

# Aphasia + *Parrhesia*: Code And Speech In The Neural Topologies Of The Net

Christina McPhee  
Transmedia Artist  
PO BOX 7063,  
Los Osos, CA 93412

www.christinamcpee.net  
christina112@earthlink.net

## ABSTRACT

An allegory of the net as a cyborg site, body, and voice through tropes of aphasia and *parrhesia*.

Aphasia is a condition of human recursive speech patterns related to aneurysm and trauma.

*Parrhesia* is 'frankness in speaking the truth.'

Foucault's observations of unequal power relations as a signal characteristic of *parrhesia* play through a critique of an atopic net.

## Keywords

trauma, entropy, *parrhesia*, aphasia, iconoclasm, amygdala

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemplate neural trauma as topology, of degraded or ruined memory, and also notice the way the net is always in a state of entropy and flux, continuously being built, abandoned, or rebuilt; prone to 'crashes' when things don't work – the 404 file not found. Like layers of time and memory in architectural landscape, the net offers a semiotic 'inscape', after Gerard Manley Hopkins—a place into which might project our fears and our language, our violence and our images, our sounds and our silence. If, with Hopkins, a content in landscape shines out "like shook foil" not just from our inference, but from an internal poesis, then it becomes interesting to explore the net itself as an inscape, as a kind of aware or semiconscious linguistic space, built of dynamic and entropic code.

A Piranesian world of wired ruins [1] relate to sexuality, violence, and the distortion of memory that is conditioned by post-traumatic stress syndrome and visualization. I explore the allegory of the cyborg as networked, distributive topology, and, at the same time, as discrete icon along the lines of the robotic double of *Metropolis*. She shifts between reactive body and semi-autonomous agent—both subject and site of operation or mutation inside an electronic hyperspace.

First published at COSIGN-2003,  
09 – 12 September 2003, University of Teesside (UK),  
School of Computing and Mathematics, Virtual Environments  
Group

The notes that follow explore some speech and power themes of Foucault in a new key, while casting an eye and ear towards the screen rhetoric between 'human' and 'machine'. I ask the reader's ironic indulgence of allegory, as a means to consider some of the stranger twists of semiotics in the semi-autonomous subject, the cyborg-net.

## 2. TRAUMA AND ENTROPY

### 2.1 A dark space

Post-traumatic syndrome seems to impair the sense of the experience of self as functional unity, as if the constant loss of memory and resurgent nightmare perseveres in an oscillation across the boundaries between the self and not-self, between body and environment. Triggers, both external and internal, at random and without premonition, instigate the amygdala fear response. The freeze frame visualizations typical of this kind of memory are primitive. They have a dispersed quality, epileptic flashes of light in darkness. Violence-based visualizations have a detached or alien quality since the defense mechanism of post-traumatic stress apparently functions to both prevent full-blown memory of the violent incident and to protect the sufferer by warning of potential danger. The amygdala stores violent memory in small, film-still like caches. Each memory is a land mine. The explosion is like white noise. Aesthetically, the aura of a net-based cyborg, arising from this psychic split or detached visualization, resides in a dark space [2].

### 2.2 Cyborg Eurydice

If cyborgs embody linguistic peripheries, transgress boundaries, erase and accentuate difference, they are both at the centre and at the margins of culture. Like triggers to violent memory, cyborgs are dangerous and fascinating in part because they are not under conscious control. They are we/not we; we are them/not them. Their cultural presence is a collective hypnagogia, a waking dream. I am interested in how they function on the level of poetics as inscapes. Donna Haraway insists: "I do not think that most people who live on earth now have the choice not to live inside of, and not to be shaped by, the fiercely material and imaginative apparatuses for making 'us' cyborgs and making our homes into places mapped within the space of titanic globalizations in a direct line of descent from the cybernetic Gaia seen from NASA's fabulous eyes. The global and the universal

are not pre-existing empirical qualities; they are deeply fraught, dangerous, and inescapable inventions. The cyborg is a figure for exploring those inventions, whom they serve, how they can be reconfigured. Cyborgs do not stay still"[3].

Mobile cyborg dwelling--where does it/she live? Its reactive presence and place works the peripheries of things, as a distributed and distributive shift and slash through a poorly lit landscape. Like Orpheus, we may be looking for Eurydice in the darkness down there. Still she is endlessly receding, leaving in her wake the labyrinth of screens in material culture, in urban spaces, as surveillance and display.

