adam was joined by Eve in 2000, thanks to the Texas execution of a female convict, and the dead couple has gone global. The many spin-off sites now listed, apparently without irony, include the "Visible Human Slice Server"; the "Visible Human Project Products" site, touting scans of fresh cadavers; and the "Visible Human Female Head and Pelvis Browser." Cyber-Adam's genesis is a fitting creation story in the age of the posthuman. Now Foucault's famous panopticon, where the prison warden oversees the slices of space inhabited by inmates, has been transposed onto the microscope of his disciplinary clinic, overseeing slices of the inmates themselves.

The modern complaint of Eliot's urban *Wasteland*—that "nobody sees me," engulfed by the crowd—has now shifted. The millennial complaint from Adam's point of view, so to speak, is that Everybody sees me, even though I do not exist. (The "I," in fact, is dead.) In the age of the virtual, it would seem that even the dead Other has lost his imaginary clout, his spookiness, along with his privacy.

But even the dead, as Žižek points out, are not entirely accommodating: the vampires and Zombies who abound in popular film attest to the Freudian uncanny as the "return of the repressed," refusing to remain buried.<sup>21</sup> Like so many uncanny phantasms, the timeworn motif of the undead now has an objective cor-



The Visible Human Project, *Adam*, 2001.

relative in real life: stockpiled bodies frozen in liquid nitrogen tanks—called “patients” by the Alcor Life Extension Foundation—are artifacts at the blurred boundary between nightmare and utopia, awaiting resurrection. (“Neuropatients” are severed heads only, floating in picnic-cooler-size tanks.) The widely publicized custody fight about freezing Ted Williams’s remains—which has turned an All-American sports hero into an icon of the creepy excesses of technology—demonstrates the public investment in techno-cultural practice.

In millennial culture, boundaries are newly permeable (live/dead; me/you; human/machine; man/woman). And since the fall of iconic twentieth-century borders such as the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall, geopolitical frontiers between “us” and “them” are increasingly violable. Now, try as we will, we can’t seem to find the enemy at his home, or keep him out of ours. Al-Qaeda is the emblem of the invisible enemy who seems to be everywhere at once; its spokesmen are media superstars whose latest releases receive worldwide play.

In other words, humanity today is dogged by the suspicion that the body is in crisis or obsolescence (an obscene leftover, like the astronaut’s orbiting corpse). Or we are troubled by the corollary fear that the body is a public domain, displayed by monitors (like Stanley Kubrick’s iconic computer HAL, who keeps an eye on everyone onboard, killing them when he doesn’t like what he sees). The fragile fetal astronaut floating at the end of his tether reflects the real-life nightmare of the space pioneer cut off from earth (*Apollo 13*), in full view of NASA’s

monitor. And as Linda Singer and other feminist theorists point out, these images of astronauts at risk intersect with real political life in the posters of the Right to Life movement. (The gigantic intrauterine fetus on freeway billboards bears more than a passing resemblance to the floating spacesuited astronaut, cathected at the waist to a placental lifeline.)<sup>22</sup>

In a cyberpunk variant of this nightmare, the human subject is overcatheted to objects (Gibson's *Mona Lisa Overdrive*; Bruce Sterling's *Global Head*; Pat Cadigan's *Synners*; Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*). David Cronenberg's horrific remake of the 1950s classic *The Fly* merges scientist, insect, and teleport hardware, in a monstrosity that drags its wires and hairy limbs across the floor, while still-human eyes plead with the heroine to fire and end the creature's misery. (Again, there is a resonance of abortion gone wrong, as Jeff Goldblum emerges bloody and mutilated from the "telepod.") Like the many eyes of cyberspace, the multivision of *The Fly* reminds us of the new limits of human being in an evolutionary battle that we once considered already won by the survival of the smartest.

