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Perspectives: Travels in **cyber - reality** - We're told that we're part of a technological revolution. We're told that our old notions of politics, of culture, of humanity itself are dead or dying. We're told that nothing can be the same again. What can it all possibly mean?

By: By JENNY TURNER

Feed your head, a scruffy poster says, directing us into an oldish building with a cinema attached: this is the arts part of Derby University, so at least we can be clear about that. Inside, there beckons another poster. Cybercafe, this way. So up the corridor I go, to what looks very much like an ordinary cafe, with coffee in styrofoam cups and sandwiches in see-through plastic boxes. Off I go down the corridor again, stepping neatly over a homily laid in bronze upon the 19th-century terrazzo floor: Today/Is The/Tomorrow/You Were Promised/Yesterday.

And so I have come to a big, dark room, a bit like a church hall. Except that the air is full of ambient sounds, the room is veritably stuffed with computers, and already, at 11 o'clock on a Saturday morning, the room is filling up with people who look like students. For the most part.

'I'm looking for this Head thing,' a woman of about 60 says to me. 'What's it all in aid of, then?' 'I think it's a sort of open day for the community,' I tell her. 'A chance for people from outside to get to use the Internet.' 'What's that?' 'An international computer network you can use to get information from all over the world,' a helpful student butts in.

'A bit like Ceefax, then?' 'No, not really,' says the student, with a patronising smile.

'Oh. So what are all those squares in aid of?' asks the woman, pointing at a big colour Mac with some jazzy moving-chessboard visuals running on its screen.

'That's our Virtual **Reality** software. Put on the dataglove and your hand can actually enter the computer environment.' 'I'm sorry, but I don't see why I'd ever want to,' the woman says, turning to go home. 'I think I'll leave all this stuff to you young ones,' she adds, patting me on the arm.

'We always see change happening through a rear-view mirror. We assume that the future will be much the same as the past, only more so that life will go on in much the same way as it has before, give or take a few gizmos. But we have to ask ourselves the question: what do new technologies allow us to do that we have never done before? The computer is a machine which injects speed into all activities, social, economic, scientific. So expect to see change at a rate you have never seen it before.' Thus says Sadie Plant, cyberfeminist, a tousle-headed woman dressed in jeans, desert boots, and a big plaid overshirt. A lecturer in Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, Sadie has recently started metamorphosing into a media academic: she was a guest on Radio 4's Start The Week with Melvyn Bragg recently, she has been profiled for the Observer's Cyberspace column, and by the Guardian, which proclaimed her 'the most interesting woman in Britain'.

Today, Sadie is giving the keynote lecture at this Head thing, which for the course of the afternoon is given over to instructing members of the local community in the principles of the philosophy of the future. We are told it is perfectly possible that in the future, we will be able to learn Japanese by sticking an implant in our brain. So what will happen to our education system then? We are told that there is no such thing as a right and a left in politics any more. Indeed, when someone asks a question about politics, Sadie laughs: 'I'm not even sure that word means much any more. We probably need to invent a new word.' Sadie is followed to the podium by her frequent collaborator, Nick Land, a philosophy lecturer at the University of Warwick. 'Hello. I work in the field of The Collapse of Western Civilisation Studies,' is how Land begins his talk. Land has an alarming stage presence. Slight, dark and anxious-looking, he stalks around the stage, working his hands in strange, balletic movements. He has a choked, whispery voice which you can actually hear him shove himself against as he speaks. Physically and, you sense, emotionally, he has the unpredictable vulnerability of an uncut elf.

Land's text for today is 'complexity': crudely, the recognition that messiness, not order, is the basic stuff of the universe. According to Land, the widespread belief that our world is or can be orderly is an

illusion which has been fostered by capital. But now, capitalism is in decay, and our world-illusion is breaking up and, as it does so, we can expect to see 'power' assert itself in a more brutal way than 'power' ever has before. 'No one's trying to persuade you. The system is just driving itself to death.' Land sees this break up as the inevitable outcome of what he calls 'open systems': information networks which know no boundaries of nation, law or identity viruses which invade bodies, institutions, machines, mutating themselves and everything they touch as they go. And there is nothing those entities which used to think of themselves as human beings can or will ever be able to do about it.

