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Nishant Shah

MATERIAL CYBORGS; ASSERTED BOUNDARIES

Formulating the cyborg as a translator¹

Emerging as an epistemological category with the rise of the Information and Communication Technologies, the cyborg leads to a complex set of negotiations about the production of a cyborg identity. This paper looks at the cyborg as a translator, to see the new mechanics of translation that come into play as the cyborg straddles multiple systems of making meaning and producing itself. Analysing the new social networking systems that have emerged in the last few years, the paper posits the cyborg as not only an author of translated texts but also as produced in the processes of translation. Focusing on one particular instance of the production of a cyborg identity, exploring the various players involved in the process of cyborgification and the material consequences of imagining the cyborg, the paper seeks to analyse the new incomprehensibility or illegalities that the cyborg, in its role as a translator, generates and is in itself generated by.

Keywords cyborgs; cyberspace; cybercultures; information and communication technologies; identity; translation

I, the cyborg

The cyborg, a combination of hardware, software and wetware, stands as one of the most visible figures of the cybernetic age. A portmanteau of two words: cybernetic and organism, the term cyborg refers to a biological being with a kinetic state that can be transferred with ease from one environment to another, able to adapt to changing environments through technological augmentation. The first living Cyborg to find its way into the human family tree was a rat. Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline – two astrophysicists, in 1960, thought of a ‘hybrid-organism’ system (a rat with an osmotic pump) that provided biological stability to an organism in response to its constantly changing environment. In their paper in *Astronautics* they wrote:

For the exogenously extended organizational complex . . . we propose the term ‘cyborg’. The Cyborg deliberately incorporates exogenous components extending the self-regulating control function of the organism in order to adapt it to new environments.

(Clynes and Kline, 1960: 1)

Notwithstanding this, the cyborg is most commonly thought of in a futuristic vein, escaping the confines of the physical body and recreated through various digital forms like databases, networks and archives.

With the emergence of the World Wide Web, the cyborg has strategically evolved in our imaginations as a metaphor of our times. We are already in the age where the 'first living cyborg' (Warwick, 2000: 15) has announced his arrival. In his autobiography *I, Cyborg*, Stephen Warwick, a professor of cybernetics and robotics, unveils how he became the first human cyborg through a series of path-breaking experiments. He begins his narrative by saying, 'I was born human. But this was an accident of fate – a condition of time and place. I believe it's something we have the power to change' (Warwick, 2000: 5). Cybercultures theorist David Bell, on the other hand, especially with the proliferation of new digital technologies, in his preface to *The Cybercultures Reader*, locates the cyborg in 'the crucial mechanics of urban survival' (Bell, 2000: xxi) that produce everyday cyborgs through digital transactions and technologically augmented practices. Sherry Turkle, looking at the experiments in genetic engineering and reproductive practices, traces the processes of 'cyborgification' in the production of 'techno-tots' (Turkle, 1992: 154) – a new generation of designer babies who have been augmented by technology to have the perfect genetic composition.

In this paper, I seek to explore the possibility of formulating the cyborg as an author or translator, who is able to navigate between the different binaries of 'meat-machine', 'digital-physical', 'body-self', using the abilities and the capabilities learnt in one system in an efficient and effective understanding of the other. What does the cyborg as a translator add to our understanding of the processes of translation? If we were to examine the formation of a cyborg identity embedded in the digital circuits of the World Wide Web, what is the text of translation? What are the translated objects? Who performs these translations? Is the user the omnipotent translator who brings to this site, her special knowledge of distinct systems to make meaning? When inflected by technology, does the process of translation, performed by the cyborg, enter into realms of incomprehensibility which get translated as illegality? How does the figure of the translating cyborg enable an analysis of the cyborg as materially bound and geographically contained, rather than the earlier ideas of the cyborg as residing in a state of 'universal placelessness' (Sorkin, 1992: 217)?

