

The Mechanics of Engenderneering

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THE MECHANICS OF ENGENDERNEERING: CYBORGS AND ALIENS AS MANUFACTURED EVIL IN SCIENCE-FICTION FILM

This essay examines a process called engenderneering, which can be understood as personification with a twist: the investiture of non-human entities with a gendered identity. Science fiction films, despite their futuristic settings, often associate gender markers with assignments of moral value. Manufactured life forms such as robots and cyborgs highlight the extent that gender markers serve as necessary or sufficient determinants of an entity's value. Aliens, although not bound to human gender constraints, still tend to retain explicit, conventional signs of gender. To avoid projecting the negative associations of femininity into the future, perhaps science fiction narratives could transcend gender as a two-valued concept.

The American novelist Ursula LeGuin raised a question whether gender was necessary to define an entity as human. To answer this question, LeGuin created in *The Left Hand of Darkness* the hermaphroditic race known as the Gethenians. By removing the markers of gender that are considered static, essential, and definitive, LeGuin sought to "define the area that is shared by men and women alike" (1976, p. 133). Much of the human protagonist's character development in *The Left Hand of Darkness* centers upon his struggle to orient himself among beings whose gender is flexible rather than permanently imposed and recognizable. By permeating the boundaries between male and female, LeGuin hypothesizes a world less alienated from itself because it does not suffer the reverberations of the rupture between masculinity and femininity. Far from a utopia, however, Gethen is rife with intrigue and rivalries. The removal of gender separation has failed to remove the "struggle for dominance" that should have been transformed into "a search for balance" (LeGuin, 1976, pp. 138-139). The pessimistic message to be gleaned from LeGuin's hypothetical erasure of gender is that dominance and exploitation are rooted in humanity per se. Another message, however, may be that any attempts to render gender irrelevant or invisible encounter barriers that are difficult to surmount.

The cyborg and the alien are figures that problematize rather than transcend gender distinctions and expectations. At times, the American scholar Donna Haraway echoes the LeGuin's optimism, casting the cyborg as the featured "creature in a post-gender world," abandoning the threats to "organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity" (Haraway, 1991, p. 150). In more sober moments of reflection, however, Haraway treats the cyborg as the paradigmatic case of negotiating boundaries or building identities that are static enough for individuation yet flexible enough to permit functioning in different circumstances. The problem cyborgs raise is that of the "floating signifier" (Haraway, 1991, p. 153), with multiple and sometimes conflicting identities that must be negotiated by the subject and by whomever it encounters. Just as an elderly woman of color simultaneously traverses various categories of identity based on her age, gender, and/or race, the cyborg functions both as a human and a machine (cf. Haraway, 1991, p. 155). Sometimes the demands of being human conflict with the imperatives of the machine, or vice versa. This human vs. mechanical conflict was a recurrent theme in the original *Star Trek* series, which embodied and internalized the tension between heart and mind in the tortured human/Vulcan Spock. Not coincidentally, Spock was a mixed-race character, and he had the most difficult time integrating his two "sides." The challenge posed by the cyborg becomes "how to craft a poetic/political unity without relying on a logic of appropriation, incorporation, and taxonomic identification" (Haraway, 1991, p. 157).

The alien offers important insights into how to approach a non-oppressive negotiation of identities. When humans encounter a radical Other, how might this interaction lead to outcomes aside from destruction or subjugation? The film *Starship Troopers* (1997) answers this question quite simply: the Others will be outsmarted, massacred, and their leader captured to become a guinea pig. Twenty years earlier, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) suggested that other options may exist even when the radical Other remains mysterious. This paper explores the ways that the relationships between aliens (the non-human), cyborgs (the quasi-human), and humans are negotiated via science fiction film in ways that tend to preserve and retrench the fissures between genders and the idea that humans and machines are irreconcilably different.

Vivian Sobchack (1987) observes that science fiction film as a genre shoulders as its "distinctive generic task the cognitive mapping and poetic figuration of social relations as they are constituted and changed by new technological modes of being-in-the-world" (p. 102). It is therefore appropriate to look toward science fictions films when investigating how alien life forms and synthetic versions of humans affect and reflect operant assumptions regarding gender. Several more precise questions arise from technologically catalyzed reconsiderations of gender roles. How does the functional and aesthetic engineering of artificial life (robots, cyborgs) affect how such entities are treated and used by humans? What physical and behavioral markers of gender do alien life forms borrow or transform from humans? How might the configuration of gender as incidental rather than natural alter the understanding of gender?

