

# Sampling Haraway, Hunting Björk: Locating a Cyborg Subjectivity

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## Haraway's Cyborg in Context

In the context of post-Marxist and poststructuralist thought, Donna Haraway's early writings are hardly distinctive in having a strained relationship with the binary opposition. In an article that recounts her difficult attempt to define "gender," Haraway claims that "the evidence is building of a need for a theory of 'difference' whose geometries, paradigms, and logics break out of binaries, dialectics, and nature/culture models of any kind."<sup>1</sup> Her phrasing suggests the complexity of the problem: she does not claim either to know of or use such a theory, nor does she claim that her own writing does not continue to make productive use of various binary formulations when they suit her purposes. She seems to hint that even honest attempts at such a theory would likely be undermined by intransigent oppositions lurking in unsuspected corners of their meta-theoretical architecture. Yet the explosive fervor and potentially self-recriminatory nature of Haraway's proposition cast her as an honest theoretical adventurer who might be forgiven any dependence on an intellectual heritage that both defines the problem and must be effaced by its solution. It befits the image of Haraway-as-revolutionary to picture her improvising a massive mobile

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 129.

whose gravity might eventually render its moorings superfluous, unafraid of the contradictions that might arise along the way.

The quotation above also suggests an ambivalence toward theory itself, detectable in much of Haraway's writing. While always committed to a scientific-materialist project to develop "better accounts of the world,"<sup>2</sup> her contributions to critical theory tend to take the form of mythical figures (such as FemaleMan©, OncoMouse™, and, most famously, the cyborg) that function as highly implicative extended metaphors or participate in mythic historical narratives, rather than as universal critical postulates or elaborate abstract edifices.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Haraway enacts the situatedness of knowledge offered by these figures, while leaving the location of each of these subjects imprecise enough to allow her readers both multiple imaginary habitations of them, and flexible coalitions with them.

Music-centered Haraway readers have ranged widely, both in the extent to which they foreclose such metaphorical implications in an attempt to extract theoretical dogma, and in how far they are willing to follow Haraway's conflicted flight from binarism. Lawrence Kramer's *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, which presents Haraway's postmodernism as laudable but impossibly multiplicitous and utopian, openly depends on maintaining binaries in its analytical projects,<sup>4</sup> while Alistair Williams uses Haraway's dissatisfaction with her own eradication of binarism to criticize Kramer for being too willing to accept the plethora of perspectives Haraway asks us to acknowledge.<sup>5</sup> Most references to Haraway in writing on music associate her with

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>3</sup> See Donna Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan©\_Meets\_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 8-11 for an elliptical tour through those semantic spaces implicated in her use of the word "figure," a tour which begins in Erich Auerbach's mimetic theory. FemaleMan© and OncoMouse™ are detailed in chap. 2 of that book, while the cyborg's origin text "The Cyborg Manifesto" is found in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), especially 7-9.

<sup>5</sup> Alistair Williams, "Musicology and Postmodernism," *Music Analysis* 19 (2000): 389-90.

the figure of the cyborg and her famous "Cyborg Manifesto."<sup>6</sup> While Susana Loza describes a variety of fictional cyborg subjects,<sup>7</sup> and Maria Pini uses the figure to explore the role of house music in women's imagining of their own subjectivities,<sup>8</sup> too much of this writing reifies the cyborg as a fixed concatenation of limited boundary crossings. Even in work that engages Haraway's critique of binarism (such as articles by Kay Dickinson and Joseph Auner<sup>9</sup>), analysis of musical and multimodal examples often reduces their fictional cyborg subjects to fixed textual artifacts constructed in terms of familiar binary oppositions in sometimes unfamiliar configurations, without registering this as an incongruous use of Haraway's most famous post-binary mascot.

Among those artists claimed as cyborgs in Haraway's name, Björk has suffered most frequently,<sup>10</sup> with the most prominent instance appearing in the volume *Music and Technoculture*.<sup>11</sup> Charity Marsh and Melissa West's promise to "dismantle" the opposition between nature and technology belies a problematic theoretical geometry where a "narrowing" of this division is said to allow "a continual state of flux" between terms.<sup>12</sup> Yet a core binary coupling constrains this flux

<sup>6</sup> See note 3 above.

<sup>7</sup> Susana Loza, "Sampling (Hetero)sexuality: Diva-ness and Discipline in Electronic Dance Music," *Popular Music* 20 (2001): 349-59.

<sup>8</sup> Maria Pini, *Club Cultures and Female Subjectivity: The Move from Home to House* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Kay Dickinson, "'Believe?': Vocoder, Digitalised Female Identity and Camp," *Popular Music* 20 (2001): 333-47; and Joseph Auner, "'Sing it for me': Posthuman Ventriloquism in Recent Popular Music," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 128 (2003): 98-122.

<sup>10</sup> Selected examples: Greg Hainge, "'Pagan Poetry', Piercing, Pain and the Politics of Becoming," *Scan* 1 (2004), [http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal\\_id=43](http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=43) (accessed 20 April 2007); Daniel Pimley, "Cyborg Futures: Cyborgs, Cyberpunk and the Future of the Body" (2003), [www.pimley.net/documents/cyborgfutures.pdf](http://www.pimley.net/documents/cyborgfutures.pdf) (accessed 4 January 2007); Rick Poynor, "Cyber Björk," in M/M, ed., *Björk* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2001); and Steven Shaviro, "The Erotic Life of Machines," *Parallax* 8 (2002): 21-31.

<sup>11</sup> Charity Marsh and Melissa West, "The Nature/Technology Binary Opposition Dismantled in the Music of Madonna and Björk," in René Lysloff and Leslie Gay, eds., *Music and Technoculture* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 182-83.

("in Western society, nature and technology are socially constructed respectively as feminine and masculine"), and supports a further set of conventional associations ("the nature/culture dichotomy relies upon the definition of nature as feminine, subjective, and of the earth, whereas culture is defined as masculine, objective, and controlling the earth") and ethical consequences, such that if "culture's appropriation of nature is manifest through technology," then culture is a chilling, misogynist border raid of nature's warmth.<sup>13</sup>

Marsh and West's "de-gendering' [of] nature and technology in popular music" relies on equating the narrowing of binaries and mixing of their terms with an inversion of "culture" in which female nature warms male technology through juxtapositions, gradual transformations and ambiguities.<sup>14</sup> Because it seems to redress the usual power structure of the binary, this inversion is read as an implosion of the binary itself:

Björk, like Haraway, suggests an alternative escape from the oppressive forces of gendered binary oppositions. Björk manages to accomplish this by juxtaposing the elements traditionally considered by Western societies as opposing. Because "the cyborg [or Björk's *Homogenic* is] no longer structured by the polarity of public and private...Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other."<sup>15</sup>

This quotation in a quotation unwittingly demonstrates how unlikely it is that Haraway would recognize this inversion-as-implosion model as her own. Marsh and West's take replicates the original binary as the measure of successful change; in this case, fully intact versions of nature

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 183-84.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 196, quoting Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 151. The text in brackets, by Marsh and West, refers to Björk's album *Homogenic* (Elektra 62061-2, © 1997).

and culture measure their mutual appropriation and incorporation. Any ethical judgment made from this position has by its own terms failed as revolution. Moreover, Haraway's theory ever more delicately uncouples one binary from another, recognizing each as a separate act of exclusion. Dismantling oppositions between nature and culture in specific historical moments and material contexts is central to this project. Perhaps the popularity of the "Cyborg Manifesto," an intentionally over-generalizing polemic, has obscured the degree to which Haraway's ecstatic vision of revolution—as in many utopian texts—is a fantasia on histories detailed elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

Even in the "Manifesto," the figure of the cyborg emerges in a time and space where the opposition between nature and technology is unstable:

...I want to signal three crucial boundary breakdowns that make [my] political-fictional (political-scientific) analysis possible. By the late twentieth century in United States scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached....The second leaky distinction is between animal-human (organism) and machine....The third distinction is a subset of the second: the boundary between the physical and the non-physical is very imprecise for us.<sup>17</sup>

The first two of Haraway's oppositions disrupt the nature/technology binary by introducing a third term—the human. Crucially, what it

<sup>16</sup> This article follows Crewe's gambit to rescue the "Manifesto" from becoming an "overrated period piece" (Jonathan Crewe, "Transcoding the World: Haraway's Postmodernism," *Signs* 22 [1997]: 902) by casting Haraway's work as a distinctive and significant postmodernism. It might be read as emphasizing "the relentless dynamism of a transcoding model" (p. 894) in the subjectivities that underwrite textual production and reception, while resisting the binarism it implies as anything more than a rhetorical and heuristic device.

