

The Loneliness of Cyborgs

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Until recently, I thought of cyborgs as creatures of fantasy, perhaps achievable in fact in another century (if we don't destroy ourselves before then), but certainly not relevant to my daily life. But then a few sentences in Alice Adams' *Reproducing the Womb* radically rearranged my perspective on the subject. I was taking cyborgs too literally, and forgetting their allegorical value. While literal, albeit rudimentary, cyborgs do exist (such as people with pacemakers, or those with the Jarvik-7 artificial heart), the real key to understanding the cyborg is in seeing it as a metaphor for our relationship to technology.

The NASA control room is in chaos: the video monitors are filled with the image of an experimental plane in flames. The pilot's cry rings out over the babble, "Flight Com! I can't hold it! She's breaking up, she's break --". Then silence.

Steve Austin, NASA pilot, is mutilated and near death.

But not for long.

"We can rebuild him. We have the technology. We can make him better than he was. Better . . . Stronger . . . Faster."

So was "born" America's first prime-time cyborg. Steve Austin, *the Six Million Dollar Man*, introduced Americans to the future of humanity, the cybernetic organism—part human, part machine. Every week for seven years, Steve illustrated the benefits of the machine/human synergism. He was, in every way, physically superior to unenhanced humanity. In addition, he was intelligent, good-looking, and moral—traits

unrelated to his bionic condition, but linked in the viewer's mind nonetheless. Steve portrayed the cyborg as a super-hero that we could all look forward to becoming: no need to be born on another planet, as was Superman, or to be the victim of a mysterious lab accident as was Spiderman. The promise of Steve Austin was that modern science could, and someday would, take us all beyond the limits of our biology.

A decade later, in 1984, the cyborg re-emerged as a figure of evil. In contrast to the *Six Million Dollar Man* and the *Bionic Woman's* utopian depictions of the future that technology would create for us, *The Terminator* signified the dark side of technology. In this representation, rather than enriching our lives, technology leads to our destruction. *The Terminator* comes from a future in which the computers that control our nuclear warheads become self-aware and decide that humans are not only superfluous, but a threat. After waging a successful war against humanity, the computers are on the verge of wiping us out forever. But one man, John Connor, has brought the remaining humans together and led them in a rebellion against the machines. He is close to defeating the computers when, as a last desperate effort, they send a cyborg back in time to terminate John's mother, Sarah, before she can give birth to John (the so-called retroactive abortion). If the *Terminator* succeeds in his quest, humanity will be vanquished forever.

Since the *Terminator*, the cyborg has become a very popular theme in science fiction films. The *Six Million Dollar Man* and the *Terminator*, two early examples of this trend, show the extremes of a pendulum swing in depictions of cyborgs from utopian to dystopian. Jerry Mander writes in *In the Absence of the Sacred: the Failure of Technology and the Survival of Indian Nations* that "the first waves of description [of new technologies] are invariably optimistic, even utopian" (30). Such was the case with *the Six Million Dollar Man* and his cohort Jamie Sommers, *the Bionic Woman* in their presentations of the

cyborg during the seventies, a time when technology still promised a rosy future. Jaime and Steve were the good guys, fighting evil; their mechanical and computerized enhancements only increased their goodness quotient. Mander argues that because corporations control the production of new technologies, they have a vested interest in seeing those technologies succeed, regardless of any potentially deleterious effects. As cyborgs started moving from the realm of fantasy into that of (extreme) possibility, it would certainly have been to the benefit of the corporate world if we were already inured to the idea of a being that was part human and part machine. The *Six Million Dollar Man* and *Bionic Woman* served this function admirably, and just happened to coincide temporally with advances in the artificial heart, the first true cybernetic appliance. In 1978, toward the end of the bionic duo's long television lifespan, the Jarvik-7 artificial heart, the first of its kind that actually had the potential to replace the vital human organ, was invented. Suddenly confronted with the *fact* of cyborgs, Americans found that a host of philosophical questions that could previously be ignored (except by science fiction writers who had been asking these questions for years) now had to be faced. Is it morally correct to replace organic body parts with cybernetic ones? Will we someday all be cybernetically enhanced? How much of a person can we replace before that person stops being a person and becomes a machine? What, exactly, constitutes a person? What do cybernetics imply for the future of human race? The Jarvik-7 was just one factor in the swing away from the utopian cyborg. Another contributing element was the fact that the late seventies and early eighties, the period between the *Six Million Dollar Man* and his nemesis the *Terminator*, were especially fecund years for electronic consumer technologies. There were profound changes in the impact that electronics had on our daily lives during that period, and the technology primarily responsible for them was the microprocessor.