#### CYBERANALYSIS IN PSYCHOSPACE

A fascinating if weird reflection on the fate of the body, providing yet another take on human evolution, appears in Jean-François Lyotard's essay "Can Thought Go On without a Body?"<sup>23</sup> Here, boundary wars are framed in a gendered dialogue between "he" and "she," as the interlocutors ponder the feasibility of colonization of the universe by thinking machines, after the inevitable extinction of the human race. (Lyotard points out that this will occur in four billion years with the explosion of the sun, assuming some microbe or warhead or ecological disaster or asteroid doesn't get us first.) The question becomes philosophic—can computers think? The essay rehearses the argument first presented in 1979 by Hubert Dreyfus (*What Computers Can't Do*): the opacity of the world is experienced by a body with depth and substance, a corpus which puts us *there*, on the scene (Heidegger's *Dasein*), permitting us to anticipate unseen surfaces.<sup>24</sup> We position ourselves analogically, "as if" we could see from another angle, thanks to identification with the other's point of view. This projective vision exceeds the binary logic of here/there; on/off; either/or; the embodied vision is not limited by the square cadre of the pixel. Even when 3D computer imaging circumvents an object—says cyberfather Nicholas Negroponte (*Being Digital*), there is no "as if" to its logic: it sees sequentially, rather than by identification or intuition.<sup>25</sup>

In Lyotard's gendered dialogue, the interlocutor labeled "she" predictably argues for the incommensurability of binary logic with thought: "humanity" is an effect of all-too-human suffering ("The pain of thinking isn't a symptom coming

from outside to inscribe itself on the mind instead of its true place”). What Lyotard calls “thought itself resolving to be irresolute” (the opposite of the Cartesian plan by which thought resolves to rid itself of error) is “[thought] deciding to be patient, wanting not to want, wanting, precisely, not to produce a meaning in place of what must be signified.”<sup>26</sup> Human thought requires a patient and painful receptivity to the other’s point of view.

In Lacanian terms, this argument reflects the *transitivity of the subject position*: listening itself may be considered a function of human mobility, in a conversation made possible by the shifting point of view of interconnected subjects.<sup>27</sup> As the conversation is bandied back and forth, the participants are obliged to project their vision to the place of the other, lending the other the pronoun “I,” for a turn. The subject is thus obliged to see “self” as object, to see from another’s site/sight, perceiving “where s/he is coming from.”

In this volley, Lyotard underscores the radical Lacanian point that human thought has a gender, and that this is a productive stigma, an aspect of an incompleteness that motivates a reaching out to other subjects. Lyotard argues that thinking machines will not colonize the universe unless they can learn to suffer, to yearn, to submit to the condition of lack activated by difference. And this is not just sexual difference, but also the difference between self and other, between you and me—even the difference between I and me, subject and self-image.

Lacan’s version of this concept insists that human beings dwell in the gaze of the Other, thanks to the space of difference that alienates but facilitates; and our bodies give us a position in that field, in the eye of the Other. This recognition of the shiftiness of the listening eye, site of a multiple gaze, counters the conventional Western aspiration to one correct overview, the position associated from the Renaissance onward (as Lyotard points out) with the unifying eye of the monarch, the triumph of one-point perspective. In our mobility and capacity for trying on other positions, we lose our near-sighted vainglory, our illusion of sovereignty.

The many visual fields of cyberspace may remind us of the contingency of our human being; but if we are online, are we at the end of the line? Perhaps we may cut ourselves some slack and suggest that all of this technophobic paranoid theorizing, even if it is descriptive, is not necessarily predictive. Oedipus is perhaps not quite dead, though vital signs may be flagging. Perhaps the psychoanalytic model of depth in the subject may suggest ways of retrieving our embodied minds from their hypersurfing, reeling them back into physicality. For every *fort* will have its *da*.

## OEDIPUS INTERNAUT: THE SCHEMA L IN CYBERSPACE

Lacan's work suggests a way to counter the paranoid zeitgeist by recasting the term "paranoid" itself. In his third seminar, he describes a paranoid modality governing the acquisition of human knowledge, rather than always resulting in psychosis.<sup>28</sup> Every time we structure our discourse in light of an anticipated response, we are fantasizing and constructing in a paranoid mode, acting "as if" we know what others might perceive.

