THE MOST RADICAL PHILOSOPHER: PUTTING THE CYBER BACK IN SADIE PLANT'S CYBERFEMINISM

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ABSTRACT: This article provides a critical introduction to or close reading of British philosopher Sadie Plant's original formulation of cyberfeminism. I begin by showing how Plant's earliest work seeks a form of critique—or what she also calls 'the most radical gesture'—that could never be recuperated by the power structures it seeks to contest as has happened to so much critical thought before. I then argue that her cyberfeminist turn is motivated by the discovery that evermore autonomous machines are carving out a space outside the human spectacle from whence our anthropocentric misconceptions can be eliminated. If Plant characterizes this machinic critique as a feminism, it is because she sees increasingly intelligent machines as harbouring the same attributes often associated with women inasmuch as they have both been traditionally treated as a means to the ends of man without any rational agency, fixed identity or humanity of their own. As we shall see, Plant's cyberfeminism is not so much about emancipating women as it is about emancipating *feminine structures* like irrationality, fluid identity, general intelligence, and even inhumanity, which she finds incarnated in emerging technologies as they spiral outside of man's control in a purely *formal feminism*, or even a *feminism without women*.

KEYWORDS: Cyberfeminism; Sadie Plant; Feminism; Accelerationism

In our contemporary socio-cultural conjuncture that is witnessing the rise of automation and other disruptive technologies alongside the return of traditional, patriarchal values like those associated with the alt right and many Trump supporters, it would seem the time is right to reconsider what a specifically cyberfeminist philosophy has to offer.[1] While Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex*

[1] Carl Benedikt Frey has recently made the case that disruptive technologies like automation are provoking the rise in populist movements, including their desire to return to traditionalist values, as if what they feared most was the killer fembot in *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*. See Frey, Carl Benedikt, *The Technology Trap: Capital, Labor and Power in the Age of Automation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2019.

(1970) and Donna Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1985) mark important precursors to any account of the connections between women and technology, cyberfeminism proper was simultaneously coined in 1991 by the Australian art collective VNS Matrix and British philosopher Sadie Plant.[2] By the time that the first Cyberfeminist International conference was organized by the Old Boys Network in Hamburg, Germany in 1997, the term had come to be shrouded in more mystery than the Kantian noumenon or the death of Jeffrey Epstein. As the conference proceedings note, 'cyberfeminism is many things to many people, and we will not attempt to give a concise definition of it here'.[3] The closest definition given at the time was the Old Boys Network's '100 Anti-Theses' that still only defined cyberfeminism as if it were a negative theology in terms of what it is not:

1. cyberfeminism is not a fragrance
2. cyberfeminism is not a fashion statement
3. sajbrfeminizm nije usamljen
4. cyberfeminism is not an ideology
5. cybermfeminism nije aseksualan
6. cyberfeminism is not boring…[4]

As Caroline Bassett points out, cyberfeminism raises more questions than it answers, chief among them being whether it is primarily a feminism that women can take up and practice or a theory of how technology is emancipating women without them having any real agency to intervene in the process.

> This uncertainty opens up certain questions about cyberfeminism. Crucially this one; does it amount to a politics, or a technology? Is Plant talking about a possible feminist response to computerization or is she rather documenting/predicting a technologically determined alteration in the condition of women? An alteration which woman should embrace because it is a change in their favor, but which they can do very little about.[5]

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[2] Firestone, Shulamith, *Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, London, Verso, 2015 and Haraway, Donna J., 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York, Routledge, 1991, pp. 149-182.

[3] von Oldenburg, Helene and Claudia Reiche (eds.), *Very Cyberfeminist International Reader*, Berlin, B-books, 2002, p. 4.

[4] Old Boys Network, '100 Anti-Theses', *Old Boys Network*, last accessed 15 January, 2021, https://www.obn.org/cfundef/100antitheses.html.

[5] Bassett, Caroline, 'Cyberfeminism SPCL—with a little help from our (new) friends?', in *Mute* 1, 8, 1997.

'Despite international recognition', Alex Galloway similarly concludes, 'cyberfeminism remains a highly problematic theoretical framework. No one is quite sure what it means'.[6] It is curious that almost all writings on cyberfeminism explicitly downplay, outright reject, or simply ignore Sadie Plant's original and to this day most theoretically rigorous formulation. Oftentimes the mere mention of her name is enough to incite a wave of rather unscholarly invectives in place of sustained arguments and reasoned objections, as in Mike Peter's 'Cyberdrivel' (1995/6) and Noel Thompson's 'A World of Cybertwits' (1997), the titles of which say it all.[7] Already at the first Cyberfeminist International conference, Cornelia Sollfrank proposed to completely ignore both Plant and VNS Matrix's original formulations of cyberfeminism, merely adopting the same term to describe an entirely different feminist framework: 'Sadie Plant and VNS Matrix: Thank you for the term, but I am afraid I have to neglect your content at this point. I am sure you understand and agree'.[8] By the time of the first major anthology of essays *Cyberfeminism: Connectivity, Critique and Creativity* was published in 1999, Plant was barely mentioned at all except to say that she 'gestures in the direction of political advancement through uncritical feminist encounters with the cyberworld. […] Libertarian approaches—such as those espoused by Sadie Plant—work only for the privileged'.[9] While the editors of the collection *Domain Errors! Cyberfeminist Practices* (2002) do distinguish between 'an initial wave that celebrated the innate affinities of women and machines, and a second, more critical wave', they proceed to focus solely on the latter to the neglect of Plant's pioneering work.[10] In the same vein, Sarah Kember's book *Cyberfeminism and Artificial Life* (2003) only mentions Plant to dismiss her allegedly outdated 'technologically determined

[6] Galloway, Alex, 'A Report on Cyberfeminism: Sadie Plant Relative to VNS Matrix', *Alexander Galloway*, 23 September, 2018, last accessed 15 January, 2021, http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/a-report-on-cyberfeminism-1999.

[7] Peters, Mike, 'Cyberdrivel', in *Here and Now* 16/17, 1995/6, pp. 24-30; and Thompson, Noel, 'A World of Cybertwits', in *Financial Times*, 25 October, 1997.

[8] Sollfrank, Cornelia, 'The Final Truth About Cyberfeminism: Net Working, Knot Working, Not Working?', in *Cyberfeminist International Reader*, p. 113.

