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The Cyborg Affect: Encountering Via Switch

This paper is the presentation of a new thinking toward the idea of “encounter” in relation. Following the emphasis on encounter—that is, a form of situating relation in communication and culture—I would like to summarize the idea of “switch” and expand this thinking toward a new consideration of our relationship with technology. This contributes to understanding relation and encounter in affective and not effective terms. If relation is affective, embodied in both technology and ourselves (if we should make such distinctions), then this changes our conception of the encounter, what it means, and how it can be applied toward creating new theoretical terrain.

Affect is a contested term and for this paper will be taken to mean a sensation or the felt-ness of intensity. This conception of affect is consistent with explorations of relation in process philosophy. In this form of philosophy, much as it sounds, the process and not the result of interaction is the primary source of relational generation. In reference to Henri Bergson’s work that reflects thinking with process philosophy toward understanding positionality, Brian Massumi writes: “Position no longer comes first, with movement a problematic second. It is secondary to movement and derived from it. It is retro movement, movement residue” (2002: 7). Thinking of position as the residue of movement helps us break out of normative modes of thought. Typically we assume the existence of a subject or object that “is-such-already.” The subject or object is constituted somehow before the relationship it has with the rest of the world. In this imagined existence, the subject or object is already positioned and this position largely dictates the potentialities for the subject or object’s relation because the subject or object is pre-constituted and thus left without the capacity for movement. The only way for movement to enter this framework is through the encounter with an other. As thinkers and researchers we then focus on how this encounter has effected the positioning of the subject or object. Instead, we need to think about relation as a process and the definition of subject or object as generated from affective sensitivity. This change suggests that relation generates and produces the subject or object, that position is the result of the retrospective codification of movement, and that the encounter then is not merely a relation between subjects and objects pre-defined, but rather is part of an unfolding affectivity.

The encounter in this thinking is not occurring between subject and object but instead the encounter becomes part of the movement that generated the retrospective positioning that we have come to call the subject or object. This is not a full reversal of traditional thinking but is rather the understanding that “encounter” holds much broader implications for communication

and culture than has traditionally been addressed. The encounter is often relegated to the crossing paths of subjects and objects, but this framework does not adequately portray the encounter and mistakes encountering for the totality of the relation. Thinking about encounters through process philosophy and affectivity allows us to ask different questions of relationships, technology, culture and communications.

Essentially then we have entered a different mode of thought that ceases to be about subjects or objects and what occurs between these entities, instead entering a world wherein it is understood that the relation and process of this relation will generate the entities known as subject or object. This shift and accompanying suggestions for agency in the process are exemplified for our relation with technology by the concept of “switch.” We encounter the switch metaphor as affective agency when relation is understood as embodied, rather than as something generated between two points of subjectivity. This metaphor of switch can then be used to suggest potential openings for agency even for those terms thought to be in a dialectical relation. The switch is both a conceptual model for engaging agency in technological relationships and is the entity we encounter via affect in a philosophy of process.

There are two lines of thought that contribute to building the switch as a metaphor. The first line requires a reading of Donna Haraway’s cyborg (1991: 149-81) encountering Hegel’s dialectics (1969). The second utilizes the relational-generation of a figure appropriated from cultures practicing Bondage Dominance and Sadomasochism (BDSM).¹ By exploring the two lines of thought in the service of describing switch thinking, the broader implications of situating this new kind of affective encountering can be addressed. The encounter, understood through the switch metaphor as an affective phenomenon, is better suited for engaging processual relation and avoiding assumptions of a priori place; that is, as an inscription of identity on the relation, rather than an exploration of the potential of encountering.

Haraway’s Cyborg Greets Hegel’s Dialectics

Haraway’s Cyborg is Pleased to Meet You

Donna Haraway (1991: 149-81)² boldly proclaimed that we are cyborgs, instilling a new metaphor for thinking about our relationship with technology. This figure changed the potentialities previously understood of the cyborg figure, offering a new thinking for the

¹The acronym BDSM is understood to hold a number of different modes and politics toward its disambiguation, certainly many beyond the limited and intentionally direct interpretation taken for this paper.

