

CYBORGS, CYBORGS & CYBORGS...

written by Janice Lee | August 7, 2014



A **cyborg** (short for “cybernetic organism”) is a being with both organic and biomechatronic parts. See for example biomaterials, bionics, and biomechatronics. The term was coined in 1960 by Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline. D. S. Halacy’s *Cyborg: Evolution of the Superman* in 1965 featured an introduction which spoke of a “new frontier” that was “not merely space, but more profoundly the relationship between ‘inner space’ to ‘outer space’ – a bridge...between mind and matter.” – from *Wikipedia*

For the exogenously extended organizational complex functioning as an integrated homeostatic system unconsciously, we propose the term ‘Cyborg’. – Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline

Cyborgs have long been a subject of fascination in literature and popular culture, as a symbol of future evolution in science fiction, as an interrogative device into the core of humanity and what makes us *human*, as a way to ask questions about subjectivity, perception, and consciousness, and even as a way to better understand current political and social climates. I even explored some of these questions in my first book, [KEROTAKIS](#) featuring G.I.L.L.

From Donna Haraway’s [“A Cyborg Manifesto”](#):

A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. The international women’s movements have constructed ‘women’s experience’, as well as uncovered or discovered this crucial collective object. This experience is a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women’s experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.

Contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs – creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted. Modern medicine is also full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine, each conceived as coded devices, in an intimacy and with a power that was not generated in the history of sexuality.

[...]

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation. In the traditions of 'Western' science and politics – the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other – the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination. This chapter is an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction. It is also an effort to contribute to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a postmodernist, non-naturalist mode and in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end. The cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history. Nor does it mark time on an oedipal calendar, attempting to heal the terrible cleavages of gender in an oral symbiotic utopia or post-oedipal apocalypse.

[...]

The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity. In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense – a 'final' irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic telos of the 'West's' escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space. An origin story in the 'Western', humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate, the task of individual development and of history, the twin potent myths inscribed most powerfully for us in psychoanalysis and Marxism.

[...]

The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological politics based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world. Unlike

the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and cosmos. The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust. Perhaps that is why I want to see if cyborgs can subvert the apocalypse of returning to nuclear dust in the manic compulsion to name the Enemy. Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not re-member the cosmos. They are wary of holism, but needy for connection- they seem to have a natural feel for united front politics, but without the vanguard party. The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential.

I won't make any attempt here at any overarching statement about cyborgs, just that we continue to be fascinated by them as a metaphorical, allegorical, literal, physical, and present figure in literature, film, art, and pop culture.

Many years ago, after reading Haraway's text, Maxi Kim and I began a conversation in and around cyborgs. We never finished the conversation, but here are some pieces of that conversation from 2007:

MK: We've seen many efforts to manage crisis. But it has become clear that we've entered a field whose consequences are devastatingly unpredictable. I'm reminded of Guattari's address to the Schizo-Culture Conference organized by Semoitext(e) in November, 1975 at Columbia University.

"I do believe that a whole series of factors are leading to an absolute crisis at all levels of social organization throughout the world. This situation should call for revolutionary solutions, but nothing, no one, no organization is prepared to deal with it and its imperatives. The obscene thesis I wish to defend before you now is this: all these organizations – Bolshevik, Marxist-Leninist, Communist, Spontaneist (in one form or another), Social Democratic – are missing an essential aspect of this revolutionary struggle and its development."

Here I'd claim naively that with the introduction of the New World Order we're in a similar, absolute crises at all levels of social organization. And

from my perspective the organizations are different (e.g. NeoLiberalism, NeoConservatism, NeoConfucianism, Classical Humanism, New Age Spritualism) – yet they are similar in that none of the organizations are prepared to deal with the crises; they're all missing an essential aspect. Do you think Haraway's cyborgs fills in the gap? Is a revolutionary spirit tenable under cyborgism?

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JL: Perhaps a unique characteristic of revolution is the desire for a profound change against, from, or for a specific ideology, and perhaps a unique characteristic of change is that there is before and after. But is there a concrete "before" for the cyborg? Haraway states that "the cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust." Frankenstein's monster revolts against his master for having brought him into the world without any initial consent, and for having been brought into a world already constructed on laws that do not include monsters like him. In any revolution do some group of people not mourn their present conditions, do they not rage the situations they have been born into unjustly? But then what of Haraway's cyborg, the being that lacks an origin, a father, a mother, a past, a memory, "their fathers, after all, are inessential." Frankenstein's monster may be an example of an early cyborg, a pastiche of lost histories, his body lacking any historical constitution. He leaves his creator, because his creator is not his father. Perhaps the advantage that cyborgs today may have over the monster is the density of the world in which we live. The monster may have been alone, utterly alienated, without even a name for what he was. Yet today everyone has become a cyborg, or, we have already and always have been cyborgs. Are cyborgs truly without fathers? In what way do cyborg bodies become historically constituted? (without history, memory, and evolution) Is there a collective memory for cyborgs?