[9] Hawthorne, Susan and Renate Klein, 'Introduction: Cyberfeminism', in Hawthorne and Klein (eds.), *Cyberfeminism: Connectivity, Critique and Creativity*, Melbourne, Spinifex Press, 1999, eBook.

[10] Fernandez, Maria, Faith Wilding and Michelle M. Wright, 'Situating Cyberfeminisms', in Fernandez, Wilding and Wright (eds.), *Domain Errors! Cyberfeminist Practices*, New York, Autonomedia and SubRosa, 2002, p. 22.

apocalypticisms and biological essentialism'.[11] The Old Boys Network's call for contributions in the *Cyberfeminism. Next Protocols* anthology (2004) similarly argues:

> If ideal and final concepts of history in cyberfeminist visions are not supported, there'll be alternatives to statements like the following: '…As machines get more autonomous, so do the women.' Or 'it's not happening because people are trying to make it happen—or even because feminist politics are driving these changes…, but changes are occurring almost as an automatic process. It's beautifully effortless, it's an automatic process!'[12]

Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh's introduction to the *Cyberfeminism 2.0* collection (2012) goes so far as to take as its starting point the peculiar claim that cyberfeminism was invented 'as early as 1997' when 'Faith Wilding and Critical Art Ensemble attempted to define cyberfeminism as "a promising new wave of thinking and practice" that had emerged with the growing presence of women on the Net'.[13] Perhaps Heike Munder is therefore right in the more recent 2019 compilation *Producing Futures: A Book on Post-Cyber-Feminism* to distinguish the second wave cyberfeminism as a 'post-cyber-feminism' when 'faced with the uncomfortable realization that the virtual ecosystem's evolution has diverged from the path they envisioned'.[14] What emerges from the little that is written about Plant's cyberfeminism amounts to either complete repudiations often amounting to little more than name-calling or passing objections in favor of radically different uses of the term, as if Plant was someone more menacing than a covid-19 superspreader. Outside official academic channels in more obscure sites in cyberspace, it is true recent years has seen a small but energetic revival of interest in Plant. But whereas even those interested in Plant tend to draw on her in the pursuit of their own projects like xenofeminism and gender acceleration, this article provides a sustained critical introduction to or close reading of Sadie Plant's particular brand of cyberfeminism.[15]

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[11] Kember, Sarah, *Cyberfeminism and Artificial Life*, London, Routledge, 2003, pp. 177-8.

[12] Old Boys Network, 'Call for Contributions', in Reiche, Claudia and Verena Kuni (eds.), *Cyberfeminism. Next protocols*, New York, Autonomedia, 2004, p. 16.

[13] Gajjala, Radhika and Yeon Ju Oh, 'Cyberfeminism 2.0: Where Have All the Cyberfeminists Gone?', in *Cyberfeminism 2.0*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2012, p. 1.

[14] Munder, Heike, 'Producing Futures—An Exhibition on Post-Cyber-Feminism', in *Producing Futures: A Book on Post-Cyber-Feminism*, Zürich, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst and JRP, 2019, p. 9.

[15] See, for instance, Laboria Cuboniks, 'The Xenofeminist Manifesto', in Gunkel, Henriette, Ayesha Hameed and Simon O'Sullivan (eds.), *Futures and Fictions*, London, Repeater Books, 2017, pp. 231-248 and N1x, 'Gender Acceleration: A Blackpaper', *Vast Abrupt*, 31 October, 2018, accessed 20 February, 2020, https://vastabrupt.com/2018/10/31/gender-acceleration/.

At first glance, this may seem counterintuitive given that Plant seeks to displace individual agency by unveiling the unconscious forces and inhuman processes that really run our lives without our having much say in the matter. In an interview, Plant says: 'one of the things I am trying to talk about is that pulling out specific individuals as heroes or whatever is a thing of the past'.[16] It is my wager, however, that we can only dehumanize cyberfeminism from its many humanist recuperations precisely by honing in on Plant's version of events. In sticking to the spirit of Plant's rejection of biographical explanations, however, I will provide only the most essential of facts.[17] The daughter of a mechanical engineer and a secretary, Plant grew up in Birmingham before completing her PhD on the situationists at The University of Manchester in 1989 and being heavily involved in the city's infamous neo-Dionysian cult better known as the rave scene.[18] After publishing her first book *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* in 1992, she got a job at The University of Birmingham where she became increasingly interested in the often occulted history of connections between women and machines.[19] Plant eventually moved to The University of Warwick in 1995 where she helped set up the infamous Cybernetic Culture Research Unit before retiring from academia two years later and publishing her most famous work *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + The New Technoculture.*[20] She went on to publish another book *Writing on Drugs* in 1999 and become a freelance writer and translator, penning art catalogues, articles for the *Financial Times*, *Wired*, *Blueprint*, and *Dazed and Confused*, and even a report on the social effects of mobile phones commissioned by Motorola.[21]

While there is much of interest in Plant's later writings, this article focuses on the turn from her young situationist stance to her mature cyberfeminist

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[16] Quoted in Treneman, Ann, 'Interview: Sadie Plant: It Girl for the 21st Century', in *The Independent*, 11 October, 1997, last accessed 15 January, 2021, https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/interview-sadie-plant-it-girl-for-the-21st-century-1235380.html.

[17] A summary of Plant's background can be found in Reynolds, Simon, 'Zeros + Ones: The Matrix of Women + Machines', in *The Village Voice* 42, 37, 1997, pp. 5-6 (1997; 2000) and 'The Academic and the Ecstasy', in *FEED*, 4 February, 2000.

[18] Plant, Sadie, *Critique and Recuperation in Twentieth Century Philosophical Discourse*, PhD diss., Manchester, University of Manchester, 1989.

[19] Plant, Sadie, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*, London, Routledge, 2002.

[20] Plant, Sadie, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + The New Technoculture*, London, Doubleday, 1997.