²This text was originally published as Haraway, D. J. 1985. Manifesto for cyborgs: science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s. *Socialist Review* 80: 65-108. The 1991 publication is the text used for this paper. Sofoulis (2002: 85) calls the 1991 publication “the definitive final version” of the writing. I take this version of the paper to be the most appropriate for addressing the cyborg body.

perceived limitations of the women's movement and feminist thought approaching the 21st century (Hawthorne 1999; Sofoulis 2002). Haraway's text

helped clarify differences between techno and eco-oriented feminists, and those who didn't subscribe to cosmic feminism could find in Haraway a voice that validated a range of other approaches to studying, interpreting, dreaming, and mythologizing about the woman-technoscience-world relation. (Sofoulis 2002: 92)

Through Haraway, this familiar hybrid figure is imbued with emancipatory potentialities because it breaks down traditional boundaries framing how human beings think about their relationship with technology.

Articulating difference through relation in the cyborg metaphor, Haraway pays homage to the collapsing of boundaries now understood as artificial: human/animal, organism/machine, and physical/non-physical (1991: 152-53). With these boundaries collapsing and cyborgs emerging from the rupture, Haraway addresses the tendency toward dualism with the "informatics of domination." The informatics re-align terminologies so that thinking can be done, to quote Haraway, "not in terms of essential properties, but in terms of design, boundary constrains, rates of flows, systems logics" (162). An embodied cyborg metaphor then is a necessary response to redress thinking that led to a modernist singular-human condition. However, Haraway's cyborg is standing still. When the cyborg body moves, the stasis of hybrid-form is made explicit and our cyborg bumps into Hegel, who kindly introduces her to dialectics.

The Greeting: Dialectics Will Call You Back

Cyborg possibilities are made most explicit as an embodied metaphor; Being, after all, requires body. As medical anthropologists Lock and Scheper-Hughes state, "the individual body should be seen as the most immediate, the proximate terrain where social truths and social contradictions are played out, as well as a locus of personal and social resistance, creativity, and struggle" (1996: 70). The body of the cyborg is precisely the site where the battles for social truths and contradictions are played out, post-Haraway. Meeting the cyborg as a moving embodiment underlies a rift or splitting (similar to Haraway's collapsed boundaries) that must be considered in light of Hegel's process of dialectic relation. The moving cyborg body generates a cyborg dialectic.

The cyborg that appears as a singularity simply is not a singularity. Dialectics is a realm where the word "encounter" seems rather implicit. Sublation³ suggests an encounter before the

³*Aufhebung* (sublation) is a difficult word to translate to English. The literal meaning is 'out/uplifted' but when used as a verb, a duality in the word itself meaning both 'to cancel' and 'to keep' emerges. The term then demonstrates its own meaning in German language uses, while it requires some description to achieve similar understanding in the translation to English. Sublation in this paper cancels as it keeps.

encounter—a relation of absolutes, dependent on the value of one to assure the other’s existence. Mutuality of some form can be seen in the movement of the sublated term. As Hegel writes:

They are not reciprocally sublated—the one does not sublimate the other externally—but each sublates itself in itself and is in its own self the opposite of itself What is sublated is not thereby reduced to nothing. Nothing is *immediate*; what is sublated, on the other hand, is the result of *mediation*; it is a non-being but as a *result* which had its origin in a being. (Hegel 1969: 105-07, italics in the original)

The result of mediation and not the immediacy of nothing, a non-being that had its origin in a being, assuring that determinate unity is carried in the non-being as much as the being itself: this is the cyborg of the 21st century. The notion of sublation underlies the process of dialectics and helps us toward the idea of negation, leading to our encounter with cyborg dialectics.

The human and machine are sublated in the first negation, both shifting as now determinate beings via dialectic movement, but the cyborg itself becomes/is becoming, and the second negation is the level at which the alteration via transition occurs. (Fornssler 2010: 110-11)

So the figure of the cyborg has become an entity in itself. That is, an entity that stands distinct from both the human and the machine. But this former hybrid, now a singular entity called the cyborg, is not immune to further dialectic process. The cyborg, as “singular” negates itself, as it contains itself and thus is fed back on itself producing another dialectical relation—one that grasps toward the elusive second negation.

