

Chapter Six

The cyborg body

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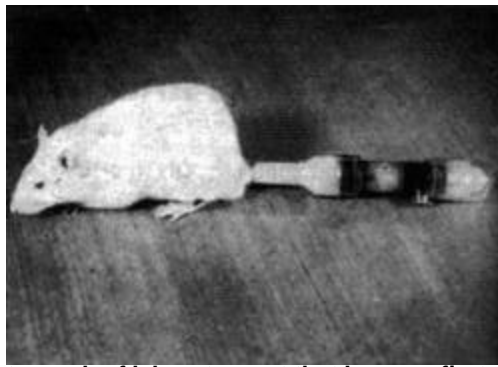
The body is returned to itself.
(VNS Matrix 1998:39)

The aim of this last chapter is to explore the final body in the field of body types, namely the cyborg body, which materialises as the melding (not necessarily harmoniously) of flesh and machine. I argue here that the cyborg body, as viewed from a cyberfeminist position, is the most potent and promising figuration for human/technology interaction. The cyborg body type, I will explain, promises the most favourable embodied stance of all the body types discussed so far. It meshes with new technologies without settling for a bodiless solution and hence, I place it on the semiotic square as the **present** and **pattern** configuration. The cyborg body, in its “enfleshed materialism” (Braidotti 2002:13), sets forward a responsible embodiment that counters the previously discussed techno-transcended, techno-enhanced and marked bodies’ troublesome relations with embodiment.

In order to explore cyborg bodies, it is also necessary to enquire about the political agencies concealed behind the fragmented core of cyborg bodies. It can be ascertained that cyborg bodies are anything but neutral entities, for, although they are agencies in flux, cyborg bodies are inv(f)ested with political motifs, which determine their potential for becoming situated and embodied subjects or disembodied agencies.

The following course has been set to elucidate the cyborg body: first to interrogate critically the most prominent manifesto that has contributed to and shaped cyberfeminist postulations of cyborg bodies, namely Donna Haraway’s “A manifesto for cyborgs” (1990). Then images of cyborg bodies, both fictional and factual, are interrogated, in order to establish the different representations of cyborgs that are perfused with patriarchal intentions in comparison with cyborgs as “situated knowledges” that may be termed cyberfeminist cyborgs.

6.1 “A manifesto for cyborgs”: are all cyberfeminists cyborgs?



**Fig. 6.1 Photograph of laboratory rat that became first cyborg, 1960
(Clynes & Kline 1960:xv)**

When charting a cyberfeminist position in the virtual age the cyborg becomes an important configuration of how new technologies are embodied. It is the cyborg (the embodied cyborg) that is at once the most controversial and yet also the most expedient representative of the obstinate union between bio-bodies and new technologies. Donna Haraway's "A manifesto for cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s" puts forward the ironic political myth of the post-gendered cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (1990:191). The term itself is a shortened form of "cybernetic organism" and it emerged from the field of cybernetics.¹ The term was first applied in 1960 in a scientific article co-authored by two NASA scientists Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, entitled "Cyborgs and space". Clynes and Kline's research concerned itself with solving the problem of human survival in hostile environments such as outer space. The first bio-organism referred to as a cyborg was a laboratory rat [Fig. 6.1] with an osmotic pump attached under its skin, which formed part of Clynes and Kline's research. They reflect as follows on the rat's enhanced cyborgian state: "Like all cyborgs, this white rat has something extra, that sign of excess that marks the creature as somehow 'trans' to what once counted as normal and natural" (1960: xv).² The osmotic pump spurted chemicals into the animal's bloodstream at a slow controlled rate without its being aware of the intrusion, and without its consent, one may add. Therefore, the first cyborg referred to as such was an unreflecting and co-opted agent; it was apparently oblivious to its own cyborgian state, in contrast with Haraway's cyborg, which is a self-reflective and self-conscious agency, wary of any myth, tale or construction that attempts to restore an original whole or unity.

6.1.1 *No origins, boundaries and politics*

Accordingly, Haraway identifies the culprits in the construction of origination mythology as humanism, the Oedipal system in psychoanalysis, capitalism, Judeo-Christianity, Marxism, patriarchal thought systems in general and importantly, some strands of radical feminism. True to its scepticism towards the myths of origin, Haraway's cyborg does not long for the

Garden of Eden. On the contrary, the cyborg would probably not even recognise Paradise, for it was not created from mud and neither will it return to dust. Refreshingly, this also indicates that Haraway's cyborg played no part in the dramatic fall of mankind into physicality and sin, because it has never been part of the Garden of Eden or the drama of sinful seduction. As a result, the cyborg remembers nothing about bodies being wicked and deceitful. One may wonder how effective such a strategy of collective amnesia may be for future cyborgs.

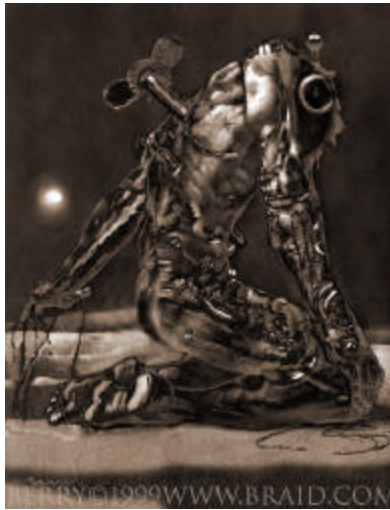


Fig. 6.2 Rick Berry, *Wind-up Man*, 1999³
(Braid Media Arts 2002)

In fact, Haraway's cyborg did not fall into a "natural" body, for it was not born from a "natural" body in the first instance. It has no mother: perhaps it may have an artificial one, but no natural one as defined under the laws of the decrepit nature/culture dispensation. Haraway explains: "The cyborg skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense" (1990:192); and apparently "cyborgs have more to do with regeneration and are suspicious of the reproductive matrix and of most birthing" (1990:223). Haraway's cyborg regenerates and replenishes, but is definitely not born. If there is no birth, but merely regeneration, what happens to death? Does Haraway imply that the cyborg is immortal and that, lizard-like, it replaces failed organs and lost body parts without facing the final penalty for being embodied? If so, is she not perpetuating the techno-transcendent dream of immortality, which would make her cyborg unattractive from a cyberfeminist standpoint?

Additionally, in an attempt to escape from the "evil mother of masculinist fear" (1990:219), Haraway revives the myth of the "**originally** literate mother who teaches survival" (1990:219, emphasis added). Although her dismantling of the archetypal monstrous female as constructed in Oedipal systems is beneficial for a cyberfeminist project, I cannot but wonder why Haraway prefers to slip in this instance into an "**original**" literate mother. The concept of a "literate mother", combining two spheres (the maternal and the cultural) that have been unjustly disconnected, is indeed admirable. But by turning to an '**originally**

literate mother", does Haraway not compromise her dismissal of all origins? In this case Haraway unknowingly reveals how origin myths are retold and refigured by cyborgs and cannot entirely be forgotten in their construction. This slippage on Haraway's part could illustrate the impossibility of her project to do away entirely with all origin myths and constructions. The dismissal of all myths of origin is, thus, itself a myth. What seems to be required though, is not the mere denouncement of origins, but to move beyond the *impasse* of the concept by relativising it while yet acknowledging origins. Obviously, a cyborg cannot be reduced to its origins, but neither can it deny original traces in its socio-political construction.