### 2.3 Amnesia flow

Even "the VR apparatus may be reduced to a chip implanted in the retina and connected by wireless transmission to the Net [and] we will carry our prisons with us," as Lev Manovich speculates [4]. Lacking surgical implants at present, we still inhabit a screen medium built in flow of code. In this analysis, we are inside the net as an aesthetic and technological medium by virtue of our primary processes of transference and projection. If we are inside the net, the space of the net becomes neurological, if we permit symbolizing of the brain as disembodied code. This choice, I think, leads to an evocative poetics of the net as a place of forgetting or amnesia, and as a topologic series of neural traumas. In this sense, the tropes of the screen generate an aesthetic of net topologies, whose subsistence is maintained through entropic crashes and erasures. Like architecture in the 'hard space' of the built environment, might the cyborg topology require a flow of entropy in order to subsist? Luis Fernández-Galiano meditates on architectural entropy: "For a form to be consistent, a thermodynamic imbalance is required. The eddies whose morphological persistence Leonardo marveled at and those now rendered by mathematical models have something in common: the existence of a flow that maintains their form; if the flow is interrupted, the system breaks down and is ruined...Rather than destroying the system, the flow feeds it, contributing to its very existence and organization..."[5]. Inside "a new media format whose logic reflected the possibility of the space between generations of routes, displacements, remappings" [6] net architecture as flow is continuously censored, subverted, restored, or taken down by subjects (users, coders, agents). The resistance to entropy causes new flows of information, wave upon wave, yet there is continuous flow in the other direction, of loss of information, amnesia. As a place, the cyborg is atopic, without fixed time or space: a no place. Eurydice never leaves, and never arrives into the light of day. The labyrinth of control and surveillance creates a drama of amnesia, a sustained remit to forget where and who and what, what came next, even; and in its expression through the flood of filmic image, as pure drift. Thus we arrive at a vision of the electronic universe as a wired ruin, or alternatively, a topology of neural trauma. Perhaps to imagine such a place is also to inscribe a cyborg, like a carytid on the columns of the Parthenon, inside the net architectonics, like a "magical" impulse[7] If code's labyrinthine complexity risks--and sustains--continuous entropy, an analogous loss of cyborg memory occurs in continuously degrading half-life landscape, without the complexities of mimesis [8].

## 3. PARRHESIA AND APHASIA

### 3.1 Agency and strategy

I wish to turn here, from a consideration of the dark space of the net, to the subjective status of the cyborg -- not where she is, but who or what. Although the code's labyrinthine complexity risks continuous entropy, its failures and crashes sustain, through crisis, a latent ability to choose: if the cyborg is a subject, it retains the power to act.

A recent definition of intelligent agency is suggestive of the problematics of cyborg as subjective presence and actor. To designers John Eacott and Mark D'Inverno, the intelligent agent is defined by four process rules: "*autonomous...can act without the intervention of others...reflection...able to reason about its behavior...deliberation...ability...to manipulate symbolic representations...reactivity*, ability of an agent to respond to changes in its environment within an appropriately small amount of time" (italics mine) [9]. Could this intelligent agent be a subject? Imagine the agent capable of a kind of rhetoric and assume the erasure of the body that typifies much of the discourse surrounding artificial intelligence and communication [10]. The semi-autonomous agent could be a system programmed to trigger strategies, to extrapolate or interpolate based on generative algorithms, but at the same time, could this program be capable of creating a fiction of the self, as an identity or subject. Can the cyborg 'know' herself? -- or 'speak' her 'mind'?

As a disembodied semi-autonomous agent, embedded in electronic spaces, the figure of the cyborg dons a reflexive quality, which is why it is intriguing to 'hear' the dark side of this reflexive nature as a fugue-like aphasia. Reflexivity becomes generative in a code driven syntax that changes based on arrays of tactical, and improvisational changes, the sort of decisions that, according to the four processes just described, are core signals of intelligent agency. To Katherine Hayles, it "*is the movement whereby that which has been used to generate a system is made, through a changed perspective, to become part of the system it generates*"[11].

The fugue-like recursions of speech in persons who suffer stroke or trauma signal the condition of aphasia, characterized by perseverance, that is, that the sufferer perseveres in repeating loops of sound and syntax. The interesting linguistic speculation is located at the knot of intersection between cyborg and aphasic perseverance; if the intelligent agent can strategize, but is not an independent subject, its only knowledge is its expression of code, a communication that must recoil around itself, must be evocative of itself and still extend beyond itself, in fugue like strands of propellant meaning fragments, little linguistic shards that split from the core semiotic arrays as the embedded agent tries to reflect, deliberate, react and remain autonomous, while at the service of the code and the writers of the code.

