A Struggle to Preserve the "Self" in *Ghost in the Shell* (1995)

Or, *"The Ghost in the Mirror"*

By Ernesto M. Zamudio

I was ignorant as to what OSHII Mamoru was aiming to achieve the first time I watched *Ghost in the Shell (1995)* as a teenager. Having recently rewatched this film and becoming enraptured in the presentation of complex and unfiltered philosophical ideas, and the critique of the relationship between technology and "humanity." All of which contained within a paradoxical depiction of a not-so-distant cyberpunk image of Hong Kong; conditions described as gritty and dilapidated characteristic "low life," while simultaneously illuminated the impoverished streets with glistening lights of the "high tech." This notion created the defining characteristics of a traditional cyberpunk nightmare that both allurs and frightens us. Throughout my rewatch of this film, I was unable to get my mind off the main conflict; it was not in the capture of the Puppet Master, rather, the internal struggle of Major Mokoto Kusanagi and her persistent questioning of her identity. After her conversation with Batou on the boat after her late-night dive, I have been unable to get my mind off the ideas she presented with such a stern expression.

Batou begins by rhetorically asking Mokoto if she ever wished to quit Section 9. This prompts her to pose the transhumanistic question of "how much of your body is owned by you" if the majority of its inner workings are entirely man-made. Meaning, she is asking if it is essential to regard your physical body as a part of your identity, or if it is simply a secondary factor. In a transhumanist society in which we sign away our organic bodies to corporations to customize, what would separate us from the very technology that was aided to construct us? Do the components define the self, since our consciousness relies on the familiarity of the body to define itself, or is the Ghost inside our mind the root out ourselves as an individual. In other words, are we the sum of our parts?

To further investigate the reasoning as to why we humans restrict ourselves, we can begin to question why we place such importance on our organic bodies. I've posed a similar question to many close acquaintances since rewatching the film, seeing the different perspectives they might provide me. However, at the heart of all their justifications, the answer was always the same. Humans want to be "organic." Be it for theological reasonings, or simply because they are comfortable with the status quo. The familiarity with the body we possess is intrinsically tied to our definition of "human" we each have created. We call our friend a "friend" because we have mutually agreed on such a title. A "friend" loosely defined as "a close companion," but ask

anyone, and you will get variations in their definitions. The same line of thinking can be applied to how humans bind the "self" to their living breathing body, and to a greater extent, the organic materials which make it up.

We are connected to this body because we use it to interface with the world in a way that makes sense to us. The way we see colors, hear sounds and touch objects are all projected to us in the only way we have ever understood the world. The introduction of a new interfacing device would be a hard pill to swallow for some. There is no knowing how well the cyborg components will align with our pre-existing knowledge of how we perceive the world, and if we could accept such a change. Many whom I talked with seemed to have been adverse to the idea of transhumanism because they wished to avoid becoming a machine. This is the "Ego of Humanity," in which humans wish to elevate themselves above the machines they've created, as an attempt to separate the two. Definitions of "consciousness" are consistently being reworked with every advancement in artificial intelligence, and many are receiving cybernetics already in the form of prosthetic limbs. The lines between man and machine have already begun to blur, so where do we draw our line in the sand?

The reason Batou asked if Mokoto would ever quit Section 9 was to figure out how she felt about her cyborg body, since she was entirely composed of inorganic cybernetic parts specialize for her work, unlike himself. Batou must have felt that incorporating so many specific cybernatic cusomtizations would be akin to selling his identity, since it would essentially mean living with a complete reliance on Section 9 for maintenance of said parts. However, the Major is evolving her understanding of the definition of "self" and is becoming increasingly more abstract, explaining the parts as the ingredients which build her conscience.

"All components that make up me, as an individual"

There are countless ingredients that are used to define the self, as Mokoto explains. "A face and voice to distinguish oneself from others. The hand you see when you wake up, your childhood memories and feelings about your future." However, despite having a personal definition of her identity, she is unable to move past a "boundary" which restricts her, this is her humanity. In the end while speaking with Project-2501, he tells her "...your longing to remain yourself will continue to restrict you." Despite Motoko believing that she is a cyborg, she is undeniably human.

