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LIFE THROUGH THE LENS: CYBORG SUBJECTIVITY IN CINEMA

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By

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**ABSTRACT**

This study uses the character of the cyborg, as it is invoked in Science Fiction film, to understand representations of identity, focusing on gender, from a perspective that is embedded in both social and material contexts. The cyborg deconstructs the dichotomies that define the Humanist subject, such as subject and object, real and fantasy, technology and culture. However, as society transitions from a Modernist, to Postmodern and beyond, cyborg fantasies reflect differences in ideology and values. These social changes can be tracked on the bodies of cyborg images.

In this research, I use the cyborg, a figure of rich cultural significance, as a heuristic to research representations of gender from a perspective that accounts for cultural and material contexts. Scholars specializing in feminism, anthropology and cultural studies continue to theorize how the rich cultural significance of the deconstruct(ed)(ing) cyborg body. This research contributes to this on going discussion by focusing on the cyborg's significance in film discourse and feminist discourse.

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I argue that the cyborg, as a subject of film, conflates the false opposition between empowerment and victimization. My research method uses the cyborg character to illustrate that these two terms are not opposites, but connected in an intricate weave. This weave between power and powerless materializes through the cyborg's gender performance, the representation of her body, and context of the mise-en-scene. In addition, I argue that with social and technological shifts, the dynamic between empowered gender performance and victimized performance changes.

Specifically, this research complicates the notion of objectification. Laura Mulvey's argument presupposes that 'object' indicates passive and repressed while 'subject' indicates active and powerful. Women are passive because they are framed as spectacles or objects. The foundation of Mulvey's theory of the gaze presupposes that objectivity must be a passive position. The cyborg does not totally disrupt this filmic code, but it does present an active spectacle. The cyborg reveals that object and subject are false distinctions. Object or body is the basis of the subject; embracing that leads toward new experiences and ontology.

While I remain more reserved than Haraway's utopianism, I do take up Haraway's challenge to reject the describing all women as victims by closely analyzing these cyborgs' performed and programmed gender. This research

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contributes to previous feminist analysis, but it also critiques feminist discourses that maintain the opposition between empowered and victimized. Instead, both positive and negative trends come into focus through the cyborg as a lens thereby creating a two dimensional perspective of gender performance.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

This study uses the character of the cyborg, as invoked in Science Fiction film, to understand representations of identity, focusing on gender, from a perspective that is embedded in both culture and materials. The Humanist subject, an autonomous rational mind, has been the dominant ontology of Western society since the Enlightenment. This subject, however, does not account for the complex network of cultural, political, and material forces co-constituting identity. The cyborg deconstructs the dichotomies that define the Humanist subject, such as subject and object, real and fantasy, technology and culture. The cyborg character invalidates the Universalism of Descartes' subject because it does not fit into strict dichotomies separating object and subject.

However, as society transitions from a Modernist, to Postmodern and beyond, cyborg fantasies reflect differences in ideology and values. Technology, media, as well as concepts of identity, are in a period of transformation. As diverse media, distinct genre, and unique cultures circumfuse in contemporary media, once natural and defined categories of identity coalesce. Without clear distinction of what constitutes identity categories like gender, sexuality, race, nationality, and what represents the Other, once stable hierarchies of identity and subjectivity are leveled.

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These social changes can be tracked on the bodies of cyborg images. Reading the cyborg's body, scholars use this subject to interpret the relationship between identities and technology. They have investigated how the cyborg subject develops as the technology and mechanics change. In addition, cyborg figures represent radical subject positions since the Enlightenment. Because the cyborg integrates bodies and machines, fantasies of sexuality and gender are also projected onto the cyborg body. This opens a second line of questions that feminist have posed such as, what does the cyborg's gender and sexuality performance reveal about gender roles in society. In this research, I will contribute to this discourse by elaborating on the relationship between the film technology and the cyborg identities produced in that medium. In the pages that follow, I interpret cyborg figures from both a film studies perspective as well as cyborg theory position. From this analysis, I illuminate locations where both perspectives do not fully represent the consequences of the cyborg's identity. By incorporating two theoretical positions, I illuminate new depth of these characters and their significance in film and feminist discourse. Before venturing further into this analysis, I will define how I will use three key terms: technology, cyborg, and gender.

