

## Living Room Wonderlands. Gendered Spaces of Media Use

Susanna Paasonen

Published in Anu Koivunen and Astrid Söderbergh Widding (eds.), *Cinema Studies Into Visual Theory?* School of Art, Literature and Music, series A, no 40, University of Turku 1998, 129-213.

Lived space is, as Michel de Certeau has pointed out, always very much a mental construct. Spaces are being produced in practices of their use as interpretations, experiences and immersive environments – they are different sensory spheres marked by memories of things past and present.<sup>1</sup> Taken the sensory aspects of space, it is often difficult to define and conceptualise what is meant with media space, particularly within domestic contexts. Is one discussing the physical space of media use, the illusionary space opened up on the screen, the sonic environment, or a merging of all these aspects? To put it another way, what is the role of the media user's physical locus for the media experience?

It seems to me, that these divisions are both media specific and deeply gendered in terms of the assumed media user. To prove this point, I will look in the following at two conceptualisations of media space: those of television and those of information networks. The usage of both media is based on a terminal operated by a private user who chooses between different media products transmitted by radio waves, cable, or telephone lines. They are both screen-based practices and essential parts of leisure in the industrialised "West" of the 1990's. However, there are elementary differences in the ways their usage is discussed. These differences in discourses are, I believe, partly due to the intertextual relations and references which have been created while formulating the media as "environments". Media environment is built, according to Cecelia Tichi, in various interpretative texts created by created social critics, educators, advertisers, broadcasters, print journalists and others. This discursive production makes medium a "space itself, an encompassing surrounding", "a spatial configuration".<sup>2</sup> As Tichi points out, medium as environment is created by using already existing cultural discourses, values and traditions. Thus a new medium can be more easily domesticated, made familiar and culturally comprehensible.<sup>3</sup> Although new media spaces are on one level exciting in their novelty, on another level they are also already familiar. Media historian Erkki Huhtamo has named these recurring features of meaning making in discourses on technology topos, structural elements and building blocks.<sup>4</sup> I will focus here on one such topos, namely that of wonderlands, which Huhtamo has also discussed in relation to the topos of optical travel. Doing this, I go back to fiction concerning the

---

<sup>1</sup> De Certeau 1988, 103-108.

<sup>2</sup> Tichi 1991, 3-4; 6.

<sup>3</sup> Tichi 1991, 43. See also Nye 1997, 180.

<sup>4</sup> See Huhtamo 1997, 9-10.

creation of parallel realities from within the home. What kinds of wonderlands are opened up from living rooms? To whom are they opened up? How are these wonderlands gendered? How is this topos at play in discourses on TV and Internet?

No body at home?

Television environment was created as domestic since 1940's in various discourses surrounding the medium. Television became the centre of family life, the "electronic hearth" which brought the dispersed nuclear family back together.<sup>5</sup> This has been taken into account in television studies, in which a great deal of attention has been paid on private living rooms as sites of media use. The physical and social location of the user has been of elementary importance when studying the meanings and values attached to TV programmes and the medium at large.

Television viewing, in short, has been looked at domestic practice generally taking place in a living room. This focus on the domestic has been present in theoretisations of televisuality and televisual space, in which the private and the public spheres of life merge and interact. In the words of Roger Silverstone "Television is a domestic medium It is watched at home. Ignored at home. Discussed at home. Watched in private with members of family or friends." Television viewing is defined by the social and economic dynamics at play in the home, a situated activity, and, by definition, a domestic activity in which both gender and generation play determining roles.<sup>6</sup> Audiences are thus seen as living in "different overlapping but not always overdetermining spaces and times: domestic spaces; national spaces; broadcasting and narrowcasting spaces; biographical times; daily times; scheduled, spontaneous but also socio-geological times; the times of the *longue durée*."<sup>7</sup>

I find an interesting connection, or, actually, a certain lack of connection, between TV studies and studies on information networks, in which the practices of media use have been conceptualised in radically different ways. Leslie Haddon, writing on home computers, sees home computing as an activity that "can not be viewed as an activity based solely in the home". According to Haddon, unlike with television viewing, in computing the experiences outside home have an important impact on the experience of media use.<sup>8</sup> This is surely true, although I have my doubts whether the experience of television viewing should be seen as solely confined to the domestic space. As both Cecelia Tichi and Roger Silverstone have pointed out, the usage of television includes various public discourses and practices of gossip and "TV-talk" that take

---

<sup>5</sup> See Tichi 1991, Spigel 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Silverstone 1994, 24-25.