The term *engenderneering* signifies the denaturalization of gender differences. In contrast to the developmental process of realizing and stabilizing one's gender through socialization, engenderneering highlights the deliberate, voluntary assignment of gender identity to objects or beings that do not fit into predetermined gender categories. Engenderneering offers a reminder that gender identity is subject to reexamination and renegotiation. This constant, reflexive critique differentiates engenderneering from gender as a component of human identity, as Figure 1 demonstrates.

Figure 1. How Engenderneering Operates

Engenderneering

Non-human (applied to machines or aliens)

Engendering

Human

Engenderneering

Gender has functional value tied to task performance

Engendering

Gender has social and aesthetic value tied to collective values

Engenderneering

Objects/beings are invested with gender

Engendering

Objects/beings discover their gender

Engenderneering

Gender is assigned or designed (acquired)

Engendering

Gender is part of natural development

Engenderneering conjoins mechanization with sexuality, calling into question how social bonds are established and reinforced when human value systems no longer occupy center stage. The engenderneering process also highlights how humans participate in actively constructing gender rather than merely observing gender as already constructed and "there" as inseparable from an entity's essence.

Technology and Gender

Instead of the familiar axes of "progressive" or "destructive," technology's connection with gender raises questions more akin to disruption than to teleological goods or evils. For example, in *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), when the Borg Queen familiarizes Data with "physical forms of pleasure" after activating his emotion chip, the question is less whether it was "good for" either of them, but to what extent sexual acts are possible among machines and how such an experience could be conceived in human terms. The matter has more than academic importance. Sobchack (1987) observes: "Indeed, in a decade when organ transplants and remarkable prosthetic devices are common-place, we are (for better or worse) theorizing our bodies, ourselves, as cyborgs" (p. 109). Hayles (1995) estimates that ten percent of the United States population qualify as cyborgs because they have various types of implants (e.g., breast implants), prosthetics, and mechanical enhancements (e.g., pacemakers). Of course, Donna Haraway (1991) foregrounded the cyborg image with its gender-related baggage.

Positioned as partially or derivatively human, the cyborg serves as a fitting metaphor for the negotiation

of feminine identity. Hayles (1995) attributes the power of the cyborg to its status as both a metaphor and a physically realizable entity. The cyborg acquires potency because it epitomizes existence in the fissures between identities (human-machine), a condition experienced commonly in multicultural society (e.g., African-Americans and other hyphenated identities) when multiple identities sometimes exist in tension (cf. DuBois, 1903/1995). As a construction not entirely constrained by its creators, the cyborg calls into question the ways that human identity is established and maintained. The figure of the cyborg also problematizes who defines entities that blur the boundaries between familiar, inflexible categories. The woman as cyborg must reconcile her identity as woman with her identity as human when the two categories diverge. Gender issues more generally invoke the cyborg image when gender identity is involved. Transgendered people, for example, must shift their identities to fit established gender categories or try to manufacture additional categories that traverse existing boundaries between genders (International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy, 1997).

Many types of mechanical incursions into human life are possible. Figure 2 illustrates several possible modes of bodily intervention, which may be biological, mechanical, or behavioral (Armstrong, 1998, p. 6). The resultant combination of human and machine is a somewhat uneasy interface between not only the components but the values associated with organism and mechanism. Tim Armstrong (1998, p. 78) calls this combinatory process *mechanomorphism*, the transformation of what could be considered human by incorporating mechanical adjuncts. Perhaps most notable among the logically possible mechanical transformations is the distinction between negative prosthesis, which covers a lack or replaces what is missing, and positive prosthesis which extends human abilities (Armstrong, 1998, p. 78). The gender implications of mechanical "adjustments" are enormous. If femininity is tied to organic identity as a woman, then the association of the feminine with the inferior, inefficient, or undesirable implies that such "flaws" can be engineered away or at least minimized with proper foresight. But plans can go awry, and flawed prosthesis may raise doubts about optimistic industrial progressivism (Armstrong, 1998, pp. 79-80), where machines were considered the salvation of the body. The relationship between human and machine has not only been questioned but reversed. Human capacities are now measured by the yardstick of mechanical performance, as in Frederick Taylor's "scientific" theory of industrial productivity and efficiency.