Configuring the cyborg as a translator

The cyborg, as fashioned by science fiction narratives, cinema and cartoons, conjures images of human-machine hybrids and the physical merging of flesh and electronic circuitry. Different representations of the cyborg abound in science fiction narratives in print, film, animation and games, from reengineered human bodies showcasing fin de millenia nostalgia for large robotic machines of power and strength to sleek and suave microchip-implanted silicon-integrated human beings who work in their artificially mutated enhancements. The cyborg has covered a wide imaginative range from looking at a happy human-machine synthesis to a degenerate human body made grotesque by machinistic implants to a rise of a potent cyborg community that threatens to overcome the human world of biological certainty and mortality. Some of the most famous instances of cyborgs in popular narratives illustrate this wide

spectrum; from Maria the robot in *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) to Lara Croft in the *The Tomb Raider* series (Toby Gard, 1996); from Case in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) to Mr Anderson a.k.a. Neo in *The Matrix Trilogy* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999–2003); from Johnny Quest (Hannah-Barbara Cartoons, 1996–7) in the eponymous animated series to avatars created on social networking sites and MMORPGs² like *Second Life*.

However, with the popularization and democratization of new digital technologies of information and communication (ICTs), we see a certain evolutionary production of the cyborg as an increasing number of people interact with digital spaces and sites and adopt mobile gadgets of computation and information dissemination as an extension of their bodies. The cyborg, as imagined within the digital realms of cyberspace, is imagined differently from the more hyper-real, hyper-visible constructs within the fictional narratives.

Arjun Appadurai (1996), in his formulation of post-electronic modernity, explores how electronic media offer new everyday resources and disciplines for the imagination of the self and the world. He argues that the individual body and its ownership are wedded to the logic of capitalism and the notion of ownership that characterized most of the twentieth century. Appadurai suggests that the body becomes a site of critical inquiry and contestation because a capitalist state grants the individual the rights to his/her body and the choice to fashion that body through consumption patterns. When talking of Technoscapes,³ Appadurai posits the idea of a technologically enhanced sphere of activities and identity formation that defy the processes of capitalism and produce new instabilities in the creation of subjectivities.

Cyberspace has become such a site where the individual body, marked in its being (genetically, biologically, socially and culturally) and circumscribed by the (physical, reluctant and cumbersome) space, can free itself from the relentless materiality of a capitalist set of reference points, to create a truly global self and a universally accessible space. Katie Hafner and Matthew Lyon, in their comprehensive history of the origins of the web, mention how in 1968 Joseph Carl Robnett Licklider and Robert Taylor, who were research directors of the United States of America's Department of Defense's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) and who also set in place the first online community (ARPANET), prophesied that online interactive communities 'will consist of geographically separated members, sometimes grouped in small clusters and sometimes working individually. They will be communities not of common location but of common interest' (Hafner and Mathew, 1996: 44). This prophecy was realised by the end of the twentieth century, as scholars announce the construction of the 'discontinuous, global agoras' (Mitchell, 1996: 27) and the arrival of the new commons shaped within the technoscapes of the internet. The imagination of the internet as the new public sphere of communication, interaction and collaboration also brought into focus the skills that a cyborg requires in order to materially exist on the intersections of various domains. Donna Haraway, in her seminal essay 'A cyborg manifesto' (1991), posited one of the most influential imaginations of the cyborg as residing in the 'optical illusion between social reality and science fiction' (Haraway, 1991: 151) Haraway's cyborg hints at the possibility of imagining the cyborg as a translator:

The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian and completely without innocence. No longer

structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household.
(Haraway, 1991: xxii)

This cyborg, in the blurring of the public and the private, in the diffusion of the physical and the virtual, and in the yoking together of economic practices and social identities, becomes an agential subjectivity that translates one system into another, using the referents of meaning making and processes of knowledge production in one system for deciphering and navigating through the other system. Haraway's cyborg is a willing and conscious extension, an illustration of what Judith Butler, in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) calls the 'performative', thus infusing the figure of the cyborg with the ability to negotiate with its immediate environment and shape it through the material practices it engages with. The cyborg as a translator, thus has an interesting role as a mediator between the two systems. The cyborg no longer makes the distinction between an original and a translated text – the two systems occupy equal and often contesting zones of reality and authenticity for the cyborg.

