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By Josephine Berry

Sadie Plant's writings have been instrumental in defining many of cyberfeminism's foundational concepts. Here, Caroline Bassett takes one of her recent essays, *On the Matrix: Cyberfeminist Simulations*, as the point of departure for a critical look at feminism's most recent progeny while **Josephine Berry** reports from the conference *Wired Women* where some of cyberfeminism's more popular figurations were placed under the microscope.

At Portsmouth University's 'Wired Women: Virtual Worlds/Real Lives' conference this March, confusion reigned in the land of the metaphor. In what turned out to be a stand-off between an assortment of feminist 'figurations', the only consensus that could be reached was the realisation that it's really hard to agree on exactly what a metaphor is and how it behaves. In the arsenal of figurations, the historical figure of Ada Lovelace battled it out with Victorian vampires and the shadow of Haraway's cyborg in a multilateral race to claim the role of most apt figuration for our new, networked reality. Diverting as this Night of the Long Femmes was, one was left wondering about the link between metaphors for our times and the female human or post-human body. Are their contours able to contain the complexity of our tech-present? And if that line of enquiry is completely missing the point, and finding appropriate metaphors has nothing to do with their capacity for describing the world around us, then how potent can they be in the quest for resistance and transformation?

Sadie Plant set the debate rolling by elegantly linking Ada Lovelace's hysteric condition with Freud's diagnosis of hysteria and the model of connectivity. According to Freud's diagnosis, hysteria - a feminine condition - results from an abundance of perceptual sensitivity. This hyper awareness which sensitises the sufferer, Kasper Hauser fashion, to an excess of phenomena has a destabilising effect. In Plant's terms the hysteric is akin to a network in that the condition forges perceptual links between points which would otherwise remain isolated. This characteristic perceptual acuteness is then the Faustian price of hysterical connectivity. Plant obliquely suggested that Lovelace's hysteria had some sort of causal relationship to her role in the development of the Analytical Engine. The suggestion was that Lovelace's contribution to the world's first software, the forefather of that which facilitates today's super connectedness, was in some way determined by her hysteric condition. As is often the case, the seeming simplicity of this argument is instrumental to reinforcing its underlying message: the naturalness of connectivity. This trajectory reaching from the womb (prerequisite of hysteria) to the network is hard to reconcile with Plant's espousal of a transgendered model of connectionism. Indeed its coupling of non-linearity with the feminine would, surprisingly, seem to reaffirm familiar masculinist rhetoric. Lovelace's intellectual achievement is accounted for more by means of physiology than scientific rational. Was Plant trying to pay her an obscure compliment?

The theme of sickness was extended by Sarah Kember's resurrection of the figure of the vampire which she used to combat Plant's connectionist disavowal of difference. Kember's libidinous bloodsucker works both as a metaphor for the flow and exchange of information, with its resonances of contagion, and as a ploy for relocating desire within the gendered body of "the monstrous desiring (feminine) self". This recentering of desire within a coherent self serves to readmit agency to the philosophical play pen. Kember argued that the connectionist advocacy of self-organising systems, which work on a super-individual level, refuses a sense of individual agency and is consequently de-historicising and de-politicising. Kember's vampire is a bid to reassert difference in the face of the metastasis implied by Haraway's cyborg.

Kember's figuration challenges a fundamental pillar of traditional feminist resistance tactics by virtue of its boundedness. Verena Conley's summary of traditional feminism's strategy for situating the self in the world sheds light on this departure: "[Feminism] does not advocate power reversals, but devises ways of letting both others (humans) and other "things" (organic and inorganic) merely be. The division into subject and object, the post-Cartesian operation that reduces and flattens the world through use of a language detached from the body, is said to lead to repression". According to this line of thinking, our contiguity with the world around us, the dissolution of boundaries, the crashing of concepts of origination and derivation are ways of escaping patriarchal control. They return us to the pre-symbolic moment. Science's instrumentalism, which suspends our connectedness to phenomena in order that we might quantify and hence manipulate them, is profoundly linked to this 'post-Cartesian operation'. Or at least this has historically been the case. The question we must now ask (and which wasn't specifically raised at Portsmouth) is: does, in fact, technoscience and its ability to link us across greater distances, with its telematic extension of our affect, lessen our severance from phenomena? Unlikely - for this new found connectedness could not be described as lessening our propensity for quantifying, manipulating and distributing materials and people across distance. In fact, this connectedness is paradoxically more likely to increase our disengagement from external phenomena due to the lessening of their affect on us. In light of the changing nature of technoscience, connectionism as a rhetoric of resistance is becoming ever harder to defend. Kember rightly identified its flawed logic, but the vampire figuration was a flimsy attempt at finding a third alternative.

The vampire, it must be conceded, does effectively marry the image of circulation and exchange with that of the 'desiring self' in a single image. But Kember's vamp, however camp, seemed too entrenched in a pre-digital world already over saturated with the metaphorical meanings of the past to carry any new ones. The ideas got tangled up in the metaphors and far from unleashing a 'spiral dance' between real and ideal, the vampires held things in check. Caught between a Victorian heroin on the one side and the era's undead libidinous legacy on the other, you couldn't help feeling that life is elsewhere. No pun intended...

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Wired Women: University of Portsmouth,
8th March, 1997

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<http://web.archive.org/web/19980213130721/http://www.envf.port.ac.uk/women/>