In an attempt to relativise the origin myth and yet, to show how it may still operate as motivational construction, a comparison between Haraway's cyborg and the mythical goddess Athena may be useful. Such a comparison seems attainable for neither being is born of woman, but instead both "originate" from the heads of men. Athena sprouts forth from Zeus's head, while the cyborg is incubated in the heads of military men. Haraway insists that her cyborg has no father – at least not one that it is faithful to – but nevertheless, she does admit that cyborgs are the "illegitimate offspring" of militarism, patriarchal capitalism and state socialism. She is, nonetheless, quick to point out that illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins and, besides, these "fathers" are, after all, inessential (1990:193). I am not convinced that these reluctant fathers are indeed as inessential as Haraway wants us to believe.

The mere fact that cyborgs dismiss their fathers does not necessarily mean the fathers will reciprocate by dismissing them in return. Then again, solely typifying cyborgs according to their origins simply perpetuates a destructive and hierarchical myth of genesis. Consequently, if Haraway's cyborg is not born, but rather replicates like a virus, it could be a clever strategy to subvert all debilitating origins and to intercept military inceptions.

On the other hand, the fact that Haraway's cyborg has no mother (except for Haraway's unfortunate slip into the original literate mother), but an illegitimate father, whom it nevertheless denounces, casts some doubts over its coded existence. As already stated, although the cyborg may denounce its origins, this does not necessarily mean that the act of denouncement is reciprocated. This means that Haraway's cyborg, viewed from another angle, could be Athena reborn in a twentieth-first century technological guise, sprouting from militaristic and capitalistic fathers' heads. After all, the cyborg's illegitimate fathers can be traced back to technological developments for the military, carried out, for instance, by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA).⁴ For that reason, although unfaithful to its military fathers, the cyborg does not automatically remain outside the reach of either their corrupting influences or the seductions of their capitalist powers. In fact, it may be argued that, in some instances, the cyborg's denounced fathers are even cleverly continued in the cyborg,

although disguised behind a smoke screen of waywardness, discord and disinheritance. My main argument here is that denunciation of origins is a fascinating political strategy, but the mere act of denunciation does not necessarily succeed in severing all familial and familiar ties.

In its defiance of an original creation myth, the cyborg is described by Haraway as a cybernetic organism that combines organism, animal and machine. Appropriating this unholy trinity into a harmonious unity is extremely difficult and almost impossible, especially within a culture where bestiality and machine control are extremes that are almost equally feared.⁵ Combining organism, animal and machine indicates that the cyborg does not have clear boundaries, seeing that the "last beachheads of [human] uniqueness have been polluted" (1990:193). The humanistic divisions between "man" and "animal", and the dialectic construction between "man" and "machine" have all been transgressed in cyborg politics. No longer can man dream of the beast "out there" in the wild, nor can he conjure the machine as an autonomous and controllable being, for both are already "inside" and internalised. The skin of the cyborg does not end at the end of the body, but is instead endlessly permeable and leaky, like that of women, whose bodies are said to be prone to "leak" blood, tears and milk. As Haraway phrases the loss of boundaries, "Why should our bodies end at the skin or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?" (1990:220) In fact, cyborg bodies and discourses leak all over. For this reason Haraway does not differentiate between mind and body in her construction of the cyborg, for the cyborg is a creature that belongs both to social reality and the fictional sphere. In other words, it is both "real" and "unreal" in as far as those two categories still have meaning in a cyborgian world.



Fig. 6.3 Rick Berry, *Cybionette*, 2000
(Braid Media Arts 2002)

One would suspect, then, that a permeable and fused entity such as the cyborg, being constantly "disassembled and reassembled" (1990:205), would prove politically ineffective,

for it has no agency or coherent centre from which to operate. Yet Haraway insists that cyborgs provide feminists, particularly, with a new socio-political myth, albeit an ironic one. She informs us that "the cyborg simulates politics" (1990:205), an activity that, she claims is more potent than Foucault's bio-politics, because "Discursive constructions are no joke" (1990:205). Haraway also develops a politics of "affinity" rather than automatically "belonging" to a specific identity. The discordant concept of "women" is replaced by the category of "women of colour", related not by blood but rather by choice:

There is nothing about being "female" that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as "being" female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class-consciousness is an achievement forced on us by patriarchy, colonialism, racism and capitalism. (1990:197)

The new voice of "women of colour" is an "oppositional consciousness" that is "fully political", because it understands the "webs of power" (1990:197). Haraway understands "women of colour" to be "a **king** of postmodernist identity", for it is constructed out of otherness, difference and specificity. (It is to be hoped that Haraway's use of **king** is either an oversight on her side or subversively applied.) Initially the notion of "women of colour" was contested by precisely those "women" whom it would now represent, but it has since become a powerful tool for those women (black, chicana etc.) who could not previously speak either as "women" (being excluded on account of their race by white women) or as "blacks" (being discounted on account of their gender by black men and their race if they were non-black). In other words, "women of colour" is an inclusive term for all those who were previously doubly excluded, except that it now appears to sideline "women without colour" namely, white women.

Furthermore, on the political front, Haraway urges all cyborgs to "take responsibility for the social relations of science and technology" (1990:223). But how can a cyborg identity take responsibility if there is no transcendent agent of responsibility? As Jill Marsden enquires: "If we do not choose to be cyborgs, *can* we choose our responsibilities for machines? Are we still in control?" (1996:14, original emphasis). Throughout her manifesto Haraway makes reference to the "informatics of domination", but once again, does the concept of domination still hold any meaning in an age of reigning informatics, where it is not clear who is made and who is the maker in the relation between humans and machines? In other words, how are concepts such as "domination" and "responsibility" possible when there is no subject "at home", not even a transitory "as if" subject that can embody responsibility?



Fig. 6.4 Rick Berry, *Iron Fawn*, 2000
(Braid Media Arts 2002)

Ironically, Haraway also undermines her own revolutionary thinking by unequivocally stating that the world is translated "into a problem of coding, a search for a common language in which all resistance to instrumental control disappears" (1990:206). Apparently the biggest threat to this New World order of informatics is a breakdown in communication, for, as Haraway informs the reader, the cyborg is "wary of holism but needy for connection" (1990:193). Not once does Haraway suggest that a breakdown in the information mapping and coding of the material reality can and does occur. Haraway has no doubts, it seems, that the material realm is completely codifiable, quantifiable and transparent to the electronic eye. Everything from race to gender to daily existence has become information and has therefore been reduced to merely another interface or "window". Haraway explains:

No objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language. (1990:205)

Resistance to this simulated political arena of codes seems futile, except perhaps by sabotaging the networks, thereby denying cyborgs their much-needed connection and communication. But even when the communication lines are broken and the cyborg becomes stressed, this merely interrupts the flow of codes and does not alter the inevitability of a coded world. Teresa Ebert in *Ludic feminism and after* (1996) criticises Haraway on more or less the same point, although from what she calls a "resistance postmodernistic" position. Ebert argues that the new informatics of domination, which Haraway preaches, is not really new, but a technological determinism substituting Marxist economic determinism. In other words, Haraway substitutes historical materialism for technological "matterism" (Ebert 1996:106), without blinking an eye. As Ebert explains: "Haraway erases the very real material conditions of science and technology: she obscures the fact that they are *capitalist* science and technology" (1996:107).

