

## Articles

# Bodies of technology: Performative flesh, pleasure and subversion in cyberspace

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### Abstract

This article contextualises the body in cyberspace, using the specific examples of the performative body and the social networking site Facebook. Technology is established as a process which continually unfolds and illuminates new understandings of subjectivity, unfurling in parallel with the performative body – and gendered identities – that Judith Butler articulates. Here, the author conducts a close analysis of the technological affordances of Facebook as a site that fosters the construction of a phantasmic, performative subject that Butler describes. This argument relies on an understanding of technology and the body as having their meaning dynamically constituted through mutual interconnection – an understanding of interface that is taken from the theoretical work of Donna Haraway and Vicki Kirby. The purpose of seeking out the performative body in cyberspace is to explore the possibility of technologically-derived, subversive bodies. This is done by examining the emergence of pleasure in human engagement with technology. This pleasure suggests that subjects are enticed by the creative possibilities which technology offers, as it leads to regenerations that, under the right conditions, yield subversive bodies.

**Keywords:** body, corporeal subversion, cyberspace, dualism, Facebook, gender, performativity

### Introduction

Cyberspace provides a new forum for exploring embodied subjectivity, and in turn addressing the problematic dualisms and restrictive social practices that produce heteronormative gender identities. While not supporting the position that cyberspace is utopian, it can nevertheless be acknowledged that digital technologies – particularly those that encourage the creation and continual recreation of anchored, online identities – offer a new visibility of the self that can be informative, inspiring and confronting.

First, the dualisms that are inherent in locating the body in cyberspace are discussed, building on the foundations of key theorists of the human/technology interface: Donna Haraway and Vicki Kirby. While there is a much longer lineage of philosophers and digital humanists who have explored the human relationship with technology – notably Walter Benjamin (1936) who was the first to comment on human–machine inter-reliance – it is appropriate to focus on Haraway and Kirby due to the overt feminist project guiding their work and their exploration of the interface as a site of potential. Kirby's concept of 'mutual constitutiveness' (1997) is used to elucidate an understanding

of the online body, through close analysis of the way Judith Butler's notion of the performative body is illuminated on Facebook. This exploration of the online body leads to an understanding, in the Butlerian sense, of the construction of gendered identities and their relationship to embodiment.

Ultimately, locating performativity on Facebook speaks to the Heideggerian 'unconcealing' capacity of technology (1977), as new understandings of subjectivity arise from human interactions with the machines and processes that structure quotidian life. Specifically, the argument can be made that while the discourse guiding Butler's performativity purposefully disguises its effect on the flesh,<sup>1</sup> aspects of the construction of the social body are physically visible when digitally inscribed on a Facebook wall. This new visibility is deemed a factor in the potential subversion of gendered identities, which remains a perhaps underexplored footnote to Butler's articulation of performativity. While it is not claimed that technology necessarily yields subversive bodies, this technological illumination of gendered identities, and the pleasures of engaging with such technologies, can facilitate an agentive understanding and the emergence of subversive identities.

### **The multiple interfaces of subject and screen**

A contemporary feminist understanding of the human-machine interaction commences with the work of Donna Haraway (1991, p. 151), who envisions the postmodern human subject as a cyborg: 'By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs.' The cyborg is 'oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence' (1991, p. 151), all irrevocably ambiguous qualities that encourage the transgression of boundaries and the subversion of categories of identity. The technological relation to embodiment is explicitly referred to by Haraway (1991, p. 180): 'The machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment', and this contamination of categories across the interface of nature and technology is envisioned as a mutual, 'disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling' (1991, p. 152). This allows the cyborg to be considered a technological body, in and of itself, an 'ether, quintessence' (1991, p. 153) in which the ethereal lightness of microelectronics allows it to be actually inhaled as organic matter.

