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Fembodiment: New Millennium perspectives on the body in Luc Besson's movie Lucy

Suryendu Chakraborty

Abstract:

New age embodiment envisages a biology/machine symbiosis, bestowing an effortless competence to the human self in transcending the mind and body's conceptual content and stated capabilities, by artificially dissolving our mental and physical limitations. As post-modern criticism challenges the notion of the conventional embodied self, the cyborg has come up to explicate the validity of such claim. Techno-scientific intervention on the human body in theory, fictions and films seem to represent a human condition that we all are experiencing. The collisions – and collusions – between the corporeal human body and the chimerical digital world produce a hybrid entity; that for cyber-feminists seem to possess a key towards a dialectics of differently enunciating the women's embodied experiences of the self. This paper through an analysis of Luc Besson's movie *Lucy* uses the 'cyborg' motif, and the readings that have been made of it, to expostulate to a greater critical degree notion of feminine subjectivity and a possibility of a new world-view towards female empowerment. The paper foresees new gender possibilities and seeks for new definitions of embodiment, not through dissolution of the construct, but by expounding the cyborgian tendency to suck up materiality into the web of ever-changing semiotic sign production.

Keywords: Body, Cyborg, gender, techno-science, Lucy

Introduction

Our predominant experience of the self is of and through our bodies –a highly contested terrain of human evolution and history – simultaneously a necessity and a taboo. Maybe post to



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post-modernity has rendered it more visible and maybe, (rather definitely), we are continuously seeking out innovative ways to expose flesh to an out-and-out explosion in both popular and academic writings on the body; yet the body has never been absent, neither academic curiosity has been blind to its growth. Even when we tried to relegate the body merely at the interface of social interaction, joining in the hollow and isolated celebration of the brain, mimicking ‘Cogito, ergo sum’ (Descartes); we could never actually obliterate the body from cultural/philosophical/academic curiosity, where body and notions of embodiment kept uncannily lurking like a fetish. This paper, through an analysis of Luc Besson’s 2014 movie *Lucy* intends to show how post-modern techno-scientific interventions to the body can challenge stable notions of embodiment and create trans-human possibilities of the self where those stable binaries like male/female - mind/body tends to dissolve, redefining and remodelling the body and notions of embodiment in a newer way. In this paper the term used to signify the assertion of female bodies is ‘fembodiment’, adopted from Elissa Weinzimmer’s movement of women’s circle; not because the protagonist is a woman, but to signify that it is only the female body that is capable of staging the unique phenomena of techno-transcendence of the flesh. The movie shows the effect of synthetically produced CPH4 on the female protagonist, empowering her to use 100% of her brain capacity, with ultimate dissolution of her corporeal frame. But I am not interested in exploring the hypothetical and contested premise of science that the movie presents, neither the apparent dissolution of the mortal body and transformation of the protagonist into a pen-drive of knowledge, where we can cry out like Enlightenment thinkers: ‘no bodies please’; but rather tends to explore the frame – the body, that bears testimony to all the drama of science or science fiction that the movie chooses for its subject matter. The paper strives to uphold one premise – to sell the mind you need the body, not as a mere carrier but as an active player, whose pattern of embodiment can only create a hermeneutic loop to the mind. The woman’s body and her unique fembodiment, is shown to be the site of new scientific body drifts, resonating with the viral metaphor of the VNS Matrix: “We are the modern cunt...we are the future cunt” (qtd. in



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Preez, 88); proclaiming a rejection of phallus-centric worldview and mobilizing the vagina as a marker of modern scientific body consciousness.

