

Cyborg-Politics

The cyborg is not subject to Foucault's bio-politics; the cyborg simulates politics, a much more potent field of operations
-Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs"

The concept that the body is a sacred temple has taken on new and conflicting interpretations over the years. It is slowly dawning on human consciousness that preserving the body does not necessarily mean retaining the body in its natural state. The cyborg body has such a heady attraction for this reason; the very concept of the cyborg is antithetical. To retain the continuation of human experience, one takes mechanical bits and in essence becomes superhuman. This has created three problems, which the metaphor of the cyborg can be useful in deconstructing: the manufacturing of evolution; which leads to problems with identity; which in turn creates the humanity of dolls.

In the past few centuries humanity has reached a new height of sentience; that is to say, humans as a whole have become more aware of their bodies' function and how they are limited. Various technological innovations are developed in tandem with this newfound consciousness of our mortal insecurities. Many of these technologies have been used to alienate humanity from its natural state; the environment we live in now is far from what it used to be, even though we still strive to perform "natural" acts. An animal's life is spent in the act of being alive—eat, sleep, copulate and keep others from ending its life prematurely. Humans, by manufacturing the production of those goods and services needed by the general population to survive, have reached a state above nature. Humans are now the super animal. We are economic, productive, and safe from many of the original pitfalls of living. Modern science has shown us how to eat as much as we want without becoming corpulent, proper ways to either get the most out of our sleep or how to cope when we can't get enough, and how to copulate with little to no risk producing young or infection. In general we live longer, stay healthier, and lead better quality of lives (unless you are Amish).

We live in a healthy but fundamentally unnatural state. At the bestial, “natural” level we are diseased, malnourished, neurotic and terrified beings contained within weak flesh. The female body is further degraded by the probability that it has produced young at what would now be viewed as a horrifyingly young age. At this level there is only one way to survive eternally, and that is through one’s children. Worded differently, survival in this manner is survival through representation. A child is like its parent, and could continue the same traditions and functions as its parent. It is a sort of survival, but vague at best. It has occurred to people that to live on in this fashion is only a partial solution to the unfortunate necessity of dying. Moreover, modern scepticism and in some places down right disownment of the validity of a “noble” lineage has removed this as an option. Someone’s son may not follow directly in his footsteps and become respected in the family business for instance. It is more likely that this person’s son will change his name to Vanessa and start selling cars in Vegas. Therefore the only way to ensure one’s posterity is to ensure that pieces of oneself remain, unchanged by combination with another human or the manipulation of future personalities.

There are a number of ways to make a lasting mark on the world. Shakespeare has achieved a kind of immortality in this manner—he exists within the collective consciousness of humanity. This is not to say that everyone in the world intrinsically knows who he is, but enough of humanity knows of him that his existence has not faded. I define “existence” in this context as anything that can be defined as a noun—a person, place, thing or concept. A concept is a thing that floats in the ether of thought and knowledge. I am not suggesting that Shakespeare sought immortality through his work—none of us can know that. Yet the concept of Shakespeare endures, and is likely to continue to endure for a long time. However, the concept of Shakespeare is subject to the same problems as posterity found through reproduction, in that our concept of Shakespeare is not and can never be accurate. Our knowledge of Shakespeare’s life is a construct of various historical sources, and sometimes highly subjective readings of his works. It is impossible to get a complete picture of the kind of person that Shakespeare was, which means that his immortality is partial at best.

Right now the only way to preserve ourselves is through records and imagination. Unfortunately, the very mutability of this assures its transitive nature. Someday even Shakespeare could go permanently out of style and eventually forgotten. If the metaphysical does not work, the only recourse is to return to the physical. But we have already established the futility of the flesh. Modern technology can only preserve the body so far.