This understanding of cyborg subjectivity can be extrapolated to a theory of embodiment in the online era by considering the broader framework of dualism, and the violence, hierarchies, oppression and divisions with which they have traditionally been attended. Kirby (1997) seeks to rewrite binary oppositions as terms that are implicated in a relationship of differential value, wherein meaning is ascribed not through positive associations but through the incorporation of negative lack within a sign. Taking gender as an example, differential value casts femininity as simply that which is not masculine, and vice versa. At first glance, this definition suspiciously reappropriates the hierarchies of binary opposition, within which woman has long been conceived in terms of lack or as an empty reflection of masculinity. The key difference, however, is that with differential value, oppositions are inextricably contained within each other in a joint and reciprocal enterprise. The boundary captures both dichotomous elements simultaneously, and Kirby suggests that while each side of the opposition remains distinguishable from the other, it is their continual,

multiple connections which dynamically constitute their properties at any given point in time. This relationship emphasises ‘the differential *within* unity, a copulating enmeshment that is never not pregnant in the delirium of becoming other’ (Kirby 1997, p. 144).

Using this formulation, on the one hand, new technologies are seen as mere vessels for recycling issues of identity and subjectivity, which have always been present and precede the technology of Facebook, the Internet or computers. Kirby (1997, p. 140) traces back concerns regarding subjectivity to at least the technology of writing: ‘Cyberonauts regard the letter as dead because it seems inert. But, the inherent instability of textuality, the involvements of identity and the life of the letter, have become the very stuff of contemporary intellectual inquiry.’ On the other hand, new technologies by definition reveal new objects, processes, routines and facilities, which create new subjectivities through human interaction.

Kirby (1997, p. 144) regards these contradictory representations of old and new within technology as endemic to the dualist logic of linear time, ‘a logic that fetishizes differences as something extraneous and detachable ... where ‘[t]idy borders delimit time from space, origins from ends, causes from effects, then from now, and one from two’. Linear time distinguishes past and present within discrete, measured units of seconds, minutes and years. According to Kristeva (1993), linear time is also anathema to the cyclical and recursive motion of ‘women’s time’. Aside from the violent divisions that the false boundaries of linear time perpetuate, they provide an awkward and inadequate fit for the dynamic and unfolding operations of technology.

Kirby draws on Derrida’s (1974) speech/writing distinction, from *Of grammatology*, in which he argues for the need to understand time as iterative. Iterative time might be understood as replacing a perpetual ‘folding out’ with a past, present and future that are intrinsically integrated in a continual folding over. As a process, then, iterativity still encompasses perpetual motion but without set direction or determination; it dredges up history and future to irrevocably confuse them within a murky understanding of the present. This dynamic en/(un)folding yields generativity, a process that describes the interfacing of the body and technology in iterative temporality to produce infinite permutations and combinations of online embodiment..

## **Realising the performative body on Facebook**

Embodiment has always had an intimate relationship to inquiries of human subjectivity. Descartes ([1641] 1960), for example, highlighted the significance of the body to subjectivity by expressing it in terms of irrelevance. This understanding of the irrelevant body has left indelible traces on the progression of philosophies of subjectivity which, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Elizabeth Grosz (1995, p. 82) explains as ‘largely motivated by an attempt to devise an ethics and politics adequate for non-dualist accounts of subjectivity’.

What is interesting is the realisation of embodiment in cyberspace. In line with theorists who have refuted the early, dominant discourses that posited virtual reality as a utopian realm for the disembodied (Marwick 2005; O’Brien 1999), the argument is made here for a recontextualisation of the body as uniquely temporally and spatially realised through cyberspace, computers and social networking sites, due to the way technology illuminates the construction of gendered performances

through the compulsory maintenance work required to achieve online embodiment, and engages the individual in pleasurable and creative resignifications of self.

Judith Butler's (1990) articulation of performativity is an appropriate theory for guiding these discussions of the technologically situated body. Although performativity is commonly conceived of as a theory on the limits and structures of gender identity, rather than a theory of the body, one of Butler's ultimate revelations is that sex and gender, identity and flesh are one and the same, as she situates the performative body at the collapse of a falsely imposed sex/gender separation. There is utility in exploring her ideas on the body within a technological context, as the illuminating capacity of social networking technology elucidates key features of performativity which are not readily visible within the cloaked operations of discourse that Butler describes.

Butler's articulation of the performative body in *Gender trouble* begins at the binary chasm which emanates from Simone de Beauvoir's (1949, p. 267) argument that 'one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one'. As the body is culturally posited at the origin as static and self-evident matter, it assumes an authoritative facticity that prevents its interrogation. Butler's aim is to discredit a number of assumptions which flow from this statement: that the binary sex of bodies is self-evident; that binary gender oppositions are causally linked to biological anatomy; that sex and gender are separable; and that the subject has agency in accepting, rejecting or reconstructing a cultural gender identity.