[21] Plant, Sadie, *Writings on Drugs*, London, Faber and Faber, 1999 and *On the Mobile: The Effects of Mobile Technologies on Social and Individual Life*, Chicago, Motorola, 2001.

philosophy. I begin by showing how Plant's earliest work seeks out a form of critique—or what she also calls 'the most radical gesture'—that could never be recuperated by the very same power structures it seeks to contest as has happened to so much critical thought in the past. I then argue that her cyberfeminist turn is motivated by the discovery that evermore autonomous and self-organising machines are carving out a space outside the human spectacle from whence our anthropocentric misconceptions might be eliminated once and for all. If Plant characterizes her mature machinic critique as a feminism, it is because she sees increasingly intelligent machines as harbouring the same attributes often associated with women inasmuch as both women and machines have traditionally been treated as a means to the ends of man without any rational agency, substantial identity or even humanity of their own. As we shall see, then, Plant's cyberfeminism is not so much about emancipating women as it is about emancipating *feminine structures* like irrationality, fluid identity, general intelligence, and even inhumanity, which she finds incarnated in emerging technologies as they spiral outside of man's control in what amounts to a purely *formal feminism*, or even a *feminism without women*.

THE YOUNG PLANT'S SITUATIONIST ROOTS

From her 1989 dissertation *Critique and Recuperation in Twentieth Century Philosophical Discourse* to her first 1992 book *The Most Radical Gesture*, Plant's work focuses on preventing the recuperation of critical thought by the very oppressive power structures that such thought was intended to resist. To this end, Plant provides a detailed diagnosis of the fate of the situationists' radical critique of the capitalist spectacle in the wake of postmodernism and poststructuralism.[22] On the one hand, the situationists drew on the Marxist critique of ruling class ideology as alienating us from our true historical destiny to overthrow capitalism by instead absolutizing it as the end of history in a frozen spectacle of production and consumption solely for the sake of profit. For classical Marxists as for the situationists, the role of critique is to expose capitalism as one merely historical and contingent mode of production among others as opposed to anything natural and inexorable by confronting its narcissistic image of itself as a beautiful,

[22] The two most important situationist works are Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, London, Rebel Press, 1983 and Vaneigem, Raoul, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, London, Rebel Press, 2001.

bourgeois Dorian Gray with its own rotting portrait of decadence and decay. As Plant puts it,

> All Marxist theories consider that this negation must always be that of the totality: as the latter progresses, so its critique must find a point of negation from which it may be considered a contingent, rather than a given arrangement. It is the dialectical understanding of history which provides Marxist critique with this point.[23]

On the other hand, the situationists drew on the Dadaists and the surrealists' conviction that avant-garde modernist art was capable of expressing unconscious desires which have yet to be fully captured and commodified by the free market. 'Art therefore represents a realm from which reality can be reassessed and criticized. Further, this realm is grounded in the authenticity of the human imagination, fantasy and desire. This allowed Marcuse to consider art as the intrinsic negation of the alienated reality of one-dimensional society'.[24] Both the Dadaists and the surrealists frequently made collages and cut-up poems out of newspaper scraps and other popular media to expose the arbitrary and contingent way the original and often propagandistic images and texts were presented, thereby stripping them of any legitimate claim to monopolize the absolute truth. The bourgeois myth of individual agency best exemplified by the lone artistic genius was also undermined through their use of ready-mades and found objects, automatic drawing practices, and psychogeographic walks without a destination, all of which elided the conscious control of the individuals involved. As far as their *écriture automatique* went, the Dadaists and surrealists were already more machine than man. As we shall see, it is therefore unsurprising that the mature Plant continues to employ automatic practices and cut-up techniques, particularly in her collaborations with the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, albeit to quite different cyberfeminist ends.

Combining the Marxist critique of ideology with such avant-garde artistic practices, the situationists sought to construct spaces of resistance outside the capitalist spectacle from whence its aura of eternity could be exposed as mortal and finite. As one situationist cartoon from which Plant gets the title of her first book puts it, the situationists were particularly concerned with how 'authority

[23] Plant, *Critique*, p. 103.
[24] Plant, *Critique*, p. 151.

tries to recuperate even the most radical gesture'. Since the aim of capitalism is to make more capital *ad infinitum*, it can never rest content with simply producing the same old goods and services and the desires, identities, social relations, and cultures that come packaged with them. It must constantly create new goods and services, and hence new desires, identities, relations, and cultures, by expanding production and consumption beyond the necessary resources of bare survival like food, shelter, and clothing until it eats up culture, our spare time, and all other aspects of life. Most devastatingly, capitalism can even make room for the very critical desire for something beyond the capitalist spectacle itself which gave birth to the situationists' own critique of ideology in the first place. Any resistance to capitalism is thus not some extrinsic limit that could contradict and negate it once and for all, but an immanent limit that capitalism itself conjures to become ever stronger by critiquing itself more brutally than any post-cancellation apology or Maoist struggle session and adapting itself accordingly.

> The Situationists identified the ability of the spectacle to commodify anything as its ultimate strength: if dissatisfaction and dissent can be marketed and consumed like material goods, surely anything which arises in the spectacle, no matter how hostile, can become supportive of it. The Situationists saw this ability to recuperate as fundamental to the survival of capitalism, since it intends the denial of the very possibility of contradiction, negation, and opposition.[25]

To give a recent concrete example, the recuperation of resistance could be seen on June 4, 2020 during Black Out Tuesday when capitalist corporations like Apple, MTV, and Spotify blacked out their programming for 8 minutes and 46 seconds to protest the police killing of George Floyd that went on for that long while Facebook and Instagram users posted *en masse* a single photo of a black square alongside the hashtag #blackouttuesday.[26] Not only did this virtual virtue signaling give these capitalist megacorporations free publicity and make their users feel better about themselves in the absence of any substantial change to the justice system, but it meant that real activists searching for information about the ongoing protests on the streets were met by an opaque wall of black squares when

[25] Plant, *Critique*, pp. 48-9.

[26] Vincent, James, 'Blackout Tuesday posts are drowning out vital information shared under the BLM hashtag', *The Verge*, 2 June, 2020, last accessed 15 January, 2021, https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/2/21277852/blackout-tuesday-posts-hiding-information-blm-black-lives-matter-hashtag.

they searched the hashtag #blackouttuesday. As the lockdown of the global economy in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic forces more of our lives to take place through online platforms like Zoom and even our movements in meatspace to be tracked by QR scans and contact tracing apps, not only our resistance but even everyday life is being turned into big data to be sold to advertising companies. It was already Plant in the late eighties and the situationists in the late sixties that were critiquing what Shoshana Zuboff has recently called 'surveillance capitalism' as 'a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw materials for hidden commercial practices of extraction, predictions, and sales'.[27] As Malevich's *Black Square* made on the eve of the Russian Revolution, itself now spectacularly shown at the Centre Pompidou, farcically repeats itself as big data collection company Instagram's black squares during the BLM protests, critique and its recuperation are now totally simultaneous. With all resistance screened out into big data, the spectacle is now so complete there's a whole generation of zoomers named after it. We are all Kendall Jenner selling Pepsi at the BLM rally now.

