

# Drie Vrouwenkwesties



## ENGENDERING THE FUTURE: SOME TRENDS

Rosi Braidotti

### INTRODUCTION

In the sixties, Jim Morrison used to sing: 'This is the end, my friend' so, at the end of the millennium we are the ones who come *after* the end of the end. We are at the end of the age of 'post's': after the post-industrial, post-ideology, post-communism, post-feminism, post-colonialism, post-modernism: we are all sign-'posts', pointing the way to a very uncertain future. Some radicals would say: there is *no* future, of course.

But that is too extreme - it's more that the future is not what it used to be. In fact, nothing is more complicated than telling the *present*, let alone predicting the future: you can describe anything, except *now*, this moment. I take 'now' to represent the historical situation of post-industrial societies, also known as information societies. Societies where the media *is* power and where all the post's have already been consumed.

Feminists have often been criticized for their preoccupation with the present. For opponents - like Hans Righardt - this over-concern for the present is the expression of a superficial if not ignorant mind-set, which clashes with the superior wisdom of the past. I disagree with such dismissive views. I would argue instead that, in fast-changing times, there is a particular urgency about describing adequately the present, i.e: the here and now of our practice.

If I were to choose one image to symbolize the political sensibilities of this end of millennium in Europe, I would pick the public's reaction to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Alternatively labelled - depending on one's politics - as 'a phenomenon of mass hysteria', or as 'the floral revolution' - analogous to the Eastern Europeans' 'velvet revolution' - the events round Diana's death have already entered the realm of political mythology. It was also the biggest media event focussed on a single individual (as opposed to a soccer team) ever.

What is most extraordinary about the com/passionate reaction of the British public is the fact that it consisted to an overwhelming majority

of young women, gays and people of colour. The excluded or marginal social subjects, those whom Thatcherism had forgotten or swept aside, bounced back onto the political and media arena with a vengeance. It was the return of the repressed, not with a bang but a whimper. It formed a suitable complement to the landslide that had brought 'New Labour' to power a few months before. It was also a powerful expression of the continuing potency of the white Goddess as an object of collective worship.

One of the things I find relevant about Princess Diana is the fact that she was a woman in full transformation. In other words, she was more interesting for what she was becoming, than for what she actually was. I think this dynamic and transformative dimension is crucial to understanding Diana's charisma.

Transformations, or processes of becoming are the key terms in the lives of most end-of-century women the world over. In order to render theoretically these in-depth changes, we need to radically expand the classical concepts of Left-wing political practice inspired by Marxism - like oppression, ideology and solidarity.

This revision is made necessary partly by the restructuring of power relations in the globalized economy, where new technologies of capital flow and production, surveillance and control have introduced more pervasive forms of hegemony. On the other hand, this revision is also due to those 'emerging subjectivities', of whom feminists, gays and people of colour are the most vocal elements. They are hybrid and in-between subjectivities for whom the term 'radical' seems less appropriate than the uneasy prepositional term 'post/Marxist/feminist/industrial/colonial, etc.etc.'

These 'new' subjects cannot and do not recognize themselves in the political symbolic embodied in Queen Elizabeth and her Courtiers, as major standard-bearers of Euro-centric phallogentrism. This new civil society is, among others, sexed female, multicultural, non-Christian: what can the white, male, monotheistic symbolic do for them?

These emerging subjects-in-process mark patterns of becoming that constitute powerful lines of connection between the present and the past. One point I want to argue firmly throughout this paper is that

new frames of representation are needed to express these new subjects. Representations are socially mediated forms of understanding, which need to be assessed with reference to the subject-positions that are about to emerge.

Throughout the last decennia of the twentieth century, many shifts in the social and political sphere were hastily labelled as 'the feminization of culture'. The extraordinary events surrounding Princess Diana are regularly quoted as instances of this. I would argue, in opposition to this, that by the end of this - as opposed to the previous *fin-de-siècle* - there has been a proliferation of metaphors of the feminine. Very few of which bear any relation to real-life women and their experiences. The 'feminization' of Western culture has been taken by many feminist critics as the expression of a crisis of masculinity and male domination.

I would therefore translate this 'feminization' process into the need to develop socially a more flexible, multi-layered as well as a multiple approach to participation in public life and politics. If you want to label this as 'feminine' it is fine, so long as we can agree on the definition.