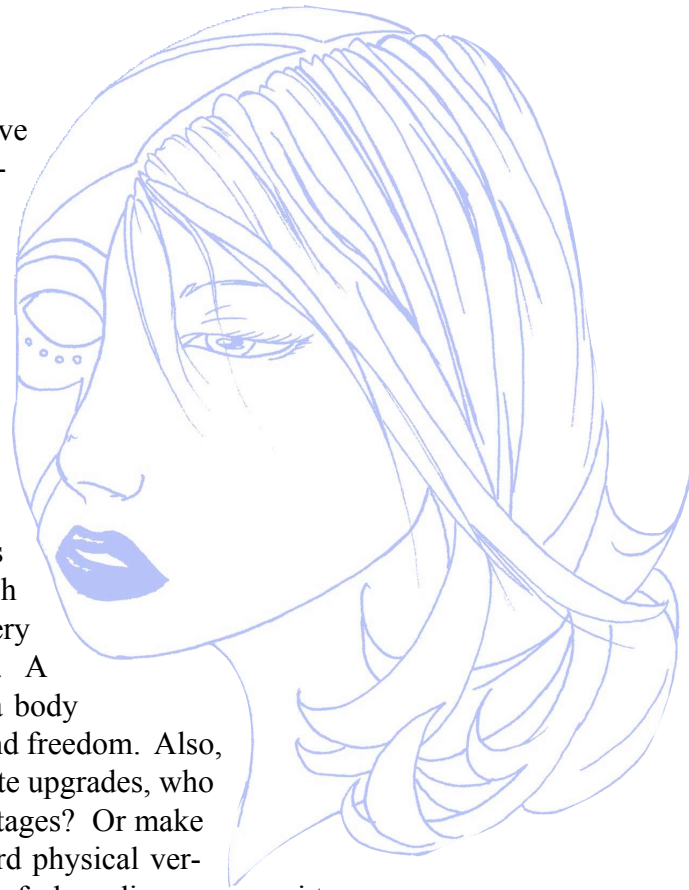
Now we come to the concept of the cyborg. When imagination and innovation cannot work on their own, then the next step is to combine them. What is needed is an entity that can be constantly refurbished and upgraded, but can also switch from the realm of physical to that of the metaphysical. This is what I consider manufacturing evolution. It is not a change that can happen naturally, and even if it was most are too impatient to wait for our bodies to catch up with our idealization. Nowadays there is a push to become something more than what we are, to develop into something greater. It seems like a self-centred concept, but evidence found in government expenditures suggests otherwise; social funding for medical research; various governments providing incentives for doctors to work in their countries; grants, sponsorships for various technological projects with extra public support if it has health benefits and so on. We live in a system that supports the modification of the body for the purpose of an enhanced and extended experience. Except for a select few who manage to do it with so called style, death nowadays is not the transition into a glorious higher plain of existence, but a failure of the collective will.

In a system that espouses eternal life for everyone without exclusion, there are some

definite problems with identity that can arise (and have already arisen). In a cyborg society, how do you separate yourself out from the crowd? When everyone has the same life expectancy and the same abilities, how do you own your achievements over someone else's? When the mirror shows your face and your face only, how do you know it is yours?

Once again the only recourse is a return to the flesh with its individual quirks, failures and advantages. In theory the flesh dictates the modification. That is to say, the flesh dictates the shape and form of the resulting body as the flesh always has. If this principle is observed then only shortcomings are modified, which gives everyone an equal starting point. This seems very fair and very democratic, but certainly not capitalist. A cyborg body at its most pessimistic (or realistic) is a body that represents a person with infinite social mobility and freedom. Also, given the opportunity and money to buy the appropriate upgrades, who would stop at fixing only the major physical disadvantages? Or make the replacements only as good as the original standard physical version? The cyborg body represents the extreme end of class disparity that no amount of government subsidizing (especially in a capitalist system) can account for. Identity then is based on what part of the spectrum you fall under. At one end is the base human, which is relatively short lived, flawed and severely limited in capacity. At the other end is the cyborg, which is highly specialized, eternal and retains only perfect human flesh.

