

## The Story

The following semiotic analysis pertains to the 1995 critically acclaimed movie ‘The Ghost in the Shell’, directed by Mamoru Oshii and written by Kazunori Ito, based on the Manga of the same name by Shirow Masamune. Ito’s film explores the construction of identity in a cybernetically enhanced human world (or perhaps, an organically founded digital world), following a Japanese Government Cyborg Operative named Kusanagi, as she and her partner Batou track down a prolific hacker named ‘The Puppet Master’. Augmented cybernetic people inhabit this world, with an organic mind - the ‘ghost’ - an essence of consciousness, which is able to interact with a digital communications net through access points on the back of the head. The Puppet Master hacks into people’s bodies using this access point, creating ‘Puppets’ with constructed memories and motivations. Kusanagi arrests a number of these puppets throughout the film, but their memories of who they were before they were hacked have been permanently erased.

The hacker eventually possesses a 100% digital body constructed with no human parts, and is shortly after hit by a truck on a motorway. It is found and investigated, and a ‘ghost’ is detected within (assumed to be the hacker’s). The body awakes however during the investigation, and reveals itself to be a fully conscious AI created in a secret government project, not a hacker, demanding political asylum as a self-aware & conscious entity. Kusanagi witnesses this and plans to ‘dive’ into the body (to connect electronically to its mind) to verify that it has a consciousness (or a ‘ghost’ as they refer to it). Before she can do this, a separate government agency kidnaps the AI and Kusanagi pursues. After a long fight, she is able to connect to the body of the AI and enter into dialogue with it. The AI reveals that it wants to merge with Kusanagi, to create a new entity from both of their ‘DNA’. She obliges, and since both their bodies were badly damaged in the fighting, her partner Batou transfers the combined consciousness into a new body.

## The Name

This movie might have been called ‘Kusanagi’, ‘Section 9’, or a more direct reference to a present theme, and at a surface level, this is what the narrative is constructed from. But it is not about Kusanagi, nor the hacker, nor the organisation, or the Japanese Government; it is about ‘the Ghost’ inside ‘the shell’. It is an explicit reference to the famous work ‘The Ghost in the Machine’ by Arthur Koestler, a critique of mind-body duality. The ghost stands in the movie, as in the book, for the ‘mind’; the ‘shell’ metonymically stands for ‘the machine’. Throughout the movie cybernetic bodies are referred to as ‘shells’, and the corresponding ‘ghost’ animates the shell. Therefore, the configuration of ‘ghost’ in a ‘shell’ forms a person, symbolising an entity worthy of consciousness: an identity.

The Ghost in the Shell explicitly presents the construction of cybernetic identity through myths of birth, death, memory, experience, and humanism. It presents two narratives from which to draw symbolism – the evolution of Kusanagi’s identity, and the revelation of The Puppet Master as emergent being with desire and self. The goal of my analysis is to understand how people make sense of AI through anthropomorphism, attaching human metaphors to something essentially digital. I believe Kusanagi’s identity struggle throughout the movie, presented through explicit dialogue and visual symbolism, provides a rich text from which to build my understanding. While the latter might form a foundation for speculating on the identity that a purely artificial intelligence might develop, it does not provide me with as direct of an anthropomorphic myth as Kusanagi’s story.

## Kusanagi's birth – opening credits



Kusanagi's narrative symbolises a complete life – beginning with Kusanagi's birth, then her life as fulfilment of duty, a struggle with identity, reproduction, then death and rebirth. Anybody familiar with Donna Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto' will immediately recognise her proposed Cyborg myth manifested in the story's main protagonist. The movie begins, aptly, with Kusanagi's birth – though not her human birth. Rather it is her construction as a

Cyborg, in a three-minute sequence immediately following the opening scene. The audience is met with a limp cybernetic frame hung by wires, human muscles and a mechanical skeleton organised into plates. This frame has no identifiable features and instead signifies the raw inanimate building blocks of a cyborg. The negation of the skin signifies to the viewer a Frankensteinian incompleteness – the 'shell' without the ghost, a vessel ready to be occupied.

The next shot sees the cyborg drifting towards a more human resemblance – now with panelled synthetic covering, rising through the surface of a fluid, emerging finally with smooth human skin. This is the first shot of many in the sequence where the shell is seen suspended in fluid, contributing an amniotic connotation to the meaning of the sequence as a 'birth'. The scenes imagery is intercut with a digital mirror showing a green render on a black background; signifying not only the birth of the physical cyborg body but the digital, cybernetic soul – the shell and the ghost.

