

Gender, Body, and Computing Technologies in the Science–Fiction Film

G

Rocío Carrasco-Carrasco
University of Huelva, Spain

INTRODUCTION

The intersections of the human body with the latest technological developments have opened up numerous debates on gender identity. Classical dichotomies body/mind, human/machine, natural/artificial seem to be dissolving in contemporary Western societies, and the limits of the “organic” body become difficult to establish. The growing importance of new computing and communication technologies shapes, then, social order. The world is dominated by technological images that have become part of our daily life and that have created new spaces for representation, such as the virtual world or cyberspace. In this context of blurred frontiers, the concept of gender remains problematic, since it no longer articulates bodily experiences. However, and as it will be contended here, gendered practices still inform computing technologies. Hence, and in spite of its transgressive nature, virtual bodies as represented in contemporary popular discourses—such as US cinema—still reproduce dominant structures of power.

Computing and media technologies are everywhere and extend to the human body, affecting the way gender has been traditionally understood. When in 1964 Marshall McLuhan referred to media as “extensions of man” he was indirectly alluding to the idea that media were instruments of male domination. Indeed, and as some feminist research has highlighted, technology is affected by gender relations. Technology in general has been traditionally considered as a sign of men’s power and masculinity defined in terms of technological capabilities. Nevertheless, current discourses have provided new definitions of technology, of gender identity and of what being human means. This inevitably challenges traditional power associations between men and technology. As Barbara Becker argues, the “difference between natural and artificial, real and virtual, material and immaterial phenomena is not an ontological one, but changes according to

technological improvements and methods of communication” (Becker, 2000, p. 361). In the same way, definitions of gender also change with time, affected by technological developments.

Cybernetics, as a set of media technologies, offers grounds from where to analyze gender identity in postmodern contexts. In this sense, “cybernetics simultaneously maps out the terrains for both postmodern discussions of the subject in late capitalism and feminist debates about technology, postmodernism, and gender” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 468). Indeed, cyberspace has offered numerous possibilities for the redefinition of the human body outside traditional boundaries, suggesting a liberation of socio-cultural constraints. This is precisely the concern of many feminist theories that aim at deconstructing the human subject from binary polarization, implying the dissolution of sexualized identities in cyberspace. Specifically, the discipline called “cyberfeminism” sees cyberspace as a gender-neutral site that enables women to communicate and act outside the constraints of male-dominated physical realms. Sadie Plant (1997) and many other cyberfeminists offer optimistic—sometimes utopian—views of the relationship between women and technology in the virtual age. In her essay “On the Matrix: Cyberfeminist Simulations,” Plant argues that virtual worlds “undermine both the world-view and the material reality of two thousands years of patriarchal control” (p. 265).¹

Yet, contrary to McLuhan’s technological determinism and his idea that technologies can enhance the senses by displaying a strong affinity between body and mind, and to cyberfeminist postulates about the neutrality of cyberspace for gender relations, popular discourses normally rely on this distinction when depicting the interaction between the body and computing technologies, inevitably adopting gender dualisms. Cyberspace is constructed by existing social, cultural and economic structures, and gender stereotypes and

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sexed body descriptions are normally employed in order to suggest authenticity to these texts.

This is not to say, however, that popular discourses do not offer fresh instances of flesh and computing technologies. As argued here, contemporary US cinema has overcome old visualizations of static and gendered cyborg figures as represented by figures like *The Terminator* or *Robocop*, and offers instead images of fluid identities set in virtual spaces, as shown in movies like *The Matrix* (1999), *eXistenZ* (1999), *Avatar* (2009), *Inception* (2010) or *Tron: Legacy* (2012), among many others. This is done by a series of visual and narrative strategies that partly help overcome the obstacles posed by cultural products that, due to their conditions of production, cannot break away from the hegemonic assumptions of gender identities. It is precisely the paradoxical nature of cinematic cyberbodies what I intend to emphasize here, especially since they articulate contemporary cultural and gender concerns.

BACKGROUND

In cultures where the organic “natural” body is gradually disappearing and giving way to fruitful instances of flesh and machine, the current outburst of debates on corporeality becomes, if less, paradoxical. The body remains at the core of many contemporary analyses, proving to be a useful tool for examining culture and gender. As Arthur Kroker contends, “[w]hile the triumph of mass media, particularly television, may portend a future of pure simulation, the overriding cultural reality is that the image machine is itself haunted by memories of the body” (Kroker, 2012, p. 1). The body becomes, then, an archive from where to analyze contemporary society. Yet, the new body that emerges—also known as the postmodern body—is perceived as a contested notion linked to fluidity, hybridity and complexity. Kroker talks about “body drift” to refer to the fact that we no longer inhabit a body in any meaningful sense of the term but rather “occupy a multiplicity of bodies—imaginary, sexualized, disciplined, gendered, laboring, technologically augmented bodies” (p. 2). The idea of the fluctuating, fluid or hybrid body has been theorized by scholars like Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayles, Judith Butler and Rossi Braidotti, among others. These writings open up a new tradition of critical

feminism that addresses the complexity of our bodies in technologized cultures.

One of the most striking examples of a hybrid body is that proposed by Donna Haraway in her material-semiotic approach “Cyborg Manifesto” (1985). As she sets out to defend, the cyborg is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities. The popularized cyborg figure has greatly stimulated many insights into the gender power relations with technology, leading to consider the possibilities that technoscience offers women. Indeed, as she defines it, the cyborg is a fictional hybrid of machine and organism, “a creature in a post-gender world [which] has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity” (1991, p. 150). The technological world frees women’s representations, in a sense, from patriarchal domination: “cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (Haraway, 1991, p. 181). Consequently, identities seem contradictory, partial and strategic.

Along with Haraway, postmodern feminists like Judith Butler have sought to deconstruct binary systems by reconceptualizing gender as unstable and performative. She considers corporeality as an act of imitation. Butler affirms that “the regulatory norms of ‘sex’ work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” (1993, p. 2). Sex, then, becomes one of the norms that “qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility” (1993, p. 2). In this sense, and very much like the cyborg figure proposed by Haraway, the performative body “has no ontological status apart from the various acts of identities which constitute its reality” (1993, p. 228), suggesting the fluidity of our identities.

There is a strand of feminist practices, called “material feminism” whose writings become of special interest for the argument of this paper. For Hayles, Braidotti and other materialist theorists, the body becomes fundamental for analyzing contemporary human-machine interactions. Subjectivity and the body are decentered as distinct units, troubling the information/material

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