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Ghost in the Shell: A Re-Examination of the Discourse of the Human

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Abstract:

With postmodernism and its narrative of multiple truths, fragmented narratives and the rejection of a singular, universal notion of truth, there emerged multiple perspectives that viewed the burgeoning social movements from minority, marginalized vantage points. Cyberpunk, as a genre catapulted into stardom with its insistence on very plausible, high-tech futures that threatened to alter our boundaries of human and machines with the diffusion of the demarcations between meat and metal.

Donna J. Haraway takes it a step further to examine what this erasure of the sanctity of the body does to our notions of sex, sexuality, gender and gender roles in a world where on one hand, merit, rather than gender is considered and where on the other hand, even in radical genres like cyberpunk that offered women better, more meaningful roles, women unquestionably played a role considered integral to her sex, that of an eye candy.

The paper examines the anime *Ghost in the Shell*, a landmark text, in a bid to examine how it plays with the ideas of borders between the meat and the metal and questions the sanctity of the body as a site identity, since the lack of a body not only undoes gender, but also renders the entire debate inconsequential. The body cannot be marked now, since it does not belong to the person, leaving no scope for a consolidated identity, and the very nature of existence. Identity, individuality, as well as the purpose of life is not just reevaluated, but on the brink of collapse.

The cyborg figure, then, does not just dismantle or push or stretch the borders of conventional gender or meat/metal demarcation; rather, it begins with the question of whether these ideas of individuality, gender, sexuality, morality and identity, which have served the human cause since Enlightenment, are even valid.

Keywords: Enlightenment, Postmodernism, Secular Humanism, Cyborg, Gender, Identity, techno-orientalism.

Ghost in the Shell(1995), with its potent cyborg figure Major Motoko Kusanagi, a young policewoman whose shell/body is manufactured by the military to house her consciousness/ghost, in its controversial depiction of the possibility of the post human future, not only interrogates and reframes our founding ideas of liberal humanism as heralded in by the Enlightenment, but renders the whole debate of gender, gender roles, sex, sexuality, identity and reality irrelevant. The idea of the human as a definite, definable, or coherent category is on the brink of a collapse, and the very idea of a human, as is currently understood and in existence, is rendered obsolete, or mutable, into a new post human self, that is unstable, undefinable, and defies being contained in the Enlightenment model of the human.

GITS, as it is popularly known, calls for a re-examination of the discourse of the human, and points to a technological future where the human is no longer identified by the traditional yardsticks of reason, free will or morality that is divorced from theology and is based in the rationality of ethics, and vulnerability that marks us as an intelligent, unique and fragile artifact worth preserving. The cyborg figure dismantles this easy notion of the human as it not only trespasses the borders of the flesh to accommodate invasive, intelligent programmed technology, but also invades the mind and its reliability as a marker of identity. While much of Western classic cyberpunk had accommodated the loss of either the mind or the flesh, relying on the other to preserve humanity in the capitalistic technology, GITS envisions a future where the reliability of both the mind and the body is compromised.

The concept of borders and borderlands is integral to cyberpunk, as it deals with a very plausible, technological future that threatened to alter, with invasive technology, our comfortable notions about the nature of humanity, as Gibson said, one no longer knows where the meat ends and the machine begins.

The Gothic idea of the monster lurking within takes on a realistic garb, the looming possibility of becoming a stranger to oneself, as humans gradually become complete cyborgs, which Haraway argues, is only a perfect form to which humanity is only inching closer with current advancements in technology.

The cyborg or the posthuman is already harassed by its ontology. While they inhabit borderlands as spaces that lie nowhere, neither fully human nor fully machine, one looks at borderlands not with the euphoric vision of a liberating space that these subalterns create and occupy, but as problematic spaces where all kinds of Frankensteinien freaks have been cast aside, occupying a tangible geography without being a part of it.

With that in mind, the shifting of borders becomes even more problematic, as cyborgs mark a shift from organic, individual life forms to replicable, or at least, replaceable life forms.

Ghost in the Shell (1995) stands out in Science Fiction for its seminal shift in the ideological direction of SF.Its protagonist is a woman who is a cyborg with a titanium shell for a body, which houses her "ghost", or consciousness. It is her cyborg body that is interesting, since this unmarked, disposable body challenges the very notion of the existence of 'human' as a category, instead of merely shifting the border to accommodate the future.

The anime opens with a scene where she waits for orders from her superiors in Section 09, Foreign Affairs, to only remove all her clothing and jump naked from the terrace of a high-rise, armed with heavy artillery – it is reminiscent of the trope of the femme fatale, a seductive, fatal woman.

When asked about the static in her brain, she responds with a curt "It's that time of the month", in the Japanese original version, which has been sanitized in the English dubbing as "It must be a loose wire."