Theoretical perspectives on fembodiment

Female bodies have always been a point of enquiry in academic discourse where the constitution of the word 'feminine' itself was at the heart of the debate. Medieval notions of the female body and its functioning were heavily interjected by patriarchal and masculine ideologies. Popular belief ran that female genitalia were inferior and an inverted version of male genitalia. Even anatomical descriptions of Vesalius, didn't dispel the fictitious and concocted notions around the female body, which was eternally caged within the binary of maternal/demonic. Later psychoanalytic theories further aggravated the position when the female body was identified through its lack of 'phallus', disempowering it and banishing it from the centre of power. In contrast to those hollow myths circulating around the physicality of female bodies, the illusionary codes of the cyber-era provides newer possibilities of embodiment and representation of women. The body is reloaded into the digital matrix, forcing us to reboot our notions of embodiment in this era of ubiquitous information flow.

For me fembodiment marks the physical and mental possibility of the woman's body keying into the digital matrix, splattering everything with their slime, always in a state of flux, losing and gaining meaning within a particular culture and a predominant mode of social formation. With every sociological and anthropological shift, from traditional/tribal to modern/post modern to technological/computerized to android modes of existence; experiences of embodiment and primarily female-embodiment always underwent a radical shift, re-presenting and re-positioning itself with every turn, both ontologically, in how the body was lived and epistemologically, as how it got known and represented in academic discourse. As we are ushered into the world of apps, we are developing newer layers of abstracted relations to our body and its immediate ambience. Newer forms of embodiments are on the rise, making it necessary "to objectify,



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rationalise, quantify, package, process and market the self” (Cregan, 5), for a new and newer digital world-culture.

In this paper I will limit myself to a narrativist approach to the female body and trace exclusively the processes of fembodiment. As Western culture or for that sake any culture, at any epistemological turn, has always made incursions into the female body, formulating and re-formulating our understanding of it with every social and ideological shift; renders it a debatable site of enquiry. Patriarchy’s appropriation of the female body makes us assume that it has never been a body; on being perpetually denied subjectivity and always an object of enquiry and contestation; always socially ambivalent; and therefore apt to accommodate and replicate modern techno interventions to it. The increasingly abstracted world of cyber communication can only be befittingly expressed through female bodies.

Modern women’s place in society is characterised by the digital space that she inhabits and the World Wide Web that she frequents. Automated environment creates a malleable feminine being that in its shape shifting nature, in tune with cybernated categories, and functioning within a virtual matrix, opens up new nodes of meaning/analysis and embodiment. The digital *habitus* of modern female bodies is not only her acquired social connections and conventions, but also the zone within the digital world and the web of information that she takes part in or values or identifies with.

The theoretical point of entry into this paper will be through Donna Haraway’s initial assertion that we are already cybernetic beings, in allowing our bodies to be continuously under medical gaze and technological intervention. I will start by referring to her most influential work “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century”, and then move on, in the course of my analysis, to explore her shifting position in later texts.



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The cyborg, that is what we are, represents a state of hybridity, in which developing techno-science have pervaded the everyday life of humans, be it through medical intervention, or information and communication technology. Boundaries between animal/human, organism/machine, and physical/non-physical are disintegrating, and we are left to question:

Who are my kin in this odd world of promising monsters, vampires, surrogates, living tools, and aliens? How are natural kinds identified in the realms of late-twentieth-century technoscience? What kinds of crosses and offspring count as legitimate and illegitimate, to whom and at what cost? Who are my familiars, my siblings, and what kind of livable world are we trying to build? (Haraway, 2018:52)

The body gets hooked up to the creative potential of the internet, and is a boundary crosser in its own right, like its fellow travellers: OncoMouse and FemaleMan – “synecdoche for all of technoscience” (Haraway 2018:22).

Haraway provides new possibilities for the women's body, by arguing that digital world opens up new vistas of embodiment – “The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code” (2015:163). Women's cultural capital should be communication technologies and cyber codes, by which she can reinstate her new *hexis*. For Haraway, re-fashioning women's bodies can only take place by absorbing the techno-scientific interventions to one's own end. The new digital codes, yet another linguistic metaphor, become the new tool to embodiment: “Communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools re-crafting our bodies. These tools embody and enforce new social relations for women world-wide...” (2015:180). Though biotechnical bodies are beyond stereotypes of sex and gender, yet they open up new ways towards fembodiment. “A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end (or until the world ends); it



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takes irony for granted” (2015: 180); yet these hybrid bodies are what women require, abstracting the self from emotional attachment to life, and society in general.