The audience is a strange mix. There's a row of student types, all in black with strikingly-razored hairdos, religiously taping the proceedings on a four-track. A couple of slightly squarer-looking people - a teacher and a social worker, as they later turn out to be - try hard to persuade Land that there are still useful things left for human beings to do. My mind, meanwhile, is wandering, to a videotape of The Terminator running in my head: great hideous black machines, clanking themselves autonomously across a blasted landscape, squashing all human life, sending Arnold Schwarzenegger from their future to sow the seeds of destruction in our here and now. Then my mind wanders back, to this very ordinary lecture-hall in the Midlands, full of creatures who look to me pretty much like very ordinarily unruffled human beings. Surely there can be no connection between these two worlds? But then again, I have just proved that there can be. Because I have proved it is possible to think of both of them at exactly the same time.

For the rest of Feed Your Head, we are supposed to wander around the darkened hall, trying on the VR dataglove, dipping into the CD-Roms, browsing through virtual-art galleries and nightclubs on the World Wide Web. But the more interesting stuff is happening in the corridor, where the smokers sit flicking their ash over the homily in bronze. It is here that Nick Land and Sadie Plant sit hunched for most of the day, demagogically surrounded by an eager entourage. Both of them - and most of the entourage, for that matter - smoke like tomorrow will never come.

Sadie Plant and Nick Land are both in their early thirties. Both of them are products of comprehensive schooling, and both of them started out as philosophy students, he at Sussex University, she at Manchester. Neither was ever quite conventional. Sadie's first book, *The Most Radical Gesture* (1992), was a spirited, un-neutral study of the Situationists, the Sixties French surrealo-political sect. And Nick's *The Thirst For Annihilation: Georges Bataille And Virulent Nihilism* (1992) was full of bits like this: 'My detestation for the Christian faith exhausts my being, and more. I long for its god to exist in order to slake myself as violence upon him.' And so on.

Neither, however, went **cyber** until they discovered technology - and each other - in 1992. When you ask Sadie why she made the leap, she talks about starting work at Birmingham and falling in love with the Macintosh computer laid out for her on her desk. 'It was just so beautifully designed. There were so many things you could do with it.' When you ask Nick, he mutters something about how 'this area converges on a zone of question-marks and silence'. The responses are typical of the two.

One day, someone should write a radio play about Sadie Plant and Nick Land. Her writings discuss computer culture in terms of 'weaving', 'chattering and nattering' and a 'tactile environment' potentially more hospitable to women than to men. He is interested in viral invasion, the death of modernity and 'the replacement of myotic sex by bacterial transfer' - a process which, in a rare moment of levity, he says is like 'going from wife-swapping to gene-trading'. She puts an optimistic, cheery, hands-on spin on things. 'NL is a palsied mantis constructed from black jumpers and secondhand Sega circuitry, stalking the crumbling corridors of academe systematically extirpating all humanism,' runs Land's bio in a little magazine I would not have dared present such a caricature myself, but as he presumably approved this one, let us say that it hits a mark. She is a bright, engaging, well-organised talker who smiles a lot as she speaks. He has a palpable nerviness, and an equally palpable fondness for words like 'zone', 'convergence' and 'contamination', each of which attain in their every enunciation a peculiarly threatening spin.

And while she drinks orange squash, he is an unflinching and unrepentant snakebite man. Roll over, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir! No, but seriously. Together, the Land-Plant nexus personifies our ambivalence about the revolution coming upon us. Will it all be okay after all, and even quite a positive thing for women, so long as they **cyber** up a bit? Or are we looking into a future of technonetworked robotic hell? 'The question,' as both of them say noticeably often in response to my

questions, 'is irrelevant.' Whatever the future is going to look like, it won't shape up as such a simple either/or.

Sadie and Nick, Land and Plant, are not popular among the academic community. Their work surfs across disciplines which normally are treated as discrete, too specialised and difficult for outsiders to understand. Land, for example, is currently obsessed with non-linear dynamics, and pours scorn on the notion that mathematical concepts are best left to trained mathematicians. As well as writing for traditional academic publishers, they also contribute to smaller, weirder-looking enterprises: *Unnatural: Techno-Theory For A Contaminated Culture* (1994). And *\*\*\*\*collapse*, a sinister-looking zine of material trawled from the Net whose first edition was printed out earlier this year. Here is a snatch of the Plant-Land nexus's contribution to *Unnatural*: 'Immuno-vulnerability is cyberpositive, and its viruses are not just infection, but connection continuing to interlock with the matrix even after they are secreted inside the body.' Not even the wackiest of academic post-modernists ever managed to slither quite like that.

