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Presents

A Loretta Tan Production

SCREENIC SIRENS
&
THE IDEAL CYBORGEAN SPECTA©TOR

AN ANALYSIS OF THE SHARP
ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN

NOW PLAYING
NOVEMBER 2005

So I begin where Slavoj Zizek ends in “Welcome to the Desert of the Real”,

So perhaps one can conclude with a modest Marxist point: since the digital network affects us all, since it already is the network that regulates our daily life to its most common features like the water supply, it should be socialized in some form of *another*. Is such a measure “totalitarian”, threatening to impose control over cyberspace? YES . (lacanian ink, 80) (*italics mine*)

Indeed, a revolution has occurred at speeds faster than the Blue Men can hurl themselves against the Pentium M. In fact, with the Intel Centrino technology imbued in all these high speed machines, the Blue Men will not even have a wire to hold them should they fall.

Cybernetic technology continues its meteoric upgrade to clinch a niche in the domain of culture, ushering the ubiquitous Information Age whilst simultaneously reproducing staid organizational structures that still prevail in our contemporary society. This technological wizardry that characterize our times should have no inherent gender bias but as Sherry Turkle pointed out, the “computer culture is not equally neutral” (365). Taking as object of analysis, the new advertising campaigns by SHARP, this paper hopes to illuminate upon the conflation of current modes of production and consumption with models of female sexuality in this “one dimensional society of the spectacle of advanced capitalism” i.e a society that consumes images more than it consumes objects (Debord, qtd in Hard Core, 106)

By utilizing a framework of analysis drawn up by Leo Spitzer and Roland Barthes, this paper aims at re-politicising these print ads through an analysis of the images portrayed, thus intervening in our reception and identificatory process that typically takes for granted these images that saturate our visual field. In addition, the relationship between feminist discourse, technology and commodity fetishism will be enabled through a nuanced study and reconfiguration of seminal theories – Laura Mulvey’s influential essay on the (Male) Gaze (it was written 30 years ago!), Joan Copjec on “The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan” and Linda Williams’ witty and insightful take on Deep Throat that provides a comparison of the Marxist and Freudian fetish.

Further, drawing from Donna Haraway’s varied works on feminism and technology, this paper aims to draw parallels between media (or what I will argue as screenic technology) and the increasingly common metaphor of the cyborg to exhort for a new Ideal Specta©tor position. These, in addition to mine own critique, observations and a certain

Mr Jim Carrey no less will aim to provide a key to understanding how today's commodity culture, sexual desire/pleasure and phallo-technocracy interpolate.

ADVERTISING // AT-ENTICING

Niklas Luhmann, a German social philosopher defines the media as regulating mechanisms within detached market-like institutions,

Media...solve[s] the problem of ...contingency through transmission of reduced complexity. They employ their selection pattern as a motive to accept reduction, so that people join with others in a narrow world of common understandings, complementary expectations and determinable issues. Media is not only words, symbols, or codes; they are meaningful constellations of combined selectivity which can be signified by words, symbolized or codified legally, methodologically or otherwise. Prominent examples are money and power, we would like to add truth, love and perhaps art (qtd in Poster, 43)

A clear claim is made: the media is kernels of information that circulate discourse and images through our social reality, taking the form of newspapers, television, radio etc. The key interest here however is as Poster points out, the inclusion of truth, love and art foregrounds the "immense theoretical problem of social unity [for] media is the sinews...[that] holds together the differentiated institutions of modern society"(44). Extending the metaphor the media as sinews, we now see how each "soft sell" works – the perceivable images in our particular instance functions in the "bigger picture" and aids us (whilst keeping its precise working invisible) in threading (a love and gendered) narrative based on our lived experience. However, as Roland Barthes astutely points out, such "natural links" are but the workings of mythology,

Myth is not defined by the object of its knowledge, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no "substantial" ones. Everything then can be a myth? Yes, I believe this as *the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions. Every object can pass from a closed silent existence to an oral state open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things.*(109) (italics mine)