There was a scene in an elevator where when talking with Batou, Motoko expressed doubt about the existence of human cells in her cybernetic brain. Here, she is questioning if it's even possible to prove that she is human, or if she is entirely a machine. Batou disregards her musings and tells her that nobody is able to see their brain to confirm this. This is because he believes that appearing as human and acting as one is enough to be treated as such. To analyze Batou's logic a bit further, I think what he really means is that it is unnecessary to question the validity of your humanity if you can even pose the question to yourself. "Ergo cogito sum" -- I think, therefore I am. Becoming sentient is enough to prove existence. However, this

film presents the quandary with an increased amount of grap-area where robots are appearing just as human as their creators. The mental hangup intrinsically tied with the question of humanity is a very human problem; those wishing to define themselves as human are most likely human because they are unable to separate themselves with what they most wish to remain as. The Major was initially unable to move past this barrier because she was doubting her humanity, but the irony lies within the likelihood that this was only a mental hang up because she was human. Restricting herself to remain static in an attempt to preserve her understanding of her identity as "human" is inherently paradoxical. Standing against the tide of evolution and progression is holding her humanity back. She wished to remain as an image of herself that she was familiar with, but the truth is that people are not static beings. Humans are constantly shifting emotions and constantly evolving. Motoko had been hung up on preserving her false image of her human identity that ultimately restricted her progress, thus making her less human. Project-2501 speaks to her: "And your longing to remain yourself will restrict you." Forcing yourself to be a non-changing being will restrict your humanity, and as such you will be unable to be human. Ironically, Motoko's doubting of her own humanity led to her living as the thing she least wanted to become.

"Now, it's like we're looking through a mirror. And what we see is a dim image"

In the video game Soma, the big reveal mid-game is that the main character learns he is simply a copy of himself using a robotic body. This plot development was ingeniously weaved into the gameplay mechanics with the usage of carefully withholding information. The entire game up until the reveal, we assume we are playing as a human. From the beginning, even in a completely different location, we never once question that we were still human. We took this fact for granted and instead focused on uncovering mysteries to figure out what happened and survive the horror of the situation. The question this game was bringing to the table was "are you still human if you no longer have a human body?" I believe so, our humanity is defined by our "Ghost." The Ghost is our conscience as explained by Mokoto in the 1995 film; it is our soul and our sense of self. It consists of the thoughts, feelings and memories that define us as ourselves, and are entirely unique to us. Some may argue that memories are what define us, and I agree since memories are building blocks that establish our self. They establish our morals, emotions and experience. Returning to *Ghost in the Shell,* when Project-2501 explains that they have memories and are a sentient machine, it is acceptable that they exist. Those memories formed their experience, and they possessed a Ghost despite being a machine. Humans easily accept that notion that memories are contained within our brains. However, in the advent of a technological singularity, we have trouble processing the possibility to consider data as memories, despite being comparable collections of information. In that regard, a machine that recognizes data as memories can use it to establish themselves as a sentient being.

At the opening of the film, we are presented with an idea; "even if electrons and light flow freely amongst computer networks and said networks eclipse the stars, countries and races are not yet obsolete." This is because humans have not and may never be willing to discard these

archaic structures to move past human boundaries. We wander along these pre-defined lines but never cross them because humans are unwilling to cease being what they are already familiar with. We have established societies, governments, countries and alliances for millennia as if to play by the rulebook. These rules have since retroactively been used to define modern humans. Even after technology has eclipsed the stars, we will never cease to be human, even if our defining of such shifts. The Major had trouble processing the possibility that she might not be human because she doubted her humanity, and as such, she ironically became less human. Humans progress, and even if the image of humanity is completely different in a century, we will still define ourselves as humans. So, is *Ghost in the Shell* arguing for or against humanism? Quite frankly I can't really answer that. I feel as if the film is less about choosing a side and more about presenting these ideas to get people thinking more critically about how they define themselves. Afterall, the question posed is inherently ambiguous. The ideas are presented on a stage of the future, yet illuminated by philosophical quandaries which have plagued humanity from its inception.