'They're just careerists and self-publicists, aren't they?' a Warwick academic complained to me. 'And the writing is utter nonsense. Silly, solipsistic bilge.' 'She thinks she's very radical, but really, her work is so right-wing. It's just a paean to market economics,' was the comment of another off-the-record prof. Jealous? Threatened? Justified? It is difficult to tell. Whatever else they are or may stand for, Plant and Land have in their work made change itself their thing. That universities, that the concept of knowledge itself, will be changing along with everything else is very much part of their theme. Their work is both cause and symptom of the very sense of crisis it is setting out to describe.

'So,' I ask cleverly of Sadie. 'What do you think you'll be doing in 20 years' time? Doesn't it worry you that you might be arguing yourself out of a comfortable career?' 'I think whether I'm arguing myself out of a job or not is irrelevant, if institutions are going the way I think they're going,' is her cool reply. 'Of course, there's something so solid about universities, you can't imagine they would somehow collapse . . . But there is still something untenable about them.' I try the same trick question on Nick. 'We-ell,' he says, with a deep breath. 'The signs indicate that a really big upheaval is coming in 1996. The convergence between computers, broadcasting and telecommunications is going to be functional from about that date. And if you look around the world, just about every country on the planet has a general election coming up - the US, Russia, Japan - and Deng Xiaoping in China is about to die. It will be a key threshold. It's going to change everything just as much as 1989 did . . .' So Land, presumably, does not see himself collecting his university pension. Does this bother him? 'Oh, I pretty well wholeheartedly welcome it. I'll have to find another way to fund my nicotine habit. But the state education system is basically dead.' BACK IN JULY 1992, Cliff Stanford, a smalltime designer of accountancy software based in Finchley, north-west London, decided he wanted access to the burgeoning networks of online chat and chaos he had heard were growing up in the US - up until then, only universities and big corporations could afford to be on the Net. So he posted an ad called *tenner*. a month on a local computer bulletin board, desperately seeking 200 fellow computer enthusiasts willing to help him raise the pounds 20,000 necessary to buy a share in a 'pipe' running under the sea to a machine called EUnet in Holland. Why Holland? Because EUnet was the nearest site to Finchley that offered a way into IP, Internet Protocol, the format in which messages must be packaged if they are to switch with computers in the US. Stanford's software outfit was called *Demon*, so this new enterprise became *Demon Internet*. From tinyimps enormous monsters of change and confusion grow.

'Actually, Cliff only got 120 replies to his original *tenner*. a month,' Steve Kennedy, now business development manager at *Demon*, confides. 'And I'd've been second on the list, only my credit-card details went astray, so I ended up 63rd . . .' From 120 techy-heads stumping up pounds 10 each, *Demon* has grown in the space of 30 months to having '26,000-plus' subscribers, a figure which, on current trends, is growing at 15 per cent a month.

The columns of the mainstream press were, until last summer, practically empty of cyberreportage. Since then, they have been filling up at ever-redoubling rates. There's cyberbusiness on the business pages. Cybernightclubs, cyberfashion, cyberdrugs, in the style press. Cyberlaw on the legal pages. Features pages are full of knotted-brow think-pieces about the coming of an 'information superhighway', which is what apparently we will have when the whole world goes online, and the concomitant 'multimedia revolution', when it will, oh joy, be possible to book a pizza, buy stocks, vote Newt Gingrich in as president of the world, chat on the vidphone and snog Clark Gable in a simstim

version of *Gone With The Wind*, all from the selfsame user-friendly box in the corner of your living-room. Thus, in a recent *Cosmopolitan*: 'Future Sex And Shopping. Our brilliant guide to cyberspace'.

Online, the Guardian's weekly science-and-new-technology supplement - itself a symptom of this general netty-techy explosion - recently estimated Net 'connectivity', as hipsters call it, at around 50,000 networks, four million computers, 30 million-plus users, worldwide. These figures represent only educated guesses. The Net is a decentred, sprawling structure. There is no supercomputer sitting like a queen bee to keep its activities in check. Nevertheless, projections of current increases in Net usage indicate - we are told - that the entire world could in theory be connected by the year 2003.