Now the question that I would like to pose is: Why female bodies are considered to be laden with possibilities of body drifts and techno-scientific transcendence? To answer this question, we need to look at the history of medical gaze to contentious bodies of women purportedly afflicted with hysteria. Hysterical bodies have always been a point of concern for patriarchy as they transgress the linguistic order of men. Medical sciences have assiduously relegated hysterical bodies to a position of otherness, and through them have tried to assert women’s overall materiality that needs to be curbed. The disease was linked to the womb, more pertinently to ‘wandering wombs’ – a separate living organism within the body of women – “the womb is like an animal within an animal” (Aretaeus, qtd in Preez, 3). Under-utilization of the womb was considered to be a cause of hysteria. Nineteenth century medical intervention to such bodies disempowered women of control over their bodies as they were silenced to “storied bodies” (Matlock 137), waiting to be scrutinized and labelled by an essentially male physician. But what is of primary importance to this analysis is how these women at times spoke their minds, “with perceived lack of modesty and audacity by addressing men as if they were of the same sex” (Preez 10). This was a particular quality of the female hysterical body, that it could mime or simulate any disease or any behavioural pattern. First being denied human subjectivity by being labelled as an animal; and secondly with her miming capability, “as if the hysteric is a mirror of her surroundings, incorporating the signs from another’s body as the reflection of her own” (Kirby 57), the woman’s body, which was considered to be hysterical by disposition, could be like a clean slate in the web of networking, upon which any code could be mapped, [Ctrl-Delete]ed, and again could be readied to embody the next set of codes.

Luce Irigaray’s assertion that “*Hysteria is all she has left*”(71), is a statement that I borrow to assert fembodiment from a cyber-feminist standpoint. Women through the miming strategies of



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hysterical bodies can break the silence that has been accorded to her, and create her own linguistic codes within a cyber-network. Her hysterical body can emerge as the *sensible transcendent* calling for a different symbolisation, so that they can no longer be viewed “as the sole guardians of corporeality” (Whitford, 142). “The intertwining – the chiasm”, through which Maurice Merleau-Ponty articulates the fleeting nature of the flesh, where it “has no name in any philosophy” (147), as it cannot be “experienced as thought” (Vasseleu, 28), is of primary importance in understanding fembodimentin a digital age. The mysterious nature of the hysteric’s flesh giving way to the overall mystery around female body has always been silenced in theory as it couldn’t be fathomed properly by patriarchal mono-lingual codes. Mearleau-Ponty’s assertion that, “The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance...midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea...Not a fact or a sum of facts, and yet adherent to *location* and to the *now*” (140), makes me assume that the female body is neither material, nor completely psychological, but with a pre-condition for both, locating itself at the juncture of the mind/body split; and most apt for techno-interventions.

Another notion that I will be discussing for the time being is the modern phenomena of body drift and Katherine Hayles’ contribution regarding the same. It was assumed that post modern scientific intrusion in our lives will bring about a marginalization of the body, but quite the contrary has happened. With the rise of digital flesh, the corporeal body has drifted from a singular, cohesive and universal history of the body to a multiplicity of existence, where we parallel inhabit imaginary, sexualized, gendered and yet cyborgian bodies. Prioritizing new scientific theories over physchoanalysis, Hayles’ effectively captures the trajectories of body drifts enmeshed within a technological matrix. There is an overwhelming idea of the ‘regime of computation’ as it dislodges traditional histories of the self, and emerges as the dominating force in the formulation of the new-era-cyber-organisms.



