CYBORGASM: MACHINES AND MALE HYSTERIA IN THE CINEMA OF THE EIGHTIES

MARJ KIBBY, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, The University of Newcastle

ABSTRACT

In the films of the eighties the figure of the cyborg combines violence and loss of self in an hysterical response to the impact of technological development and rapid social change on masculinity and patriarchy.

Many of the popular films of the eighties reflect a nervousness in the face of advanced technology, depicting a contested space between the human and the technological. Film narratives depict an anxiety about the nature of masculinity within a technological environment combined with the fears of patriarchy in decline. These narratives play out the reinstatement of hegemonic masculinity and the restoration of patriarchal capitalism.

Qualms about the changing relationship between masculinity and technology are written on the figure of the cyborg in a significant body of films from the eighties. Sobchack saw "a convergence and conflation" of the science fiction and horror film genres in the eighties, situating the phenomenon "in the context of the ambivalent horror and wonder provoked by the social upheavals of the last two decades". In discussing the narrative role of the child, Sobchack described the horror film as showing "the terror and rage of a patriarchy in decline" and the science fiction film as depicting "a regressive patriarchal quest for a lost innocence it never had" through "a reunion of patriarchy and paternity" (1986, 8-28). The conjunction of the horror and sci-fi genres is evident in the "cyborg" films of the period, which enact the crisis inherent in the absence of a masculine identity and the loss of a patriarchal future.

MASCULINE IDENTITY

While unease concerning issues of gender and technology is not a recent phenomenon, a new or reconstituted fear is evident in these films. From *Metropolis*, film makers have depicted industrialisation as a threat to individuals and society. In the eighties, however, the focus of film narratives is the fear that man will be incorporated by the machine, rather than the threat that machines created for man's benefit will make him expendable. Jeffords suggests that in the eighties a dominant theme "that pitted human values against the presumed non-values of technology and mechanisation" was established (1994, 104), giving as an example Rambo's shedding of his technological accoutrements, to defeat the enemy with only his personal strength and skill, in a triumph of nature over the machine. However, alternative readings of this are available, including that Rambo's excessive body is a machine. He has become the machine, and it is the successful integration of nature and technology that is his, and masculinity's, salvation. As Jeffords admits (1994, 112) in *RoboCop* neither Alex Murphy nor RoboCop are heroic as separate entities, it is the fusion of the man and the machine that recuperates a masculine identity. In *Metropolis* the nightmare of rampant technology ends with the restoration of order, balance re-established. Labour and capital, feminine and masculine, technology and humanity are restored to their proper balance as the robot perishes. However, the idea of technology being basically good, but capable of being abused, or of the machine being in opposition to a better more natural way of life, has little currency in the eighties cinema. Technology is simply there, part of the home and the workplace; malfunctioning,

overwhelming, conglomerating.

The Terminator forges a link between contemporary and future technologies: the contemporary household and workplace technology that malfunctions, is misused or fails its user in some way, and the future high tech that launches a full scale revolt against humans. The nature of technology's danger to humans in the film is described as its intelligence, but it is depicted as physical violence. The Defense Network that "got smart" and saw all people as a threat, is represented by Terminators, the violent cyborg imagery asserting a phallic metaphor for technology.

As Haraway submits, technology no longer plays a dialectical role as the "other" of humanity; instead that otherness exists *within* the human, thereby challenging assumptions about the nature of cultural identity, especially gender and racial identities (1991, 150-153). Science fiction is "no longer an elsewhere, it is an everywhere" (Baudrillard 1991, 13). It exists within a dispersed and decentred social space, where previously taken for granted identity becomes fluid and unknowable. The uncertainty over the boundary between humanity and technology originates in our relationship to the new technological systems, not to traditional machines. The robot was the "other" of man. The cyborg is part man. Baudrillard asks:

> Am I a man, am I a machine? In the relationship between workers and traditional machines, there is no ambiguity whatsoever. The worker is always estranged from the machine, and is therefore alienated by it. He keeps his precious quality of alienated man to himself. Whilst new technology new images, interactive screens do not alienate me at all. With me they form an integrated circuit (1988, 14).

