Digital, Human, Animal, Plant
The politics of cyberfeminism?

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*When feminism is discussed as "**post**" or "**cyber**", it seems to gain a new kind of market value that has not been attributed to any traditions in feminism or feminists. The concept of postfeminism did indicate a move "above" or "beyond" feminism, even becoming its antithesis, as, for example, formulated in the writings of Camilla Paglia. This detachment from any tradition of feminist politics has made postfeminism easier to market, but in the case of cyberfeminism its marketability owes a great deal to the high exchange rate of cybertheory in general.[1]*

Cyberfeminism can be defined as sets of activities which take over information technologies both on a conceptual and practical level. Information technology can be taken as a tool for dealing with gender politics, playing with popular culture and sexuality in art, theory and activism. Sadie Plant, a British writer based at Warwick University, has gained recognition as one of the best-known theorists of cyberfeminism particularly through her recent monograph *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + The New Technoculture* (1997). Cyberfeminism, as defined by Plant, is **an insurrection on the part of the goods and materials of the patriarchal world, a dispersed, distributed emergence composed of links between women, women and computers, computers and communication links, connections and connectionist nets.**[2] The key function of

clitoris and the mission of disrupting the symbolic order from within (from masculine design and network solutions) is typified by the female artists' group VNS Matrix's *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st century* and by their later work, which are for Plant both signs and proof of cyberfeminism overtaking the Net:

In Greek, the word for womb is *hystera*; in Latin, it is *matrix*, or matter, both the mother and the material. In *Neuromancer,* William Gibson calls it '*the nonspace*', a '*vastness where the faces were shredded and blown away down hurricane corridors*'. It is the imperceptible '*elsewhere*' of which Irigaray speaks, the hole that is neither something nor nothing; the newly accessible virtual space which cannot be seen by the one it subsumes.[3]

Plant produces cyberfeminism as a discursive terrain based on cyberpunk, etymology, feminist art projects and quotes from Irigaray and Wittig. This collage of techno-fantasy is presented through a depiction of the Internet, written as a space where theory is consumed, metaphors come to life and concepts can be translated into almost graspable objects. (Given this collage, it is not that surprising that William Gibson's words of appreciation fill the entire back cover of the British version of *Zeros + Ones*). To put it quite bluntly, Plant is mapping information networks as a space for feminist utopia, theory come-to-life, the imaginary revisited; in the words of Sara Diamond, as **a unique pre-Oedipal stage where no identity is fixed.**[4] Plant aims not to deconstruct notions of "cyberspace", nor the limitations and power relations of Internet, but to picture the Internet *as* Cyberspace and a quintessentially feminine one.

I find Plant's approach includes many problems, as well as dangers. Instead of dismantling the ideologically loaded fantasies of progress that surround new media technologies, Plant creates equally bent counter-fictions. Doing this, she shifts the focus concerning issues of women and technology from cultural, social, political and economic questions to more metaphysical and ontological ones. What interests me, are, on the one hand, the theoretical assumptions on which Plant builds her theories, and on the other, their implications. What are the relations of her writing to feminist theory? How can the feminism in her cyberfeminism be defined?

RosieX asks : What about hype?
Sadie replies : Well yeah! [smiles].[5]

Plant's attitude towards computers and information technology is optimistic, to say the least. She sees the relationships between women and computers as intimate, since, according to her, **women have been machine parts for very much of male culture**, and, **just as machines are getting more intelligent, so women get more liberated! (...) Changes are occurring almost as an automatic process (...) as machines get more autonomous, so do the women.**[6] There is, then, for Plant, a sort of teleology at play, an inevitable liberation of women and machines, the most predominant manifestation of which is their use of Information networks. She has no patience for notions of male dominance on the Internet. In fact, she claims that **It is now estimated that 50 percent of the Net's users are women**[7], a figure contrary to the majority of surveys, and

without any reference to research that would back up her claims. Labelling processes of liberation as automatic, natural, and unavoidable in the way that Plant does, is a very risky thing to do in the context of feminist politics. It illustrates one danger in her writing that cultural, social, or political changes do not happen by themselves, and that the concept of "**natural**" itself is an ideological fiction that has been used to justify claims that are very much culture-specific.