The last few decades marked the arrival of the post-human subjectivity with its political significance of code studies, laden with possibilities of a new humanism developed at the threshold of simulation and materiality. Techno-science gave birth to a new transformative-generative grammar of the body, where we were made to creatively interrogate notions of psyche and sexuality, culture and power in the wake of a computational culture where codes were/ are the new sperms floating freely and aggressively from the visible to the invisible, from materiality of the body to the language of simulation fully internal to self configuration. The modern language of the OncoMouse, with its dissipative structures and leaky boundaries can only be imprinted on the fluid and bifurcated bodies of women.

Hayles suggest a new critical perspective on technology, where the human subject can revive its embodied consciousness by limiting itself as a “co-evolving” (qtd. in Kroker 11) partner to technology. Hayles’ looks forward to depth participation by the body in the matter of technology. To preserve materiality of the body, technology must remain external to the body, and then only technological humanism can find its theoretical voice. From absolute surrender as cyborgs to co-exist with technology, forms the theoretical foci of the essay for the time being; and with this theoretical capital I will move on to explore Luc Besson’s *Lucy*.

The web of illusion: *Lucy*

A student at Taipei, Lucy fall victim to a drug racket and is forced to become a drug mule, bearing pouches of CPH4 in her abdomen. On being brutally tortured the packets rupture within her abdomen giving her extraordinary power to utilize her mind to the fullest, and in the course of the movie as she passes from 10% to 20% to ultimately 100%, the flesh fails or rather embodies itself into a new age computer pen-drive, hooking into the soul of the universe and giving the ultimate message – “I am everywhere”. As I have previously stated, I won’t go into critiquing the premise of science presented in the movie, rather assuming it to be purely fictitious I will explore Lucy’s fembodiment through various stages of psychic and physical evolution and



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treat her changes to be a direct consequence of bio-scientific interventions, showing her emergence to be the *bildung* of a 'cyborg' or maybe something post-cyborgian.

The movie starts with the evolution myth and moves on to revolutionize perspectives on body and embodiment. For quite some time two different sets events parallel and overlap one another: Lucy's phenomenal change and Professor Norman's seminars on brain power. The directorial technique almost renders Lucy's body as the spectacular substantiation of the Professor's hypothesis in the conference, reminding me of Dr. Charcot's public lectures at Salpetriere, where female hysteric bodies were displayed in their apparent deviance. Lucy's body on display with fitting collapses and turbulent convulsions on absorbing large quantities of the drug, in not a body to be medicalized and surveyed upon, but a body, in binding itself with her hysteric sisters of the previous centuries, is a body in preparation for assumption of a new order of embodiment, empowered to resist oppressive role models. Maybe the analogy appears far-fetched, but as the Professor states in the movie: "Knowledge and learning are handed down through time"; likewise it can be stated that conceptions about the self are also genetically embedded, handed down from cell to cell, over time; making it absolutely logical to represent Lucy's body in a state of hysteria.

In his seminar Professor Norman states that as we move from 10% to 20% to 40% of our brain power, it may be hypothetically assumed that we will first have access and control over our own bodies, will be able to synthesize gigantic proportions of information, and exert absolute control over our ambience. But the Professor himself admits that to predict about that state would be "to enter the domain of science fiction". Someone from the audience poses the question, as to the consequences of using 100% of brain cells, to which the Professor flatly confesses that such a state is beyond conception. Since much of the seminar belongs to the zone of hypothesis and assumptions, its best to focus on the stunning transformation of Lucy.