For instance, the outpour of emotions around the death of Diana was translated into the need for more emotional authenticity. 'Soft' values, as opposed to the rather rigid protocols that still govern the public sphere and reflect not only its male-dominated structure, but also the male-saturated imaginary that supports it, as Susie Orbach, the Princess's own psycho-therapist, pointed out.

At the end of the millennium we witnessed the rise of spirituality as a new kind of political sensibility in reaction to the decline of the enlightenment ideals of political rationalism. Autonomy seems less desirable than inter-connectedness; empathy more fundamental than analysis. This 'feminized' political sensitivity is also the backdrop to the rise of that diffuse form of spirituality which was made so explicit in Diana's funeral. It was both the manifestation of an atavistic devotion to the body of the Royal, and a postmodern expression of 'secularized spirituality'. Marxian in the visceral sense of yearning for justice, Marian at heart and not at all monotheistic in its expression. A trans-formation of intimacy on a planetar and media-mediated scale.

## THE PRESENT

The difficulties related to making sense of the Diana phenomenon - which I take as symptomatic of the social and discursive production of 'the feminine' at the end of the millennium - are linked to the methodological problems raised by the necessity of accounting for the present.

How to describe contemporary societies and account for their fast-changing structures is keeping everybody busy. From social planners to media activists and artists. How to describe *change* is hard work. How to escape the velocity of change is even harder. Unless you like complexities, you can't be at home in the early twenty-first century. This is primarily but not exclusively a Western problem. Our culture is about ethnic mixity, through the flow of world migrants, refugees, exiles, asylum-seekers. Their virtual reality is *not* high-tech, it rather comes closer to social invisibility. Present society is about multiculturalism at a time of increasing racism and xenophobia. But it is also about a new alliance between technology and culture, machines and knowledge.

In the present situation in the Netherlands, where the flexibility of the work force and the burden of part-time work define the social reality of all citizens, with especially heavy consequences for women, I think it important to take distance equally from two related pitfalls. On the one hand the euphoria of professional optimists who advocate multiculturalism as an easy panacea. Or the optimism of the techno-nerds who grab advanced technology and especially cyber-space as the possibility for multiple fantasies of expansion, ubiquity or escape. On the other hand I also disagree from the many prophets of doom who mourn the decline of the classical world and transform nostalgia into a political platform.

When it comes to technology, a sort of epistemological confusion settled in the early part of the twenty-first century. This poses increasingly complicated interrogations. The attitude of our culture to technology has evolved from the paranoid fear of surveillance and control, - have you noticed all those security videos everywhere? We're being filmed all the time and we don't even know it! - still, we have evolved from fear to a far more complex approach. Instead of

appearing antithetical to the human values, technology can now be seen as inter-mingled with the human. The friendly purr of your P.C.; the constant dispossession of your image by hidden cameras. All those smart cards with chips that you cannot eat - are now an integral part of our lives.

Technology has become a challenge - it is the chance we have given ourselves, as a culture, to re-invent our creativity and become more intelligent. Technology should assist human evolution. The question is not: *what* we are, but *what* do we want to become? And how can technology help us achieve this?

I would consequently reset the question of technology in the framework of the challenge of change or transformation, which I see as central to both mapping the present and working towards a constructive future.

The best illustration of this challenge is the new information technologies such as the Internet. The World Wide Web is a paradoxical mixture: it confronts us, on the one hand, with a cheerful cacophony of clashing bits and bytes of the most diverse information, and, on the other, with the threat of mono-culture and the largest concentration of military-industrial monopolies in the world.

The theories as to the composition, the implications of and possible solutions to the paradoxes of technology are very wide - ranging from euphoric promises of electronic democracy (the 'desire to be wired' of John Barlow, Nick Negroponte or the Krockers), to prophecies of doom (the Unibomber). Some scholars like Castells and feminist critics like Haraway seem to be keeping a sober perspective on what is, after all, the great challenge of contemporary social theory and cultural practice; namely: how to assess science and technology and their impact on the embodied subject? They prefer to restate a healthy materialism: to the bitter end, proud to be flesh!

## THE BODY STRIKES BACK

The end of the twentieth century, also known as high postmodernity, saw the return of the repressed of modernity. Those devalued 'others' which constituted the specular complement of the modern subject, re-emerge triumphantly. These 'others' were: woman; the ethnic or

racialized other and nature or 'earth-others'. They are the complement to the modern subject, who constructed himself as much through what he excluded, as through what he included in his sense of agency or subjectivity.