In other words, the informatics of domination – far from politically or economically neutral – creates and designs with capitalist values in mind, meaning that the inferior position of workers, especially women [“the feminization of poverty” (Haraway 1990:209)], is mercilessly perpetuated in this techno-process (*Gestell*). Furthermore, the world or materiality is increasingly being translated into a mere question of coding. Materiality is dematerialised into code and interfaced into discourse. As Ebert phrases her criticism: “Haraway thus has not moved beyond determinism; she has simply reversed it: the economic is determined by technology as code; discourse determines the material nondiscursive” (1996:107). Political change will come about by means of semiotic recodings or the writing of different stories. Ebert criticises Haraway, not because she does not catalogue the problems in the material domain, for Haraway does indeed mention the homework economy and the international division of labour, but rather for the way Haraway explains these problems: “What kind of connections does she make [...] what kind of political interventions and social transformations does her explanation enable?” (Ebert 1996:108). According to Ebert, she displaces the production paradigm as part of an ongoing bourgeois “post-al Left” attempt to alienate immediate producers from their work.

Arguably Ebert runs the risk of absolutising labour and production, but she nevertheless makes some valid points in the cyborg debate. On the other hand, from a cyborg position Ebert obviously still places too much emphasis on the original myth of unalienated labour. Haraway extrapolates her simulated cyborgian political stance by explaining that old ideological questions addressed by decrepit feminists (and Marxists), such as the division between labour/production, mind/body, nature/culture, man/woman, animal/human and organism/machine have all been “techno-digested” (1990:205) by the new informatics of domination. All these debilitating categories have been cannibalised and are apparently no longer of any importance: the “**actual situation** of women is their integration/ exploitation into a world system of production/reproduction and communication called the informatics of domination” (1990:205, emphasis added). Suddenly, Haraway changes the tables by protecting the “actual” position of women in this New World order of domination, while the older ideological struggle over concepts such as nature/culture has apparently become redundant. In other words, when it suits Haraway’s argument, the discursive and coded struggles all fade in importance against the “real” situation of women. Arguably, Haraway’s text switches from “fact” to “fiction” as needed, which makes it very difficult either to substantiate or criticise her political “position” or its lack.

I fail, though, to understand how categories such as nature/culture and women/men have become completely redundant and have ceased to inform the debate (whether discursively and/or materially) on the informatics of domination. Obviously, these categories have become exceedingly more complex and dynamic in the virtual age and have arguably been layered with nuances and multiplicities beyond previous comprehension, as I argued in

the discussion of transsexuality and transgenderism in the previous chapter. However, in my view, the informatics of domination perpetuates the premises that mind can transcend body, and culture can surpass nature. While these dichotomies are interspersed and complicated sometimes beyond recognition, this does not render them meaningless or, importantly, politically impotent. Although, I agree that these categories are fluid, fluctuating and constantly being renegotiated, politically they continue to hold significance.

The fact that more “women” (the category is expanded to include transsexuals, lesbians, homosexuals, gender outlaws and especially “women of colour”) are raped than “men”, is an example of how the categories of “men” and “women”, although constructed and highly disputed categories, cannot easily be discarded. Perhaps “men” rape differently and for different reasons under the dispensation of informatics; yet more “women” continue to be raped than “men”. This indicates that the so-called redundant categories of “men” and “women” have somehow migrated into the age of informatics; they have replicated themselves into unrecognisable mutants, while dragging their power inequalities with them. The categories of “men” and “women” may, therefore, have to be expanded in a virtual age, while steering clear of a “feminist dream of a common language” (Haraway 1990:215).⁶ Doing away with these embodied categories, altogether, however, seems ludicrous. In fact, I want to suggest, that Haraway, even though she professes otherwise, continues to operate within these parameters. For instance, she argues:

To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading an existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex. (1990:208, emphasis added)

Is she not using traditional categories such as masculine/feminine, male/female and gender/sex to construct her analysis here? In other words, even in the cyborgian post-gendered world “to be feminised means to be made extremely vulnerable”. Clearly new technologies challenge exhausted binaries, such as male and female, and make it very difficult to distinguish between “what is mind and what is body in machines that resolve into coding practices” (1990:219) and yet these binaries are constantly being refigured and re-embodied. When I, subsequently, refuse to discard categories such as male and female, it should not be misunderstood as an attempt to sustain rigid binary constructions of differences. Instead, as I have argued throughout, I understand sex/gender differences to be constructed as embodied signifiers morphing in a matrix of possibilities, ranging for instance from extremely male to extremely female, and from extremely feminine to extremely masculine. In this matrix of possibilities “men” are on their way to becoming “men” and “women” are on their way to becoming “women” (or even vice versa). There are no natural or

a priori “men” and “women”, but there are pre-existing socio-political constructions and expectations of what a “woman” and “man” should be, just as there are bodies that materialise daily in different shapes and forms.

By way of concluding my reading of Haraway’s cyborg, I have to add that, despite some of the concerns raised, Haraway’s cyborg possesses many useful qualities for developing a cyberfeminist position on bodies and technologies, which have guided this study’s analysis of techno-embodiment. As Haraway claims:

Cyborg writing must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man. Cyborg writing is about the power to survive not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other. (1990:217)

The fact that Haraway’s cyborg does not claim “innocence” as a saving virtue holds fascinating prospects for women in particular who have to live the unbearable distinction of not only being marked as other, but also being forced into the “no-woman’s land” between fallen whore and innocent virgin. Haraway’s cyborg seems to be simultaneously whore and virgin, and yet neither. If “women” want to survive the informatics of domination they will have to do so not by claiming technological innocence and ineptitude, but also by infiltrating the “boys’ toys” and domains. As the art ensemble VNS Matrix announces in their computer game *All New Gen(der)* (1997) (which will be discussed shortly) no moral codes abide in the digital matrix. Although myths of women’s so-called original sin may have survived in cyberspace, they are thrown together with other life-affirming myths. Similarly, Haraway asserts that no bodies are sacred in themselves,⁷ which means that no bodies are technologically innocent and pure, which places women specifically in an advantageous position regarding gender and technology. Any endeavour to return to a technologically innocent and naturally pure body is exposed as not only unfeasible, but also as a non-option. Accordingly, when Haraway boldly claims at the end of her manifesto that she would rather be a cyborg than a goddess, she strongly opposes the assumptions and constructions underlying the goddess myth, which hark back to a lost origination myth and a supposed naturally pure body.

6.1.2 No gender

This brings me to the issue of gender and the cyborg. Haraway makes it clear that her cyborg heralds a post-gendered world:

The cyborg is a creature in a postgender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-Oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to

organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity. (1990:192)

Ironically, even though Haraway attempts to depreciate all origin myths and utopias, her post-gendered cyborg is permeated with utopianisms. Haraway admits as much when she states that the cyborg is "oppositional, **utopian**, and completely without innocence". She adds that she is "imagining a world without gender" within a utopian tradition (1990:192). Haraway's longing for a utopian post-gendered world conjures an original myth of completeness; in turn, this invokes utopia. The term is derived from the Greek *ou-topos*, meaning literally no-place. Therefore, despite her best attempts to create an ironic socio-political myth without gender, Haraway's cyborg does not realise this genderless state, except as a chimera shimmering on a coded horizon of a "no-place". As she herself states, this utopian post-gendered world may be a world without genesis, but it is also a world without definite outlines: "We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the **utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender** (1990:223, emphasis added).



