

Cyborg Futures:

Cyborgs, Cyberpunk and the future of the body

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The 'new wave' in science fiction, a collective description for works displaying the new sensibilities and aesthetic that emerged in the genre during the 1980s, was a time of new directions among authors and critics alike. Among the critics, Donna Haraway would introduce some of the most revolutionary and influential alternative thinking with 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs' ⁽¹⁾. In it, she argued that because the figure of the cyborg destroys the traditional Judeo-Christian association of Woman / Nature, it could free women from the gender-constraints imposed by contemporary society. Female cyborgs are by definition an assault on our cultural coding. They introduce the possibility of woman not as a pure and innocent creature of God, but as a breached and hybrid entity. In its fusion of the organic and the artificial, the cyborg rejects notions of the body as sacred. Haraway asserts that "The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust." ⁽²⁾ She discusses the new opportunities for disintegration and reconstitution, modification and duplication offered by the technologies of the post-industrial information society, seeking to apply these processes to the human body. Her vision of a cyborg future imagines the disintegration of gender boundaries and the reconstitution of the body as an organic machine. She describes this vision of the future as a post-gender utopia. ⁽³⁾

Likewise, the Cyberpunk genre has prophesied the disintegration of internal and external boundaries. William Gibson's cyberspace is a world of data populated by computer systems, intelligent viruses, interactive personality recordings and God-like artificial intelligences. When humans "jack in" to cyberspace, their minds reach out to a world beyond, escaping the heavy flesh of their bodies to join the dataflow and roam the network. Every human who jacks in has immediately transformed into a cyborg. This hyperactive information society is a world of flux, in cyberspace and in real life, a world where nothing is certain and everything can be altered, even the human body. Flesh and bone have become just as malleable as data. The individual components of the body can be replaced or upgraded by surgical procedure, just like the components of any other machine. In his review of Cyberpunk literature, Peter Fitting declares that Gibson's writing illustrates "the irrelevance of the integrity of the human." ⁽⁴⁾ In fact many of Gibson's characters actually despise the body for its physical constraints and discover freedom in its abandonment. The body is represented as a shell, independent and detachable from the mind and personality.

The writing of Haraway and Gibson continues to see biology and technology as opposing forces unable to co-exist. Trapped by the nature / culture argument, some of the most forward thinking authors and critics still insist that embracing the future means rejecting our biological inheritance. To be fit to populate these worlds we must cut loose the dead weight of our primitive biology, even abandon our bodies entirely. However, as technological advances accelerate in communications, medicine, surgery, genetics and robotics, the distinction between humans and machines is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. Donna Haraway comments that: “Late-twentieth century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally-designed.”⁽⁵⁾ At a time when modern technology is in the process of transgressing the borders that our society uses to distinguish between humans and machines, merging nature and culture in the image of a gendered cyborg seems to transgress too many borders at once. Both sides of the argument reject this image and the polar oppositions are maintained. There are technophobes and technophiles; the choice is culture or nature, biology or technology.

Alternatively, some authors and filmmakers see the future as an approaching technological horizon where human biology and modern technology are convergent forces. One of the seminal works of this alternative vision appeared as early as 1973. In his novel *Crash*, science fiction author J. G. Ballard suggested that the moment of convergence had in fact already arrived, and that the focal point was sex. Ballard, the eponymous narrator of *Crash*, discovers a new world of sexual possibility in the 20th century phenomenon of the car crash and its violent collisions of “blood, semen and engine coolant.”⁽⁶⁾ Ballard believes that the overlay of technology, communication, design and commerce onto every aspect of modern life has changed the nature of our everyday experiences, thoughts and fantasies. In the author’s introduction he writes in retrospect: “Throughout *Crash* I have used the car not only as a sexual image, but as a total metaphor for man’s life in today’s society. As such the novel has a political role quite apart from its sexual content, but I would still like to think that *Crash* is the first pornographic novel based on technology.”⁽⁷⁾ And so it is. Ballard’s techno-fantasies do not require that he transform hard technology into soft, so that he may imagine technology as a parody of organic life. He fetishises the technology for all its fantastic Otherness: an alien anatomy of angular steel integrating with our bodies at high speed.

