Recursive subjectivity: reflecting upon William J Mitchell's *Me++*

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Playfully grandiose and hopefully dystopian, William J Mitchell's (2003) *Me++: The Cyborg Self and the Networked City* invokes the end to 'the trial separation of bits and atoms' (3) and asserts a broader, technically driven, dissolution of borders between body and city (30-31), self and network (194-198). *Me++* marks the culmination of a trilogy of books that attempts to chart a rethinking of the landscape of the city and urban spatiality motivated by computation, at the end of the 20th Century. While the first two books in Mitchell's series (1995; 2000), 17 and 12 years on respectively, now read as evocations of an alternate future, never actualised as a present, 10 years on *Me++* articulates concerns that do resonate with aspects of contemporary urban life.

Whereas in the previous two books, *City of Bits* (1995) and *E-topia* (2000), the site of concern was principally the landscape of the city, its architecture and infrastructures, *Me++* attempts a shift in spatial registers, with the (human) body as much more of a focal point. Gone now is the earlier (1995), somehow separate realm of 'cyberspace', replaced by 'a world of less rigid, more fluid and flexible relationships—of knowledge to action, of shape to materials, and of people to places' (5). Flirting with Joyce's *Ulysses* as a literary allegory, Mitchell presents a fast-paced and wide-ranging survey of the ways in which the contemporary sociotechnical milieu is constituted. As Katherine Hayles remarks

on the dust jacket, Mitchell is witty and urbane in his analysis, but also, I argue, firmly anchored in late 20th century urban America. Nevertheless, in a similar vein to Howard Rheingold's *Smart Mobs* (published a year earlier), in his conclusions Mitchell looks to the technically-enabled protest of the early 2000s as the most redolent symptom of the networked 'cyborg' politics he diagnoses.

The breadth of enquiry in Mitchell's project (across all three books) is ambitious, written with the assuredness of a scholar at a point in their career (and with the prestigious institutional backing) that affords significant space to 'reflect, imagine, and invent' (p 6). The result of this fluidity and discursive freedom is an expansive narrative, but there are clear themes. I want to focus, in particular, on two of Mitchell's key themes: mind and space and place. The site of experience, for both of these conceptual themes, is the 'cyborg self'. However, this is not quite the politically slippery figure that troubles established geometries of power (following Harraway, 1991) but rather, with an echo of McLuhan (1997), Mitchell considers himself 'a spatially extended cyborg' constituted 'in a mutually recursive process that continually engages … fluid, permeable boundaries and my endlessly ramifying networks' (Mitchell, 2003: 39). The territory into which the cyborg is extended is the 'networked city', 'no longer bounded by walls, but by the reach of our networks' (16). In a sense, the body is extended with connective urban architectures and infrastructures and the city is figured as a prosthesis to the recursively connected body. In what follows I will take the two themes—mind and space and place—identified above and discuss them in turn.

If the cyborg self is multiply connective and connected, with 'muscular, skeletal, physiological, and nervous systems [that] have been artificially

augmented and expanded' (Mitchell, 2003: 19), so are the cognitive and deliberative capacities. Mitchell argues that with the growing number of 'sensate, intelligent, interconnected devices scattered throughout [the] environment' (34) we need to look to something like Bateson's 'ecology of mind' to understand that 'consciouness, if present at all, is always only partial' amidst these 'nonliving elements as well as multiple organisms... not necessarily defined by a boundary such as the envelope of skin' (Bateson, 2000: 466; cited in Mitchell, 2003: 35). The cyborg self is certainly not a clearly defined Cartesian intentional subject, with a delineated mind and body, but an 'extended body', through 'indefinitely extended electronic systems' that signal questions about the nature of agency, cognition and memory. Through his reading of Bateson, Mitchell argues that 'we are not fully contained within our skins; our extended networks and fragmented habits make us spatially and temporally indefinite entities' (38). Cognition, Mitchell confidently asserts, extends outside of and beyond the body but we are left to guess at the specifics of how this might actually function. Hints are made through examples of 'complex mechanical linkages' such as bicycles and surf boards with allusions to 'interface devices, sensors and servos' (36) whereas the internet is figured a vast memory repository. What is perhaps missing from this account of an externally extensible mind is recent discussions of the plasticity of the brain and the ethical and technical sensibilities required to address that malleability in relation to technology (see, for example: Malabou, 2008; Stiegler, 2010b).