<sup>17</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 151, 152, 153. Although its final form appears for the first time in Haraway 1991, the "Cyborg Manifesto" appears in an

is to be human seems quite different for each resultant binary. By separating humans from animals, most of the characteristics allied with “female” by Marsh and West—emotion, the body, subjectivity—dissociate from the natural, becoming as much “human” as the “male” characteristics of reason, mind, and objectivity. Yet when humans and animals are both considered “organisms,” in opposition to “machines,” the alliance between the male values of coldness, rationality, and objectivity splinters, as a masculinist conception of human agency is wont to reconstitute a warmed-up reason as central to its subjectivity.

In her critique of the social formations that supported the Nature Movement from about 1890 to 1930 in the United States, Haraway uses the term “man” to construct nature and technology quite differently, marking both as potential agents of physical and social decay:

Decadence threatened in two interconnected ways, both related to energy-limited, productive systems—one artificial, one organic. The machine threatened to consume and exhaust man. And the sexual economy of man seemed vulnerable both to exhaustion and to submergence in unruly and primitive excess.<sup>18</sup>

While in the “Manifesto,” Haraway’s “third distinction” between the physical and the non-physical was transgressed by the magical, spiritual aura of invisible technologies, here the transgressor is disease. Human experiences of sex and technology are mechanized in this formulation,

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earlier form as early as 1983, and in a near-final form in 1985’s *Socialist Review*. It will be useful to keep in mind that although Haraway talks about “the late twentieth century,” the article was first formulated long before the internet boom, and not long after the advent of MTV, however much we might find this work relevant for the later twentieth century. I should also note that the portion of Haraway’s 1989 book *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989) on which this article most frequently draws appeared in a near-final form in 1984/5’s *Social Text*, and is thus contemporary with the “Manifesto.”

<sup>18</sup> Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 55.

and the wear of mindless repetition becomes an invisible contagion that threatens the health of both the individual and social body. This model of disease, no less than the figure of the cyborg, breaks down the boundaries between human and nature, and between nature and technology. Indeed, articulating a boundary in order to show its transgression or “dismantling” is always somewhat of a rhetorical ruse, a convenient historical fiction. Binaries gain their power not only through contrast, but because that contrast is so incompletely made. They are forever being negotiated, with the desires and insecurities of the negotiators always central.

The term “human,” then, is central to whatever center produces a binary, competing with and complementing “male,” “female,” and other livable gender positions as origins of binary construction. The human subject is not, however, always constructed as that which is subjecting; while a single human “self” constructs the multiple “other” as both a tamed negativity and a feared imaginary, those fears can become real obstacles to the maintenance of that self. We might read Marsh and West’s inverted binaries as an attempt to negotiate this fear, where their warm female subject must shore herself up against a technology coded less as disease than as sanitization. To dismantle a binary as a feminist political act, then, is both to expose the powers and flaws a self takes from that binary, and to recognize independent values in what it had suppressed. Nor is this act universal, but rather an operation on local configurations of binary redundancies and exclusions.

Haraway’s utopian visions of the displaced masculinist self are inextricable from narratives of that self as scientist, where makeshift geometries make way for specific histories of political and epistemological transformations. The following sympathetically “blasphemous” account connects the decadent and cyborg selves that she posits. While nineteenth-century white, male, middle-class scientific practice mythologized and pathologized other genders, races, and classes as decadent contagions, without concern that they might speak for themselves, or indeed that any observed data might actively challenge those scientists’ self-serving presuppositions, twentieth-century materialist epistemologies—remade by science’s victorious

claim to objectivity—did not support the maintenance of the other as fiction. For modern science to have claimed objects at all, it needed to allow them the possibility of independent value; once an object was only partially structured by the will to power of its viewing subject, the threat it might usurp the positive, value-laden position of the binary forced the subject to continuously reappraise its own position and authority. Once an idealized scientific method itself exceeded the human capacity for rationality, and artificial intelligence blurred the line between this hyper-rationality and subjective agency, the masculinist subject once at the center of the scientific project yielded to an ideal it could never achieve. This emptying of the subject resulted both in its relative mobility—by accreting scientific-cultural capital, a greater variety of people can inhabit it than ever before—and its fictionality. As a fiction, it becomes reinscribed more generally as a position non-scientists may adopt in a doomed attempt to secure their objectivity.

Moments from this narrative can be illustrated with Haraway's studies of twentieth-century primatology, which follow the shifting status of primates from problematic objects to emergent subjects. At the beginning of the century, apes were seen as the boundary case that both originates man in, and separates him from, the natural world, bracketing a continuum of otherness that rendered racist taxonomies as an evolutionary series. From the 1930s, as apes were found to be challengingly complex, they were repeatedly reconfigured as metaphors for the human condition, viewed through capitalist lenses of dominance, submission and production. From the 1970s, as increasingly autonomous subjects that threaten the uniqueness of our agency, they have attracted a kind of ethical advocacy that alternately embraces and resists the paternalism of colonial discourses.<sup>19</sup>

In this story, the subject must battle on two sides to maintain its privilege: on the one side against nature, on the other against technology. Indeed, the positive value ascribed by science to both nature and technology renders the "human" the feared, imaginary

<sup>19</sup> Representative examples of Haraway discussing these three historical moments may be found in *Primate Visions*, chaps. 2, 4, and 7 respectively.

space in Haraway's binary pairs—any binary that can be constructed to quarantine something as otherness renders the subject empty to the extent that its other gains positive value. At this point, a binary has been truly dismantled. Although Haraway herself writes, "the cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed,"<sup>20</sup> we might claim that this ever more amorphous boundary has itself already been effaced by the implosion of the subject. What makes Haraway's version of this story distinctive is that it leaves behind not a void but a panoply of located selves, all incomplete and indiscrete, though selves may continue to attempt to inhabit the absent subject position.

### A Cyborg Speaks: Björk in Interview

The subject's simultaneous disappearance and persistence complicates both textual analysis—particularly the analysis of art and entertainment—and the ethical discussion of authorship pursued by Marsh and West. On the one hand, Björk's oeuvre is a good candidate for cyborg authorship, with each text relying on multiple creators, each constituted by technologies, emotions, rationales, and bodies in conflict and cooperation. This plurality coexists with Björk's individual authorial claims, and her discussion of her texts in terms of her own particular and self-consciously cyborg identity. Even a cyborg, when it speaks, is a subject in the linguistic sense, a point of articulation for an intersection of identities, and the capacity for articulation reclaims the subject as a potentially political agent. But authors cannot be expected to express subjecthood only to this extent; Haraway's utopia, after all, remains a fictional one, and that fiction incompletely penetrates the real, as well as other fictions. While an author might desire to embrace the cyborg self, this desire is modulated by the fear that results from ascribing positive value to an incompletely positive space. The fragmentary and inconsistent negotiation of that

<sup>20</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 152.

identity reveals itself both in the author's work and in his or her various and perhaps conflicting commentaries on it, manifested in ambivalent boundary crossings, self-serving historical manufacture, unwitting reliance on disavowed models, and progressive exhortations—all of which constitute a political reality toward which we can only maintain ethical equivocality.

In a particularly cogent interview with Michel Field given during a promotional tour for *Homogenic*, Björk positions her relationship with nature and technology through her own primate vision:

Similarly, the word “nature” and the word “techno” mean the same thing. It depends whether one places oneself in the past or in the future. I explain it like this: take a little house in the mountains; from the perspective of apes it is techno, it is the future, but for us it has become nature. I think the principle is the same. Between techno and nature lies the present. We must live both and find a happy medium, it's very important. We can't be exclusively techno or exclusively natural.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> “De la même manière le mot nature et le mot techno ont le même sens. Cela dépend si l'on se place dans le passé ou dans le futur. Je l'explique comme ça: prenons une petite maison dans la montagne, en la voyant des singes diraient qu'elle est techno car elle représente le futur, mais pour nous elle serait nature. Je pense que le principe est le même. Entre la techno et la nature se trouve le présent. Il faut vivre les deux et trouver le juste milieu, c'est très important. On ne peut pas être exclusivement techno ou exclusivement nature.” Björk and Michel Field, “Interview de Björk par Michel Field. Tracks du 19 décembre 1997,” <http://archives.arte-tv.com/tracks/19980130/ftext/InterTX.htm> (accessed 4 January 2007). For a German translation, see <http://archives.arte-tv.com/tracks/19980130/dtext/InterTX.htm>. “Tracks” is a weekly arts show on the Franco-German television station “arte-tv.” All quoted excerpts from this transcript are in the author's translation; many thanks to Matthieu Boyd for his assistance with this translation.