Biology also persists in many technophile visions of the future. In her analysis of Cyberpunk fiction in popular culture, Claudia Springer has found that characters with overtly gendered identities are actually a common feature of the genre, despite its many narratives concerning the abandonment of the body. She concludes that: “while popular culture texts enthusiastically explore boundary breakdowns between humans and computers, gender boundaries are treated less flexibly... Cyborg imagery has not so far realized the ungendered ideal theorized by Donna Haraway.”⁽⁸⁾ It is an ideal that may never be realized, if observations of late 20th century computer culture are an accurate reflection of future directions. In her study of how the Internet is changing our psychology, *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle made the discovery that gender continues to be important even in the online world of faceless communication. She joined one of the many online communities known as Multi-User Domains (MUDs), elaborate virtual environments and conversation spaces that exist entirely in text form. Discussing her experiences, she recalled her own interest in the gender of other users:

“Playing in MUDs, whether as a man, a woman, or a neuter character [by withholding her gender], I quickly fell into the habit of orienting myself to new cyberspace acquaintances by checking out their gender... The preoccupation in MUDs with getting a “fix” on people through “fixing” their gender reminds us of the extent to which we use gender to shape our relationships.”⁽⁹⁾

In conversation with Turkle, a female MUD user confirmed the difficulty of abandoning gender in the online world. “The neuter characters [in MUDs] are good. When I play one, I realize how hard it is not to be either a man or a woman. I always find myself trying to be one or the other even when I’m trying to be neither.”⁽¹⁰⁾ If the body ceases to have significance in the virtual world, as Cyberpunk fiction declares, then why are users so drawn to it? The evidence suggests that gender is an important aspect of our identity, and one that cannot simply be abandoned in a post-body virtual world or in a post-gender cyborg utopia. Our complex relationship with the advanced technology that is redefining the boundaries of our bodies has been explored in the Cyberpunk fiction of Japan, a technophile nation ruined and rebuilt by technology. Modern Japan is in a unique position to investigate this relationship. William Gibson has declared that: “Japan is the global imagination’s default setting for the future.”⁽¹¹⁾

The anime feature film *Akira* tells the story of Tetsuo, an orphaned teenage boy who is shy, small and weak, and always the underdog. Through a freak accident he attains awesome psychokinetic abilities, but his anger at his previous physical frailty and his feelings of rage towards the world remain unresolved. What results is the destruction of an entire city, as Tetsuo's id takes over and he strikes out with his apocalyptic new power at any target he can find. *Akira*'s theme of losing control of one's own body is a powerful caution about the dangers of further integration with technology while our fractured attitudes towards our bodies remain unresolved. The future prophesied by Cyberpunk could release a monster from the id more terrible than any atomic-age creation imagined in the 1950s.

Ghost in the Shell is another film that explores a Cyberpunk future, considering the psychological implications of becoming a cyborg. Major Kusanagi is the cyborg leader of a tactical combat team. She has been modified for superior communications, strength and agility, and she describes herself as a "full-body replacement" because the only part of her natural body that remains is her brain, housed inside a synthetic hard shell. "The possibility of an invulnerable and thus immortal body is our greatest technological illusion", ⁽¹²⁾ proposes Kathleen Woodward, and this is what Kusanagi signifies. At the beginning of the film we see her reborn in a production line process that evokes the sterility of surgical science and the scale of heavy industry. In this vision of a cyborg future, mass production has substituted reproduction. Kusanagi's synthetic body represents both the absolute perfection of the human form and the utter rejection of human biology. She is technophile wish-fulfilment. However, anime critic Carl Gustav Horn has noted that this perfect human specimen is portrayed as a deathly pale and unblinking automaton, perhaps "to reflect the lack of essential vitality of even a perfect body in an age where they are but shells." ⁽¹³⁾ Her synthetic body may be enviable, but it is a sterile shell and she is incapable of copulation or reproduction. Kusanagi mourns the loss of her biological body and the genetic memory that it held. She begins to question her origins, wondering if she is really human at all. The loss of her body equates to the loss of her identity. The cyborg can only be a positive figure for women if it is gendered; the post-gender utopia imagined by Haraway is a future where women have abandoned not just their bodies, but a part of their identity as well.