Stop and think back a moment. How many technologies do you take for granted today that did not even exist when you were a child? I was nineteen when the first ATM came to town; that same year Walkmans hit the market. At twenty-two I saw the first billboards pushing the fax machine, and it was around that time that Apple began marketing the first personal computer directed toward the consumer (as opposed to the electronics hobbyist). There were no video games when I was a kid, no answering machines, no VCRs, no Blockbuster video stores, no microwave ovens, no camcorders, no cable TV, no MTV, no Virtual Reality, no remote control. During Steve Austin's tenure as our cybernetic savior, 8-track tapes and cassettes were replacing the LP, color TVs had such bad picture quality that my parents opted for a black and white set, and someone invented icing in a can (much to my delight at the time).

In just the first half of the 80s, a remarkably short period of time, the marketplace was inundated with technologies that radically altered our relationships with machines and with other human beings. With ATMs, we no longer had to interact with another person to do our banking; Walkmans allowed us to be in a crowd of people safely cocooned within a wall of sound; answering machines let us talk to a machine instead of to whoever we were trying to reach; intra-office voice mail allowed us to leave a message for someone even when they were in the office and available to talk; fax machines reduced the need for messengers and phone calls; VCRs let us stay home to watch the movies; and so on.

While there is benefit to each of these devices, all have a side effect of increasing our ability to isolate from other human beings, effectively speeding us along in what Philip Slater called in 1970 our "Pursuit of Loneliness." As these technologies were adopted by both businesses and consumers, we found that we were spending more time than ever before interacting with machines instead of with people (it was also

during this period of time that the closed-circuit TV surveillance camera became ubiquitous, casting an aura of suspicion around many transactions that had formerly been opportunities for connection). These new contraptions permanently altered our cultural landscape: the science-fiction future was arriving, and most people felt powerless over its advance. Despite the fact that the new consumer technologies were “dumbed down” — no longer designed with the technological priesthood in mind — many of these devices left people feeling stupid: they couldn’t figure out how to program the VCR, for example. Those that could not or would not adapt to the new social configurations were left out of the cultural loop. They worried that perhaps they were superfluous after all.¹ Even moderately serious techno-weenies like myself feel overwhelmed by the rapidity of changes in computing technologies.

As the realities of a computerized future started overshadowing the idealistic fantasy of a world where machines do all the work and leave humans abundant leisure to pursue self-realization, technology began to take on a sinister cast. The cyborg, as an intimate representation of humanity’s relationship to technology, moved from a utopian figure to a dystopian one. Cyborgs are, in essence, a cultural barometer: they are one medium through which we express our anxiety about the rapid and seemingly out-of-control expansion of technological devices in our daily lives. In the years since the *Terminator*, cyborgs have come to be represented with somewhat more depth and nuance, but the same themes appear repeatedly in films and television shows about cyborgs. Investigating these themes and how we portray cyborgs in general may enable us to better understand our own attitudes toward technology and its role in our future.

You Can't Judge a Cyborg By Its Cover

Cyborgs come in many guises, though all involve some combination of electronic, computerized, and biological elements. Human-born, or biological, cyborgs, start life as human beings but are later enhanced with cybernetic prostheses, whereas manufactured, or mechanical, cyborgs are fundamentally machines with biological elements. The *Six Million Dollar Man* and the *Bionic Woman* are biological cyborgs: both retain most of their original biology; their electronic enhancements only replace body parts, such as arms, legs, and eyes. The original *Terminator*, in contrast, has an entirely mechanical infrastructure: its only biological elements are external ones such as muscle, skin, hair, and eyes, which cover a steel skeleton and computer brain.

Cyborgs can be either male or female. Some cyborgs can pass as human, while others look more like machines. There is no correlation between appearance and origin: a mechanical cyborg such as the Terminator appears human, while RoboCop, who is born human, looks very machine-like. Further, even in cases where technology is the villain represented by the cyborg, evil cyborgs do not necessarily look like machines, and good cyborgs do not necessarily look human. Again, the Terminator and RoboCop are good examples. One must look beyond surface appearances to discover the true nature of the cyborg—this is unsurprising as one reoccurring theme in cyborg films is the quest to find the true nature of the human being.

One of the ways we use the cyborg to explore what constitutes humanness is by characterizing it as an actor in a culture-vs.-nature conflict. In such scenarios, the cyborg's milieu is one of technological excess, which has created a world that is virtually unlivable. In the movie *Cyborg*, for example, chaos rules, and a deadly plague is wiping out the remnants of humanity. In *American Cyborg: Steel Warrior*, machines

have taken over the world, and all remaining humans, who are infertile, are left to live out the remainder of their lives in closely guarded ghettos, while *TC2000* features a world where the rich live underground and the poor suffer on the surface of an environmentally decimated planet.