Indeed it is with this quote that we situate our project—the print ad as cultural text first needs to be demythified and repoliticised, thereby increasing the awareness of the constructedness of the images that circulate. Further, Barthes too highlights the purpose in doing such work—the very same factors, in italics, that allows for mything too allow for recuperation and reappropriation of these myths, not to an "original untainted" status, but rather provide a challenge to existing pervasive ideology and "taken-for grantedness" of its circulation. In short, this project whilst exhorting for the cyborg as the Ideal Specta©tor, also performs a cyborgian function,

The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self that feminists must code. Communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies. These tools embody and enforce new social relations for women worldwide. Technologies and scientific discourse can be partially understood as formalizations i.e. as frozen moments, of the fluid social interactions constituting them, but they should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings. The boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical systems of social knowledge and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge. Indeed, myth and tool mutually constitute each other. (Haraway, 447)

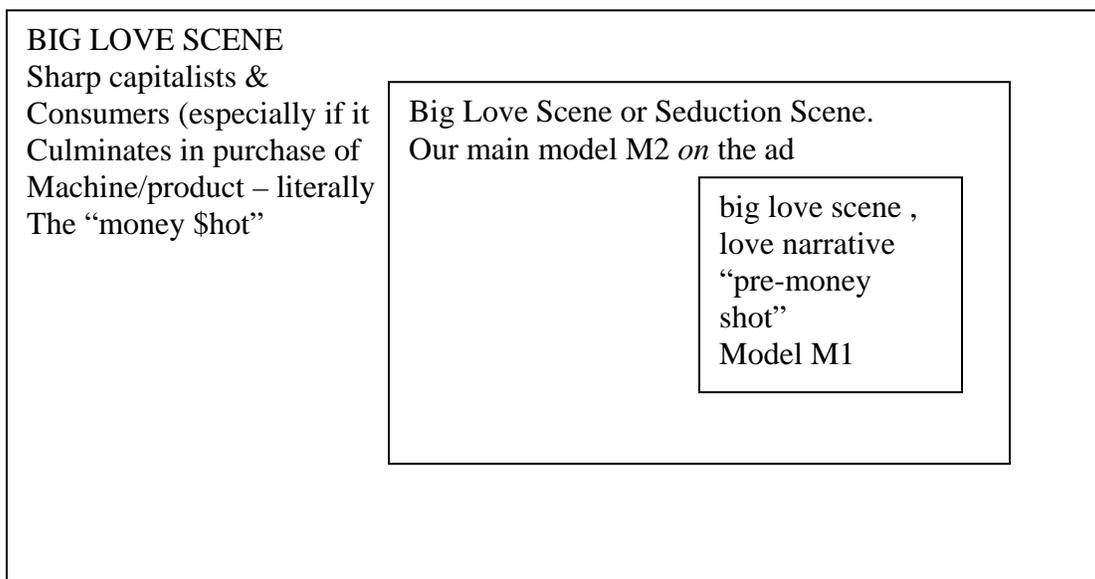
MODEL DV-L80 @ MODEL DESIRABLE VAMP-LOLA EIGHTY

Emblazoned across the two print ads is the tagline : “READY for the big love scene?” and EXPERIENCE an unbelievable pleasure”. Set on a deserted beach front drizzled by the soft glow of the setting sun (I say setting rather than rising as I am drawing a reference from the women’s apparel and upon my knowledge of the world that associates sundown with romance and sensuous summer parties), the former ad and the focus of our discussion features a blonde woman clad in a tiny golden number, complete with gold stilettos and an enviable pair of long, firm sun-kissed legs, stares resolutely into the screen of the sleek wafer thin 8” Widescreen LCD Display, at once displaying a will to desire and a seeming ease of mastery over the machine, given the calculated angling and positioning of the two models (woman and DVD player). Disregarding the laws of proportion, it is her body that is emphasized in the ad with her (downcast) eyeline on par with “READY”, the “vast expense” of Nature (the drifting clouds, setting sun, pastel hued sky, calm inviting waters) is diminutive behind her and it is her body that dominates (seemingly) over the pint-sized machine. Her desire and sense of longing (for what we will soon explore) is betrayed by her stance – body ever so slightly thrust forward, open, anticipating, yearning.