Of course, a cyborg future does not necessarily mean a disembodied future, as Sherry Turkle has discovered. Turkle describes the story of another female MUD user who lost a leg in an automobile accident. While she was recuperating, she used a MUD to learn how to be comfortable with her disability. She created a one legged character with a removable prosthetic limb and the friends she made learned to deal with her handicap. Then her character became romantically involved, and she found a virtual lover. “After the accident, I made love in the MUD before I made love again in real life... I think that the first made the second possible.”⁽¹⁴⁾ Rather than leaving her unacceptable body behind, this user took it with her into the virtual world and learned to accept it. Her physical form became a defining feature of her character in the MUD.

Even the absence of a biological body does not necessarily mean the absence of gender, as illustrated by an alternative vision of a cyborg future from a most unlikely source. The remarkable music video for Björk’s *All is Full of Love* addresses concerns about the crisis of identity caused by the loss of the body. Director Chris Cunningham responds with a tender love scene between two cyborgs. “The video is an elegant, moving description of two Björk robots enraptured. As they are pieced and wired into existence, they sing to each other and fall in love. The video reaches its harmonious climax as the robots join in embrace.”⁽¹⁵⁾ These cyborgs are gendered; their synthetic bodies are shapely and sexualised. They possess human faces and they display sexual desire towards one another. A sexual act is undoubtedly taking place: the heat of skin against skin is replaced by flying sparks, flesh and bone by metal and plastic, sweat and fluids by gushing water. The video uses the convention of cut-ins and close-ups, of dissecting the body with the camera’s eye, familiar to pornography. Cunningham insists with his camera that we are witnessing not sterile robots in action, but fertile bodies in motion. Cunningham’s cyborgs may not recognize the Garden of Eden, but they know carnal desire.

Haraway is perhaps closest to the truth when she writes: “A cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines.”⁽¹⁶⁾ We should be wary of visions proposing a post-gender or post-body society, prophesising the eventual abandonment of biology. The retreat into a world of formless minds and the ultimate repression of our bodies is far from inevitable. The cyborg offers us hope not as a ‘thing’, but as a ‘he’ or a ‘she’.

Notes

1. Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature, Routledge, New York, 1991, pp. 149-181.
2. Ibid, p. 151.
3. Ibid, p. 150.
4. Peter Fitting, 'The Lessons of Cyberpunk' in Technoculture, edited by Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, U.S.A., 1991, p. 302.
5. Haraway, p. 152.
6. J. G. Ballard, Crash, Vintage, London, 1995, p. 81.
7. Ibid, p. 6.
8. Claudia Springer, 'The Pleasure of the Interface' in Screen, vol. 32, issue 3, pp. 308-309.
9. Sherry Turkle, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1996, p. 211.
10. Quoted in Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet, p. 212.
11. William Gibson, 'Modern Boys and Mobile Girls' in The Observer Magazine, 1st April 2001, p. 8.
12. Kathleen Woodward, 'From Virtual Cyborgs to Biological Time Bombs: Technocriticism and the Material Body' in Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology, Bay Press, Seattle, 1994, p. 51.
13. Quoted in The Complete Anime Guide, Trish Ledoux and Doug Ranney, 2nd edition, Tiger Mountain Press, Issaquah, U.S.A., 1997, p. 47.
14. Quoted in Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet, p. 263.
15. Kevin Holy and Matt Fretwell, Director File, 2002, <http://www.director-file.com/cunningham/521.html>.
16. Haraway, p. 154.