Sandy Stone, in her anthropological study on technosociality – the technologised social order that emerges with ICTs and the social order of the technologized communities – emphasizes this very critical role of the cyborg:

In technosociality, the social world of virtual culture, technics is nature. When exploration, rationalisation, remaking, and control mean the same thing, then nature, technics, and the structure of meaning have become indistinguishable. The technosocial subject is able successfully to navigate through this treacherous new world. S/he is constituted as part of the evolution of communication and technology and of the human organism, in a time in which technology and organism are collapsing, imploding, into each other.

(Stone, 1991: 81)

Stone's idea of the cyborg as collapsing the binary between the organism and technology is indicative of how the cyborg, in its processes of translation, reproduces both the worlds, and in fact allows for a dual process of translation between the two so that systems implode to form a complex set of references that determine the meanings of the text. This dual process of translation produces a critical episteme to revisit the notion of translation where the skills of the translator and the figure of the translator are generally looked upon as residing in a nuanced and close reading of the original text and the interpretative techniques by which it is reproduced in the 'new' or translated text, making sure that the original gets suffused with the meaning and ironies of the other language. Stone also adds to Haraway's conception of the cyborg as she recognizes another distinction that the cyborg as a translator blurs in its being – the distinction between technique and the structure of meaning.

The cyborg as a translator, because it produces its identities through the same techniques that it produces the translated texts, internalizes the very techniques of translation. However, this process of internalization, instead of making the techniques invisible, foregrounds them as essential to the comprehension and understanding of the meanings which have been produced in this dual process of translation. The next section of this paper does a close reading of an instance of particular cyberspatial

form – the social networking systems – to illustrate the dual processes of translation and the textuality of the texts involved.

Lost in translation

Both Haraway and Stone imagine the cyborg in a process of self-authorship through the interaction with the digital technologies. However, both of them only deal with the conceptual category of the cyborg and do not really examine the specific practices that this cyborg produces. Within cyberspaces, social networking systems, blogs, MMORPGs, multiple user dungeons (MUD), discussion boards, media sharing platforms, p2p networks,⁴ etc., all create different conditions within which the physical users, through their digital avatars, interact with each other and form complex models of social networking and personal narratives. In this section I look at the notion of this self-authoring cyborg, embedded in the social networking system of 'Orkut', to illustrate and examine the discussions in the preceding section.

Orkut, a Google project, is one of the most thriving social networking systems that allows people to reacquaint themselves with people they have known in the past – friends, colleagues, acquaintances, family – who might be distributed across geography and lifestyles. Orkut also enables people with similar interests to form communities and interact, network and form new relationships with strangers in an unprecedented fashion. Orkut follows the AmWay⁵ Economic model for its social networking, whereby an individual person inherits the friends of friends, thus often connecting themselves down more than 50 levels of friendship. Such a connection, such possibilities of networking, and the overall feeling of belonging to a dynamic, ever-growing network, gives the users a heady rush of emotions, using Orkut for various personal and professional reasons – from dating to holding meetings, from public performances to professional networking.

Most users within Orkut find themselves members of communities which are created around themes, hobbies, issues, ideas, movies, heroes, idols, books, religions, universities and schools, organizations, institutions, subjects, disciplines and music. One of the pre-requisites for using the various services on Orkut to their full potential is the creation of a profile. The profile, unlike a personal ad, is a concentrated effort at translating the 'physical' self of the person into 'digital' avatars that refer to the 'original' user behind the profile. Because of the pseudonymous nature of cyberspatial interactions, there is also an extra effort at making these avatars more verifiable, more real and more trustworthy. As an increasing number of users use social networking systems to find friends, to connect with partners and form communities that often translate back into the physical world, they spend a lot of effort on their profiles, trying to simulate (or translate) their personal identities and ideas into the digital world.