Upon first glance, one may hastily surmise that the ad breaks the stereotype of the woman as technophobe but instead highlights her liberation and mastery over the machine. However, upon further inspection, we note that the object of her attention is perhaps less the SHARP machine itself but the image that is (re)produced on screen- women (hence termed M1) as passive femme limp in the eyes of her master/hero who stakes his claim on her by positioning her between his outstretched legs, devouring her with his testosterone –dripping kisses. Our model for ease of discussion will be termed M2, looks on enchanted and we note now, at the very edge of the frame, a hand strategically positioned on her chest as that belonging to her lover-male/master/maestro and we recognize now that it is he who owns the Gaze and the Machine.

The tagline now resonates with greater clarity- whilst the target/potential Gazer is the (male) consumer, the identificatory processes are mediated by two other screenic worlds:

the big love scene on the DVD or what I will hence term as the cinematic screen, the potential Big Love Scene between M1 and her lover, and the BIG LOVE SCENE (the media (as) screen or the un-scene/unseen) that we consumers and arguable M2 can gain privy to if we owned this Machine that will “weaken anyone’s resistance and [take you] wherever the mood leaves you”. The processes of identification with the image is as I will argue truncated and thrice removed from the merchandise proper. The diagram below better illustrates the interface, points of identification and layers of this screenic economy (DVD screens, the ad itself as screen) we will be systematically uncovering. What is important to note is that while the “uncovering” process is viewed in a linear fashion, the identificatory and fetish processes are not meant to be viewed as causal or linear but rather mutually inform and intervene with each other.



In time, the paper seeks to demonstrate that the screenic devices employed in this new logic of advertising and the oft mentioned commodity fetish, in addition to merely performing a projection function, is also employed as frame and interface – seducing us into identifying with the models (machine, M1, M2, male model?) through the big love scene that occurs in the other screenic sensation we are familiar with – the cinematic screen. Given the increasing complexities of technology, untenable now is the simplistic subject-object position as laid out by Mulvey.

THE CINE-ENIGMATIC GAZE

We recall Mulvey’s oft quoted writing on the Gaze,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional

exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote a certain to-be-looked-at-ness (33).

According to Mulvey, the image of woman stands central in patriarchal culture, not for the realities of women but as a signifier of the male other, a sight/site for men to enact their fantasies and obsessions by imposing on them the “silent image of woman tied to her place as bearer and not maker of meanings” (qtd in Ussher, 104). Studying Freud, Mulvey illuminates upon the two forms of pleasure identified by him. Pleasure from voyeuristic scopophilia arises from the surreptitious observation of an(other) as object and making them into an object of sexual stimulation through sight. Given a darkened auditorium and the conventions of film that portray a hermetically sealed world, the audience can play out their fantasies onto the objects. The pleasures of the narcissistic gaze is, on the other hand, derived from an identification with the central male protagonist who possesses “more perfect, more complete, more powerful” attributes that allow complete mastery of the woman by rendering her as a phallic fetish, thereby allaying fears of the castration complex. Indeed, in a predominantly male oriented economy, the woman’s body typically functions as the fetish commodity – a notion we will explore in a moment.

While the pleasures of scopophilia and narcissism as pointed out by Mulvey are largely undisputed today, certain reconfigurations have to be made in the light of new technologies, new modes of visibility, perception and identification. Indeed, the screenic pleasure on sale here is not that *of* a cinematic screen or even that of a home theatre system- but rather drawing on our familiar identificatory processes *through* the cinematic screen, this “beautiful, portable DVD player”, we are so(ld) told offers a “breathtaking 8” widescreen LCD display (I hope to draw your attention to the very oxymoron-ic description 8” display).