Cyborgs are the fulcrum of these narratives in which the continued survival of nature/humanity is threatened by technology, and often the fate of the world is decided by whether or not a cyborg wins or loses its battles. In *Digital Man*, for example, the D1 cyborg is attempting to upload the launch codes for 250 nuclear missiles that will instigate an all-out nuclear war. In *American Cyborg*, the last fertile female and her embryo (conveniently encased in a glass and metal container for transportation—a little cyborg himself) must be protected against the cyborg overlords who are planning the death of the human species. In *Nemesis*, a powerful group of cyborgs have instigated a nefarious plot to replace all humans with cyborg replicas. An exquisite summation of this theme can be found in the blurb for the video release of *Prototype X29A*: “In an explosive climax, the ultimate battle commences that will determine whether mankind or machines will survive.”

All of these films demonstrate either the failures of first world economic priorities, or the dangers of our love affair with technology. The apparent message of these films is that nature, as expressed by the human being, is superior to culture, as represented by technology. One way this is demonstrated is through the fact that the futuristic landscapes in which humans are subordinate to machines are always introduced in the movie's prequel; the film itself shows humanity winning out. Consider also that in nearly all cases the physical strength and computer-enhanced motor skills of the cyborg are emphasized by the plot of the story (interestingly, female cyborgs seem to be alarmingly prone to gymnastic displays of prowess); yet, despite

their physical superiority, cyborgs are never indestructible. Evil cyborgs are always defeated by agents of humanity. For example, in *The Terminator*, Sarah and Kyle destroy the Terminator that is pursuing Sarah, and the Borg in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* are defeated at the verge of their conquest of the United Federation of Planets by the quick thinking of the Enterprise crew. An excellent example of the inevitable vulnerability of cyborgs is the movie *Digital Man*, where a mixed team of humans and cyborgs must take down the D1, a cyborg designed to defeat entire armies. In the ensuing battles, the first team members to die are the cyborgs. Only the humans can ultimately defeat the rogue D1 unit.

Perhaps the clearest example of the theme that humanity / nature is superior to technology / culture is the sentiment expressed at the end of the movie *Cyborg* by Dr. Pearl, the cyborg after whom the film is named. Pearl, a scientist in one of the last remaining “civilized” enclaves in the United States, volunteers to be turned into a cyborg to gather data that will allow her colleagues to cure the plague that is wiping out humanity. During her trek, she is repeatedly rescued by Gibson, a tough guy with a heart of gold, and ultimately is safely returned by him to her laboratory in Atlanta. On watching Gibson’s departure, Pearl muses, “It’s strange, but I think he’s the real cure for this world,” effectively calling into question the entire technological enterprise in which she and her colleagues are engaged.

My Hero

Despite the frequency of plots that glorify “nature” while demonizing technology, our own ambiguity about where humanity fits into the picture shines through. The cyborg, an intimate melding of human and machine, straddles the

(imaginary?) breach between nature and technology.² For this reason, cyborgs are heroes as often as they are anti-heroes, but the message imparted by both is that there is an entity called humanity that is in conflict with technology and capitalism. The cyborg anti-hero embodies the evils of technology and is defeated by human agents. The cyborg hero, in contrast, shows that humanity is a quality that is not restricted to biological humans. The message here is that culture has the ability to improve upon nature, and that the esoteric trait of “humanity” is actually a component of culture, not nature. As an android in *Nemesis* quips, “It takes more than flesh and blood to be human.”

Beneath the save-the-world scenarios so common in cyborg flicks lurks this question of what exactly constitutes humanity, a question that faces all of us in our increasingly technologically oriented society. In his essay “It’s a Poor Workman Who Blames His Tools,” John Perry Barlow writes, “As a species, we are beginning to feel technology as a threat not so much to our literal survival—though certainly it’s that at times—but to our *identity*” (126). The struggle of human against the nemesis cyborg is a struggle to save humanity from the aspects of itself that have embraced technology too intensely, while the cyborg hero is used as a metaphor for our own internal struggle to claim or reclaim a human identity. Cyborg heroes embody Joseph Campbell’s theories about the roles of heroes in culture: the cyborg hero is on a journey, a journey to find its human self. Along the way, the cyborg must face various obstacles, and must overcome them in order to succeed in its quest.

RoboCop is just this sort of hero. Alex Murphy is a Detroit police officer killed in the line of duty. But he is resurrected by Omni Consumer Products (OCP) as RoboCop, an experimental crime fighting cyborg. The person called Murphy has been obliterated: his body is reduced to a mere torso and face with cybernetic prosthetics for limbs and

computer implants in his brain; his face is hidden behind a steel mask, and his identity has been replaced with a computer program. To OCP, Murphy is dead; the company defines RoboCop as “a machine that uses some human tissue.” But at one crucial moment in the film, Murphy’s biology overrides the computer program that defines RoboCop, and RoboCop has a dream about Murphy’s death. As RoboCop clomps out of police headquarters in pursuit of the murderers, he is confronted by his old partner, Lewis. Lewis is the only person to have figured out that RoboCop is actually Murphy, and she attempts to reach the Murphy personality. Though RoboCop is at first nonplused, he later accesses police files and makes the connection between his memories and the name “Murphy.” He realizes who he is/was. In one of the more poignant moments of the film, Murphy returns to the home that he had shared with his wife and son before his transformation into RoboCop. As he walks through the empty rooms, he is inundated with memories of domestic bliss. As his rage at being denied access to his old life builds, you see Murphy’s struggle to reject the RoboCop programming and to emerge as the dominant identity. Ultimately, Murphy triumphs; at the end of the film, RoboCop has removed the headgear that hid his face, and when asked what his name is, he replies “Murphy.”