In Phillip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* the androids are not so much not-human as in-human. Although Deckard develops a sympathy for them, a number of incidents demonstrate the crucial difference between androids and humans, their inability to feel empathy. Their torture and killing of a spider, their attempts to undermine the empathetic experience of Mercerism, and Rachael's calculated seduction of Deckard, all make it clear in the novel that the androids are to be understood as inhuman. In *Blade Runner*, the film based on the novel, the replicants occasionally demonstrate superhuman physical capabilities, but for the most part the film plays down or blurs the distinction between the human and the replicant. The narrative suggests that technological reproducibility is a condition of the postmodern world. Rather than depicting an essential and organic human element that exists in opposition to the replicants, the narrative breaks down the opposition between the original and the copy. This is not achieved by extending "humanity" to the androids, but by revealing the distinction to be unviable. Harrison Ford plays Rick Deckard, an ex-blade runner (law enforcement officer) who reluctantly accepts an assignment to track down a group of androids, or replicants, who have mutinied on a space colony and returned to earth, looking for a way to prolong their restricted life span. Deckard's task is to uncover the replicants and then retire, or terminate them. But everything in the course of his "detection" of the androids leads to a recognition of the ephemeral nature of identity. The Tyrell Corporation's genetically engineered products are completely lifelike, down to manufactured memories of non-existent childhoods. When Tyrell is asked how Rachael can not know that she is a replicant, he answers "Commerce" and goes on "More human than human is our motto". The problem for Deckard in uncovering replicants to retire is that he cannot be certain that he himself is not a replicant. To perform his job, a role required by corporate interests, he must have the qualities that define a replicant; intelligence, physical strength, emotionless performance. Disconcerted by his increasing reluctance to be involved in killing replicants he says, "Replicants weren't supposed to have feelings. Neither were blade runners." The Voigt-Kampf Empathy Test uncovered replicants by revealing their lack of emotion. "Have you ever tried that thing on yourself?" Rachel asked Deckard, "Ever retired a human by mistake?" Immediately after he

explains that replicants have a special attachment to photographs because they need them to reaffirm their "memories", Deckard is shown deep in contemplation of his own family photographs. Throughout the film there is an erosion of the difference between the man and the replicant. The irony in Batty's question "Aren't you the good man?" is that first Deckard is no longer completely sure that he is a "man", and second, being a "good" man in the corporate world means being a machine. Three of the characters in the film apparently transcend their designation to discover their "true" identity — the two "machines", Rachel and Roy, and the "man", Deckard. Tyrell, the manufacturer of the replicants, is killed by Roy in an act of classical Oedipal revenge. Tyrell is their symbolic father; he is the focus of their quest for immortality, and at the same time the "law" governing their lives. His death enables a humanisation of the other characters. Roy spares Deckard in a recognition of the value of life and dies himself in an acceptance of its limits — his time has come. His death allows the flight of Deckard and Rachel into the actual and metaphorical sunset. While the ending can be seen as a transcendence it can also be read as a validation of the status quo. Deckard is rewarded by a capitalist system for the suppression of the workers' revolt against the system. And his reward is Rachel, a "real woman" of the "basic pleasure model", submissive, sexually available. In a society that uses machines to replace, exploit or control men, anger is displaced from the social source of the frustration, onto the machine.

The hegemonic masculinity represented in the cinema of the eighties was not so much perceived masculine identity, but more an hysterical response to an apparent lack of identity. Masculinity constructed as a stable identity position necessitated a constant struggle to remain "masculine" within changing social, cultural and economic frames. The hysterical, because always impossible, struggle to recover an identity from characteristics defined only in relation to the other, is reflected in the cyborg films of the eighties. The threat to the notion of an embodied and discrete masculine identity was reflected in cinematic representations of the triumphant macho-cyborg, or the heroic man-machine.

PATRIARCHAL POWER

The end of the seventies saw rapid developments in the technologising of the workplace and a concurrent questioning of what it means to be a man in a world in which the ever-encroaching mediations of technology are inescapable. The seventies were a period of rapid change in the nature of work, as social changes introduced new groups to the workforce; economic changes spawned new industries and sent established ones into decline; and rapid technological change revolutionalised traditional competencies and de-valued age-old skills (Howard, 1985, 2). Cockburn's study of compositors in the newspaper industry in London at the end of the seventies uncovers situations and concerns that could be said to be exemplary of the workplace at the time. The compositors, as a group, were skilled, well paid, and secure in their employment within a patriarchal craft culture, until the social, economic and technological upheavals of the seventies. Computerised photocomposition was introduced to replace the "hot metal" technique of preparing type for letterpress printing. As a result, jobs were lost, men were retrained for positions they saw as less manly, their place on the skilled/unskilled hierarchy became less certain, and they were working with/competing against women for the first time. Cockburn summarises, "Computerised composition has hit the compositor's craft a terrible blow, shaking the class and gender relations that have been developing over hundreds of years, throwing them into a maelstrom of confusion" (1983, 216). Those who lost their jobs were defeated by a combined force of technology and women. Those who were retrained had to develop a new emasculated relationship with the machine.

