

A Monstrous Manifesto: “Philosophers of the World, Create!”¹

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For popular culture vultures, and us filmgoers, the year 2001 would be a logical time to rethink the space odyssey created by Stanley Kubrick years earlier. Certainly this would be a predictable trope to employ in a presidential address. But we get something more, something *un*-predictable from Nicholas Burbules this year. Burbules offers us a provocative, transformed interpretation of Homer’s classic epic tale to use as a metaphor for thinking philosophically. His clever strategy forces us to reflect on what we do as philosophers, and why. Inspired by, among other influences, the French poststructuralists, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who assert that “philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts” (*WP*, 2), Burbules treats us to his own creation, his own self-understanding of philosophical change.

Not unlike Deleuze and Guattari who are known as “thinkers of ‘lines of flight’” (*WP*, viii), Burbules provides one such flight path, one such opening, “that allow(s) thought to escape from the constraints that seek to define and enclose creativity” (*WP*, viii). He invites us to think outside the sedimented, disciplined boundaries of our training as professional philosophers, shifting our perspective as we experience something new — something fresh — something unsettling.

Like Deleuze and Guattari, Burbules poses the question “what is philosophy?” and “what does it mean to be a philosopher?” However, he does so in the prime of his life, at the pinnacle of his career here as president of his primary professional organization at the turn of the century. They, on the other hand, suggest that such questions can be asked “only late in life with the arrival of old age and the time for speaking concretely” (*WP*, 2). For them, it is in old age “where one can finally say, ‘what is it I have been doing all my life?’” (*WP*, 2). And, for them, it is a time of “sovereign freedom” (*WP*, 2).

I applaud Burbules for his courage and freedom to ask publicly these questions with us — before it is too late — while he still has the vitality to commit to thinking anew. Like Richard Shusterman, he is engaged in philosophy as a life-practice that does not separate philosophical thought from the lived context of the philosopher.² Although he never uses first-person singular, and his essay is not exclusively autobiographical, Burbules appears to be recounting his own philosophical journey, his own self-examination of character, his own dangers and temptations that have brought him to this desire for monstrous philosophy. Certainly this is not an idiosyncratic experience unique to him; it reflects intellectual movements of the past three decades that have influenced many of us.

So while I applaud Burbules, I also want to note that others before him paved the way: feminist scholars, critical race theorists, and postcolonial writers have been elaborating their ideas of hybridity for some time. Yet, this is relatively new terrain for the Philosophy of Education Society. Burbules deserves credit for putting it out

here — especially in his Presidential Address — for risking his own identity as a “reasonable” thinker. I am sure many of you are wondering, who is *this* Nick Burbules? What is he *talking about*? Is he on drugs? Is he a sleep-deprived new parent who has lost his bearings?

I do not think so; in fact, as a fellow traveler, a sister wanderer with Burbules, a sympatico binocular-wearing “fox,” I have made a similar journey. Moving around and through Marxism, critical theory, hermeneutic, and pragmatism, while influenced profoundly by various feminisms and postmodern thought, Burbules and I experienced what Deleuze and Guattari might call a “process of ‘parallel evolution’” (*WP*, viii). We now embrace the outcasts, the nomads, and even the monsters *within*. Like others on this path, we have both confronted a certain degree of dis-equilibrium, dis-location, and uncertainty as we traveled — as we made our philosophical changes — as we re-framed our thinking.

Burbules speaks of feelings of doubt, puzzlement, disenchantment, and loss that can accompany such profound shifts. I also want to note the excitement, hope, and imaginative possibilities that occur when one opens to new understandings — *when one takes flight*. It is literally impossible *not* to see things differently.

In this context I am reminded of an important feminist thinker who took flight and brought many others along: Donna Haraway. Not only is her work focused on monsters and hybrids, but she *herself* (at least her professional self) embodies hybridity as a historian of science, biologist, and feminist professor of the history of consciousness. As Burbules suggests, Haraway is one who resists classification and reminds us of the effects our categories have in normalizing our expectations about the “natural” divisions of the world.

Offering an original analysis of nature, Haraway exemplifies what Guattari and Deleuze would say is *philosophy*: the creation, fabrication or invention of concepts. In her book, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Haraway invents and re-invents nature. She does so because she sees nature as “perhaps the most central arena of hope, oppression, and contestation for the inhabitants of the planet earth in our times” (*SCW*, 1).

Haraway instructs the reader to see her book “as a cautionary tale about the evolution of bodies, politics, and stories” (*SCW*, 1). It is a tale that illuminates the possibilities of “a ‘cyborg feminism’: a feminism that is attuned to specific historical and political positionings and permanent partialities” (*SCW*, 1). The historical time is the late twentieth and early twenty-first century; “the cyborg is a hybrid creature, composed of organism and machine” (*SCW*, 1).

With the deployment of this hybrid monster, Haraway interrogates and destabilizes boundaries, narratives, and identities. Her cyborg body is neither innocent nor does it seek unitary identity. Just as Burbules warns that we need to be suspicious of either/or dichotomies and to embrace the in-between, Haraway offers “cyborg imagery (that) can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms” (*SCW*, 181).

This imagery, this dream that Haraway gives us, is one “not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia...an imagination of a feminist

speaking in tongues...both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, spaces stories” (SCW, 1).

So how can we recognize ourselves in Haraway’s cyborg, or in Burbules’ monster? What would it mean to embody that identity, that positionality as philosophers of education? To shift shapes as we rethink, re-experience familiar terrain in an effort to de-familiarize it? What would it mean, for example, to accept as Haraway does, the cyborg as our ontology, as a “creature of a post-gender world... committed to partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity” (SCW, 150-51). For Haraway, “the cyborg defines a technological *polis*” in which the social relations of the *oikos* (home economy, household) have been reworked, as have the concepts of nature and culture (SCW, 151). What Burbules invites us to do is to re-imagine our craft, our creativity in order to enlarge the conversation. To return to ourselves. To return to Penelope in a different form.

I am ready to take up the challenge laid down by these two monstrous philosophers and encourage you to come fly with me!

1. My title invokes the work of Donna Haraway who offers us a cyborg manifesto as “an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism”; Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1991), 149. This text will be cited as SCW for all subsequent references. It is also indebted to the definition of philosophy elaborated by Gilles DeLeuze and Felix Guattari in their book *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5. This text will be cited as WP for all subsequent references. And of course, we do not want to forget Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*.

2. Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 19.