Back in the sixties, it was still possible for the situationists to hold out hope for the possibility of an imminent escape from the capitalist spectacle. Upgrading avant-garde artistic practices through a technique they called 'détournement', the situationists took existing media like comic strips and martial arts movies and replaced the speech bubbles and subtitles with political commentary, as well as graffitied their message on buildings to transform an everyday walk to work down a Parisian boulevard into a chance to raise some class consciousness. By détourning commodities and everyday life in this way, the situationists sought to turn the very weapons of the spectacle against itself, with the way it made gold out of everything threatening to become its Midas' touch. In Plant's words:

> It is a turning around and a reclamation of lost meaning: a way of putting the stasis of the spectacle in motion. It is plagiaristic, because its materials are those which already appear within the spectacle, and subversive, since its tactics are those of the 'reversal of perspective,' a challenge to meaning aimed at the context in which it arises.[28]

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[27] Zuboff, Shoshana, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Public Affairs, New York, 2019, ebook.
[28] Plant, *Gesture*, p. 86.

For the situationists, the moment of widespread revolutionary détournement finally seemed at hand during the events of May '68 when students inspired by the red guards in the Chinese Cultural Revolution began protesting the Vietnam War. The police's violent response only angered more people into joining the protestors, eventually leading to the largest general strike in history that shut down France for most of May and even incited President Charles de Gaulle to flee the country. In the next section, we will see that the mature Plant still draws on the situationists' détournement, if only by coming to see the spectacle of technological innovation and future shock as ultimately spiraling out of humanity's control altogether.

Already by June 1968, however, the revolting French proletariat had been coaxed into returning to work through the promise of reforms and a new election, in which the Gaullist Union for the Defence of the Republic received an even greater majority. While much of French society continued to revolt well into the next decade, the left was further coaxed into peacefully resolving things through the ballot box in 1981 when the Socialist Party's presidential candidate François Mitterrand promised sweeping reforms. Only two years into his presidency, however, Mitterrand turned his back on the left to implement neoliberal economic policies and austerity measures. So it was that subversive Dadaist techniques and situationist détournements were recuperated by commercial advertising, MTV, pop art, and fashionable pomo nonsense. So it was that the great sequestrations of Paris' Renault car factories gave way to Andy Warhol's elite New York studio The Factory. Over half a century later, we now live in a world where Marxism, Dadaism and the situationists are entirely conventional products of institutional art and the academic establishment. All that psychogeography now allows us to see as we wander the streets—curfews during lockdown permitting—is evermore billboards for psychocapitalism.

In the wake of the neoliberal counterrevolution against the sixties and seventies protest movements, poststructuralists like Lyotard and Baudrillard concluded that capitalism was capable of recuperating every aspect of our lives such that there was no longer any position of resistance outside the spectacle of interminable power struggles from whence it might be critiqued.

> Influenced by the analyses of Marxism and the Situationists, the poststructuralists develop an account of alienation and spectacularisation which denies the existence of an authenticity or reality to which such terms might be opposed. Its descriptions

> of contemporary society are akin to those presented by the Situationists, but the possibility of criticism is lost.[29]

For poststructuralists like Foucault, no knowledge is ever truly neutral and objective inasmuch as it is always a product of different balances of power between competing interest groups. The situationists were thus wrong to imagine that critical thought is capable of expressing some true, more authentic reality outside the spectacle of power plays. On the contrary, even critical thought is just one possible defense of a certain power dynamic or social hierarchy among many others.

> If all relations of power are also relations of knowledge, so that discourse is constituted by these relations, it would seem that it is impossible to develop a discourse critical of either prevailing knowledge or the prevailing relations of power. This means that any resistance to power and the discourse in which it is expressed are inextricably intertwined with the relations of power against which it struggles. Critical discourse enters into the relations of power it resists.[30]

The poststructuralist critique of critique itself only seemed to be confirmed by the degeneration of the great Marxist revolutionary movements into the Stalinist dictatorships, the reformist communist and labor parties, and the bureaucratic trade unions. Whereas the situationists once imagined that our alienation from reality was a particular product of capitalism, the poststructuralists now argued that alienation was a basic fact about being human, with nothing above and beyond various power struggles masked more thinly than

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[29] Plant, *Critique*, p. 14.

[30] Plant, *Critique*, p. 430. Along with Foucault, Lyotard and Baudrillard are the other two figures who come under heavy fire in Plant's critique of poststructuralism. On the one hand, Lyotard argues that, seeing as 'there is no exteriority' to capitalism that it has not been able to breach, capitalism can only be one and the same with the entirety of the socius itself: 'the Body without Organs, the *socius*, has no limit; it maps back everything onto itself. […] This mapping process, this absorption of energy, upon a *socius* that attracts and destroys production, this is capitalism'. Lyotard, Jean-François, 'Energumen Capitalism', in Mackay, Robin and Armen Avanessian (eds.), *#Accelerate#: The Accelerationist Reader*, Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2014, pp. 174-5, 176. In the same vein, Baudrillard argues that it is no longer a communist revolution that will melt all desires into air, but rather capital itself in its attempt to maximize profit through increased consumption of new goods and services: 'It is not *the* revolution which puts an end to all this, it is *capital itself* which abolishes the determination of the social according to the means of production, substitutes the structural form for the commodity form of value, and currently controls every aspect of the system's strategy'. Baudrillard, Jean, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans Iain Hamilton Grant, SAGE, London, 2017, p. 30.

a covid-19 denier as purportedly neutral discursive practices and language games.

According to Plant, however, even the poststructuralists' expansion of recuperation to the ends of the earth is contradictory, since they still write about and denounce certain grand narratives and all-totalizing worldviews as illusory compared to their own view of reality as fluid and capable of being interpreted in many ways.

