

## The Cyborg Paradigm as seen in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and Cindy Sherman's *Untitled*

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The image of the cyborg proposed by Donna Haraway in her essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,”<sup>1</sup> is not of the actual machine-organism hybrid itself, but rather of its concept, which embraces the ambiguity of various boundaries prevalent in the modern world. Because of its post-modern appeal, the cyborg paradigm has been an exceedingly popular theme of choice for various creators in the late twentieth century. James Cameron and Cindy Sherman are two prime examples of such artists, and though their works differ greatly in medium and in their interpretations of the paradigm, they are equally valid and consequential for the viewer. The “cyborg-ness” of the Terminators in Cameron’s *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) is indisputable; Schwarzenegger himself defines a Terminator as a cybernetic organism. On the other hand, whether the figure in Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled* (1992) is a Haraway-ian cyborg or not is more questionable, as she is strictly speaking neither a machine nor an organism. However, she is an inorganic mass assuming organic form, and her presentation contests socio-cultural and physical conventions – and in that context, her “cyborg-ness” is validated.

In both works, the artist visually presents to us how their cyborgs both reaffirm and defy human conventions. Cyborgs are a human creation and thus operate within our social reality, but at the same time they are immune to the limitations that constrain us

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<sup>1</sup> Haraway, Donna. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991. 149-181.

humans. They are indeed “disturbingly lively,” and in contrast the humans appear “frighteningly inert.” With its confrontational attitude magnified by the vibrant color choices in lighting, Sherman’s image of the distorted figure is indeed both disturbing and lively in a very perverse way, confusing the boundaries between the organic and the inorganic. The contrast is even more manifest in *Terminator 2*; as the film sets its premises, the cyborgs jump straight into action while their human counterparts remain inert, immobile and inefficient. Sarah Connor is confined to a mental institution for violating social standards, John Connor is a helpless adolescent ignorant of his fate, and Dyson is trapped in the myriad of his newly found power.

The boundaries that define our existence and control our actions do not pertain to cyborgs. In *Terminator 2*, the cyborgs are actively defying all such limits by their very existence. They defy time by traveling through it to alter history. They defy space as they constantly form and reform themselves in response to given circumstances. They defy life, since they are not organic and thus can act without the innate fear of death. Most importantly, they defy gender, as they are creatures of the post-gender world; they have detached themselves from the sexual process of organic reproduction. Although both Schwarzenegger and T-1000 assume white male personas in the film, this is merely for convenience in fulfilling their mission, and they are in essence neither male nor female; the categorization is in fact irrelevant. Below the superficial layer of appearance, they are machines that can take on either male or female roles if situations may so demand, as T-1000 repeatedly does during his pursuit of John Connor. It is important to note, however, that the preferred physical form of T-1000 is a white male officer, at once possessing the power, the status and the universality dominating our culture today.

Cindy Sherman's cyborg is also liberated from such limitations, but not actively so as Cameron's cyborgs are. Rather than negating them completely, her cyborg both accepts and often violently challenges the elusiveness of such boundaries. The cyborg is very much aware of its audience who is observing this conflict, and her conscience elicits the viewer to ponder how they relate to their own precincts. Being a photograph, the image must exist within our reality – but everything about it counters our preconceived notion of time, space, life and gender. No indication of time or place is given, and the viewers are startled to see a head where they expect to see genitalia. It is a direct commentary on the female gender, but by objectifying the female body and ridiculing the gaze, it has temporarily negated the role pertaining to the female sex. Her exposed genitalia have sexual connotations, but their obvious fakeness in fact denies her sexuality and her potential to reproduce.

If cyborgs are not about reproduction, then they are about regeneration. Sherman's cyborg cannot reproduce, but is able to regenerate itself indefinitely, as she is nothing more than a compilation of replaceable limbs. Cameron also places much emphasis on the regenerative quality of the cyborg, as the viewer repeatedly serves witness to the regeneration and reconstruction processes of T-1000's "injuries." His regenerated limb is undeniably "monstrous, duplicated, potent." At the same time, the film is about the regeneration of the human race; we too are cyborgs in the sense that we have been profoundly injured and are seeking regeneration, not rebirth, in the form of a savior, John Connor. We are responsible for our machines, and we refuse to be dominated or threatened by them.

By negating the fundamental promise of organic life and thus refuting the Christian doctrine of Creation, cyborgs are quintessentially blasphemous. By not only creating an imitation of the human form but also distorting it, Sherman has assumed the role of Creator, as the humans have done in creating Terminators. But because they have established their blasphemy, cyborgs are entitled to mock the Father's ubiquity and spirituality, as physically represented by the formless quality of T-1000's fluid form. Machines are ether – they are everywhere, they are invisible, and their miniaturization has given them unconditional power. The foremost threats in the film are deceptively diminutive, be it T-1000's liquid droplets or the cyborg microchip. Consequently, in order to counter the revolt of the mock-God, John and Sarah Connor are likewise required to embrace blasphemy and to overturn the predestined fate of the human race. Their presentations of their cyborg paradigm may appear drastically dissimilar, but fundamentally, it is clear that Cameron and Sherman share similar views of the paradigm and its implications. In both of their works, the cyborg is an inorganic entity assuming the physical form of an organism, freed from conventions to explore the boundaries between human and animal, the organic and inorganic, and the physical and the non-physical. All such qualities lead to the appraisal of the cyborg as the blessed manifestation of postmodernist theory, and its ambiguity is what continues to captivate us today.