Yet that success is not permanent. In *RoboCop 2*, Murphy is again struggling to retain his identity against corporate onslaughts that insist that he is a machine, not a person. RoboCop has tracked down the new home of his former wife, and every day spends hours sitting in his patrol car outside the house. Eventually, she sues OCP for harassment, not knowing that the strange robotic creature watching her is really Alex. OCP’s attorneys sit down with RoboCop and insist that he accept that he is not Alex Murphy. Murphy resists. But when the lawyers ask, “Do you think you could ever be a husband to her?” Murphy has to concede that the body he inhabits is not human. In a

victory for OCP, Murphy rejects his wife, telling her that he is not Alex, Alex is dead, he is only a machine. He does this for what he believes is her own good, even though it is clear that his wife is willing to accept RoboCop as Alex.

Throughout the film, Murphy continues to resist OCP's efforts to convince him that he is only a machine. But eventually his defenses are systematically destroyed, and his identity as Murphy is again subsumed under OCP programming. In a heroic attempt to reassert himself as the dominant identity, Murphy zaps himself with thousands of volts of electricity in the hope that this massive power spike will erase the OCP programming. Murphy takes this risk because he would rather die than continue to live as a machine. By the end of *RoboCop 2*, however, Murphy has fully reclaimed his identity, as evidenced by his last line of the film: "Patience, Lewis, we're only human."

A hero's purpose in culture is to serve as a role model. The hero embodies the values and characteristics that a culture finds most laudable. The trials and tribulations the hero must undergo are representative of the difficulties we all must face in our own pursuit of a good life. Alex Murphy is a modern American hero, struggling to retain a human identity and human connectedness in an increasingly technological and isolating world. As we are forced to interact with machines instead of people in more and more situations, we become appendages of the machine, just as machines such as telephones, Walkmans, camcorders and computers become our own prosthetics. Ultimately, we begin to lose our connection to humanity as a whole.

This loss of connection is also part of RoboCop's story. As an American hero, RoboCop is extremely individualistic, and a major portion of his struggle is for the freedom to determine his own fate. But it is important to note that RoboCop does not find his humanity on his own: he has help. Lewis' role in RoboCop's reclamation of his human identity is one that I have termed the "midwife." Every cyborg whose quest is to

find his or her human identity has such a midwife. For Zoey, the *TC2000*, it is her partner Jason, for the Terminator in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, it is 10-year-old John Connor. For Philip, the *Cyborg Cop*, the midwife is his brother Jack. The enabling agent that catapults the cyborg hero into humanity is always an intimate connection with a human being. The cyborg shows us that the quality we call *humanity* is integrally tied to community. Further, we see that machines lack such community and connection, which is why the cyborg hero is positioned in opposition to technology, though he or she is alive because of it. This apparent incongruity simply mirrors reality. Technology itself is extremely contradictory in its effects: it has the amazing ability to connect people, while simultaneously serving to isolate them.

Murphy's battle is not only against technology, however, it is also against OCP and the corporate culture that produces and promotes technology, regardless of its dangers, and which glorifies profit at the expense of the workers who make that profit possible. He is not alone in this: many of his cyborg compatriots find that to regain their humanity, they must battle the corporation.

The Product is You

Corporations and corporate interests are frequently the masterminds behind the nefarious plots that either employ cyborgs as agents of evil or else are thwarted by cyborg heroes. In many films, the cyborg, evil or not, is actually a victim of the corporation. Consider the cases of RoboCop; the *TC2000*; Phillip, the *Cyborg Cop*; Steve Austin, the *Six Million Dollar Man*; and Alex Rain of *Nemesis*: all human beings who are converted into cyborgs without their consent by corporate or government. The stories

of such cyborgs, though set in the future, resonate within us because we, too, have been cyborgized by corporate demands.

The factory and the assembly line, for instance, force humans to work at a measured pace: the pace of the machine. As Lawrence Wright notes in *Clockwork Man*, “From the day when machines had been installed in any factory, all workers had to start and finish at the same time, with foremen to keep them at it; no one could pause even briefly, because the machines did not” (118). One of the benefits of machines, of course, is that they can be remarkably efficient, far more so than human beings whose attention spans are not infinitely fixed as are those of machines. Humans want to chat, form social connections at the water cooler, space out, or otherwise do something besides the task at hand. Yet because we still need humans to work with the machines, capitalist enterprises, in their perpetual search for profit, force humans to behave like machines in order to keep up. “Technology makes people into machine parts. Don’t think of them as people, [then] they’re not in the way,” (32) writes Rebecca Ore in *Gaia’s Toys*.