The replicants in *Blade Runner* exemplify the android as Doppelgänger (Francavilla, 1991). The Doppelgänger operates by wavering between radical difference from the original and enough similarity to the original to threaten imposture or displacement (Francavilla, 1991, p. 7). Androids, cyborgs, and aliens confront humanity with externalized versions of conflicts that simmer within themselves, one of the more notable being the opposition between male and female. To explore the negotiation of relations between these opposing tendencies serves to clarify the formation of human identity - as well as how humans view "Outsiders." The Doppelgänger forces consideration of how apparently contradictory traits or identities within the same being can be reconciled.

The lure of bodily enhancement stems from a pessimistic sense of the body besieged by internal and external threats. Tim Armstrong (1998) traces such a justification for bodily alteration to the late 1910s and continuing for decades. This Darwinist defensiveness parallels fears of racial pollution from immigrant blood, a terror articulated in the racist writing of Madison Grant (1916). While the threats to the blood stemmed from alien racial stock, the threats to the body came from perceived environmental pollutants or malfunctioning bodily processes.

Mechanical Monsters

The monstrosity of the cyborg may lie in its violation of the human developmental life cycle (Hayles, 1995). Since cyborgs typically have no childhood per se, they do not evolve organically. While a machine endowed with artificial intelligence may learn, its increased cognition carries connotations of being unearned and therefore illegitimate by human standards. With the exception of IBM programmers and cadres of computer enthusiasts, the Big Blue and Deep Blue chess playing computers were cast as the evil antagonists of their human opponents. Approximately two-thirds of more than 1,000 respondents to a CNET poll chose chess champion Gary Kasparov as the ultimate winner, reflecting his status as a sentimental favorite even though he eventually lost the match (Black, 1997).

Figure 2. The Mechanomorphic Matrix

Objective

body enhancement

Means of Achievement

improve appearance or function of body

Examples

implants, cosmetic surgery (e.g., calf implants for bodybuilders, breast augmentation)

- body replacement
- restoration of missing or damaged body parts;
- negative prosthesis (Armstrong, 1998, p. 78)
- organ transplants, prosthetic limbs

- body extension
- expanding the capacity of the body
- performance enhancing drugs (cf. *Altered States*)

- body substitution
- leaving one's own body, or inhabiting the body of another
- downloading consciousness (cf. *Neuromancer*)

- body mimicry
- camouflaging the inorganic as the organic
- Doppelgänger (cf. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*)

- body relief
- delegating physical tasks to machines
- automation

- escape from the body
- removing physical limitations to action; replacing one's physical body with a surrogate body
- virtual reality (cf. *Lawnmower Man*)

Tetsuo: The Iron Man (1988) could qualify as the ultimate mechanistic violation not only of the human life cycle but of human aesthetics. Sexuality acquires an eerie, disturbing edge as the film fuses sexual encounters with mechanical mutations. An erotic scene turns brutal when the main character's penis transforms into a whirling sewer screw more capable of evisceration than stimulation. This surrealistic pastiche of grotesque graftings of random metallic parts onto a human frame ends with a violent and homoerotic encounter between two males simultaneously transforming into machines. They meld their metallic parts together, forming a single patchwork vehicle. They reaffirm the transgressiveness of their union by defiantly vowing: "Together, we can turn this f...ing world to rust!" Both heterosexual and homosexual liaisons become monstrous to the extent that the bodily manipulations transform into conjunctions of randomly grafted body parts. Instead of lovers exploring the unique contours of each other's bodies, sensuality vanishes as the metallic parts have no necessary connection to the bodies they are grafted onto. Sexuality becomes a reassemblage, a stimulus for rearrangement that bears little resemblance to sexual stimulation. In *Tetsuo* and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), bodily extensions and enhancements spill over into bodily distortions. The machine/man in *Tetsuo* watches his own body with horror as it grows new mechanical appendages and sheds old ones. Edward can use his hands to sculpt shrubbery, but he also repeatedly injures himself. In neither case does the altered body seem able to control or cope with its supposed enhancements. Even when the body is organically whole, it is "both familiar and radically self-estranged" (Armstrong, 1998, p. 104).