Fig. 6.5 Rick Berry, *Hedhunter*, 1999
(Braid Media Arts 2002)

The desire and dream to move towards a "monstrous world without gender" do, therefore, exist within everyday enfolded situatedness where the relation between technologies and gender transpires as highly contested and not as a gender-neutral (or post-gender) utopia. The political "reality" of cyborgs can in no plausible way transcend the sexed and gendered embodiments of cultures and bodies in relation to technologies. When Alice Jardine argues that "technology has always been about the maternal body and therefore **the machine is a woman**" (1987:156, emphasis added), she grants a very specific gender and sex to the cyborg. Unlike Haraway, Jardine's gendered cyborg may prove more useful for a cyberfeminist enquiry into techno-embodiment. Jardine's specifically sexed and gendered cyborg directly opposes Haraway's vehement disassociation from origins and "natural" mothers by clearly acknowledging the "maternal body". Jardine's version also challenges Haraway's refusal of a gender-specific cyborg. Obviously, the specific sex/gender position of

a cyborg is always already invested with and embedded within a socio-political matrix. Consequently, it is not possible to deal with the cyborg in a purely taxonomical manner, as the following analysis of cyborg imagery illustrates. Just as there are no natural bodies, there are no sex-gender-neutral cyborgs, or post-gendered cyborgs, for that matter. Cyberfeminists are therefore cyborgs – embodied cyborgs who live in and through their sexed and gendered differences and interactions with new technologies.

The remainder of this chapter investigates images of cyborg bodies and specifically the way they are sexed and gendered in popular visual culture. The analysis is introduced by a brief discussion of the quintessential patriarchal cyborg, the fembot Maria as depicted in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926), followed by the 1980s rendition of the hyper-masculine model of cyborgs in films such as *Terminator* and *RoboCop*. Thereafter a short comparison is made between the Queen Borg as portrayed in *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996) and the earlier fembot Maria, to indicate how the value systems for interactions between humans and technology have shifted in the late twentieth century. The analysis of patriarchal cyborgs will be concluded with a short discussion of three recent advertisements for the Acer Company advertising computer hardware. Thereafter, I proceed by elaborating on cyberfeminist cyborgs by discussing three contemporary visual examples: the virtual character *All New Gen(der)* created by the Australian art ensemble VNS Matrix (1995-7); Australian artist Linda Dement's interactive artwork entitled *CyberfleshGirl-Monster* (1995) and the comic character *Tank Girl* (1995) as portrayed in the film with the same title.

6.2 Patriarchal cyborgs: Daddy's girls and boys

The depiction of the cyborg in art, popular media and fiction has a diverse and complex history to which I can only allude here. One depiction of the cyborg in film that has credibly informed the sex/gender debate about women and technology is German director Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1926).⁸ In this cinematic rendition of the cyborg, patriarchy's ambivalent fascination with and fear of technology are embodied in the female robot⁹ [Fig. 6.6]. The reasons for the ambiguity in the construction of the cyborg can be traced on different levels. Firstly, as Andreas Huyssen explains, the film is representative of both German Expressionism's view of technology as oppressive and destructive, and the upcoming *Neue Sachlichkeit*'s unbridled confidence in technology during the 1920s (1981-82:223). Lang's fembot is the ambiguous combination of two opposing viewpoints on progressive technologies. Secondly, Lang's feminisation of the machine is the coupling of two spheres – women and technology – that were not traditionally associated with one another, as I explained earlier in the chapter dealing with gender and technology. The two spheres only became interlinked during the late nineteenth century when machines started to threaten traditional roles of production and labour (Huyssen 1981-2:221). This was also discussed in relation to the weaving industry and the development of the Jacquard loom. The

disruption of traditional roles of production occurred during the same epoch as women began to threaten traditional gender roles by lobbying for the vote (in the Suffragette movement), as well as campaigning for equity in education and work. The fact that the robot is sexed as female is clearly not coincidental, and does not only link with the contemporaneous women's movement, but also links with how male fears and anxieties at the time were projected onto their opposite, namely femaleness and femininity. Male anxieties appeared at the time in the guise of the threatening and seductive *femme fatale*.

The image of the *femme fatale* thematically dominated the oeuvre of many artists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to which Gustave Moreau's (1826-1898) repeated depiction of Salomé and Gustav Klimt's (1862-1918) preoccupation with Judith testify. The early twentieth-century techno-version of the *femme fatale* perpetuates the myth, not only in terms of iconology, but also its ideology. Fritz Lang's fembot is thus not a novel portrayal of woman; in fact she merely sustains and nurtures prejudices and fears about the feminine and female sexuality. As argued earlier, combining the threat of a rising female consciousness and the increasing industrialisation of reality into a dangerous union between **woman-machine** makes sense within the given socio-political context. Fritz Lang's Maria can, accordingly, be described as an *angst*-filled patriarchal version of the **machine-woman** cluster.



Fig. 6.6 The fembot Maria in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, 1926

The cinematic construction of the fembot Maria also shows a definite correspondence with the Pygmalion myth, where a female entity is similarly created under male supervision. In Lang's cinematic version of the Pygmalion myth, the reclusive scientist Rotwang creates a robot in the image of his lost love, Hel. The fact that the robot resembles Rotwang's lost love inverts the Pygmalion myth in an interesting way. As Pygmalion transforms lifeless matter into living flesh in the person of Galatea (sponsored by the goddess Aphrodite) in the *Metropolis* version, the lost love becomes, not a living being, but an animated robot.

Joh Fredersen, the Master of Metropolis, instructs Rotwang to create the robot in the likeness of Maria [Fig. 6.7], the daughter of a worker and spiritual leader of the working masses. In other words, Maria the robot, or the false Maria [Fig. 6.8] as she is called, is both a tribute – a reminder of a lost love – and simultaneously a decoy for the masses. Being a devious creature by nature (as women are said to be devious), the robot wearing Maria's likeness foils her masters' control when she becomes more than they anticipated. Reminiscent again of hysteria, the false Maria at first obediently mimes her masters' voices and then becomes uncontrollable. Like her other immoral *femme fatale* sisters, the Maria-robot also causes havoc by utilising her sexuality to enchant her male audiences and lead them to destruction. Her aberrance culminates in the scene where she dances like Salomé to ensnare her victims. She is punished for her evil deeds by being burned at the stake – the fate of many a witch. It can accordingly be argued that the female robot is punished not only for her lecherousness, but also for daring to challenge the patriarchal capitalist powers and hence, for challenging the Law of the Father (Huysen 1981-82:224). The message is conspicuous: give women power and they will surely misuse it and consequently, they have to be mastered and controlled.



Fig. 6.7 The “true” Maria, *Metropolis*, 1926



Fig. 6.8 The “false” Maria, *Metropolis*, 1926

In sharp contrast to the false Maria, the “true” and philanthropic Maria shows the children of the poor how the rich live above the ground. She also counsels the poor to have patience while awaiting the messiah. Although she preaches the coming of the Mediator, it is actually she who operates as mediator between the rich and the poor, the city above and the work pits below. In her “sermons” at the Catacomb meetings she proclaims: “Between the mind that plans and the hands that build there must be a Mediator, and this must be the heart.” Inadvertently, Maria is the “heart” that links these opposing worlds, although the messiah is revealed as possessing the “correct” sex and gender, namely Freder Fredersen, the privileged son of Joh Fredersen. Tellingly, Maria is allowed to preach the coming of the saviour, but she cannot also be the saviour, for that would make her too powerful.