Is this really likely, given that enormous parts of the world still are not connected to clean running water? Still, it is difficult to read such a statistic without seeing, for a split second, the image of a utopian world communications network flash before your eyes. Computers, at a certain level of abstraction, are but machines which transform the stuff of our past and present into the stuff of possible futures. Yet computers are completely unable to discriminate between what is true and what is false, what is useful and what is pointless or misleading information. The more our culture becomes a cyberculture, the more the distinction between factual present and hypothetical future, **reality** and fantasy, becomes blurred.

'You think to yourself, hey, I'm surfing on the worldwide superhighway. Actually, IRL, what you're doing is keyboarding on a computer and creating a message which is communicated in machine code down copper wires. You are on a primarily text-based medium on which spatial relationships have to be conveyed in letters, encrypted on silicon and then beamed down. But it's easy to forget that sometimes.' Thus says James Bloom, computer-whizz: 19 years old, and a big cheese on *Wired*, a beautifully-designed, glossy-advertisement-heavy, cyberglossy magazine, hitherto available on import from the US.

From the end of this month on, *Wired* will appear in a British version, produced by none other than the Guardian. 'Why *Wired*?' reads a manifesto from the mag's US editor, Louis Rossetto. '*Wired* is about the most powerful people on the planet today - the Digital Generation. These are the people who not only foresaw how the merger of computers, telecommunications and the media is transforming life at the cusp of the new millennium, they are making it happen.' And so on and so on and so on. As you can see, the philosophy of the future is not the only sort of discourse which makes its points by being insistent about things which have yet to happen. This is exactly what the language of advertising is all about as well.

James Bloom's big Internet interest is in MUDs, multi-user dimensions, on which as many people as have the right privileges all log on into a gigantic database at the same time, under any identity, and with any gender they like. There are MUDs for pretending to be furry animals in. There are MUDs for discussing post-modern culture in. And there is the magnificent LambdaMOO. When you subscribe to LambdaMOO, you get given your very own room, yours to write up in any way you like. You can invite any new friends you make into your room with you. You know these friends only by what they write. Men write as women. Women write as spivaks, whatever that may be. Anything can happen: transfiguration, transsexuality, cyberviolence, cybersex. Not that James ever indulges in such dangerous and transgressive pursuits. He says he doesn't see the point.

'It's just text, but it's so well-written, you feel you actually inhabit it as you move around. It's like a novel, except that you're writing it. And the strange thing is, different users all seem to have much the same conception of the environment. It's lovely stuff,' James says. 'Sharing a virtual **reality** teaches you a lot about, I suppose, subjectivity. And projection: how much you think you know what someone else is feeling just because of how you're feeling. It used to be impossible to relate to anybody without the body coming into it somewhere, even if just as your handwriting or your voice. But in these dimensions, you can relate to people in all sorts of ways just by using your mind.' The prefix '**cyber**' first arrived in the English language just after the second world war, when mathematician Norbert Wiener coined the concept of cybernetics, the study of systems of communication and control. 'We, as human beings, are not isolated systems,' Wiener writes in *The Human Use Of Human Beings* (1954). 'We take in food, which generates energy, from the outside, and are, as a result, parts of that larger world which contains those sources of our vitality. But even more important is the fact that we take in information through our sense organs, and we act on information received.' So the notion that human

beings are not really as different from machines as once upon a time they had thought they were was born.

Cyberspace arrived 30 years later, in *Neuromancer*, William Gibson's visionary novel of 1984. The hero of *Neuromancer*, the burnt-out Case, is a cybercowboy who jacks his laptop straight into his brain. When he does so, he sees, and interacts with the Matrix, 'a graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system'. He hacks through layers of digitally-encrypted information like a bank-robber of yore hacked through safes and walls. He experiences data as a parallel **reality**, with its own dimensions of time and space, and its own ability to wreak stupendous harm.

Cyberspace has no mass or extension. So it cannot be exactly physically 'real'. But neither is it entirely fantastic. William Gibson has defined it as 'a consensual hallucination': something not real, but which appears so because it is socially shared. But then again, this is more or less how philosophers since Kant have been defining the sense of **reality** within which human consciousness traditionally lives. You can see why philosophers are currently going **cyber** at a rate of knots.