In response, performativity uncovers the body as a 'reality effect' that is produced through a series of stylised, repeated performative acts which congeal to produce the illusions of sexual truth and stable gender. Ultimately, Butler argues that sex and gender are synonymous, but are perceived as separable through a discourse which simulates a separation between surface and depth and then erases all traces of its formative input. Finally, in order for these illusions to take hold, performative acts must be continually repeated. It is within these repetitions that stable gender is realised and the subject comes into being, as Butler argues that there is no pre-performative agency.

Butler also investigates the operation of discourse in shaping and maintaining binary gender identities. She surmises that the hegemonic discourse which produces these rigid binary gender roles is one which is invested in perpetuating the heterosexual matrix, where compulsory heterosexuality reduces bodies to their sexual reproductive function. The prohibitions of this heterosexual matrix are enforced through fear and punishment, as the non-conforming subject is rendered discursively unintelligible. However, despite the fixed limits of the discursive system, she uncovers possibilities for subversion within the performative process itself. Although Butler deviates from Foucault on the existence of pre-discursive substance, she still finds value in his ideas on the generativity of the law, which suggest that the judicial system necessarily produces the very abject subjects and unintelligible identities it is said to prohibit. This presupposes the existence of inherently non-conforming bodies. Consequently, the potential for subversion occurs within the reiteration of performative acts, as Butler suggests that each repetition opens up gaps of dissonance and slippage in which it becomes possible to subvert and shift gender roles.

These main points from Butler's theory of performativity will be used to organise an analysis of the performative body as it appears on the social networking site Facebook. Social networking sites

(SNSs) can broadly be described as online websites which construct or represent social relations, and facilitate the maintenance of these relations through a variety of multimodal channels. Given the wide deviations in the usage and functionality of different social networking platforms, this analysis focuses specifically on Facebook as, with 845 million active monthly users at the end of 2011 (Facebook 2011), it is not only the most widely used service, but one of the most dominant sites in the contemporary cyberspace environment. Given the huge user base of the site – spanning different languages, nationalities, ethnicities and ages – it is not within the scope of this article to offer a definitive and singular understanding of the ways in which the site is used. However, it is possible to look to the technological affordances that have been developed as a guide to the intended and popular usages of the site.

The Facebook profile is anchored through the publication of descriptive information ‘such as age, location, interests, and an “about me” section’ (boyd and Ellison 2007) which allows friends to verify the identity of the individual online. In addition, users typically fashion their profiles to represent their personality and interests. This branding occurs both as a conscious effort by the user – who is responsible for uploading profile pictures; writing status updates; uploading photo albums; becoming a fan of groups; downloading applications and engaging in quizzes and games; and revealing personal interests – as well as by the site, that controls the overall visual display of the profile body. After the creation of a Facebook profile, the individual situates it within an online network of friends. The creation of a network of Facebook friends generates an automatic newsfeed, which is the default homepage.

Engaging with the social networking site involves interacting with friends through a variety of modes and means of communication: ‘[M]ost interaction on Facebook is built on and facilitated by small exchanges of information, challenges, photos etc. between friends’ (Dalsgaard 2008, p. 9). There are multiple avenues for textual communication, such as writing on a friend’s wall; private messaging; instant messaging; or commenting – in addition to non-textual exchanges that may take place, such as liking a post or photo; tagging a friend in a photo or video; and playing interactive games.

The dynamic, unfolding qualities of performativity and technology align to illustrate Butler’s understanding of the iteratively constructed body and to argue for the existence of an online body – rather than mere identity or persona – in cyberspace. However, not only is the illuminating capacity of technology able to illustrate the superficial facticity of flesh, but it also exposes the hidden discursive inputs that, Butler argues, are not readily apparent or visible in the subject’s appearance.

Performativity documents a metaphysics of substance where natural bodies, pre-discursive flesh and the pre-formed subject are simply discursive illusions. Butler (1990, p. 142) argues that there is never a pre-formed subject nor a ‘doer behind the deed’, but that the illusion of a stable, material subject serves to prevent the interrogation of discourse by positing a false sense of agency within the individual.