The mechanistic threat to humanity may derive from the interchangeability of manufactured parts, the frightful Athena-like birth of fully functional components that can be detached from their surroundings and discarded when obsolete. Herein lies the true mechanistic nightmare. Humans fear the day when their individuality becomes questionable, when "my bodypart" or "my mind" loses its possessive and becomes one of many that can be selected and incorporated. While the ultimate human horror might have been possession (cf. *The Exorcist*, 1973), mechanistic encroachments on humanity raise the spectre of dispossession, rendering "mine" into a detached (and perhaps detachable) "that." At what point, then, does the individual itself become as disposable as its manufactured components? The legacies of cyberpunk, germ line engineering,

prosthetics, and other technologies designed to enhance human capabilities has been to reverse the human-machine relation. The older question of the role machines would play in a human universe now has become the question of when and whether unmodified humans are viable (Hayles, 1995).

A similar set of considerations applies to monstrous alien life. In *Aliens* (1986), Ripley, although not biologically the mother of the founding child Newt, legitimizes her motherhood by an adoption of choice. Ripley decides to mother the lone child, while the alien queen is a gigantic birth machine, methodically laying eggs that hatch indistinguishable larvae. The alien queen, although organic, becomes a machine because her motherhood is solely mechanical. The alien's reproductive process is objectified and obscene because it uses human hosts merely as reproductive vessels to house the larvae. This angle on reproduction also could problematize the long-standing understanding of women as receptacles of sperm and vessels that contain the developing fetus. As a birthing machine, the alien queen represents "the mapping of assembly zones onto life cycle narratives" (Hayles, 1995, p. 334). The confrontations between Ripley and the alien queen embody the conflict between human parenthood and mechanistic replication. This confrontation between human and non-human continues a theme Kavanagh (1990) finds in the original *Alien* film. Ripley is "reinvested with femininity" (Newton, 1990, p. 86) when her female body emerges toward the end of the film as she undresses to enter the sleep chamber (cf. Creed, 1990, p. 140). Her sensual body sharply contrasts with the nonhuman robot Ash, whose only relation to sexuality or gender is his attempt to jam a rolled men's magazine down Ripley's throat, a violent forced entry. The alien is anti-human not only by virtue of its attacks on humans, but its very blood is acid that corrodes humans. Kavanagh (1990) considers the victory of the strong women in *Alien* a synecdoche for the triumph of humans over non- and anti-human forces. The ability to maintain her sexually alluring appearance and touchingly sensitive devotion to her cat, however, renders Ripley as the embodiment of traditional femininity. "Impulsive, nurturing, and sexually desirable, she is not so threatening to men after all" (Newton, 1990, p. 87).

Emasculating the Other

Interestingly, despite the gender issues that seem to permeate science fiction film, sexuality per se is largely obscured (Sobchack, 1985). The few cases of female protagonists mask sexual identity whenever possible. The role of Ripley in *Alien* was written originally for a man (Sobchack, 1985), and Ripley proves herself more aggressive and combat-ready than Marines (*Aliens*, 1986) or hardcore criminals (*Alien3*, 1992). In *Contact* (1997), Dr. Ellie Arroway pursues her dream as a scientific researcher with SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) by abandoning her love affair, retaining the traditional idea that women must choose between love and a career. If Sobchack correctly estimates the dearth of biological sexuality in science fiction films, then such repression may signal that sexual identity itself is circumvented in this medium. That conclusion would be hasty. Sexual identity is present, but it tends to be transmuted into social constructions of gender that relate as much (if not more) to machines and aliens as to humans.

In *E.T.* (1982), the first question young Gertie poses regarding the adopted alien raises the gender issue: "Is [E.T.] a boy or a girl?" Presumably, Gertie cannot experience an anthropomorphized form of life without the interpretive filter of gender roles. Just as creation in Genesis was dualistic, human re-creation of the first experience with human-like aliens preserves gender roles and expectations. E.T., however, bears all the signifiers of child-like, emasculated vulnerability while exhibiting some aspects of the patriarchal constructions he contradicts.