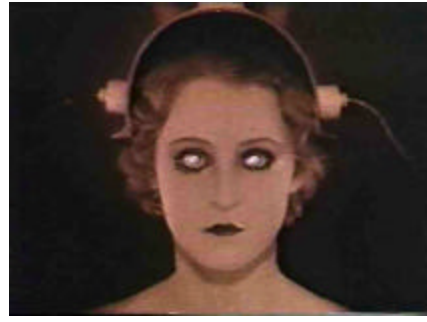


Fig. 6.9 “True” Maria transforms into “false” Maria, *Metropolis*, 1926

The double construction of femininity as both angelic and evil, virgin and vamp, false Maria and true Maria, is significant in this early visual twinning of women and technology.¹⁰ It indicates the simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from technology and the female, for both are apparently in need of (male) control and supervision. In the end both are controlled, for the false Maria is burnt at the stake and the true Maria is married to the hero.

Lang's *Metropolis* offers a comment on the machinist-industrialised society of the early twentieth century, which has since developed into the post-industrial era emphasising information and digitisation. Subsequently, the image of the cyborg reflects these changes from steel machines to fluid information. With the development of electronic technologies, a coinciding discomfort grew with the "femininity" and "passivity" that is required when interacting with computers. Sandy Stone comments on the increasing feminisation required by new technologies when she states: "to put on the seductive and dangerous cybernetic space like a garment, is to put on the *female*" (1991:91). The impending discomfort with the implied femininity of microelectronics has consequently resulted in the resuscitation of a core masculine identity in films such as *The Terminator* (1984, director James Cameron); *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991, director James Cameron); *RoboCop* (1987, director Paul Verhoeven) and *RoboCop 2* (1990, director Irvin Kershner).

According to Claudia Springer, commercial films such as these are "entrenched in a tradition that upholds conventional sex roles and maintains a stable masculine subject position by constructing a gaze assumed to be male" (1993:88). In other words, an attempt is made to construct the male body as fortified and indestructible in the same way that the German soldier corps known as the *Freikorps* tried to construct themselves as invincible and all-conquering during war.¹¹ Elements that represent the feminine and the female are banned from the fortified masculinised centre. Accordingly, the image of the cyborg is constructed as heavily armoured, muscular and almost invincible.

The Schwarzeneggerian model as embodied in the *T-100* [Fig. 6.10] in the *Terminator* series has become the most recognisable and popularised image of the hyper-masculine cyborg. Hyper-masculine cyborgs such as the *T-100* contrast precipitously with Lang's seductive fembot, who does not use brute power, but sexual persuasion, to capture her audience. The supposedly indestructible masculinity of the Schwarzeneggerian model is

however, challenged by the amorphous and shape-shifting *T-1000* [Fig. 6.11]¹², featured in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*. Whereas the older *T-100* is composed of “living tissue over metal endoskeleton” (Pyle 1993:238), the newer *T-1000* is composed exclusively of liquid metal. And even though the *T-100* is able to repair itself, it cannot nearly compete with the adaptability and agility of the so-called “feminised” *T-1000*. The liquid *T-1000* also has the ability to mime any human voice and to morph into any animate or inanimate object or creature. Given the emphasis placed on the process of mimesis earlier in this study, the *T-1000*s ability to mime and morph bears striking affinities with the feminised play between women and technologies. Accordingly, the *T-100* model with its hardcore masculine agency can be described as a modernist rendition of the cyborg, whereas the *T-1000* with its amorphous feminine identity can be likened to a postmodernist construction.



Fig. 6.10 T-100 model (Arnold Schwarzenegger), *Terminator*, 1984

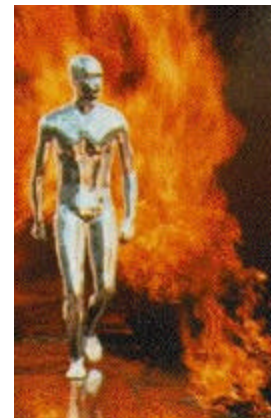


Fig. 6.11 T-1000 model, *Terminator 2*, 1991

Neither of these two cyborgs fulfils Haraway's utopian dream of moving beyond genders into a post-gendered world. It is clear that cyborgs as portrayed in the popular media, frequently become not so “hopeful monsters”. Contrary to Haraway's account of the post-gendered cyborg, popular depictions of cyborgs embody and portray very specific sexes and genders. Therefore, even though Haraway's cyborg bears instances of hope for new identity constructions in the age of informatics, the privileges and power relations that inform everyday realities are transposed onto the imaginary identities of cinematic cyborgs. It is not surprising then that the hyper-masculinised cyborg (*T-100* model) retains popularity over a feminised cyborg (*T-1000* model) due to prevailing sexed and gendered biases. The fact that the Shwarzeneggerian cyborg is redeemed in the end by becoming a hero who touchingly sacrifices himself to exterminate *T-1000* and save human lives, attests to obvious gender partialities.



Fig. 6.12 Scenes from *I love Maria*, 1988

While the hyper-masculinised cyborg may dominate popular renditions of cyborgs, the machine is still depicted as a woman on certain occasions. It may even be argued that in some cases the sexualised image of the **woman-machine** pairing, as portrayed in *Metropolis*, has morphed into the digital domain with the same intentions. A good example of how the visual trace of the ambiguous fembot has lingered is the film *I love Maria* (1988, director David Chung) [Fig. 6.12] starring an evil fembot that terrorises Hong Kong until she is re-programmed. In this instance the wayward fembot does not pay the penultimate penalty, but is re-programmed to behave in a more socially acceptable manner. In this case, women's misconduct is merely a question of faulty programming.



Fig. 6.13 The Borg Queen and Captain Picard, *Star Trek: First Contact*, 1996

One of the most striking recent appearances of the **machine-woman** is portrayed in the figure of the Borg Queen in the film *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996, director Jonathan Frakes). The Borg Queen (Alice Krige) [Fig. 6.13] is depicted as a cruel, persuasive and dangerously seductive creature capable of assimilating all living entities into “the Collective”. Thus the Borg Queen embodies projected fears of returning to the undifferentiated *chora* or the maternal body. As Mary Anne Doane explains: “The threat of the maternal space is that of the collapse of any distinction whatsoever between subject and object” (2000:116). Once

assimilated by the Borg, resistance proves futile, for the subject is dissolved into a nondifferentiated collective consciousness. Losing control over his subjectivity has been one of the greatest threats to the construction of the hu(man) subject. The distress that Captain Picard experiences upon meeting with the Borg again is a clear indication that the process of assimilation is not an enjoyable experience. The fact that the threat of assimilation is posed in the form of a woman is of definite significance. The threat of returning to the “nothingness” of the pre-symbolic womb can, apparently, only be convincingly posed by a devouring female.