Accordingly, cyberspace – often wrongly defined as a lack of physicality (Kirby 1997) – appears as an ideal realm in which to investigate this phantasmatic flesh. Online profiles are assumed to be virtual, therefore Butler’s point that stable matter is only realised through superficial, external

actions can be illustrated by reading Facebook as a body which only takes form through reiterative updating. Dividuality is a reference to anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's (1988) understanding of a subjectivity which explicitly incorporates others and objectifies external relations within the composition of self. The dividual construction of the Facebook profile exemplifies the point that the body is not constituted as a static and isolated materiality, but is always and only formed through continuous exchanges within a system of meaning.

Once the individual's profile is created it becomes a hyperlink, meaning it is networked, indexed and searchable within the online Facebook community. This is central to Facebook's premise as a social networking website:

The Facebook-person is presented relationally, in that a profile without connections to friends would make no sense since that is the whole point of the social networking site ... Facebook persons are thus not presented as bounded individuals, but rather as unbounded dividuals. (Dalsgaard 2008, p. 9)

As a dividual, intersubjective self, the Facebook profile is dependent on the actions of others to give it form, as these exchanges literally become incorporated as the body of the profile. Like the performative body, the Facebook profile is a phantasm that is entirely constituted by a limited range of defined actions permitted by the website.

However, Facebook also reveals the insecurities arising from the subject's realisation that their existence is not grounded by a stable and self-evident materiality. Members of an online community are caught in a perpetual existential crisis as, without a visible audience, they cannot determine whether posts have been read and ignored, or missed entirely. This leads to the unique quality of online interaction where an individual requires regular validation, regardless of whether that response is positive or negative. As Stern (2008, p. 111) explains in the context of teen blogs:

Lack of feedback is especially disheartening to those who put considerable effort into the appearance of the personal home page or the language of the blog. The feeling that one has been heard, that one matters in a greater context, is impeded when authors receive no or little response.

Through the important and reciprocal micro-exchanges on Facebook, the individual's online identity is continually verified and interpellated by others and by the website. As individuals tag photos, write on the wall and respond to status updates, they literally compose and reiterate their online bodies. In opposition to the concept of flesh, whose stable materiality is presupposed, the profile is a representation of the performative body, whose presence sublimates without ongoing resignification. That is, a Facebook profile that is not maintained loses its visibility in the currency of the newsfeed and becomes a signal of an unreliable means of communication with the individual, which amounts to irrelevance in the digital world.

Butler (1990) emphasises the importance of repetition in enforcing the surface–depth illusion. Not only does repetition allow performative acts to congeal to produce the appearance of stable materiality, but as there is no 'doer-behind-the-deed' this perpetual motion is required to bring the gendered subject into existence: '[T]he action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established, and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation' (1990, p. 178).

Performative repetition allows subjects to understand their bodies as natural and material, whereas such surface spectres of performance are – according to Butler – all that exist.

Consequently, Facebook's design is set up to maximise responses to posts and actions, and facilitate dialogue across its different layers of multimedia. Each comment, photo, post and status update has a textbox in which any networked friend can write a response. Moreover, it is the quantity of responses, rather than quality, which appears to be encouraged by Facebook. Although Facebook does not limit text responses to a set character limit like Twitter, text boxes are small and long posts become abridged when added to the individual's profile or the community newsfeed. In February 2009, Facebook added a further way to improve the quantity of responses with its 'like it' feature (Pearlman 2009). This feature allows users to click an icon which records a small 'thumbs up' against a post, allowing a user to record a response with the most minimal of physical actions. This repetition of action – which allows the individual to construct the profile as a phantasmic, online representation of self – mimics the construction of phantasmic 'flesh' that Butler describes.

Despite these resignifications that give the online body its form, however, Facebook does not replicate the assumption of stability attributed to the material body. Instead, the dividual constitution of profiles exposes bodies that are subject to unexpected change through the comments and actions of others in the network: 'Young people revisit their own web productions, not only to see how they might update them, but also to see what has happened to them in terms of "hits" or response messages and so on' (Weber and Mitchell 2008, p. 27). The online body is not moderated, and it is not possible for the user to access their profile continuously, thus necessarily leading to conditions where the publicly visible body at times evolves without the owner's awareness. This quality violates the assumption of stable materiality that discourse propagates.