### **Definition of Terms**

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Technology, in this research, is to be understood as more than a tool or mechanical instrument, but as a cultural artifact or work of art intended for practical or industrial use. Following the precedent set by other media theorist, technology in this study includes not only tools, but also the network of materials and institutions connected and co-creating industrial, communication, or science artifacts. The term technology, as it is most often used today, evokes images of tools, industry, specialized tasks, communication systems, and mechanical devices. Although all of these things are technologies, they do not encompass the full significance of the word. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the original usage of the word as, “A discourse or treatise on an art or arts; the scientific study of the practical or industrial arts” (OED).

Technology is not just an object but an object attached to political, economic, and social networks. Hence, when writing about film technology, I am referencing not only the camera, celluloid reel, computers, or sound equipment, but also, the conventions dictating the use of the tools and the network of people required to make the tools function. I adopt this use of the word technology after Mediologist, Régis Debray’s use of the work *Mediology*. He defines the area of study for Mediology when he writes, “Our interest, then, does not concern an object nor an area of the real (e.g., the media), but the relationship between these objects or these areas. Between an ideality and a materiality, a thought and a machine, a plan and a device” (1). Likewise,

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my interest in film technology focuses not on the material object alone, but on how the object connects to a network of discourses.

Although Chapter 1 defines and historicizes the figure, establishing the basic definition of the cyborg here creates context for the rest of the introduction. I define the cyborg as a figure of imagination and a living being whose body is composed of both organic and in-organic, often technological, components. For this study, I focus on cyborgs as characters of imaginations. As fixtures of our imagination, I understand the cyborg embodies human's relationship with technology. Since the enlightenment through to now, the cyborg figure embodies the cultural, material, and economic tensions that characterize a society's relationship with technology. This definition is meaningful because it highlights the cyborg's most often theorized cultural significance: conflated dialectical opposites. Object/subject, real/fantasy, physical/metaphysical, no longer opposing each other, rather these opposites collapse. Framing the cyborg as the embodiment of human/technological relationships allows me to use the cyborg's body as a point of entry to identify the connections between identity and technology.

A third focal point of this study, I refer to gender as a performance of learned and deeply entrenched social and cultural norms, rather than a biologically determined category. While the cyborg represents our relationship with technology, it also

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conflates technology with gendered bodies. The mechanical integration does not sterilize or de-sexualize these characters. Rather, the opposite is most often evident; they represent exaggerated gendered stereotypes. Although gender is often discursively associated with nature and naturalness, for the purposes of this paper, gender is an identity category that develops through discourse and remains relatively stable through discipline and reinforcement. I ground this use of the word gender in Michel Foucault's argument in *History of Sexuality Volume I* that the sexuality is a discursive construction. I also base this definition on Judith Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* that gender is naturalized by "the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them" (140).

## **Defining the Subject**

I read thee unique cyborg figures as embodiments for our relationship with technology, as well as performances of gender and sexual fantasies. Maria, Rachel, and Kusanagi, from Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis*, Ridley Scott's 1982 *Blade Runner*, and Mamoru Oshii's 1995 anime film *Ghost in the Shell*, respectively, are the names of the three characters at the center of this study. Cultural imaginations play out on the

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bodies of these figures, which are alike in some ways, dissimilar in many others.

These characters are fantasies of technology and of sexuality.

Although there are other cyborgs in film that could have been included in this study, these three mirror each other in popularity, fantasy cities, and visual themes. All of them have been financially lucrative. Although *Blade Runner* did not achieve success until a decade after its initial release. *Metropolis* continues to fascinate audiences after almost 100 years. AFI includes *Blade Runner* on its top 100 films in 100 years and top 10 Science Fiction films. *Ghost in the Shell* received several awards at the time of its release and is considered a groundbreaking use of computer and digital imaging to create a rich fantasy world. The large quantity of scholarly attention, volumes in the cases of *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner*, also indicates these films' significance in cinematic history.