These excluded 'others' return with a vengeance. The women's movement has marked an indelible scar on the symbolic tissue of phallogocentric culture; emergent subjectivities from the post-colonial horizon have displaced the Euro-centred world-view; various brands of fundamentalism as well as both communist and post-communist nationalism have created powerful images of avenging other. This process confuses the distribution of values according to self-other dichotomies. To top it all off, ecological disaster spells the end of the drive towards mastery of nature, while the technological revolution makes it all the more urgent to resolve issues of access to and participation in a democracy that is threatened by the informatics of domination.

Centuries-old acquiescent conventions about 'human nature' are thrown open. 'Human' and 'Nature': these are the two pillars on which Western humanism has erected itself, bringing along instances of sustained exclusion, domination and extermination. Throwing open these old dichotomies like the mind/body dualism.

In such a context it is only inevitable that - not unlike the empire - the body will strike back.

On an everyday sociological level, the body is striking back, with a vengeance. An estimated two million American women have silicon breast implants - most of which leak, bounce off during bumpy airplane flights, or cause undesirable side-effects. Millions of women throughout the advanced world are on Prozac or other mood-enhancement drugs. The hidden epidemic of anorexia-bulimia continues to strike one third of the females in the opulent world - as Princess Diana so clearly manifested. Killer-diseases today don't include only the great exterminators, like cancer and AIDS, but also the return of traditional diseases which we thought we had conquered, like malaria and T.B. Our immunity system has re-adjusted to the anti-biotics and we're vulnerable again.

There is no question that what we still go on calling - somewhat nostalgically - 'our bodies, ourselves' are abstract technological con-

structs fully immersed in advanced psycho-pharmacology, chemical industry, bio-science and the electronic media.

What is equally clear to us all is that we need to be vigilant. The techno-hype is over and that we need to assess more lucidly the price that we are paying for being so tech. We got our prosthetic promises of perfectibility - now, let's hand over our pound of flesh.

In other words - in order to adequately represent the present, and thus to advance some speculation about the future, it is time to contain the excessive edges of the postmodernist denial of the materiality of the bodily self. I would recommend that we think a lot more rigorously about the bodily neo-materialism as a conscious strategy. I also think it's well time for critical thinkers of all kinds and especially feminists - to re-appraise the unique blend of vitalism and dynamic anti-essentialism developed by Gilles Deleuze in his notion of the an-organic body - sometimes referred to as: 'body-machines'.

I would like to make a plea for forms of *radical immanence*. This means thinking *through* the body - not in a flight away from it - which in turn means confronting boundaries and limitations. This approach comes down to a plea to re-integrate concepts like 'embodiment' or even 'nature' into serious analytical and political accounts.

The Ecological movement in all of its many-fold variations has long tried to re-integrate 'bodily materiality' into the debate. Ecological feminists have recommended that we add a new 'ism' to the list of evils they try to correct: next to sexism, racism, ethnocentrism and classism - we need to add 'natur-ism' as the obsessive treatment of what Val Plumwood calls 'earth-as-other'.

Even the most convinced social constructivists today argue that the performances of bodies cannot be ascribed exclusively to the symbolic and imaginary orders - nor can they be read back into the Holy Scriptures of the DNA Scrolls. Both 'nature' and 'the body' are slippery categories - that tend to slide towards essentialism; get caught into positivist reductions - or in their opposite: new-agey naive celebrations.

## A NEW DIAGRAMME OF THE BODILY SELF

Both from the perspective of feminism and in the light of what is known as the crisis of the human and social sciences, I would want to argue that there is much to be gained from the radical philosophies of immanence that have emerged from French poststructuralism, especially after all the dust and polemic about relativism have finally settled down. We need more rather than less theory at the moment. Some aspects of contemporary philosophy can offer the inspiration, or qualitative energy, that we need.

I think that the emphasis Deleuze and Guattari place on the embodied and embedded nature of the subject - through the notion of radical immanence - gives to their philosophy an eco-logical dimension. Knowledge claims rest on the immanent structure of subjectivity and must resist the gravitational pull towards abstract transcendentality. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the knowing subject has to be rethought in material terms: territories, resources, locations and forces. In so doing, we shall take our leave from the spatio-temporal continuum of classical humanism. Similarly, we need to move beyond the reductionism of social constructivism, which tends to underplay the continuity of the factors that provide the empirical foundations of the subject and which are mostly related to affectivity and especially memory and desire.

