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The Question Of The Embodied User Facing The Web Praxis: How To Make A Body In A Virtual 'Biosubjectivity'?

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Abstract

How does the user manage an “embodied” identity in the Web case? How can we understand the links between body and identity build in the relation with the Web? The paper will study those questions in trying to clear up the problems related to body, embodiment, subjection and identity. Therefore, the case of Web produces some specificities: user, facing the Internet, is in a position of inaction: sitting in a chair, he only watches the screen and activates the mouse and the keyboard. We can compare this static position to an immersion of the body in a virtual and immaterial world, as the body was extended by that virtual reality. User's body is investigating the virtual interface, until it becomes the nodal point between virtuality and reality. We will explore the concepts of Body without organs (Deleuze & Guattari) and biosubjectivity (Andrieu) to understand those contexts of virtual world. Finally, we will extend this theoretical approach to a further analysis of what Deleuze called the societies of control, following the societies of discipline.

How to make oneself a body in front of a computer, surfing on Web? What does it mean, to have a body, and from there, a subjectivity, in the virtual space of Web where the identity owes be negotiated again and again?

We will speak first about the embodiment, and we shall define this one in an immanent centring, that does not force us to a definition of the body, and the embodiment, as an object or a substance. The Body without Organs - that we shall understand at first as *a limit of the lived body* as the body goes to it when it is crossed by affects or by becomings - of Deleuze and Guattari will lend us assistance in this practical meaning of a word of the embodiment, and we shall see how the proposition 'To make oneself a body' takes its sense in a theoretical approach of the representation of the body as inventor of biosubjective standards (according to Bernard Andrieu¹).

This first part will lead us to consider the context of Web praxis to propose the body as virtual biosubjectivity. This understands a process of deterritorialization and ceaseless reterritorialization between a virtual Body without Organs, registered in the smooth space (or haptic space) by the worldly virtuality of Web and the stratifications produced by the biosubjectivicals and biopoliticals standards.

Finally, we shall carry this proposition towards the strata that the contemporary society settled as sediment and that Deleuze called the societies of control. Indeed, the biopolitics, arisen

¹ Andrieu, B., *La représentation du corps, inventrice de normes biosubjectives*, www.staps.uhp-nancy.fr/bernard/docpdf/normesbiosubjectives.pdf

from a disciplinary society, go to a reorganization of its foundations in the new contexts of surveillance, video-surveillance and Ambient Intelligence.

1. Embodiment ('To make oneself a body')

We choose to consider the body neither as a substance, nor as a transcendental value attached to this substance. Our first option is that the body is involved in a whole of practices, and not as an essence, an object, in opposition to the substance, the soul or the spirit would unceasingly come to be opposed. Not at all, to have a body, to make a body, it is to be implied in an assemblage of *practices*, movements. It is to learn to be affected, to be moved, put moving by other entities, human or not human.²

The body, considered as an object or a substance requires a theoretical discussion from an holist or dualistic point of view, in which we will not enter here. The body, escaping definition of a substantial type (the question of what is the body by *nature*) enables us to considerate it as a 'interface' which would become increasingly describable when that interface learns how to be affected by various elements, human as nonhuman. We do not give a sense to define the body as an essence or a substance, and it is not either the residence of something of superior, as such as thought or soul.

It is necessarily, in our optics, to make a body, to create it, to try it out and insert its own subjectivity there. It is from an active point of view that we conceive it, 'in process' with the world, which surrounds us, populated of human and nonhuman.

How, consequently, to consider the body requiring at the same time the externality of human and nonhuman, and at the same time a whole of practices to be understood as affected? About which types of practices do we discuss?

Actually, the contribution of Deleuze and Guattari, who proposed the concept of Body without organs, could be useful for us. What is a body without organs? Initially, it should be not regarded as a concept, but as a set of practices.

*It is non-desire as well as desire. It is not at all a notion or a concept but a practice, asset of practices. You never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit.*³

Then, BwO is not the opposite of the organs, but the organization, i.e. 'the organic organization of the organs', which must be understood like the strata, stratifications imposed by the standards, connections, normative transcendences organized, social and political formations.

*Dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself, but rather opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage...[...] You have to keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn;...*⁴

The organism, it is not organs on a body. Organism, it is coding or combinative (it is even in the sense that one will speak about a genetic code), organs on the body without organs. The organism is a stratum. The strata, it is a species of formation on the body without organs, which will involve it, to fold back itself, to yield, to form bi-univocal relations. The body without organs taken in a strata yields, is folded up, form a folding back, which produces standards and regulations. Therefore, the first stratum is the organization. The strata of organization is very simple, it consists in making with the body without organs an organization, we organize it according to the principle of the output of the useful energies, for example, of energies of work. The strata of organization take in account what occurs already

² Latour, B (2005), *How to talk about the body? The normative dimension of science studies*, in *Body & Society*, Special Issue of Bodies on Trial, 10, pp. 205-229.

³ Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *A thousand Plateaux*, Minnesota University Press, 1987, p. 149-150.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 160.

on the body without organs in a system, which will direct it in an other direction. It will divert it.

The second strata, are the strata of significance. The third strata, that one of subjectivation, can say that there is no reality dominating without a point of subjectivation, and this point is not at all the point where the subject emerges, it is the point from which is organized the angle of signifiante and the variable opening of this angle. It is always starting from a point of subjectivation that the division of dominating realness is made, and it is always starting from the point of subjectivation that the machine of significances will take place, and then, the machine of organization. There is no organization of an organism, no significance of significations, no determination of a dominating realness without a corresponding point of subjectivation.

The BwO is a practice of perpetual tension; it is a process, an experimentation. That means that one is always making a BwO, there are not a completed process. The immediate effect of the body without organs, that makes only one with the experiment, the experimentation of a depersonalization. The BwO must be understood as a biosubjective constitution of the body, which would raise of a process of singularization of oneself counters domestication representational of the social formations. In other words, undifferentiated and not stratified, the body without organs brings to the idea of a subject, which is spread out over the circumference of the circle from the center, which the self has deserted.

Between the BwO and the stratas or sedimentations, effectuating movements of ceaseless deterritorialization and reterritorialization, it proceeds tensions: we can consider sedimentations as standards, here biosubjectives standards, on whom are tested experimentations, deterritorializations and reterritorializations of the BwO. I will name that tension, borrowing the term from Bernard Andrieu, biosubjectivity.

What biosubjectivity⁵ ? The subjective representation of the self defines a body standard of liveable while allotting to the judgement on the form and the matter of the aesthetic and functional criteria: that means that the body itself becomes a producer of standards for itself.

Normally is not only any more incarnated in the subjectivity (understood here as a mental metaphor), but in the body matter, it is even incarnated in the subjectivation. To take again the terminologies of Deleuze and Guattari, I will say that the movements of deterritorialization that produce virtual BwO settle as sediment strata of subjectivation.

It is necessary to understand the body as producer of biosubjectives standards - and in that point Andrieu and Deleuze & Guattari meet themselves -: the biosubjectivity is the tension which is born between virtual BwO from haptic space and the biosubjectives standards.

More classically, it is a new form of body subjectivity, which wants to be carried out in the biomaterial matter of the body. Biosubjectives from our constitution, it is from now on consciously a realization this biosubjectivity in the matter of our body that is aimed. The 'biosubjectivity' is a setting in culture of the body: the body is not only anymore the cultural object of the subject, but the identity matter of the self, mobile and alive.⁶

The invention of the body by the subject initially was a conquest of the feminists, the gays and lesbians, patients, immigrants, prisoners, disabled people: the right to have its own body testifies to ideological fights, of desires of marginal modes of existence. They are instituting

⁵ Concept of Bernard Andrieu, notably in *La représentation du corps, inventrice de normes biosubjectives*, op.cit. et *Somaphore et corps biosubjectif*, in *Multitudes* n°14, Philosophie de la biologie, Ed. Charles Wolfe, p.59-69.

The term biosubjectivity remains obviously the foucauldian concept of biopolitics, which is built all along his works. For an achieved historical panorama of the biopolitics, we refer to that very relevant paper of Bernard Andrieu, *La fin de la biopolitique chez Michel Foucault : le troisième déplacement*, in *Le Portique, Foucault, usages et actualités*, pp. 190-203.

⁶ Bernard Andrieu, «Faut-il respecter le corps humain ?», in *Le Portique, Le Respect*, mis en ligne le 15 décembre 2005. URL : <http://leportique.revues.org/document553.html>.

biosubjectives standards, in resistance to the shapes of normative domination of the social body, lived like ideological by the minority modes.

We can take as example the cyborgs of Haraway⁷ who legitimate the existence of these biosubjectives standards. Haraway says that because we have already accepted that the technologisation of our bodies through the intervention of medical science – immunisation, pacemakers, transplants, ultrasound, the human genome, etc. - we are already biotechnological beings. We are cyborgs, cybernetic organisms.