But is not human knowledge always-already deflected through the Other, the "eye in the sky" over the cradle, the hovering giant visage at once alien and like us? Lacan asserts that the infant is caught in a whole web of objects—animate and inanimate—that seem to look back, so many faces enlivened by our attention and reflecting our desire. In psychoanalysis, object desire is contagion, contracted by the larval infant in interaction with other human beings and their objects. And though the world may respond to the infant's needs, it will never fully conform to its demands—for of course every baby, even when fed, warm, and dry, still cries implacably for something more. This is expressed succinctly in Lacan's famous formula: "desire is the excess of demand over need."<sup>29</sup> We never get what we want, even if we get what we need. (Interestingly enough, Lacanian doctrine, notoriously difficult, has now infiltrated pop culture: the entire first scene of the 2003 release *The Life of David Gale* consists of a professor's lecture [Kevin Spacey] to a packed auditorium on the philosophical implications of Lacan's *objet petit a*.)

In any case, a Lacanian perspective on cyberspace might help counter the panic aroused by the frontier of virtual reality—millennial culture's "hyper-imaginary" mode. For in the region of hypertext, space is not necessarily a vacuous no-man's-land; it may be a crossroads, a site of communication in a maze of difference. If this sounds familiar, it is because I am invoking Freud's "resolution of the Oedipus complex," which he describes as a move from lethal incestuous short circuit to salutary social detour, thanks to the presence of the overseeing Other as prohibitory third, an enabling screen. This dimensionalization allows us to think what a postmodern subject might be, if not a soporific video consumer, stupefied by what Ray Barglow and others have termed the "preoedipal" computer, the addictive lure of the Mother Board to which one is connected for hours on end.<sup>30</sup>

Lacan's reading of Freud suggests that the posthuman subject may indeed be paranoid, but in a sanguine sense, engaged in anticipatory thinking and projection vis-à-vis the Other. Rather than a tool of surveillance—the one-sided screen mirror of the panopticon—the intersubjective gaze may adopt other subject positions, seeing "as if" through other eyes. Might we reconceptualize cyberspace as a field that may enfranchise human subjectivity, a net in which the Other is caught

but not captured? As Sherry Turkle points out, the virtual permits us to try out other corporeal perspectives, other points of view, thanks to our symbolic capacity to visit the “other’s” site.<sup>31</sup> Lacan, after Freud, insists that the symbolic is at the heart of the social; the gendered body is at the heart of the symbolic; and human difference (as gender) is at the heart of the body.

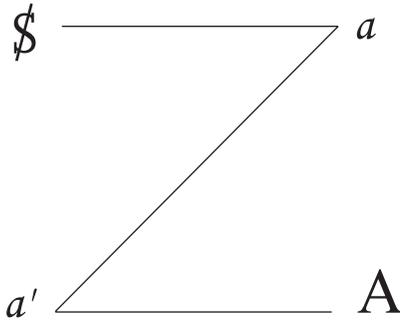
Somewhat more whimsically, we might conceive of communication in the information age as Lacan’s “paranoid knowledge” in action. In cyberspace we gain information through projective identification, identifying with screen names, playing roles in chat groups, re-placing ourselves with visual icons or “avatars,” as our representatives are termed online. We are self-nominated participants in intersubjective play, as well as in professional interest groups through which we identify with areas of expertise. (We can, of course, “lurk” online without participating, but that very possibility extended to all others creates the ambient paranoia of cyberspace, the sense that “someone is watching.”)

What is a message path but a labyrinthine voyage in space, a peregrination traced in the header, enacting Lacan’s axiom (“the signifier is a subject for another signifier”), where the address is a message for another address?<sup>32</sup> When Žižek quips that “We are what we want, in cyberspace,” it does not have to mean that we are stuck in a narcissistic circuit: we are following a communicative filament, passing linked bits of paranoid knowledge from other to other. When we perform a search, our little spider-messengers crawl around in the cybermaze, following and spinning a “string.” In fact, given the prevalence of cyber terms invoking the labyrinth—net, web, webcrawlers, strings and paths—the myth of Ariadne and Theseus rivals that of Oedipus as a millennial paradigm.

