

CYBORG IN CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS AND FILM

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In science fiction novels and films, ideas about human subjectivity and identity have most often been established in a comparison between self (human) and Other (nonhuman) characters. So, in terms of the genre's codes and conventions, it is possible to see how the alien or robot of science fiction may provide an example of Otherness, against which a representation of "proper" human subjectivity is worked through. Images of Otherness in science fiction can be understood as a metaphor for forms of Otherness within society, or between societies, which have traditionally been built upon gendered divides or upon distinctions based on racial differences. Indeed, a recognition of how science fiction operates on this metaphorical level has allowed critics and theorists alike to take the genre seriously, to look at what it might tell us about various definitions of the human subject and about the fears and anxieties surrounding a given society's Others.

However, in recent years, a new and important figuration called the cyborg has become prominent in both science fiction novels and films. This is a figuration that manifestly challenges the dichotomous model of self/Other that the genre has previously relied upon. As Claudia Springer puts it, whereas in past science fiction robots have represented "the acclaim and fear evoked by industrial age machines for their ability to function independently of humans, cyborgs incorporate rather than exclude human, and in so doing erase the distinctions previously assumed to distinguish humanity from technology" (Springer 1991: 306).

In the cyborg we have the literal melding of what were previously seen as separate and divided: the human/machine, the human/nonhuman, the human self/Other. Therefore, the cyborg can not only be understood to mark a possible shift in the very structures that underlie the science fiction genre, but can also be seen as a potent threat to much of Western philosophy's reliance upon Cartesian-inspired dualisms (mind/body), or the binary dichotomies that underpin dominant patriarchal society – self (white male)/Other (female, nonwhite male, etc.).

What is the Cyborg?

Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline originally coined the term "cyborg" in 1960 (by combining the words "cybernetic" and "organism") to describe how man (sic) might be amalgamated with machine, in order to survive the adverse conditions of space travel. However, the word cyborg also refers back to the advent of an earlier scientific discipline known as cybernetics, which was founded by Norbert Wiener (1948). In brief, Wiener's theoretical system was born of the marriage of communications theory with other scientific disciplines, and aimed at developing "a common explanatory framework to talk about animals, machines, and humans by considering them as information processors" (Hayles 1995a: 82). In recent years, the term cyborg has come to allow for a very broad description of cyborgian being; spreading liberally to encompass practically any living organism that is altered by, or interacts with, mechanical and biotechnologies. For instance, in looking at the human/machine cyborg,

Distinction between "technical" and "metaphorical," the cyborg can also be understood as simultaneously "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway 1991: 149). The idea of the cyborg as both a material production and concept has opened up a highly contingent space in which various cyborg imaginings can be conceived and contested – a space from which it is possible to challenge traditional/dominant ideas of "proper" human social/material arrangements. In fact, past definitions of what counts as human subjectivity now appear so deficient that this has led theorists like Hayles to consider the notion "that the age of the human has given way to the *posthuman*" and to argue that the cyborg stands "at the threshold separating the human from the posthuman" (Hayles 1995b: 321–2). Hayles' statements can be understood in a variety of ways, but in looking at the various representations of this new form of being in science fiction, it seems that this figure is used in written fiction and films to either recuperate and/or to reconfigure a sense of human selfhood in a rapidly changing, technological world. Taken this way, the site of the cyborg offers not only the hope of a form of human survival, but also the chance to rewrite what counts as human subjectivity. Certainly, it is my hope that the brief analyses to follow will make apparent how questions of human beingness and personhood are currently being fought out over the fused body of the cyborg in both science fiction literature and film.