The dividual construction of the online body also leads back to Butler's discussion of the performative subject's lack of agency outside of its performative reiterations. There is a sense of ownership of one's Facebook profile, a remnant of the myopic view that the screen reinforces hierarchical distinctions of humans over machines. It can, however, be seen that the online body acts quite independently in many respects. Not only is the profile constructed through the actions of others in ways that are not moderated or immediately visible to its creator, but the online body is subject to technical alterations through authoritative action taken by the website's programmers. The form of the online body evolves and is re-shaped by changes to the layout and format of the interface, which occur regularly. These changes are often undertaken to improve user functionality as well as the business viability of the site. Once changes to layout have occurred, the look of the old bodies is irrecoverable, which has previously caused much consternation to users and makes for continual tension between users and the site's programmers:

Some user-created groups on Facebook make it clear just how unhappy and frustrated users are with the new design. According to [Facebook group] Vote on the New Facebook Layout, more than 1.3 million people have voted, and only 80,400 support the new design. And so far, another user-generated group, Petition Against the 'New Facebook', has more than 1.7 million members. (Gaudin 2009)

In addition, although the site is not moderated, content is subject to removal at the discretion of the site's owners and their changing terms and conditions (Facebook 2010). Consequently, it can

be seen that online bodies have an autonomous presence which falls outside the scope of control of their owners.

The subject's false sense of agency is a discursive illusion that is replicated online through the interpellation of the Facebook profile. Butler employs Althusser's (1971) concept of interpellation to explain the way subjects are built and bound by performative acts. Butler considers performative acts to encompass a wide range of socially ritualised linguistic, gestural and symbolic deeds, but does place particular emphasis on the role of language in performative constructions. Interpellation therefore highlights the importance of naming to the constitution of the self, not only in terms of what or how a subject is named, but where power is invested by those who are given the privilege of naming.

At first glance, the naming of a Facebook profile seems to be a simple act of self-interpellation, as the creator brings into being their online representation. However, further investigation makes clear that in fact this interpellation is severely limited by the purpose and functionality of social networking technology. Given that the profile becomes meaningless without a network of anchored relations, identity verification is paramount to this medium. If a profile is not immediately recognisable by name, then a friend request is less likely to be accepted by known friends, and it also removes the utility of Facebook as a searchable index. Within these limitations, then, it appears that the individual has little choice but to anchor his/her profile informationally, which often involves the straightforward replication of the creator's name in an act of culturally enforced interpellation.

In fact, the reach of Facebook appears to extend to denying the individual's agency over whether to connect with the site at all. As a global communication phenomenon which has embedded itself in the fabric of quotidian life, refusing to engage with the site leaves the individual at risk of being excluded from activities, information and communication that increasingly span the false distinctions of offline and online worlds – even conscientious objectors of the site cannot guarantee that photos of and references to them are not posted online by others. Butler argues that inciting a fear of social exclusion is one of the main discursive tactics for regulating the individual, as subjects that do not adopt established gender identities are exiled from the realm of discursive intelligibility. This same symbolic threat appears to govern the individual's engagement with pervasive social networking technology. Facebook therefore replicates the false agency presumed by the discursive subject, but simultaneously exposes its construction as a reality effect.

Butler (1990, p. 145) uses the term 'reality effect' to explain how the illusions of stability of the body and the authority of sex are legitimated solely through a veiled discursive undertaking that erases the traces of its own input: "[S]ex" is the reality-effect of a violent process that is concealed by that very effect. All that appears is "sex", and so "sex" is perceived to be the totality of what is, uncaused, but only because the cause is nowhere to be seen.' Although the experience which results from these effects is real, to the extent that it is lived as social fact by the subject, the lack of visibility of their discursive origins impedes the potential for their reappropriation and subversion. Butler suggests that it is crucial to acknowledge that reality effects do not emanate from within us as independent agents, or from an impartial, omniscient universe, but are calculatingly designed by a discourse with heterosexual investments.



Failing to concede the artificial construction of reality effects provides a major obstacle to subversion, thus it becomes important to evaluate the potential of cyberspace to illuminate discursive illusions. In contrast to the obfuscating tendencies of performative discourse, cyberspace is set up as a cognisant artificial reality. It does not, however, automatically provide a solution to exposing covert discourse, as its juxtaposition to the material lends it the character of a false barrier that confirms the ‘reality’ of real life against the virtuality of cyberspace (Žižek 2006), thereby replicating the illusion of binary division. This can be seen through Facebook’s requirement that ‘being’ entails anchoring information from a real-life persona to an online profile.