Most users put pictures of their face, along with populating their own virtual photo album with pictures of their pets, partners, friends, family and places they have visited. Profiles often change, adding 'new pictures uploaded' as a caption, to invite friends to visit their space and find out what is new about their virtual lives. Users can also keep track of all the changes that the people in their networks are making to their profiles, thus giving the sense of a fluid and a changing persona rather than a static

description. Applications which allow the users to track birthdays, special dates, online calendars and the important events in their friends' lives, add to the nature of communication and interaction. Most profiles have a fairly detailed narrative, using poetic imagery, exaggerated style, witticisms and pop philosophy to translate the person behind the screen. The profiles are also filled with their favourite activities, TV shows, music and books. This process of mapping a virtual body and producing texts of the physical body is the first level of translation that the users perform. The model of cyborgs that Haraway and Stone posit look upon the possibility of role playing, of fantasy, of adaptation and of authoring the self, in this process of cyborgification, as extremely liberating and subversive.

The social networking system and the related profiles also draw our attention to the dynamic interactions of the translated self within the digital domains. Through a metonymic process, the digital profile – the translated self – comes to stand in for the bodies of the users who not only create the translated self but also mark it with desires and aspirations. The translated self is largely under the control of the physical body. And yet, there are several ways in which the translated self does not allow for the physical body to emerge as the original, the authentic or the primary self within the dynamics of this site. On the one hand, it is the physical body of the user that authors the digital self, and hence it should be looked upon as the primary or the authentic text. On the other hand, the interactions that happen within the social networking system are interactions of the authored/translated self. The responses that the profile receives, the way in which the self is represented, the techniques used to engage with more people or invite strangers to communicate, are all the practices of the digital self.

Within Orkut, the profile of the person is bound to the physical body of the user behind the profile. While it is of course necessary to invoke a virtual avatar, because of the nature of social networking with people one already knows or has known, there is a certain disinvestment of fantasy within Orkut. Several users select pseudonyms which allow them to remain totally anonymous, but most of them have a visible face which tries to approximate their real-life persona online. Unlike the circuits of blogging or role playing games, Orkut emphasizes the need to be a 'real' person, thus validating its unique feature of 'scrapping'. By employing it, users are encouraged to publicly perform their intimacies and relationships, which can be easily documented and tracked by others outside the one-to-one interaction. Thus, there seems to be a specific need to narrativize the self through the profile and the various functionalities available on Orkut. Members of the Orkut community are encouraged to think of themselves as part of a larger database – transmutable, transferable sets of data which they have authored for themselves – and can mobilize their virtual self across different networks to enhance their sense of social interaction and networking.

Also, the digital self is not translated solely by the physical user. Orkut has a feature of testimonials where the people in the networks of the translated self, also author opinions, observations and endorsements for the profile. Moreover, the public nature of communication and the archiving of this, add to the meaning and the functioning of this translated self. This production of the meta-data introjects the translated self into a circuit of meaning making and producing narratives that is beyond the scope of the physical body. Thus, there is a strange tension between the physical body of the user and the translated self that the user produces, which leads to

the emergence of a cyborg identity. The cyborg is neither the physical body nor the translated digital self. It resides in the interface between the two, each constantly referring to the other, creating an interminable loop of dependence. The cyborg, because it is produced by the very technologies of the two systems that it is straddling, makes these techniques or the technologisation of the self synonymous with the processes of producing the narratives or making meaning.

This production of narratives of the self through different multimedia environments is not simply a process of writing biography or making self-representations. The users on Orkut (as well as other social networking sites like MySpace or blogging communities like Livejournal) are authoring avatars or substitute selves which are intricately and extensively a part of who they are. These translated selves do not live independent lives, but are firmly entrenched in the physical body and practices of the users. While there is a certain flexibility in the scripting of the avatar, the projections are more often than not premised upon the possibility of a Real. The avatars are also scripted as engaging in extremely mundane and daily activities to create verisimilitude and to map the physical body on to the avatar. To leave status messages like 'stepped out for lunch' or 'Working really hard' or 'I am bored, entertain me' is common practice for the users. As increasingly more users stay connected but are not always present on these digital platforms, they also let the avatars 'sleep' or 'eat' or 'go away for some time', synchronizing the avatar's actions with their own.