In the original French, the word “techno” is used as slang for both “technology” and “technological,” as well as sometimes seeming to refer to the genre of music “techno.” To keep this ambiguity alive, “techno” has been left untranslated. Moreover, “techno”

Björk's notion of the cyborg does not seem to depend on the radical subject displacement that Haraway envisions. For nature and techno(logy) to mean the same thing, their construction as negative spaces projected by a universal subject must be complete. By coupling nature with the past and technology with the future, Björk places this subject at the spearhead of history's arrow, leaving other identities in its wake. The use of the ape to bookend these cast-offs as primitive, evolutionary precursors that are still endowed with the anxieties of human subjectivity suggests a social Darwinism that Haraway connects to various forms of race and class oppression. By historicizing her subjecthood, however, Björk is also acknowledging its contingency and fictionality. Just as the present is an imaginary boundary between past and future, the subject imagines itself anxiously at a shifting boundary between nature (the other as tamed negativity) and technology (the other as feared imaginary):

When man discovered [fire], he was afraid and said: We're all going to die. Then he learned to cook and to utilize fire. When man discovered nuclear energy, he was afraid, and rightly so. But nuclear power can be beneficial, we can draw energy from it.<sup>22</sup>

This formulation of discovery might be taken as an analogue to the kind of modern scientific epistemology that Haraway charts through the past century. The other is discovered in the world, already independently

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is often cited as the highest compliment Björk bestows (cf. Poynor, "Cyber Björk," 115).

This particular extract is very similar to a quotation provided by another interviewer, Evelyn McDonnell, in *Army of She: Icelandic, Iconoclastic, Irrepressible Björk* (New York: AtRandom.com, 2001), 23-24.

<sup>22</sup> "Je crois que c'est le même phénomène que la découverte du feu. Quand l'homme l'a découvert, il a eu peur et se disait: Nous allons tous mourir. Puis il a appris à cuisiner et à se servir du feu. Quand l'homme a découvert l'énergie nucléaire, il a eu peur, à raison. Mais le nucléaire peut être bénéfique, nous pouvons en tirer de l'énergie." Björk and Field, "Interview."

real. The human subject's naiveté results in the fear of that object, at which point the object is coded as techno(logy). Once the subject learns how to use and tame the object, it becomes second nature, and then eventually just nature. In this way, the equivalence of nature and technology is predicated not on the masculinist subject's preeminence, but rather on its removability; without it, there is indeed no difference between nature and techno(logy) in the case of fire and nuclear energy, the difference depending entirely on "whether one places oneself in the past or in the future." The subject becomes an unsuccessful colonizer, leaving only faint semiotic traces on the world it inhabits. Even in those traces, our fear of nuclear energy makes us apes too, subject to a techno(logy) more rational and durable than we are. This fear is captured in "The Modern Things" (the third track from Björk's 1995 album *Post*<sup>23</sup>), in which technological others are coded as natural entities, only taking on the coding of technology by posing a greater physical threat than the semiotic infringements detailed above:

**Example 1.** "The Modern Things" (excerpt).

...all the modern things  
 have always existed  
 they've just been waiting  
 to come out  
 and multiply  
 and take over  
 it's their turn now<sup>24</sup>

In the end, however, Björk's faith in her own subjecthood and its naturalness overrides any anxiety: "We are afraid of things that we

<sup>23</sup> Björk, *Post*, Elektra 61740-2, © 1995.

<sup>24</sup> Björk Guðmundsdóttir, "The Modern Things," *Post*. Reprinted by permission of the author.

don't understand and that might be stronger than us. It's natural, but ultimately there is nothing stronger than human nature."<sup>25</sup>

Later in the same interview, Björk articulates her position in relation to culture, nature, and technology somewhat differently:

Two days ago I bought a little accordion in Italy. The quality of the sound and the mechanism were surprising. It was a product of its time. If one invented the mechanism now, with today's music, the sound, the notes, the musicality would be completely different. It's interesting to see that all instruments are not only created by science, but are also influenced by the musical taste of the time. In each instrument resides the ideal of beauty and the spirit of invention of its time. Today, we have samplers. They make very beautiful sounds that marry the hope, the curiosity, everything that moves us in 1997, with technology. It's a beautiful marriage!<sup>26</sup>

Here, Björk sees technology more as a novel product of culture than as a reinterpretation of nature. The masculinist subject imbues itself into its technologies only for them to become obsolete in the wake of that subject's continuing perfection. Those technologies are nonetheless envisioned as cyborg fragments that embody their culture's "hope"

<sup>25</sup> "Nous avons peur des choses que nous ne connaissons pas et qui peuvent être plus puissantes que nous. C'est naturel, mais de toute façon il n'y a rien de plus fort que la nature humaine." Björk and Field, "Interview."

<sup>26</sup> "Il y a deux jours, j'ai acheté un petit accordéon en Italie. Les accords et le mécanisme sont surprenants. Il a été créé en fonction de l'époque. Si on inventait ce mécanisme maintenant, avec la musique d'aujourd'hui, les accords, les notes, sa musicalité serait complètement différente. C'est intéressant de voir que tout instrument n'est pas seulement créé par la science, il est aussi influencé par le goût musical de l'époque. Dans chaque instrument se rejoignent l'idéal de beauté et l'esprit d'invention de l'époque. Aujourd'hui, nous avons les samplers. Ils font de très beaux sons qui marient l'espoir, la curiosité, tout ce qui nous a fait vibrer en 1997 et la technologie. C'est un beau mariage!" Ibid.

and “curiosity.” The metaphor of marriage suggests that technology and culture are also gendered conventionally, where technology is male and nature—here elided with culture through “musical taste,” and allied with Björk’s own authorial position—is female. However, this conception of technology does not map conveniently onto its earlier characterization as the feared imaginary; while that fear emerged as the projection of a masculinist self into the void, rendering its product not-male, this second version of technology is male yet passive and malleable, supplicant to its female author.

Björk describes sampling in terms that incorporate the authorial position of the universal masculinist subject in her compositional practice:

The good thing about the sampler, *l'échantillonneur*, is that you can choose what you repeat. It's a great freedom. For example, take the track we're making now; we're speaking together, we decide the story and the context. Conversely, if you sample a train, or a waterfall, and you repeat this sound many times, you make a motif, it's like wallpaper. You have a context; if you mix in a saxophone or a voice, this will be the story. Or again conversely, if you sample me, my voice will be everywhere and this becomes the context, and the train or the waterfall will be the story.<sup>27</sup>

In a strange twist, the “freedom” of the all-powerful author derives from an extension of the provisional, located nature of subjectivity,

<sup>27</sup> “Ce qui est bien avec le sampler, l'échantillonneur, c'est qu'on peut choisir ce qu'on répète. C'est une grande liberté. Pour l'expliquer prenons l'exemple de la pièce où nous sommes: nous parlons ensemble, nous décidons du récit et du cadre...Mais si nous inversons...si vous samplez un train, ou une cascade, et que vous répétez ce son plusieurs fois, vous obtenez un motif, c'est comme du papier peint. Vous avez un cadre, vous y intégrez un saxophone ou une voix, ce sera le récit. On peut aussi inverser: vous me samplez ma voix sera partout, ce sera le cadre, le train ou la cascade seront le récit.” Ibid.

but is realized through the fictional subject Björk creates in the text. In such a text, alternative histories generate new binary configurations by reorganizing the temporal structure of the environment and freely exchanging elements between self and other. While the central subject remains a privileged referent regardless of what happens to constitute it, the process of sampling attempts to at least disrupt conventional binary couplings. However, the power of manipulation supposed by a universalist subjectivity over the world itself here operates only on representations of that world. The infinite recombining of those representations is coherent in texts only because they are underwritten by an external order they do nothing to erase.

### A Cyborg Sings: Björk on Screen

Björk's song and music video "Hunter" (from *Homogenic*; see Example 2) provide an opportunity to consider her cyborg identity in the context of Haraway's thought, as Haraway identifies an ambiguity between the self as scientist and the self as hunter at the beginning of twentieth-century primatology.<sup>28</sup>

#### Example 2. "Hunter."

If travel is searching  
and home what's been found  
I'm not stopping

I'm going hunting  
I'm the hunter  
I'll bring back the goods  
but I don't know when

I thought I could organize freedom

<sup>28</sup> Haraway, *Primate Visions*. See especially chap. 2.

how Scandinavian of me  
you sussed it out, didn't you?