While certain features remain salient in Mulvey’s work, pleasure from this screenic device and its identificatory processes must then be organized along a differing trajectory than that postulated 30 years ago as it is evident the DVD player does not elicit the same pleasures as that of the cinematic screen. Indeed as the next section will argue, whilst one can underscore that a tangible product is being marketed/sold, its use value is rather negligent given the ascendancy of computers, accessibility to cinema and the lure of the larger than life cinematic screen with its darkened auditorium that allows for the willing suspension of disbelief. The precise relation between the negligible use value and the exorbitant exchange value of the DVD player lies in this late capitalist reconfiguration of our notions of Desire, Pleasure, Identification and Privacy through which we call the fetishism of the commodity.

COMMO-DEFYING THE FETISH

In the famous passage from *Capital*, Marx defines the commodity as a “mysterious thing” on which the “social character of men’s labour” appears to be “stamped” on the very

products of that labour. Further, through an extended analogy to vision, Marx explains that just as “light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as an objective form of something outside the eye itself, we see the commodity as possessing inherently intrinsic qualities. But whilst in vision, there is an actual passage of light, there is no such trajectory between the seeing eye/I and the commodity: the relationship between the two is that of an illusion, a “fantastic form of relation between things” – the Marxist fetish thus exists as a matrix enabling and suturing the divide between the subliminal and the material.

At this juncture, we return to the ad and recognized that we actually know no more about the specifications of the marketed product but one can imagine a potential buyer succumbing to the lure of the product. As a detailed demand-supply economics is beyond the confines of this paper, suffice to say that though the workings of fetishism and advertising, the commodity in question appeals and appears to be useful to the consumer and money/currency then takes on the function of rendering this (perceived or otherwise) use value of the object (DVD player) into a representable form or embodiment of exchange value. As Williams’ rightfully points out,

[A]esthetic illusion became an independent function of selling- packaging and desirability as opposed to proven usefulness, began to substitute for the tangible product. What is most characteristic of late capitalist fetishistic consumption then is that increasingly nothing tangible is purchased (107).

So what is sold/bought ? – the answer comes below in the **MONEY SHOT**.

THE MONEY SHOT

The money shot – the pornographic industry’s slang term for the moment the hard core film “delivers the goods” of sexual pleasure, and the money shot seems the perfect embodiment of that illusory and insubstantial “society of spectacle” quoted above. Obviously, a fetish, the money shot combines money and sexual pleasure- “those simultaneously valuable and dirty things” that seduce and appeal to the specta©tor.

Taking from Williams’ lead, the workings of the money shot is I argue, akin to the workings of (manufactured) Desire to the point of ultimate Pleasure for both the capitalist and the seeing eye/I of the ad . The moment that produces this image-satisfaction desired by the specta©tor at once converts/fetishises this insubstantiality of use value (ejaculatory fluids for non-reproductive purposes/breathtaking 8”LCD screen) into consumption satisfaction which in turn feeds back into the structure of needs and at once renews the consumers’ willingness to pay for which will never be owned (Haug 55, qtd in Williams)

Adapting Marx, Haug wrote that “commodities borrow their aesthetic language from human courtship” and cast flirtatious glances at their buyers. The effect of such commodity courtship mediated by money is that “people are conditioned to enjoy what

betrays them” even when like the fetishist, they know that their enjoyment is founded upon an illusion (qtd in Williams 108). Indeed, in a post industrial society where spending is said to be the key to a healthy though inflated economy, it is perhaps as Williams’ wittily summarises, the money shot’s repeatedly inflated “ex-spending penis” that enables us to see all the condensed and conflated principles of late capitalism’s hyper consumerist/pleasure oriented society- pleasure as the orgasm of spending and the fetish not just as commodity but as the surplus value of orgasm (Williams 108) with the women functioning as the screenic siren, suturing the crucial link between Pleasure, Desire, Consumption and the Screens themselves. However, given that this is not the cinematic screen, pleasure in this instance is derived not merely by that distinct split between active/male and passive/female with the determining male gaze projecting its fantasy onto the female figure but a fractured play of the screen as mirror, the mirror as screen and the transgression of the public and the private and the cyborg’s arrival onto the scene of the obscene.

