

# READING IN „BROKEN ACCENTS“ – THE CYBER STROLLER THROUGH MEDIASCAPE –

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with gender performativity in media practices, with interweaving realms of *flâneur* figure and scopophilia phenomenon seen through cyborgian mythology. Not so much a research on media representations of women, this paper is an attempt to investigate the (im)possibility of women gazing back, transforming the mediascape into imaginary of the *flâneuse*, the female stroller. Paradoxical figure of the *flâneur* becomes the aporetic figure of the *flâneuse*, measured not by the aesthetic distance between the subject and the object of the gaze, but by proximity, dangerous connectiveness and disruptive kinships that escape the „regulated scopophilia“ of falogocentric male gaze. Female gaze has too often been associated with consumerist voyeurism, on the one side, or with public invisibility, on the other. The pervert gaze of the *flâneuse*, feminine gaze, can be looked upon from a critical viewpoint and from semiotic „stitches“ in Shelley Jackson's hypertext *Patchwork Girl, or the Modern Monster* (1995). *Patchwork Girl* utilizes the collage technique in creating the *flâneuse* gaze that destabilizes depictions of the female body as a commodity, domestic figure and patriarchal projections of desire. This feminine gaze is strolling on the boundary of the imaginable, patchworking the plural body, cut through by intertextual practices. The assembled stitched female

body as the hypertext-body (Shelley Jackson's hypertext) creates a challenging mediascapes for questioning dominant gender discourses.

**Keywords:** mediascape, cyberspace, *flâneuse*, hypertext, skin, body

## I. INTRODUCTION

“My eyeballs are wondrously firm and spherical, my vision clear and sharp, my gaze calmly speculative. I can peruse with equal clarity the finest of print and the faint script of smoke from a distant chimney; I owe this to Tituba, who loved to read.”

Shelley Jackson, *Patchwork Girl*

In her postmodern hypertext *Patchwork Girl*, Shelley Jackson has created provocative skinscapes that question the modernist literary work of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The author investigates diversified meanings of scar, bite, wound and hole in the nets of identification, autobiography, language and technology. The scar is the biological, anatomical, structural nod, and the semantic, ideological, symbolic stitched place of absence, separation, and lost. It is a

monument manifested on the place of separation, the *stitch* (such a historically and etymologically proliferative word), and indeed a spot of indecision, contamination, of "in---between" gendered skinscape, and a border point of my research paper.

I would be flying through the nets of semiology, syntax, *hyperecriture*, gender-skinscapes, and would be as much entangled in it. We cannot escape the noded points, but I am sure we can fly, slide on routes of connections, to weave and unweave quilted artistic works of Shelley Jackson.

## II. THE PLACE OF THE STITCH – SKIN DEEP

"The connection to the other is a reading – not an interpretation, assimilation, or even a hermeneutic understanding, but a reading."

Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book*

As a border, skin is an uncanny text to be read, re-read, touched, inscribed, and re-written, the canvas with the inscriptions of the logic of desire. In all its forms, skin is layered *within* and *without*, and this paper particularly focuses on this aspect of the skin, especially regarding Paul Valéry's verse: "Nothing is deeper than *the skin*". Valéry's thought of skin as of a generator of illusions of depths, bottoms and profundities is crucial. "Marrow, brain, all those things we require in order to feel, to suffer, to think ... are inventions of the skin; we burrow down in vain, doctor; we are ectoderm." (Valéry, 1961 : 216)

In contemporary artistic and theoretical practices, and political nominalisations, the skin is a relevant and traumatic signifying space, the site of remembering and forgetting, of inscription and erasure. From the discourse of race (Fanon's notion of „racial skin

chromatism"), and skin as „meta-organ“, as *mixing* (Michel Serres), we would pave our way through the skin, until the skin itself becomes the site of pluralistic encounters (haptic, empathic, cultural, political, sexual...), and the patchwork of mnemonic marks. Emmanuel Levinas claimed that the skin is the place of political recognition, before the rational recognition, where the other is present/absent in its *proximity*: „skin is neither a container nor the protection of an organism, nor purely and simply the surface of a being, but nudity, presence abandoned by a departure, exposed to everyone and then too unfaithful to itself, insolvent, yet also delivered over to the things, contaminated, profaned, persecuted, in fault and in distress". (Levinas, 1987 : 120-121)

