

Man and Machine (Re)Building Cyberspace

The Cyberpunk Project

I want to be a machine.

-- Andy Warhol

I'd rather be a cyborg than a goddess.

-- Donna Haraway

One of the central themes in cyberpunk fiction is established early on by writers like Gibson and Cadigan and by filmmakers like Cronenberg : technology's invasion/replacement of, effect upon, or indistinguishability from the human body. The body, within cyberpunk visions, becomes a physical site for the working out of postmodern conflict and for the speculative mapping of technology. But these conflicts, issues with reproduction (both sexual and mechanical, if there's a difference), and constructions of the body have as much to do with current perception and fears of the body in relation to technology as they do with the future- mapping "speculation" of sci-fi.

While the human has often been put in opposition to an alien, (supposedly) distinctly different Other in traditional science fiction, cyberpunk locates the Other in our own technology and promptly threatens the distinction between man and machine in combining or confusing them. The idea of the human body, that of the natural, biological (genetically encoded and unalterable by man), and complete (as in bounded and contained within the limits of the flesh) entity, becomes, within cyberpunk and the works of theorists like Haraway and Bukatman, a fading remnant of Baudrillard's "real". "Implosive science fiction finds the scene of SF problematics not in imperial adventures among the stars, but in the body-physical/body-social and drastic ambivalence about the body's traditional--and terrifyingly uncertain--integrity" (Csicery-Ronay "Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism").

The Natural and the Artificial Misbegotten literally plug into the head of Gina, a human synthesizer. Within the world of "Burning Chrome", Rikki gets blue Ikon implants in the hopes of getting into simstim, Jack has a myoelectric arm, and Bobby "moves" through a computerized matrix of information for a living. Once exposed to Videodrome, Max Renn becomes "video made flesh" and internalizes-- literally, once hallucination is inseparable from reality for him and the viewer -- television signals. Cyborg images merge with, supplement, and change the flesh of the body with man- made hardware, programming, and data. What is human and what is made by humans become indistinguishable, and the uniqueness/irreplaceability of the human being is questionable. How much use is the body without technology ? And how "real" is our concept of the body in the first place ?

A disturbing factor in the mix of human and machine in cyberpunk is what Csicsery- Ronay, Jr. terms the attack on the "idea of the image of the body" (189). If the body becomes emblematic of what is "natural" and "human", then the entrance of the non-human from outside becomes a threat to the most obvious signifier of what is "human".

As our "fiction" and "theory" show us the cyborg, it is difficult to stop reading and find the "reality". In fact, The "idea of the image of the body", like the Gernsbackian vision of the future peeking through the architecture of gas stations and soda shops, pops up in fiction, advertising, theory, etc., but its reality eludes us. As Donna

Haraway would insist, we and our bodies are not untouched in a state of nature : we wear glasses, have pacemakers, rely on computers to do our daily work, wake up to alarm clocks, and communicate by phone and email. The technological, whether it actually invades a specific human body, assists, affects, or even regulates the body's activity. The cyborg, we realize, is not a corrupting of the "real" flesh of the human body, it, like the ideal natural body, is yet another image in a series. "Even while we mistake ourselves for humans, the way we talk shows that we know we're really cyborgs...We're talking about whole new forms of subjectivity here. We're talking seriously mutated worlds that never existed on this planet before. And it's not just ideas. It's new flesh." -- *Wired* interview with Donna Haraway. The Internal and External Bobby jacks in and rifles through what Gibson calls "mankind's extended electronic nervous system" in "Burning Chrome" ("consensual hallucination" and "data made flesh" in *Neuromancer*). With the instigation of the Videodrome signal, Renn's incorporation of the technology into his body not only invades his mind ; it also gives form to Renn's hallucinations/fantasies (in his own perception of his body and in the recording of those fantasies in the back of Spectacular Optical. Even "The Gernsback Continuum" involves a sort of turning inside out of the body as the narrator begins to see parts of "the mass unconscious". The "inside" of the body, the mind and its perception, are not inviolable within cyberpunk; technology can liberate the mind from the "prison of the flesh", and it can reprogram the body/mind as if it were a computer. Andrew Ross points out in "Hacking Away at Counterculture" that the AIDS virus already does similar work when it invades the body.

Eroticizing the Machine

The ultimate substitution of signs is perhaps the intervention of the technological into sexuality. The machine steps in and enhances (or serves as well as or better than) the body as an object of desire. Renn caresses and sticks his face in an undulating television, and Gina wonders if being forced into sinning can be considered rape if she knows she's going to like it. In addition to the obvious comparisons to the sexual act and its pleasure when Bobby "jacks in", Rikki comes on to Jack by beginning to stroke his electric arm.

Is man any different from a machine ?

Ultimately, cyberpunk treats technology and its invasion of the body with a mixture of fear and awe : even as it promises to bring new power, capability, pleasure, longevity to (or freedom from) the body, it threatens to make the body, as well as the body's connection to "nature", obsolete. If our images of the body, within the whole of culture or specifically within cyberpunk fiction, are a sort of social mapping of identity, then what constitutes the real of the body ? Can our notions of what is unique and natural, in terms of bodies and desire from and for them, stand up to postmodern theory and the cyberpunk movement ? If we lift the map, is there anything underneath ?