All three films construct similar urban spaces, marked by exaggerated class disparity. The films open with similar establishing shots over the cities soaring towers and gradually introduce the viewer to the urban decay on the ground. This economic gap is so great that the wealthy are physically separated in soaring towers from the poor inhabiting the dirty crowded streets. Effects of urban decay and industrialization appear in every scene. All of the spaces on the street level are congested yet richly

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detailed. This stands in stark comparison to the expansive, open, and clean penthouses of the wealthy.

These three films also represent similar cyborgs: all young, beautiful, strong, and dangerous. The cyborgs display similar, highly sexualized, gender roles. They are all sexually explicit, proficient seductresses, often shown undressed, to reveal idealize female bodies. These characters are all also deceptive. They confuse the difference between human and non-human, subject and object. This confusion is a productive space to discuss changing fantasies of sexuality and technology and performances of gender that play across boundaries.

In terms of film technology, history and visual genre, however, they differ significantly. They cover filmic technology from its early application to groundbreaking uses of new media. Modernist, Postmodern as well as post-postmodern cultural shifts appear in these three films. In visual genre, *Metropolis* is an early, yet stereotypical science fiction, *Blade Runner* is a unique hybrid of film noir and dystopic science fiction, and *Ghost in the Shell* represents the specific sub-genre of anime *Mecha*. This variety presenting an opportunity to compare the changes in film technology and the image of the cyborg. These characters are not new to scholarly research. Rather, two primary scholars lay the groundwork for theoretical interpretation of the gendered cyborg, as well as women's role in cinema.

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## Theoretical Grounding

The foundational texts for this study are Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema* and Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*. Laura Mulvey's feminist critique argues that film privileges heterosexual male viewers by positing male characters as active subjects while women are positioned as passive objects. Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* argues that cyborg subjectivity, which works to break down the binaries between subject and object, is potentially empowering because it breaks down dialectics. This is empowering because it allows for more variety and multiplicity than a dialectic construct. If Haraway's argument is correct, it should follow that the cyborg likewise collapses the binary between the male subject and the female object identified by Mulvey. When we look at the popular cyborgs in film, however, they appear to contradict Haraway's utopic vision. They continue to be objectified, passive and submissive to male desire. They do not stand for radical feminine independence or empowerment. Why then, are cyborgs representing conservative gender roles that privilege male desire and objectify women? If the cyborg is empowering, why are the men active while the women often passively accept their attention?

Although the cyborgs in film do not immediately resonate with Haraway's description of radical feminism, I identify situations where these characters **do** disrupt



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the conservative codes representing women in film. I argue this based on an analysis that uses the cyborg as a heuristic to view cinema as an artifact co-constituted by culture and technology, imagination and reality. Using this cyborg lens creates a multifaceted perspective to interpret cinema as a composite of society and the technology.

While I remain more reserved than Haraway's utopianism, I do take up Haraway's challenge to reject the describing all women as victims, thereby complicating Mulvey's argument, by closely analyzing these cyborgs' performed and programmed gender. A complex understanding of the subject does not allow the cyborg, male or female, to fit into static binary Mulvey sets up as the basis of her theory. Instead, this analysis looks at empowering and victimizing trends as related terms, not opposites. Because the cyborg is characterized by a collapsed binary, it is an ideal heuristic to demonstrate how gender is performed across and through binaries. In this research, I identify exact scenes where the cyborgs disrupt binary constructions of gender described by Mulvey.

## **Preview of Analysis**

I develop this argument in the following four chapters. In the first chapter, I review the history of the cyborg and established literature following Haraway's model

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of cyborg feminism. In this chapter, I discuss a range of texts in order to present a nuanced definition of the cyborg. This also demonstrates how feminist and media theorists have used the cyborg as a theoretical lens to interpret technology as an element of culture. In addition, the cyborg reveals how identity is culturally embedded. I adopt this cyborgian position for interpretation in the proceeding three chapters.