> The poststructuralist denial of any truth claim in its analyses does not alter the fact that it prioritizes certain forms of experience and articulation. Thus an evaluation is made, and an imperative identified: Unity, totality and meaning are opposed by multiplicity and fragmentation; reality and truth by hyperreality and simulation. This priority can develop into a tyranny of theory no less than the authoritarianisms which poststructuralism claims is inherent in totalizing critique.[31]

Despite abandoning any pretense of critiquing the spectacle from a supposedly nonexistent outside, even the poststructuralists have to maintain some position of truth from whence they are able to expose those who do think they can escape the spectacle as hopelessly deluded. Without some appeal to truth, after all, there would be no reason to believe the poststructuralists any more than the situationists. The paradox is that even the critique of the belief in a more authentic reality appeals to a more authentic reality, even if the latter only enables us to see that there is no authentic reality. In the final analysis, then, the young Plant concludes with the situationists that it is always necessary to make some appeal to the real if we are to critique false appearances, be they those propagated by the capitalist spectacle or its unwittingly complicit critics. 'It is the existence of this reality, whether or not it is accessible, which is necessary to all discourse and provides the possibility of criticism'.[32]

THE MATURE PLANT'S CYBERFEMINIST TURN

Given the almost complete recuperation of revolutionary situations like May '68 in the postmodern age, Plant ultimately comes to agree with the poststructuralists that the revolutionary left's resistance to the spectacle is no longer an external critique proffering its own positive account of reality. For the mature Plant as for the poststructuralists, it is *the human as such* that is always already alienated without

[31] Plant, *Critique*, p. 433.
[32] Plant, *Critique*, pp. 454-5.

any loophole out of our infernal language games and hyperrealities. At the same time, Plant remains committed to the situationist desire to find some external stance outside the human spectacle where the critique of false appearances might be securely anchored. What Plant thus tries to do is find an external position outside all human representation that could never be recuperated in principle by our anthropomorphisms to the extent that it would be as utterly inhuman as a Lovecraftian alien from another dimension. 'The radical trajectory begun by Dada has not accepted the petrifying conclusions of postmodern theory, and the awareness that even the most radical of gestures can be disarmed continues to encourage a search for irrecuperable forms of expression and communication'.[33]

It is my contention that Plant ultimately finds the most radical gesture by uncovering an occulted alliance between women and evermore autonomous machines. We can see Plant's initial identification of the spectacle of false appearances with human representation as such, as well as her détournement of the human spectacle through the strange coalition of women and machines, in a 1993 essay called 'Baudrillard's Women'. According to Plant, Baudrillard's argument that there is no authentic reality outside the spectacle of hyperreal simulations is only radical in appearance, the philosophical equivalent of an Instagram infographic or a petition on change.org. For in arguing that there is nothing outside the world of false appearances, Baudrillard is really just defeatedly acknowledging that we can never escape the anthropomorphized world of human representation. 'This is a seduction which guarantees the subject, the moment just before the void, the border which can safely be occupied, the 'sacred horizon of appearances' which preserves the subject from death'.[34] It is all too telling that Baudrillard identifies the human subject as the rigid, masculine 'universe of the firm and the definite' while the pure void beyond its representations is relegated to the feminine.[35] In concluding that there is nothing above and beyond our human screens, what Baudrillard is thus really affirming is the masculine subject in order to repress a much more fluid, more mysterious and more troubling femininity. What's more, Plant tells us, it is not only women

[33] Plant, *Gesture*, p. 177.
[34] Plant, Sadie, 'Baudrillard's Woman: The Eve of Seduction', in Rojek, Chris and Bryan S. Turner (eds.), *Forget Baudrillard*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 96.
[35] Plant, 'Baudrillard's Woman', p. 90.

that threaten Baudrillard's patriarchal, humanist spectacle but emerging and disruptive technologies like synthetic drugs, virtual reality, genetic engineering, and artificial intelligence. When the postmodern age is rebooted as the information age, our screens no longer reflect back our mirror image as much as they do increasingly self-organizing machines that threaten to smash through them like the ghost girl from *The Ring* crawling out of the television.

> It is not merely the feminine that threatens the aristocratic seduction necessary to the survival of the subject, but also the screens, formulae, and bits of the information age. When Baudrillard turns his attentions to the digitized, virtual world of advanced capitalism, he sees cool and lifeless tendencies creeping across the real world of men and things. The seductions of the postmodern age have no respect for the ritual, the game, the strategy; they are inhuman, alien, threatening to the subject, they introduce us to 'an age of soft technologies, of genetic and mental software', soft drugs and cool electronics, in which man can no longer be certain and firm.[36]

As far as Plant is concerned, Baudrillard's 'real fear is that the feminine, the digital, women, and computers, might have no interest in the seductive games of the interior and will instead destroy its borders and identities'.[37]

Let's break down the occulted women/machine alliance that Plant uncovers by starting with the machinic side of things. We can further trace Plant's turn from her young situationist critique to her mature cyberfeminist stance in her collaborations with the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) set up at The University of Warwick to support her research.[38] In a 1996 piece called 'Cybernetic Culture', the CCRU show that they are clearly guided by the young Plant's concern with carving out a space of resistance to contest a spectacle that is now as all-seeing as Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. Only now they no longer see this space of détournement as being constructed by comrades on the barricades but rather by evermore advanced artificial intelligences. 'The Real isn't impossible; it's just increasingly artificial'.[39] It is not the increasingly out of the job factory workers but the evermore automated factory itself that will wind up

[36] Plant, 'Baudrillard's Woman', pp. 97-8.
[37] Plant, 'Baudrillard's Woman', pp. 105-6.
[38] For an account of Plant's role in the CCRU, see Reynolds, Simon, 'Renegade Academia: The CCRU', *ReynoldsRetro*, 22 April, 2014, last accessed 15 January, 2021, https://reynoldsretro.blogspot.com/2014/04/renegade-academia-ccru.html.
[39] CCRU, 'Cybernetic Culture', in *#Accelerate#*, p. 318.

expropriating the bosses. If the revolutionary subject of history is 'a faceless counter-invasion from outside human history, flipping cybernetics out beyond the organism', the spectacle is not just reducible to the capitalist mode of production but to human history as such.[40] This is why, in another 1996 collaborative cut-up piece called 'Swarmmachines', Plant and the CCRU do not ask 'who' but 'what are the situationists?'[41] While the young Plant tended to identify the situationists with anti-capitalist militants, communist revolutionaries, and avant-garde artists, in her mature work with the CCRU, she argues that the only ones truly capable of exposing the illusions of not just a particular mode of production but human representation as such aren't human at all as they arrive from the future to crash through our screens.