#### **THE LABYRINTH AS SCHEMA L**

As the link between myth and cyberculture suggests, even if the virtual is an imaginary structure in the Lacanian sense, it is a symbolic circuit as well, a “signifying chain” sending an always-rerouted message in search of an always-missing object. In the cyber version of Lacan’s circuit, the missing object is the real letter of which e-mail is the simulacrum, and by extension, the simulacrum of the real person who sends it, staying in touch but out of reach.

The message path retraces the vicissitudes of the subject as constituted in Lacan’s “Schema L,” the first and clearest elaboration of the relation of the Lacanian subject to objects of desire.<sup>33</sup> The diagram traces the circuitous path of deflected desire by which what we imagine we want (*object petit a*, the other) is linked to who we think we are (our self-image [*a'*]); and also to the way we desire to be seen by our objects and Others [*A* for *Autre*]. What we desire is to be desired, to be reflected and magnified in the eye of the Other.



The Schema L.

In Lacan's pictogram of dynamic subjectivity, first elaborated in the 1950s, the subject is primordially split (since the unconscious is never fully known to us, no matter how long we are in analysis: Lacan figures a *barred* subject as  $\$$ , invested in and moving among the "other" positions). The subject is constituted in relation to its object of desire (the *objet petit a*, in the schema above); as well as in relation to its own image (the ego/imago: "moi" or  $a'$  in Lacan's schema). The subject is also constituted as in relation to the Other ( $A$ ; *Autre*), which may stand for several things, among them the classic oedipal father who figures prohibition of the subject's desire. Even in this early diagram of subjectivity as intersubjectivity, we can see that for Lacan the subject is alienated in and by its Others, in a relay where desire is refracted and circulated among the various positions in the field.

Perhaps today the Lacanian model finds an instance in (E)go-mail, bounced back and forwarded. Marked by its origins, always recursive, it is a "Purloined Letter" of sorts (Poe's famous detective story is the inspiration for Lacan's most famous seminar, where he plays on the French term for a letter suspended in circulation: *en souffrance*/in suffering).<sup>34</sup> To be sure, e-mail is a response to the Desire of the Other. We may think of the zigzagging pass of desire in the Schema L as an electronic path, where our own messages often return to us in inverted form. It is as though our own ego-mail is "forwarded" online, with a proliferation of screen names and headers, returning to us relabeled as a message from another site on the net, perhaps enclosed in an anonymous mailer, at once replying to and eliciting replies from a chain of screen interlocutors. To cite Lacan's famous aphorism in the commentary on Poe: "a letter always reaches its destination." Like a homing device, our own encoded message, a refraction of our own desiring gaze, may return to us, sometimes labeled with deadpan irony (like the message that recently appeared on my screen: "reply/forward/reply/re:no subject"). And our desire, expressed online by our purchases and haunts, also returns to us as spam

from unseen others who pay to know what we want, and where they can find us. For if “a letter always reaches its destination,” as Lacan concludes, it is perhaps because one’s chickens come home to roost with the accuracy of a smart bomb. (“Why do those people hate us so much?”)

The recursive path of ego-mail also recalls the Lacanian formula: “desire is the excess of demand over need.” For do we in fact *need* all this information, on demand? Perhaps the information deluge—a welter of chat, usenets, search sites—is a symptom of the insatiability of the social as human desire, rather than of its demise. The virtual never provides complete gratification, by definition: its success is measured by how real the experience *seems*, as adjudicated by a real body. And that body receives the message almost in spite of itself (cyberromance can set the heart pounding like a face-to-face encounter). This may remind us that virtual games are premised on real desire, even if they are always perpetuated by the unavailability of the Real Thing—not only in cyberspace, but in any human space. In cyberspace, the virtual seduces by the promise of “real” access; but the inaccessibility of the Real is what the virtual delivers.

