















You don't have to  
CARRY ME  
AROUND LIKE  
THIS...



I WANT TO  
...

(eksie kitchin)

## REFLECTION

Jane McBride

*Terminal* is a comic inspired by the 1998 anime *Serial Experiments Lain*. It is intended to follow on from the series emotionally, aesthetically, and thematically. In *Serial Experiments Lain*, a young girl named Lain (who is unknowingly God) becomes immersed in the Wired (i.e., the internet), and blurs the lines between physical reality and the internet. Lain's face is shown on various screens as she flows through the technology that keeps society interconnected and allows her omnipresence. Lain is presented with the idea that the death of the body could allow her to transcend the body and exist purely online. *Terminal* borrows all these ideas to tell its own story about death and the screen.

In *Terminal*, Tove has left her body behind. She exists inside technology, free to jump from one machine to another. Her body is gone, but she is not dead. This is her terminal. "Terminally online" is a phrase used to describe those who spend most of their waking moments on the internet – it is often used disparagingly, but also self-deprecatingly, since only those who are terminally online would be familiar with the phrase. Tove's new state of being is intended to be a more literal representation of this phrase, as well as an exploration of Scott Bukatman's twin concepts of "terminal identity" and "terminal culture" where technology and virtual reality cause a new state of subjectivity, altering our perception of reality and identity.

A terminal is an end point. This end point can be death, but it can also be the final stage of something — the terminal station of a train line, for example. A train does not disappear when it reaches the terminal; it just ends its journey. In terms of human life, terminal implies fatal, but in a society where the organic blurs into the artificial and humanity is mechanised,

could the terminal stage of a person's life be its final station but not its end? It is unlikely, but through fiction it is possible to imagine new ways of being.

There is a weight that comes with being in the physical world. There can be a lot of baggage. Sometimes even breathing feels exhausting. In and out, all the time. It is always a commitment. Dying seems like a simple answer to this. A way to opt out. What if there was another way? Something like dying. Another terminal station. You could leave the heaviness behind and be like a hummingbird or housefly. Just buzzing from place to place. You could become the buzz of a machine. No body to inhibit you. What if you could be liminal all the time? Well, that would not be liminal at all. When you are clicking your remote, searching for something to watch, the channels on TV are only liminal so long as you do not settle on them. Then again, those channels are always liminal, because the images are always changing. (If you think about it, comics capture that experience like a fly in amber.) What if you could be like that? You could be like the Red Queen in *Through the Looking-Glass*, moving fast and staying still. No stress. What if you did not have to decide and it just happened, like a caterpillar becoming a moth? No stress. Just flow.

And because this terminal is so like death, on the surface, some people may be uncomfortable. You remind them of a ghost. You understand. Now that you are like this, you feel peaceful. You used to be scared too. When you lose your body, you lose your worries. You understand now that being disconnected in some ways does not mean you have to be disconnected in others. A ghost is disconnected from life, but it is not disconnected from memory. You do not have a body like your friends do, but you are still with them. In *Serial Experiments Lain*, Lain goes through an identity crisis. Not knowing if she is human or if she needs a body makes her doubt if she exists at all. And more important than any metaphysical worries are her worries about how she can relate to her friends in this state. She never comes

to a clear answer to her worries about identity and existence, but she does find some closure regarding her relationship with others.

In *Serial Experiments Lain*, the blurring of boundaries is represented by the growing presence of technology in the physical world. It goes from being controlled by humans to something influenced by the subconscious, almost with a life of its own. Lain's bedroom goes from a normal girl's room to a cluttered computer laboratory, cluttered with monitors and coolant systems. Wires cover the floor and grow from the window like weeds. While the series ends with Lain altering reality to reverse its influence, I was curious about what a reality where technology crept organically and the lines between natural and artificial continued to blur would look like and how that could be represented in a comic. I was not interested in how it would function, but how it would feel to exist in that world. Telling this story as a comic allows me to depict this reality in a way that is both immediate and abstract.

When it comes to expressing ideas, I prefer fiction over non-fiction, the abstract over specific and comics over prose. Comics use less words to tell a story. With comics, I can express abstract or vague ideas with simple images. When writing, I always struggle not to be didactic or affected; put into words, my ideas never seem as pure as they are in my mind. As my ideas are image-focused, it makes sense to translate them into comics, a visual medium. With comics, I can present the reader with imagery that is concrete but still open to interpretation; I do not have to tell the reader what to see or how to see it. The screen is a visual medium. It makes sense to address it with another visual medium. Stylised imagery can communicate complex ideas and emotions. Writing can over-specify, defining terms in an airtight way. This can lead to problems when it comes to certain topics. There is no definite understanding of the human relationship with death or technology. This is not a direct, scientific examination of either, but an indirect, speculative look at our relationship with these ideas.