Despite the confusion and contradictions engendered by technological advancements,

to the extent that anyone has an interactive and influential relationship with technology, it is men. Science and technology are culturally the domain of men. Patriarchal masculinity establishes its hegemony through a physical power but also through the power of reason. Connell (1995, 165) describes an historical division between forms of masculinity organised around direct domination, and forms organised around technological knowledge, suggesting that the latter have challenged the former for hegemony in advanced capitalist societies. Under late capitalism "instrumental rationality" and "technocratic consciousness" are the "quintessentially modern masculine style" (Winter and Robert, 1980, 271). Patriarchal masculinity is now legitimised by the technical organisation of production, rather than imposed by physical or legal force. While technological control legitimates patriarchy, many men are left powerless under this system. The new technology has altered the familiar connection between masculinity and machinery. While the machinery of the industrial age required mastery by physical strength, the technology of the information age involves a more physically inert, passive approach. In the modern workplace the machine is master, man (or often woman) is the helper. Accompanying technological development was a loss of certainty, a collapse of fundamental beliefs, and a blurring of the boundaries through which the world was once classified. Patriarchy itself seemed under challenge in the new technological order. The patriarchal authority of the father could not be supported by an unambivalent relationship with the new technology.

THE CINEMA CYBORG

Haraway saw the promise of cyborg identity as eliminating "troubling dualisms" within the Western tradition and thereby realising a "utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender". She suggested that "cyborgs might consider more seriously the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment" (1992, 329). But if the fusion of the human with computer technology opens up the possibility of dispensing with the gendered body, then it was not represented as such in the cinema of the eighties. Haraway described the cyborg as "a creature of the post-gender world ... a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" (1991, 163). It is difficult, however, to read Schwarzenegger's aggressively corporeal Terminator, or see Eve VIII (who has a nuclear bomb in place of a womb), as post-gender. The eighties cinema cyborg portrays a nostalgic struggle for gendered subjectivity, creating an alternate world that allows a reassertion of a masculinist hierarchy in the face of a feminising technology. The transgressive political project outlined in Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* is denied in a virtual celebration of an aggressive masculinity.

In describing Max Headroom, Joyrich explained:

> The television cyborg achieves a kind of grace and overpresence − an egoless absorption of the patterns on the screen. Thus achieving a harmony of being, ... the cyborg seems to embody an image of femininity which has also been described in terms of empathy and closeness, excess and disruption ... the television cyborg is then figured as feminised" (1989-90, 15).

In Cyberpunk novels, as Ross described, technologically enhanced male bodies tend to be "spare, lean and temporary" subject to frequent alteration by "boosterware, biochip wetware, cyberoptics, bioplastic circuitry ... and the like" (1991, 137). Joyrich and Ross see the fusion of human and computer in television and the novel as producing an amorphous male body. However, in the cinema the combination gives birth to a masculine "body-fortress". Instead of representing cyborgs as superior intelligences whose bodies have atrophied for want of purpose, the eighties cinema gives us man/machines whose superiority lies in their muscular

bulk and their capacity for violence.

The cyborg in the eighties cinema is an invincible armoured killing machine. A crisis of unified male subjectivity is deflected onto a technofascist celebration of invulnerability. An unrealisable fantasy is made real in the cinema's invincible killing machine, the terminator who "absolutely will not stop, ever, until you are dead". The prosthetised body is sexualised but the sexual dynamic is displaced onto violence. The heightened physicality culminates not in sexual climax, but in climactic violence, as the ecstasy of killing substitutes for sexual gratification. The Terminator destructively penetrates people and objects with bullets and body parts. Watching Jill have sex stimulates the Mark 13 in *Hardware*, reactivating its program to kill indiscriminately and incessantly. RoboCop shoots a would-be rapist in the groin, between the legs of the screaming victim, the bloodied hole in her dress completing the narrative of rape. A crisis of masculine identity is written as a fusion of twin desires of death and sex, reconfigured as orgasmic loss of self.