2. A virtual biosubjectivity

Which type of biosubjectivity is built in Web practice? How to renegotiate its virtual identity as a body, as a body matter? It is the questions that we will try to answer in this second part.

The interrogation on the identity compared to the identification with the alive body thus comes from the body lived, reflected, informed and asserted, from now on, a biosubjective construction of self, like process in constant movement of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. The BwO that meets the virtual space of the Web is particular: it lives in the smooth space of the Web praxis. Smooth space, haptic space or nomadism are also concepts of Deleuze and Guattari. Mireille Buydens⁸ confirms us a very relevant vision of smooth space to think the space of the Web.

The concept of space smooth constitutes a particularly fertile model to think various contemporary phenomena characterized by a valorization of the dissolution of the borders and structures, fluidity, not planned and the spontaneous one. In this direction, it is an excellent tool to conceptualize cybernetic space. Doesn't Internet function indeed precisely like an adirectional space, non-polarized and not cartographic, where the images are tied and untied on an also close level? Doesn't one speak besides about surfer on the network, as one sails with the liking of the waves, slipping without compass on the dust of pre-formals pixels? The Net surfer is a nomad, controlling at sight in the proximity of the pages, without possible prospect. Also Internet is space smoothes par excellence, like spaces intoxication and of fata morgana, as full and vacuum to him as the Sahara, also near and also plugging. Striated space would be then, on the contrary, the paradigm of the traditional media, with their linearity, their construction, their depth and their setting in prospect: the readable orography of the vision moved away, reflected and panoramic, opposed to the pervasive proximity of the haptic vision in smooth space.

The virtual BwO of the smooth space of the Web, how to build it? If the Net surfer is a nomad, it creates a subjectivity in a body which is expressed only in one static of the screen, the keyboard, the mouse. We are far, in this position, to believe in the nomadism of the e-user registered in a biosubjectivity. However, he can make a BwO, deterritorializing himself and reterritorializing himself in this non-tangible space.

The forums of discussions invites us to the pseudonyms, the webcams to the dressing-up, the role games in network to the creation of a narration of a protagonist in which one can believe, one can steal an identity of player to another, divert it, cheat, etc.... The e-users are done of BwO virtual of all kinds, they try out, follow lines of flight, take along, then create for themselves identities, without being affected in their majority identity.

In what that does affect our body, our embodiment? The answer is very simple and joins the assumptions of Bruno Latour⁹ about the body. It is because our body is affected, is touched,

⁷ Haraway, D., 1991, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the reinvention of nature*, Routledge, New York.

⁸ Mireille Buydens, « Espace lisse / Espace strié » in *Le vocabulaire de Gilles Deleuze* (sous la dir. Robert Sasso et Arnaud Villani), Les Cahiers de Noesis n° 3, Printemps 2003, pp. 134-135.

⁹ Latour, B (2005), *How to talk about the body ? The normative dimension of science studies*, in *Body & Society*, Special Issue of Bodies on Trial, 10, pp. 205-229.

put and moved onto this Web world, to which we take part, in which we surf, that we are making a biosubjective body. Our biosubjective body belongs to the Web, as much as the Web belongs to our biosubjective body.

3. From an embodiment towards a virtual biosubjectivity: considerations about the society of control

We could widen the concept and wonder how this biosubjectivity works beyond a 'restricted' and personal virtual space (the e-user in front of its screen as a model). Indeed, the invasion of ICT's in the contemporary societies takes several forms and invades our every-day-life. We assist, often without none possibility of contesting, to the growth of a multiplicity of ICT devices, presented almost as *natural* and necessary objects or needs.

The policy representatives often promote that ICT's development, and try to encourage their acceptance inside the society. A recent example is the case of the new technologies raised by the projects of Ambient Intelligence (AmI) and their visions. The AmI is a notion of computing engineering including a set of technologies sharing common features. The European Commission, through the 6th Framework Programme, supported largely the developments of those new pervasive, ubiquitous technologies. AmI results from the convergence of three domains:

- *Ubiquitous Computing*, who consists in integrating microprocessors into the objects of the every-day-life.
- *Ubiquitous Communication*, who allows these objects to communicate between them and with the user.
- *Intelligent User Interface*, which allows the users to control and to interact with these objects in an intuitive way.