For Plant, this liberation of humans and machines is an automatic process of "*feminisation*" which is at work equally in the economy and employment practices. Feminisation is defined as entropy, a tendency towards disorder as depicted in the law of thermodynamics and as an erosion of tidy systems.[8] A major political problem in feminist perspective arises, when part-time or discontinuous work and maximal adaptability from the part of the employee are taken as signs of feminisation, a kind of progress: **Women have been ahead of the race for all their working lives, poised to meet these changes long before they arrived.**[9] However is the future of uncertain, often low paid work, a prospect to celebrate? Who is likely to profit from it?

In line with the process of feminisation, anthrophomorphism is at play on various levels in *Zeros + Ones* Plant discusses computers as agents that seem to have a will of their own.[10] This applies also to information networks: cyberspace is able to **present itself**, and to promise **a zone of absolute autonomy in which one could be anything, even God.**[11] As already noted above, according to Plant, there is no "**doer**" behind the liberation of women and machines: this process is pictured as both autonomous and automatic. **When intelligent space emerges alongside the history of women's liberation, no one is responsible. That's the point.**[12] Both computer and information networks are, then, saturated with performative force: through their use, subjectivities are created **New modes of communication, even little bits of other senses, have already emerged from the multimedia.**[13] Discussing *"new senses"* instead of literacies or skills, Plant is attaching herself to a biological paradigm instead of a socio-cultural one. Plant's case is actually quite different than if argued through Judith Butler's ideas on performative construction of identity. In Plant's argument, multimedia and digital culture are evolutionary forces that change subjects and their sensory

capabilities. However, for Butler, drawing on the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, the subject is produced through a compulsory performative repetition - there is no doer behind the deed, but the deed produces the doer.[14] For Plant, again, the deed (use of information technology) transforms the doer by feminising her/him. Thus, she is attributing the machines themselves (as substitute for the deed) with a kind of subjectivity, a nature that is feminine.

In a *Geekgirl* interview Plant answered questions about access to computers and particularly access for women in "information-poor" countries by saying, that **Even though we still have problems, it seems implicit in economic and political terms that these processes are automatic (...) we are in the first wave of information technology, and of course, issues of access are important - but soon the issue will not be of access but how to avoid it**.[15] Access to Net culture is, however, not an automatic process, but one conditioned by politics and economics on both international and national level. There is no teleology, no automaton at play, that would ensure global access - one needs only to think about access to telephones in various "*third-world*" countries, to put things in a different perspective.[16] In fact, for Plant, the question is not politics as a means to change things but ontology. She sees not only an alliance between computers and women, but also one between women and animals, plant life, and even bacteria. **Bacteria indulge in fluid, lateral exchanges which exceed all reproductive demands and slide between elements as confused and contiguous as Wittig's** *Lesbian Body*.[17] This use of definitions of female corporeality written in the context of feminist philosophy as analogous to results gained in bacteria and molecule research, is baffling, to say the least. The functioning of automatic and autonomous intelligent machines are equalled to those of microbes, and even the polymorphous "*nature*" of women. Links between nature and women, and metaphors derived from the female body, are a particularly risky discursive route taken by Plant. In fact, information technology, microbes, plant life, sea, and women are pictured here as an alliance of rhizomatic networks that prove wrong the male claims of control, order, rationality, and the monadic subject. Plant not only uses biological metaphors, but even research published in *The Economist* on the gendered uses of brain-capacity to illustrate the connection of women and information networks - an activity that is not entirely value-free in the age of neo-biologism.[18]

It is also a practice that seems to lead in a theoretical cul de sac, in which rather opposing paradigms melt together into a grand narrative of feminisation. Questions quintessential to ask, then, are, what are these metaphors used for, and, what are their aims ?

