Cyborgs without organs

Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism* (London and New York: Verso, 2020), 192pp., £9.99 pb., 978 1 78663 266 1

In her endorsement of *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, culture and media theorist McKenzie Wark locates its author Legacy Russell among those who are 'playing in the ruins' of 'the old empire of imperatives about both flesh and tech'. The book, she seems to warn, will walk you through the walls of an established theoretical tradition, all the while casting shade on its crumbling masonry.

And yet, while Russell's prose is as determined as any good manifesto's in containing the force of rupture its existence must imply, and while an entire chapter is committed to the glitch 'throwing shade', any takingdown of predecessors is minimal and gracious. Russell saves her word count for better things: for celebrations of radical art and injunctions to political creativity. But to adequately affirm her success in this project – which offers an alternative to decades of tortured Theory – I feel I must recall some of the empire of problems amidst which the book was born.

Like most who have located their intellectual innovations within a history of cyberfeminism (the site of many an imperative on flesh and tech both), Russell acknowledges early in her book an important, if ambivalent, relationship to the thought of Donna Haraway. *Glitch Feminism* mines internet-based artistic practice in arguing for the online space as a liberatory site of experimentation in 'glitching', or subverting, the binarily gendered body. Haraway, of course, remains best known for her 'Cyborg Manifesto', an essay that in 1985 responded to what the author had been tasked with identifying as the Reaganera's central challenges to socialist feminist politics. Her manifesto was a call to leftist feminists to reimagine themselves as political subjects by imaginatively reconceiving the boundaries of their bodies. As Russell phrases it in a reframing of de Beauvoir's old adage: '*One is not born, but rather becomes a body*'.

Haraway, observing how immiseration was being wrought differentially among feminised agents by the globalisation and de-industrialisation of capital, proposed that resistance to these new forms of damage demanded a new kind of political identity. Neither 'woman' nor 'proletarian', in her view, was adequate to capturing the complex and complexifying affinities of queer women or women of colour, not least those assembling computer chips in East Asia. Conjuring the image of the cyborg as imaginative aid, Haraway asked her readers to recognise all living organisms as necessarily hybrid, enveloping and smudging falsely circumscribed identities, just as the cyborg – both human and machine – necessarily dissolves the definitive boundaries of the 'natural' and the 'synthetic'. Hers was a vision of multiplicity and infinite permutation across the spectrum of the feminised and within each feminised subject, giving political agents an appreciation of difference around which, paradoxically, they might be better placed to collectivise.

The advent of the internet, however, invigorated among feminist artists, coders, gamers and writers inspired by Haraway a more literal idea of the political subject as both organism and machine. Cyberfeminism, a school of both theory and praxis, unified itself in 1997 when 38 of its proponents convene at Documenta X. While the shared manifesto they produced betrayed varying notions of cyberfeminism's definition, all sought to emphasise the necessary role of internet technology in feminist revolution. It was clear that information and communication technologies were not only developing in the mould of the human nervous system, but were also themselves effecting the kinds of alteration in the human field of perception that gave the figure of the cyborg vivid new meaning.

In redefining the cyborg simply as she who operates online, most cyberfeminisms of the '90s and early 2000s had effectively dispensed with Haraway's concern to sustain an account of difference, allowing the vision of emancipatory ends pinned on techno-optimism to license its divisive means. As cyberfeminist artist Faith Wilding pointed out, the net was '*not* a utopia of nongender', but rather an entity 'already socially inscribed with regard to bodies, sex, age, economics, social class and race'. And as Russell adds, summarising cyberfeminism's historical limitations, '*white women = producing white theory*

= *producing white cyberspace*'. Even as artists such as Wilding began to range further than the net, confronting other technological frontiers of feminist practice (notably that of biotechnology), the problem of reconciling difference with a unified feminist project endured. In 2021 it feels almost platitudinous to state that the absorption of 'technology' in untrammelled techno-capitalism has enhanced the latter's potential to redouble divisions between women along the lines of employment status and labour conditions. As technologies of exploitation flourish at a quickening pace, the degradation of some women's labour collides more horribly than that of others with the exploitation of their race, sexuality and class.