While the story is linear, comics allow for a more non-linear reading than prose. Every panel leads to another, but everything inside the panels floats freely. The reader can decide what aspects to focus on and what order the words and pictures fall in. Every panel of a comic is like a gif; not like a photograph, where a single second is trapped like a fly in amber, but moments in time that repeat every time they are read. The reader does not even have to progress from panel to panel. If the reader wants, they can take in a whole page as a series of panels, like looking at multiple TVs, one on top of the other, all playing different scenes of the same film. This is one of the reasons why I depicted Tove's face appearing in rows of TV screens. Another reason was to set the scene. I wanted to present a world with a dreamlike atmosphere, where technology is as present in the everyday as trees or buildings. TVs and other devices are everywhere in this world, without being placed there by anyone. They are simply there. Mome wandering through this setting and Tove passing effortlessly through machines is meant to echo Lewis Carroll's *Alice*, itself an influence on *Serial Experiments Lain*.

The screen is often seen as something cold and clinical, but there is an intimacy to it. The screen of a television or a computer is not a living, thinking thing, but humans often form emotional connections with inanimate objects. Watching television alone or with others, or spending online, can feel private and personal, in the same way as listening to music or reading a book. In *Terminal*, this intimacy is increased by having one person interact with another who is now behind a screen. Tove appears in this comic as a face on a television screen. She no longer has a physical body, only the two-dimensional image of one. As she explains to her friend, Tove is not confined to a single screen. She can flit between screens, as well as other devices, including radios and telephone lines.

Basically, Tove becomes liminal, in a way a person grounded by their body couldn't be. Liminality is one of my fixations; one of my lecturers from undergrad described me as obsessed with it. I am currently applying to do a PhD on liminality, and nearly everything I

draw, write about, or engage with has something to do with the liminal. Again, this was a concept I discovered through *Lain*. Susan J. Napier calls Lain a liminal girl, like Lewis Carroll's Alice. I see Lain as the ultimate liminal girl because she does not need a body. Liminality appeals to a need to be ephemeral, and how can you be ephemeral if you are stuck in a physical body? In *Terminal Identity*, Scott Bukatman points out that the signs of technology working all around us have become more subtle, sometimes invisible, with cities "being replaced by the *non-place urban realm*" – the way it all works seems almost ephemeral, and so it's difficult not to feel like things have become more abstract or surreal. What if you became abstract too? What if, like Lain or Tove, you became part of the invisible flow of technology, your appearance disconnected from the body and flickering through screens? According to Bukatman, this is how contemporary fiction reflects our modern experience of being in the world. In the real world, everything is connected, but those connections are not always visible to us; they are not right in front of us like with machines of the past.

Tove says that, when switching between devices, she does not have to exist for a while. For her, this is not a bad thing; it is a relief. It is not exactly death, but momentary non-existence. This temporary non-existence is inspired by the gaps between the panels of a comic, as well as Bridget Crone's concept of the "flicker-image as a flash of light that has the potential to disrupt the mechanics of vision." In terms of the screen, "the flicker-image disrupts the smooth space of both image production and time perception." This is an idea that can be applied both to Tove's state of being and to the medium of comics: "Image. Followed by image. Followed by image."

Tove's friend Mome is awkward and slightly uncomfortable with Tove's new state of being. At first, she makes the mistake of thinking that Tove's being is confined to a single device, as if the television set has become her new body. Mome mistakes Tove for literally being a TV. This is intended to draw parallels to how a person in real life may react to a friend

coming out as transgender and beginning their transition; confused both by changes in their friend and by abstract ideas they find hard to grasp but must learn to understand. Mome is trying to reconcile the idea of Tove as she knew her with the way she is now. Tove, in contrast, is happy with her changes, patiently waiting for Mome to come to terms with them. The comic ends with Mome carrying Tove inside of a television set, as a way of feeling physically close to her. Unlike Tove, Mome is still uncertain about how to stay connected to her friend; as she still has a body, presence is a significant part of intimacy. Carrying her friend like this is unnecessary, but it is her way of bridging the gap. In *Serial Experiments Lain*, a similar gap emerges between Lain and her friend Alice; as Lain becomes more disconnected from her own body, losing her sense of self, Alice lets Lain feel her heartbeat, using physical intimacy as a way of keeping her friend grounded. Like Tove, Lain ultimately becomes an ephemeral presence, an embodiment of the internet, but she does not discard her bodily appearance or her connection to Alice. I am not interested in deciding what form of connection is more meaningful or authentic, but in the idea that intimacy is possible, even with a face on a screen.

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