<sup>7</sup> Silverstone 1994, 132 (paraphrasing Paddy Scannell).

<sup>8</sup> Haddon 1992, 86; 94.

place outside the home just like the "computer talk" discussed by Haddon does.<sup>9</sup> However, Haddon wrote his article before the birth of the "Information Superhighway" was manifested, at the time when cyberspace was just starting to be discussed as media environment. The discourses of home computing are, I would argue, partly separate from the discourses on information networks, in which there has hardly been a too strong emphasis on the domestic context. There are differences in the media environments which are created for these computer-based practices, although they also tend to overlap. Although the amount of computers is counted per household (not per offices, for examples), in discussions on the use of Internet as situated within the home. Media space has in this context been named cyberspace, a dimension into which the user is assumed to dive when gazing at the computer screen. The experience of cyberspace, unlike televisual space, then, is assumed to transcend one's physical environment. This possibility of supposedly total immersion relates to a larger set of assumptions concerning the corporeal experience of computer use.

Cyberspace is a bit ephemeral as concept. According to the online-dictionary Mofile, cyberspace translates as "worldwide network of computers that facilitates data transmission and exchange", thus having to do with Global inter-connectedness and interaction.<sup>10</sup> In this perspective, cyberspace is a media environment created by communication via servers connected to worldwide Information Networks. Sherry Turkle, for example, thinks that "when we read our electronic mail or send postings to an electronic bulletin board or make an airline reservation over a computer network, we are in cyberspace. In cyberspace, we can talk, exchange ideas, and assume personae of our own creation".<sup>11</sup> Roger Burrows, again, connects cyberspace to virtually all media technologies that simulate environments in which people can interact.<sup>12</sup> Thus cyberspace is discussed literally as media environment and Internet use as being in it. Cyberpunk fiction has been extremely influential in the creation of cyberspace environment. Writer William Gibson who is perhaps most famous of having given a visual description on information networks in visual terms and having named them cyberspace. For Gibson, the "meat" is left behind when "jacking in" the computer terminal: as Marj Kibby puts it, "'meat' is obsolete as soon as thought can be uploaded into the network." It is no surprise, then, that the Cartesian divide is deeply rooted in the rhetoric of information networks.<sup>13</sup> Gibson's cyberspace, as described in *Neuromancer* (1984) is a zone in which information takes up strange forms and in which many dangers await the traveller. The user enters cyberspace, seemingly

---

<sup>9</sup> Silverstone 1994, 130; Tichi 1991, *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.mofile.fi/cgi-bin/forms.exe/dri?word=cyberspace>. A discussion on Cyberspace as postmodern product of US capitalism is provided by David E. Nye, who defines the Cyberspace environment in a different way. See Nye 1997, 161-175.

<sup>11</sup> Turkle 1995, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Burrows 1997, 240.

disembodied and abandoning the sphere known as physical reality. Meat is of no importance here – it is a relic of sorts, a lump of matter that can be manipulated and changed at will thanks to cybernetics. There has been some criticism of these underlying notions concerning cyberspace but they are, however, used widely even as basis for theoretical speculation on Internet use. Dreams of pure intellect, abandonment of "carnal vessels", and liberty to imagine alternative corporealities on the Net have been widely discussed in technothory.<sup>14</sup>

Home is not, by definition, far as "sexy" a media space as cyberspace. It has, and to a degree still is, gendered female: home is a space of privacy and emotional ties. Indeed, how could home ever be "cyber"? Lynn Spigel, following Raymond Williams, has defined domesticity in industrial culture as linked to "fantasies of being somewhere else while in the comforts of one's own."<sup>15</sup> Home, then, can be seen as both the setting of everyday life, and the quintessential space for escaping it. Home is the space for mental travel aided by various media technologies from books to optical apparatuses – a difficult concept, but also an important one, and one too often overlooked when conceptualising the uses of information networks. Earlier media environments such as magazines and TV alike have been vehicles of virtual travel, through which the distant and the exotic can be made accessible without the need of physical travel – indeed, without leaving the confines of one's own home.<sup>16</sup> This tradition, named "armchair travel" by Erkki Huhtamo, goes back to camera obscuras, stereoscopes, mail-order catalogues, TV, VCR, and other domestic media technologies.<sup>17</sup>

Electronic media also build on innovations like electric light, which was marketed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for middle-class consumers with keywords like "purity, brightness, cleanliness", and telephone, which was praised for enabling communication with people outside the home without a need of any physical contact. As media historian Carolyn Marvin points out, there were various popular discourses and fantasies at play at the time concerning expanded experience which "could be entertained within the steadily contracting circle of physical, emotional, intellectual, and moral fireside. (...) One's own family and neighbourhood would then be the stable center of the universe – beyond it would be margin and chaos."<sup>18</sup> Lynn Spigel links also radio and television to a tradition of social sanitation, in which the medium addresses not a mass audience, but insulates listeners as individuals. This "fantasy of antiseptic space" meant a possibility for people "to travel from their homes while remaining untouched by the actual social

---

<sup>13</sup> Kibby 1997, 1.