Each of the three next analytic chapters focuses on a single film and a specific period in film history, in order to describe how the cyborg conflates a specific binary once considered natural and oppositional. Chapter 2 analyzes Maria from Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*. This film is situated at the climax of the silent film era, a time shortly after narrative cinema and the continuity system became the established code for filmmaking. In my analysis of this first film, I establish how the cyborg conflates the difference between subject and object in film language. Chapter 3 analyzes Ridley Scott's 1982 *Blade Runner*. This postmodern cyberpunk was produced at a turning point in film production. Shot exclusively in camera, it is one of the last Science Fiction films that *does not* utilize computer graphics or digital film. Building on the argument of Chapter 2, I posit that not only are subject and object indiscernible in this film, but that fantasy and reality also lose clear boundaries. In the final chapter, I analyze Mamoru Oshii's 1995 anime film *Ghost in the Shell*. This feature-length

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anime represents a turning point in film history toward a new model of film toward New Media production. Film is no longer produced from analogue recording. Rather, it is a composite of digital images and computer animation. Further deconstructing binaries, this film represents a moment in film technology and cyborg subjectivity where physical and metaphysical collapse.

Mirroring the nature of my subject matter, the argument developed a hybrid form in the following pages. I draw on fictional, scientific and academic descriptions to illustrate the interconnection between our imaginations and lived experience. This form reflects the cyborg body is a hybrid mix of flesh and machine, fiction and reality, and, culture and science. By intertwining the cyborg models of differing discourses, I compile a description that is multidimensional and rich with semiotic associations.

The form of this thesis also mirrors its subject by frequently weaving between real and fantasy, object and metaphor. The cyborg is both an object of reality and a figure of imagination. Its hybrid body serves to blur the distinction between reality and fiction, object and imagination. Likewise, I will also alternate between grounded discussion of media artifacts and abstracted discussion of fantasy and illusion. I have adopted this writing style after the precedent set by other theorist of cyborg ontology. Most significant of these is Haraway who introduces her Manifesto as an “ironic political myth” (1). She builds her argument on irony -- the ability to say two contrary

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things simultaneously. When she writes, “Irony is about humour and serious play” it is clear to the reader that, although her Manifesto contains radical political implications, she utilizes serious, as well as, the playful arguments. Other feminist and media theorist employ similar playful, metaphorical, and ironic methods, notably, Sadie Plant, Anne Balsamo, Scott Bukatman, and Allucquere Rosanne Stone. Cyborg theorist blur the distinction between fictional, academic and scientific discourses is also evident in various academic anthologies that include works of fiction. David Bell and Barbara Kennedy’s *The Cybercultures Reader*, David Trend’s *Reading Digital Culture*, and Chris Hables Gray’s *The Cyborg Handbook*, all three of which contain seminal essays on cyborgs and cyberculture, devote a substantial section to works of cyberpunk and science fiction short stories. Forms of argument that utilize serious as well as word play and metaphor are not unique to cyborg studies, Marshall McLuhan is a notable example in Media Theory. However, this form is uniquely suited method of analysis to represent the hybrid meaning imbibed by the cyborg metaphor.

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## Chapter 2. History of Cyborg Subjectivity and Subject

The cyborg's long rich history in literature and science, which this chapter expands on, represents the cultural significance of the cyborg's body as a specific figure which revealing identity as unstable and unknowable. The following literature review is composed of three parts. In this chapter, I will first review the history of the cyborg. I start this history with Frankenstein's Monster and move forward through cyberpunk and Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*. In this history, I outline characteristics that define the cyborg and connect the diverse array of cyborg subjects. Also through this history, I historicize the cyborg by discussing the significance of embodiment relationship between culture and technology. Throughout the history of the cyborg, I outline locations where the cyborg disrupts once solid binaries. In the second section of this chapter, I review contemporary feminist and cultural theory literature that analyzes cyborg subjects. In this section, I review feminist discourse that appropriates and critiques of Haraway's utopic cyborg woman. I focus on how the cyborg is used as a heuristic of cultural and feminist studies. Finally, I parallel these cyborg discourses with major Media Studies scholars who look at media in a culturally and materially embedded way. These parallels provide precedence for using the cyborg as a heuristic to research film and New Media.