Plant's theories on women and machines owe to the so-called French feminist theory (including here the works of Luce Irigaray, Héléne Cixous, Monique Wittig), as well as to optimistic versions of cybertheory and cyberpunk. In Plant's reading, the alliance between women and computers is fundamentally natural. **Like Irigaray's woman, it (computer) can turn its invisible, non-existent self to anything: it runs any program, and simulates all operations, even those of its own functioning. This is the woman who 'doesn't know what she wants', and cannot say what she is, and yet still, of course, persists as though 'elsewhere', as Irigaray often writes.**[19] Thus, the strategy of mimesis, used and described by Luce Irigaray, is seen as the functioning principle of computers, one linking them to women (as subjects that have come to being in patriarchal culture) to the degree that computer actually becomes the woman.

For Irigaray, mimesis is a strategy for making visible the phallo-logocentrism and economy of sameness in the writings of the male canon of Western philosophy. As Rosi Braidotti has put it, Irigaray produces textual performances in which she combines theory and imagination, philosophy and literature, on the one hand looking at the possibilities of feminism, and on the other, criticising the Western philosophical tradition. Her poetic style opens up questions concerning the position of the subject, and ways of expression: to whom and of whom does she write?[20] The difficulty with Irigaray lies in the specific context of her theory and way of writing, since she does not speak about "*real*" women, but on the constructions of "*women*" as excess in Western philosophical (phallo-logocentric) discourses, and the strategies of opposition left within it. Irigaray discusses "*women*" as something not yet existant, as an idea or possibility of being that would not be defined by the patriarchal norms and the masks of phallic femininity. This differs essentially from the ways that "*woman*" is discussed by Plant as an entity that has ancestresses, and a historical nature. In her reading, "*woman*" is not so much a textual concept open to negotiation, mimesis and speculation, as it is for Irigaray, but a phenomenon of the physical world.

Plant's style of writing resembles to a degree that of Luce Irigaray, but the differences are important to note. If Irigaray is using mimesis in the context of metaphysics, whom does Plant, then, mime? Is she miming Irigaray, techno-discourses, or nothing specific at all?

Corporeal metaphors used by Irigaray have been widely discussed as both essentialist and strategic in creating non-hierarchical inter-subject relations. Difference, located not only between women but also within women, marks this "*sex which is not one*" as a way of being excluded from the Cartesian perceptions of subjectivity. Female corporeality is central also for Plant: **Even the textbooks reluctantly concede that the human female is actually sensitive all over her body, and appears to be very much more responsive to tactile stimuli than the male, and more dependent on touch for erotic arousal.**[21] Plant is, thus, using "*scientific*" proof to back up a certain kind of theory of sexual difference. Writings on medicine are used to illustrate points made by Irigaray in her work, however this is recognised and best described as poetic metaphysics. Plant , when she does this, is mixing two totally different paradigms without reflecting on the implications of this act as a form of universalizing essentialism.

The story that Plant creates in *Zeros+ Ones* is indeed a totalizing one, a proper master narrative - take, for example, her claim that **At the end of the twentieth century, all notions of artistic genius, authorial authority, originality, and creativity become matters of software engineering. Beats extract themselves from melody; narrative collapses into cycles and circuits of non-linear text...**[22] Plant refers to VNS Matrix, Linda Dement, Orphan Drift and several other female artists or groups as the cutting edge of experimentation and intervention in taking over **male conceptions of creativity and artist genius now extended into the new multi-media and interactive spaces of the digital arts**.[23] Again, the question is a whole lot more complicated. Plant identifies romantic conceptions of artist and creativity as "*male*", and the activities of women artists as alternative to this. According to Plant, women artists are not after fame, for example, and their works are multimedia by definition.[24] One need not possess much knowledge in art history to oppose these claims. Plant's bipolar graph of gender and culture assumes male hegemony and limited intervention by both women and information technology, the problem is presented as one between male-dominated romantic/modernist ideas of art and artistry colliding with the "*postmodern*".