<sup>14</sup> See Kibby 1997, 1-2; also Springer 1996, 16-49.

<sup>15</sup> Spigel 1997, 225.

<sup>16</sup> Leach 118, 126; Salo 1995.

<sup>17</sup> See Huhtamo 1995, 90-92; Huhtamo 1997, 83-84; 122-159.

<sup>18</sup> Marvin 1988, 76; 200-201.

contexts to which they imaginatively ventured".<sup>19</sup> Effortless and global, "clean" long-distance communication which necessitated no bodily connection, was enabled by the 19<sup>th</sup> century telephones and telegraphs as it has been by the radio, TV, and digital information networks of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The uses of WWW can be linked to these freetime activities performed by people sitting down in a space of everyday life. Thus the media space can be defined at once as domestic (settings of the act), mental (experience and interpretation of the views consumed), and one that can be defined through the technology used (images, sounds, texts, etc. as consumed through specific media), as well as through the contexts in which the media products have been generated. All these aspects contribute to Internet environment as discursive construct which frames the experience of media use. This approach is quite different from discussions of "cyberspace" as *the* media space: not only as the mental, but the overall one, into which the user is immersed. William Gibson's depiction of cyberspace recasts, according to Scott Bukatman "the invisible processes of information circulation (...) in visual and tactile terms (the metaphor resides in the status of cyberspace as *narrated*, rather than *actual*, space).<sup>20</sup> But Gibsonian cyberspace not only gave form to invisible processes, it also influenced the way these processes were developed.<sup>21</sup> As mentioned above, various terms developed by Gibson have become prominent in popular and academic discourse alike, yet surprisingly little attention has been paid to their implications.

Dreaming my life away

*I jack in and I'm not here. It's all the same.*<sup>22</sup>

"Going to" and "being in" cyberspace is, in Gibson's books, an all-inclusive experience of travel in a parallel reality. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice, going through the looking-glass, Gibson's cowboys get immersed in the 3-dimensional virtual world, in which they leave their Cartesian "meat" behind and encounter information taking odd visual forms. For Alice the wonderland is a twisted continuum of the domestic space, a mirror image of the "paramount reality" she has just left behind, which even has its own hearth:

*Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through.' (...) And certainly the glass WAS beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist. In another moment Alice was through the glass, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room. The very first thing she did was to look whether there was a fire in*

---

<sup>19</sup> Spigel 1992, III.

<sup>20</sup> Bukatman 1994, 70-71; 74. On Gibson and social theory, see also Burrows 1997.

<sup>21</sup> See Burrows 1997, 238.

<sup>22</sup> Case in *Neuromancer*. Gibson 1997, 105.

*the fireplace, and she was quite pleased to find that there was a real one, blazing away as brightly as the one she had left behind.*<sup>23</sup>

The cyberspace encountered by Gibson's protagonist Case, again, is an abstracted form of urban city space which is reached via computer:

*Now - Disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler grey. Expanding - And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity. Inner eye opening to the stepped scarlet pyramid of the Southern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of Mitsubishi Bank of military systems, forever beyond his reach.*

*(...) He checked the time. He'd been in cyberspace for five hours.*<sup>24</sup>

Or, take Frank Baum's description of Dorothy waking up in the Munchkinland of Oz, another alternative reality:

*The little girl gave a cry of amazement and looked about her, her eyes growing bigger and bigger at the wonderful sights she saw.*

*The cyclone had set the house down very gently--for a cyclone--in the midst of a country of marvellous beauty. There were lovely patches of greensward all about, with stately trees bearing rich and luscious fruits. Banks of gorgeous flowers were on every hand, and birds with rare and brilliant plumage sang and fluttered in the trees and bushes. A little way off was a small brook, rushing and sparkling along between green banks, and murmuring in a voice very grateful to a little girl who had lived so long on the dry, grey prairies.*<sup>25</sup>