Physically androgynous yet paternal in function, adult, wise, and wizened, yet an innocent, childish, little 'wise guy': technologically and personally powerful, yet a vulnerable little victim of circumstance - E.T. physically escapes traditional patriarchal form *without* yielding traditional patriarchal power, and thus is able to reside in (terrestrial) domestic space and serve as Elliot's surrogate father. (Sobchack, 1991, p. 20; emphasis in original.) The masculine sexual markers E.T. does bear pose no threat because they are not employed to dominate or destroy others. The glowing phallic finger (Sobchack, 1991, p. 21) offers a healing touch and signifies warm affection; the extendable neck, far from a penetration device, allows E.T. to communicate with others at eye level and thus interact more as an equal.

Sobchack (1991) observes that the aliens in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* are physically child-like and "completely androgynous" (p. 17). The technological superiority of de-gendered aliens serves as a critique of the militaristic, macho patriarchy that is rendered helpless and therefore child-like in their presence.

The loss of gender markers and disruption of the traditionally "proper" sphere of influence threaten the patriarchy against which the aliens are juxtaposed. Sobchack adds that some science fiction films highlight the tension between gender-free aliens and gender-bound humans. When confronted with the prospect of complete physical alteration, thereby losing familiar markers of gender, Dr. Eddie Jessup in *Altered States* recoils. Devolving from sexually promiscuous male university professor to ape-like savage might promise the ultimate journey to macho savagery. After almost dying from his own experiments, however, Jessup must be nurtured back to physical and psychological health by his estranged wife. He ultimately retreats from and renounces the "'hideous nothingness' which annihilates the difference upon which patriarchy is based" (Sobchack, 1991, p. 20).

The human/machine distinctions discussed so far should not be interpreted as bifurcations, although many films seem bent on magnifying and absolutizing the gulf between them. *The Terminator* (1984), for example, grants the possibility that humans and machines may be indistinguishable (Penley, 1991). *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) further blurs the boundaries of the human by showing the original Terminator developing a relationship with young John Connor. The Terminator becomes more and more human, to the point that John's mother trusts him as a protective surrogate father. Penley (1991) further observes that while sex per se is relatively absent in science fiction films, the differences between the sexes are displaced by relentless explorations of the differences along two other axes: human/alien and human/cyborg (p. 72). But in these cases, the differences are magnified and absolutized in ways that entrench the non-human's status as the Radical Other. So even if sex is not treated explicitly, issues of sexuality still emerge in how machines and aliens can function and be identified as masculine or feminine (Penley, 1991, pp. 71-72).

Care-ful Aliens

Instead of serving as sexual objects, Sobchack (1987) claims that aliens in recent science fiction films provide an opportunity to exercise human ethics of "care for Others" or "benevolent indifference" toward a radical Other (p. 105). Certainly this point receives support in the Prime Directive of the *Star Trek* universe: Do not interfere with alien cultures. The paradigmatic case of mutual care between alien and human, of course, is *E.T.* (1982). Thoroughly impotent sexually, E.T. is non-threatening, a pure caretaker who in his turn must receive care from his surrogate family (Sobchack, 1985). To the extent that E.T. both cares for Elliott and receives care from him, he is at home despite distance from his home planet. The resident alien, even when residence is temporary, finds a place among humans insofar as the alien finds a place in their hearts. The aliens in such situations thus are not alienated emotionally, despite their inexplicable oddities. The ethic of care exhibited and encouraged by benign visitors such as those in *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) or *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) mitigates physical or cultural dissimilarities by highlighting emotional commonalities with humans. Mayeroff (1971) explains this phenomenon of belonging as it relates to care: "In the sense in which intelligibility means being at home in the world, we are ultimately at home not through dominating or explaining or appreciating things, but through caring and being cared for" (p. 76).