The story Plant is writing is a white and Western one, and it spans from white Victorian "*cyborgs*" to their female predecessors using computers today.[25] This is not only a white woman's tale, but one which takes Anglo-American women as a misleadingly unified group representative of Women, and a group which is not split by the axes of class or ethnicity. It is noteworthy, that Plant while has appropriated the metaphor of cyborgs as feminist subjects, and weaving as metaphor for networking from Donna Haraway's *A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s* (1985), has chosen to bypass the politics of location so elementary to Haraway's thinking. For Haraway, all knowledge is partial and situated, and globalized objectivism is always a fiction that claims authority. Writing theory assumes both acknowledging the situatedness of the self, and taking responsibility for the knowledge that is being produced.[26] In *Zeros + Ones*, for example, there is little that positions Plant as a holder of situated knowledge. Instead, she creates theory on "*women*" and "*technology*" on a very general level. For Haraway, **There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices.**[27] Therefore, connection between women should be based on concept of alliance, not that of a shared identity. For Plant, the alliance is based on a shared identity,[28] one moulded by the experience of growing up in a patriarchy, but it is also one rooted in centuries, even milleniums, of "*women's culture*".

Creating a history of women as users and creators of technology is a very important and valid thing to do, but building it on the not-so seamless analogy between "female" uses weaving machines, typewriters, computers, and information networks, is problematic. Although Plant tells the story of Internet as starting from military networks (ARPAnet), and developing into institutional one with limited access (University networks in the U.S.), and then into one that covers Europe, North America and South-East Asia, she foregrounds another kind of history, a herstory, that spans from telephonists, receptionists, and switchboard operators to the **emergence of a lattice of connections later known as the Net.**[29] Thus, political and economic realities are brushed aside, as **roundabout, circuitous connections with which women have always been associated and the informal networking at which they have excelled now**

become protocols for everyone.[30] *Zeros + Ones* reads as a narrative very much like those outlined by Vladimir Propp in the context of fairytales: it begins with a stasis of women and the culture of weaving, then is unbalanced by industrialization and male control, until finally the stasis is regained with women continuing their weaving and networking practices in computer culture, in which **these imprinting procedures (...) reconnect with the tactile depth of a woven cloth.**[31] Metaphors like weaving might be useful in setting up a discourse alternative to the discourse of technological progress by male scientists and engineers, that is, when used strategically. However, when an entire book is based on this metaphor without reflecting upon its limitations, the analogies tend to turn against themselves: thus, it becomes impossible to differentiate between mimesis and essentialism or any tactical use of terms like universalism. In *Zeros + Ones*, the herstory includes the weaving Goddesses of destiny, as well as the nocturnal work of weaving as shared by women of different generations in "*foreign*" cultures.[32] **Weaving was already multimedia: singing, chanting, telling stories, dancing, and playing games as they work, spinsters, weavers, and needleworkers were literally networkers as well.**[33] In my opinion, it is most problematic to name the Net as "*female*" by referring to women's weaving practices dating back to the Neolithic era. The fact that women are not 'zeros', without any place or space in the culture of technology, is a valuable point to make, but turning the table around, by claiming computing as a quintessential feminine activity, might not be the best strategy either, particularly if this means falling back on essentialism. **If handwriting had been manual and male, typewriting was fingerprinting: fast, tactile, digital, and female**[34.] Posing attributes "*female*," "*male*," "*feminine*" and "*masculine*" as if identifiable with the cultural practices of using technology in this way is not, in my reading, an act of mimesis, but one of simplification.

RosieX: Do you think technology is sexy?
Sadie: Yeah, really sexy.[35]

Stylistically, *Zeros + Ones* is written as prose and it richly uses quotes from the books of William Gibson and other cyberpunk novelists. Both cyberpunk and cybertheory produce the language and discourse used on information networks - they define the terrain, provide metaphors and a language for discussion. The shape of Internet, as it is known, is produced through various acts of definition, through discursive production. When discussing the impact of current information networks that society as a whole does not yet know, writers take fictions produced by writers like Gibson and Philip K. Dick as illustrative examples, and even as proof, of the shape of things to come. Science fiction novels discuss present day issues in future tense, but when used as tools of cultural theory the point of reference is easily lost. In a way "*cybertheory*" deals more with futurology than traditional media studies, since information networks and information societies are elementary parts of future planning.[36]