Sharalyn Orbaugh notes that the opening scene begins with the "perfect paradoxical introduction to a narrative that is all about the nature of sex/gender identity and self-identity in general in a future world where sexual reproduction has given way to mechanical reproduction." While the viewer is baffled by the reference to menstruation while her nude body clearly does not bleed, the opening credits scene shows the production of her body in a facility, thus revealing her cyborg, non-organic body. It strips the body of all sexuality, actually rendering the debate of sex (or at least organic sex)irrelevant, as it is yet unknown whether the body is capable of sexual arousal, and whether it would be a heterosexual act or a homosexual one,since the body is just a metal shell with a DNA. In fact, it is doubtful if it can even be called "sex".

Another idea that is said to define humanity is the idea of singularity or individuality, and therefore, uniqueness. And it is memory, to a large extent, that constructs both, the idea of reality, and the self. Kusanagi's doubting of the veracity of her own ghost, after figuring out that the garbage man's mind has been ghost-hacked by the Puppet Master, the rogue AI, resulting into implanted memories, hints at the possibility that one's ghost could replicate or simulate copies of itself, making it a simulacra,, a copy of which there is no original. Human, as a category, does not simply cease to exist. The very legitimacy of the category" human" is compromised, marking a shift from a reinforcement of "humanity" in AIs, to the dismantling of the very category as a grand narrative.

The unmarked body, manufactured, and therefore disassociated from the ghost organically, and swapped conveniently under the project of capitalism, with no relevance to organic or authentic memories and the stability of the self, essentially, the lack of trust and reliability combined with the commodification of the body, the mind, and memories, deconstructs the entire notion of whether the category "human" even matters in the posthuman

world. Haraway finds the Western tradition of epistemologies essentialist and restrictive, which lead to formation of taxonomies which create "antagonistic dualisms", such as self/other, human/non-human, male/female, primitive/civilized, truth/illusion, and God/Man, which "have all been systematic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals... all [those] constituted as others." (A Cyborg Manifesto 299).

The idea of the human is further breached by the new order of reproduction, the consummation of two ghosts, one of Kusanagi which might or might not be modified, and that of the Puppet Master, creating a merger of the ghosts to unite them in Kusanagi's new body, that of a preteen girl. The bodiless reproduction, with no physical entity being produced from the successful union, but rather a new kind of Darwinian adaptation of regeneration through merging to enable mutations and prevent redundancy in the programming, the technological equivalent of DNA, presents a radical shift in the way birth and reproduction are conceptualized.

Enlightenment marked a departure from the Bible in establishing the independence of the human form from its religion, emphasizing on traits that render humanity a unique entity capable of a scientific, rational attitude, made up of experiences, memories and essential attributes of civilization. It emphasizes humanity as the supreme species, and all studies in literature have more or less celebrated the category of the human, and deviances from the "civilized" form of humanity became the cynosure with Gothic literature. This monstrous human self, however, has been adequately tamed in science fiction, as either an anomaly (Sunny in *I, Robot*), or the result of an attempt to subvert the natural order (*Frankenstein*) – either their humanity is restored, or they are eliminated, resulting in the triumph of humanity.

With pre-cyberpunk and cyberpunk, the emphasis had shifted to reasserting the humanity of cyborgs, posthumans and androids – so as to accommodate the imminent future without disturbing the grand narrative of Enlightenment, gradually and smoothly injecting technological advancements in the stream of humanity, without losing the essential attributes of humanity. Despite all fancy technological implants, Molly Minions or Case in *Neuromancer*, or Phousita or Nikko in *The Bohr Maker* are essentially human, with all their failures, follies and virtues.
Ghost in the Shell, instead of reinforcing humanity, disturbs the natural order by rendering it irrelevant. Much in line with Haraway who says, "In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture – we have all been colonized by those origin myths, with their longing for fulfillment in apocalypse." (A Cyborg Manifesto 291) The figure of the cyborg, then, confounds the modernist criteria for subjectivity, thus dismantling the category of the human.

Worse, as Haraway says, "The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust."(293), the cyborg does not care for identification with humans, or for a recall to the human fold, rather, setting out in their

monstrous state to find their place, contrary to a lot of SF that actually revolves around the anxiety of rescuing humanity from the possibility of a non-human cyborg existence.

As Haraway further notes, "The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity."(297) Kusanagi has no notion of the social appropriateness or moral discourses of nudity, sex or sexual intercourse. The act of merging her ghost with the Puppet Master's is not linked with either sexual desire or any understanding of motherhood or reproduction – the merging represents, to her, an opportunity of evolving, and therefore surviving, by being able to travel freely through the Net without the need of a body – this relinquishing of the meat, though, is less celebratory in mood than that of Gibson's protagonists –the need for freedom arises out of an existential crisis, from the knowledge that she is cut off from the rest of humanity by the very nature of her reincarnation as a cyborg, and that any attempt to prove herself human enough, even to her own satisfaction, was an impossibly futile exercise into delusion.

The body, then, instead of being a site of identity or resistance, in fact, becomes a site for demolishing the idea of identity or humanity. The cyborg in *Ghost in the Shell* chooses to reject humanity consciously, willing to chart its own path in the unknown future, instead of striving to prove its humanity.