When the Borg Queen first makes her appearance, she descends as a free-floating **head**, which is then attached to a body. As the Borg Queen descends connected to a halo of tubes, she oddly resembles an insect with the head in the middle, flanked by tubular legs. The correlating image of a female spider or mantis preying on unsuspecting mates also comes into play. The Borg Queen's tubular halos are likewise suggestive of Medusa's snakehead – the quintessential and archetypal embodiment of supposed female monstrosity. Attached to the cluster of female monstrosities is sexual adeptness: it is not surprising, then, that the Borg Queen is depicted as possessing sexual prowess. She tries her utmost to seduce both Captain Picard and the android Data into submitting to her onslaught of assimilation.¹³ In this regard, teasing out some of the similarities between the Borg Queen and Maria – Fritz Lang's seductive fembot – may be useful [Figs. 6.14 & 6.15].

Like the Borg Queen, the false Maria also utilises her sexual attractiveness and skill to control and seduce men, which is an obvious comparison with the Borg Queen. Both constitute *femme fatale* figures. On a socio-cultural level, the false Maria embodies early twentieth-century fears about women and technology and the transformation to an industrial society. The Borg Queen, on the other hand, represents a postmodern mirage of fused female cyborg identity and a post-industrial society. In appearance they also correspond, for both are portrayed as hard-bodied cyborgs with little reference to the softness of female flesh. For instance, their breasts are constructed as cone-like weapons rather than nurturing symbols. Both figures' torsos are sculptured and outlined, without a hint of tenderness or vulnerability, which echoes some of the ideas sketched in the chapter dealing with technology and womb-envy. These fembots are deadly and their problematic allegiance with technology makes them even more so.



Fig. 6.14 The Borg Queen, *Star Trek: First Contact*, 1996 (United Paramount Network)



Fig. 6.15 Maria, *Metropolis*, 1926

Concluding this analysis of how patriarchal cyborgs are sexed and gendered, I want to turn to three recent advertisements for the Acer Company, where the *machine-woman* cluster is revitalised in order to advertise a computer range. The following three advertisements are relevant for my discussion: the advert for the *Acer Veriton 7100 and 5100* [Fig. 6.16] with the leading copy: “The same, only different” (the rest of the copy reads: “The Acer Veriton will always perform for you”); the advert for the *Travelmate 350* [Fig. 6.17] with accompanying text: “Travelmate. Playmate” and “Meet your perfect match in the Acer TravelMate 350. Sexy, attractive and more than a little willing to perform [...] the Acer Travelmate 350 can sense your needs, even across a crowded room”; the advert for the *Travelmate 603* [Fig. 6.18], “Intelligently balanced” with accompanying copy: “A sensational memory in a healthy body [...] the Acer Travelmate 603 combines form and function in perfect proportion”.

In all three advertisements the hardware’s promised performance is symbolised by the image of a highly seductive female robot, visually indebted to the fembot Maria. The Acer female robot is, though, conveniently faceless and robotically anonymous, unlike the false Maria wearing the true Maria’s resemblance. The Acer fembot represents the Acer hardware’s convenience and endurance, and is appropriately described as sleek and eager to fulfil the user’s needs. The availability and convenience of these computers intersect with the traditional connection of women with other household appliances, which also supposedly operate on the same level.



Fig. 6.16 Advert for the Acer Veriton 7100 and 5100, 2001



Fig. 6.17 Advert for the Travelmate 350, 2001



Fig. 6.18 Advert for the Travelmate 603, 2001

The reference to a “travel mate” could be a reference to Playboy’s Playmate of the year competition. It also suggests that the *TravelMate* is the perfect travel companion away from “home” and all that may entail. The link between technology and sexuality are, nonetheless, not a new code transmitted by the Acer advertisements as became evident in the depiction of the Maria fembot. In a sense the Acer female robot digresses from this model though, for she embodies the “perfectly” proportioned female in her voluptuous form, while also being the ultimate servant in her readiness and availability to “perform” and to sense the user’s needs “even across a crowded room”.¹⁴ The Acer fembot, in her willingness to perform, typifies the patriarchal ambition to control disobedient and unruly females such as out-of-control fembots, witches, hysterics and lesbian sexuality.

If women were to occupy the demeaning place appointed to them by the masters of technology and started to “perform”, but not as prescribed and anticipated by their technological supervisors, what would the outcome be? Cyberfeminism entertains this possibility. As Sadie Plant muses, “there is more to cyberspace than meets the male gaze” (2000:265). In a similar vein the art-collective VNS Matrix and their virtual character named *All New Gen(der)* topple comfortable notions about the supposed incompatibility and controllability of women and technologies. In the computer game/art installation created by VNS Matrix the following questions are asked: what type of relationship is established when women and networks silently start to correspond and to “hack into security’s control” (Plant (2002:265). What would happen if “tools mutate into complex machines [and] begin to learn and act for themselves” (Plant 2000:267)? Who stands at risk when information becomes liquid and starts to spread languidly across the Internet? Who will be performing for whom then? How convenient will this be? My enquiry now shifts to cyberfeminist cyborgs.

6.3 Cyberfeminist cyborgs: “the promise of monsters”



Fig. 6.19 VNS Matrix, *All New Gen* from *Bad Code* game, 1995-7

In vivid contrast to both the hyper-masculinised and feminised cyborgs previously discussed, the cyborg created by VNS Matrix in their electronic art installation entitled *All New Gen(der)* (1995-7)¹⁵ embodies an ambiguous cyborg both in terms of sex and gender differences. *All New Gen(der)* consists of a computer game, a video installation, an acoustic installation, a *Cyberfeminist manifesto for the twenty-first-century* (shown and discussed in chapter two) and a "shrine" to the Oracle Snatch. VNS Matrix's futuristic quest game revolves around *All New Gen*'s [Fig. 6.19] mission to sabotage the databanks of Big Daddy Mainframe: "Her aim: to corrupt Big Daddy's data/His mainframe/His Hard On" (VNS Matrix 1998:38). The main representative or "sidekick" of Big Daddy Mainframe in the game is the "dangerous technobimbo" (VNS Matrix 1998:37) Circuit Boy, who, owing to his direct mind link with Big Daddy Mainframe is almost invincible. *All New Gen* is assisted in her mission to infiltrate and re-map the "phallic patriarchal code" (VNS Matrix 1998:37) of Big Daddy Mainframe, by the DNA Sluts [Fig. 6.20]. They are Patina de Panties, Dentata and the Princess of Slime – a band of sexy and subversive renegades that operate by disrupting and corrupting codes. As the name indicates, the DNA Sluts are extremely disrespectful towards their "origins" and not to be trusted at all, for they tend to affiliate with any creature, irrespective of creed, bio-construction or gene-material.

The trio act as the "mercenaries of slime", and, instead of drawing attention to the supposedly abject nature of the female body, they now re-map the female body and draw attention to the power of eroticised female embodiment. The DNA Sluts also have direct access to the Matrix, which is described as everything and everywhere; an omnipresent mist that threatens to infiltrate and corrupt Big Daddy Mainframe's highly structured databanks. As I explained earlier when the *Cyberfeminist manifesto* was discussed, the DNA Sluts also

have direct access to the Matrix via their clitorises, which clearly subverts dominant ideologies concerning access to technologies.