This cyberspace is, in a way, a looking glass room filled with objects that have their referents in the physical world, yet one in which "all the rest is a different as possible", to paraphrase Carroll. Like Alice, Dorothy, or even Toto, Gibson's Case ventures in a somewhat dangerous, yet fascinating and even addictive parallel dimension, which is the quintessential stuff that fantasy literature is made of. A noteworthy difference between the parallel realities imagined by Baum, Carroll, and Gibson is the gender of both the main protagonists and the assumed readers. As Andrew Ross has noted, "one barely needs to scratch the surface of the cyberpunk genre (...) to expose a baroque edifice of adolescent male fantasies."<sup>26</sup> The futures Gibson describes are inhabited by boys and their toys, white male cowboys and action gals, and written following the genre of hard-boiled fiction.<sup>27</sup> The protagonists of Baums' and Carroll' novels, on the other

<sup>23</sup> [gopher://wiretap.spies.com/oo/Library/Classic/looking.txt](http://gopher://wiretap.spies.com/oo/Library/Classic/looking.txt)

<sup>24</sup> Gibson 1997, 52.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/People/rgs/wizoz10.html>

<sup>26</sup> Ross 1991, 145.

<sup>27</sup> Ross 1991, 153.

hand, are female and their sidekicks are pet animals or animated figures (scarecrows, speaking animals, etc.). In these texts the parallel realities open up from homes: Alice's wonderland is reached via the living-room looking-glass, and for Dorothy the home itself, as object, is the means of transport to Oz. And, quite clearly, the genre of writing is in both cases one of fantasy fiction aimed for children of undefined gender.

The connections between the fictions quoted above are, I would argue, quite obvious. Parallel realities are opened up from reflecting surfaces of screens, mirrors, and windows. Alice stepping through the mirror, Case immersing to the computer screen, and Dorothy seeing both the cyclone and Oz through the windows of her home, are all experiencing a comparable reality confusion aided by parallel media. In all cases, the parallel reality is not only one to be incorporated through the eye, but one to move around in, and even to live in – a spatial dimension. Thus, we are discussing both virtual travel and travel in virtual reality, a continuum of fiction about alternative realities, fantasy spaces that are more or less imaginary.

"Ihmema", Wonderland, is the name of the most popular Finnish search engine.<sup>28</sup> The name of the engine suggests entry to a an alternative dimension, from which the user can find almost anything, provided that she or he uses the services of *Ihmema*. Internet is here discussed directly as Wonderland not unlike those which Dorothy and Alice experienced their adventures in. This kinds of rhetoric frames the experience of Internet use in a particular way. Cecelia Tichi, writing on the creation of television environment in the 1940's US, quotes DuMont advertisements, in which "television is 'the biggest window in the world', a 'looking glass' through which the viewer becomes 'a modern Alice'". These ads, as Tichi points out "ring with utopian fervor. The promise the fulfilment of aspirations stated to be transcendent of history and of geography."<sup>29</sup> Wonderland is thus a metaphor used in creating both TV and Internet environments. This topos has linked these media into a continuum of fiction on parallel realities, lands of wish-fulfilment, adventure and wonder. Television and computer screens alike have been produced as ways "out" from one's everyday environment. Another DuMont advertisement promised the user to become "an armchair Columbus" who could "sail with television through vanishing horizons into exciting new worlds (...) New flashes will bring you eye-coverage of (...) everything odd, unusual and wonderful, just as though you were on the spot."<sup>30</sup> These promises could as well be linked to the 1990's Web browsers Netscape Navigator and Microsoft Explorer, or Kolumbus (Columbus), the Finnish Internet service.

---

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.fi/>

<sup>29</sup> Tichi 1991, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Tichi 1991, 15, commented also in Huhtamo 1997, 9-10.

Fantasies and dreaming are essential when comparing the “ways out” staged by Baum, Carroll and Gibson in their novels. For Dorothy, as well as for Alice, parallel realities provide freedom and adventure in spaces that are more difficult to define in terms of city space than those in which Case is being immersed. Their fantasy lands are not reached via technology, but by dreaming or by “just” flying oneself over there. For Case, however, these parallel realities are ones of profession, of work, and they take technological objects to reach. Contrary to this, Dorothy and Alice both practice an art often depicted as feminine: dreaming, imagining alternative realities and creating spaces of one’s own as mental “elsewheres” Often the space for dreaming has been the home, not a safe haven or refuge, but a site for domestic work, limited professional opportunities, and even emotional claustrophobia.<sup>31</sup> The mental spaces produced by dreaming enable one to overcome space and time, and the confines of one’s social position, all very much issues defined through the power relations of gender, ethnicity, and class. Janice A. Radway, in her well-known study *Reading the Romance*, identifies escapism, the ability of reading to transport the (female) readers as if out of their living rooms, as an essential pleasure provided by romance. Reading can be seen as free space, in which reader can feel liberated from the duties of everyday life, but, as Radway emphasises, readings as escape from present is “neither new behaviour nor one peculiar to women who read romances.”<sup>32</sup>