Our cyborg-selves are only discernable from the relation via two cyborg figures, each holding a pole of potential in what is understood to be a dialectical process. Two archetype cyborg figures can help in understanding how there is a dialectic relation in the cyborg. For the sake of demonstration and articulation we will call these figures the Emancipatory-Feminist-Cyborg (EFC) and the Military-Industrial-Cyborg (MIC). Each figure is emergent in the becoming-cyborg. The terms in dialectics are bound to each other in a manner that precludes the term being separated or split in the sense of creating a hybrid figure. In dialectic relation there is not a grey area, third way, or middle; there is only the mutual constitution of singular terms. The EFC and the MIC demonstrate this relation because there is no in-between. These figures are the same cyborg. The controlling factor rests in the approach, the “how” of our engaging this cyborg, in the becoming movement of our cyborg bodies, in the switch as determinant of the nature of our engagement.

Bondage Dominance Sadomasochism and Appropriating Switch for Life Technique

BDSM for Becoming Either/Or

It is my intent to focus on the potentials for relational thinking that emerge from BDSM practice, rather than addressing the practice itself in great detail. I do not claim authority over, nor do I

seek to detract from, the myriad of personal and political interpretations that exist with regard to any sexual politics or practice. BDSM in the context of this paper is to be understood as a performance based on the explicit power relations of a dominant and a submissive pairing. These encounters last for a set amount of time and often occur in a designated space. The practice of BDSM is not a sexual pathology. Instead, BDSM practice should be understood as a consensual social interaction engaged in by adult practitioners. Authors Weinberg, Williams and Moser describe particular elements that they argue comprise the BDSM encounter, including the appearance of rule over one partner by another, often emphasized via role-play involving exaggeration of submissive and dominant positions. Further, the encounter is consensual and holds shared meaning for the participants (1984: 379-89). Although this source is dated and provides a rather homogenizing account, it still serves as a useful archetype for a brief summary regarding the context of expression for those unfamiliar with BDSM.

During the enactment of role-play in the BDSM context, the relation of submissive and dominant characters is made explicit. “Switch” describes someone who engages in the role-play as either a submissive or dominant actor based upon the context of encounter. The switch figure does not engage materially but rather is in a position of either/or, a position of flux. Switch is not external or involved, but becomes one or another based on the context of the relation. Put another way, the moment of switch becoming submissive or dominant highlights a decision made in affective resonance. Switch is a moment of becoming of identity, a process that is dependent on relational circumstances such as: Who is the partner? What is the scene? How does this person feel—quite literally—on this day at this time? The switch remains what could be colloquially called “outside” the engagement of submissive and dominant relations. Not outside in a more traditionally location-based or operative-logical mode, but rather switch stands as a model to locating the expression of an idea. It is only through the moment of engaging relation, the movement, that switch *becomes* the dominant or submissive actor. This is also then the thinking-about required for a form of renewed agency in engagement with our technology.

Technology as Life Technique Necessitates Agency

Renewed agency is essential for engagement with our technology because our technology is our technique to life. Wolfgang Schirmacher (1989; 2005) describes the process of living through our technology as a life technique that is an intimate expression of our humanity. There is no strict division between technology and human, because technology is precisely the technique to life that is emergent from (our)selves. Our engagement with that technology is an expression of our “how,” our approach to life. In this respect, we *are* our technology. Further, Schirmacher (1999a; 1999b; 2000) argues that human beings have always existed in a state of artificiality, a state that also suggests our technology is an expression of our humanity. To view technology in this light makes the distinction between the human and our machines all the more malleable. If our technology is quite explicitly our “autopoietically authored acts” this makes us much less cyborgs and all the more simply human. However, the term cyborg provides a necessary

imaginary for conceiving this embodied relation. As such, I have not sought to redefine the historically contentious term “human” and instead embrace the malleable term “cyborg” to express the idea of switch. Thus it is through an affective sensation similar to that experienced by switch in the BDSM community that the type of cyborg we may become is determined.

The switch figure offers a metaphor for understanding our engagement with technology precisely because this engagement is a dialectical process of becoming cyborg, the process of our being-as-cyborgs, and thus enhances our technique to life. Switch can be understood as technique toward agency in our navigation of the dialectical cyborg figures— affective movement to influence engagement of the two cyborg archetypes, whether patriarchal or feminist emancipatory. Switch is both-in-potential, but much like dialectical process, does not require external generation or something separate from the process called relation. This “appearing as” binary metaphor must be understood through the role of the “switch” in BDSM communities; otherwise our cyborg collapses into the stasis of solidified identity. Switch is not a static category.