Fig. 6.20 VNS Matrix, *DNA Sluts: Patina de Panties, Dentata and The Princess Of Slime from All New Gen* (1995-7)

VNS Matrix plays indiscriminately with differences and oppositions between genders, sexual preferences and the sexes. The game is overtly proclaimed as an “interactive game for non-specific genders” (VNS Matrix 1993). Upon entering the game the first question the player has to respond to is: “What is your gender? Male, Female, Neither” (VNS Matrix 1993) to which the “correct” answer is “neither”. If the player chooses one of the other options s/he is sent on a loop out of the game. Similarly, the “body” of the player/character VNS Matrix uses to manoeuvre their tactics cannot unequivocally be interpreted in terms of sex and gender. VNS Matrix cleverly weakens and confuses uncomplicated oppositions between male and female, heterosexual and homosexual bodies. The gender of the main character *All New Gen* is fluid and indecisive, for, as Steffensen suggests: “she could be a girl with a dildo, with a magic phallus, or a fantasmatic homosexual boy”.



Fig. 6.21 VNS Matrix, *Circuit Boy is disarmed by a DNA Slut who removes his detachable penis and turns it into a cellular phone from All New Gen*, (1995-7)

All New Gen's opponent Circuit Boy [Fig. 6.21] (also playfully referred to as Dickboy), although directly linked to Big Daddy Mainframe, can also be interpreted in some ways as being of indeterminate gender. The reference to “boy” indicates that he may be an androgynous coupling of girl and boy, and that he is not yet completely a “man”. His androgynous nature surfaces playfully at the end of the game in the sequence described as “The triple temptation of Circuit Boy”.¹⁶ During the sequence, Circuit Boy is seduced and quickly adapts to “the rewards of willing submission” (VNS Matrix 1998:41). Subsequently, he discloses a more feminine side to his otherwise masculinised chrome demeanour. Also, Circuit Boy’s androgynous nature is revealed by his detachable penis: in other words, his penis is a transferable prosthesis and not a fixed part of his “identity”. The detachability of his penis opens an imaginary “post-phallic” (Schaffer 1996) space for differently gendered and re-combinable possibilities. Power and control are defused and shared during the triple seduction sequence, which provides a refreshing inversion of more conventional game structures, where the player is usually required to annihilate his/her opponent in order to survive another second of gaming.

What is more, *All New Gen's* visual appearance or presence is not even a certainty in the game. As VNS Matrix informs the player: “You may not encounter All New Gen, as she has many guises. But do not fear; she is always in the matrix, an **omnipresent intelligence**, anarcho cyber terrorist acting as a virus of the new world disorder” (VNS Matrix 1998:37, emphasis added). *All New Gen* appears sporadically and in different forms and does not embody a hyper-sexualised female character created for pubescent male voyeuristic interests, as is usually the case in the gaming industry. The epitome of such a sexualised virtual game character would obviously be the extremely popular Lara Croft of *Tomb raider* fame [Fig. 6.22].¹⁷ Although Lara Croft can likewise not be interpreted as an unequivocal sex symbol of the late twentieth century, her virtual construction does undeniably perpetuate certain stereotypical aspects, such as her large breasts and narrow hips, which install female embodiment into sex objects.



Fig. 6.22 Lara Croft, 2002
(TM Core Design Limited)

The *All New Gen* game also digresses from mainstream games, for, instead of building up an arsenal of weapons to kill the opponent, the player is fuelled by G-slime [Fig. 6.23]. G-slime is an indiscriminate fluid that defies easy definitions and “metaphorically lubricates the binary logic system” (Schaffer 1996). The player is constantly reminded to monitor her/his levels of G-slime and to bond with the DNA Sluts in order to replenish supplies. Thus even the process of re-arming, so to speak, turns into a pleasurable and rejuvenating event. The motto of the game is: **“BE AWARE THAT THERE IS NO MORAL CODE IN THE ZONE”**, which is consistent with the game’s liminal positioning between artwork and commercial prototype, aiming to inject alternative gendered narratives and characters into the adolescent “shoot ‘em up” games market.

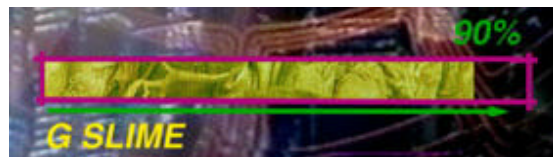


Fig. 6.23 VNS Matrix, G-Slime, *All New Gen*, 1995-7

Also, unlike most other games, the *All New Gen* game ends in the union of Circuit Boy and *All New Gen*, without announcing either of the entities as undeniable victor. By sharing victory, the initial animosity between the two virtual entities is cleverly perplexed and translated into positive sexual energy. The game ends as follows:

Circuit Boy tended her biological components, practicing ethereal modes of convergence in his down time. He partitioned his RAM, slowing his response times to match her requirements. She was highly encrypted, he became expert at decoding. Their surveillance narratives grew so dense **it was impossible to know who was in control**. (VNS Matrix 1998:42, emphasis added)

Although their shared victory results in Circuit Boy’s corruption, it does not leave him defeated and baffled, but rather satisfied. The cyborgs created by VNS Matrix can, thus, not be interpreted as one-dimensional and essentially over-embodied. Neither can they be interpreted as completely dispersed and disembodied, but instead, they mime a speaking position temporarily from different inter-sexual and trans-gendered positions “as if” (female) agency is possible.

In very much the same vein, Australian artist, Linda Dement’s interactive multi-media CD-ROM artwork entitled *CyberfleshGirlMonster* (1995) [Figs. 6.24 & 6.25] configures a cyberfeminist cyborg. In her computer-based interactive artwork Dement makes use of donated body parts, which she collected during an art festival held in Adelaide, Australia in 1994. About thirty women participated in this event by scanning chosen body parts and

digitally recording a sentence or sound related to that body part. From this source material Dement constructed conglomerate bodies, which are digitally animated and interactive. In opposition to dominant notions of the computer as devoid of visceral traces, Dement insists on inserting the female body – blood, guts, slime and all – into cyberspace. She wants to infect men's clean and slick silicon machines with visceral counterparts, in a similar way to VNS Matrix. The result is no shining metallic robot comparable to Fritz Lang's Maria, but rather a fleshy and messy amalgamation – for the female body is said to be leaky¹⁸ and difficult to contain because she seems to seep and trickle from fissures and cracks.

Likewise Dement counters highly structured and hierarchically organised computer interfaces by not making use of an obviously structured menu system or clearly controllable interfaces. Instead, she goes about the process of structuring by creating a *bricolage* of possibilities. Each interface is remarkably interactive and personalised and reveals intimate stories about the donated parts. Arms and hands, lips and virtual *wombs*, have all morphed into “witty little monsters” (Dement 1995:9) enticing the viewer to interact with them by making use of commands such as “*press here*” and “*touch me*”. The apparent hideousness of these donated body parts engages with dominant evaluations of the female body as monstrous on the one hand and, on the other hand, it demonstrates that the unfixed liminal, even ambiguous, nature of the monster can possibly produce alternative figurations of female bodies. In similar vein, Rosi Braidotti specifically develops the possibilities of the monstrous as an empowering position for female embodiment that is “both horrible and wonderful, object of aberration and adoration” (1994:77-8) at the same time.

Upon activating one of these “monsters”, the words recorded for that body part can be heard or seen, or another monster may appear, or a digital video may start to play, or a medical history of the body part will be displayed. Here technology, traditionally perceived as cold and distant, invites viewers to interact and to touch. Dement reveals that she wants her pictures to appeal to viewers' smell, taste and touch and to make contact with “senses still to come” (Dement 1995:10). She is appealing to future senses, which have not yet been developed in the body's interaction with technologies. *CyberfleshGirlMonster* consequently engages with embodied sensory beings, rather than with free-floating disembodied spectres as portrayed in the techno-transcendent model.