My Own Private & (im)Portable Idaho

The distinction between the Pleasure(s) derived from the cinematic screen is what I call (im)Portable Privacy. Indeed, the tag line of the ad itself posits to speak to the consumer directly and revels in its ease of accessibility,

“THERE ARE NO RULES THAT SAY YOU HAVE TO BE IN A CINEMA TO EXPERINCE THE ACTION NOT WHEN OUR BEAUTIFULLY PORTABLE DVD PLAYER GIVES YOU SUCH BREATHTAKING 8” WIDESCREEN LCD DISPLAY... JUST GIVE IN AND GO WHEREVER THE MOOD LEADS YOU.”

As highlighted by Mulvey above, the representations produced by the institutions of the cinema are accepted as the subject’s own. However, there is as highlighted by Copjec, already an ambiguity of what constitutes “own” – is the image identified with an image of the subject or an image *belonging to* the subject? To Lacan however, whether that which is represented is specularised as an image of the subject’s own body or the subject’s image of someone or something else is key to my questioning of “private *own-ership*” – what it *really is* does not matter as much as the fact that the identification with the images call for a “that belong to me aspect” so reminiscent of (private) property. The pleasures of the DVD player thus offers me the (illusion) of private ownership of the images on the 8” LCD screen, away from the collective viewership in the cinematic screen. Here, Mulvey’s notion on voyeurism and scopophilia remains undisputed. Indeed, it is this aspect of *own-ership* that allows the subject to see in any representation not only a reflection of itself – one needs only consider the striking likeness of M1, M2, the male model(s?) in the ad or in other words, the verisimilitude of the big love scene and the BIG LOVE SCENE (potentially confusing, if need arises, see diagram).

Our interpolation with the ad however is too derived from such a logic, we like M2 are meant to perceive ourselves as masters of the image – of all images in fact: our very owned versions of reality. In fact there is no need to distinguish or establish even the

similarity between the image and the real referent (e.g. M1, M2 or us) Our impression of reality(s) results from the fact that the Spectator takes the image as a full and sufficient representation of him/her/itself and his/her/its world. Pleasure from the ad (hopefully leading to purchase) is thus derived when the Spectator is satisfied that he/she/it has been adequately reflected on the screen. The “reality” effect and the “subject” effect both name the same constructed impression: that the image makes the subject fully visible to itself (22). In the case of the ad, the identificatory process can be deferred as we identify ourselves first with M2, the main model and the voyeur. [What is interesting to note too that we like Hitchcock’s audience, especially in *Psycho* and *Rear Window*, are always the “real” voyeur]. Here quoted at length is this process of identification as aptly explained by Copjec and I will undertake to relate writings to the text at hand through the inscriptions in parentheses,

Sometimes the reconstruction of representation is thought to take place secondarily rather than directly... The subject first recognises itself by identifying with the gaze and then recognizes the images on the screen (*in this case, it is the familiar love narrative and the image is that of a heterosexual couple fornicating, the “pre-money shot”*) Now what exactly is the gaze in this context?... [T]his ideal point can be nothing but the signified of the image, the point from which the image makes sense to the subject. In taking up this position at this point, the subject sees itself as supplying the image with sense. Regardless of whether one or two stages are posited (*with big love scene or Big Love Scene*), the gaze is always the point from which...the picture becomes fully, undistortedly visible... at which sense and being collide. The subject comes into being by identifying with the image’s signified (*the pleasure derived from this love, sexual experience and woman as master-able*)... The image seems not only to perfectly represent the subject, it seems also to be an image of the subject’s perfection (22-3)