The AmI promises us a world strewed with small electronic, cheap, interconnected, autonomous elements, sensitive to the context and having certain degree of intelligence, all this in our daily environment (in our cars, in buildings, in trees, in the streets). Their utilities would be multiple: from the prevention (from fires, accidents) towards the assistance (guide, control at distance) by way of the comfort. One of their high quality would be their total transparency: they would be present, but completely invisible for us, the interaction with them that must be also transparent. One of the applications of the Ambient Intelligence is 'to make a couple' with the devices of video surveillance. These control mechanisms would thus be strengthened due to the invisibility and the intelligence of the technologies AmI, and it would contribute to make the social control more dependent on technological artefacts.

Foucault has showed in which the disciplinary devices of Panopticon contributed to lead a control of human bodies envisaged as mass¹⁰. However, the concept of biopolitics is a concept fundamentally static and a category fundamentally historic. It is connected to the history of the disciplinary societies that took place in 18th and 19th centuries, with their highlight at the beginning of the 20th century. They proceed with the organization of the big circles of confinement. The individual passes from a closed environment to another one, with their owns laws: at first the family, then the school, then the barracks, then the factory, from time to time the hospital, possibly the prison, which is the environment of confinement par excellence. Already at the end of the World War II, we were not living anymore in these societies of disciplines; we pass in another shape of society, which Deleuze named 'society of control'.

We observe, following Deleuze in his article *Postscript on the Societies of control*, the passage of a surveillance centred to the human body (it is the modern biopolitics) moving

¹⁰ Notably in Foucault, M., 1975, *Surveiller et punir*, Paris, Gallimard.

towards the control of the virtual identity, and from then of its subjectivity and virtual biosubjectivity.

*The conception of a control mechanism, giving the position of any element within an open environment at any given instant (whether animal in a reserve or human in a corporation, as with an electronic collar), is not necessarily one of science fiction. Felix Guattari has imagined a city where one would be able to leave one's apartment, one's street, one's neighbourhood, thanks to one's (dividual) electronic card that raises a given barrier; but the card could just as easily be rejected on a given day or between certain hours; what counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person's position--licit or illicit--and effects a universal modulation.*¹¹

To understand why the contemporary biosubjectivity is connected to the society of control, we must evaluate once again the concept of biopolitics. The production of subjectivity, which was determined by the biopolitics, was still a production of subjectivity, in that case, almost always neutralized. The enormous foucauldian effort to bring back the networks of biopolitics to the determination of the subjectivity never ended. It is a theoretical lack that we may fill in. Several things could be underlined to understand the societies of control. First, from the dispositives of surveillance points of view, the panopticon of Bentham is 'rhizomatizing'¹², it means that it bursts his unique eye in a non-organized eyes multitudes. For example, a downtown area stuffed of CCTV does not obey only one supervisor-agent, but it also obeys a multiplicity not organized of supervisors behind the cameras: representatives of the city itself, tradesmen, and unquestionable particular. Moreover, other eyes can record as video amateur by familial cameras, mobile phones, and become another eye or surveillance in the case of security needs, for example. This bursting has several consequences: we can observe a reinforcement, on the one hand, of the dispositives of the data collected and monitored, and on the other hand, of the processes of data protection, which involve an unlimited and perpetual movement from the causes towards the consequences. Indeed, because of the incredible quantity of the data to be collected, monitored and protected, it is necessary to control more and better, and reciprocally, it is because control is invading and omnipresent that we must take care of us as a person.

Therefore, Deleuze says that if in the societies of discipline, one did not cease passing from confinement to another, in the societies of control, the environment itself acts as a distorting universal. What is essential in the societies of control is the exercise of power as massifiant and individuant at the same time (it is biopower or biopolitics), the signature indicates the individual, and its number (of national register, of identity card) indicates its position in a mass. In the societies of control, the essential is not anymore an administrative numeration or a number, but a code. The numerical language is made of codes, which give access to information: one is in front of samples, data ad infinitum, in perpetual growth. The individuals become 'dividual'. The biosubjectivity is folding into the codes and can profit from them to build it.

It is thus following the foucauldian and deleuzian studies in connection with the societies of control that some questions concerning the body are formulated. One can wonder what it means to say, to have a body, in this context of control? On one hand, we can encompass logically the body as passive, subjected to the standards and the normalizations raised by the new dispositives of surveillance. Nevertheless, the new productions of subjectivity, notably the one related to the biosubjectivity, make us hope that those ones are producing new forms of resistance, and that the person 'dividuel' can act in that new way of constructing identity, which we called biosubjective body.

¹¹ Deleuze, G., *Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle*, in *L'autre journal*, n°1, mai 1990.

¹² For the concept of rhizome, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand Plateaus*, op.cit.

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