Facebook is considered to be an anchored form of online communication which stresses identity verification amongst users with an offline relationship. Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008, p. 1818) suggest that the most important identifying information includes ‘a person’s legal name, residential location, and institutional affiliations’. Information anchoring is visible in the mandatory forms which a Facebook user is required to complete, to realise their profile. This process reveals information such as name, sex, relationship status, educational and job networks, geographical location and birth date. In this manner, a user realises an anchored online body that – in its appearance as a collection of pictures, words and information stored in cyberspace – does not threaten the superiority or origins of the material body.

It is this regenerative capacity of the performative subject realised on Facebook that leads to an interest in the subversive potential of online bodies. The following section draws on this understanding of the online body as irrevocably intertwined with and mutually constituting the physical, discursive body, to discuss Butler’s notion of identity subversion in the context of new technologies.

## **Subversion and the human pleasures of technology**

The question of subversion is a difficult one that, in some ways, is not satisfactorily addressed by Butler. Butler (1990, p. 8) is concerned with subversion, although she concedes that it is severely constrained by the impossibility of escaping the all-consuming effects of discourse:

Obviously the political task is not to refuse representational politics – as if we could. The juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence, there is no position outside this field, but only a critical genealogy of its own legitimating practices.

She does, however, find the promise of subversion emanating from within the operations of discourse, alluding to Foucault’s (1979) notion of a juridical system which necessarily generates the prohibitions it regulates. The power of the law (that both produces and prohibits) requires a necessary writing of what is deemed taboo into existence; accordingly, the abject and unintelligible identities which the law forbids are always necessarily produced by the framework of discourse. This confirms that not only is subversion possible, but its presence is guaranteed within the confines of performativity.

Butler uses the examples of drag and cross-dressing to illustrate the potential subversion of gender. These practices overtly reveal the constructed nature of gender and purposefully reconstruct it in perverse ways: ‘In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender

itself – as well as its contingency’ (Butler 1990, p. 175). Gender parody is defined as making explicit the potential for misalignment between gender and sex, and destroying notions of any natural bond between them. While Butler names subversion as embedded in the process of performativity, the argument can be made that pleasure is also inherent in the process, as repetition yields gaps of dissonance that allow the subject to regenerate him/herself creatively. Also, it can be seen that gaps of dissonance provide the only possibility for agency in the discursive framework that dictates that ‘power can be neither withdrawn nor refused, but only redeployed’ (1990, p. 158).

Given that performative iterations are occurring continuously in the creation and maintenance of social subjects, it appears unusual that only one act of subversion can be identified which, furthermore, is heavily qualified, as not all acts of cross-dressing constitute subversions of heterosexuality. Clearly, a major hindrance to subversive potential occurs as the discourse which creates and pervades bodies, and then purposefully erases the traces of its performative constructions, creates a diminished capacity for subjects to subsequently identify this process and understand its potential for satirical treatment. While Butler (1990) provides arguments that detail the connection between subversion and the performative process, technology and pleasure must be used to explore the connection between subversion and the performative subject.

Subversion, on the one hand, resists fixed definition, as its generativity renders it as unstable as the bodies and technologies that morph in the unfolding flux of dynamic time, space and meaning. While subversion cannot be reduced to an act, it is crucially distinguished in scale from mere creative regenerations of self. While regeneration allows the subject to adapt and change its form, it maintains an appearance that is discursively sanctioned. Regenerations of self do not challenge hegemonic discursive roles. On the other hand, subversion involves a shocking recreation of self in a way that mocks the supposed authority of discourse and exposes the fundamental misalignment of sex and gender, surface and depth. Although they emerge from the same folds of performativity, the majority of regenerations are not subversive. Thus, while regeneration is easily undertaken within the reality effects and false agency discursively offered to the subject, subversion is not so readily attainable. Technology is, however, considered to be a medium that can potentially facilitate subversion in three ways: by providing the structure or context for subversive identities; by rupturing the process of performative reiteration and allowing gaps of dissonance to emerge; and by making explicit the role of discourse in processes of construction and challenging the tacit acceptance of reality effects as natural, authoritative fact. These three hypotheses will now be explored in turn.

