Cyborgs From Fiction to Reality:
Marginalized Other or Privileged First?

Aneta Stojnić

Dr., University of Arts in Belgrade[1]

(aneta.s7@gmail.com)

Abstract:

In this paper I will offer an analysis of cyber technology, cyberspace and cyborg from its appearance in fiction to its contemporary realizations, in order to show symbolic place of cyborg has changed, in the light of contemporary power relations. I will focus on the cyborg figure in literature and film, mainly the cyberpunk genre characteristic for fictionalization of the relations between individual, society and technology.

Key words: cyborg, technology, life, cyberpunk

Numerous connections, relations and intersections between fiction, technology, art and life have been named through terms (such as robot, cyberspace, genetic engineering, computer virus etc.) that have been coined in various works of fiction, and are now used in science and technology. I find this important because the articulation of the term is equal with the articulation of the concept, which means that those specific concepts now operative in reality were first introduced in fiction.[2] Same can be applied to a number of technological as well as critical anticipations of social and political relations in cyberpunk dystopian societies. The anticipations at issue have obtained direct or transformed realizations in contemporary society. This is by no means reducible to the trivial claim that science fiction of the past is the reality of the future. Nevertheless, it emphasizes the political and activist potential of fiction.

Cyberpunk as postmodern science fiction genre appeared as a response to an upcoming age of information technology, anticipating its possible technological and sociological perspectives. Main topic of cyberpunk is the relation between hi-tech society and characters from the social margins cyborgs, machine outcasts, pariahs, and characters from various underground subcultures. The atmosphere largely corresponds with that of film noir, while formal aspects of the plot resemble detective novels.[3] The unexpected combination of romantic impulse and the dark side of science and technology creates the dramatic ambivalence of the relation between individual and society. Usually the plots are situated in the postindustrial, dystopian megalopolises where high technology takes unexpected forms, applications and transformations. The life in futuristic dystopia is characterized by rapid technological changes, omnipresent digital databases, and technologically modified bodies.

Unlike some other SF sub-genres, cyberpunk always anticipates close future while the plots are located on Earth.[4] This is important because it emphasizes the tendency towards re-thinking the technological growth and development in terms of actual sociopolitical circumstances.

The plots are usually generated in the tension between most advanced cyber, and information technology at one side and total brake down or radical change of the social order on the other side.[5] Hackers, cyborgs, different variations of hybridity between life forms between human, machine and artificial intelligence, enter in the conflict with gigantic corporations that have produced them. The classic cyberpunk characters are marginalized, alienated loners, existentially

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[2] The very term "cyberspace" was coined by Wiliam Gibson in his short story "Burning Chrom" in 1982. However, the term will gain its popularity only after Gibson's famous novel "Neuromancer" from 1983. The term cyberspace was used to describe the computer generated three dimensional space which very much resembles, what is now known as Word Wide Web. Together with Ridley Scot's *Blade Runner,* that came out the same year *Neuromancer* was one of the fundamental work of cyberpunk genre.

[3] Stacy Gillis, *The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded*, (Wallflower Press, 2005), 75.

[4] Of course there are exceptions this genre convention, the most notable being Frank Herbert's saga "Dune" whose plot is situated in far future.

[5] Donald M. Hassler, New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction (University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 75-76.

and ontologically incorporated into the same digitalized hi-tech society with which they are in conflict. This means that they are literally constructed and articulated by the economic and technological systems of power. They originate from cyber technology (ontology) and their existence is determined by given parameters of cyber-society (existentially).

Cyborg is one of the paradigmatic characters of cyber fiction that over time obtained more or less unexpected realizations in reality, and earned an important place in contemporary theories of culture. We find precursors of cyborgs in the earliest science fiction novels, bordering with the genre of horror. The first fictionalized cyborg can be traced back to 1897, in the famous Monster character from Mary Shelly's novel *Frankenstein, or Modern Prometheus.* It will become one of the most cited and possibly most influential works of the genre, one that will obtain numerous incarnations and elaborations in fiction and popular culture of 20th and 21st century. Unlike some of his later "successors" like Robocop or a Replicants from "Blade Runner," Frankenstein's Monster does not have machine/digital components implanted in his body. Assembled from parts of dead bodies and brought to life by electricity this "protocyborg" was still not clearly positioned as cross or transitional entity between living being and machine. However, he was precisely and literally conceptualized as an organism situated between the living and the dead. As such it fits the understanding of a cyborg as a being generated in the synthesis of being and nonbeing, that is, as that which displays the interactive relations between presence, perspective and appearance, of time/space event of artificial world. Also, we can recognize the idea of intersection between living organism and machine in the fact that the Monster was "brought to life" by electricity.[6]