You could smell it  
so you left me on my own  
to complete the mission  
now I'm leaving it all behind

I'm going hunting: I'm the hunter<sup>29</sup>

Both scientist and hunter are in search of the kind of sexless reproduction with which Björk identifies the sampler. For the hunter, the tool is taxidermy, which reconfigures the uncontrollable real in the negative, semiotic space of the realism which attempts to replace it. Whereas for Björk, unknown nature is technology, for hunter and taxidermist Carl Akeley (Haraway's main actor in her account of the Nature Movement), the unknown becomes nature through technology. This transformation is unlike sampling in that its realism depends on an infringement on the world; nature can only be a refuge from the machines in death, their mode of reproductivity. If this control can be had over nature, then perhaps the same control can be had over the body, the site of nature's greatest purchase on the self:

From the dead body of the primate, Akeley crafted something finer than the living organism; he achieved its true end, a new genesis. Decadence—the threat of the city, civilization, machine—was stayed in the politics of eugenics and the art of taxidermy. The [American] Museum [of Natural History] fulfilled its scientific purpose of conservation, preservation, and the production of permanence. Life was transfigured

<sup>29</sup> Björk Guðmundsdóttir, "Hunter," from *Homogenic*. Reprinted by permission of the author.

in the principal civic arena of western political theory—  
the natural body of man.<sup>30</sup>

For the hunter, an animal becomes quarry when it is “a worthy opponent. The ideal quarry is the ‘other,’ the natural self.”<sup>31</sup> While Björk’s ape was a benign prop to her fictional evolutionary subject, here the boundary between human and nature is traumatic; as a worthy opponent, nature is coded as male by the gun that threatens it, and made real by being allowed to simulate subjecthood. In this way, the feared imaginary can be coded as male, as a hunted that always threatens to invert roles and become the hunter. The subject can then transfer aberrant experiences of his own body onto this totem of nature as threat, so that murdering his opponent is made acceptable as a preservation and rehabilitation of both their bodies. For the scientist, the equivalent of the sampler is not the gun but the camera, a tool that straddles the boundary between realism (the real as reproduced object) and the semiotic (real reproduced as sign). A camera—although it tends toward the passive—is also a reproductive tool that allows the shift “from nature worthy of manly fear to nature in need of motherly nurture.”<sup>32</sup> Like the accordion, the camera as cyborg fragment is construed as male yet supplicant; at the moment the phallic lens “shoots,” it passively accepts an image (though we still call this passive act “capture”). This feminization of domination also resonates with Björk’s sampler, which is likewise, as Haraway would put it, “superior to the gun for the control of time.”<sup>33</sup>

The hunter in “Hunter” also negotiates the known and the unknown by turning the feared imaginary into tamed negativity. If knowledge and habituation transform technology into nature, then the hunter’s journey leaves nature—and the safe balance between knowledge and fear that constitutes the present—behind, surging

<sup>30</sup> Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 27.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

forward relentlessly into unfamiliar technologies.<sup>34</sup> If the subject is a negative space made present only discursively, we might hear the incessant claim to identity as an ever-increasing need to articulate the possibility of existence beyond that frame; as long as the “I” can still articulate itself as a linguistic subject, it continues to exist.

Haraway argues that a human hunter is by default a masculinist subject. Indeed, this hunter’s incredulous patriotism expresses the same central, masculinist conundrum—law as drive to both individual agency and moral taxonomy—that Akeley solves by taxidermy, the display of carefully crafted exemplars as a typification of nature. Yet while Akeley’s hunts focus on apes that have already been evaluated as suitable for future manufacture as “natural” in taxidermic display, Björk’s less experienced hunter claims a mission without time frame or object—though the phrase “the goods” suggests that the object of the hunt is already somewhat tame, already constructed in some form of economy, or at least not as a competing agent. Perhaps this hunter is not human, but instead one of those animals endowed with human agency and anxiety by human subjects who desire an adversary. Perhaps Björk’s incessant repetition of her claim to identity—“I’m the hunter”—suggests less the certainty of subjecthood than unfamiliarity with it; is it inauthentic, uncomfortable, or still in need of rehearsal?

One of Björk’s explications of the song, in which desire for the hunter’s power becomes a metaphor for her desired attitude toward human relationships, is undercut by these uncertainties, as well as by her halting, confessional tone of voice:

It’s based on, um, what my grandma told me on  
Christmas about two different types of birds who are,

<sup>34</sup> In an interview Björk conducted with Karlheinz Stockhausen for *Dazed and Confused* in 1996, the year before “Huner” was written, he presages this equation of the hunter and scientist through their shared engagement with the unknown: “I am like a hunter, trying to find something, and at the same time, well this is the scientific aspect, trying to discover.” In Mark Sanders & Jefferson Hack, eds., *Star Culture: The Collected Interviews from Dazed and Confused Magazine* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 121.

um, birds that always have the same nests all their lives, like swans, and they always have the same partners... and there are birds that travel all the time and they always have different partners all the time, and kinda like, um, to make a conscious decision to stay a hunter.<sup>35</sup>

That Björk's hunter is less than consummate is consistent with her wanting less to conquer a feared, imagined object than to reject the tamed, known, domestic subject position constructed as the hunter's opposite. This priority is suggested in the lyrics by the second-person address, directed toward a figure more like an abandoned fellow swan than a hunted object.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, the linking of the hunt to the pursuit of love highlights the hunter's rejection of natural reproductivity in exchange for the dream of autonomous, sexless reproduction (a parallel with Björk's material relation to her product). At the same time, the hunter chooses to construe love as a conquering and colonization of the other in an attempt to shield the resolve of a newly empowered self.

The music video for "Hunter," directed by Paul White, multiplies the possibilities inherent in its lyrics.<sup>37</sup> It begins with a blank white screen and no sense of space or distance. As the music fades in, so does a close-up of Björk's head and shoulders. She is bald, wears

<sup>35</sup> From a *South Bank Show* documentary first broadcast in the UK on 9 November 1997. Björk is filmed making this statement near El Cortija, the studio in southern Spain where *Homogenic* was produced, at about the time the live tracks for "Hunter" were recorded.

<sup>36</sup> The printed booklet that accompanies the album has the lyric end with the twice-repeated line "you just didn't know me," which does not appear in the song or video. This line suggests that Björk's "decision to stay a hunter" may have occurred in a less than perfect nest. In journalism and popular biography, "Hunter" is most often interpreted as a break-up song written about Björk's relationship with jungle musician Goldie (for example, in Ian Gittins, *Björk—There's More to Life Than This: The Stories Behind Every Song* [New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002], 89).

<sup>37</sup> Streaming video of "Hunter" is available at <http://www.bjork.com/videogallery>. The video is also included on the DVD compilations *Volumen* (One Little Indian Records, 1999) and *Björk: Greatest Hits* (One Little Indian Records, 2003).

no apparent make-up, and her bare shoulders seem to suggest her complete nudity. The camera frame is fixed for the entire video (shot in a single take), with Björk's head always filling the screen. Her eyelids flutter as if she is unaccustomed to the light, and her head moves about abruptly, avoiding prolonged eye contact with the camera. Indeed, she only looks at the camera to sing, her eyes darting outside the frame as soon as a lyric has been delivered; perhaps she is guarding a secret.

Björk's image alternately evokes two different versions of the hunter. When she sings, she is the perfect masculinist human subject. With no hair or body to mark her as female, she assumes the neutral gender proper to that subject's claim to universality. Unencumbered by external objects, the subject is all powerful; its singing face radiates the other as pure negativity. And yet it is precisely this isolation that makes her appear so vulnerable. In her moments of distracted inattention, the glances, smiles, and exaggerated movements that suggest some innocent auto-erotic satisfaction figure her as a fantasy of big game, disoriented by an artificial enclosure. As viewers, we cannot be sure whether we are dissolved in this subject's negative space, or whether we project this creature as an idealized opponent or allegory. Moreover, if a hunter is always a threat, even if only as a role we ourselves could take, is this hunter's subjectivity stronger than our own, or a nature that might violently burst out from under our rationalization of it?

At the first of the many utterances of "I'm the hunter," some of these ambiguities come more clearly into focus, though they are in no way resolved. Shiny metallic plates slide out from under the skin on the sides of Björk's face near her temples, somewhat like scales, only to retract again. They emerge and recess, covering more and more of her face until she is thoroughly, if only briefly, transformed into a cyborg polar bear. The scales tend to appear during pauses between lyrics, though this is not always the case. Each time the transformation occurs, Björk appears more at ease, more playful; sometimes she seems to take pleasure from the exertion required to retract the scales, and glances mischievously at the camera when she jerks them quickly from behind her ear. The complete transformation occurs three times, during the

second and longest of which it is the polar bear that sings, once only, "I'm the hunter."