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First I would like to draw attention to her indomitable hunger. After breaking out of her confinement she eats like a man, uncouth, breaking free of the oppressive gender models of femininity. She develops an ‘oppositional consciousness’ that is ‘fully political’, as she begins to understand the ‘webs of power’. Lucy’s loss of innocence, in tune with Haraway’s cyborgs, holds intriguing prospects for women’s bodies that as an uncanny presence have always being pushed into the borderlands, inhabiting the dichotomy between the innocent virgin and the vicious whore. Lucy’s hysteric and scientifically invaded body is a mix between whore and virgin, and yet neither. Lucy becomes a befitting example of Haraway’s cyborg bodies, because she embodies the all new gender in her infiltration of boy’s toys and male domains. It is only through her technologically-formulated body that a woman can transcend her stigma of original sin; and the negative connotation around the term *femina* gets dispelled with the assumption that on being technologically meddled with no body retains its state of sanctity (Fisher), marking women better off from traditional perspectives as far as her gender is concerned. Lucy never wants to revert to her lost innocence, a non-option in fact. Rather she lays claim to her cyborg identity, and wanting to inhabit the goddess myth, dislodging such patriarchal stereotypes for ever that have lured and suffocated women for ages with the utopic and unachievable trope of the abstract goddess’s body, while pulling her down continually to the corporeal body of the whore. Her cyber body heralds a post-gendered state: “The cyborg is a creature in a postgender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-Oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity (2015: 192).

On her way to the hospital Lucy realizes that she has become extra-perceptive as she can listen to people far off; in the hospital her capability to decode unknown languages; and in the operation theatre her medical perceptions on the brain astonishes her. She taps into inner recesses of her mind as she comments – “I feel everything”. Her call to her mom, where she narrates that she can feel space, air, vibrations, people, gravity, rotation, heat leaving the body, the blood in



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the brain; juxtaposed with the operation of her body, reminds me of the 'Carnal Art' Manifesto of St. Orlan's body modification projects; but more importantly I would like to highlight that at this point Lucy's memory "of the taste of mother's milk", challenges the Virgin Mary's trope of representing women as an abstract entity. As Kristeva states, "What milk and tears have in common: they are the metaphors of non-speech, of a 'semiotics' that linguistic communication does not account for" (qtd in Weir 176). But here, not only the taste is accounted for but also the Mary/Eve divide permanently dissolved, as the verbalization of the taste of the milk accords a fleshy frame to the body of the mother figure, whose breasts are capable of oozing out milk whose taste can be consciously remembered. The new body of Lucy also resurrects the vibrant feminine discourse like the fluid milk, in contrast to the hard monolingual phallo-centric discourse of patriarchy.

Lucy can read thoughts; can access electronic machines as if they are her extended being; even reads up six thousand seven hundred and thirty four pages of the professors research; and taps into the loop of common human knowledge. She does not feel pain, fear, desire; "all things that makes us human are fading away". What Lucy means by the statement is that those unchallenged codes that have governed sex, race, class, or even power dynamics seems to be 'aw snap', and as those pages of past ideologies fail to load, we are left with an epistemological lack out of which emerges a plural-technoscientific code governed practice of practising embodiment. Always chimerical, shape-shifting and dependent on other codes, limitless possibilities are offered to these futuristic female bodies, which can not only drift within their own bodily history, but by being intensely present at all significant moment of human evolution offers a scope of resurrecting the subject 'woman' from the abyss of being objectified down the ages. The woman, only by allowing her body to drift from the materiality of the flesh can push towards the autobiography of the individual 'I'. Body drifts allows a female body to circulate effortlessly from one code to another, and Lucy intimately feels and communicates to the Professor/s with inconceivable granularity of detail the multiplicity of bodies that she has become. The effect of



champagne on her body, already under the evolutionary process of CPH4, makes her body drift from her stable forms. She seems to drift within and across the multiplicity of bodies that she has become, dissolving the basic identity of the personal in a generously proportioned and diverse current of code drifts.

Freud in his lecture 'On Femininity' (1933) makes an interesting link between women and weaving: "It seems that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization, there is, however, one technique which they have invented – that of plaiting and weaving" (qtd. in Boer 63). The statement, merged with the miming quality of hysteria, provides an important entry point into fembodiment to uncover a voice for women, primarily in the world of digital codes. During the process of weaving the weaver and the loom, women and machine, are closely bound up together and almost "linked limb by limb to the process" (Plant 104) - "Weaving has always been a vanguard of machine development, perhaps, because, even in its most basic form, the process is one of complexity, always involving the weaving together of several threads into an integrated cloth" (Ibid 103) – of knowledge, where women's body is inextricably assimilated with the codes that she weaves. Women's cultural capital in the digital era is her capability to weave codes and in the new *habitus* that she inhabits, yet her individual taste must also be taken into consideration: "Taste is the practical operator of the transmutation of things into distinct and distinctive signs, of continuous distributions into discontinuous oppositions; it raises the differences inscribed in the physical order of bodies to the symbolic order of significant distinctions (Bourdieu 174-5). This difference in department lends individuality to the highly abstracted body of the female cyborgs.