A distinction between "humans born of women and metahumans manufactured by men" (Barr, 1991, p. 26) in *Blade Runner* reverses the ethic of care. In the case of replicants, the hierarchy of human vs. machine is far fuzzier than the human/alien dynamic in *Alien*. The human characters in *Blade Runner* have an almost somnambulistic shallowness, living as emotionally deprived automatons. Deckard has no compunction about his mercenary destruction of replicants, and it takes the replicant Rachael to extract empathy and tenderness from him. The non-human evokes an ethic of care, but the emotional range displayed by replicants often far surpasses that of humans. In many ways, especially seen in replicant Roy Batty's moving retrospective monologue about his own life, the replicants exhibit far more humanity than the supposedly human characters (Francavilla, 1991). Batty even displays mercy toward Deckard, rescuing his own nemesis.

The ethic of care associated with aliens has a darker side. Such universal imperatives as caring or non-maleficence apply only to aliens that qualify as human enough to dilute their status as radical Others. Unqualified caring might be a necessary but perhaps not a sufficient condition for treating someone or something as they wish to be treated. One of the more menacing qualities of the Borg in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is their insatiable desire to assimilate other life forms, a ruthless sort of caring for the Borg collective that reduces other beings to usable information and spare parts. The instrumental (both in the technological and the moral sense) value the Borg place on life acquires feminine overtones with the appearance of the Borg Queen in *First Contact* (1996). Evoking primal castration fears, she toys with the

males she straps to her examination table. With her modular heads and bodies, the Borg Queen becomes the archetypal female manipulator, using men without maintaining a consistent physical identity of her own.

Perhaps the greatest disruption of human relational assumptions stems from the difficulty of conceptualizing - and of course realizing - a symmetrical human relation with a non-human. Non-humans are often simply the unidentifiable Other, and their categorization as a collectivity thwarts personal contact. The typical relational dynamics seen in science fiction films exemplify disconnection rather than bonding that leads to mutual growth. As feminist psychotherapists have observed, the masculine modes of relating treat relationships as alternatives to individuality, restraints on individual realization, or connection based on dependency (Miller and Stiver, 1997). What basis for connecting could exist without some range of shared experience? How could a symbiotic relationship arise without threats of domination or destruction? Contrary to Sobchack's contention, human relationships with aliens often are framed as inexplicably agonistic (as in *Independence Day*) with the concomitant demonization of the non-human (*Starship Troopers* is especially thorough).

The goal of restoring relational symmetry informs how androids and cyborgs are represented as incomplete humans. Like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*, mechanized humans strive to add or recover something that will make them more human. Data in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* constantly tries to develop his sense of humour and emotions. He is reluctant to use the emotion chip because he wants to develop his human side internally rather than relying on artificial augmentation - much like humans who would tend to renounce the mechanical measures described in Figure 2. The replicants of *Blade Runner* attempt to create or recover memories. The message is clear: conversion from human to machine entails an irretrievable loss or surrender, while humanity represents an enhancement (usually intangible) to the machine. The human/machine relationship is competitive and asymmetrical, with machines suffering the deprivation of being non-human.

The problem of establishing a relationship with radical Others may be accentuated by the tendency to view them through masculine relational lenses. The space explorer often was idealized as "the helmsman," a lone master of technology who could harness technological wonders to control the environment and solve social problems (McCurdy, 1997, p. 218). From this perspective, non-human organisms and machines can have only instrumental value, gauged by their ability to accomplish goals and share values devised by humans. Isaac Asimov's famous three laws of robotics entrench this mindset, serving as a declaration of enslavement for robots. According to Asimov, robots must unconditionally obey and value humans while protecting their own existence. Humans cannot invest their mechanical creations with free will, and dire consequences ensue if free will extends to the mechanical world.

Alien and Automated Bitches

The radical other, epitomized as the alien being, often bears feminine markers that opposes it to a masculine norm (Disch, 1998). But the alien version of gender is marked not simply by its femininity, but by its transgression of expectations associated with the feminine. Rhonda Wilcox (1996) contends that non-human characters such as Lal, the android companion manufactured by the android Data in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, are rendered less threatening because they are female. The assertion that being female minimizes the threat of the nonhuman fails to account for cases where the threat stems from feminine traits. A paradigmatic case of the feminine menace is *Species* (1995), with the greatest danger to humanity being the alien's seduction of males in order to reproduce. Indeed, reproductive capacity embodied in the sexually alluring female drives the entire plot. The assault on the alien's reproductive cycle necessitates termination of wanton reproduction, taming procreative capacity by the posse that hunts and attempts to recapture the escapee. The entire film may be understood as the quest to subdue wanton sexuality, since the alien threat emerges after she escapes from containment. Like the alien queen in *Aliens*, the alien in *Species* exhibits its perversity in its impersonal, mechanical sexuality. The pure drive to reproduce leads to indiscriminate encounters that promise less a sexual union than mere acquisition of reproductive raw material (sperm). The female reproductive machine run amok raises the spectre of reproduction uncontrolled and uninhibited by males. The fitting response to such a transgression is not capture. After all, the alien in the *Alien* film series is much too dangerous for the Company to retrieve and use for biological weapons research. No, the only way to cope with the wild female sex machine is to destroy it.