A post-humanist and post-anthropocentric philosophy gives time a much more central place in the structuring of the subject. Deleuze's 'nomadology' as a philosophy of immanence rests on the idea of sustainability as a principle of containment and tolerable development of a subject's resources, understood environmentally, affectively and cognitively. A subject thus constituted inhabits a time that is the active tense of continuous 'becoming'. Deleuze defines the latter with reference to Bergson's concept of 'duration', thus proposing the notion of the subject as an entity that lasts, that is to say that endures sustainable changes and transformation and enacts them around him/herself in a community or collectivity. In this perspective, even the Earth/Gaia is posited as a partner in a community which is still to come, to be constructed by subjects who will interact with the Earth differently. In some ways close to 'deep ecology', but radically anti-essentialistic in their understanding, Deleuze and Guattari turn to Spinoza to find

philosophical foundations for a vitalistic yet anti-essentialistic brand of immanence. We need to rethink continuities and totalities, but without reference to a humanistic or holistic worldview.

In this respect, there are striking similarities between their project and Donna Haraway's feminist emphasis on deep-ecology as a shift of emphasis away from anthropocentrism in favour of bio-centric egalitarianism. Both differ from deep ecology, however, in not underplaying the contradictions and discontinuities between the human and the non-human universe and thus in not romanticizing the interaction between them.

The concept of 'becoming' is central to this project of radical redefinition of the subject. I find it particularly important not to confuse this process of subjectivity with individualism or particularism. Subjectivity is a socially mediated process. Consequently, the emergence of new social subjects calls for new social representations. It follows that the imaginary emerges as a crucial social, political as well as cultural notion.

## TOWARDS A NEW SOCIAL IMAGINARY

Social scientists and cultural critics have commented on the significance of the imaginary. Appadurai and Giddens as well as Balsamo and of course, Donna Haraway have registered the extent to which the social imaginary is a contested space and how techno-culture is the dominant code at the moment.

Whether we like it or not - or know it or not - contemporary culture makes us desire the interface human/machine or body/technology.

Given the importance of the social imaginary and the role of technology in re-colonising it, we need forms of representation that are *adequate*. The struggle over the social imaginary is about representation and in this struggle the issue of developing alternative or resisting *images* is simply crucial.

The 'imaginary' refers to a set of socially mediated practices which function as the anchoring point - albeit unstable and contingent - for

identifications and therefore for identity formation. These practices act like interactive structures where desire as a subjective yearning and agency in a broader socio-political sense are mutually shaped by one another. Neither 'pure' imagination - locked in its classical opposition to reason - nor fantasy in the Freudian sense, the imaginary for me marks a space of transitions and transactions. Nomadic, in a Deleuzian sense, it flows like symbolic glue between the social and the self, the outside and the subject; the material and the ethereal. It flows, but it is sticky: it catches on as it goes. It possesses fluidity, but it distinctly lacks transparency. I have used the term 'desire' to connote the subject's own investment - or enmeshment - in this sticky network of inter-related social and discursive effects. This network constitutes the social field as a libidinal - or affective - landscape, as well as a normative - or disciplinary - framework.

I wish to emphasize the relevance of this understanding of the imaginary to the project of developing adequate descriptions of the present. Social issues and their cultural representation are blurred, in the age of technological mediation. The boundary between sociology and cultural studies is hard to define. Appeals to disciplinary 'purity', or methodological accuracy, are hardly convincing.

Considering the structure of the imaginary, one cannot claim it possesses any unitary or generalized meaning. It is rather the case that the task of decoding and accounting for the imaginary has been a critical concern for social and cultural critics since the sixties. It has provided the arena in which different and often conflicting critiques of representation have clashed, fuelling the discourse of the crisis of representation. I think this crisis needs to be read in the context of the decline of Europe (West 1994) as a world power. It is also intrinsic to the post-nuclear predicament of an advanced world whose social realities become virtual - or de-materialized - because they are changing at such a fast rate under the pressure and the acceleration of a digitally-clad economy.

The imagination plays a major role in this process of conceptual creativity. The notion of 'figurations' - in contrast to the representational function of 'metaphors' - emerges as crucial to this notion of a conceptually charged use of the imagination. Deleuze, not unlike Haraway or, for that matter, the performance artist Laurie Anderson,

thinks by inventing unconventional and even disturbing conceptual personae. These mark different steps in the process of undoing power relations in the very structures of one's subject position.