In fact, Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor have outlined various tactics for escaping the boredom of repetitive everyday life. Letting the mind drift elsewhere, daydreaming, imagining, and longing are, according to them, salient features of everyday life: “Fantasies are always on the tip of our mind, about to enter consciousness. They squeeze themselves into all those moments of our lives when we are not fully engaged by the demands of the concrete world. They provide a continual possibility for the blurring and distortion of the clear predictable lines of paramount reality.”<sup>33</sup> There is thus no paramount reality without means of escape, no routine without an element of fantasy. As Cohen and Taylor point out, fantasy and escape has been neglected in the majority of discussions on everyday life. Products of mass culture, such as films, TV programs or novels are being used as to conjure up “territories in an alternative world”, and these activities can not be analysed with a crude communication–audience model.<sup>34</sup> Fantasy is active production, appropriation and use in which media products serve the function of platforms and frames.

---

<sup>31</sup> See Cohen and Taylor 1992, 8; Star 1996, 31-33.

<sup>32</sup> Radway 1984, 87-90; 93.

<sup>33</sup> Cohen and Taylor 1992, 70; 88; 91.

<sup>34</sup> Cohen and Taylor 1992, 92; 106; 138-139.

This perspective on media and fantasy opens up many routes for thinking about the uses of information networks and creation of parallel realities. In a lot of current technothory the Cyberspace is defined as space of fluid identities, genders and ethnicities. In fact, one could claim that it has been seen as the mental “elsewhere” that provides escape from the social reality, and one to be shared with other people. This view is certainly shared by Sherry Turkle, who discusses Internet both as cyberspace and wonderland accessible via a looking glass:

“We are able to step through the looking glass. We are learning to live in virtual worlds. We may find ourselves alone as we navigate virtual oceans, unravel virtual mysteries, and engineer virtual skyscrapers. But increasingly, when we step through the looking glass, other people are there as well. The use of the term ‘cyberspace’ to describe virtual worlds grew out of science fiction, but for many of us, cyberspace is now part of the routines of everyday life”.<sup>35</sup>

For Turkle computers and Internet offer “new models of mind and a new medium on which to project our ideas and fantasies”.<sup>36</sup> These mental “elsewheres” are sites of communication and play with identities in relation to other people online. Turkle suggests, that in this wonderland it is possible to travel and build like in those parallel realities that Alice and Dorothy experienced their adventures in. It is interesting, that Turkle’s by now famous and often quoted analysis of identity and Internet takes for granted the idea of cyberspace as dimension separate from one’s physical environment, an immersive environment in itself. The reference to stepping into a looking glass is no coincidence here, since cyberspace is indeed depicted in very similar terms than Alice’s wonderland: it’s features and characters bear resemblance to one’s everyday environment, but often in a twisted, appropriated, and reversed way. Like wonderland, Internet is for Turkle a dimension of serious play full of challenges and dangers, not only a safe haven of escape.<sup>37</sup> In brief, she locates her analysis of Internet and its uses as site of identity construction into two paradigms of fiction writing as well as the discursive continuum on domestic media as routes of escape without reflecting at all on the connotations that these metaphors might possibly have.

Cyberspace as wonderland is thus used as depiction of the shape, form, and experience of Internet. It is quite interesting, then, that the escapes assumedly proffered by the Internet are discussed in quite different terms than soap opera watching, romance reading, or other uses of cultural products most often termed escapist. The question concerns the frame of reference. When immersions into cyberspace are being discussed in terms of information technology and new form of subjectivity created by its use, the wider cultural practices surrounding these uses

---

<sup>35</sup> Turkle 1995, 9.

<sup>36</sup> Turkle 1995, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Turkle 1995, 268-269.

are being bypassed. (It is quite intriguing, that the imageries and conceptions used of Internet are derived from a cyberspace, which provides the means of escape for the main protagonist of a cyberpunk novel, reading of which can be thought of as a form of escape in itself.)