The molding of human to machine is best exemplified by the work of industrial psychologist Frederick Taylor, who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries pioneered the concept of “scientific management” of workers’ tasks. Taylor performed time-motion studies on all sorts of repetitive tasks to come up with the most efficient methods of performing them. For instance, he broke the job of shoveling down into several discrete movements, and workers were instructed on the precise ways to hold their shovels and move their bodies in order to achieve maximum efficiency. Managers were thrilled with Taylor’s work, claiming that it saved them substantial amounts of money, which demonstrated the profitability of turning humans into machines.

The profit motive subsumes the needs of human workers to the demands of the corporation. Biological organisms have internal clocks that tell them when to eat, when to sleep. But workers must ignore their internal clocks and instead move to the rhythms of the factory clock. Wright's description of the rule of time in the mediaeval monastery is clearly applicable to our own experiences in school and on the job: "Here, for the first time, we find chronarchy, organized and absolute. Its purpose is clear: the individual is to be sunk in the community, in willing submission to the discipline and time-table of 'a school of the service of the Lord'. To be free to ask oneself 'What shall I do next?' is to be free to err. The monk may not even think up individual acts of piety and self-denial, as a hermit may. He has no personal influence, as the wandering friar has. He needs no more initiative than an ant" (41). The same is true of the child forced to sit still in class, the factory worker with a quota to meet, or the office worker trying to look busy. In all of these cases, the free will of the subject is impaired by the constraints of the bureaucracy in which it is cradled. Note that one of the primary characteristics of the cyborg is this loss of free will. Cyborgs, whether biological or mechanical in origin, always find themselves under the control of the Corporation in one of its many forms. Steve Austin, for example, is beholden to the OSI, the government agency that transformed him into a bionic man. He is required to carry out dangerous missions in order to pay back the six million dollars OSI had spent reanimating him. In *Nemesis*, Alex Rain is blackmailed by the Los Angeles Police Department, which has planted a bomb in his heart when adding additional cybernetics. Alex must either find a missing LAPD agent, or else die in three days. *RoboCop*, *Cyborg Cop*, *TC2000*, *the Bionic Woman*, *Cyborg 2*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and *Judge Dredd* all feature one or more cyborgs whose free will is compromised. Even the D1 cyborg in *Digital Man* apologized as he lay dying that he was only following his programming. Once again, the cyborg points out

to us the problematic structure of our own society. For though we cherish the concept of free will, in reality our own free will is circumscribed by the State, the Corporation, and bureaucracies in general.

Free will is chaotic, unpredictable, and in no way standardizable and is therefore anathema to the rule of the machine. Consider that one of the most crucial innovations of modern technology was the standardization of machine parts, which made more efficient both the manufacturing and repair processes. Just as the machine age led us to attempt to force humans to emulate the physical operation of machines, the concept of standardization led to changes in our perception of the human psyche. It should be no surprise that the birth of psychology followed the industrial revolution: psychology was strongly influenced by it. Alice Adams writes, “Huxley joins the name of Freud to that of Ford, suggesting that psychoanalysis operates on the assembly-line principle, producing a subject whose psychic organization—however conflicted—is identical to that of every other subject” (97-98). (John Brunner, in his novel *The Jagged Orbit*, also explores this topic). The fields of psychiatry and psychology invented a set of norms that people were expected to adhere to; failure to do so implied mental illness or neurosis. Not surprisingly, those norms were ones that upheld the status quo and ultimately benefited the Corporation. Consider the psychological maxim that your problems all originate in childhood, not from the stresses brought about from the insecurity of being a wage earner, or from being turned into a machine at your job, or from witnessing the destruction of the environment. Diagnosis of mental health is also closely tied to the corporation: one of the ways that we determine whether or not someone is mentally ill is whether or not he or she can hold down a job. Given that the vast majority of jobs require one to constantly subvert one’s own needs to the needs of the business, and generally to be obedient to the rules of the institution, it is clear that

such conceptions of mental health leave something to be desired. This twisted reasoning about what constitutes mental health is also applied to cyborgs. For instance, when Cassella Reese, the lead cyborg character of *Cyborg 2*, escapes the clutches of Pinwheel, the company that manufactured her, technicians describe her actions as a “freedom cathexis aberration.” Here the cyborg again shows us inherent contradictions in our cultural schema: mental health, as defined by the corporation, is in conflict with many aspects of our treasured value of individualism, and, according to the cyborg hero, should be rebelled against.