Terms like 'figuration' or 'fabulation' (Barr 1993) are often used to describe this politically charged practice of alternative mappings of the present. Examples of these figurations are: the rhizome, the nomad, the bodies-without-organs, the cyborg, the onco-mouse and acoustic masks of all electronic kinds. It is a way of bringing into representation the unthinkable, in so far as it requires awareness of the limitations as well as the specificity of one's locations.

Where 'figurations' differ from classical 'metaphors' is precisely in calling into play a sense of accountability for one's locations. A figuration is the expression of one's 'politics of location' - to quote A. Rich. It is self-reflexive and not parasitic upon a process of metaphorization of 'others'. Self-reflexivity is, moreover, not an individual activity, but rather an interactive process which relies upon a social network of exchanges. Figurations thus act as the spot-light that illuminates aspects of one's practice which were blind spots before. A conceptual persona is no metaphor, but a materially embodied stage of metamorphosis of a dominant subject towards all that the phallogocentric system does not want it to become.

Feminist theories of 'politics of location' (Rich 1987), or 'situated knowledges' (Haraway 1990) also stress the material basis of alternative forms of representation, as well as their transgressive and transformative potential. In feminism, these ideas are coupled with that of epistemological and political accountability (Harding 1991), that is the practice that consists in unveiling the power locations which one inevitably inhabits as the site of one's identity.

The practice of accountability (for one's embodied and embedded locations) as a relational, collective activity of undoing power differentials is linked to two crucial notions: memory and narratives. They activate the process of putting into words, that is to say bringing into symbolic representation, that which by definition escapes consciousness, in so far as it is relational - i.e. interactive- retrospective - i.e. memory-driven - and invested by a yearning or desire for change - i.e.

outside-oriented. Feminists knew this well before Deleuze theorized it in his rhizomic philosophy.

In other words, we need *more*, rather than less theory, but we also need to think differently about this historical encounter body/technology we are going through. Learning to think differently requires conceptual creativity - the invention less of new conceptual tools than of new conceptual personae that can help us change deeply ingrained mental habits. We need to operationalize the transgressive potential of non-metaphorical figurations of a subject that comes *after* the encounter body/technology; human/machine. After that first intercourse - into full cyborg maturity.

In the postnuclear context of the end of the second millennium a feminist quest for a new imaginary representation has exploded. Myths, metaphors, or alternative figurations have merged feminist theory with fictions. It is precisely this mixture of the techno-scientific with the fictional or fantastic that characterizes the contemporary social imaginary.

On the horizon, clearly defined against the post-industrial epistemological haze, emerge new, and somewhat scary figurations of our present concerns. They are hybrid, and yet 'women-friendly' nomads, monsters, goddesses and cyborgs. They are familiar, yet idiosyncratic and slightly disconcerting; they jolt us into further questioning, short-circuiting facile answers, self-congratulatory certainties and easy-made solutions. There is no fast food for thought.

I take these images as figurations, of incommensurable difference, which nonetheless strike us as being intimately close to our daily existence in these high-tech days of disillusionment and yearning. They are also reminders of factors of resistance to the nihilistic components of the contemporary crisis. Figurations such as these are empowering political myths which may provide some guidance through the maze and haze of contemporary social and political theories.

The alliance among feminist critics of science who attack rationality as one of the foundational myths of Western science and post-colonial black and 'Eastern' feminisms is important. The meeting ground is the shared conviction regarding the historical decline of the Western and

Eurocentric model of development which was informed by the Enlightenment belief in rationality and progress. Of special significance are the efforts aimed at bridging the gulf that has come into being between environmentalist and feminists across institutional and disciplinary boundaries. These new alliances rest on the rejection of holistic appeals to a unified idea of 'nature', as much as they resist any essentialist notion of women's privileged relationship to nurturing and caring for 'earth others'. They emphasise instead an ironic variant of embodied materialism, manifestly opposed to psychological, social and biological essentialism. They also aim to undo classical dualistic oppositions and to replace them with living processes of transformations and a redefinition of subjectivity.

No Nietzschean transmutation of values is immediately guaranteed. But the process of transformative re-possession of knowledge is just begun and with it the quest for alternative figurations to express the kind of knowing-subjects we have already become. There is a gap between how we live - with multiculturalism, technology and telecommunication, to name just a few - and how we represent to ourselves this lived familiarity. Filling that gap is the great challenge of the present. And I cannot think of a bigger one for the future.