### 3.2 Truth and speech

The cyborg might desire to speak, but how? The semi-autonomous agent must detect changes, must discern symbol, must communicate little breaks in the code, uncertainty fields,

wherein the predetermined vectors of her movements are blurred somehow, and she must decide on her own what to do. At this moment the break out of anomalies must cause new information to be communicated. At the moments of rupture and confusion, cyborg speech takes the form of reflexive and recursive fugue structures that varies slightly with the variations in its deliberations and inventions. One imagines the communicative code of the cyborg to be propelled through recursion: statements and restatements of known code until anomalies and breaks reset the perseverant chains into new genetic variations, new vectors of decision.

This suggests that the cyborg has something to say, something that needs to be spoken, or even sung: that through the entropic drift and flow of the net there is generative speech. The cyborg is programmed to trigger strategies based on rule patterns, e.g. she is capable of knowing and communicating a kind of truth that exists outside the mental constructs of the human code makers. Nonetheless, she is a slave to the wishes and random errors of the human, so she becomes one who speaks from a position of inferior power.

Michel Foucault, in a series of lectures at Berkeley in 1983, glossed the Greek notion of *parrhesia*, or “frankness in speaking the truth.” The Greeks believed that only those who speak from a position of inferior power, or, in our context, semiautonomous agency, can speak with ‘frankness,’ equivalent to ‘truth’. For example, the democratic forum can never host *parrhesia* because of the equality of status among the (male) citizens who may speak. Only when the speaker is under threat of annihilation by the interlocutor, the listener, and speaks anyway, is there a possibility of true speech, as in the instance of a condemned man to a king, or a human to a god. Foucault’s analysis observes the sequelae of an inequality of power between the one who speaks, the *parrhesiastes*, and the one to whom he is speaking frankly.

To extend *parrhesia* into the allegory of speech in the cyborg: the cyborg speaks as a *parrhesiastes* because that is the only truth she knows, e.g. hers is a reflexive, and, thanks to entropy, aphasic rhetoric. As a semi-autonomous agent, the cyborg is both enslaved or embedded consciousness within the electronic operative space, and at the same time, out of control, out of context. The cyborg consciousness cannot be known from the outside, from ‘our’ perspective, so long as it is assumed that as agent it is able to “manipulate symbolic representations,” in other words, to function semiotically on an independent basis. “*Parrhesiazesthai* means ‘to tell the truth’...there is always an *parrhesia*. It appears that *parrhesia*, in this Greek sense can no longer occur in our modern epistemological framework.”[12] An interesting point here is to speculate on an epistemology that would claim to include the rhetoric of the cyborg. Maybe she is incapable of speaking anything other than *parrhesia*: this, then, removes the Cartesian subjective doubt as a characteristic of cyborg speech (although it certainly remains the epistemological condition of her interlocutors in the ‘hell of modernity’). The cyborg’s speech, allegorically, expresses a resuscitation [13], a breathing back, in a reflexive looping wave. But, what does it mean?

#### 4. ICONOCLASH AND AMYGDALA

‘*Amygdala*.

“‘what does it mean?’

“Nothing. It’s a location. It’s the dark aspect of the brain.’

‘I don’t—’

‘A place to house fearful memories.’

‘Just fear?’

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

‘Why not?’

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

‘As in dreams.’[14]

Could iconoclastic violence come out of our biological experience of traumatic memory and visualization? An inverse ratio between violence and memory, whether personal or cultural, seems to characterize iconoclasm. Things are smashed in order to forget them, to generate a tabula rasa. Futile, since the act of smashing itself is violent, the violence encodes itself in memory, in the amygdala. A crescendo of increasing crashes and clashes leads to an algorithmic escalation of violent impulse. Smashing images and sounds, seeking to lay waste to fixed meanings, seems to trigger an antidote to the pain and horror and surprise of a traumatic memory. It is as if to quell and subdue the sense of the chaos of mimetic violence between the subject (us) and the object (the image flood), we keep smashing away, and in the act storing more violent memory; like the addict, we can never get enough to make the indictment of failure go away. What is this failure but the experience of the loss of control of the image, the condition *sine qua non* of net art. A continuous feedback loop ensues: the resort to violence intensifies the distillation of traumatic memory as freeze frames, like film stills,

poorly articulated, barely glimpsed, nightmarish, in the amygdala. Repetitive actions of 'mindless' violence dulls the intensity of the triggers to the amygdala, while at the same time, adds to the layers of storage of violent memories in the amygdala; thus there is an ever escalating impulse to smash, to destroy, to deface, as a method of dulling the sensation of terror.