In the 1980s, rewriting what it means to be human in today's world was being busily undertaken by a number of science fiction authors. With roots that can be traced back to novels

like Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968; the novel upon which the film *Blade Runner* [1982] was based), J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973) and Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1975), the Cyberpunk subgenre emerged. Writers such as William Gibson (the "Neuromancer" trilogy [1984, 1986, 1988] etc.), Bruce Sterling (Cyberpunk writer and editor of the *Mirrorshades* collection [1986], etc.), Pat Cadigan (one of the few female writers within the genre: *Synners* [1991], etc.) and Marge Piercy (whose *Woman on the Edge of Time* [1983] and *Body of Glass* [1991] owes much to Cyberpunk) tackled this issue as a primary concern within their narratives. These writers presented the reader with a number of central cyborg characters whose interaction with technology was illustrated in a variety of different ways. For instance, there is a great difference between the kind of technological melding undertaken by Cadigan's "Visual Mark" character and that of "Sam-I-Am" – both of which appear in the novel *Synners*. Visual Mark strives to become completely immersed within a virtual environment and eventually succeeds in downloading his consciousness into a computer world, thereby leaving the material world forever. Sam-I-Am, however, relies upon her body to literally power her customized technological enhancements and interfacing system to the Net, thereby remaining firmly connected to the material world. A further example can be taken from Gibson's *Neuromancer* in which his "console cowboys" work side by side with characters like Molly Millions: Molly's body is cybernetically enhanced, giving her increased physical prowess, whereas Case (our main console cowboy), spends most of his time with his mind "jacked" into a computer created world called the Matrix, through which he directs his desires. So, each of these novels appears to extrapolate from today's metaphorical and technical cyborg to give the reader a range of cyborgian forms of being.

The Celluloid Cyborg

The sort of gender divide prevalent within Cyberpunk writing is even more obvious when looking at the way the cyborg has been configured in films. This is particularly evident in mainstream Hollywood films of the 1980s; however, in sharp contrast to Cyberpunk's "disappearing" masculine body, the films of this period presented the viewer with visions of an excessively masculine cyborg body. Samantha Holland, looking at a number of examples released in the 1980s–early 1990s, has commented that in these films: The cyberbodies are represented in such a highly gendered way to counter the threat that cyborgs indicate the loss of

human bodies, where such a loss implies the loss of the gendered distinctions that are essential to maintaining the patriarchal order (which is based on exploiting difference).

These images presented the viewer with highly exaggerated versions of masculine subjectivity and critics had much to say about the hyper masculinized heroes and antiheroes that rampaged through these films. Susan Jeffords, in a scathing critique of these muscle-man cyborgs, relates these figurations specifically to "the Reagan Era" in America. Jeffords (1994) argues for links between a 1980s conservative "backlash" and the sheer number of highly muscular, male heroes seen in mainstream Hollywood cinema during this period. She backs up her case in charting the apparent modifications made to the representation of masculinity in films of 1980s through to the 1990s. One of the examples she uses is the shift in how the cyborg is represented in the first *Terminator* film (dir. James Cameron, 1984) compared with *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (dir. James Cameron, 1991). She argues that, in the first film, the cyborg's "hard body" stood for the aggressively militaristic and defensive business strategies of this period in American politics. With the advent of the "softer" Bush administration, Jeffords contends, the terminating cyborg was refashioned into a protecting father figure (Jeffords 1994: 156-75). While there is certainly a point to be made here, Jefford's sometimes bases these arguments on an overly simplistic model of the relationship between text and context, often bordering on a reading of these figures as a direct and unmediated reflection of the social context from which they may well have emerged. For instance, I would contend that the sight of the Terminator body provides such a hyperbolic visual metaphor that it may well exceed the kind of narrative intent that Jeffords assumes. In this sense, the excessively muscular body of the Terminator comes to represent a performance of masculinity clinging to residual notions of gender and can therefore be taken as kind of political critique of the period. Other analyses of some of the cyborg heroes/antiheroes of this period have revealed a more ambivalent picture than Jefford's reading suggests. For example, the very fact that these spectacular male bodies are set up for visual scrutiny can be seen to problematize traditional gendered identity – particular bearing in mind the more conventional cinematic viewing constructions that position the female/feminine body as that which is to be openly gazed upon. Whilst in some of these science fiction/action films there are moments when a passive display of the male cyborg body appears offset by demonstrations of extreme violence, the majority of these early cyborg films encourage a very consistent gazing upon the body in question. Surely, an invitation to gaze is hard to

contest when, for instance, in both *The Terminator* and *Universal Soldier* the central male cyborgs are featured naked.