In short, the actual pleasure derived from the DVD is not in the specific object itself but rather comes from the ownership of the object’s ability to manifest the potential consumer’s desire for identification. What makes this DVD player different from the cinematic screen is the subject’s *physical* proximity and possession of the object – the player can be taken to the beach front (as seen in the ad) and can be physically controlled by the subject. Indeed, playing on the identificatory mechanisms of the cinematic screen, the SHARP advertisers aim to create a desire for this “breathtaking 8” DVD player. The elision or rather conflation of these screenic identifications causes Desire to be realised in two ways:

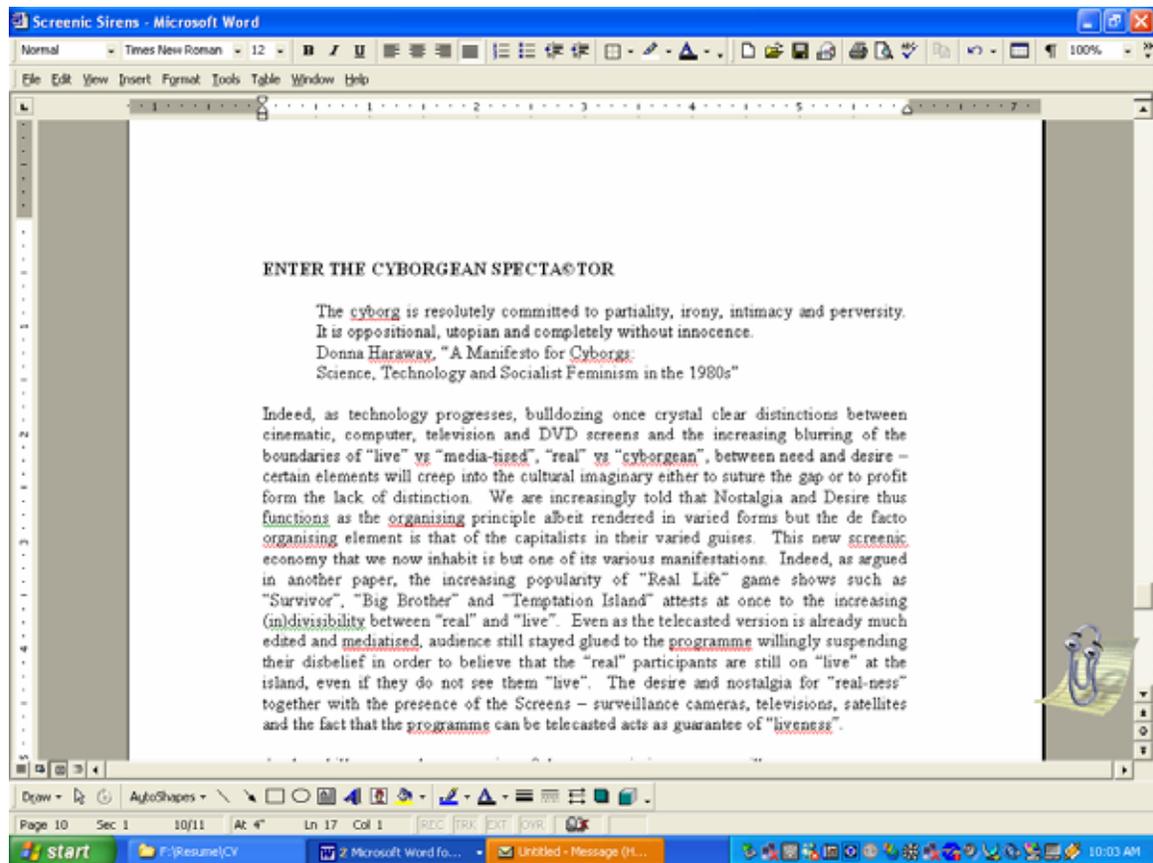
- (1) Desire is conceived as an actual state resulting from a possibility allowed by the law or by the institutions that have power over the individual
- (2) If desire is something one simply and positively has (and has to have) then nothing can prevent its realisation except a purely external force (Copjec, 24)

If the destiny of Desire is realisation (through purchase) – the SHARP capitalist leap for joy.