The focused but unresolved paradoxes of this hunter's subjectivity call into question analyses like that of Marsh and West, where the meanings of a text become clear as various binaries conspire to articulate stark juxtapositions. In such an analysis, the captivating finesse of Björk's physical transformations would, if not definitively decide the nature of this subject, at least marshal nature and technology to delineate the significance of discrete semiotic possibilities. In the "Hunter" video, such a strategy is spectacularly inadequate. Not only do both of our competing characterizations of this hunter turn out to be valid—Björk's hunter is both animal, with resonances both evolutionary and mythological, and consummately technological—but both the natural and the technological encroach on and/or reveal the cyborg at the same time and place: from under the surface of the skin in moments of honest disclosure. Any distinction between these options is made just as Björk said it would be: by disrupting this synthetic temporal elision with our own subjectivity. Any attempt to tease out the opposition is futile; there is no world in which we can watch this creature act, no other selves or other others to resolve questions of relative power, no basis for ethical judgment. Even the symbols themselves are ambivalent; the polar bear is both hunter and hunted, and the artificial scales that produce the transformation are its disease and its protection. Just as that Italian accordion was "a product of its time," so too is this cyborg, a fiction located in a particular present defined as much by its intersection of unstable binaries as by its self-sufficient presence, with multiple contradictory views of the future and the past. Such cyborgs tend to date so quickly not because the world changes, or even because binaries reconfigure with it, but because of changes in how those binaries deform when they are stretched across our lithely mutative subjectivities.

Five years after recording *Homogenic*, in an interview in which she offered supplementary details and revised interpretations of her greatest hits, Björk said this about "Hunter":

I guess that song's about when you have a lot of people that work for you and you sort of have to write songs or people get unemployed, you know? In most cases, it's inspiring but in that particular song I was pissed off with it. I was ready for a break but it didn't seem fair on the people I worked with at the time.<sup>38</sup>

Again the gender binary seems inadequate. Björk couches her concern for her employees in terms of economic responsibility rather than as familial nurture. The hunter as nurturer might have exemplified the scientific materialist incursion of the independently real on masculinist fantasy; while the human hunter imagines his ideal foe through the lens of his own masculinity, real hunters in nature are just as frequently female, their motivations poor analogues for human conquest and domination. In the case of polar bears, the sow is her cubs' sole provider and their only protection from hostile boars. In the above explanation, on the other hand, Björk recasts the hunter as an entrepreneur, the driving force and guarantor behind a corporate machine that churns out products sparked by her creativity—that is, as an agent of sexless reproduction. The codependence of Björk and her staff is therefore construed as a corporate ethic that holds her responsible for insulating their productivity from the threat of decadence.

### **The Rhythm of the Hunt**

To elucidate how the music contributes towards the positioning of the subject in "Hunter," we might turn first to a brief reception history of Maurice Ravel's *Boléro* (1928), whose characteristic rhythmic pattern features prominently throughout Björk's song. Ravel himself explained *Boléro* in terms of technology. In an English interview in 1932, he stated, "I love going over factories and seeing vast machinery at work. It is awe-inspiring and great. It was a factory which inspired my

<sup>38</sup> David Hemingway, "Björk," *Record Collector* 276 (2002): 43.

*Boléro*. I would like it always to be played with a vast factory in the background.”<sup>39</sup> He expanded this view in his 1933 article, “Finding Tunes in Factories,” in which he provocatively proposed the “Business Man as Hero,” installing the entrepreneur’s sexless reproductivity as the engine driving both technological and cultural progress.<sup>40</sup> Privately, however, Ravel acknowledged *Boléro*’s sexual dimension; as Benjamin Ivry notes, Ravel “was certain *Boléro* would never be programmed at Sunday concerts because of [its] sexual element.”<sup>41</sup> Taken as part of Ivry’s aim to place Ravel’s work in the context of his sexuality and his identification as a decadent, we can see the machine image not as a ruse but as a conflation. Ravel’s aestheticized mass production and sexual intercourse both involve pleasurable repetitions that increase in pleasure as the repetitions increase, and in both cases the pleasure’s focus on repetition progressively distances its origin in productivity. An early anecdote from Ravel’s brother might suggest the threat to a coherent masculinist subjectivity inherent in this conflation of the body and the machine: “At the first performances [of *Boléro*], Edouard Ravel saw an old lady gripping the back of her seat furiously and shrieking, ‘*Au fou! Au fou! au fou!* ... When he heard this story, Ravel said, “That lady ... she understood!””<sup>42</sup>

Deborah Mawer has traced the interaction of tropes of sex, death, and mechanization through various balletic stagings of *Boléro*, from Ida Rubinstein as the “robotic” object of an increasingly agitated all-male *corps*’ desire at the 1928 premiere, to the multiple cyclic structures realized in both dance and lighting in the pulsing, “unashamedly erotic” choreographies by Maurice Béjart in 1979.<sup>43</sup> In

<sup>39</sup> Arbie Orenstein, ed., *A Ravel Reader: Correspondence, Articles, Interviews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 490.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 398–400.

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin Ivry, *Maurice Ravel: A Life* (New York: Welcome Rain, 2000), 158.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 157–58. Ivry roughly translates “*Au fou!*” as “Help the madman!”

<sup>43</sup> Deborah Mawer, *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel: Creation and Interpretation* (London: Ashgate, 2006), 229, 244. Another relevant production that Mawer details was produced by Léon Leyritz in 1941 as a posthumous realization of Ravel’s own scenario. Set in a factory, this version includes chain structures in both movement and staging, features a matador Leyritz christens “the slayer” (p. 236), and closes with

popular culture, *Boléro* frequently connotes sexual passion—ranging from its use “as background music for girlie shows like the Earl Carroll Vanities” in the 1930s to Bo Derek’s repeated restarting of it in her seduction of Dudley Moore in *10* (1979)—though this passion has become atrophied through its ubiquity, as in Torvill and Dean’s celebrated 1984 kitsch masterpiece on ice.<sup>44</sup>

Two further contexts of reception provide contrasting ways in which the repetition in *Boléro* has been considered degenerate. According to Allan Bloom, “Young people know that rock has the beat of sexual intercourse. That is why Ravel’s *Boléro* is the one piece of classical music that is commonly known and liked by them.”<sup>45</sup> Ever since Théophile Alajouanine tested Ravel’s deteriorating musical capacities and attributed the results to aphasia,<sup>46</sup> a steadily increasing number of psychologists have posited that *Boléro*’s repetitions are evidence of Ravel’s mental illness, with diagnoses ranging from amusia to Pick’s atrophy.<sup>47</sup> Although Bloom’s and the psychologists’ discourses conceive of the natural body in quite different ways, both see the mechanistic as a sign of an eroding masculinist subject.

While Björk has suggested the relationship between *Boléro* and “Hunter” is an inconsequential product of having recorded the song in Spain,<sup>48</sup> she said this about Ravel in her interview with Field:

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a “bewildered bull dancing incoherently” (p. 238). The ballet ends without the bull being slain.

<sup>44</sup> Ivry, *Maurice Ravel*, 158, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 73.

<sup>46</sup> Théophile Alajouanine, “Aphasia and artistic realization,” *Brain* 71 (1948): 229–41.

<sup>47</sup> Respectively, D. Kerner, “Ravels Tod. Zu seinem 100. Geburtstag am 7. März 1975.” *MMW Münchener medizinische Wochenschrift* 117 (1975): 591–96; and L. Amaducci, E. Grassi & F. Boller, “Maurice Ravel and Right-Hemisphere Musical Creativity: Influence of Disease on His Last Musical Works?” *European Journal of Neurology* 9 (2002): 75–82. For an extensive bibliography on this subject, with brief summaries by John Spiers (including defenses mounted against Ravel’s loss of autonomy), see <http://website.lineone.net/~jdsapiers/bibliogmed.htm> (accessed 4 January 2007).

<sup>48</sup> In Björk’s own words: “It kinda ended up being a little bit of a bolero I guess, maybe because it’s Spain.” *South Bank Show*, 9 November 1997.

There have been people like Maurice Ravel, for example, who were very influenced by machines. The rhythm of *Boléro* was born under the influence of his father, who invented the car. He invented the first steam powered car... Ravel's sense of rhythm came from machines.<sup>49</sup>

Regardless of the factuality of assertions about Ravel's father,<sup>50</sup> Björk here identifies *Boléro* with technology more than with sex and/or nature. This technological vision is grounded in patrilineal robustness rather than Ravel's mechanics fetish,<sup>51</sup> and installs Ravel as just the sort of captain of industry that he had sought to commemorate. In its turn (and recalling her explanation of the song's genesis in terms of her responsibilities as inventor and entrepreneur), the distinctive *Boléro* rhythm in "Hunter" announces Björk's own sexless rebirth into this hale patrilineage. If its aberrant repetitions are not just semiotic traces but a rhythmic "sense," the product of a psycho-physical pathology, Björk inherits a body clock grinding its way to a reproductive halt. But Björk stares into the future without organicist fears, successfully refashioning her cultural ancestry through a new teleology. For Björk, Ravel, too, is a cyborg.