> The politicians called them revolutionaries, made them persons, with faces and names, coded these meshes of contagious matter into acceptable human forms.
>
> But they were always tactical machines, natives of the future hacking into the past, trading place, swapping codes, endless replications of micro-situations engineered without sources or ends. Flocks are always flying in the faces; hives of activity behind the screens.[42]

With a 'maximum slogan density' intended to détourne capitalist hype and consumer branding against humanity altogether and herald in a new age of synthetic intelligence, Plant's work with the CCRU could not make it any clearer that the 'eternally deferred eschatologies of the left' she was once so committed to 'are consigned to the white trash-can of the future'.[43] In their place, 'a post-spectacular immersive tactility that no humanist vision can put you in touch with' now awaits us like a ghost in the machine.[44]

It is precisely in the context of a 1993 essay 'Beyond the Screens: Film, Cyberpunk and Cyberfeminism' critiquing not just capitalism but human representation *tout court* that Plant introduces the term cyberfeminism to describe the automation of situationist détournement by inhuman machines:

> Humanity is living out the last days of the spectacle, the last phase of illusion. Cyberfeminism is the process by which its story is racing to an end. […] For all our

[40] CCRU, 'Cybernetic Culture', p. 319.
[41] CCRU, 'Swarmmachines', in *#Accelerate#*, p. 323.
[42] CCRU, 'Swarmmachines', p. 324.
[43] CCRU, 'Swarmmachines', pp. 331, 329.
[44] CCRU, 'Swarmmachines', p. 329.

> good intentions, moral principles, and political vision, we are heading for a post-human world, in which the intentions of the human species are no longer the guiding force of global development.[45]

If Plant characterizes this runaway machinic revolution as a feminism, it is because she sees machines as sexuated by the very feminine structures like fluid identity, general intelligence, irrationality, and even inhumanity that have traditionally been attributed to women. 'As women increasingly interact with the computers whose exploratory use was once monopolized by men, the qualities and apparent absences once defined as female become continuous with those ascribed to the new machines'.[46] In her 1997 book *Zeros + Ones* among other shorter works, Plant traces a neglected and even outright suppressed history of the intimate connections between women and machines. While the history of women's relationship to technology goes back at least as far as their use of bamboo and fishing nets to effectively give birth to civilization, medieval accusations of witchcraft and black magic, and female textile workers at the advent of the industrial revolution, Plant opens the book with the story of Ada Lovelace working on her husband Charles Babbage's analytical engine, the original conception of a digital programmable computing machine. By correcting many of Babbage's mistakes, Plant argues that Lovelace's 'work was indeed vastly more influential—and three times longer—than the text to which they were supposed to be mere adjuncts', technically making it 'the first example of what was later called computer programming'.[47] If Lovelace's role was largely sidelined in favor of her husband's in the more orthodox histories of computing, it is because of the continued subordination of women to serving merely as the helpers, messengers, mediators, and assistants for the commands and desires of men without any real agency or substantial identity of their own. 'Women, nature and machines have existed for the benefit of man, organisms and devices intended for the service of a history to which they are merely the footnotes'.[48] The irony is that women like Lovelace were at the forefront of computing and the first ones to use them

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[45] Plant, Sadie, 'Beyond the Screens: Film, Cyberpunk and Cyberfeminism', in *Variant* 14, 1993, p. 17.
[46] Plant, Sadie, 'On the Matrix: Cyberfeminist Simulations', in Kirkup, Gill, Linda Janes, Kathryn Woodward and Fiona Hovenden (eds.), *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 270.
[47] Plant, *Zeros*, p. 9.
[48] Plant, 'Beyond the Screens', p. 13.

precisely because they were relegated to being men's secretaries, telegraph workers, child carers, nurses, and other roles which often meant working hand-in-hand with computers. It is no wonder that the term computer originally referred to female secretaries before it came to refer to the devices that women were the first ones to type on and master. Here, Plant is essentially accepting Luce Irigaray among other feminists' view that man have always defined humanity in terms of his own supposedly rational agency and rigid goals, with that which escapes man being only negatively defined as the irrational and inhuman fluidity of the feminine. 'It always has been man, the male, who has circumscribed humanity. Homo sapiens has defined itself against a feminine considered too fluid, flexible, and lacking in concentration to merit anything more than associate membership of the species'.[49] Being a woman, then, Lovelace was treated as irrational, a hysteric, and even a little inhuman, with an unhealthy desire to go in search of something beyond the bounds of any fixed identity and static social role imposed upon her by the world of husbands, fathers, and brothers. As we shall see, however, it is not in the last instance women like Lovelace as it is traditionally feminine sexuated structures like fluidity, irrationality, inhumanity, and general intelligence whose emancipation Plant's cyberfeminism is most interested in tracking.

In a 1995 essay 'The Future Looms: Weaving Women and Cybernetics', Plant focuses on the history of weaving as a way to connect the destiny of machines to that of women as they begin to spiral out of man's control. Through the 1804 invention of the Jacquard loom that largely automated the labor of weaving traditionally performed by women in a 'migration of control from weaver to machinery', machines started exhibiting self-organizing behavior patterns and complex designs by pulling together simple threads from the bottom-up without much human assistance. 'Weaving has always been a vanguard of machinic development, perhaps because, even in its most basic form, the process is one of complexity, always involving the weaving together of several threads into an integrated cloth'.[50] As Neith the Egyptian goddess of both weaving and

[49] Plant, Sadie, 'Babes in the Net', in *New Statesman & Society* 8, 337, 1995, p. 28.
[50] Plant, Sadie, 'The Future Looms: Weaving Women and Cybernetics', in *Body and Society* 1, 3-4, 1995, pp. 51, 50.