A look at many other similar sites like blogging communities on 'Livejournal', or dating communities like 'Friendster', can give us an idea that the first stage in authoring a cyborg rests in creating these profiles, or avatars. Users spend an incredible amount of time trying to create for themselves the best avatars, which will be continued projections of the self. These tend to rely mainly on the visual component, as in games like 'Second Life' and chatting platforms like 'Yahoo!', but they can also rely on a combination of visual and verbal elements. Thus, the cyborg starts a process of translation whereby both the physical body and the translated self are distilled into data sets that get distributed across different practices and platforms, changing continuously and feeding into each other. Thus, just the first step of translation – the translation of the physical body into the digital avatar – is already a complex state, where we it is not as if the cyborg exists *ex-nihilo* and then translates from one system to the other but that the cyborg is produced in this very process of translation. Moreover, the translated text is not simply the sole authorship of the cyborg but has other players, who are a part of either of the systems, adding meanings and layers to the text.

The second step in this process is a reverse translation. Even within role playing games, where the alienation of the avatar from the body reaches its highest levels, there is an invested effort on the part of the gamer to provide physical and material contexts to the imagined bodies which they have created. Mizuki Ito (1992), in her work about online gamers, looks at how, with an increased investment in the digital lives, users tend to shape their own physical selves around their projected avatars. Many chronic users of cyberspaces have their language, their social interaction and even the way they dress and behave affected by their practices online. Sherry Turkle, in her analysis of the MUD world in *Life on the Screen* (1996), points out that an increasing number of users start looking upon their screen lives as a constitutive part of their reality rather than an escape from it.

A computer's 'windows' have become a potent metaphor for thinking about the self as a multiple and distributed system. The hypertext links have become a metaphor for a multiplicity of perspectives. On the internet, people who participate in virtual communities may be 'logged on' to several of them (open as several open-screen windows) as they pursue other activities. In this way, they may come to experience their lives as a 'cycling through' screen worlds in which they may be expressing different aspects of self.

(Turkle, 1996: 43)

In another essay, titled 'Playblog: Pornography, Performance and Cyberspace' (Shah, 2005), I illustrate how the process of 'reverse embodiment' takes place in the life-cycle of bloggers. This process entails a mapping of the translated avatar on to the physical body of the users. This process of reverse translation often leads to the users abandoning their avatars, cutting down on their public presence or sometimes actually committing 'digital suicides', killing their own selves to start new identities and networks. Julian Dibbell, in his celebrated essay, 'A Rape Happened in Cyberspace' (1994) looks at the dynamics of this reverse mapping or inverted translation as well. Dibbell was witness to one of the most popular cases of 'digital violence' in the late 1990s, when in an MUD, a particular user called Dr Bungle, devised a 'voodoo doll' on the Lambda MOO MUD, which gained control over two of the other users, making them enter into a series of involuntary sexual acts of deviousness and perversion, in a public 'room' where all the other users could see them. What might be looked upon as a simple gaming aesthetic of a more powerful player taking over the avatars of two players with lesser power became a topic of huge discussion as the physical users behind the translated avatars complained of feeling violated and 'raped'. This claim had very serious consequences because it no longer allowed for a linear notion of the physical body being translated into a digital avatar but insisted that the translated avatar is always, because of the users' emotional involvement but also because of the practices that the avatar initiates, mapped back on to the body of the physical user. This is a process of reverse embodiment where the presumed 'original' is now re-shaped and re-configured to suit the translated object. Such a phenomenon is perhaps possible only in the domains of the cyberspace. Also, the cyborg, generally presumed as residing in the physical body, is now relocated in this two-way process, at the borders where it not only facilitates meaning but also realizes itself in the process of facilitation.