### Home, home, sweet paradoxical space

As it has often been pointed out, there is little doubt that home computing and Internet use are strongly influenced by gender. Unlike television watching, leisurely computer use (especially in the form of programming and hacking) has been marked predominantly a male activity carried out in isolation from the other members of the household.<sup>38</sup> As was the case with the 19th century innovations of electricity and telephones, computer and information network expertise has been predominantly a white male domain. Women have been constructed as others in discourses surrounding the technology.<sup>39</sup> Internet use was, until the latter part of the 1990's, very much male-dominated, and although the percent female users has since increased rapidly, women working in computing are still a minority. There are fears, for example, that information production on the WWW will become (or, remain, depending on the point of view), a male preoccupation.<sup>40</sup> I will not go into discussing the gender aspects of Web-design business or computing any further, but focus instead on non-commercial production of Web pages, specifically personal homepages, on which the self is represented often in "private", leisurely perspective.

As pointed out earlier, home can be seen as point of identification, site of leisure and intimate relationships. For Roger Silverstone home is "the product of our practical and emotional commitment to a given space, and as such it can be seen to be a phenomenological reality in which our identities are forged and our security maintained".<sup>41</sup> Mary Douglas, again, has defined the home as a "pattern of regular doings."<sup>42</sup> These doings have special loci in time and space, in certain social, cultural, ethnic, and economic structures, and in gender and class systems. In a similar vein, paraphrasing Judith Butler, gender identity can be seen as pattern of regular doings, as repetitive and performative production.<sup>43</sup> Thinking of both identity and home as doing rather than as being is, I think, a very fruitful approach also to thinking about personal homepages on the WWW. Homepages are sites for representing the self through text, image, links, and depending on one's access and html skills, possibly sound, animation, and video. On

---

<sup>38</sup> Vehviläinen 1997, 153; Murdock et al. 1992, 151; Wheelock 1992, 110; Livingstone 1992; Haddon 1992.

<sup>39</sup> Marvin 1988, 18; 26-30; Vehviläinen 1997; Pohl 1997, 193.

<sup>40</sup> Pohl 1997, 192-193.

<sup>41</sup> Silverstone 1994, 45.

<sup>42</sup> Douglas 1991, 287.

<sup>43</sup> See Butler 1990, 136-145.

homepages the self is being produced via textual and visual representations, associations and connections. In maintenance homepages are being constantly updated, and “visitors” are informed of the latest activities and events in one’s life. Since the mass of information available is generally rather limited, homepages are highly stylised collages which are supposed to illustrate the essential features of one’s identity. Representing one’s identity in this way is simultaneously production of that identity. So being, homepages can be seen as performative utterances in which one’s identity is made into existence as coherent entity.

Generically, homepages include family snaps along with information on the person in question, and occasionally the pages even take the shape of diaries and scrap books opened up for all the world to see. Homepages are often representations of an entire family in the tradition of family albums and other edited domestic histories and portfolios. Compiling, maintaining and preserving family histories has traditionally been the mother's responsibility – a female occupation.<sup>44</sup> This also applies to writing diaries and exchanging personal letters, which both have a well-documented middle-class cultural history. Thus both the format of representation at play on personal homepages, and communication via email can be looked at in relation to these previous practices carried out by women in the domestic space. This kind of contextualisation can help in rethinking gender and the environment of Information Networks as located in a continuum of different communicational and representational practices.

The fantasies of for free play with fluid and multiple identities at play on MUD's (Multi User Dungeons) and other forms of online-communication are quite distant from the practice of homepage building. The interactivity within homepages is usually limited to the possibility of sending email to the person in question, and thus homepages tend to take up more the form of monologue than dialogue. On homepages the self is represented with photographs, information on one's hobbies, occupation, social life, and contact information. The "meat" is not left behind here, but represented as the corner stone of representation of the self. Homepage practices are thus not so much about fantasies of transgressing one's corporeality and social location as they are about manifesting one's presence online. As Marj Kibby has pointed out, "personal, 'this is me', homepages of women reveal little desire to escape the body in creating a Web persona."<sup>45</sup> I think it is no coincidence that so far very little attention has been paid to the situatedness of Internet use from the point of view of homepages. Sherry Turkle depicts homepages as “dramatic illustration of new notions of identity as multiple yet coherent”, as postmodern bricolage and identity work.<sup>46</sup> Susan Leigh Star, again, writes on homepages as nomadic

---

<sup>44</sup> Seabrook 1991, 172-174.