And you can also see why, for traditionally-minded thinkers, cyberphilosophy is such a disturbing thing. It is bringing science and the arts, the cosily-delineated 'two cultures' beloved of C P Snow, into all sorts of bizarre collisions. It is confusing science-fiction, in the shape of William Gibson and the other quaintly-labelled 'cyberpunk' novelists, with philosophy and science fact. Above all, it blends the same weird mixture of rigorous-sounding hypothesis and stuff that sounds like ad-speak that seems to be endemic to all talk about the future. 'Connectionism . . . 'Sadie Plant writes in a recent essay, 'is less a matter of being taught the old than a process of learning the new. It is not a new theory, but fatally disturbs the role of theory itself. It is not an answer, but a question.' Is this sort of thing really that different from the designer ideas-surfing of *Wired*? William Gibson, author of *Neuromancer*, once said in an interview: 'What's most important to me is that *Neuromancer* is about the present. It's not really about an imagined future. It's a way of trying to come to terms with the awe and terror inspired in me by the world in which we live.' I wonder, I say to Sadie Plant, do you not think that all this stuff about the future is really just projections of the way different people feel about the here and now? 'No I don't,' she replies. 'I think the future has a way of leaking backwards, into the present.' What on earth does she mean by that? 'I remember visiting Mexico a few years back, and I saw these kids selling these weird little gizmos on the beach. They were the sort of Made In Taiwan thing you'd think nothing about if you saw them here, but in the context of Mexico, it seemed really strange. They were little packets from the future dropped into the present.' No, no, I say. That's just what our present is actually like. All sorts of different levels of technological advancement coexist in the same place at the same time. Sadie falls silent. Later, when I am transcribing the conversation, I realise that this is exactly what she meant.

NICK Land has been working as a 'scum-level' - as he puts it - philosophy lecturer at the University of Warwick since 1991. 'Dr Nicholas Land' it says on the door of his room in the Social Science Building, the Land wittily amended, in pencil, to Blank. As well as the usual typed and tattered lists of office hours and essay-assignments, the door carries a gothic-looking advertisement for \*\*\*\*collapse, a magazine of 'spe(w)ed text' produced by someone with an e-mail address that goes PYUDO@warwick.ac.uk.

Nick Land, it turns out, has decided that what I really need to do is to talk to a few of his favourite students, the cybercr. . .eme de la cr. . .eme. This few turns out to mean a dozen student cyborgs, arranged around a table like a diligent, well-ordered seminar group. I sit down smiling gamely, waiting for the spectacle to begin. Expectant silence. Oh, I see. This afternoon's spectacle is going to be me.

Students, love them or hate them, live on the cutting edge of cyberculture. Janet, the Joint Academic Network, has been using the Internet Protocol since 1990, and is financially supported as it does so by all the British universities together. So whatever use a university makes of its Net connection after that costs it essentially nothing.

There are 3,000 points of access to the Internet scattered around the Warwick campus, in libraries, offices and open-access labs, on a mixture of mainframe terminals and PCs. Every student is given a logon with their matriculation card. So long as they don't clutter up the keyboards by fooling around

when other users have serious work to do, students can spend as long as they like on the Internet, absolutely free.

In *Surfing On The Internet*, 'a net-head's adventures on-line', a book shortly to be published in this country, one J C Herz writes about sitting in front of a computer terminal for six hours a night for weeks and months at a stretch, until she claps out and joins the Online Internet Addicts' Support Group ('please tell me all the clocks are wrong and it isn't really 4.30am, and I haven't been on for three days straight . . .') As J C Herz's book makes clear, it takes that degree of immersion, that much time, really to get to know the stranger corners of the cyberexperience as presently available to humanity: the heavyweight newsgroups, the MUDs and the MOOs. How did J C manage to waste so much time and bandwidth? 'I'm just goofing in the Science Center basement. Procrastinating - anything to keep from writing the Term Paper From Hell for that stupid jerk-off seminar . . . I put it away for a minute and start fooling around on the computer, just wandering, fishing through the shell . . .' It might have been sex or drink or drugs or MorrisDanceSoc. But for increasing numbers of modern students, cyberculture is the time-wasting, device of choice.