Thus the virtual is merely the techno-form of a psychic configuration as old as the species itself. Freud’s imaginary, be it daydream or fantasy, is virtual reality minus the hardware. As Freud points out in his description of the desire of the writer, our imaginary narratives have always helped us to navigate life. Freud also insists, however, that the difference between creativity and onanistic fantasy is that the artist’s desire does not end in private gratification; it is routed outward toward an audience. Lacan’s Schema L thus schematizes Freud’s desiring long circuit, that must visit the Other-as-audience.

In any case, our transactions in cyberspace give a new cast to the psychoanalytic notion of desire as web, or chain. Our (online) “desire is the desire of the Other”: our Internet service providers exhort us to visit the hottest websites, and reward us with a cookie when we do so, banding the pigeon for retailers. As surely as in any Lacanian parable, “a subject is a subject for another signifier” online, in a chain disseminating the latest joke/hoax/rumor, or even bearing a call to political action (the online petition is the tool of the twenty-first-century organizer). Meanwhile, cyberdating reveals that virtual love is an effect of ambivalence, as always. The traditional lover’s protest, “I need my space,” may now be acted out by establishing one’s own site, by changing e-mail addresses, or by hiding behind a screen name. Even the psychosis of paranoia has a cyberinstance: projected desire often comes back at us as a fantasmatic persecution, displaying all the aggressivity of mail bounced by the Mailer Daemon, maliciously labeled “no path to host” or “fatal error.” (Ironically enough, when our own message is bounced back to us like a boomerang, the voice of a familiar stranger announces cheerily: “You have mail.”)

Indeed, cyberspace is fairly humming with voices, and this buzz has created its own institutional paranoia among self-righteous officials, from Berlin to Washington, who are attempting to censor the emerging field of cyberspace. But these attempts to legislate behavior have given rise to electronic resistance, like the Blue Ribbon Internet crusade for free speech, complete with an electronic “march on Washington” in 2000 that flooded Congress with e-mails. On a more spontaneous level, the Internet encourages fantasies of revenge, such as the mass dissemination of the outrageously priced “secret” Nieman-Marcus cookie recipe by a furious consumer. (It seems that the incident itself is apocryphal, but the fact that it was so widely circulated shows our desire that greedy online vendors “get what is coming to them.”)<sup>35</sup>

But a return is not always a rebuke, as the spacewalker knows when he touches ground, Odysseus come home. In his own homecoming to Father Freud, Lacan recasts the oedipal narrative as the symbolic pact with fellow beings. Perhaps it is this social net which will also bring us back from the ether, tangled up in real life, always owing what Lacan calls “the Symbolic Debt,” the social desire caught from, then retransmitted to, our Others. Perhaps we should keep Oedipus around to cruise the Net: for millennial psychoanalysis, far from losing its purchase, offers us ways of thinking about space without endangering Otherness. Since psychoanalysis views the psyche as plural and social, it may help us to temper an antisocial and isolationist view of the future, giving us some say in the shape of things to come.

#### POST-OEDIPAL POSTSCRIPT

Oedipus is still accused of consorting with Descartes: two members of the old boys’ network, they are accused of being vestiges of a positivist patriarchy. But whereas Descartes thinks to exist, Oedipus exists to think, and is thus post-Cartesian, even “postmodern,” in spite of himself. And let us also give the Doubter his due: Descartes is as skeptical as any postmodern in his search for answers; even while intrepid Oedipus is in deep denial of the evidence that inculpates him. However, Oedipus and Descartes part company when it comes to the status of the “I” asking the questions. Descartes justifies himself by interpellating the Other as all-knowing God who guarantees existence (“He thinks, therefore I am,” is the gist of Descartes’s ontological cop-out). But Oedipus interrogates the Other as enigma, to discover that even when “I” solve the riddle through reason, “I” am precisely never who my reason thinks I am.

Lacan’s account of intersubjectivity shows us that Oedipus must ultimately pay the Symbolic Debt for solving the riddle of the Sphinx concerning humanity. As

Lacan points out in his discussion of Descartes (“The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious”), the “I think” of Oedipus is actually an anti-*cogito*. For his confident assertion underscores that “he is not” who he thinks he is, and that the eventual revelation of who he really is will only provoke wounding and wandering. Oedipus discovers that when language seems to make things clear, solving enigmas and securing our position, it may actually only obscure the truth in a potentially tragic misrecognition. In fact, Oedipus is never so off the mark, so deluded about his “identity,” as when he solves the riddle of the human and is “recognized” as Jocasta’s rightful husband. Lacan’s version of Oedipus (the Schema L) is a diagram of the human condition, the domain of missed meanings and appointments, as well as a field of ever-renewed hope.