It is difficult to ascertain what Björk might gain from her silence about the other, historically dominant side of *Boléro* reception. Her talk about nature in the Field interview does not include talk about sex either; indeed, her occasional elision of nature with her own asexual creative reproduction as author might make this difficult. If we recall her characterization of the sampler's repetitions as choice, as creative freedom, we might see where a line would have to be drawn;

<sup>49</sup> "Il y a eu des gens comme Maurice Ravel, par exemple, qui ont été très influencé par les machines. Le rythme du boléro est né sous l'influence de son père qui est l'inventeur de l'automobile. Il a inventé la première voiture à vapeur...Le sens du rythme de Ravel vient des machines." Björk and Field, "Interview."

<sup>50</sup> See Ivry, *Maurice Ravel*, 6.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Mawer, *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel*, 106; and Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, 212.

the repetition in *Boléro*—where the interface between technology and degenerate sexuality reveals the self-replicative masculinist subject gone awry—is compulsive, overtaking the agent that initiated and controlled it. If, on the other hand, her silence about the sex in *Boléro* is a signal of her discomfort with its representation of sex more generally, one might ask how Ravel’s representation of an isomorphism between sexual pleasure and mechanical reproduction might parallel the structure of the hunt, and how Björk’s use of *Boléro*’s characteristic rhythm manages this inheritance.

Even more than the two-measure pattern’s incessant repetition throughout *Boléro*, its internal structure suggests an answer. While the pattern’s ubiquitous triplet pick-up mechanizes sex in what might have been a caricature of male sexual performance overtaken by base instinct, its alternation from measure to measure—first “dididi dum dum,” then “dididi dididi dididi”—creates a balance between movement withheld and movement hastened, between a feeling of steady progress and checked urgency, that eroticizes the mechanical:



Example 3. *Boléro* rhythm.

According to Brian Luke, such a tension between sex as controlled desire and sex as compulsive drive is central to the erotics of twentieth-century English-language hunting discourses, expressed through an easy slippage between tropes of romance and rape.<sup>52</sup> In “Hunter,” however,

<sup>52</sup> Brian Luke, “Violent Love: Hunting, Heterosexuality and the Erotics of Mens’ Predation” *Feminist Studies* 24 (1998): 627-55. While Haraway’s chapter on Akeley in *Primate Visions* (chap. 3, pp. 26-58) does not thematize the hunt as romance, a reading of the desire to possess the quarry in its death as rape feeds into her interpretation of taxidermy as masculinist self-replication. Taxidermy would become an attempt to rescue the hunt from being cast as decadent, as natural instinct turned pathological primitive excess.

Björk separates out the pattern's momentary accelerations, dramatizing control and compulsion as competing aspects of the subject's relation to repetition. On the side of control, a common-time extended version of the first measure of the *Boléro* pattern is looped by two cellos for eight measures between the refrain and the bridge, and for twenty measures in the coda (see Example 4). The low register, the resonant perfect fifth, and the regular harmonic alternation all contribute towards a sense of solidity and purpose, and its uninterruptedly processional rhythm forgoes a characterization of the hunt as romance for the certainty and purpose appropriate to a masculinist predator.



**Example 4.** Cello ostinato from “Hunter.”

On the side of compulsion, a snare drum in the right audio channel presents insistent yet ever-changing accelerations to each strong beat throughout much of the song, recalling and often amplifying the urgency of the second measure of the *Boléro* pattern. The pattern's increasing variability and hyperactivity suggests the predatory instinct's impending breach of the autonomous subject's self-control; just as the language of sexual predation takes over in descriptions of the imminent capture of prey (the hunt's equivalent to the sexual plateau phase), the impassioned snare attempts to drown out the steady, “reasonable” cellos. In the coda, at the peak of the snare's proliferation, a slower triplet placed on a strong beat sounds like a defiant and perhaps somewhat successful attempt to wrest control from the profusion of repetitions.

While this interpretation suggests a certain correspondence between the subject's psychic state and the physical activity of the hunt, Björk's movements in the video are in agreement only intermittently. Most of Björk's more extroverted movements pertain to her physical

transformation and her delivery of the lyrics. Sometimes, she imitates the “dididi” rhythms by shaking her head and, when the slower triplet is introduced, with measured jerking precisely in sync.<sup>53</sup> To look closely, though, her body rises and falls slightly in time with the music throughout much of the clip, particularly at the beginning, a gentle movement at odds with both the music’s iterative profligacy and her occasional physical responses to it. While Ravel’s music was intended to accompany actual dancers, there is no hunt here, nor any of the sex or machines associated with that vision of repetition; there is only Björk pulsing to the sound of her own music—a subject, trying on significations.<sup>54</sup>

### Locating the Hunter

The space in which this performance takes place is not entirely empty. Every time Björk loses and regains our eye contact, or sings a first-person pronoun, the viewer engages with both artist and character, and is invited to negotiate the relationship between them. Fan

<sup>53</sup> One probably should keep the order of production in mind here; while the music track has already been completed at this point, and Björk is moving in response to it, the digital processing was done long after her performance and without her close collaboration. I choose to assume that her movements were made in response to what she imagines might be digitally added later, though her physical response to the music might in many cases be less premeditated.

<sup>54</sup> The same quiet pulsing and rapid movements often characterize Björk’s live performances of “Hunter.” Outside the confines of the camera’s fixed close-up, the two modes become more clearly contrasted; her whole body can be seen to rise and fall metrically, while the rapid movements transfer to her arms, perhaps an exaggeration of an unruly drum corporal, where it functions as a piece of stage business to hold audience attention as the vocal line drops out towards the end of the song. While her motions have connotations at once military and dance-like, childish and erotic, it is even more clear onstage that they are more a momentary exploration of her sonic environment than evidence of purpose or identity. A good example from 1998 is available on *Later With Jools Holland* (One Little Indian, 2003, chap. 5), though bootlegs of later performances (at the Coachella Valley Music Festival in 2002, for example, or at the Fuji Rock Festival in 2003) show that these aspects of her performance have remained fairly consistent.

web postings of reviews of *Homogenic*, encouraged by both fan and commercial websites, record interactions of various viewers and listeners (it is usually impossible to disentangle viewer from listener) with this song/video. Though highly constrained by subject matter, brevity, and a high degree of anonymity, fan writings reveal an incomplete and temporary imposition on the ideological oppositions and nexus of the subjects that underwrite them, and can thus be taken seriously as a body of interpretive acts that together sample the range of meanings that might be attributed to an artist and her work.<sup>55</sup> In order to suggest the relative prevalence of various interpretive strategies, the ensuing discussion includes every interpretive comment about “Hunter” posted on Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com>) until the end of 2005, along with a few pertinent quotes from other sources. All the quotes that follow are extracted from positive reviews, reflecting their tendency to include more interpretive detail. My discussion of these quotes chooses to over-determine their subjects, indulging in the “acts of creative reading” that “stand in for physical presence,” which David Porter claims characterizes all web reception.<sup>56</sup> I allow each fan statement

<sup>55</sup> In this regard, this article willfully disregards ethnographers such as Andy Bennett, who in “Researching youth culture and popular music: a methodological critique” (*British Journal of Sociology* 53 [2002]: 451-66) advocates an increased critical distance between scholars and fans, though that space is closed as much through acknowledging the critical insight of ordinary listeners as from the assumption of fan status that justifies many participant-observer studies. A similar position is offered in Daniel Cavicchi’s *Tramps Like Us: Music & Meaning among Springsteen Fans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), particularly chap. 5, “Listening and Learning,” though the emphasis here is less on the modes of interpretation than on its substance.

<sup>56</sup> David Porter, “Introduction” in *Internet Culture*, ed. David Porter (New York: Routledge, 1997), xii. My “acts of creative reading” compensate for the fact that, because many of the fan postings are fragments, it is an all too easy slippage to see them as reflecting fragmentary subjects (certainly Amazon can in no way be described as an internet “community”), whereas my guiding metaphor here is Haraway’s “hypertext” (introduced in *Modest\_Witness*), which she sees as a politics of connectivity—“reconstructing commonsense about relatedness” in a way that also “delineates possible paths of action” (Haraway, *Modest\_Witness*, 125, 126).

the potential to negotiate alliances with others so that they might also reveal their differences, while remembering that each fan exceeds our imagination of them.

