



‘Feminist Re-Visions Of The Cyborg : Theory And Praxis’

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ABSTRACT

Cyborgs are becoming increasingly ubiquitous. Our films, popular fiction and theoretical writings are enmeshed with it. This paper intends to highlight the feminist concept of ‘Cyborg’. The term is a conflation of ‘cybernetic organism’, coined by research space scientist Manfred Clynes. Cyborgs appeared in science fiction stories decades earlier. A ‘cyborg’ can be anything from a human with a prosthesis to a robot with a thin veneer of skin, according to Donna Haraway, we are all cyborgs to some degree. Thus she postulates a cyborg ontology which takes as its premise the dissolution of traditional boundaries associated with body. This paper tries to foreground the feminist perspective of this cyborg.

Keywords: Cyborg, Ontology, Organism, Feminist, Dissolution.

Our new technologically enmeshed relationships oblige us to ask to what extent we ourselves have become cyborgs, transgressive mixtures of biology, technology and code. The traditional distance between people and machines has become harder to maintain. (Turkle 21)

The term cyborg is the short form for Cybernetic Organism. A hybrid of body and technology, of flesh and steel, the cyborg of contemporary popular culture often is depicted as the highly gendered incarnation of either the sexy femme-bot or the hard-boiled masculine terminator, seen in movies like *The Matrix*, *Terminator*, etc. Cyborg bodies are simultaneously biological and technological. They seem like a combination of human organs infused with visible implants. It is the curious offspring of neo-colonial science and super-power Cold War militarism. Nathan Cline and Manfred Clynes, scientists contracted by NASA, published a radical article, ‘Cyborgs and Space’, in the scientific journal *Astronautics* (1960). This article sketched the potential of enhancing the human body for space exploration. The *body* could be modified to endure the hostile environment of outer space with the help of, for instance, self-regulatory devices such as adrenaline pumps inserted directly in the heart, exoskeleton space suits, and even long-term genetic engineering to augment the oxygen and breathing capacity of humans. Kline and Clynes imagined that cyborgs would drastically improve the position of the United States in the space race with the Soviet Union.

At a historical conjunction, when every inch of the globe was to be claimed, colonized, and meticulously monitored by military satellites, the idea of the cyborg offered the opportunity of a two-fold territorial conquest: outer space and the inner space of the body. Medical technologies, such as Ultra-sound and Computer tomography (CT scans), are military spinoffs that enabled new insights into and cartographies of the body. Cyborgs were to operate according to the military logic of C3I: command-control-communication-intelligence. C3I was designed to replace brute force by deploying smart technologies for effective regulation, guidance, and steering (Haraway 164). Cybernetics, the science of feedback and regulation, of engineered control and communication in living organisms as well as in stealth airplanes, was applied to the human body and to society in general. Kline and Clynes envisaged the cyborg as a body containing an integrated artificial feedback system. The cyborg was thus initially conceptualized in relation to war and imperialism. It was a science fantasy of man-made generations of hyper-masculine warriors that would resonate in popular culture.

Cyborg practices proliferated as foetal development began to be carefully monitored inside the womb and combat pilots were sensorially attached to the interface of their aircraft. Indeed, any woman on the pill (regulating her internal hormonal levels) embodies an example of cyborg engineering. Cyborg technology is life-prolonging, it is used to enhance the body and create a superman, in the case, of the cyborg pilot or the formula-one racing driver. Today, the enormous variety of human-machine couplings defies definition and ranges from disabled patients who can rely on high-tech equipment or the vaccination of new-borns to the creation of effective human killing machines. Both in their life-prolonging and life-threatening functions, cyborgs have become a symbol of the ambivalences of high modernity. Cyborgs represent the more flexible mediation capable of incorporating, rather than repudiating, science and technology. The manifesto for cyborgs

is therefore seen by Haraway as a statement to socialist-feminists that they would do better to opt for the contradictions of everyday material life, than for the comforts of divine resolution (Squires 367). Interested in bringing together feminist, Marxist and environmentalist concerns, Haraway ironically reconfigures the cyborg as an exemplary postmodern figure which resists the conventional unifying utopian vision. Her motivation for constructing such an 'ironic political myth' is explicitly grounded in the political realities of contemporary society, that of lived social relations (Squires 367).