One of the greatest disservices perpetrated by industrial age psychology was the invention of the standardized test shortly before World War I. We’ve all been subjected to these tests, from the Iowa tests every other year in grammar school, to the S.A.T., the G.R.E., and the I.Q. test sneakily administered with the Iowa tests. Your scores on such tests have an impact your life and your choices. The Iowa tests and I.Q. test are made a permanent part of your grammar and secondary school records: administrators use them to place you in classes, and teachers review these records and form preconceptions about your abilities. The S.A.T. can determine which college you attend, and the G.R.E. can influence whether or not you are admitted to the graduate program of your choice.³

Regardless of issues of accuracy, one thing is certain. I.Q. and other standardized tests, especially those foisted upon grammar school students, do not take into consideration the unique circumstances of the individual student. What if a student gets so nervous about being tested that he can’t perform well? What if she is sick with a cold that day and can’t think clearly? What if he didn’t eat that morning or the day before? What if the student is being abused by a parent and is so emotionally distraught that doing well on such a test seems of minor importance? I know a woman who, in third

grade, saw the unfairness of the Iowa tests, and deliberately did poorly on them as a gesture of rebellion. Despite the fact that she was a good student and did well in her class for “smart” kids, she was moved to a class for “dumb” kids *based on the test results alone*. This is a clear instance of human experience and perception being subverted to the epistemology of the machine, a way of knowing that is absolutist, homogeneous, and monolithic.

I have focused on the standardized test because I believe it is an excellent example of the ultimate effects of technology on our lives. A sane society does not assess people according to the same sorts of “objective” criteria to which mass-produced products are subjected. Our conceptions of humanity, virtue, and what constitutes the good life have all been radically affected by the forces of mechanization and standardization—twin aspects of technology—in ways both gross and subtle. Representations of cyborgs serve many functions, and one is a warning about the future we are creating for ourselves through technology. But because questioning the structure of our society—the very fabric of our lives—is so difficult and frightening, we usually position cyborgs as different from people, effectively distancing ourselves from the reality they represent. For example, a common device for introducing a cyborg character in film is showing the world through the cyborg’s eyes. The image is flat, like a computer screen, its edges seethe with scrolling data, and in the center are digital sights for targeting. The term “seeing” is frequently used as a metaphor for describing a way of thinking—“she and I don’t see eye-to-eye,” for example. So, we tell ourselves, not only are cyborgs physically different from humans, they don’t think like we do either. Mechanical cyborgs also have a special Achilles’ Heel that is not shared by biological human beings: their power supply. In *Cyborg Cop*, *American Cyborg*, and *Nemesis 2*, the evil cyborg is destroyed when it is shorted out. (Admittedly, humans can

be electrocuted, which is similar, but death by electrocution is not standard fare in human-only action films).

Despite our efforts to distinguish ourselves from cyborgs, the truth is that we are not so very different from them. They are, after all, part human, and the issues wrestled with by the cyborg hero are applicable to all humans. What we don't like to admit is that the cyborg is the creature that we are becoming as a result of our efforts to make humans conform to the needs of machines. Cyborgs in the movies are manufactured in corporate and government laboratories. The factories that produce *our* cyborgized selves are schools, bureaucracies, and the mass media. Consider, for example, the ways that advertising shapes us into consumers: ". . . television ads tell us who we should be and what we need to be that person. Those who don't know themselves, or who are dissatisfied with themselves, flock to buy the 'new improved' identities sold by corporate marketers in the form of brand names, styles, team logos, even cartoon characters," writes Rick Crawford in "Techno Prisoners." A more succinct, and ominous, description of the impact of advertising on the viewer is a 15-second "anti-ad" television spot called, "The Product is You," produced by The Media Foundation. In this "infomercial," a man sits in a darkened room before a television screen. As the camera pans to the back of the man's head, the announcer intones, "Your living room is the factory. The product being manufactured . . . is you." The final shot shows a bar code tattooed on the back of the man's neck.

The multiple forces of technology ultimately act together in society to mass produce a compliant population. As Taylor Stoehr writes in "Media Trance," "The standardization of behavior made great strides in the United States with the development of geographic mobility (the cars and roads), the demise of rural life, the depersonalization of urban neighborhoods, and the breakup of the extended family. But

the media have taken it much further, achieving almost complete cultural conformity. Local difference and regional character exist less and less anywhere in the country. If a pocket of resistance is discovered, it immediately becomes the subject of a 'Special' or 'Expose.' Whatever foreground remains to individuals, accidents of inheritance and experience, the background is now pretty much the same for everyone, so far as language, decorum, morality, and civic life are concerned. There are no provinces, no provincial behavior" (14).

To get a better sense of how this uniformity is manifested, consider as an example the daily routine of an imaginary woman named Rachel. Rachel's alarm goes off at 6 a.m., along with the alarms in four of the other apartments in Rachel's building, and throughout her time zone as well. All of these people wake up, regardless of the readiness of their bodies, because they must go to work to earn the money they need to survive. They are all controlled by the "factory" clock.

