Synopsis
Kevin Parker, *Haraway's Laughter and the Early Life of the Electron Microscope.*

In the Spring of 1985 I was a fresh History of Consciousness graduate student sitting in Donna Haraway's Feminist Science Fiction seminar participating in a discussion about Ursula K Leguin's *Left Hand of Darkness.* Usually feeling completely out of my depth amongst a roomful of high-powered cyber-feminists, some of whom were collaborators in the development of Haraway's recently published "Cyborg Manifesto," I felt that as a student of visual culture I finally had something to contribute to the discussion. Effectively, I criticized Leguin's novel for its uncritical reiteration of an all too familiar association of light, truth and presence, all summed up in its ontological prioritization of the visual. I wasn't exactly sticking my neck out as the sort of charge I was making was utterly commonplace, at least among visual culturalists. Without skipping a beat Haraway launched into a seemingly endless peel of laughter. As soon as she was able to catch her breath she said that announced that "there were compelling biological reasons for believing that vision is important," before being consumed by yet another wave of laughter. This paper tries to do justice to the significance of that laughter.

Obviously, Haraway is no ordinary STS writer. Like Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, Haraway has always refused to participate in the orthodox STS conceit that the bracketing of "the social" in modern scientific discourse is somehow not equally problematic as STS's bracketing of "the natural." This "nature," of course, is not the nature of naïve realism; it is far more complicated than that, according to Haraway, and

she is always quick to point out that the texture of this complication is never lost on science practitioners.

A prime example of Haraway's desire to construct an alternative approach to scientific practice and its study, an approach fully informed by and for feminism, was her attempt to redefine a workable conception of "objectivity" in her influential essay, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," (1988). In keeping with the laughter associated with her refusal to dismiss the biological significance of the visual, Haraway argues that a reconsideration of human visual is precisely where a practical reformulation of objectivity should begin. Working against conventional critiques of the instrumental, disembodied character of technically mediated visual systems Haraway suggests that an engagement with the "social, technical and physical" translation of visual information in technical devices like magnetic resonance imagers, spy satellites or high energy microscopes might provide comparative insight into the character of our own, "organic" visual systems. This paper takes up the suggestion of the high energy microscope, paying special attention to its contradictory role in, on the one hand, the radical challenge to classical conceptions of physical situatedness in Werner Heisenberg's virtual gamma ray microscope of 1925, and, on the other hand to the role played by Ernst Ruska's electron microscope in the rise of "biophysics" in the 1930s. Both of these instruments can help us to understand what Haraway means by "situated knowledges," across all three of the registers of the physical, technical and social well beyond the conventional nature/culture divide. A consideration of the very different situatedness of these two devices sheds considerable light on the situatedness of our own, organic, visual systems.