Space and place are figured throughout the book in a number of ways that pit topological against topographical understandings of the world: topography in terms of specific measures of the surface of the earth; and topology in terms of

the relations between bodies and their various prostheses. Scale, however, is retained as a normative measure of the matter and reach of the extention of the body. The atom, the body, and the city are all invoked as scales at various points in Mitchell's articulation of space. Nanotechnology, at the scale of 'billionths of a meter' (68), is figured as a frontier in the construction of material affordances (64-69, 83-84). The body is the extensible and modular unit of subjective experience (41-47). The city as a scale is figured both in terms of the ways in which it representable in the guise of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) (115-127) and in terms of the multiple ways in which consciousness is unspooled in parallel, following Joyce's *Ulysses* (103). Mitchell argues that space is produced in these various registers through the practices that 'secretes [sic]... society's space' following the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991). In particular, following Castells (1989), Mitchell suggests that he is

> 'particularly concerned with the technological infrastructure of the global space of flows, the secretion of spatial patterns by means of that infrastructure, and the specific changes that are resulting from the development of a pervasive, wireless computation and telecommunication infrastructure' (Mitchell, 2003: 215n216).

While the examples Mitchell offers can be informative, there is a times a privileging of the immaterial 'flows' over the viscerality of embodied experience. An interesting counterpoint here might be the work of Katherine Hayles (1999) on posthumanity and Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge (2011) on 'Code/Space'.

The manner in which Mitchell represents his analysis is very strongly situated in the cultural and economic context of the United States of America. A significant range of examples, of course, stem from work undertaken at Mitchell's

institution, MIT, with further references (if you dig through the extensive endnotes) drawn from the Cold War think tank the *Rand Corporation* and the Silicon Valley futurologist consultancy the *Institute for the Future*. The defining event of Mitchell's book, having been written at the beginning of the first decade of the 21st Century, is 11th September 2001. The exceptional circumstances of the event are used by Mitchell as a lens to reveal, amongst many examples: the national dependence on information infrastructures (10) and the constitution of related 'emergency' strategies (51); the becoming real-time of distributed news reporting and memory capture (37, 107); the primacy of the electronic image and its truth effects (111-112); and developing practices of telecommuting (152-153). Furthermore, and perhaps in reaction to that event, Mitchell glimpses the imbrication of digital media in alternate modes of organisation for activism, invoking: 'a new category of human assemblage' (161) that he hopes will facilitate forms of 'networked reciprocity' (204) and 'ethical connectivity' (210) in the formation of a new 'global polis' (208-210), somewhat echoing McLuhan's 'global village'.

In *Me++* Mitchell attempts to critically catalogue and react to the ongoing reconfiguration of a sociotechnical present. It is, of course, a partial and culturally situated account but in offering it there is a real sense that Mitchell is attempting to be expansive to look for ways his observations might plug into broader or other understandings of an increasingly digitally mediated world. However, while Mitchell does stitch together a tapestry of evidence for the construction of the 'cyborg self and the networked city'—assuming from the outset that 'we shape our technologies, then our technologies shape us, in ongoing cycles' (6)—there is no explicit attempt to take this further articulate

what we might think of as a theory of contemporary 'technogenesis': the co-evolution of the human and the technical (following Hayles, 2012; Stiegler, 1998). Nevertheless, Mitchell does begin to think through the political challenges for the networked and recursively constituted cyborg self as forms of governmentality founded on access control, privacy, identity security, tracking and control. The challenge set by Mitchell, understood a decade on, is perhaps then to continue to respond (for example, in the mode of Galloway and Thacker, 2007; Rifkin, 2000; Stiegler, 2010a) and to attempt to think and create forms of 'networked reciprocity' and 'ethical connectivity'.

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