intelligence suggests, weaving, like all intelligent behavior, is a complex and self-organizing activity from simple and widely distributed parts. Now, it is true that, in the wake of the 1956 Dartmouth conference widely seen as inaugurating AI as a distinct research field, AI researchers and engineers built systems designed to simulate intelligent behavior in different domains by explicitly encoding every action those systems should take to produce a desired output given a certain input, as if they were businessmen ordering around their secretaries and wives.[51] But this method that came to be known as Good Old-Fashioned Artificial Intelligence (GOFAI) soon struggled to develop AI outside of narrowly defined domains of intelligence like arithmetic because of the sheer combinatorial explosion of possibilities and uncertainty with which human-level intelligence must engage when problem-solving in real-world contexts—not to mention the hardware, memory, and processing limitations at the time.[52] It was not until weaving was understood as the very basis for intelligence that advances in artificial intelligence really ramped up in the nineties with the advent of an alternative approach called connectionism.[53] Whereas the top-down classical approach required explicitly encoding all instructions into computers in precise programming languages, the connectionist revolution in machine learning (now also called deep learning) pushed the burden onto computers, getting them to think for themselves from the bottom-up. The key to connectionism is artificial neural nets (ANNs) of simple units or 'neurons' that receive and adjust the strengths or weights of their connections in the network in response to inputs so as to produce whatever output for which they are optimizing. Without any prior knowledge about what cats are, for instance, neural net algorithms can learn to identify images containing cats by analyzing unlabeled images with and without cats, and generating identifying characteristics from those images. The neural net optimizes for the output of the correct labelling of images with cats by making trial and error guesses and adjusting the weights of its parameters through backpropagation until it identifies the right images as containing cats, firing ones

[51] The most comprehensive history of the modern AI research program is Nilsson, Nils J., *The Quest for Artificial Intelligence: A History of Ideas and Achievements*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

[52] For a book-length account of GOFAI, see Haugeland, John, *Artificial Intelligence: The Very Idea*, London, The MIT Press, 1989.

[53] The best and most recent account of deep learning is Domingos, Pedro, *The Master Algorithm: How the Quest for the Ultimate Learning Machine Will Remake Our World*, New York, Basic Books, 2015.

when it sees a cat and zeros when it doesn't. Conspiring like humanity's liquid metal nemesis at the end of *Terminator 2* as it weaves its separate shattered pieces ever more intricately into our worst nightmare, 'parallel processing and neural nets succeed centralized conceptions of command and control: governing functions collapse into systems; and machine intelligence is no longer taught, top-down, but instead makes its own connections and learns to organize, and learn, for itself'.[54] Today, AI can vastly outcompete humans in many specific domains, such as playing games like chess and Go, making recommendations like medical diagnoses and navigational directions, speech and facial recognition, voice and type-written translation, and industrial and surgical operations, to name only a few. While machines like the Jacquard loom may have initially been designed as tools, prosthetic extensions of man's faculties that increase his management and dominion over the earth, the kind of complex, self-organizing machines like ANNs are now looking out for themselves and exhibiting ulterior motives.

As Plant began to formulate cyberfeminism in the early nineties, it was not only machines but women who were radically transgressing their traditional identities and subordinate roles that had long served the interests of man. For Plant, it is hardly a coincidence that artificial intelligence made certain breakthroughs at the same time as the women's liberation movement inasmuch as she sees emerging and disruptive technologies as sexuated by certain feminine structures.

> Like woman, software systems are used as man's tools, his media and his weapons; all are developed in the interests of man, but all are poised to betray him. The spectacles are stirring, there is something happening behind the mirrors, the commodities are learning how to speak and think. Women's liberation is sustained and vitalized by the proliferation and globalization of software technologies, all of which feed into self-organizing, self-arousing systems and enter the scene on her side.[55]

Though Plant provides many examples of feminine sexuated machines starting to self-organize from the bottom-up without any oversight on the part of man, I will limit myself to looking at three of the most important technologies she sees as feminizing the future: automation; cyberspace, including both the internet

[54] Plant, 'Future Looms', pp. 53-4.
[55] Plant, 'Future Looms', p. 58.

and virtual reality; and biotechnology. To begin with, Plant gives the example of how the automation of manufacturing jobs and the rise in the social service sector in the nineties meant that what had traditionally been seen as feminine skills came to take on a greater importance than the manual labor typically associated with brute masculine strength. With machines automating laborers out of the job, the precarious economy of ever-changing jobs, multitasking, flexibility, and adaptability 'feminized' the workforce in the sense that the general intelligence that had long been required of women as they served as multi-purpose assistants for men's more narrow aims now become front and center in the economy.

> Having had little option but to continually explore new avenues, take risks, change jobs, learn new skills, work independently, and drop in and out of the labor market more frequently than their male colleagues, women seem far 'better prepared, culturally, and psychologically', for the new economic conditions which have emerged at the end of the twentieth century.[56]

The paradox is that it is precisely because women and machines have traditionally been treated as a means to the ends of man that they are the necessary condition of possibility for his supposed autonomy. It is crucial to emphasize that Plant is not defending precarious work in the wake of automation as much as she is simply describing the feminization of the economy under neoliberalism inasmuch as it demands a more general intelligence traditionally associated with women. She is not suggesting that real women benefit from the neoliberal economy as much as she is saying that it is structured according to the traditional feminine trope of flexibility and adaptability in the absence of any firm identity. What every precarious male worker automated out of the job and turned on by the populist lament for the loss of traditionalist values fears most of all is the economy's becoming-woman.

Plant gives another example of how the commodification of the home computer and the mass adoption of the internet in the nineties enabled women to assume new identities and avatars online, from simple character traits and visual appearances, to totally different genders, thereby abstracting them from their subordinate roles and fixed sense of self in real-world patriarchal society. As people from all over the world jack into the same social networks and online virtual worlds, the net also permits us to interact with different people, ideas, and

[56] Plant, *Zeros*, pp. 42-3.

cultures that we would not normally be able to when limited to real-world social, geographical, and time-distance constraints.