The digital transactions in which the users within such spaces engage have huge social, economic and cultural purport. The authoring of these selves, of these digital avatars, leads to the idea of the cyborg as not simply a synthesis – a site upon which the synthesis happens – but as a dynamic situation in which all subjects participate, producing and supporting its own identity. The cyborg exists in the interstices of the different oppositions of the real and the virtual, the physical and the digital, the temporal and the spatial, the biological and the technological. Moreover, the cyborg does not reside simply within the digital domains but becomes and embodied technosocial being, with a material body that enters into other realms of authorship and subjectification. It is necessary to recognize that the cyborg is not simply a self-authored identity but is also subject to various other realms of governance. These material cyborgs, then, assert the need for the body as central to their imagination.

This bounded cyborg is also subject to the territories that it resides within. The last section of the paper looks at the State as a critical part of the production of these material cyborg identities and analyses how the incomprehensibility of this particular identity reproduces it in a condition of illegality, rescuing it from the boundless universal imagination and reasserting the geographical and the territorial boundaries that the cyborg exists within. In this particular analysis, because of my own familiarity with the context and also because new digital technologies are still emerging and unfolding into new forms in India, I shall speak specifically of the Indian State but hope that the particular case that I analyse shall have resonances for other geo-cultural and socio-political contexts as well.

The state of the cyborg

The cyborg, thus residing on the interstices of so many different paradigms, can no longer be limited to aesthetized representations and narratives, but is becoming a part of everyday practices of global urbanism. The range of human–machine relationships is diverse and increasingly varied. We might not be complete cyborgs but we do deal with ‘intimate machines’ (Turkle, 1996: 142) and live in ‘cyborg societies’ (Haraway, 1991: 179). The cities where we live constantly remind us of the machinations we are dependent on; sometimes they blind us of our dependence on the technology, sometimes they make it starkly visible. Different organizations like the Military, Space Studies, Medicine, Human Research and Education are using new forms of organism–technology interactions in the increasingly urbanised world. Just like the interactions of the translated avatara and the physical users, David Bell and Barbara Kennedy, in their introduction to *The Cybercultures Reader*, look at the interactions with various different technologies of communication and transport, and posit the notion of an ‘Everyday Cyborg’ that gets produced in everyday practices:

Taking Viagra, or [using] a pacemaker, or riding a bike, or withdrawing cash from an ATM, or acting out [our] fantasies as Lara Croft in the latest Tomb Raider game or as a Nato bomber pilot blitzing Kosovo, or anyone watching footage from Kosovo live on the late-night news.

(Bell, 2000: ix)

In their list, the authors are more interested in looking at human–machine interaction and making historical continuities to the production of a technosocial identity or a cyborg self. This ‘naturalized’ cyborg robs the cyborg of its criticality or importance. It seems to posit the cyborg as simply a coupling of organism and machine, and hence a benign cultural formulation which can now be decontextualized and analysed in the digital domains. The cyborg as a translator – initiating a complex and intricate set of relationships between the different systems of meaning making that it straddles – questions this trivialization of the cyborg and instead helps produce the cyborg identity as an epistemological category which needs to be analysed to see the processes that produce it and the crises it produces in the pre-digital understanding of text and textuality.

It is with these questions that I begin the analysis of what has popularly been dubbed as the 'Lucknow Gay Scandal' in India. In India, under the Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, as a part of larger 'Unnatural Sex Acts', homosexual activity is a punishable offence.⁶ However, the reading of this particular act has always been invoked in dealing with the act of same-sex sexual behaviour and not to punish a particular identity. However, when the queer rights and gay collectives started gaining momentum because of the rise of digital technologies (Singh, 2007), the production of the queer cyborg produced an anxiety about the fantasies, the digital avatars and the material practices of the users behind the avatars. In January 2006, policemen in the city of Lucknow, masquerading as gay men, registered with a popular queer dating website called 'Guys4men'. Explicitly a gay dating site, it allows users to create their profiles, add pictures and text, translate their personal data in a scripted space, exchange messages and chat. Like the earlier discussed social networking sites, Guys4men also allows users to search and befriend each other, encouraging public discussions and arranging for physical encounters at a personal or a collective level.