For some fans, there is little resistance to seeing Björk herself as a hunter, but that acceptance is modulated by the various quarries they propose or imply. One poster sees “Hunter” as a “declaration of freedom and self-sufficiency,” a pronouncement of unlimited subjecthood dependent on the hunt’s object neither for the assurance of its potency nor for binary negatives to constitute it.<sup>57</sup> While this quote suggests a subject that eschews fragmentation or community, it does not decide between the positions that might repeat the claim “I’m the hunter,” as detailed above. Indeed, the word “declaration” permits various motivations; potentially a performative utterance that sings a subject into being in the manner of a political charter, a declaration’s force is then constituted only by others and in a particular political economy. <F. D Royster “orbitalone76”> hears Björk in the midst of a hunt, which, by incorporating relevant lyrics, he casts as a military exercise: “Life and all its complex twists and turns is her mission, and she isn’t stopping for a minute till mission accomplished.”<sup>58</sup> While this subject also seems focused and competent, the urgency suggests a threat, or at least internalized surveillance; the problematic object “life” collapses into the subject, introducing the interests of countless others. <C. Heath “Lyricweaver”> shows more discomfort in imputing a masculinist hunter’s violence to Björk, who nonetheless retains its drive: “Subtly aggressive, Björk sings as if she’s searching for answers, and she won’t give up until she finds them.”<sup>59</sup> The inclusion of the

<sup>57</sup> Anonymous, “Oh, how can i DESCRIBE??,” 22 February 2003. Unless otherwise noted, all fan quotations are taken from the Amazon reviews pages for Björk’s album *Homogenic*, <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/B000002HPV> (all posts as viewed on 4 January 2007). Quotations from reviewers who have assigned themselves names will be indicated as follows: <screen name>, the title of their review, and the date on which they posted it. For consistency, umlauts have been added to “Björk” when reviewers have omitted them.

<sup>58</sup> <F. D Royster “orbitalone76”>, “Beats, Strings and Heartache,” 10 August 2004.

<sup>59</sup> <C. Heath “Lyricweaver”>, “An Ecstatic Homecoming,” 9 December 2004.

lyric “searching” fuses hunting and gathering, and her relentlessness is modulated by the renewability of her quarry, “answers.” That choice also foregrounds a lyric context that threatens to elide hunter and tourist—“if travel is searching”—implicating Björk in a colonialist casting of other as spectacle. For <disdonc22>, the hunt is even more broadly delimited, constructed as Björk’s desire itself: “Hunter” reflects “her eternal quest of the intangible emotion that drives us to seek what we don’t already have.”<sup>60</sup> This hunter’s quarry is irrelevant precisely because it is an intangible projection; at the moment the object is grasped it is no longer desired, and the subject must project its lack elsewhere.

Now that their differences have been exaggerated, the aspects that these brief fan statements share become all the more prominent. For instance, none accommodates a reading of the “you” of the lyrics, resulting both in the fan’s identification with Björk’s hunter and a denial of the only other mentioned in the text. Of course, granting subject status is double-edged; this is the same imagined identity that Haraway sees as justifying the hunt by rendering the hunted a worthy opponent. Also, the cited fans bind the subject’s identity to its activity by consistently assigning it an imperfective aspect; the hunt is always imminent or ongoing, its aims inexhaustible. While these fans provide no textual justifications for their subject characterizations, their interpretations can be related to the lyrics’ narrative and emotional stasis and to the two-chord harmonic loop, though hearing the drum track as regular throughout requires that its proliferating details be overlooked. There are many reasons these fans might have neglected the contrasting central section, with its sometimes incomprehensible multi-tracked voices and relatively dramatic harmonic moves, not least being the length of and lyric repetition in the return to the opening texture. What is significant here is that an albeit partial reading of the song text that chooses not to account for its others or changes can bypass binary oppositions by relying on absolute features. These features do not actively resist binary interpretations, but neither do they require

<sup>60</sup> <disdonc22>, “an incredible and powerful album of epic pain and love,” 24 December 1998.

them, remaining ambivalent in their relationship to other subjects and environments. Indeed, these fan posts rest on the same erasure of otherness that I used earlier to argue that the binary implosions in “Hunter’s” text are, within the space of the text, irreversible. And yet this erasure now seems too easy, too casual, too egocentric, even though the characterization of the self as richly centered by its contradictions and generousities could be simply another way of expressing Haraway’s call to situatedness. This lone subject’s ambivalence might too easily foster accidental oppression.

For those few fans who see the hunt as “a metaphor for Björk’s search for love,”<sup>61</sup> the subject is a much more fragile construction. Extended metaphors that imagine love as hunt—or as quest, as desire, as war—imagine an unrequited love that is a danger to the subject’s power and autonomy. <Sandra Mandelis>, drawing on her knowledge of Björk’s recent romantic life but in terms that imply a personal recollection,<sup>62</sup> resolves the contradiction between proclaimed autonomy and audible vulnerability by hearing the song as an ecstatic but unsustainable denial: the song “captures that feeling of invincibility when one says, ‘I don’t need you, I’m doing fine without your love’ before breaking down into tears.”<sup>63</sup> <Douglas King>’s comment hedges to offset any self-identification: “Björk seems to be ‘hunting’ for love and peace of mind, both through intimate relations and within herself.”<sup>64</sup> Perhaps responding to the auto-erotic quality of the video, <Douglas King>’s is the only fan post I have found that suggests the song’s sexual potential. This is not, however, the sexuality of *Boléro*, nor a feminization of Akeley’s taxidermy as sexless reproduction. Indeed, the contrast between these two readings suggests that they are prompted less by details in the text than by an identification of the readers’ own experiences with the “I” of the song, even though it is the “you” that invites their engagement. In this way, the pop lyric subject

<sup>61</sup> <Roger Antonie “Steve”>, “All Neon Like,” 19 February 2005.

<sup>62</sup> See note 36.

<sup>63</sup> <Sandra Mandelis>, “I thought I could organize freedom...,” 6 May 2002.

<sup>64</sup> <Douglas King>, “Gorgeous,” 5 December 2003.

is simultaneously made in a listener's image, and read as in search of a listener/lover that heals its fragmentation. With love and self-love as its quarries, <Douglas King>'s hunt is not presented as endless, though its dénouement is imagined after the song. This allows others to be admitted into the hunter's world, but the continued focus on Björk as star allays any need for such others to be further specified.

No doubt in response to the video, a number of fans see the hunter as essentially animal: "The strings are shocking and remind me of any predator lurking for prey."<sup>65</sup> In an attempt to reconcile this subject with Björk's human role as artist, these fans all employ binary structures. Their writing is often reminiscent of the social Darwinist discourse explored by Haraway, though the conflation of animal and primitive man seems safely located in the prehistoric or, perhaps for <The Nocturnal Aerial™>, the fantastic: "She sounds here like a wild animal, searching for food in the middle of the night. The lyrics here are so primal and out of control it's unreal."<sup>66</sup> It is interesting that the musical components <The Nocturnal Aerial™> deems animal or primal—the strings, the voice—are recorded live performers and serve to characterize the subject, whereas the technological aspects of the music—drums and production—are relegated to the environmental. This replicates the division drawn by Björk's description of the Italian accordion, which associates the natural with her female authorship and the technological with a passive masculinity. Associating language with the animal subject, which should endow this female/animal/primitive with the defining expression of masculinist subjectivity, here disrupts the inversion; <The Nocturnal Aerial™> joins Ravel's posthumous doctors in seeing the lyrics' repetitions and fragmentation as evidence for neurological decay and the erosion of agency. This disruption of binary associations is so great for one fan that the evolutionary model cannot contain it. The natural, human, and technological all

<sup>65</sup> <Darkstar k'Chona>, "There is simply too much to be said in a review," 18 December 2004.

<sup>66</sup> <The Nocturnal Aerial™>, "Prepare To Be Shocked By The True Genius Of Björk," 14 February 2004.

constitute the feared imaginary, so there is no location from which Björk's historicized subject can determine an opposition, and the only option is extraterrestrial: "Hunter" has "intimidating lyrics and an eerie tune that leaves you thinking you were lost in the woods with an alien chasing after you."<sup>67</sup> For another fan, Björk's vocal delivery so degrades language that the focus shifts entirely to the physicality of the voice: "Björk growls through a landscape of lush beats and electronica."<sup>68</sup> While her voice responds to the beats' reverb and increasing complexity, the word "lush" stands in contrast to another reviewer who describes the music as "very stark, very cold but ... beautiful, like being stranded in the middle of the Arctic tundra."<sup>69</sup> Yet "lush" is not so incongruous a compliment for mid-nineties electronic dance music, in which the subgenres jungle and tribal house—defined by an elaboration of beats associated with a primitive, sexual body at the expense of language, melody, and other signifiers of masculinist subjectivity—trade on a continued association between primitive man and sonic artifacts of a comparatively recent equatorial Africa.