Butler’s (1990, p. 54) conclusion from generative law is that practices which are regulated by taboo do not cease to exist, but merely become powerfully and perversely eroticised through their prohibition: ‘That the prohibition exists in no way suggests that it works. Rather, its existence appears to suggest that desires, actions, indeed, pervasive social practices of incest are generated precisely in virtue of the eroticization of that taboo.’

This presupposes the existence of subversion and attaches pleasure to it as definition. Claudia Springer (1996, p. 55) relates this directly to the technological eroticisation of taboo:

Ambivalence toward the body has traditionally been played out most explicitly in texts labeled pornographic, where the construction of desire often depends on an element of aversion. That which

has been prohibited by censorship, for example, frequently becomes highly desirable.

Due to its very prohibition, what is denied automatically becomes sexually desirable. In the problematic of technology, what is prohibited appears to be the transgression of boundaries between humans and machines, as well as deviation from the sexual reproductive function of bodies as designated by discourse. Both these prohibitions are addressed in the practice of cybersex.

Sherry Turkle (1995, p. 21) also broaches the topic of online sex, noting that her respondents were particularly surprised at how intense the experience of cybersex could be: 'Many people who engage in netsex say that they are constantly surprised by how emotionally and physically powerful it can be. They insist that it demonstrates the truth of the adage that ninety percent of sex takes place in the mind.' Springer (1996, p. 58) describes the thrill of cybersex in terms of liberating disembodiment, where 'it becomes possible to express fantasies involving all kinds of personal transformations. Gender becomes fluid: men can interact as women or vice versa, and desire can be unleashed into the electronic realm from the comfortable safety of an anonymous identity.'

Turkle and Springer hypothesise that it is the anonymity of the screen and the fluidity it supposedly facilitates which allow for this new thrilling sexual pleasure, as new technological features actively allow the subject to pursue new ways of living and experiencing the self. Moreover, it appears to be an exploration of the limits of the body and its pleasures – if the body is discursively seen as a mere reproductive vessel, then technology provides the means for experimenting with forms of sexual expression that are divorced from reproduction. Superficially, then, technology provides the substance and form of a body that is subversive because it is not limited to a reproductive function.

It is, however, questionable whether cybersex can really be considered subversive. While online personas are often an expression of regenerated selves, there appears to be a stubborn replication of the same oppressive and rigidly discursive roles that appear materially. That is, although cybersex seems to offer a new way of performing sex, it still replicates the notion that flesh is relegated to sex. Moreover, while individuals might experiment with the experience of having sex within bodies of different genders, Springer (1996, p. 36) argues that the structures within which gender-bending takes place often reveal an insistent adherence to hegemonic binary gender roles, hierarchies and stereotypes: 'Characters can choose to become male or female, but they still function within a patriarchal system that elevates men's interests above women's.'

Bringing this discussion back to an analysis of Facebook, the online profile falls short of being considered subversive as it is most commonly viewed as a false barrier against which material existence is confirmed, acting as a virtual body that reinforces the authenticity of the flesh. While Facebook illuminates different expressions of subjectivity, these new forms merely recreate rather than subvert the limits of the flesh. Facebook's conventionality does not challenge notions of sex or gender, nor the patriarchal system in which these categories flourish – which is not a surprising finding, given that it is a technology modelled on the replication of material anchors. While technology can potentially provide the forum for expressing subversive subjects, in reality this rarely occurs, as composing a technological body does not automatically guarantee subversion.

The second avenue to explore is the use of technology to create a rupture in the usually seamless, automatic and unquestioned process of performativity. Performative processes are engaged with on an involuntary, instinctive manner by the discursive subject, where ‘the reiterative practice of locutionary acts produces material meanings and effects which assume the status of the commonplace’ (Kirby 2006, p. 43). Typically, the consistency of performative acts congeals and reduces the capacity for iterative disjunction, from which subversion emanates, to be located. However, technology disturbs the surface of stable performative materiality. It changes the set routines and repetitions of daily life, and creates new gadgets and modes of communicating, working and playing. Evidence of technological disruption most commonly manifests as fear, as discourse battles to wield regulatory power over emergent technologies and possibilities. Facebook, for example, has been linked by the media to rape and murder (Smith 2010), syphilis (Moses 2010) and breaches of privacy (Timson 2010).