This then leads to questions about what defines "perfect" flesh. The current hegemony has a very specific idea of what the ideal construct would be (see Appendix A), though the parts themselves should be kept basic so as to not become outdated as fashions change. A hegemony is nothing if not a collective concept—difficult to subvert but still transitive (i.e. the collective concept changes through the replacement of one generation by the next, the fleeting and widely differing affections of fashion and taste, practical considerations, etc). Therefore ideals may change but there are always ideals in place, and consequently there is always something in opposition to those ideals. Bodies, regardless of the current ideal, are particular and esoteric; what holds true for one may not hold true for another. Thus alternate constructions are born (see Appendix B for some possibilities). From this viewpoint there can be three basic possible constructions in relation to the controlling hegemony: the base model that fits the ideal; a model in opposition to the hegemonic ideal; or an alteration of the base material (the flesh) to fit into the hegemonic structure (the machine). The first possibility seems to be the least problematic, assuming that you have the means (monetarily, physically capable) to accomplish it. If you do not have the monetary means, then you are regulated to the bottom of the spectrum and what you do with your body is irrelevant to the upper echelons. If your body is not physically capable of fitting into the dominant construct (visceral reaction), then you must use one of the other scenarios in order to fit into society. An oppositional model would be the easiest for these persons to achieve. The problem is fitting the oppositional model into the hegemonic system. With advancements comes a more complicated and regimented civilization. If an adaptor cannot be found to fit the alternate model into the system, the alternate is no more useful than if there were no modifications. Therefore if the hegemony cannot change to meet the needs of the alternate model,



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than the alternate model is regulated to the base of the spectrum. The final option is to alter the base material to fit the hegemonic system. If a body rejects a transplant, then there is little you can do besides drug the body and force it into an unnatural state. If parts become incompatible in the cyborg system the only thing to do is to replace them. In essence the body becomes less and less human and eventually becomes a completely manufactured person. Ironically, the manufactured body will fit into the hegemonic model better than the body that entered into it naturally, the so-called “base” model. In theory the hegemony is based on the majority traits, so any reaction that is characteristic of the majority is natural. However, the body is subject to the whims and urges of the flesh—whether these reactions are termed “natural” or not depends not on biology but whether the reactions integrate into the dominant system. An unnatural reaction should be avoided and moulded into a defined natural state since leaving the reaction “untreated” could undermine the whole system. Hence the alternate model is rejected outright, and what is natural is possibly completely in opposition to what is biologically natural.

We have reached a point now where the natural being, the ideal, has to be a complete construct to fit into the system without problems. In essence, the only perfectly functioning humanity is a humanity of dolls. These are a people completely removed from their original, biologically determined natural state into an imposed natural state. Individual physical quirks are just as abhorrent as major deformities. The society itself is defaced, interchangeable, and perfect within its own ideals. If the people are interchangeable than they are also interconnected, creating a vast network defined by a Transcendental Ideal. This Ideal is the collective conception of the perfect body, which is the measuring stick for all that have access to the network. Whether the concept is given to these dolls or created by mutual consent is immaterial. The doll figure is terrifying not only in its (by definition) unnaturalness, but also in its probability. Take a look at a line of fashion models and notice the growing similarity to a Barbie doll, the body measurements of which are physically impossible and certainly not human. If someone cannot connect to the network, than that person has no way to orient himself or herself to the dominant system. On top of that, if that person’s body has had a visceral reaction to the modifications than not only can they not orient themselves, but they are also incapable of integrating into that system in any way. The minority groups are forever pushed to the margins, incapable of approaching the centre of power.

This enforced marginalization is the doll’s solution to its problems of identity. The minority is defined as individual, deficient, unnatural and ugly. The doll has the Ideal to set its back against and assure its place. Since the Ideal is at the centre, then so is the doll. Since the doll is at the centre then those that are not like the doll are not at the centre. Since those that are not like the doll are not at the centre, they are wrong and to be avoided. At this point the system becomes self-perpetuating; if imitating the Ideal instead of altering it to reflect the changing society becomes the best course, than the hegemony is no longer transitive. The humanity of dolls is static, natural only within its own definition, and ultimately lifeless. The class rebellion is necessary and most likely inevitable at this point. If the rebellion does not happen, then the doll’s house will probably collapse from the inside out when it can no longer support itself (there is not enough humanity left to perpetuate the system), with results that would be chaotic and difficult to predict within this theory. If the rebellion does occur, then it would simply perpetuate the Marxist cycle, unless the manufactured evolution is put to an end, as is unlikely.