In this „economic“ account of skin, these dermal investments in culture, politics, education and language, the „human“ subject can only count on its own vulnerability. The fragility of the subject is shown through ruptures, openings, it is punctured, wounded and mended in these artistic practices of stitching, closely tied to the *chirosoy* (wisdom of the hand) that Ann Marry Tully named „practice of the ruptured mark“. (Tully, n.d. : 1) The subject becomes the „body of jointness,“ of always being-with (the other).

Skin, supposed to be the bodily border, is usually considered as the end line of one's body. Perspectives might be changed, so skin can be opened, cut through the point of view of border's instability, in recent art work and trends. Skin is emerging as a counter-scientific phenomena, as the border itself, as an ambiguous space, being here and there, belonging to the human body and to the „outside“ world. That is, skin can intervene, break the stability of the closed, gendered, structured image of the self.

*Patchwork Girl; or, A Modern Monster* by Mary/Shelley, & Herself, is created in the program Storyspace and published on CD-ROM. Jackson's idea was to recreate and re-write Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, but the protagonist of this hypertext, "the patchwork girl", is the much desired, abandoned and dismembered female mate to Frankenstein's monster.

The fragmented literary hypertext of Shelley Jackson is not linear, and it consists of several main lexias, or modes of text with the following titles: "a graveyard" (in which the patchwork girl is introducing the previous owners of her body parts); "a journal" (Mary Shelley's journal); "a quilt" (citational framework reference, patchwork of excerpts from L. Frank Baum's *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* to Hélène Cixous' "Coming to Writing"); "a story" (a complex autobiography, the discontinuous narrative of the patchwork girl's life), and "broken accents" (the patchwork girl's reading strategies concerning the relation between the genre of hypertext and one's body).

In an interview "Stitch Bitch: The Hypertext Author as Cyborg-Femme Narrator," Shelley Jackson elaborates on the (im)possibility of happy monster, and her endeavor to create one, delivered by a loving mother:

It's clear which one Mary Shelley prefers. She likes monsters; she birthed one, after all. Or rather, two--but Mary Shelley's second child, a patchwork girl as big and bad (as in baaad) as her brother, was ripped apart before the last thread was knotted. Which may have been a mercy killing: in the world Shelley knew, there could be no happy monsters. But only because of bad dad. A motherless monster with a shiftless dad runs amok, but what about a monster with a loving

mother? I took up that inquiry, but--the Frankenstein monster having brought his tragic trajectory to a fiery end--I was more curious about Mary's second child. I might believe that women have a little more experience in growing up monstrous and still getting by. My monster is crucially more adaptive, wry, and made strong as well as handicapped by her monstrosity. (There's no point sitting around wishing we were all human.) (Jackson, 1998)

The texture of *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* written by Mary Shelley at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is the canvas with the inscriptions of the logic of desire, a text that, in courageous „intensive parasitism“ of Shelley Jackson, would write down a body/patchwork of a female as the hypertext-body, „representing the female as a jigsaw totality of womanhood“. (Ensslin, 2005 : 206)

In „the graveyard“ lexia, under the „headstone“, the patchwork girl is born:

Here lies a Head,  
Trunk, Arms (Right  
and Left), and Legs  
(Right and Left)  
as well as divers  
Organs Appropriately  
Disposed  
May They Rest in Piece.  
(Jackson, 2005)

The white, naked body of the „modern monster“ is cut through with stitches, dotted lines, and thus establishes the monstrous possibility of the *Frankenstein* text, that of the female Frankenstein. The reader has numerous possible paths in/out: „body of

text“, „graveyard“, „journal“, „crazy quilt“, „story“, („broken accents“), and a list of sources. In hypertext of Shelley Jackson, Mary Shelley is one of many narrators. In „journal“ lexia, Mary's narrative voice is given through her notes on meeting her abandoned creation, the patchwork girl, here, in hyperspace, kept „alive“, stitched, „under the needle, and under the pen“. Marry's words are: „I made her, „stitching deep into the night by candlelight, until the tiny black letters blurred into stitches and I began to feel that I was sewing a great quilt“. (ibid.)