Switch, Agency and Encounter

Switch is Agency in Affective Process

“Switch” emphasizes a conception of the relation that is rooted in sense perception and embodied affective choice. The switch engages without undermining dialectical relation, or trying to side-step Hegel’s process. The switch performing as dominant in one encounter performs as submissive in another. Switch offers agency insofar as any material relation will allow. Switch is a term for the affective sense of our being toward the world and the corporeal actions emergent in a sensing of the affect-of-relation. The agency is restored to the cyborg, to us becoming cyborg, via an awareness of the role of the switch, or at least the possibility of switch that is already in one’s process. The affect of the cyborg may also be a prompt to envision our fundamental relation with technology differently.

Affective encounter is what brings forth and allows the process of emergence. As Brian Massumi states: “interaction is precisely what takes form” (2002: 9). This site, this momentary pause of coming to form, is what I call switch. Our technologies are (our)selves and our living through these technologies is our “how”—the technique—of approach to technology. This “how” of our becoming is dependent on unfolding relationality, or put differently, is dependent on the micro-moment of sense thought. This is an affective movement that constitutes the process of relation that is becoming. Switch is the threshold of a decision on the affective micro-level.

The cyborg is still our primary relation metaphor for technology. But engagement as the embodied cyborg brings about the necessity of switch that highlights a being-ness of the cyborg, either submissive or dominant. Switch gives relation an ontogeny that holds close the idea of agency and gives forward the generative potentials of dialectic process embodied with the

cyborg figure. If we accept switch metaphor, we have choice in our technique to technology, to crafting ourselves as cyborgs. Switch terminology gives us a “how” in this approach to relational unfolding, but more it provides a name or designation by which we can explore this still evasive concept. Switch makes accessible the idea, this visioning of our affective sense-relation, our tactic to re-emphasize the “how” of ourselves made explicit in technology—in this case, with the moving body of the cyborg.

Switch Thinking Toward Situating Encounters

Thinking about the encounters we have with technology and the relationships that emerge between human beings and technology—if we should make such distinctions at all—is a delicate task, all the more so when these technologies push the threshold of the body to new limits. How do we situate the encounter in communication? I suggest that it first involves putting aside frameworks that pre-suppose what constitutes the entities experiencing encounter. These frameworks that assume entity, rather than accounting for its generation, are dependent on a thinking toward existence that is abstracted from time and being as they come to form in corporeal movement. Erin Manning writes: “The body does not move ‘into’ space and time, it ‘creates’ space and time: there is no space and time before movement” (2007: 17). This inclusion of movement that constitutes space and time suggests that we cannot situate an encounter before the moving body. Nor can the encounter emerge without the affective sense brought about via body.

The relation then is not to be understood as something occurring between two actors, an engagement premised upon pre-existent ends. The encounter can only be situated insofar as a moving body is measurable against the constraints of our spatial-imaginary. Typically we understand the encounter to be that which resonates between two poles, the something in-between, or perhaps simply the meeting of these poles. But, in consideration of what Massumi (2002: 68-88) addresses in his chapter *The political economy of belonging and the logic of relation*, if the poles are instead generated by the relation and hence, the encounter is understood as such only through retrospective codification, then our ideas surrounding the conceptualization of encounter and relation must also necessarily shift. It is, as Massumi writes:

Only by asserting the exteriority of the relation to its terms that chicken and egg absurdities can be avoided and the discussion diverted from an addiction to foundation and its negation to an engagement with change as such, with the unfounded and unmediated in-between of becoming. (70-71)

Separating the relation from the polemic ends that mark or codify that relation is the route to engaging change. An encounter thought in these terms then is the force-full generation of archetypal poles as they emerge affectively via the context of relation. The agency toward encounters of this type can be understood through the switch metaphor. By using the metaphors of cyborg and switch to address a conception of relation with technology and the body, perhaps

relevant for all relationally thought bodies, it is my hope to continue the discussion toward a philosophy of corporeal body process that provides new directions in the framework of our thinking toward and about the concept of encounter.

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