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MK: What's encouraging about Haraway's book *Primate Visions* is that it takes us out of "dumb" ideology; I say dumb because often dominant ideologies are silent – which is why I think they're so difficult to tease out. I realized after reading it that we tend to masculinize our discussions on evolution (e.g., "reproductive competition and sex between aggressive males and receptive females").

But this first step out of dumb ideology happens primarily because Haraway points out the masculinizing ideology – straightforwardly. Not obliquely. Her book is academic, no experimental pretenses. If she had written a purely "non-masculinized" narrative with oblique experimentation – there would be no first step out of dumb ideology. The experiment is only valuable as a second step.

I'm not saying that we should dismiss or get rid of experimental texts like Christian Bök's. But we should contextualize the meaning of Bök. Bök's potent power to remove us further away from dumb ideology lies only after we've read that other more direct approach to pataphysics. Bok is a second

step. Could I be on the right track?

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JL: I think you could be on to something. It's also interesting what arises in response to Haraway ie. Bhanu Kapil's book [*Incubation: A Space For Monsters*] I think is experimental in ways but also coherent and intelligent. Bök asks something of the reader, to know what he is responding to and what he is getting at, neither of which are transparent unless the reader is already educated.

What then of a theorist like Baudrillard? Would he be considered blunt and honest? Or also somewhat muddled.

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MK: I think Baudrillard is a special case: he's both a first step and the last. I think this is also true for someone like Zizek.

When reading Haraway it is clear that yes, you're one step further away from dumb ideology. But then again it's clear that Haraway once she's taken you out of one box puts you in another box – a French Theory-adjacent, mollified Western Feminism. Granted, for me, Haraway's "postmodern feminism" is a welcome relief to "essentialist feminism" – but at the end of the day you're in the mire of ideology, albeit a soft one. [...]

The thing about Baudrillard is is that the first time I read him, I wanted to just dismiss him. How can a person say there's no reality? To say the Vietnam War never happened? There's no more sexuality? He's nuts.

So here, for me, there was no first step. It's more of a half step in the beginning. Like Haraway, it's clear that he's attacking dumb ideology – but unlike Haraway you don't believe him. All there is is bark – no bite.

Of course, something did dawn on me after looking at some of his other books. Of course, he's a hyperbolist. So then you read his critiques more seriously. What's to be taken seriously is not the form of the joke. The form of the joke is masking the fact that it is indeed serious.

So why even hyperbolize? Well, I suppose it does bring a sense of urgency to, not so much the critique, but the world that its critiquing. So I ultimately took it that much seriously. But it is a curious thing with Baudrillard. He doesn't so much take you out of dumb ideology to put you in a communicative one. Because his whole argument, because it's hyperbolized, falls in on itself. His books collapse under its own weight. So in this sense Baudrillard's books act as the first and last steps. The world is fucked and you can't go back to *SIMULATIONS* for the answers.

What do you think?

Of course, it remains to be seen – what's the braver, more heroic act?

To destroy old ideologies and build new, more vibrant ones?

Or to just leave you in the blank desert, hungry?

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JL: Maybe the question is why even destroy or create new ideologies? Why a new ideology every day? We might as well have an-ideology-a-day-flip calendar, with ideologies being constantly destroyed, created anew, or recreated, what are we gaining? What do we want to gain? Is there a goal in mind? Is this constant revision process a process in revising our world, our environment? Our lifestyles, our thought processes? Or something within ourselves?

It seems we have always been searching for new frontiers to conquer and “revise” ideologies on, new places and spaces to mount new or old traditions. perhaps we now look for frontiers within ourselves, perhaps we have run out of new lands to start over in and can not start over anywhere. Manifest destiny or not, where do we now turn to for further revision of our past and present states of being? Is there where our fascination with Mars, aliens, and black holes comes from? Do we drool over Stephen Hawking’s texts on black holes hoping for a way out? We’ve started over and restarted over and yet society and its rules and ideologies have followed suit. Do we look at cyborgs, for example, because they act as a frontier within ourselves? Is not hybridity another way of crossing, pushing, edging across, exploring, expanding, living upon- borders? Do we not push the border further and further away as we explore more new land? Maybe we look at cyborgs because they are a frontier within ourselves, if we can not change our environment, do we now look within ourselves?

And are cyborgs not the new anti-hero? They are always on the outside of the system – any system, running from or towards something, always the “other,” and always looked as a muddled or hybrid form, where hybridity pitted against purity is a negative thing. Might the roots of this new anti-hero lie in past anti-heros, past hybridized misnomers, cursed wanderers, filthy orphans of the desert...Do we see similarities with the insurance salesmen of film noir – these characters seem to have no pasts or false ones, the stark black and white contrasts only highlighting the polarization of good and evil, or pirates – products of an unholy wedding of man and sea, forced to wandering ever-foreign waters...