The quilt (of body, text, narrative, identity, gender), sutured together by needle-pen (dotted lines), would dismember itself, one stitch after another. Amorous relationship, a certain form of monstrous epistemophilic relations, between Mary Shelley and the Patchwork girl, would end up in horrendous secession. Patchwork girl, stitched and split part by part, and the degradation starts with the left foot, is trying to hear Marry Shelley's final journal note, trying in vain to summon a new journal note.

### III. QUILTED BODY – BANISHED BODY

“It should not be thought that a haecceity consists simply of a decor or backdrop that situates subjects, or of appendages that hold things and people to the ground. It is the entire assemblage in its individuated aggregate that is a haecceity; it is this assemblage that is defined by a longitude and a latitude, by speeds and affects, independently of forms and subjects, which belong to another plane.”

Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

Frankenstein and Patchwork Girl are the sored bodies of text and hypertext, made by the needle-pens,

always already a quilting work, an echo of the other, a divisive place in which the language resides – in a place of the stitch, between life and death, in and out, center and margin.

I hop from stone to stone and an electronic river washes out my scent in the intervals. I am a discontinuous trace, a dotted line. (ibid.)

Poetic use of quilting and manifesting the needle work is a terrifying artistic move, the one that is unstitching the wholeness of the human body. Frankenstein creature and Patchwork girl are the bodies, each one a plural body, sewn up together by narratives and fragments of text and hypertext, by stitched artistic practices – a body as “a multiplicity of anonymous particles”, that has “no absolute boundaries: I am a swarm.”

I am buried here. You can resurrect me, but only piecemeal. If you want to see the whole, you will have to sew me together yourself. (ibid.)

These hybrid bodies, stitched identities, the body of cadaverous Frankenstein and the body of modern cyborg Frankenstein in female collage-body, keep a dead watch on the frontier of politico-ethical discourse on the human, the sexuality, gender, and human-monster divide. The difference between naturalized semiotics of „human“ skin and the stitched skin of „the monster“, is in fact situated in the monstrous visibility of the stitches, that human skin hides. Stitches are never removed, they can not be overseen, they are the core of monstrous representation, of body image cut through, linking „borrowed parts, annexed territories“. In „graveyard“ lexia, Shelley Jackson states, we are reading the histories of body parts, digging them up and incorporating them: “you dig up body parts and learn their histories” (Jackson, 1988). Body parts, as

parts, carry the reminiscences of previous bodies, of unstable identities, and are “not here to stay”. This migrant, “ghostly”, the nomadic anti-structure is in line with the “phantom limb”, and with the monstrosity of Patchwork girl in being “made, not born”.

In the quiet of the desert at noon I can hear my body murmuring to me. If I held a small, powerful microphone to my wrist or thigh you’d hear like interference on a wire the tiny distant voices of other personalities, of which I am a cord, or discord. I mike my fingernail. I mike my tripe. These voices aren’t stilled, distilled, iced over, stopped in permalife. They’re not recordings. They’re not potentialities either, and they’re not “types”. They’re people, thinking and talking about it. They’ve got a sense of history, dense and disappointing. At times I write down what I hear. (Jackson, 2005)

We can name these plural bodies, each of them, the skin-bodies, that make the needle-pen work visible, on the edges of the narrative fragments, on the places of the suture (“I am a disturbance in the flow”), where the echo of the other resides. The suture is the site of language, the symbolic skin, the place in-between. So, the body of a „book“ is the plurality of bodies. These unfinished textualities, as George Landow would say, can be described in terms of „nod, link, network, web and path“. (Landow, 1997 : 3)

My introductory paragraph comes at the beginning and I have a good head on my shoulders. I have muscle, fat, and a skeleton that keeps me from collapsing into suet. But my real skeleton is made of scars: a web that traverses me in three-dimensions. What holds me

together is what marks my dispersal. I am most myself in the gaps between my parts, though if they sailed away in all directions in a grisly regatta there would be nothing left here in my place. (Jackson, 2005)

In the *Paradoxa 4* text „Stitch Bitch: the Patchwork Girl“, Shelley Jackson states that the body is a patchwork, „though the stitches might not show“.