Here I would like to reflect on the name "Monster" that was attributed to doctor Frankenstein's creature. Since the age of Antiquity, in Western imagination, the "monsters"(dragons, centaurs, mermaids, medusas and other chimeras) defined the borders of society. Borders behind which is the realm of unregulated, anarchic, terrifying realities ungovernable by human laws. Similarly Frankenstein's Monster was cast off by the society, which perceived him as an asymmetrical other. Asymmetrical power relations[7] are the basis for the construction of otherness that will become one of the central motives in the cyborg myth. The distinctive backdrop in the SF genre has been fascinated by the development of science combined with the ambivalent relation towards its possible outcomes. What distinguishes Monster from "Frankenstein" as a protocyborg of the later fictionalizations is the absence of symbiotic relation between living organism and a machine. The replicants in "Blade Runner" are fictionalized as bioengineered organisms, i.e., bio-robotic organisms (cyborgs), so perfectly designed that it is impossible to differentiate them from humans. The implicit, but precise analysis of (still actual) racial relations is given through the social status of replicants. Although "Blade Runner" is not explicitly about race, the latter is, in fact, one of the main motives in this movie. If we pay attention to the shots of the crowded city streets we will notice the complete absence of black people. It seems that in LA of the future there are no Afro-Americans or any other people of black African origin. Analyzing this aspect of the movie Robert Barringer suggests two possible explanations:

> [...] Either African Americans have joined the white exodus to the off-world colonies or they have been exterminated. The former is unlikely in light of chronic economic discrimination and ghettoization, and the latter too horrifying to contemplate, though the darkness and despair at the film's heart would not preclude such a genocidal backstory.[8]

The numerous scenes of crowded streets are connotatively important because they show the ethnically diverse landscape of the town that makes the absence of black people even more obvious, and proves that we're talking about conscious director's decision. It functions on the level of subtext that I shall now explain following the Barringer's analyses. Although the movie doesn't explicitly touch the topic of race, one of the main subjects in the "Blade Runner" is slavery. Regardless of whether the black slaves have obtained the economic power and moved to alien colonies, or they have been eliminated by white governance, it is evident that they are not there to fulfill the social and economic functions that have been assigned to them in the present social order. In the absence of the black race, as cheap (or free) labour, new artificial sub-class have been developed: the Replicants.[9] In comparison to humans they are superiorly strong and skilled, while different models are produces with different IQs. The use of Replicants on Earth is strictly banned. The powerful corporation that produces Replicants, exports them to colonies on other planets, where they are used for labour that is undesirable and/or dangerous for humans. Blade Runners are special agents whose job is to seek and destroy the runaway Replicants. Ironically enough this process is called retiring. The plot of the movie

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[6] In the historical context of the novel (19th century) electricity was the latest revolutionary technological achievement.

[7] Only the dominant group has the power to determine, decide and impose its own specificity (identity) as a value, and to devaluate and discriminate other specificities (otherness) ref. Simon deBeauvoir, "The Second Sex," Alfred Konoph, New York, 1952.

[8] Robert Barringer, "Blade Runner: Skinjobs, humans and racial coding"in *Jump Cut*, no. 41, May 1997, 13-15, http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC41folder/bladeRunner.html (acc. 08.06.2013).

[9] Ibid.

follows the group of runaway Replicants who have found out that they have an "expiry date" and are headed for Earth to find their "maker" and change their "destiny"

"Bladerunner" opens numerous and complex questions from area of power relations between different forms of life, problematization of humanistically oriented ethics, questions of the ethical aspects of artificial intelligence and critiques of colonialism and capitalism. In other words, we can read "Blade Runner" as a metaphor about the production of life that becomes an economic category. I want to emphasize this as a key moment since it creates a direct relation between production of life (biopolitics) and production of death (necropolitics). A certain form of life, a cyborg (Replicant) has been designated as merchandise made for export, with a defined expiry date. Replicant is simultaneously biopolitical and necropolitical subject. It is produced as a life whose function is death. To this "merchandise" intelligence is allocated, but the human emotional experience is denied. The only way to distinguish them from humans is their inability for empathy. I other words, dehumanization is executed by means of deprivation of the capacity for emotional response. This problematic motive gets its twist in Rachael's character, a new Replicant prototype. Rachael has implemented memories of childhood and is produced in such a way that she can fully develop human emotionality. As a perfect copy of the human being, Rachael embodies the greatest fears and greatest desires of cyber culture.[10] Dualism between a human and a machine is destabilized momentarily with the disappearance of the difference between organic system and digital system. The title of the novel on which the film was based *Do Androids Dream Electronic Sheep?* precisely indicates the central aspect of this story: the question of cyborg experience and human inability to access that experience. Introducing the issue of android dream, this title is provocative on two levels:

a) it suggests the psychological space of the replicant

b) it suggests the human inability to approach that space.

The idea of a "dream of electronic sheep" suggests radically different ontological experience – Replicant's dream is of electronics. Both fascinating and disturbing is the fact that the dream stands as a place of similarity and difference, joining and separation between human subject and bioengineered, technological or the cyber subject. This would mean that a human can understand the experience of an android or a cyborg but cannot share, nor control their experience. In this way "the dream of electronic sheep" becomes a disturbing concept that joins the trauma and the fulfillment of desire.