As Rachel drives to work, she shares the road with hundreds of other people who, like her, must arrive at work by 8 a.m. She considers the amazing fact that across the country, millions upon millions of people are also on their way to work at that very moment. Seeing a McDonald's, Rachel decides she's hungry and joins the line at the drive-thru window. She speaks her order into a white pedestal, drives to a window where she gives a woman wearing a telephone headset money. Then she drives to a second window and is handed her food. This is Rachel's assembly line experience for the morning. As Rachel takes a bite of the rubbery Egg McMuffin™, she realizes that her Egg McMuffin™ is exactly the same as the Egg McMuffins™ being served from San Francisco to New York City.

At work, Rachel turns on her computer and prepares to begin her job as a data-entry clerk. Her in-box is full of forms that need to be input. Rachel knows the forms by

heart and her hands fly over the keyboard automatically; she doesn't even need to look at the screen to know what she is doing. But she can't afford to daydream, or errors would creep into her work. There's a special kind of attention that allows her to be the empty conduit for the data to flow from her eyes to her hands: Rachel is little more than a machine at her job. After the first stack of forms is done, but the next batch hasn't arrived yet, Rachel plays a bit of solitaire on the computer until the network software "cop" warns her to get back to work. She yawns, still tired, and goes to the lunchroom to get a cup of coffee to help her body function for the duration of her tour of duty. In the lunchroom, several of her co-workers are talking about last night's *Seinfeld* episode. The television provided a communal experience for them all, even though they did not spend the evening together.

On her way home from work, Rachel endures the traffic jams caused by the hundreds, if not thousands, of other workers trying to get home at the same time that she is. At home, she pops a mass-produced frozen food product into the microwave: she's too tired to cook. She then spends her evening in front of the TV.

Rachel's life is in no way atypical for an American, and clearly demonstrates the themes of mass production, standardization, and isolation that I have attributed to the effects of technology and the Corporation on our lives. These themes are also all common features of the cyborg's story. And so we must ask ourselves: at what point do we cease being solely human, and become instead cyborgs? This anxiety about our cyborg potential is reflected in two of the films I studied.

In *Digital Man*, three of the members of the crack military unit sent to destroy the rogue D1 cyborg are cyborgs themselves, *but they don't know it*. After the first cyborg team member is killed, and his cyborg construction is revealed, the rest of the team struggles with the question, "Am I a cyborg too?" They search for any detail of their

lives that might confirm their belief that they are human—memories of childhood, for instance. The cyborgs are always horrified when they discover their own true nature. They feel confused and betrayed, uncertain of their own, previously unquestioned, personhood. Each insists, to the very end, that he or she is human, but secretly, they all have their doubts.

These cyborgs are only enlightened at the moment of their death. In contrast, Austin of *American Cyborg* survives the revelation of his cyborg nature and then must come to terms with it. Like the cyborgs in *Digital Man*, he is dismayed at his discovery, but ultimately he embraces his new identity. He considers himself an atypical cyborg, however, because not only is he not under the control of the “System,” but he has compassion for humans as well.

For us, the implication that we are cyborgs is more subtle than the question of whether we are made of flesh or metal, and is thus easier to deny. That is our great danger. For unless we are able to accept, as Austin does, that we are (metaphorical) cyborgs, we cannot stave off, the dismal future that the cyborg film predicts for us. Luckily, the cyborg hero provides a ray of hope.

The Hopeful Cyborg

Sarah, the human hero of the film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* muses, “The unknown future rolls towards us. I face it for the first time with a sense of hope. Because if a machine, a Terminator, can learn the value of human life, maybe we can too.” In this film and others, the cyborg hero pushes us to a deeper awareness of our own humanity; reminds us of the importance of community; and makes us conscious of

the bureaucratic threads, enabled by technology, that threaten to strangle our free will and individual dignity.

But there is an interesting contradiction in the cyborg hero's exaltation of humanity: it is never returned to its original, 100% biological condition. It still requires its cybernetic prosthetics in order to survive. Here cyborgs show us that technology (the penultimate achievement of our culture) need not precipitate the destruction of culture and the descent into chaos so commonly featured in cyborg films. Cyborgs demonstrate that we can adapt to the increasingly diverse and intimate technologies in our lives, that we can thrive. As Donna Haraway, in her groundbreaking work "The Cyborg Manifesto" puts it, "From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star War apocalypse waged in the name of defense, about the final appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war. From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints." For Haraway, the cyborg, as usher into the postmodern future, closes the gap so crucial to the Western paradigm between nature and culture, human and technology.