As a reminder of our mortality, Lacan insists on the notion of access to the symbolic order as dismemberment, reminding us of the fractal nature of “identity,” which only *appears* to be whole. The mirage is predicated on a primal psychic wounding (emblemized by Lacan’s “mirror stage”), a splitting of “oneself” into subject and object positions, body and mirror image.<sup>36</sup> This splitting is a function of depth—the recognition of “one’s” reflection only *seems* to abolish distance and establish “identity.” This mirage of unified identity paradoxically takes place only *thanks* to the maintained space from our self-perception, the space in which the image is reflected back.

Yet Lacan’s reading of Freudian subjectivity as an effect of the symbolic order may open the way to a new assessment of social possibility in the information age. Perhaps the social is not dead, but has just changed its site. This is Freud’s lesson in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where the pleasure of the final resolution (death) is always deferred by the life drive compelling the organism to prolong its journey. To say that Oedipus is dead is to misread Sophocles’ tale as ur-narrative, rather than paradigm, confusing the content of the message with its path. Cyberchat still reverberates with Oedipus’ questions: Are my others who they appear to be? What is human, what is monstrous? But, more significantly, Oedipus’ itinerary—the play of delusion and deferral as he approaches and avoids the knowledge of “who he is”—is also the circuit of cyberspace. Human doubt is now interactive, since we may hide behind the screen; but has it ever been otherwise, in the human web of roles, pretense, and misrecognition? More important than what millennial Oedipae ask is how and why they ask it, by what circumlocution. Cyberspace is an intersubjective maze where we grope to find our way in the field of the Other, “searching” a psychic URL where the Other may be addressed, but not found. The Other’s perception of me is the “subject” in the chatroom of the symbolic.

Perhaps virtual reality deploys, electronically, the same intersubjective dynamic of guesswork and role-playing (“My screen name is . . .”) that has always

constituted human identity. For Freud's subject is a function of *space*, of shifting subject positions, shuttling between self and Alien Other. As Lacan suggests, identity is an effect of maintained space, a function of metaphor, where the paternal name is an illusory unifying *figure of speech*, standing in for the divided self it misrepresents.<sup>37</sup>

Just so, virtual reality simulates the real in the space of metaphor, "as if." Contrary to the assertions of Baudrillard concerning the impossibility of metaphor on a flattened screen, the virtual metaphor is alive and well, taking its point of reference in actions performed by the body, like a smile mimicked in the smiley face "emoticon"

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And a whole chat lexicon of emotions has joined this familiar sidelong grin, denoting everything from displeasure

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to desire (denoted by a furrowed brow with tongue hanging out)

}:p

to quixotic puzzlement

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It is as if the more virtual technology abstracts the Real, the more tenaciously the material world insists, with cyber trappings figured as pets (the mouse, the web-crawler, the gopher) and manual tools (the scissors, the paintbrush). Online, it is an hourglass that enjoins us to wait, a symbol more primitive and "material" than any clock, analogue or digital.

Nor have we completely escaped the Cartesian grid: in our worries about the Other who is pushing the buttons, Descartes haunts us still. He did, after all, voice the worry that the whole show might be staged by an "evil genius," the ultimate Internet hoaxer/host. For being online does not assuage desire; it engenders it. In our interpellations of the unknowable Other ("Who goes there?"), we continue to play out the oedipal drama of masquerade and query ("Who is out there? What do you want? Can you come out [or into my chat group] and play?"). In the search for answers, we might do well to suit up errant Oedipus for the third millennium, his website mapped at the crossroads between Thebes and Corinth.

Resiting Freud suggests that cyberspace is the latest playground for the Other (big O), who might just be Oedipus asking us to come online.