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## **Narrative of Cyborg History**

They cyborg's history reveal diverse figures and transverses fiction and science, yet these characters display a similar opposition to static binaries, notable the mind/body separation. The Cartesian subject, the dominant ontological model since the Enlightenment, is a central concept to understand the source of the cyborg's power and threat. This concept is central to the cyborg's definition because the cyborg's subjectivity is defined by its body. This opposes the Cartesian mind body dualism. The Cartesian subject is characterized by the mind body dialectic where the mind subordinates the role of the body to near insignificance. After inductively reasoning what defines humanity, Rene` Descartes concludes, "Cogito ergo sum" or "I think therefore I am". The cogito, the autonomous mind that defines the man, has become the dominant ontology through and after the Enlightenment. It posits the abstract over the physical and the content over form.

The cyborg confuses this because its subjectivity is composed not only of "I" but also of 'it', i.e. technology. It represents subject positions in the fringes of society dominated by Cartesian logic. Nick Mansfield, in his ontological genealogy *Subjectivity*, explains the significance of the Cartesian subject

"That the key to knowledge was to be found in a formulation about the word 'I' shows the beginning of a new understanding of the human place in the world... Consciousness has been identified with the controllable,

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knowable, daylight functions that Descartes finds at the end of his list:

intellect and reason” (14-15).

The identity of the cyborg is inseparable from its body and its tools. Contrasting the autonomous cogito, its body and material context define the subject. The genealogy of cyborgs below highlights the significant locations where the mind/body dualism breaks down.

### **Frankenstein**

Prefiguring the postmodern cyborg subject, Mary Shelley’s *Monster* represents the most basic characteristic of a cyborg: man made creation that compounds human and non-human parts. Shelley’s famous Romantic narrative critiques unbridled Modernist progress. Dr. Frankenstein’s creation is the result of a technophile’s unchecked fervor. The creation is beyond Victor Frankenstein’s ability to control. Unlike the monster in films, Shelley’s monster is articulate, intelligent, and empathetic. Although he demonstrates humane attributes, the monster elicits fear, hatred, and dread from all humans he encounters. Displaying human affects and born by nonhuman process, Nina Lykke argues that Dr. Frankenstein’s creation is feared because of his hybrid body in-between human and nonhuman. She writes, “The mixture of human and non-human dimensions is what constitutes the monster’s monstrosity.” (Lykke, *The Gendered Cyborg* 76) Lykke attributes the dread of the monster to Bruno Latour’s

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description of “modernity as a process of purification...With overzealous perseverance the moderns try to made sure that any monster or hybrid that threatens to transgress the border is reclassified and ascribed to *either* the human *or* the non-human sphere” (76). The monster, like the cyborg, cannot be clearly classified as either organic or inorganic. This instigates fear in modernist human society based on clearly defined boundries. In response at least for the monster, the human creator must hunt and destroy the creature. Like later cyborgs, the monster is part human and part non-human.

In this modernist instance, that confusion is the source of anxiety and fear. Humanity ultimately proves superior and annihilates the creature or machine. Although the word cyborg is not coined for another century, the Dr. Frankenstein and the monster become the prototypical Mad Scientist and out-of-control invention. Since then, science fiction literature and film have appropriated and adopted these figures. When the cyborg eventually appears, however, the scientists are no longer mad and the invention is no longer a nightmarish fantasy. The next significant step that we will follow in the cyborg’s evolution will plant us in material reality.

### **Cybernetics**

In 1960, the cyborg character reemerged, no longer the product of a mad scientist; instead, Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline were scientists specializing in



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