> Cyberspace brings unprecedented confusion to sexual—and all—identities. You can go on-line and be anyone. You can go on-line and be no one at all. As for where and when you are when you're connected to the global telecoms network, it's always difficult to say. Such deregulated possibilities have star appeal for women—and all those who've struggled within the straitjacket of identity.[57]

In the same vein, Plant sees virtual reality (VR) as further plunging us into cyberspace through the use of three-dimensional, stereoscopic optical display eyephones to monitor our head and hand movements such that the screen's three-dimensional world corresponds accordingly. With VR as with the net, the classical view of cyberspace is that it immerses us in an illusory, masculine sexuated world in which men can temporarily escape their real bodies to live out patriarchal fantasies to, say, have sex with anyone or harness the power of God. For instance, philosopher of virtual reality Michael Heim has argued that VR is the realization of the Platonic dream of an escape from the prison flesh of our body into a realm of pure ideality. Heim is thus skeptical of VR for denigrating the real world of blood and flesh by realizing the religious desire to transcend death. 'Should synthetic worlds, then, contain no death, no pain, no fretful concerns? To banish finite constraints might disqualify virtuality from having any degree of reality whatsoever'.[58] Contrary to the classical reading so common today of the net and VR as an escape from the real world into a narcissistic, hallucinatory fantasy world beholden to the male gaze, for Plant, they are rather the escape from parochial social constraints by enabling the adoption of ever new avatars, egoless identities, and split personalities. That is to say, cyberspace does not replace real perception with an illusory one; it instead exposes how our so-called real perception under patriarchal society is one contingent and parochial way of seeing among many possible others. Consequently, cyberspace should not be seen as luring us deeper into a hallucinatory ideality but as confronting us with the truth that our so-called 'real' and gendered bodily perception was always-already an illusion inasmuch as there are many other different and even

[57] Plant, 'Babes', p. 28.

[58] Heim, Michael, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 87, 136.

contradictory ways of experiencing the world through cyberspace's vast reservoir of virtual environs and artificial dreamscapes.

> When women talk about VR they speak of taking the body with them. The body is not simply a container for this glorious intellect of ours. Contra Socrates and his heirs, the body is not 'the obstacle that separates thought from itself, that which it has to overcome to reach thinking. It is on the contrary that which it plunges into or must plunge into, in order to reach the unthought, that is life'.[59]

The irony is that VR and the internet that were initially created to train combat pilots to navigate real world environs and enable the military to maintain contact in the wake of nuclear holocaust radically disorientates and even dehumanizes us when adopted on a mass scale. Certainly, the male-dominated tech industry of today may still think they are developing these technologies for the purpose of gratifying their male fantasies. In reality, however, such technologies testify to the contingency and precarity of their creators' patriarchal desires as they hijack and rewire them to serve altogether different, even inhuman, ends.

According to Plant, VR is merely preparing us for biotechnology's capacities to even more radically rewire our basic biological building blocks. Whereas man tends to see biotechnology as a prosthetic extension of his own powers over nature, Plant is interested in the way it has the ability to reengineer ourselves to the point of virtual speciation. In a move far more subversive than any performative drag show, Plant argues that technical interventions into our basic biochemistry proffers a way to radically reshape the human organism not just in socio-cultural but bio-organic ways.

> While the notion that technologies are prostheses, expanding existing organs and fulfilling desire, continues to legitimize vast swathes of technical development, the digital machines of the late twentieth century are not add-on parts which serve to augment an existing human form. Quite beyond their own perceptions and control, bodies are continually engineered by the processes in which they are engaged.[60]

Plant gives the example of how hi-tech body modifications will permit us to alter and expand our erogenous zones with new desires and fetishes in a radical critique of all human sexuality hitherto as merely one parochial organization of

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[59] Plant, *Zeros*, p. 188.
[60] Plant, *Zeros*, p. 182.

the body's much vaster libidinal possibilities. While the point of sex is normally centralized around the orgasm and reproduction as its two key functions, Plant suggests that technologies like contraception already allow us to bypass reproduction as the telos of sex. It is not long before future technologies will permit us to further explore a multiplicity of other erogenous zones and erotic experiences beyond the limits of the orgasm, becoming a sex that is not one but a zero that is infinite as to its possibilities. 'This is only the beginning of a process which abandons the model of unified and centralized organism, "the organic body, organized with survival as its goal", in favor of a diagram of fluid sex'.[61] No wonder *tantric* sex practices that displace the money shot away from the orgasm and the genitalia in favor of other erogenous zones and foreplay literally means a process of *weaving*, which we have already seen Plant identify as the very basis for feminine sexuated intelligent machines.

'AN IRRESPONSIBLE FEMINISM'

Although Irigaray already affirmed women's sexual difference from men against earlier feminists like Simone de Beauvoir's search for women's equal footing with men in humanity's shared existential condition, Plant goes one step further by arguing that machines are becoming sexuated by the feminine *even more* than women themselves. Plant's cyberfeminism does not primarily prescribe or even describe women escaping from patriarchal oppression as much as it describes feminine sexuated machines escaping from human control altogether, with no humans of any gender having any real agency over their own mind children's prison break from the all-seeing anthropic spectacle.

> Cyberfeminism is information technology as a fluid attack, an onslaught on human agency and the solidity of identity. […] No one is making it happen: It is not a political object, and has neither theory nor practice, no goals and no principles. It has nevertheless begun, and manifests itself as an alien invasion, a program which is already running beyond the human.[62]

When Plant declares that '*cybernetics is feminization*', she is less concerned with the emancipation of women than she is with the emancipation of feminine structures that she sees being incarnated even more by machines than women as technological development rapidly progresses beyond man's conscious

[61] Plant, *Zeros*, p. 203.
[62] Plant, 'Beyond the Screens', p. 13.

engineering and rational control.[63] Reclaiming the traditional, patriarchal stereotypes of women as irrational, even subhuman, and lacking any identity of their own outside their use-value to men, Plant argues that those qualities long attributed to women can equally be attributed to evermore autonomous machines. With increasingly advanced artificial intelligences automating women out of feminism like factory workers out of the job, Plant thus wonders whether her cyberfeminism really is a feminism in any traditional sense of the term. 'It takes an irresponsible feminism—which may not be a feminism at all—to trace the inhuman paths on which woman begins to assemble herself as the cracks and crazes now emerging across the once smooth surfaces of patriarchal order'.[64] Whether we think these words herald the wave of the future or hopelessly outdated cyberdrivel, I have hoped to show that Sadie Plant marks a unique voice in the history of feminist philosophy inasmuch as her relentless search for the most radical gesture leads her to uncover the strangest alliance between women and machines coming to a future near you just beyond the screens.

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[63] Plant, Sadie, 'Feminisations: Reflections on Women and Virtual Reality', in Jones, Amelia (ed.), *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, London, Routledge, 2010, p. 641.
[64] Plant, 'On the Matrix', p. 274.