ENTER THE CYBORGEAN SPECTA©TOR

The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian and completely without innocence.
Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs:
Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s"

Indeed, as technology progresses, bulldozing once crystal clear distinctions between cinematic, computer, television and DVD screens and the increasing blurring of the boundaries of "live" vs "media-tised", "real" vs "cyborgian", between need and desire – certain elements will creep into the cultural imaginary either to suture the gap or to profit from the lack of distinction. We are increasingly told that Nostalgia and Desire thus functions as the organising principle albeit rendered in varied forms but the de facto organising element is that of the capitalists in their varied guises. This new screenic



economy that we now inhabit is but one of its various manifestations. Indeed, as argued in another paper, the increasing popularity of "Real Life" game shows such as

“Survivor”, “Amazing Race” and “Fear Factor” attests at once to the increasing (in)divisibility between “real” and “live”. Even as the telecasted version is already much edited and mediatised, audience still stayed glued to the programme willingly suspending their disbelief in order to believe that the “real” participants are still on “live” at the island, even if they do not see them “live”. The desire and nostalgia for “real-ness” together with the presence of the Screens – surveillance cameras, televisions, satellites and the fact that the programme can be telecasted acts as guarantee of “liveness”.

As the ad illustrates, the possession of these screenic instruments will guarantee access to endless, private pleasures and allow simultaneously, the voyeuristic viewing of pornographic, sexual (or otherwise) material and for the physical actualization of such fantasies to exist – the cinema no matter how dimmed may not be the most private place to engage fornication – but as SHARP advertisers would have us know, the portable DVD player will allow such freedom and access to pleasure – or “wherever the mood leads you”.

“What is *LIFE*?”

You are already a cyborg. Every day without thinking, you merge with machines and machines merge with you. Climb into your car and you conjoin with a ton of moving metal; between you and the road, the vehicle is perfectly responsive, an extension of your nerve and nerves... Log onto the Net and your body vanishes from the meatspace of your study and pops up in a wider world. We are cyborgs when we receive a titanium heart valve, get an MRI scan, eat processed food or fall asleep in front of the TV and hear the language of infomercials in our dreams. The line between natural and artificial is fading. Every day we negotiate more intimate kinships with machines of all kinds.

-Anonymous.

Our current realities do not allow for a xenophobic, anti-technology and anti-media stance but rather call for an even more critical stance towards the phenomenon. The cyborgean specta©tor thus performs the most efficacious position/identity/perspective that one should embody – “resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian and completely without innocence”. Indeed,

Physical reality is the greatest crisis of our time. We are jostled in airports, hemmed on highways, herded into lines and supermarkets and bank. The real world cannot compete with the virtual world. In your physical home, you shut the world out. In your cyber home, you let the world in. (Anonymous, “The Cyborg Manifesto)

Indeed, it would be utopic vision to denounce the existence or pervasiveness of commodity fetishism and our hyper-consumer era – this essay thus hopes to intervene in our reception process of images that saturate our visual field and hopes to have demonstrated that the cyborgean specta©tor is one constant critic, that is at once an

emancipatory icon as well as a challenge to dominant aesthetics. In fact, the ad hopes to have illustrated that even the SHARPEst of technologies posited to be at cutting edge, still utilise old tropes of objectifying women and fetishism to work their capitalist magic. The cyborgean spectactor thus is always partial, critical and alert – lest it be relegated once again as mere interface or screenic siren.

I leave you here with a snippet of Jim Carrey's acceptance speech at a recent MTV Award ceremony which performed for me this cyborgian transgression of boundaries whilst self-reflexively mocking, critiquing and announcing the indistinction between technology and self, "live and mediated", "real and cyborg" where the most sophisticated of technologies are refigured into the "forces of nature". Indeed, in the virtual economy, we will not imitate nature, and unlike what the ads suggest, we really do not need more breathtaking 8" DVD players to experience the action, for like Jim Carrey suggests, "nature" will imitate us, even if just telepathically.

Insert video, press PLAY.

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