The ultimate threat of the monster in the *Alien* series is tied to its aberrant femininity. Virtually all the alien's

threatening characteristics are derived from its distortion of the feminine. In *Aliens*, viewers discover that the creature's ferocity stems from its maternal overprotectiveness. The capacity to reproduce, presumably without the presence of a male, makes the alien a recurrent danger - and enables the procession of sequels. Reproductive capacity alone, despite the alien's phallic-shaped head and semen-like oozings, exemplifies how "particular physiological processes come to count as definitive emblems of sexual identity" (Balsamo, 1996, p. 36). Perhaps the alien's greatest affront to humanity lies in its feminization of humans. Recalling the familiar image of the woman as childbearing receptacle who dies in childbirth, humans are implanted with the alien whose emergence from the human's belly kills the host. The distinctions between childbirth and parasitism blur as the blessing of a newborn child transforms into the curse of a host-destroying parasite. The ultimate negation of "natural" maternal processes occurs in *Alien: Resurrection* with the newborn alien committing matricide.

Despite its occasional romanticization, even the role of mother is not unambiguously pleasant and reassuring to the dependents. In *Alien*, the spaceship Nostromo's computer bears the name "Mother," and her failure to divulge needed information promptly makes the machinery more an antagonist than a benign caretaker. Mother is unproblematic as long as it continues with the domestic labours of cooking and routine maintenance that would be assigned to women (Newton, 1990, p. 84). The computer Mother typifies the home worker in the "homework economy" (Haraway, 1991, p. 166) where the chores are constant, mundane, and relegated to the anonymous feminized labourer. A woman's work is never done, at least not by humans and especially not by males. Yet humans lack the competence to step in and replace Mother in her travails. Reliance on the maternal force turns into pathological dependence when Mother refuses or fails to obey commands. Malevolent femininity overtakes benevolent maternity.

In the sequel *Aliens*, the role of Mother comfortably overlaps with the antagonism of Bitch. When Ripley, the adoptive mother who protects the child Newt, encounters the alien natural mother protecting her eggs, the confrontation involves the human calling the alien mother a "bitch." The benevolent earth-mother of ancient mythology has been replaced by the horrific image of woman as the negation rather than the legitimate source of life (Creed, 1990, p. 135). Illegitimate births, classified as such because they circumvent patriarchal participation or direction, turn maternal imagery upside down. The offspring will destroy humanity (*Species*, 1995; *Aliens*, 1986), or emerge as monstrosities or deviants (*Frankenstein* 1931; the creations of the Borg).

Androids have a "long tradition of symbolic representations of the Other" (Wilcox, 1996, p. 72), so it is not surprising to find that they metaphorically and literally represent marginalized populations. The first major robotic character in film was the android Maria in *Metropolis*, and both the Borg Queen of *Star Trek: First Contact* and the first replicant Deckard encounters in *Blade Runner* are female. In each of these examples, the female android not only stands at the fringes of social acceptability but exhibits a deviance linked to the assignment of gender.

In *Blade Runner*, the female replicants oscillate between being sex toys and vicious assassins. This conflicting combination is evident in the background description of Pris, whose function is listed as "Military-Leisure." According to the ESPER computer, Pris is "programmed to provide pleasure for long term spacers," so she was constructed to sexually satisfy male colonists (Barr, 1991, p. 29). She is, therefore, a "standard pleasure model" (Francavilla, 1991, p. 14), a phrase that reflects how common such a role has become for females. The male replicants, by contrast, are designated as leadership or combat models, thereby preserving familiar stereotypes of men as authoritative fighters to be pleased by their female counterparts. Zhora, the other fugitive female replicant, bears a mark of deviance by sporting a synthetic snake. Zhora further marks her transgression against normality with a graphic attack on patriarchy: she momentarily escapes from her human pursuer Deckard by hitting him.