The practice of 'embracing technology' has never uniformly enthused the left. In 2015, Laboria Cuboniks' *Xenofeminist Manifesto* (XFM), which positioned its techno-accelerationist vision as 'the only true suspension of inequality', was lauded by many – not least among them Mark Fisher – for aspiring to break through the kind of unambitious melancholia that had stalled the turn of the millennium's cyberfeminist zeal. '[T]he machines are so alive', wrote Haraway, 'whereas the humans are so inert!', and in that sense XFM seemed to kick against the posture of leftist listlessness that redefines the 'Luddite' in the present. Its rhetoric scorned those who allowed essentialised, oppressed identities to limit the horizon of leftist struggle to 'survival' (rather than transformation). And yet, as Annie Goh has argued, XFM's explicitly 'rationalist' project of universalised feminism makes no new intervention to mitigate the costs of its hyperactive approach to those whom techno-capital most exploits. Indeed, what of those on the left to whom there remains no choice but to prioritise survival?

Russell opens her set of artist-led meditations by referencing E. Jane, who she affirms is not being hyberbolic in asserting, as 'a Black artist with multiple selves', that 'we are dying at a rapid pace'. 'Pushed to the margins', Russell agrees, 'we find ourselves as queer people, as people of colour, as femme-identifying people most vulnerable in weathering world conditions, ranging from climate change to plantation capitalism'. But while she is for this reason unable to gloss over the ways in which cybertechnologies serve to accelerate violent 'world conditions', her response is far from technophobic. As Russell sees it, for the specific 'we' that crests an intersection of gender and racial oppression, facing down architectures of power requires, as an urgent prerequisite, finding 'techniques that provide space for ourselves' to do so. If reality happens (and power lies) online as well as 'away from the keyboard' (AFK), some of these spaces of cover and resistance will inevitably rest in cyberspace. The question of engaging with the online world while sustaining a critique of power thus becomes the motivating force behind Russell's signal concept.

Enter 'Glitch Feminism', an idea Russell conceived in 2012 that in the intervening years has blossomed with artists' use of it as creative material. Where Lucca Fraser of Laboria Cuboniks brashly insists that 'Yes', the master's tools can dismantle the master's house, Russell offers the more sophisticated suggestion that what institutions of power require may be not so much dismantling as 'strategic occupation'. Beginning with an understanding of gender as a disciplinary technology – a core cog within capitalist society's wheel, and the body as a weapon of that technology – giving form to 'an idea that has no form', Russell proposes the glitch as a means of taking that form and, through rupture, rendering it abstract once more. The technological glitch – a form of 'machinic anxiety' – serves in this sense as a portal of imagination, suggesting applications of error and strategic nonperformance in cyberspace to the violently normative world in which lives are lived AFK.

Recognising, as Foucault did, that power can be both restrictive (*potestas*) and productive (*potentia*), Russell targets the internet as a central site of both types, looking to the productive force of artistic representation online as the basis of art's more general *potentia* to offer modes of refusal. Summoning to her argument a panoply of philosophical men (Édouard Glissant, Gilbert Ryle, Timothy Morton, Henri Lefebvre, Jean-Luc Nancy…), Russell's theory of parts and wholes brings to their incomplete theories an alternative framework for imagining autonomous political participation in 'reality'. This framework is formed both by and for queer and female-identifying women of colour, and plots the sphere of agency as occurring dynamically both on and away from the keyboard.