The Warwick cybergang have been meeting regularly, they say, for about two years. Last year, they came together to organise a conference, Virtual Futures, to which they invited 'all the big names' including some weirdo performance artist called Stellarc, who entertained everyone by sticking a fibre-optic cable down his throat and whose current project is to try to grow himself photosynthetic skin. This year, Virtual Futures II will be happening in May. Kathy Acker, Alan Moore, state-of-the-art cybernovelist Pat Cadigan, state-of-the-art cyberphilosopher Manuel DeLanda, new-edge cybercouple Marie Louise and Arthur Kroker of new-edge cyberjournal Mondo 2000 have all agreed to come along - 'it's a Who's Who of current cyberculture', as someone proudly says to me.

Philosophy is not a sensible subject to study at university. Philosophy graduates tend to suffer the highest post-university unemployment of all. So why, I asked the students, were they studying it in the first place? 'Well it's the old story, you know,' says Kath, a mature student and single mother who had been, she said, a straight-down-the-line reproductive-rights feminist until she discovered cyberculture. 'Why do people go into sociology? Because their family's fucked up. Why do people go into psychology? Because they're psychologically fucked up. Why do people go into philosophy? Because there's something fundamentally wrong with the way that they're constructed. Either they just want to get people to agree with them, or they're really kicking against something at a fundamental level.' 'I think you become suspicious,' said Paddy, a PhD student with a little red crest slicked on the top of his shaven head, 'when you're at school and you know full well that large numbers of you are never going to get a job. Yet you're told that you'll get a job if you follow the rules. You realise pragmatic **reality** is not the same as the way it has been characterised.' Only five of these students are being funded through their education with student grants. The rest study part-time, and work. They don't even bother to complain about this. Most of them are in their early twenties. They belong to the generation after the 'moaning minnies' Margaret Thatcher complained of in the Eighties. They take it for granted that whatever they do in their lives they will be doing on their own, aided only by 'local support networks' and by the relationships they build up on the Net. They see all social relationships in terms of markets: society is a market, relationships are a market, and the Net, with its vague, decentred, sprawling structure, is the biggest market of all. I complain that I find this notion depressingly dog-eat-dog. 'But then again,' someone says, 'it's like that anyway. Except that this phoney humanism we're all supposed to believe in obscures the fact.' To a cyborg, the Warwick students identify themselves as 'post-humanists'. They look at the human being and see not perfect souls made in God's own image, but systems of synapses and meat which interact with machines and nature all the time. Clothing and shelter. Pacemakers and hip-replacements. Physical space and virtual space. From which it becomes an easy step to contemplate all sorts of wild cyberpunkish visions of organ-swapping and body-part mutation, bio-engineered smart drugs and gene-transfer, cosmetic surgery and sex-changing. 'I mean, the idea that we can get pleasure from only one physical configuration, it's ridiculous,' says Kath, who seems particularly taken with this sort of thing. 'The real problem is the skin, though. Skin as an organ is just very, very limited. It's all extremely frustrating.' Inevitably, there is also a great deal of talk about drugs. 'Of course, it's just part of the culture,' I'm told.

For most of our seminar, I am treated like a frail old lady looked after by a bunch of well-brought-up youngsters. They talk to me very slowly and clearly. They laugh kindly at my feeble jokes. And they take a solicitous interest in the 'technophobia' and 'discomfort' they worry they may be sparking along

my braincells. 'Does what we're saying continue the terror, or abate it?' Kath gently asks of me at one point. 'You have to realise,' says a woman called Joan, who teaches political theory to fund her doctorate, 'that we were never that comfortable anyway. What good did it do you to buy into old-fashioned notions like the job for life? Look back, and you'll see that things were never really what they were made out to be. When did all that stuff ever really make us comfortable?' But then, a lad called Robin, who, it seems, doubles as the virtual editor of \*\*\*\*collapse, gets tired of all this softly-softly stuff. 'People here are being quite nice, but I think it's important to say that life is getting nasty. We aren't going to turn round and have a nice utopian world. The posthuman is a scary thing to think about, because people like to be defined and comfortable. but what we're saying is, it's too comfortable. Life doesn't have to follow the patterns you see on EastEnders! Prepare to be torn apart!' But I don't want to be torn apart, I object. I find the notion terrifying. 'Then use your fear productively. Find a niche for it and market it.' I meant to ask Robin later if that was his idea of a joke. But by the time I escaped from the seminar, I found myself just desperate to get home.