Another promise of the cyborg is the elimination of cross-cultural and racial divisions: if the chasm between human and machine, biological and mechanical, organic and inorganic can be bridged, then surely the differences between people can be too. The film *Digital Man* is an excellent example. When the first cyborg team member is destroyed, the rest of the team reacts with shock—after all, they thought he was human. The sergeant refuses to pull the dead soldier's tags, for as far as he's concerned, the cyborg is a machine, not a person. When the second cyborg team member is killed, the

sergeant responds the same way. But when the final cyborg team member dies, it is someone with whom the sergeant has formed an emotional bond, and the sarge relents, admitting that, for all intents and purposes, his friend was human.

But do the representations of cyborgs in films actually help us to change? Maybe not. Cyborgs are a medium through which we can experience our fears about the future technology will create for us, and then conquer them through the vicarious act of destroying the evil cyborg, or else the Corporate interest that created the cyborg hero. Because the corporate bad guys also always get their just desserts, the character of the corrupt and power-hungry corporation serves to ease our submission to the real-life excesses of today's corporations.

Another method that we use to attenuate the subversive potential of cyborgs is by depicting them as prototypes. The T-1000 of *Terminator 2*, the *Six Million Dollar Man*, *RoboCop* and his nemesis *RoboCop 2*, the *TC2000*, the D1 of *Digital Man*, Cassella Reese of *Cyborg 2* and Phillip, the *Cyborg Cop* are all prototype models. Portraying cyborgs as prototypes reflects our desire to feel in control of the technological Juggernaut. A prototype, after all, is a specific step in R & D and product design. The prototype is the first working model of a design; it is unique. Its purpose is experimental: how well will the product function in real-life situations? A prototype is part of an orderly and well-defined process—the opposite of our personal experience of technology. In real life, when prototypes don't work out, they are shelved or destroyed, and the R & D folks go back to the drawing board. Thus, not only does the portrayal of cyborgs as prototypes demonstrate our desire to believe that technology is proceeding as part of a larger, established plan, but because prototypes are one-of-a-kind, destroying the cyborg prototype eliminates the threat it posed.

So, although cyborgs represent our uneasiness with the role that technology is playing in our lives, we create images of them that function to give us an illusion of power and control. Hence, cyborgs in the movies and on TV are ultimately designed to lull us into a sense of security about technology, the corporation, and their roles in our culture. These images only feed our complacency. They do not urge us to action, do not make us change. In this way, cyborgs serve to maintain the status quo by reassuring us that the human spirit will always conquer the machine.⁴

Footnotes

¹ An especially enlightening comment on this topic can be found in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. Sarah, watching her son John interact with the Terminator that is protecting him, thinks, "Watching John with the machine it was suddenly so clear. The Terminator would never stop. It would never leave him. And it would never hurt him, never shout at him, or get drunk and hit him, or say it was too busy to spend time with him. It would always be there and it would die to protect him. Of all the would-be fathers who came and went over the years, this thing, this machine, was the only one who measured up."

² I am particularly interested in the human/machine symbiosis of cyborgs, and so do not in this article address the fact that androids (robots that look, act, and sometimes feel, human), robots, clones, or genetically engineered humans often are used to address some of the same cultural issues as are cyborgs. Representations of these other manifestations of technological wizardry can be found in the following sources, among others: the films *Alien*, *Aliens*, *Blade Runner*, and *Nemesis 2*; the television show *Star Trek: The Next Generation*; and the novels *He, She, It* by Marge Piercy, and *Cyteen* by C. J. Cherryh.

³ How accurate are I.Q. tests? It depends on who you ask. As we all know, critics of these tests argue that they do not solely measure inborn ability, rather they measure access to education and are biased toward upper-middle-class white males. Recent supporters of the I.Q. test, notably Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray in the highly controversial book, *The Bell Curve*, argue otherwise: I.Q. tests are accurate indicators of a person's native "intelligence," and the reason that people of color and the poor score lower than whites and the middle class is because people that have lower I.Q.s tend to sift to the bottom of the economic strata. Since I.Q. is inheritable, they argue, people with low I.Q.s bear children with low I.Q.s who, like their parents, remain poor and marginalized. Occasionally an exceptional child will be born to such parents, which explains why a few lucky souls are able to rise to a higher class than their parents and thus escape the ghetto.

Though there are a number of I.Q. tests in existence, one of the popular ones consists of questions from three categories: verbal, mathematical, and spatial. I think that it is pretty clear that large vocabularies and mathematical skills are not inborn, and that even "intelligent" children can be denied access to the materials and education that would allow them to score highly on these sections. The spatial questions involve being able to count the number of blocks in a complex configuration. Though one's ability to do this well might be inborn, I'm uncertain of what type of intelligence this section is supposed to determine. The test doesn't measure logical thinking, as does the G.R.E, or artistic or musical talents. In short, the tests are biased toward the well-educated, and are arbitrary in that they measure only certain kinds of abilities, ignoring others.

⁴ Other cyborg movies not addressed here include *RoboCop 3*, *Hardware*, *T-Force*, and *Dark Future*.

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