The body is not even experienced as whole. We never see it all, we can’t feel our liver working or messages shuttling through our spine. We patch a phantom body together out of a cacophony of sense impressions, bright and partial views. We borrow notions from our friends and the blaring organs of commerce, and graft them on to a supple, undifferentiated mist of smart particles.... Our work is never very successful, there are always scraps floating loose, bits we can’t control or don’t want to perceive that intrude like outsiders on the effigy we’ve constructed in our place. The original body is dissociated, porous and unbiased, a generous catch-all. (Jackson, 1998a)

The image of the coherent, enraptured, closed body, that functions like a whole, is dismantled in electronic linking of corporeal and symbolic pieces of narrative. Shelley Jackson is grafting a female body as a quilted body of surfaces, disembodied assemblage without organs, only skin, only the surface, the screen, skin-deep. The subject is destabilized, and seen as monstrous. This patchworked subject, with unclear, „misty“ margins *within* the body, can be understood as an impossible possibility of another image, another subject.

There is no shrink-wrap preserving you from contamination: your skin is a permeable membrane.

Molecules hang in contiguity but are nowhere near as locked in place as a brick wall, and when they get excited, they take flight! Come closer, come even closer: if you touch me, your flesh is mixed with mine, and if you pull away, you may take some of me with you, and leave a token behind. (Jackson, 2005)

#### IV. SCREEN SKIN – CYBORG HYPERTEXT STROLLER

“To put it a different way, hypertext requires a “cyborg reader,” not only because of his/her prosthetic relationship with the text but also because the text forces us to adopt a gaze which is equally modular and fragmentary.”

Carolina Sánchez-Palencia and Manuel Almagro, “Gathering the Limbs of the Text in Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl*”

The reading effort when faced with hypertext literature is always a shizoid practice, a dellirious inscribing onto/into this aphoristic body with its skin „inside“, whose margin is also the center. The reading is an encounter of being vulnerable, opened, broken, intermingled, and literary, politically and ethically invested into being broken and *mixed* (according to Serres' notion of skin/text as a metaorgan). This assemblage-text-body is a certain line of flight that is rhizomatically dispersed on an endless number of trajectories, *within* the net of possible flights, strolings, walkings and travelings, in loosing ones ways, turnings, deflections, driftings, in a nomadic border space – into the feminine.

I'm not what you think I am. I am a loose aggregate, a sort of old fashioned cabinet of curiosities, interesting in pieces but much better as a composite.

It's the lines of traffic between the pieces that are worth attention, but this has been, until now, a shapeless sort of beauty, a beauty without a body, and therefore with a few lovers But hypertext provides a body, a vaporous sort of insufficiently tactile body but a body. (Jackson, 1998a)

Katherine Hayles has pointed to the relationship between sewing and writing in her „media-specific“ analysis of „flickering connectivities“ in Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*. If the stitches are arguments, as Jackson states, and if it is not needed to explicitly make an argument in (hyper) prose, we can conclude that the *Patchwork Girl* is written by stitches themselves. „Hypertext is the banished body. Its compositional principle is desire“, says the “stitched-feminine manifest” *Stitch Bitch*. Desire of the complete, closed, uninterrupted body is the desire not to see the stitches, to form, reform and transform the assemblage, but the stitched body reveals that the stitches are body itself or, are the bodies themselves.