In this context, the cyborg is a figuration containing both promises and threats with respect to the future of our body and our sense of self. It symbolizes the destructive as well as the reproductive powers of modern science. Modern scientists have not only invented atom bombs or contribute to biochemical warfare, they have also developed techniques for artificial insemination and fertilization that helped childless couples at fertility clinics. The cyborg vision has led to a radical redefinition of bodies, identities, and the scientific discourse of biology in general. Feminists have high stakes in such changes and the cyborg, consequently, came to represent a gamut of possibilities in academic feminist writing. Cyberfeminism has been defined by the British feminist techno-theorist Sadie Plant as 'an insurrection on the part of the goods and materials of the patriarchal emergence composed of links between women, women and computers, computers and communication links, connections and connectionist machines (Gamble 211).' The cyber-feminist project, however, is not a unified one, ranging from the trendy and individualistic 'webgrrrls' or 'cybergrrrls' to the high postmodernist theory of academics like Donna Haraway. Currently, cyberfeminism has many issues to contend with, not least the necessity to balance a coherent political agenda with its visions of a feminist cyberspace utopia. The multiplicity of feminist resources and communication networks on the web already testify that there is a female presence in cyberspace, although it is yet to be seen whether this will lead to fruitful coalitions and workable strategies in the world outside the computer screen (Gamble 211).

The Cyborg was first deployed for feminist science studies in a famous and controversial article from 1985: 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', by Donna Haraway. The Cyborg bridges the illusive distinction between the human body and other biological organisms, between the virtual and the real (Haraway 1992). Haraway's cyborg signals more than just the joint merging of biology and technology. It is an imploded mode of fact and fiction, embodied and embedded in the networks of 'technoscience'. Haraway writes, 'we live in a cyborg world of electronic communications, in which the difference between artificial and natural remains ambiguous: our machines...disturbingly lively and we ourselves frighteningly inert.' The term is thus indicative of transgressed boundaries, and an interrogation of the assumption of a unified subjectivity. As a materialized metaphor for contemporary technoscience, the cyborg embodies the deconstruction of the very modern dichotomies it was built on. The nature/ culture division, for instance, collapses into the cyborg. Haraway's cyborg signalled an immense feminist challenge, because it provoked social constructivist assumptions about gender. It was a call for the feminist engagement with the material processes of embodiment as well as with biology as a high-tech science discourse generating sexual difference. Haraway's cyborg brought on a merge of 'hard' science and 'soft' scholarship and thus became the mascot of interdisciplinary alliances in interdisciplinary feminist scholarship and the feminist critique on science. Her work is a serious effort to move beyond assumed disciplinary distinctions in order to deal with hybrids, complexities, and the border zones.

In deviation from previous feminist approaches to the body, the cyborg was neither sexually pure nor innocent but instead irreverent and promiscuous. In an act of subversive resistance, Haraway deployed the cyborg as a tool for feminism and described it as female. At the same time she characterized it as 'post-gender' in relation to the biological complexities of sex, although she would later reject this term (Haraway 321-322).

The cyborg was not so much about the visible technological appendixes of a body, as about the way in which science and technology had managed to become such an intricate part of the way we live and make sense of our lives. The cyborg provided the possibility of getting around romantic ideas about the natural and women's alleged relationship to nature as an unquestioned given, a stance that was defended by ecofeminists and other feminist communities at the time that Haraway wrote her ironic manifesto. She celebrated the cyborg as more accurate reflection of women's real life experiences.

In a way, the cyborg was about developing a realistic outlook on the unexpected promises of undoing gender and dualisms, such as culture versus nature and threats of technoscience. The cyborg thus became a figuration for describing not so much individuals as such, but the whole spectrum of techno-saturated life, culture, and society.

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