Despite the incessant unfolding of technology, subversion is still considered to be a rare occurrence. The disparity between the level of technological rupture and the level of discursive subversion suggests that the two are not directly correlated. Disrupting the automation of performativity is only considered to be useful if the subject’s inability to locate the gaps of dissonance, disguised within the folds of iteration and cloaked by discourse, are the sole obstacle to subversion.

Finally, the strength of engaging technology for subversion is deemed to lie in unconcealing the artificial construction of these oppressions in a tangible way. Technology is linked to flesh as they share a similar generative construction process – as technology unfolds in the ‘unconcealing’ manner described by Heidegger and flesh is constructed (phantasmically) as described by Butler. However, unlike the position of the flesh that is naturalised by discourse, technology has the advantage of always being suspiciously regarded as constructed due to its categorisation as inorganic. By aligning these two concepts, and viewing technology as a transitional object, the manipulation of overtly artificial technology can lead to the subject gaining a metaphorical awareness of his/her own constructed nature.

Again, though, this argument is incomplete. While technology has the potential to re-illuminate the artificial construction of bodies, it does not necessarily guarantee an illumination of alternative, subversive possibilities for reconstruction. Rather, these three theories all reveal ways in which technology contributes to performative subversion, but neither in itself, nor together, encapsulates the full significance of technology to the process of subversion. The realisation of subversion rests on an essential, additional component: the agency of the technologically constituted subject.

### **Generativity: The creative potential of online bodies**

Part of the thrill of cyberspace lies in its capacity to regenerate the performative subject, where pleasures emerge from creative engagement with technology. Emergent pleasures are linked to generativity as they are not stable replications of predetermined value, but are changeable, dynamic and surprising. In addition, the process of repetition is innately pleasurable for the subject. Returning to Butler’s discussion of performativity, repetition is the mechanism through which gaps of dissonance emerge. The contention here is that these gaps are pleasurable, as they provide

the only possibility for the subject to realise his/her limited agency and creatively regenerate him/herself. Facebook exemplifies this pleasure of regeneration. The individual's compulsion to constantly update his/her profile and elicit feedback is a repetition of actions that resignify the body. This compulsion is driven by the pleasure of changing the form and limits of the online body, revealing the regenerative potential of performativity.

Although regeneration and subversion are not synonymous, as they differ in the degree to which they transform the subject and challenge discourse, they both stem from these pleasurable ruptures in performativity. Therefore, the argument is that the subject's discursively innocuous pleasure in creative reconstruction suggests an underlying pleasure in subversion.

The valuable input of technology to the subject is important here in distinguishing between the agency that reproduces and the agency that subverts. False agency is offered by discourse and is freely available; it is utilised by the regenerating subject who publishes him/herself as a disembodied identity on a social networking site, or creates an anonymous identity in the guise of the opposite sex, while stylistically replicating its gender stereotypes. It is, however, suggested that true agency is realised when the subject exploits his/her technological constitution to locate subversive gaps and expressly contest all that appears as normal, stable or given within lived experience.

The reciprocity of subjects and technology reveals that technology in isolation cannot bring about subversion. Cyberspatial selves are not necessarily subversive, and in fact usually only achieve the status of mere regenerations, capriciously engaged in by the performative subject. These creative experimentations, while not directly challenging to discursive constructions, are still useful as in their pleasurable allure they draw the subject towards the dissonant gaps and behaviours that – under the right alignment of technology, pleasure and agency – bloom as subversion. Subversion does not erupt from cataclysmic events or technologies, but emerges much less spectacularly through incremental twists and turns. What is guaranteed by the mutual enfolding of processes of technologies, bodies and pleasure, then, is the quiet joy of and commitment to generativity that hopes and promises change.

## Acknowledgement

Thanks to Mary Zournazi for her advice and guidance and Peter Collins for his assistance on this project.

## Note

- 1 The concept of flesh elaborated in this article draws on the theoretical foundations of Merleau-Ponty's *The phenomenology of perception* (1945), although it is only referenced through the more contemporary work of Butler and Kirby.

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