The body is indestructible in its incoherence – the quilted site can be the place of always another cut, part, fragment – xenogeneric, diverse. The quilted site is not immobile, it is always elsewhere. Katherine Hayles noted the patchwork girl as a subject of quilt, unsubjected to unitary identity, norm and form: „Patchwork Girl not only normalizes the subject-as-assemblage but also presents the subject-as-unity as a grotesque impossibility. The narrator satirizes the unified subject by evoking visions of resurrection, when the body will be ‘restored to wholeness and perfection, even a perfection it never achieved in its original state’ (body of text/resurrection).” (Hayles, 2005 : 150)

In the essay “Flânerie for Cyborgs”, Rob Shields explores “the cyborg landscape” as that of “the skins or interfaces, surfaces for the inscription of codes”. Shields concludes that cyborgian myth can be viewed “both a writerly device and a molecular – or smaller – scale biotechnical idiom”. The grafting, scriptable cyborg surface is not the material body, but “a fractal body”, in constant replacements and prosthetics, on the level of particles, “with impacts which reverberate up in spatial scale and out temporally as a signal which changes the surrounding milieu”. As I have mentioned, patchworked cyborg female has a huge political and ethical impact, and we can safely say that, with the “Cyborg Manifesto” of Donna Haraway, the vulnerable, frail, banished body-with (as being-with) is called onto the political stage.

She's not what he says she is. The banished body is not female, necessarily, but it is feminine. That is, it's amorphous, indirect, impure, diffuse, multiple, evasive. So is what we learned to call bad writing. Good writing is direct, effective, clean as a bleached bone. Bad writing is all flesh, and dirty flesh at that: clogged with a build-up of clutter and crud, knick-knacks and fripperies encrusted on every surface, a kind of gluey scum gathering in the chinks. Hypertext is everything that for centuries has been damned by its association with the feminine (which has also, by the way, been damned by its association with it, in a bizarre mutual proof without any fixed term). It's dispersed, languorous, flaunting its charms all over the courtyard. Like flaccid beauties in a harem, you might say, if you wanted to inspire a rigorous distaste for it. Hypertext then, is what literature has edited out: the feminine. (That is not to say that only women can produce it. Women have no more natural gift for the feminine than men do.)” (Jackson, 1998b : 534).

Various authors have engaged the idea of the postmodern stroller through the mediascape, and with the possibility of the new form of *flâneur* (in cyberspace). One of the most insightful theoretical approaches is offered by Mark C. Taylor and Esa Saarinen in the book *Imagologies*. The cyberspace strolling is an event of reading, of peripathetical exploration through the cyberspace, the authors state, and this practice of reading employs not understanding but *inter-standing*: “When depth gives way to surface, under-standing becomes inter-standing. To comprehend is no longer to grasp what lies beneath but to glimpse what lies between”. (Taylor and Saarinen, 1994 : 11) To un-read the stitches, to glimpse the *betweenness* of body parts.

Drawing from Deleuze's notion of rhizom, Mark C. Taylor has developed this idea of inter-standing: “Connection and heterogeneity...multiplicity without relation to the One...asignifying rupture...agenetic transferal...decentered mapping...different entryways that never come back to the same—foldings of a net that cannot be explicated. Paradoxically, the principles of the rhizome imply a quasi-structure that lacks principles and yet is not unprincipled. Forever heteromorphic and therefore without stable identity, the rhizome cannot be understood. Its place is the displace of interstanding” (Taylor, 1995).

Patchwork Girl's body of stitches (inter)stands for a rhizomic structure, and we may say, together with the happy monster, we are all tired of sad human bodies. Being a rhizomic structure, this text-body demands a peripatetical reading, where reader is a multiplicity itself: Patchwork Girl, author(s), narrator(s), text of broken accents, readers themselves.

The loose ends of *The Patchwork Girl* narrative, the different (always disseminating) paths a reader can follow, enable the “excess choice”, “nomadic voyaging” through the hypertext. In that sense, Carolyn Guertin finds that “the result of this random function is a sense of dislocation in space, time, and language. [...] it invites a weightless or a nomadic association rather than a homeless, disconnected one. [...] Following the trails of nomadic logic, we choose to get lost”. (Guertin, 2007)

The reader too is a quilter, a storyteller, walking through the scars, wounds, missing/lost/parting parts, stepping on the screen with the phantom limb, stitching another, other's limb to its body, narrating as the body falls apart, and after falling apart. Reading this hypertext demands nomadic navigations, dislocating, aimlessly, on the paths of always already interrupted text-scape/body-scape.

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