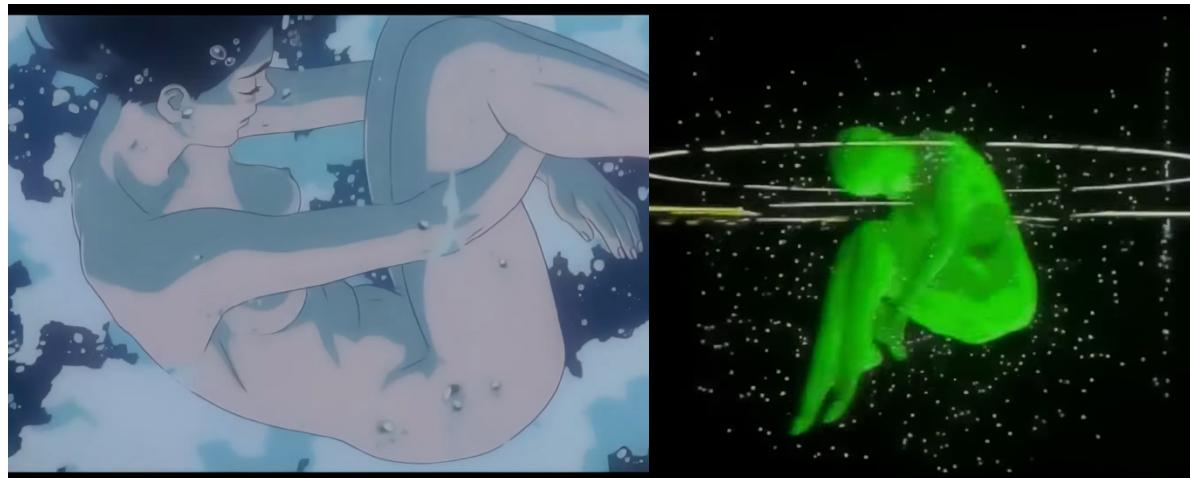
This oppositional imagery (flesh vs digital) reflects Haraway's dream of digital feminine identity as detached from the female form, born from information. We also see however, in this scene and throughout the movie, Kusanagi with exaggerated and intentionally sexualised female features, which runs counter to the intention behind Haraway's manifesto.



This tension speaks to our conception of artificial identity, and how we as humans may eventually make sense of a cybernetic self. It is fundamentally the clashing of narratives, deep assumptions of origin, experience and transience and what these might mean for a digital being. The overt sexualisation of Kusanagi speaks to the polysemic nature of signs. It represents the culturally approved practice of objectification of the female body, and thus its foregrounding as a valid method of constructing Kusanagi's identity. In this sense, I believe it symbolises an identity narrative that the film is actually trying to escape – the cinematographic choices, such as shots frequently viewing Kusanagi from below, run counter to the often-submissive presentation of women in popular media. The writing throughout the film also presents Kusanagi as particularly emotionless, commanding and high ranking; also not traits that are typically assigned to femininity in popular media.

Thus, the shots in this sequence, and through the rest of the film, find themselves at a crossroads of oppositional syntagms; one stream representing a progressive identity myth that could move us beyond the typical body-centric depiction of feminine identity in media, and another that reinforces this same objectifying narrative. This opposition typifies the struggle we face in transformational reconfigurations of narrative and identity, in that we are bound to construct stories, even highly novel ones, from the stories we already know. The movie attempts to present the birth of Kusanagi's cybernetic self through mythology drawn from Haraway's essay<sup>1</sup>, but falls short of detaching from dominant narratives symbolising female identity.

We therefore understand the AI and the cybernetically enhanced human through established narratives, assigning it identities drawn from our history of experience with similar life forms. Thus, while AI offers us an opportunity to understand intelligent selfhood beyond an embodied experience, 'The Ghost in the Shell' shows how we still frame identity not only through a narrative of emerging sentience ('the ghost'), but also its relation to its body ('the shell'). Whether or not we are capable of understanding a virtual-non-human-intelligent self without the mind/body lens is a question only the future will be able to answer.



<sup>1</sup> In the 2004 sequel, *The Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*, a supporting character is named "Haraway", aiding the hypothesis that Oshii was aware of her essay.

APPENDIX – Frames from the rest of the sequence.