What is important here is the question of answerability of the discourses produced in language, particularly as it comes to theory. Judith Butler has recently focused on the issues of language and power in quite a different context, mapping performative aspects of language elementary for thinking about writing as productive (performative in Austinian sense), as an act with consequences. **We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do. Language is the name for our doing: both what we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that we effect, the act and its consequences**.[37] Building on J.L.Austin's and Jacques Derrida's work, Butler emphasizes that the success of speech acts is dependent on the authorization of the performer, of her/him taking/being given the position of authority, position of power. This position of authority (of discourse, utterance, and also the utterer) is produced through citationality, by citing the linguistic conventions of authority. One can not know the consequences an utterance (like a piece of writing) might have, since the intentions of the utterer are in no way guaranteed to "**go through**", yet one can not deny their impact and the power used in the act.[38]

It is important to keep in mind, that speaking and writing as a scholar is not only an exercise in the art of literature, but also in the technology of knowledge: that the people producing discourses are socially positioned as holders of knowledge and, accordingly, of power. In *Zeros + Ones*, Plant discusses being in a position to know and to control as a masculine activity, one intimately linked to the male gender.[39] However, when writing and producing a certain kind of academic discourse on women, technology, nature, past and future, she is herself in the position of authority. She is the one "*who knows*", the master/mistress narrator.

The conventions of writing and reception are quite different when it comes to fiction and theory. When discussing the Internet, the codes seem often to be mixed in a fashion that makes drawing easy borderlines quite impossible. Melanie McGrath, in her novel *Hard, Soft, and Wet: The Digital Generation Comes of Age* (which is being praised on the cover by Plant), describes the Internet both as a parallel reality of instant gratification, and a future machine shaping the tomorrow. **The Net is the Peter Pan machine, the screech and bubble of the modern always promising some new identity, some novel reconstruction, forever hinting at the future and drawing in its feint outlines.**[40] When this is read from a novel, a creative piece of fiction, the implications are different to reading **Once upon a time, the future never came. Safely projected into the reaches of distant times and faraway galaxies, the future was science fiction and belonged to another world. Now it is here, breaking through the endless deferral of human horizons short-circuiting history, downloading its images into today**[41], from Plant's article published in an anthology by an academic publisher.

Paraphrasing Jacques Derrida, one can claim that the point one wishes to make is most likely not to get through: that "**letters never arrive**" to their destination, and that meanings are inevitably deferred.[42] Therefore a poetic way of writing is as valid as any other, for it creates gaps and openings in the text, spaces for jouissance. In my opinion, the project of Derrida, like that of Irigaray, is different from that of Plant, who seeks parallels between the theory of sexual difference and the cultural history of computing. She uses mimesis as tool for critiquing discourses on technology and women. However, she also builds her theory on the revolutionary, liberating aspects of information technology on these very same poetic formulations - that which, as seen above, are also mixed with bio-medical research. Deferral of meaning seems, then, unavoidable, the letter is as if written in several incompatible languages. As "**disks are sucked into the dark recess of welcoming vagina slits**"[43], is there room for more than one to speak?

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Notes

1. This was discussed particularly by Tapio Makela in his presentation in the panel *Hype! 1000 Seductions of New Media* at Isea'97 symposium, Chicago. The proceedings are forthcoming.

2. Sadie Plant ' On the Matrix: Cyberfeminist Simulations' in Rob Shields (ed.) *Cultures of the Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies* London: Sage, 1996. p.182.

3. Plant, 1996. p.180.

4. Sara Diamond, 'Taylor's Way: Women, Cultures, and Technology' in Jennifer Terry and Melodie Cavert (eds), *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life* London and New York: Routledge, 1997. p. 83.

