THE MACHINE IS NOT THE WOMAN

Cyberfeminism and the Techno-Determinism of Information Systems

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INTRODUCTION

This essay seeks to practise a non-linear non-scientific performance of knowledge and/as ideas. In doing so it challenges the linearity of much that is accorded traditional "research" status and highlights the enculturisation of knowledge from the perspectives of a dominant masculinist tradition.

It does not seek to be seamless but shows itself as a work in construction, a performance and mininarrative or what Gregory Ulmer calls a "mystery" (Ulmer, 1989). A "mystery" puts under erasure all claims to fact in writing. It shows all writing to be both personal and mysterious (my story and mystery) whatever its genre claims to authenticity and depersonalisation. It reveals the academic text to be sewn together as a compilation of the scholarly, the anecdotal or popular, and the autobiographical. It thus has numerous resonances beyond the academic genre. This text, then participates in a “mystery” and explicates the Ulmer-“popcycle” by bringing together expert knowledge, explanatory knowledge and everyday discourse and common sense.

Thus, this text acts to disrupt the expectations of the scholarly mode of writing and reading, performing a non-phallogocentric text which is inventive and discursive rather than analytical and focussed. In doing so it calls upon the work of “l’ecriture feministe”, particularly Luce Irigary, Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva. Their concepts of women’s poetics, particularly “bricolage” and “jouissance” are explored in practice. “Bricolage” refers to a workpersonlike performance that is one-off rather than done to a blueprint. “Jouissance” indicates a sense of bliss as it refers to a pleasure and fun of the text, a playing with it so that it is not following established principles; so that it disrupts expectations.

Postmodernist-feminism enacts an open-weave textuality. Indeed, as Joan Scott says: "Poststructuralism and contemporary feminism are late twentieth-century movements that share a certain self-conscious critical relationship to establishes philosophical and political traditions." (Scott, 1988:33-49).

The work of the French intellectual and cultural theorist Jacques Derrida also underpins this textual discourse, especially his concept/practice of "deconstruction". This indicates that everything in a culture is a construction and can be most fruitfully understood when it is "read against" or deconstructed to show its constituent parts. Derrida introduces the elements of mininarrative, showing knowledge as a way of "making things work", rather than as certainty. Christopher Norris says of this: Deconstruction is most importantly a textual activity that works to undermine the kinds of consoling self-image given back by a dominant cultural tradition...it interrogates not only the concepts of Western tradition, but also the ways of fitting them into a sequence, history, a well-formed narrative. (Norris, 1985:165)

This text, then, has elements of pastiche, of visiting and revisiting, and of self-reflexivity which might act to disrupt certified scholarly practices. "...the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred. (Barthes, 1989:156). In this way, this essay aims to show data as a personal narrative and to empower the reader over the singular author, recognising with Roland Barthes that "the author is dead" so there is no finalised decision/argument as in a finished "work". For Barthes, as with this essay, the text "... is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writing, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture". (Barthes, 1977:142-3)

This essay acts not only to look at cyberfeminism and information systems delivery but also to challenge the certainty of the text, particularly the self-consoling and self-replicating academic research genre. Helene Cixous challenges us with using writing itself as "...the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of social and cultural structures. (Cixous, 1991:319-320, her emphasis)

In doing so it calls for a suspension of certainties on the part of the reader: an acceptance that the text is a tissue or net in which the interstices may be as valuable as the threads.

BROAD RANGES OF FEMINISMS

There are, of course, many feminisms, although it is popular to speak of a "feminist position" as though there is only one. The missionary position? The common element of all feminisms is to improve the position of women within the local and global culture (Arnold, 1994). This improvement will lead to an improved society for children and men as well as women as the ways in which power operates and wealth is distributed will be revised for greater access and equity. Although there have been significant advances for women in the Western societies, there is no basis for assuming that women's lots have improved significantly worldwide. Even within Western cultures it is evident that the improvements are often confined to white well-educated middle-class women. Ironically, a similar group to that from which the masculinist hegemony is drawn.

Western societies, which so modestly and quite uncritically call themselves "advanced", have indeed provided women with advances such as the vote, property