The final spectacle happens when after consuming the entire drug, Lucy's body changes into a new age supercomputer, her body drifts up and down time, and she herself represents a maxtrix, which resurrects the 'wandering womb' that finds itself moving up and down time frame; where the professors are hurled into. In this new digital era "where parallel-distributed processing



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systems are running without central controlling units and are spread all over the system at any given time” (Preez 114), Lucy’s presence in the lab, simultaneous presence in the various moments of human evolution, and yet being dissolved of the mortal frame, becomes an important maker of her new hybrid embodiment; like a computer whose information base with its woven pattern of “pixelled windows on a flickering screen” (Preez 114), seems to be at once nothing and yet everything: outside of discourse and yet splattered everywhere inside language and comprehension, inside the collective unconscious, reminding us of Lucy’s final statement – ‘I am everywhere’.

Lucy’s dissolution of the corporeal frame and assimilating herself within the computer or the computer within herself is essential as the constitutive element for the spectre of her new embodiment, where the changes in her body continue to circulate as a phantasmagoric sign of plurality. As the actual meaning of the body disperses, the new digital matrix, that the current body is, circulates as a universal sign of equivalence through a network of codes. Lucy’s new avatar increasingly takes the form of a highly individual epistemological presence as a source of universal language. She ultimately transforms into a pendrive of all orderly knowledge. What is fascinating about this spectacle is that through technology she journeys back and forth from a corporeal body to the pre-linguistic state of Kristevan *chora* in changing into a web trying to connect with all knowledge sources; and finally embodying herself as a pendrive, that is, reverting back to the symbolic order, but in a new way, where she offers knowledge not out of the “death cave” (Irigaray 353) of the mother’s womb, but within the “mother-matter” (Ibid. 353) itself, that Lucy embodies with her present techno-transformations.

Conclusion



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This paper tries to show that modern techno-science accords fluidity to the fixed entity of what it meant to inhabit a body, primarily a sexed and oppressed woman's body. Modern bodies are produced with promises of transgressing gender stereotypes. The new gender drifters remix, recombine and reorient codes of gender and sex performativity, with new digital assignments, providing them with an opportunity to refuse the normative hetero-sexist worldview. The post-modern era the bounded bodies are offered with the dream of crossing boundaries and circulating in a web of knowledge. Lucy's body drifts in the movie is a promise of the bodies of future

Yet in her body drifts, and even in her undermining the goddess/ whore dichotomy, Lucy never becomes an absolute cyborg; rather she mutates into a 'companion species' in her understanding of all the evocative forms of human evolution. She inhabits a hybrid space between being an impersonal computer and a personal witness to significant moments in time

This paper has positioned embodiment as a crucial facet of being human in the face of technological intervention, in trying to search for a dependable and resourceful amalgamation between bodies and techno-science. What the paper suggests is that our bodies are continuously pervaded by new science (good/bad), but we shouldn't be hasty in deducing that the body stands the risk of being annihilated; rather tangible bodies in negotiation with intangible information, gives rise to a new embodied state of the techno-flesh. What I meant by fembodiment is the creation of socio-politico-technologically created female bodies, which represents the merger between bodies and technologies; and project possibilities of empowerment and cohabitation through dismantling those debilitating myths and stereotypes around human and machines. The new female bodies are not a free-floating techno-code, not a malleable lump of flesh; they are concrete cyber feminist bodies struggling for social empowerment in the new culture of science and experimentation.



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