The cyborg entity deconstructs the binary relations between object and subject, nature and culture, being and non-being, organism and machine, male and female, possibility and impossibility of controlling (one's own) body. Fictionalized cyborg disturbingly destabilizes the usual understanding of the concept of "natural." Cyborgs are liminal beings that don't strive towards stabile essentialized identities. Fascination with the cyborg in fiction as well as in theory is largely conditioned by the fact that the concept of cyborg opens large space for projections in different directions. The cyborg figure is important because it joins the imagination and material reality as two pillars supporting every possibility for historical transformation.[11]

According to Donna Haraway today we are all already cyborgs – theorized and constructed chimeras between living organism and a machine. Our ontology is cyborg ontology and it gives us our politics: "[...] a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints."[12]

Haraway uses the cyborg metaphor in her key critique of feminist essentialism and naturalism. In the myth of the cyborg she sees the political potential for feminism to rid itself of the need for unified identification. Instead, it opens possibilities for establishing alliances based on affinity and not identity.[13] Haraway's myth of cyborg undoubtedly undermines the idea of organic whole, placing the articulation in front of representation.

I will argue here that today, thirty years after the release of "Cyborg Manifesto" that its central thesis becomes relevant way beyond the questions of alliances within feminism and critiques of identity politics. Today self-design has become a common, one could say, an everyday practice in the first world, thus the question of the body as a social construct

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[10] Dona Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[11] Ibid

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

is more relevant than ever. As Marina Gržinić points out, permanent redefining of the relations between human and machine is important because it strives for absent but possible different present. According to Grzinic:

> [...] Alternatives are not cynicism and uselessness, that is, some kind of abstract existence, or news about technological determinism that destroyers the 'man' by 'machine', i.e. 'meaningful political action' by 'text', but immediate delinking and positioning - a different articulation of given relation.[14]

Different articulation by which we could reach a different present is happening both on fictional and real level. Dramatic tension brought in by cyborgs, replicants, androids and various forms of artificial life is realized on two levels:

 1) Issue of body as constructed symbiosis between organic and technological system

 2) Issue of artificial intelligence.

While the artificial intelligence is still in the sphere between fiction and scientific experiments, it is crucial to understand that the issue of body in relation to cyborgs has exceeded the domain of fiction and has entered the sphere of everyday life. So, here I will step out of fiction to discuss the way in which the concept of cyborg is manifested in contemporary everyday reality. Thanks to the development of technology, today it is possible to completely redesign one's own body through a number of medical and cosmetic interventions. One can change the morphology of their face, various bodily dimensions, gender, or skin color. It is not just about cosmetics. Sometimes the life indications are at stake: whether or not you'll have the privilege to replace the malfunctioning organ with a new prosthetic one can determine the length, quality or the endof your life. I argue that today the possibility for cyborgization of the body is a matter of class privilege.

Unlike replicants from *Blade Runner* these contemporary cyborgs are not oppressed, unprivileged or outcasts. This means that the cyborg is no longer the asymmetrical other. Unlike their fictionalized predecessors, today's real cyborgs are not doomed creatures from the margins of cyberpunk metropolis. On the contrary, contemporary cyborgs they are the privileged class and their class position enables them to become cyborgs.

On the other hand, in the symbolic place of the Replicants from "Blade Runner" today are those human subjects that are helplessly and hopelessly trapped in their unchangeable, bodily, biological, perishable, irreparable, deadly, exploited humanness. Human subjects of the third world are living their death by way of being exploited by cyborgized first world. Paradoxically, the social status of cyborgs in cyberpunk fiction is now inhabited by those to whom are denied the possibility of ever having a choice to become a cyborg. Today the borders of society are no longer defined by imaginary monsters, chimeras and cyborgs, situated on the other side of human law and order. It is quite the opposite. Today outside of cyborgized, privileged society remains only the dispensable, bare life.

Aneta Stojnić, theoretician, artist and curator born in Belgrade, 1981. PhD in Theory of Arts and Media at University of Arts in Belgrade, thesis title: "Theory of Performance in Digital Art: Towards the New Political Performance" (2013). Author of a various papers, critical reviews and essays on contemporary art and media, published in Serbia, Slovenia and Austria. Artist in residence in Tanzquartier Vienna in 2011 and writer in residence at KulturKontakt Austria in 2012. Ernst-Mach Scholarship holder for a research project at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna Conceptual Art study program, IBK. in 2012
http://anetastojnic.wordpress.com/cv/

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[14] Marina Gržinić, U redu za virtuelni kruh, (Zagreb: Meandar, 1998, Croatian translation of PhD thesis Gržinić Marina: "*Virtualne realnosti, Akroničen čas, paraprostor in simulacija :doktorska disertacija*". Ljubljana: 1995.

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