The animal/human binary, even as it threatens to resurrect undesirable associations, is also used by fans to sketch utopian visions, as in the following quote by <Darkstar k'Chona>: "It seems to inflect the inner-animal that is within humans, but not easily admitted. Truly, at the primal level, we are all animals."<sup>70</sup> By equating an evolutionary trajectory with a metaphor that allows history and experience to sediment complexity into the human subject (though not, it seems, an animal one), this formulation grants the human a surfeit of disposable subjectivity. Thus the animal is defined as a comparatively incomplete, and so essentially negative, space. <Freeze Frame> shares a similar

<sup>67</sup> <"areyouexperienced">, "You could knock down walls with this album!" 19 January 2004.

<sup>68</sup> Anonymous, "What an amazing song!," 12 April 1999. Posted on the amazon.com reviews page for the "Hunter" single, <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/B000009N1A> (accessed 4 January 2007).

<sup>69</sup> Anonymous, "Quite Possibly the Best Album I've Ever Heard," 15 June 2003.

<sup>70</sup> <Darkstar k'Chona>, "There is simply too much to be said in a review," 18 December 2004.

conceptual structure, though reconfigured to suggest the subject's undesirable fragmentation: "But Hunter is primal. She's is [*sic*] the hunter-gatherer that we evolved from, still with us and still a part of us. It's about shedding the denial and embracing what we are—what we really are, even though it's sometimes hard to tell."<sup>71</sup> In this version, the purity of the end state is not an animal feature, but a direct product of the questing human subject. It is less important that these fans fail to erase binary distinctions than that the text prompted them to reconsider how those distinctions are organized, and to claim those reconsiderations as the meaning of the text. In this way, these attempts demonstrate the need for non-binary discourse to which Haraway alludes.

Some fans begin by making musical observations and associations, and either implying or developing a vision of the hunter or its environment based on them. Several who use this strategy identify *Boléro* as a source for "Hunter." Even when Ravel himself is not cited, it is clear that his "bolero" is the one they have in mind; if the Bloom statement quoted above is not sufficiently convincing, then the frequent observation that Ravel's work has only a passing relationship to any bolero rhythm in either his time or ours should settle the matter.<sup>72</sup> No post suggests that both the strings and the beats are derived from the *Boléro* rhythm as I have done. Whenever a particular attribution is made, the string material is cited. Indeed, identifying the strings as a "bolero" is often done in place of an adjectival description of them, which seems to assume a common yet unarticulated understanding of what a bolero might mean.

A number of different phrases are used by posters to characterize the beats: "cascading, cartwheeling drums," "skittering breakbeats," "paranoid drums," "stuttering Drum 'N' Bass inspired beats," "military-

<sup>71</sup> From a review by <Freeze Frame> quoted on the official "Hunter" page, <http://unit.bjork.com/specials/gh/SUB-10/> (accessed 4 January 2007).

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Willi Kahl and Israel J. Katz, "Bolero," *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy, <http://www.grovemusic.com> (accessed 4 January 2007).

snare-drum.”<sup>73</sup> The first four phrases fit well with the acceleration I associated with the “dididi” fragment in *Boléro*, though they all say something different about the environment or subjectivity to which that acceleration might be ascribed. “Cascading,” both turbulent and fluent, is something natural objects do, as is “skittering,” although its sense of nervousness has a tendency to anthropomorphize, while “cartwheeling,” which shares aspects of both, is an act of childish play. “Paranoid” and “stuttering” are bleaker, words more at home in discourses of mental disease; at the same time that they speak more directly to the condition of a human subject, they articulate that subject’s vulnerability. <C. Heath “Lyricweaver”> uses the military connotations of snare drums to ascribe a “processional” meaning to the beats, such as I give to the string writing: “The drum rolls give the song a marching feel filled with persistence.”<sup>74</sup> A similar statement by another fan extends the military trope to include the ethical obligation Björk spoke about in corporate terms, suggesting that this aural cue closes off the warmer version of the hunter as nurturer: “insistent percussion that seems almost like the sound of duty if duty or dedication would have a sound.”<sup>75</sup> An integrated and purposeful hunter shares an economy of violence with this military trope, an association that rubs uneasily but productively with discourses of both play and trauma.

The lack of comment on the metrical change made to the *Boléro* rhythm is not at all surprising, the change having prevented few listeners from recognizing the reference. In the absence of posts concerning issues of passion or sexuality, my reading of the change’s effects on the

<sup>73</sup> Anonymous, “Bjork, Edinburgh Usher Hall, 15th November, 1997” [live review], *Headcleaner*, undated webzine article, <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/Members/keith.dumble/hopper/bjork.html> (accessed 4 January 2007); <funktion>, “Yet Another Classic...,” 31 March 2001; <The Nocturnal Aerial™>, “Prepare To Be Shocked By The True Genius Of Bjork,” 14 February 2004; <F. D Royster “orbitalone76”>, “Beats, Strings and Heartache,” 10 August 2004; and Anonymous, “Oh, how can i DESCRIBE??,” 22 February 2003.

<sup>74</sup> <C. Heath “Lyricweaver”>, “An Ecstatic Homecoming,” 9 December 2004.

<sup>75</sup> Anonymous, “A Sharp Contrast To Her Previous Album,” 22 October 2001.

quotation's significance seems to be largely borne out; with the strings' processional timbrally separated from the beats' acceleration, the sense of teasingly checked momentum I have figured as erotic resolves into a juxtaposition of purposefulness against play and paranoia. But while these states do figure in the posters' comments, those comments have not entirely supported a clear binary separation either in terms of meanings or in terms of the textual features I have associated with them. As much as I might like to claim that this binary is located in the structure of the song, or even to go so far as to say that the binary has been newly replicated in this particular process of quotation, it turns out to be just as prone to the inversions and interpenetrations I have investigated in this paper.

In fact, most of what fans write seems not to depend on binary oppositions. Even when one attempts to read them between the lines, as I have done here, fairly caviling interpretation is required to find conventional binary couplings in need of disassociation. While the hunter is always endowed with at least some of the self-importance of the masculinist subject, this seems more symptomatic of the importance accorded Björk as an object of fan veneration than a claim about either the hunter's persona or subjectivity in general. Those fans who want to explicitly value an all-powerful subject do not invoke binary oppositions, while those who wish to ascribe more complexity to their subject often invoke binaries only in an attempt to transcend them. Very few of the descriptions of "Hunter" imply its subject is necessarily female, and those that emphasize usually male qualities do not register this gender displacement as remarkable. Perhaps most surprisingly, no posts I have read see a need to negotiate an opposition between technology and nature, the opposition between nature and human always intervening.

### **An Ambivalent Fiction**

After my analysis of the lyric and video elements of "Hunter," I was perfectly content to pronounce its subject a fully Harawayan cyborg, both in spite of and because of the inconsistent postmodernism of

Björk's accompanying discourse. In the context of the text's reception, I cannot be so sure. If its success as an image of a post-binary utopia could be measured by how well the discourse it generated evades binaries, then "Hunter" succeeds as much as could be expected. Yet a subject described without binaries turns out to be not necessarily a post-binary subject. In part, this is a product of the text's own success. The subject it presents is so captivating to the senses and so receptive to the viewer's self-serving identification that the fate of the others that inhabit its cast-off negative space becomes of little consequence. When a binary has been truly rendered irrelevant, its absence and what takes its place need not be a focus of discussion, such absences being relevant only to those who remember the struggle. These absences may also simply signal the others' thorough suppression.

The fact that fans do not need to account for the role of technology in subject representation suggests that, at least for many of Björk's fans and at least in fictional contexts, the penetration of the real by that particular aspect of the cyborg myth is almost complete. This penetration is not, however, accomplished by the implosion of a binary, but by a repositioning of the subject that renders it irrelevant. In the masculinist version of Björk's binary logic, technology and ape both disappear at the end of history. At the same moment that humans see every possible environment as natural, every other position becomes a primitive subject with which there is no basis for empathy. The cyborg is located not at the end of history but beyond it; it desires not the reclamation of an original unity but its forgetting; it seeks not singularity but community. We cannot say whether Björk's hunter knows the difference.

For Haraway, the difference has a host of consequences for both the character of the cyborg and its relationship with others: "The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence."<sup>76</sup> While some of the fan writings claim some of these features, and my own reading self-consciously incorporated all of them,

<sup>76</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 151.

what the hunter lacks is resolute commitment, the ability to resist an interpretation that replaces these features with recalcitrant masculinist fantasy. Utopian visions cannot, however, be held responsible for their own implementation. The ability to stave off the reemergence of the masculinist subject is too much to ask of any text, theoretical, critical, or fictional. It is enough to create imaginary spaces that encourage, allow, or even herald new theoretical geometries, and that invite their collaborative elaboration.