5. Geekgirl *Interview with Sadie Plant* by Rosie X at http://www.geekgirl.com.au/geekgirl/001stick/sadie/sadie.html

6. Geekgirl Interview

7. Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + The New Technoculture* London: Fourth Estate, 1997. p.112 and for opposing views for example Nina Wakeford 'Networking Women and Grrrls with Information/ Communication Technology: Surfing Tales of the World Wide Web' in Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert (eds) *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life* London and New York: Routledge, 1997. p. 52.

8. Plant, 1997. p.42-46, also her Geekgirl Interview.

9. Plant, 1997. p.43.

10. Plant, 1997. p.33, 49.

11. Plant 1997. p.180.

12. http://www.wmin.ac.uk/media/VD/Feminisation.html4

13. Plant, 1997. p.255.

14. Butler, 1997. p.45.

15. Geekgirl Interview

16. cf. Lasse Jalonen, 'What does it Mean to Live?' In *Ground* http://muu.autono.net/ground/armadillo/

17. Plant, 1997. p.242.

18. Plant, 1997. p.170-171.

19. Plant, 1996. p.177.

20. Rosi Braidotti, *Riitasointuja / Patterns of Dissonance* Tampere: Vastapaino, 1993. pp.208-210. English edition, London: Polity, 1991.

21. Plant, 1997. p.189.

22. Plant, 1997. p.194.

23. Plant, 1996. p.180.

24. Plant, 1997. p.191.

25. Plant, 1997. p.76.

26. Donna Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's' *Socialist Review* Number 80, Vol. 15, No.2, March-April 1985. p.90-92.

27. Haraway, 1985. p.72.

28. Haraway, 1985. p.73.

29. Plant, 1997. p.119.

30. Plant, 1997. p.144.

31. Plant, 1997. p.69.

32. Plant, 1997. p.69-70.

33. Plant, 1997. p.65.

34. Plant, 1997. p.118.

35.Geekgirl Interview

36. For a good discussion on science fiction, futurology and responsibility, see Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits* New York and London: Verso 1991. Chapters 3-5.

37. Judith Butler *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* London and New York: Routledge, 1997. p.8.

38. Butler, 1997. p.51; also Jacques Derrida *Signature Event Context. In Margins of Philosophy*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf ,1982. p.316; pp. 321-326.

39. Plant, 1997. p.45.

40. Melanie McGrath *Hard, Soft and Wet: the digital generation comes of age* London: Flamingo,1998. p.288.

41. Plant, 1996. p.181.

42. Jacques Derrida *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* Chicago and London: Chicago University Press,1996 (1987). Especially p. 33.

43. Plant,1997. p.181.

MONSTER CENTRAL's READING LIST[1]

Cameron Bailey. 'Virtual Skin: Articulating Race in Cyberspace' in Mary Anne Moser & Douglas MacLeod (eds) *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments* Banff Centre for the Arts/ Mass: MIT Press, 1996.

Rosi Braidotti *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. esp.chap. 3 "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines"

Thomas Foster ' Meat Puppets or Robopaths? : Cyberpunk and the Question of Embodiment' *Genders* 18 (winter 1993)pp.11-31.

Donna Haraway *Simians, Cyborgs and Women - The Reinvention of Nature.* London: Free Association,1991. esp.chap. 8 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' (1985)

Donna Haraway and Andrew Ross and Constance Penley. "Cyborgs at Large: Interview with Donna Haraway" in C.Penley and A.Ross.(eds) *Technoculture* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Donna Haraway 'The Actors Are Cyborg, Nature is Coyote, and the Geography is Elsewhere: Postscript to "Cyborgs at Large" 'also in *Technoculture*.

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Marge Piercy *He,She and It* New York:Fawcett Crest, 1991.

Allucquère Rosanne Stone. *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*. Mass: MIT Press, 1995. chapter two "Collective Structures"

Judy Wajcman. *Feminism confronts Technology*. Penn State University Press, 1991 esp.chap. 1 'Feminist Critiques of Science and Technology'

C.Gray (ed) *The Cyborg Handbook* New York: Routledge,1995.

1. see this and more on **MonstrousCentral @ http://www.webcorp.ca/artspeak/MonsterC/parasite.htm**