Mobilising her own experiences of self-formation through artmaking, nightlife and internet living, Russell's emancipatory vision is animated by the work of an eclectic chorus of contemporary artists. As Deleuze, inspired by the Surrealists, saw in art the potential
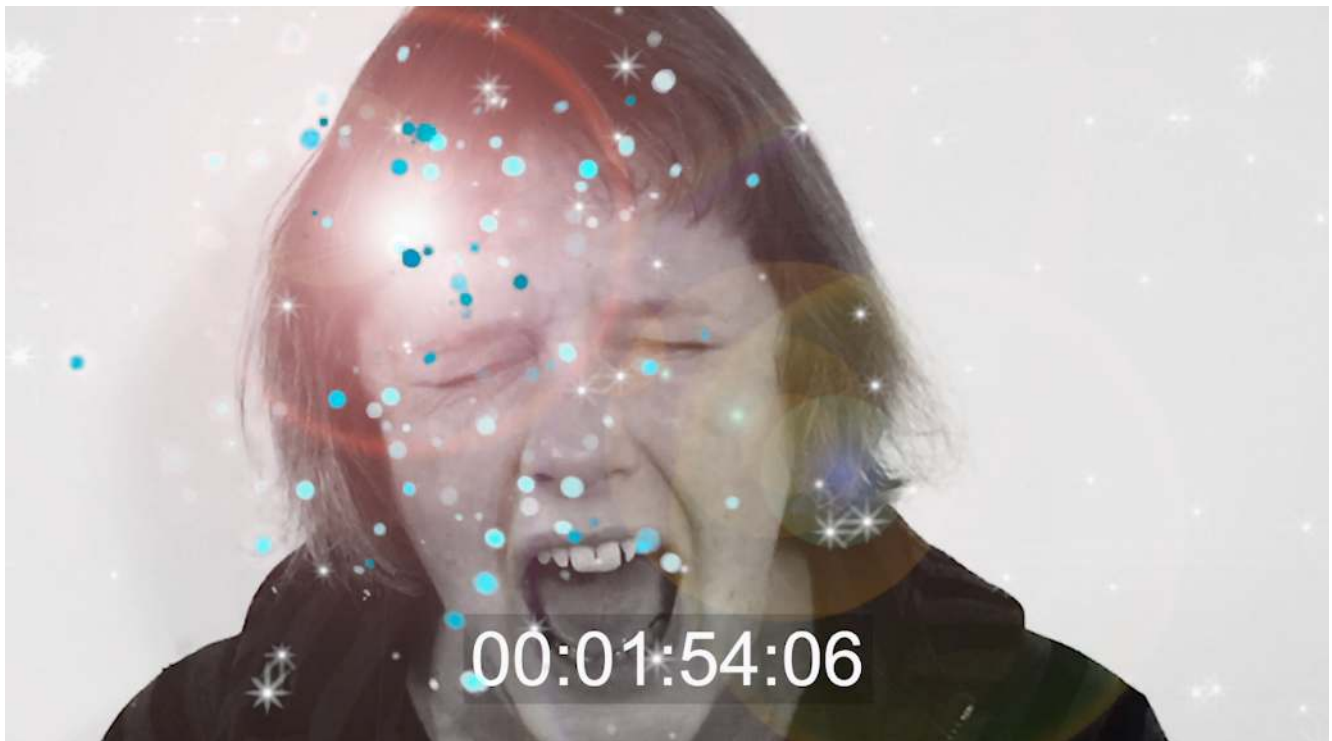
Thomson & Craighead, *#screaming* (2020)

for advancing a relationship with technology radically detached from functionalism and organised efficiency, a process of becoming 'bodies without organs', these artists engage in the digital remix of what Russell calls 'corpo-realities', reforming these in opposition to techno-capital's rabid opportunism. Stretching the body's resonance to cosmic registers, these artists draw on the peculiar potential in the aesthetic to create new ways of imagining what the body can do beyond our calcified norms.

In the glittering land of the glitch, artist and drag queen Victoria Sin exposes the seams of gender-prep through hyperbolic re-performance both online and off, showcasing cracks in 'the gloss and gleam of capitalist consumption of gender as product'; Sondra Perry uses 3D graphics to highlight encrypted signifiers of lost Black traumas, manipulating technology's rhythms of repression and surveillance; Shawné Michaelain Holloway's 'cam girl' adventures tug at the lines between vulnerable selves and impenetrable digital skins; American Artist poses a challenge to search engine coloniality; and POWRPLANT attempts to trailblaze dissolution and redistribution in digital education. Through each artistic exposition, Russell demonstrates that digital activity can

neither be unlinked from the world of AFK, nor dismissed as somehow 'immaterial'. Her frames of reference for illustrating this range from Zach Blas's 'collective masks', which effectively undermine the requirements of biometric data gathering, to Simone C. Niquille's digital avatar modelling, which intervenes in the forensic ambitions constructed by the defence in the trial of George Zimmerman.