Up to this point the discussion has been fairly abstract, but there are real instances of the cyborg system at work. The example that has been alluded to obliquely throughout this essay is the question of sexuality. We are indoctrinated into a heterosexual system at an

extremely young age. The justification of a heterosexual coupling is a natural coupling that produces offspring and would have made the most logistical sense in more primitive times. Also, various religious texts (the Bible is the usual example) dictate that homosexual relations are wrong and unnatural. This justification rejects the authority of the body to choose its own preferences and demand its own needs, as well as flouting the definition of natural: “innate or essential qualities of person or thing” (“Nature,” def 1). If something is taught, or dictated by a text for instance, than it is by definition unnatural. If we are to manufacture our evolution, which is exactly what we are doing unless so called progress comes to a grinding halt, it is important to find out what we are enhancing and what we are removing, and as a consequence what are we loosing. Is the Ideal in fact even human? Homosexuality is only one figure that can be fitted into the cyborg model and wind up forced onto the margins, but the cyborg system is especially applicable to the body’s relation to society: “Sex, sexuality, and reproduction are central actors in high-tech myth systems structuring our imaginations of personal and social possibility” (Haraway 711). since the cyborg body is something different and more than what nature provides, it is easy to apply it alternate model, and any alternate model can be put in place of the alternate model. The cyborg system does not point out the obvious (that minority groups are marginalized is hardly a revelation) but it does show the extreme results of marginalization and what that implies about the marginalizers. Haraway saw cyborg writing as something optimistic and empowering:

Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other. [...] In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture.

Haraway 715

Haraway’s model sounds great for women, but only if the cyborg is female. If the cyborg is male than nothing changes, the dualisms simple become more concentrated. On the other hand if the cyborg is female than the dualisms are simply reversed in some case, and not changed at all in others. Then again the cyborg must keep upgrading (reaffirming its central thesis) in order to validate itself against the Ideal. The cyborg becomes less human and more android, and finally the doll figure. The carbon copy who is so removed from the original reasoning that it accepts the reasoning as fact. Right now the demonized male (from a certain feminist perspectives) is fairly satisfied with the doll figure. Is the female figure so different from the male figure that they would not construct their own doll? In my opinion the cyborg body is not a liberating one for group—it is by nature politically confining. The cyborg body does this by way of its mechanical penetration and appropriation of the flesh, and is thus invasive and ultimately physically destructive.

Jennifer R Embree
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Appendix A

Beginner's Assembly Guide to Building Your Own Cyborg Part One: Base Model

First, determine the gendered part you need, then follow the easy instructions below.

Male parts: *arms, legs, chest, back, feet, abdomen, eyes, and voice*

Female parts: *neck, shoulders, breasts, pelvis, knees, ankles, wrists, nose, ears, and mouth*

Sex specific accessories: Face, hair, genitals, buttocks, and brain

In order to create a collective whole, both male and female parts are needed. So long as the base fe/male pattern is followed, the construct is almost self-assembling; the pieces fit together nicely, they are self-lubricating (to prevent friction between the members) and there are various outside influences that will hold the parts together. Thus, no adapters are needed providing the flesh does not reject the replacement (an unfortunate and sometimes unchangeable visceral reaction).

Appendix B

Beginner's Assembly Guide to Building Your Own Cyborg Part Two: Alternate Models

If there is a visceral rejection of the fe/male model, than a single gendered construction may be required. The polarity of various bits and pieces makes it difficult to mate female components with female components and male components with male components. It is usually the case that female coupling slide into place easily enough, but there is no construct to hold them in place. Consequently, while the structure is aesthetically pleasing, most consider it unstable. On the other hand, matting male parts together is much more difficult. Placing male pieces together seems very jarring to many, and the constant reapplication of synthetic mucin is generally recommended. Most major manufacturers will only provide customer service for the base model; they may soon offer service based on pending legislation.

Works Cited

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