Conclusion

The unnatural quality of cyborg identity is accentuated by the abandonment of blood ties as the foundation of ethnic identity and kinship ties. David Tomas suggests employing the term 'technicity' to describe cyborg relations as products of "technologically defined social bonds" (1989, p. 23). Since these bonds are flexible, i.e., adapted to the availability of component parts, technicity calls attention to the situational rather than essential nature of mechanical relationships. If technicity can be manipulated, then the gender markers that label relational roles are constantly being re-created rather than inherited. While the capabilities and

attributes of cyborgs may be part of their design, they are crafted to fulfill specific purposes. Cyborgs therefore potentially can render the idea of inborn, inescapable essences subservient to functionality. Rather than gender serving as a marker of static and thereby constraining identity, gender could become understandable as one variable that can affect specific functions. The question "What is your gender?" which then spawns sets of assumptions and expectations relative to the answer could transmute into "How does your assignment to a gender affect your ability to perform certain tasks?"

The figure of the cyborg does offer potentially liberating connotations for women. While the physical body may be viewed from a masculine perspective as a constraint, a biological prison of inferiority marked by fragility and menstruation, these factors could be engineered to be non-existent or inconsequential. Indeed, this biologically defined and determined position in the social hierarchy reflects the wider historical tendency to employ Darwinist theories of development to justify maintaining class distinctions (Rosser, 1992, p. 56). Departure from human somatic limits would seem to provide escape for women who "remain...timelessly and helplessly at the mercy of their individual and natural characters - which are defined and circumscribed biologically..." (Miller, 1991, p. 126). Many feminists might celebrate the rejection of biological explanations that have been "used to justify a conservative political agenda" regarding women (Rosser, 1992, p. 65; cf. p. 116). But bodily escape or manipulation exacts a high price. First, it grants that markers of feminine identity are disadvantageous and undesirable, treating them as flaws to be engineered away. Second, the inclusion of women into a grander scheme of less-gendered 'improvements' threatens to erase both individual uniqueness and the recognition that women *have* been "historically differentiated people" (Miller, 1991, p. 122). Arguably, as long as women are identified as in some way 'other than' male, willingness to dominate, exploit, and marginalize them will continue (Rosser, 1992, p. 155). Engenderneering may fuel oppression, negating the distinctive voices of women as femininity is either (1) erased or absorbed by masculinity, or (2) marginalized as irrelevant to supposedly gender-neutral goals of efficient operation.

To adapt better to the shifting relationships between humans and machines and between genders, a different metaphoric framework might be adopted. Buying into models of horizontal interlacing exemplified by webs or networks might counteract the strong tendencies to portray encounters with Others as oppositional or hierarchical. Haraway (1991, p. 170) comments that a liberatory network would not reserve a particular place for women, but would trace the ways gendered identities emerge and are shaped socially. Breaking down - or at least not absolutizing - the differences between human and machines could arrest the drive to dominate what is understood as radically different, offering a chance "to subvert command and control" (Haraway, 1991, p. 175). A similar objective extends to gender differences. Exploration of the dynamics of androgyny, while not a panacea, could open ways to differentiate among people without resorting to gender. Behavioural options, expectations, and norms then could be tailored to specific circumstances and to the individual's will (Brown, 1987).

The nagging question that stems from LeGuin's question "Is gender necessary?" is: Necessary for what, and in what sense? Could the boundaries between supposedly oppositional human/nonhuman and masculine/feminine distinctions sometimes prove useful? How could they be transformed by substituting relational networks for hierarchies that legitimize domination? If gender "is always a relationship, not a preformed category of beings or a possession that one can have" (Haraway, 1996, p. 28), then recognizing how science fiction films essentialize gender could reveal how gender roles become ossified and thereby function as tools of oppression. As Barbara Bucknall (1981, p. 66) remarks, the androgyne may be an answer, but first we must consider what question we are asking and what roles we ask gender-based distinctions to perform.

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