<sup>45</sup> Kibby 1997, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Turkle 1995, 258-259.

addition to the ways of thinking about one's sense of home. For Star, one's actual and virtual personas are morphing into one another, and Internet is a dimension one can travel – if not live – in.<sup>47</sup> I think there is definitely a problem in approaching homepages literally as virtual homes, just as there is in thinking about Internet use as travel in cyberspace. Both Turkle and Star pay no attention to the format, generic structures or aesthetics of homepages any more than they do on the metaphors of cyberspace. Homepages appear as if lacking in genealogy, separate from earlier practices of representing the self off-line, and situated in cyberspace as environment. The examples of the work of Turkle and Star illustrate that also feminist analysis of Internet repeat cyberpunk imageries when discussing identity. In many cases the concept of gender is left ephemeral, and categories such as “feminine” or “us women” are brought to play as if self-explanatory points of reference.<sup>48</sup> Often these texts seem totally unreflective of their own role in the production of Internet as cyberspace, wonderland, site of struggle, or nomadic dwelling.

Writing is always productive activity in which the context for the phenomena and concepts discussed is never given but always created. Discussing information networks in the framework of cyberpunk is a decision with limitations and political implications that I hope to have illustrated above. One should create alternative frameworks for discussing Internet use, ones sensitive to issues of gender, situatedness and contextuality. I believe that by laying emphasis on modes of experience that have been gendered as female (like escapism and dreaming), it is possible to shift the discourse from technology as machines to technology as embedded in wider social and cultural practices, and, doing this, also to re-evaluate and re-contextualise their usage. Media are always used within certain horizons of expectation: media environments, forms of everyday knowledge on the apparatus.<sup>49</sup> These environments consist of different discourses and cultural text and it is through them that media technology are given cultural meanings. I would argue, that media environments are in a state of constant reconfiguration and that one can identify simultaneously various intertwining and overlapping environments. Since media environments are discursive products that bring together strings of fantasy, interpretation and definition, it makes little sense to claim some of these descriptions more accurate than others.

To put it another way, I want to point out that media environments as intertextual constructs always consist of descriptions and fantasies and that different media environments tend to overlap and have common features. As Lynn Spigel puts it, “the discursive categories for thinking about new technologies and implementing them on everyday use hark back to familiar themes. Through their ability to bring the outside worlds into the home, electronics promise to

---

<sup>47</sup> Star 1996, 37; 41; 43.

<sup>48</sup> Pohl 1997, 190-194; Star 1996, 35; 43.

<sup>49</sup> Tichi 1991, 4-6; Vehviläinen 1997, 153.

domesticate nature, giving the private citizen the chance to travel imaginatively into the outside worlds while remaining in the comforts of one's own home".<sup>50</sup> Thus the discursive framework, the environment of Internet (cyberspace) should be seen in relation to discourses on TV inasmuch as to those on telephones and telegraphs, and that these connections are not based solely on technical solutions but also on different tactics of domesticating and making comprehensible these media. This is also a connection made by Spigel, who discusses cyberspace as continuum of fantasies of transforming domestic space into an alternate world, and of this reality being more immersive than ever. She quotes a description on the immersion into cyberspace: "it's like jumping into your TV."<sup>51</sup>

I have mapped here one possible route for rethinking media environment by looking at the topos of wonderlands as depicted in printed fiction and discourses on television and Internet. This reading, I hope, has shown the similarities between the cyberpunk scenarios of cyberspace often praised for their visionary power, and fairytale descriptions of wonderlands. One should not, however, make simple equations between, say, 19<sup>th</sup> century discourses on telephone, 1950's discourses on TV, and 1990's discourses on information networks without taking into account the differences in the social definitions of domesticity, the modes of experiencing everyday life, and the media themselves.<sup>52</sup> Thus, although these discourses have several common features, media usage and their contexts should be looked at as radically different.

Emphasising home as media space is a way to insist on the situatedness of Internet use as corporeal experience in a particular spatio-temporal location as well as in discourses on other domestic media technology. Wonderlands can be seen as belonging to the "rather common a stock of symbolic material out of which all our fantasies are fashioned".<sup>53</sup> They are utopian constructs of media environments that give promises of something better being at one's reach through the use of media technology. However, these parallel realities are built with tools of societies, in which gender, nationality, ethnicity and class alike undermine the uses of language and imageries, access and representation alike.<sup>54</sup> Media environments are thus not given but constantly made, not only something for one to explore but also something to shape and produce in theoretical writing and usage alike.

---

<sup>50</sup> Spigel 1992, 182.

<sup>51</sup> Spigel 1992, 185-186. Quote from MTV's *Buzz* (1990).