These policemen created profiles and listed themselves as gay men, to start interacting with the members of the site. They solicited sex and meetings and finally invited five men to come and meet them in a public garden in Lucknow. When four of the five men turned up for the rendezvous, they were arrested on charges of obscenity, of soliciting sex in public and engaging in homosexual fantasies. The media reported this as 'Gay Club Running on the Net Unearthed' (*The Times of India*, 5 January 2006). The website was looked upon as a physical space where people indulged in 'unnatural sex acts'.

The four men were punished, not for anything that they did in public or in the physical world but for their projected fantasies online. They were publicly humiliated, exhibited to the media as a 'homosexual coup' and put under arrest by the police. While a large part of the political society in India erupted in fury at the gross violation of the human rights and the punishment of fantasies, leading to a raging court case which still has not found resolution, what this paper hopes to glean from this particular case are four interesting points. Firstly, three of the four men, in their physical existence, were married and had children. They were not suspected to have homosexual inclinations by their family or friends, to whom this came as a huge shock. The evidence of the material practices of their physical bodies was not looked upon as strong enough to acquit them. Secondly, the policemen who were luring these men towards a homosexual encounter were themselves projecting similar fantasies. However, as theirs were sanctioned by some high authority, they gained validity and were not to be punished. It was almost as if the fantasies and the avatars that the policemen had were legitimate, sanctified translations of their selves, which made them different. Thirdly, while the men were caught in the physical meeting space, the charges against them were all based on their online activities. What was being produced was not even the act of translating their physical bodies into digital avatars. What was at stake in the particular case was the fact that, in the processes of translation, a reverse translation was also set into place, where the digital avatars and the circuits of consumption and interaction that these avatars entered into were mapped on to the physical bodies, reconfiguring them and marking them as queer. The men were punished not because they claimed a queer identity or because they had fantasies online which did not subscribe to the State's directive. These men were

being punished for the production of a cyborg self – a self which on the one hand was contained by the physical bodies of the users, thus subject to the processes of governance and administration applicable in the geography that they are located in, and on the other hand produced by the imagined selves – the translated avatars which reside outside of the geo-territorial regimes. It is this production of the queer cyborg, residing on the boundaries of sexuality, of nationality and subjectivity that was sought to be punished in this particular case.

On the whole, this case seems to prove that there is a very definite move, on the part of the State, towards the recognition of online avatars as not only extensions of the self but as more powerful identities than the physical self. The State imagines the users of cyberspace as ‘real’ cyborgs and conceives their online activities, fantasies and role-plays as punishable offences. The State also recognizes their translated selves – their datasets that they authored – as verifiable proof of their existence and actions online. The story of the Lucknow incident brings to the fore the possibility that there might also be reluctant cyborgs. The notion of the translator is always somebody who is in a conscious condition of deploying knowledge in order to bridge the gap between different paradigms. However, as the digital world becomes more democratic and becomes a part of our daily transactions, an increasing number of users enter into conditions of translation which they might not recognize as translation. It is also imaginable that a large number of users might resort to the cyberspace to reach a particular aim, without wishing to produce any elaborate narratives of themselves. They might be completely unaware of the processes of reverse translation which follow. However, because of the State’s investment in digital technologies and its infrastructures, individuals get authored as cyborgs, having to take responsibility for their actions and fantasies online, against their will and outside of their knowledge.

The implication of the State or other State-like bodies in the production of these cyborg identities and texts makes us aware of the fact that processes of translation are not simply about the intention and the effort of the translator, but are also severely embedded in the techniques used for translation and the contexts within which the translator and the translated identities are produced. In earlier discussions of testimonials and scraps on Orkut or commenting and editing on blogging platforms, we had already looked upon how the translated text, even when it is a self-narrative, on the digital interfaces, is already a product of multiple authorships and can no longer be attributed to a single individual translator. Similarly, the cyborg identity that is produced in the processes of translation – the cyborg as a translator – is also not a product of individual desire or intention but is often brought into being through the various other players within the internet as well as within the physical contexts of the users.

Why cyborg?