In this way, the male body can be thought of as feminized within traditional Hollywood conventions. Of course, the cyborg status of these male characters may well serve to underline a certain sexual/gendered ambiguity. In other words, their status in these films not only marks them as transgressive figures, but can also be seen as the “excuse,” the justification, for such an open invitation to gaze, because they are not fully human subjects in a comparison with the other characterizations featured in the films. The fact that most of these cyborgs were played by white Europeans also suggests that, in some subtle way, race was an issue in their casting: these cyborgs could therefore be read as not fully human subjects because they were not American.

Mind Over Matter

What we might call the mainstream cyborg film has “evolved” since the 1980s/early 1990s, from those films that can be read in alignment with the most basic codes of the action film or the horror genre to those that may be more accurately described as “cyber-thrillers”. Whilst many earlier cyborg films displayed an engagement with the same themes that were being dealt with in Cyberpunk, the “cyber-thrillers” have more in common with a Cyberpunk aesthetic in a variety of ways. For instance, with the emergence of “cyber-thriller” came a shift from the earlier “hard bodied” male cyborg to the image of the slimmed down, “jacked in,” male cyber-savior; made particularly evident in the featuring of Keanu Reeves in both *Johnny Mnemonic* and *The Matrix* series. It is also common to have a range of featured cyborg figurations in these more recent films, to the extent that in the *Matrix* series practically all the characters can be read as cyborgian beings. However, whilst oppositions may not strictly be displaced onto the human/cyborg (as was the case with so many of the 1980s films) these “cyber-thrillers” do appear to pit one *kind* of cyborg against another in ways that underline divisions based upon sex or race. *Johnny Mnemonic* provides one example. In this film our eponymous male hero is cyborgized due to the prostheses implanted into his brain, which enables him to carry vast quantities of data and also to “jack” directly into the Net. Conversely, like Gibson’s Molly, his “female hero” partner (Jane) is marked as a cyborg because of the technologies that enhance her bodily strength and skill. This film was based upon a short story written by Gibson and the mind (male)/body (female) divide apparent in his Cyberpunk writing is accentuated here – with Johnny standing for “mind” and Jane for “body.” Racial differences are also heavily marked in

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many of the later cyborg films. Although these films seem quite liberal, given the sheer variety of ethnic or ethnically mixed races on display, in terms of casting and character centrality, distinct self/Other dichotomies are still at play. This is particularly evident in the way that African, Afro-Caribbean, or West Indian-American characters are represented. For example, in *Virtuosity* (dir: Brett Leonard, 1995) a white/black racial opposition is ostensibly upheld through the figuring of the cyborg hero and villain of the film. The film's ex-lawman, Parker (Denzel Washington), sports a cybernetic prosthesis that replaces his previously damaged arm (heavy metaphorical references here to his lost status as lawman), whereas the villain, Sid (Russell Crowe), has been literally constructed from the human memories of several white serial killers. Therefore, once again, racial difference is mapped onto a mind/body dichotomy in the figuring of these two cyborg adversaries. In *Strange Days* (dir: Kathryn Bigelow, 1995) not only is a white/black opposition upheld, but this is mapped onto an opposition based upon sex. Here the central male hero, Lenny (Ralph Fiennes), resembles the countercultural, hacker characters ("console cowboys") of Cyberpunk writing, through his consistent use of an immersive cybernetic technology called "squid." His athletic and physically skilled, female cohort, Mace (Angela Bassett), is signaled as more fully human because she consistently refuses to engage with this technology. There is a long history of black characters being represented in both novels and films as more primitive than their white counterparts and, in some ways, their appearance in these films as more human than their white counterparts is simply an updated version of this old stereotype. For instance, although Mace can be seen as a female hero figure she can also be read as a modern day "noble savage," who, within this highly technologized society, operates as a reminder of a more "authentically" human past.

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Films

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The Matrix (dir: Wachowski Brothers, 1999)