<sup>52</sup> Spigel 1992, 186.

<sup>53</sup> Cohen and Taylor 1992, 95.

<sup>54</sup> Kibby 1997, 3.

## Literature

- Baum, Frank L., **The Wonderful Wizard of Oz**.  
<http://www.cs.emu.edu/People/rgs/wizozi0.html>.
- Bukatman, Scott (1994), **Gibson's Typewriter**. In Mark Dery (ed), **Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture**. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Burrows, Roger (1997), *Cyberspace as Social Theory: William Gibson and the Sociological Imagination*. In Sallie Westwood and John Williams (eds), **Imagining Cities: Scripts, Signs, Memory**. London and New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith (1990), **Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity**. London and New York: Routledge.
- Carroll, Lewis, **Through the Looking-Glass**.  
[gopher://wiretap.spies.com/oo/Library/Classic/looking.txt](http://gopher://wiretap.spies.com/oo/Library/Classic/looking.txt)
- Certeau, Michel de (1988), **The Practice of Everyday Life**. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press (1984).
- Cohen, Stanley, and Taylor Laurie (1992), **Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life. Second Edition**. London and New York: Routledge.
- Douglas, Mary (1991), *The Idea of Home: A Kind of Space*. **Social Research**, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Spring 1991).
- Gibson, William (1997), **Neuromancer**. New York: Ace Books (1984).
- Haddon, William (1992), *Explaining ICT Consumption: the case of the home computer*. In Roger Silverstone and Eric Hirsch (eds), **Consuming Technologies: media and Information in Domestic Spaces**. London and New York: Routledge.
- Huhtamo, Erkki (1995), *Ruumiiton matkustaja "ikään kuin" maassa*. In Erkki huhtamo (ed), **Virtuaalisuuden arkeologia: Virtuaalimatkaileijan uusi käsikirja**. Rovaniemi: University of Lapland.
- Huhtamo, Erkki (1997), **Elävän kuvan arkeologia**. Jyväskylä: Yle-Opetuspalvelut.
- Kibby, Marj (1997), *Babes on the Web: Sex, Identity and the Home Page*.  
<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/department/so/babes.htm>
- Livingstone, Sonia, (1992) *the Meaning of Domestic Technologies: a Personal Construct Analysis of Familial Gender Relations*. In Roger Silverstone and Eric Hirsch (eds), **Consuming Technologies: media and Information in Domestic Spaces**. London and New York: Routledge.
- Nye, David E. (1997), **Narratives and Spaces: Technology and the Construction of American Culture**. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Marvin, Carolyn (1988), **When Old technologies Were new: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century**. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pohl, Margit (1997), *The Internet - a 'feminine' technology?* In Rachel Lander and Alison Adam (eds), **Women in Computing**. Exeter: Intellect Books.
- Radway, Janice A. (1984), **Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture**. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.
- Ross, Andrew (1991), **Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits**. London and New York: Verso.
- Salo, Merja (1995), *Kuvalehti, valokuva ja virtuaalimatkaileijan topos*. In Erkki huhtamo (ed), **Virtuaalisuuden arkeologia: Virtuaalimatkaileijan uusi käsikirja**. Rovaniemi: University of Lapland.
- Seabrook, Jeremy (1991), *'My Life is in that Box'*. In Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (eds), **Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography**. London: Virago.
- Silverstone, Roger (1994), **Television and Everyday Life**. London and New York: Routledge.
- Spigel, Lynn (1992), **Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America**. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.

- Springer, Claudia (1996), **Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desire in the Postindustrial Age**. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Star, Susan Leigh (1996), *From Hestia to Home Page: Feminism and the Concept of Cyberspace*. In Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti (eds), **Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science, Medicine and Cyberspace**. London and New Jersey: Zed Books.
- Tamblyn, Christine (1997), *Remote Control: The Electronic Transference*. In Jennifer Terry and Melodie Cavert (eds), **Processed lives: Gender and technology in Everyday Life**. London and New York: Routledge.
- Tichi, Cecelia (1991), **Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture**. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Turkle, Sherry (1995), **Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet**. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Vehviläinen, Marja (1997), *Tietotekniikan sukupuolesta*. Teoksessa Kari Stachon (toim.), **Näkökulmia tietoyhteiskuntaan**. Tampere: Gaudeamus.
- Wheelock, Jane (1992), *Personal Computers, gender and the Institutional Model of the Household*. In Roger Silverstone and Eric Hirsch (eds), **Consuming Technologies: media and Information in Domestic Spaces**. London and New York: Routledge.