The everyday embodied cyberspace cyborg thus becomes subject to the state as well as the technology. People who enter the digital matrices are made accountable for their actions and travels in cyberspaces. There is an increased anxiety around monitoring these processes of translation, of reverse translation and production of translated cyborg identities that are becoming such an integral part of cyberspatial platforms.

The virtual avatars are re-mapped onto the body of the user, thus reconfiguring the notion of the self and the body. The state, through its efforts, becomes a major player in the authoring of the cyberspace cyborg. Other surveillance technologies like Close Circuit Television (CCTV) for instance, also produce unwilling or unwitting technologized narratives of the users caught under the camera. It is possible to use CCTV in public spaces and capture users in different actions which they can be held responsible for later. However, the cyberspace cyborg differs significantly from this model because the users of cyberspace are willing participants of the spaces which they occupy.

The positing of the cyborg as a translator and as an identity that emerges out of translation practices defines a clearer role for translation and a larger definition for translation as it gets inflected by digital technologies. Instead of the universal hyperreal agent, the cyborg as a translator emphasizes one of the fundamental principles of understanding translation – the context of the translator, the agential negotiations of the translator with the original text, the processes by which the self of the translator get produced and the importance of the technologies within which the translation occurs. The collaborative nature of digital technologies and cyberspatial forms illustrates how the process of translation is not singular and that the relationship between the presumed original and the translated text also need to be re-visited. However, more than anything else, the cyborg as a translator makes it clear that the translated text is not produced in isolation or by a single author. There are various contributions that emerge from the networks within which the cyborg translator operates and from the different technologies of governance that the cyborg translators as well as the translated texts are subject to. On the other hand, to the body of cybercultures which has sustained interest in the production and imagination of the cyborg, the cyborg as a translator offers a different way of locating the cyborg identity – not as an identity produced through cyberspaces, but as an embodied cyborg that emerges as an epistemological category to explain the processes of collaboration, sharing, collective authoring and possession of the new digital spaces.

Notes

- 1 This paper owes huge intellectual and emotional debt to Rita Kothari who first invited me to contribute to this issue, helping me formulate the germ of the idea and to Elena Di Giovanni who has been an extremely patient editor, guiding me through the many drafts that gave shape to this final version.
- 2 MMORPG – Massively Multiple Online Role – playing game is a genre of gaming in which a large number of players interact with one another in a virtual world. The MUDs that Sherry Turkle studied can be looked upon as the direct antecedents to MMORPGs like Second Life and War of Warcraft – two of the most popular gaming platforms in current times.
- 3 *Technoscapes* are the landscapes of technology. They refer to technology as both high and low, informational and mechanical, and the speed at which it travels between previously impassible boundaries. Appadurai uses the idea of *Technoscape* to imagine a fluid and transmittable topography of technology, where the different transactions and the identities formed online have material consequences in economic flows and societal formations. The cyborg thus produced actively chooses and negotiates its

identity. Identities are no longer solid, but become fractured, in that we no longer have to choose the identities or accept the ideas of the local community. We are actively choosing our programming based on that which is available to us. While the cyborg may choose to act in a manner most appropriate or relative to the cultures and geographies it is embedded within, that is no longer the only programming option available to it and many are choosing to look beyond their own cultural arenas.

- 4 P2P networks – peer-to-peer networks – inherit the cyberspatial aesthetics of decentralized networks; of nodes being distributed across the circuits of the internet and talking to each other, collaborating in projects, sharing information and exchanging digital material. The p2p networks have been under severe focus because they allow for unmonitored piracy and exchange of information.
- 5 AmWay emerged in the 1960s as the first of its kind of multi-level marketing company where the individuals inherit each other's customers and profits through a simple system of multi-directional networking.
- 6 The Wikipedia entry for IPC Section 377 reads: 'Homosexual relations are technically still a crime in India under an old British era statute dating from 1860 called Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalises "carnal intercourse against the order of nature."' Since this is deliberately vague in the past it has been used against oral sex (heterosexual and homosexual), sodomy, bestiality, etc. The punishment ranges from ten years to lifelong imprisonment'. The relevant section reads: 'Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine'.

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