A FEW days later, I nip across the space to meet up with Sadie, in her office high up in the Muirhead Tower, Birmingham University. Derby, Warwick, Birmingham. Why, I wonder, should philosophical cyberculture seem to be such a Midlands thing? 'Birmingham is such a strange place,' Sadie says. 'Such an enormous city, and yet so un-metropolitan, completely different from London. It has no centre, really . . .' So it's a bit like California, is it? I suggest. Vast urban sprawls merging into one another, a decentred network of communications, like computer culture itself . . . 'Yes, maybe,' Sadie says. 'There must be something in that.' I am preternaturally pleased. Looks like I could get quite handy at this future-gazing business myself, with a little bit of practice.

Sadie is working on her Mac on an essay about cybersex. 'Cybersex is yet to come, but already seems like yesterday's news,' she taps. 'An anticlimax before it has begun tinged with disappointment in advance of the event.' But she takes time off to take tea, and a slab of the head-of-department's slightly staling birthday cake, with a couple of sympathetic students. One is working on the philosophical implications of cryonics. Suppose they freeze your head, and work out a way of replicating your brain-patterns on a floppy disk. You could be a head without a body. You could even be a brain without a head. What does that mean for the way we think about human identity? He's a nice lad he comes from Brighton. I make every effort possible to turn the conversation round to talking about Brighton instead.

But soon it's time to make the journey from the Birmingham University campus in Sadie's little red van. For this evening Sadie is contributing to a forum on architecture and cyberspace at the Ikon, a trendy art gallery right down in whatever city centre the new Los Angeles might turn out to have. The other panellists talk exactly the same sort of vapid rot panellists in trendy art-gallery forums usually tend to talk, except that instead of mentioning postmodern culture at least once in every two sentences, they mention something **cyber** instead. But Sadie extemporises brilliantly. She may resent those old fogeys who accuse her of being a self-publicist. She may prefer to see herself as a selfless prophet and propagandist. But given her analysis of where her university job seems to be going, it is surely only sensible of her to be doing whatever she can to prepare herself for a future which, however else it may go, will be increasingly freelance.

BACK at the Head thing in Derby, the nicest part of my day came when I ran into a couple of young women called Jennifer and Sasha, in the melee of curious bodies hanging around the bank of machines set up to give us, the community, a shot at the interweaving system of brightly-coloured pages they call the World Wide Web. Cyberfeminism be blown. It seemed impossible, as newbies and as women, to get beyond being part of the admiring gaggle who crowded aimlessly round the hardware, watching the lads running through their hands-on stuff. Jennifer, 22, was a student at Derby, studying something called Visual Culture. 'What's that?' I asked her. 'Art, film, advertising, multimedia. You know.' Jennifer said she had no burning interest in cybermatters. She finds them rather boring. But she has to keep up with multimedia stuff if she hopes to get a job in her chosen field.

Sasha, 18, was Jennifer's sister, a student nurse from Tyneside, down to visit for the weekend. And Sasha, interestingly, absolutely loathed the technology she saw spread out before her. I asked her if she thought that has anything to do with being a nurse, spending her days in chatting to people, calming them when they are in pain, the one job - one hopes - that will never be digitised out of existence. 'Maybe,' she mused. 'I'd have to think a bit about that.' Then one of the big boys decided to show off to Jennifer and Sasha. He found them a World Wide Web page with the complete filmography of Tom

Cruise on it. To what noble uses this sophisticated hypertext technology appears to be being put! 'The thing is,' Sasha went on a few minutes later, after her boredom threshold understandably had been reached. 'Your hands are for writing. Your mouth is for speaking. Your eyes are for seeing, your ears are for hearing. And that's that. That's the way it should be.' You'd better watch it, Sasha. There are people out there who think you should be getting ready to be torn apart.

Surfing On The Internet by J C Herz will be published by Abacus on April 13 at pounds 9.99. Wired UK launches on March 24. For information about Virtual Futures II, write to the Centre for Philosophy and Literature, University of Warwick, CV4 7AL, or e-mail [virtual.futures@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:virtual.futures@warwick.ac.uk).