Is there a chronology present here? Can patterns be traced? If so, can Baudrillard’s hyperbolization be applied here? Where is the source? Does it even still exist?

And then here, a brief (and partial) list of 21 cyborgs in literature, film, and other media:

1) *Blade Runner*: Rachael (an experimental replicant), plus replicants: Leon, Roy Batty, Zhora, & Pris.



If only you could see what I've seen with your eyes.

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"More human than human" is our motto.

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Replicants are like any other machine – they're either a benefit or a hazard. If they're a benefit, it's not my problem.

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I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser gate. All those moments will be lost in time... like tears in rain... Time to die.

2) Cybermen in *Doctor Who*



You will be upgraded.

3) Darth Vader



Nothing... can stop that now. Just for once... let me... look on you with my *own* eyes.

4) Number Six from *Battlestar Galactica*



Madame President, you asked for a reason to help us. Vengeance. You destroy the Hub, Cylons lose their ability to download. All of us.

5) Tony Stark / Iron Man



OK, here's a straight answer. My old man had a philosophy: peace means having a bigger stick than the other guy.

6) Motoko Kusanagi from *Ghost in the Shell*



If we all reacted the same way, we'd be predictable, and there's always more than one way to view a situation. What's true for the group is also true for the individual. It's simple: Overspecialize, and you breed in weakness. It's slow death.

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There's nothing sadder than a puppet without a ghost, especially the kind with red blood running through them.

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We have been subordinate to our limitations until now. The time has come to cast aside these bonds and to elevate our consciousness to a higher plane. It is time to become a part of all things.

7) RoboCop



We had orders to destroy it.

8) Seven of Nine from *Star Trek: Voyager*



I had no idea that eating was such a... sensual experience! The tastes, the textures, feeling it slide down Seven's esophagus, it's... it's exquisite!

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May cultural differences encourage us to build bridges of understanding. To all that makes us unique.

9) Geordi LaForge from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*



Think of it this way: every time you talk about yourself, you use the word 'we': 'we want this', 'we want that'. You don't even know how to think of yourself as a single individual. You don't say '*I* want this', or '*I* am Hugh'. We – are all – separate – individuals. *I* am Geordi. *I* choose what I want to do with my

life. *I* make decisions for myself. For somebody like me, losing that sense of individuality is almost worse than dying.

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I just don't get it, Guinan. I can field-strip a fusion reactor; I can realign a power transfer tunnel. Why can't I make anything work with a woman like Christy? It's like... I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say.

10) Molly Millions (recurring character in stories and novels by William Gibson, including *Johnny Mnemonic* & *Neuromancer*)



11) Inspector Gadget



This message will self-destruct. Don't worry, Chief, Inspector Gadget is always on duty.

12) Steve Austin from the novel *Cyborg* by Martin Caidin and the TV Series *The Six Million Dollar Man*



13) Echo from *Dollhouse*



All of these things that happen to me, I feel them.

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Feeling nothing would be worse. It would be like before – asleep. I'm awake now. I don't want to go back to sleep.

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I remember everything. Sometimes I'm someone else and then I come back, but I still feel them. All of them. I've been many people. I can hear them, sometimes suddenly. I'm all of them, but none of them is me. Do you know who's real?

14) Tetsuo Shima from *Akira*



I must be dreaming. I feel like I can take out the world.

15) Cameron from *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*



Fix me? Why would you fix me?

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I think... I'm a machine.

16) Adam Jensen from the video game *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*



Sarif was right about one thing. It's in our Nature to want to rise above our limits. Think about it. We were cold, so we harnessed fire. We were weak, so we invented tools. Every time we met an obstacle, we used creativity and ingenuity to overcome it. The cycle is inevitable... but will the outcome always be good? I guess that will depend on how we approach it. These past few months, I was challenged many times, but more often than not, didn't I try to keep morality in mind, knowing that my actions didn't have to harm others? Time and time again, didn't I resist the urge to abuse power and resources, simply to achieve my goals more swiftly? In the past, we've had to compensate for weakness, finding quick solutions that only benefit a few. But what if we never need to feel weak or morally conflicted again? What if the path Sarif wants us to take enables us to hold on to higher values with more stability? One thing is obvious. For the first time in history, we have a chance to steal fire from the gods. To turn away from it now – to stop pursuing a future in which technology and biology combine, leading to the promise of a Singularity – would mean to deny the very essence of who we are. No doubt the road to get there will be bumpy, hurting some people on the way. But won't achieving the dream be worth it? We can become the gods we've always been striving to be. We might as well get good at it.

17) The Borg Queen from *Star Trek: First Contact*



I am the beginning, the end, the one who is many. I am the Borg.

18) Kamen Rider / Masked Rider



I don't have a dream. But, you know, I can protect dreams.

19) Alita



You gave me my life, Daisuke... If I'm an angel, what does that make you?

20) Frankenstein from *Deathrace 2000*



21) Pearl Prophet from *Cyborg*



Why did you help me?