It is resonant with Holger Potzsch's idea of an iBorder, a cultural technique, which looks at the practices of border-making as "hegemonic borderscapes" and "counter-hegemonic borderscapes" as cultural practices that frame both reproductive and subversive practices.*Ghost in the Shell* draws attention to the hegemonic border between the human and the non-human by rendering it irrelevant, thereby simultaneously drawing a counter-hegemonic border.

While the anime dismantles one by one the comfortable notions of what consists of humanity, it subsequently refuses to provide an idea of what replaces humanity, or the notion of it, and thus rejects even the validity of the question – it is not a refiguring of the idea of the human to accommodate the future, or adapt humanity to technology without compromising on its essential attributes. Just as Kusanagi walks away from Batou who expects an answer on what she is post her merging, the anime refuses to provide a new definition or a new border, a new framework to define the necessity and the nature of the human. With humanity, the ideas of gender, morality, sex and sexuality also become a grand narrative.

Ghost in the Shell is important in its act of refusing to mark a new border, since the marking is not necessarily a simple, innocent exercise of advancement of humanity and a broadening of vision, as the very words "modern" and "pushing the borders" would have one believe, rather, representing a theoretical shift in ideological and power structures to suit present

and near-future needs. The marking of a new border is itself trapped in its own equations of history, politics and economics, and while it seems progressive and inclusive every time there is a shift in borders, it is essentially refiguring inclusivity to maintain the status-quo of those in power.

The post in the posthuman is not a reinforcement of humanity in an apparently inorganic, robotic figure; rather, it is a moving beyond the necessity of the idea of the human as a state a sentient being should aspire to acquire. In erasing the sanctity of the individual body as the site of identity, it erases the very idea of the human. Humanity, then, like gender, seems to be nothing more than a performance –reinforced, internalized and naturalized through repetition.

The roots of this distinction between the automaton and the human also stems out of the practice of "Techno-Orientalism", whereby the USA reinforced the Orientalist discourse of civilization with reference to the 'Japanised' technology and the implications it held for the future. TheWestern response reinforces the "image of a culture that is cold, impersonal, and machine-like" (Morley and Robins 172). This serves to reinforce a Western feeling of superiority: "'they' are barbaric and 'we' are civilized; 'they' are robots while 'we' remain human" (172). The Japanese, on the other hand, negotiated technology as an evolution in the humans, a necessary exercise in establishing harmony between the technological future and its own Shinto sensibilities.

Movies like *Terminator, Robocop* or *Bladerunner* view cyborgs as inimical to the survival of humans, in a deadly combination of capitalism and technology, where humans battle cyborgian monsters to survive. In a more lenient mood, Western cyborgs are brought back to the human fold by a combination of traits such as sensitivity and vulnerability, displaying an emotionally unique identity in line with human characteristics. However, they are restricted to either sub-human inimical figures, or near-human friendly figures.

Ghost in the Shell rings in a posthuman bell with the figure of the cyborg –the disconnect of Kusanagi's physical body with her ghost, sense of identity and subsequently her place in the world, breaking the structures of gendered, human behavior to reconfigure a self that has transcended the traits identified with being human. Kusanagi, with an untrustworthy memory, a shell not commensurate with her age, and a merged ghost that falls nowhere in the realm of the human, embraces this existence that maybe only 'resembles' human, or contains some 'strains' of organic human to evolve into a new form of life in concert with Darwinian evolution for survival of the fittest.

Much in line with the Foucauldian analysis of the relationship between power and knowledge, the Enlightenment project of assigning certain definable traits to the figure of the secular human was not free from the influence, however subtle, of dominant power groups, and

the notion of the modern human was suited to the modes of production of the ruling elites of Enlightenment.

Kusanagi brings together the four terms Walter Truett used to describe the postmodern self: *multiphrenia, protean, decentred-self* and *self-in-relation* (Future of the Self, 26) – a fractured identity of non-belonging in its entirety, or partial belonging to more than one species that is still in a rapid flux, unstable enough to evade neat categorization, and the self as an entity often disassociated from others of seemingly the same kind.

The cyborg is rendered as the "Other", a form of political discourse, where gender, sex, sexuality, and sexual/gender performance become obsolete categories that no longer hold legitimacy. Instead of representing a genderless world in the sense of gender equality, it posits a postgender world where gender is only one of the two shapes of the human ancestors they have evolved from. Moreover, it hints at the possibility that a few more years into this evolution, these new sentient humans might even discard the human lookalike body shapes and switch to something more contemporary, since there is no further need for genitals, or distinct male, female or transgender bodies. With unreliable ghosts, swappable bodies and the erasure of identity and thereby the sanctity of the body, the entire project of Enlightenment, which has served the human cause, and laid the foundation for much of Western epistemology and the conception of the category of the human, is on the brink of a collapse it would never recover from.

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