Such feats of critical artmaking are of course far from devoid of their own internal scepticisms. Holloway's 'fantasy-fetish' underscores, as Russell puts it, 'the implausibility of ever being able to fully dictate or refuse how one's body can and cannot be digested through a digital platform'. Among theorists of contemporary biopower, progressively accustomed to the problem of resistance from within the neoliberal frame, there emerges a growing consensus that the absorption of the psychic self in a power apparatus that encourages auto-oppression obviates any possibility of resistance on the level of corporeal gesture. The subject, immersed in the institutional apparatus that seeks to subject them, now becomes indistinguishable from the institution itself. Russell is not blind to the truth in this negative corpo-reality.

What *Glitch Feminism* offers, however, is a commit-

ment to exploring where channels of resistance might still be forced open. While it is central to Russell's argument that, the machine being 'the material through which we process our bodily experience', bodies are 'as much computational as they are flesh', she refuses to accept this as cause for surrender to certain malign strains of computational power. 'We are standing inside the machine', she writes, and every day we make a choice whether or not to rob ourselves'. Similarly, while acknowledging that it becomes difficult to see the artificiality of gender when submerged within its omnipresent and overwhelming logic, Russell sustains an account of gender as not only as a tired fantasy, but one whose relinquishment will amount to an escape from manifold modes of regulation, management, division of labour, exchange of value and control.

Glitch Feminism, while an invocation of the 'cosmic', is all about 'finding one's range'. As such, it is vitally aware of its own boundaries and limitations. Neither a blueprint for overthrowing global capitalism, nor a set of infrastructure-level demands (in the vein of the Cyborg Manifesto's call for the unionisation of office workers), it rather renews the serious call for new forms of subjectivity that white cyberfeminisms dropped. This is not an alternative to proposing new forms of (secure, de-centralised) digital infrastructure, but rather a prerequisite for such projects. Proceeding from the self-

constructive power of her earliest chatroom handle, Russell's interest is in nascent performances of selves – gestures of digital self-determination – as necessary forms of world-building. Through her text she enters, like the early-twentieth-century artist of Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019), 'the intensity of creating and inhabiting a world with others, a domain of collective bodies, kinaesthetic experience and gestural language'.

In the process of becoming political subjects who enact the requisite 'failure to function within the confines of a society that fails us', the glitched bring into being the kinds of subjectivity that are necessary conditions of the largest anti-capitalist visions – moves towards transforming partially shared agendas such that political unity on the left might one day be more than fantasy or lie. While a latter-day Haraway, to the disappointment of her followers, ultimately draws from intersectionality only a deepening sense of cyclical, inescapable domination, Russell holds liberation on her horizon. Her achievement amounts to what Toni Cade Bambara once affirmed as the very 'task of the artist': if the task is determined by the status and process and agenda of the community that [the artist] already serves', the task for the artist whose community's survival depends upon political change is 'to make the revolution irresistible'.

Amber Husain

All that Hegel allows

The course of the relationship between philosophy and film studies never did run smooth. The encounter of these two disciplines, while producing both influential and exciting work, has often been beset by mistrust and misapprehension, ruptures, rejections and partings of ways. For all the promising developments made by the likes of Gilles Deleuze, Alexander Kluge, Miriam Hansen, and others, mutual mistrust remains. In recent years, much of the work attempting to rekindle this interdisciplinary flame has been markedly political, with thinkers

like Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou and, perhaps most visibly, Slavoj Žižek, exploring cinema as a path to ideological critique: reflecting on the social relations of the present and the modes of being which arise from them.

Beyond his extensive work on Hegel, Nietzsche and the problem of modernity, cinema has remained one of the focal points of Robert Pippin's critical attention across the last decade, during which time he has created a body of work that engages with the possibility of staging a productive encounter between the two disciplines