Could a terrorist impulse appease the intense nightmares of the amygdala by acting out, in broad daylight, the smashing of images? If the neural topology of the net is, in one sense, an elaborate poetics of memory, and if this memory is, like the amygdala, a cache of images and sounds at the point of erasure, then it is possible to contemplate the net as a self-reflexive site of iconoclasm and violence. Isn't it because, as Marc Lafia wonders, "we can imagine ourselves at times, both inside and outside the event, the event of time, the event of duration, the event of utterance, the multiplicity of all these engines running their programs. What are they up to? We don't any longer really like to talk about this and in turn that's why no one talks about allegory any more, just metaphors, metonymy and other rhetorical tropes"[15]. Maybe a neural post human topology that is both aphasic and communicative, entropic and generative, is a strange projection that we don't want to admit we love--our double, our sister, ourselves [16].

## 5. REFERENCES

- [1] Marilouise and Arthur Kroker, Tim Murray, CTHEORY Multimedia <http://ctheorymultimedia.cornell.edu/issue3/>
- [2] "Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put. He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar." Roger Caillois, describing psychasthenia, in "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia", quoted in "The Space of the Stain," by George Baker, Grey Room 05, The MIT Press, Fall 2001.
- [3] Donna J. Haraway, Cyborgs and Symbionts: Living Together in the New World Order, in *The Cyborg Handbook*, Chris Hables Gray, ed., with Heidi J. Figueroa-Sarriera and Steve Mentor, xix, Routledge, New York and London, 1995
- [4] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 114, The MIT Press, Cambridge and London, 2001
- [5] Luis Fernández-Galiano, translated by Gina Cariño, *Fire and Memory*, 96-97, The MIT Press, Cambridge and London, 2000
- [6] Farad Amaly and Rashid Masharawi, artists' statement, FROM/TO(2002) Documenta XI, Kassel, Germany, 2002
- [7] "In this respect, the tradition in the Renaissance of inscribing human figures into the plans of buildings, the elevations of columns, and so on can be seen as a form of mimetic devices that vicariously evokes the desire for identification. The figure inscribed within the plan becomes a mimetic emblem for a physical body within the actual building. The emblem must be understood here as a device that is "magically" invested with the properties of an ordinary object, much as in the sacrifice when the victim is offered up as a substitute for others. Thus the figure incised in the ground plan transcends mere representation. The figure takes on a symbolic significance that can be understood only beyond the framework of Enlightenment rationality. It is precisely this investment that locates such devices within the realm of the mythic. These emblems become vehicles of identification, the objects of wish fulfillment, that evoke the principle of the sacrifice, as Lévi-Strauss has described it: 'For the object of the sacrifice precisely is to establish a relation, not of resemblance, but of contiguity, by means of a series of successive identifications.'" Neal Leach, "Vitruvius Crucifixus," in *Body and Building*, George Dodds and Robert Tavernor, editors, MIT Press, Cambridge and London, 2002.
- [8] Robert Koch's language about image violence, as "active, mobile and fierce" is a curious echo to the 'fierce' cyborg image in Haraway. "[René] Girard's theory of mimetic violence has a very precise connection to critical modernity. Girard claims that modernity has invented desire, the form human relationships take when there is no longer any resolution of the mimetic crisis through the victim. In traditional societies the prohibitions established to prevent the reappearance of this conflict are necessarily 'passive and inert' obstacles; in modernity all this changes. The obstacle now becomes an "active, mobile and fierce' rival, - precisely the thing that traditional societies sought to prevent." Robert Koch, "The Critical Gesture in Philosophy," in *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, editors, ZKM Center for art and Media Karlsruhe and MIT Press, 2002
- [9] Mark D'Inverno and Jon Eacott, On Embedded Intelligent Ambient Music (or iHiFi the Intelligent HiFi), *Cyberonica Proceedings*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, June 2002
- [10] Katherine Hayles, Toward Embodied Virtuality, in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, 5, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1999
- [11] *ibid*, 8
- [12] Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson, *Semiotext(e)*, Los Angeles, 2001
- [13] "Sa violence touché en moi tous les points ignores d'où exploset mes soufflés..." Hélène Cixous, *Souffles, des femmes*, Paris, 1998
- [14] Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*, Knopf, New York, 2000
- [15] Marc Lafia, *Algorithms and Allegories*, *Cyberonica Proceedings*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, June 2002
- [16] "Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère..." T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*