FEMINISING TECHNOLOGY

Masculinity was under challenge in the eighties, in face of an apparently feminising technology and a perceived decline in patriarchal power. The image of the technobody was one expression of this crisis. The macho-cyborg expressed the anxieties of the dominant male culture, anxieties of a hegemonic masculinity under threat. Doane suggests that "anxiety concerning the technological is often allayed by a displacement of this anxiety onto the figure of the woman or the idea of the feminine" (1990, 163). Many of the "cyborg films" of the eighties insistently maternalise the technological, either displacing the feminine in a masculine reproductive cycle; depicting the maternal as "monstrous" (Creed 1990); or enunciating a misogynist logic. If the idea of the cyborg undermines the distinctions between animal and human, organic and inorganic, and physical and non-physical (Haraway 1991, 153), then *Hardware* reconfigures these differences so that it is Jill's body that is represented as transgressive, not the Mark 13's. It is the non-reproductive female body that denies biological distinctions. The Mark 13 repeatedly gives birth to itself, underscoring Jill's decision to only reproduce via her metal sculptures, and constructing reproduction as technological and masculine. In *Eve of Destruction* Eve VIII's circuitry is disturbed when she is caught in crossfire and she acts out Dr Eve Simmons' repressed fantasies of violence against men. Her program of revenge is trivialised and pathologised by the film, and the triviality and pathology is inscribed as feminine. The first thing Eve VIII does when her electronics are disrupted is go shopping, for clothes. A tracking shot through Eve VIII's internal organs reinforces the notion of monstrous female sexuality, revealing a nuclear trigger, a time bomb ticking away in the space of the womb. The Terminator dispassionately sets out to exterminate all women called Sarah Connor. When Lori reminds Quaid in *Total Recall* that she is his wife, he responds, "Consider this a divorce", blasting her into eternity. In *Blade Runner* the examiner asks, "Describe in single words only, the good things that come into your mind about — your mother." "My mother?" Leon queries, "Let me tell you about my mother", and shoots the examiner dead. An anxiety concerning the technological is translated into a revenge on the feminine.

TERMINATION/RESTORATION

Although some critics have read *The Terminator* in terms of a feminist challenge to stereotypical representations of gender (Necakov 1987), its narrative is developed through a series of stereotypical gender representations. While "any popular action film featuring the

demise of an Arnold Schwarzenegger character at the hands of a woman merits attention" (Goscilo 1987-8, 37), Sarah Connor is depicted first as a targeted victim and later as a damsel in distress. Her role within the narrative is cast solely in terms of her ability to bear a male child. We know that safely delivering Jane Connor would not have made Sarah the mother of the future. Sarah functions as "a mere conduit of male power and supremacy between her son and her lover, assigned her role by their male discourse, most specifically John Connor's message from the future and Reese's directives in the present" (Goscilo 1987-8, 46). John Connor is the son who arranges his own primal scene. Kyle Reese is the father of John Connor, chosen by him to fulfil that role. But there is a sense in which Reese is also the son. Sarah's affection for Reese is presented as maternal — she bandages his wounds, is solicitous about his well being. He is presented as younger than her, boyish, vulnerable. He is coded as "sensitive", primarily by his own voiceover narration.

A combination of signifiers in the film (the male-male violation of Matt's post-coital death, the doubling of Reese and the Terminator, the leatherman sexuality) suggest a reading of Reese in terms of homosexuality. In answer to Sarah's questions, Reese describes his previous relationships with women in terms of their being "good fighters". Sarah's pity for his sexual inexperience too quickly heterosexualises him, or at least presses Reese into nominally heterosexual service. Reese's one experience of sex can be described as perfunctory; certainly it contains few markers of heterosexual passion. The scene is filmed in slow motion, a technique otherwise limited to filming the bloody deaths of the other Sarah Connors. The shot immediately following shows the Terminator in full leather, riding a large capacity motorcycle aggressively towards the viewer.

The contested space between the man and the machine is the battleground on which is played out the conflicts within hegemonic masculinity, in a time when "our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (Haraway 1992, 68). The cyborg in the eighties cinema is, on one level, a symbol of misogynistic resistance to change. The super macho figure of the cyborg violently denies that there has been a feminisation of technology, a change in the nature of work, and a greater acceptance of human sexual diversity. The cyborgs perpetuate, in exaggerated form, an industrial age metaphor of physical masculinity, in a nostalgic echo of a time when masculine superiority was taken for granted, guaranteed by an alliance with empowering technology.

Although the cyborg films present a violent masculinist position, homosexual coding and strong women characters limit a single, unified interpretation of their meaning. Many of the films present conflicting tendencies resulting in a contradictory mix of profascist masculine imagery, feminist ideals and acknowledged homosexuality. The cyborg body becomes a contested site playing out a conflict between "old-style" masculinities and new ways of thinking about sexuality and gender; reconciling styles of masculinity in a restoration of patriarchy.

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