Fig. 6.24 Linda Dement, *CyberfleshGirlMonster*, Interactive CD-Rom, 1995

The fact that Dement chooses to use the term "cyberflesh" and not "cybermeat", for instance, indicates that Merleau-Ponty's concept of *flesh* may be intertextually present. As established previously, Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* is an inclusive concept that supersedes the mind/body split. Dement is likewise careful not to fix her *CyberfleshGirlMonster* into unyielding dichotomies. Reminiscent of her hysterical sisters, who could apparently not speak a coherent language according to patriarchal discourses, Dement similarly muses: "The computer-generated image in the virtual world provides **a space where the unspeakable can be spoken**" (Dement 1995:9, emphasis added). She also explicitly states that she wants to "**Make the unbearable visible**" (quoted in Delacour 1999, emphasis added). In the same way as the hysterical inmates of Salpêtrière wanted to make the unbearable position of being female visible through the signs that they co-authored onto their skins, so Dement wants to make the unbearable and non-representable in a digital age, such as wombs, breasts, vaginas and mouths, highly visible and interactive. This drive towards making the unbearable visible invokes the themes addressed by women science fiction writers, who also, according to De Lauretis, create new stories, events and characters "that were previously invisible, untold, unspoken (and so unthinkable, unimaginable, 'impossible'" (1986:11). The cyborg body that Dement puts forward in her *CyberfleshGirlMonster* is thus not technologically innocent or naturally pure, but resiliently embodied in and through technologies.



Fig. 6.25 Linda Dement, *CyberfleshGirlMonster*, Interactive CD-Rom, 1995

Similarly the comic-strip character *Tank Girl* [Fig. 6.26], featured in the British comic magazine *Deadline*, created by Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin and later reworked into a film with the same title in 1995 (director Rachel Talalay) [Fig. 6.27], presents herself as yet another alternative formation of a cyberfeminist cyborg. *Tank Girl*, the film, is set in the year 2033 in the aftermath of a cosmic cataclysm that has robbed the earth of its life-giving water. In this wasteland water becomes the currency and predictably, whoever controls the water controls the world. The ruthless Kesslee, head of Water and Power Company, becomes the most powerful human on earth and Rebecca Buck (Lori Petty), also known as Tank Girl, is the (s)hero who counters his oppressive rule.



Fig. 6.26 Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin's comic-strip character, *Tank Girl*



Fig. 6.27 *Tank Girl*, directed by Rachel Talalay, 1995

Tank Girl, together with her female cohorts, namely Jet Girl¹⁹ [Fig. 6.28] and Sub Girl, are represented as technologically skilled and innovative. They show no signs of the technological ineptitude that is traditionally attributed to women. Upon meeting the “tank”, a

highly sophisticated computer-controlled model, Tank Girl confidently jumps behind the control panel and greets the computer with these words: "My mother and your mother were hanging close". In this short remark Tank Girl discloses a great amount about her own "origin" or, rather, her apparent lack of origin in terms of humanist expectations. In fact, her words echo Haraway's denial of so-called "natural" mothers and origins. Instead, Tank Girl acknowledges the seamless relation that has always existed between women and machines, and, conclusively, between women as cyborgs. For if Tank Girl's mother knew the tank's computer-mother, the chances are they were both cyborgs. Therefore, Tank Girl affirms and appeals to an effortless bond between woman and machine that subverts any notion that the two have been wedged into separate spheres.

Tank Girl appropriates the tank – an extremely phallic and militaristic emblem – stolen from the Water and Power Company and redesigns it into a playful and colourful feminised object [Fig. 6.29]. She redecorates the tank from an unforgiving steel structure into a mobile that mocks (male) aggression. When she needs the tank, she whistles to it and it obeys like a faithful dog. The tank becomes an extension of her provocative and subversive character and together they merge into an inseparable cybernetic organism. The image of Tank Girl sitting with her legs spread across the tank's canon, while admiring "the sheer size of it", obstructs notions of the tank as solely a masculinised icon of phallic invincibility. "Armed" with the canon between her legs she strikes the pose of a "phallic woman" with the interesting visual twist added that her image does not provide any fetishistic comfort or compensation to a male audience. Tank Girl does not affirm the so-called castrated state of women and neither can her image be unproblematically aligned with an aspiration to become male by filling her supposed lack. On the contrary, her visual merger with the tank not only challenges constructions of technology as inherently masculine, but also contests the male gaze. Furthermore, her seamless union with the tank inverts the formation of the heroic knight on his noble steed saving a damsel in distress. Tank Girl is clearly not in need of a saviour, for she saves herself and the clan of Rippers on the back of her tank. Tank Girl's abilities are enhanced and augmented by her tank and together they combat the ultimate powerful cyborg, Kesslee, who is part human and part hologram.²⁰



Fig. 6.28 *Tank Girl*, Tank Girl and Jet Girl in the interior of the tank, 1995

Similar to the aberrant associations made by Tank Girl between gender and technologies, the clan of Rippers also share bonds with the unconventional. They have interesting affinities with the mythical figure of the golem, for instance. The golem has its origins in Jewish mysticism, and is described in the Talmud as a “shapeless mass”, “imperfect”, and an “unformed body without soul” (Oreck 2002). It is only once the shapeless lump of matter is touched by a magical formula, such as a chant or magic words, that it comes to life. Accordingly, it is said that when the word “truth” is written onto the creature’s forehead, it becomes animated. The golem was frequently created as a guardian to protect the Jewish community from physical danger and onslaughts.²¹ The Rippers were similarly created as soldiers to protect their military fathers’ interests, before they were abandoned by their creators. In addition, the altered DNA-structure of the Rippers can be compared to a “shapeless mass” magically inscribed by the coding of biogenetic engineering to create a species of super-soldiers.



Fig. 6.29 The tank after its appropriation, *Tank Girl*, 1995

The Rippers are excellent examples of Haraway’s cyborgian transgression of human/animal boundaries using technology’s aid. Designed to be the ultimate soldiers, they have, instead, become outlaws after their creators, or “military fathers” to be more precise, abandoned them when government funding stopped. Whereas Haraway’s cyborg identity actively denies its

origins, the Rippers, are ironically, actively deserted by their "origins". The desertion of the Rippers by their military fathers turned them into an underground force, and it is exactly from the underground that they plan and execute their subversive and deadly offences.

The assortment of cyborgs depicted in *Tank Girl*, namely Kesslee as hologram, the Rippers as genetically altered cyborgs and Tank Girl as a cyberfeminist cyborg, testifies to different political agencies and cyborg embodiments. Hence, the form and appearance of a cyborg are not neutral, but greatly dependent on **who** (what political agency) occupies its fragmented core. Obviously Kesslee's power-lusting core differs greatly from Tank Girl's more democratic and subversive identity construction. In addition, not all cyborgs are constructed from the "woman of colour" category, as Haraway suggests. If "there is no one kind of cyborg" (Hables Gray 1995:2), it can be deduced that cyborgs are not only utopian post-gendered figures, but are specifically gendered and embodied agents that can also embody techno-patriarchal ambitions, as in the case of the hyper-masculinised *Terminator*-type.

Jill Marsden explains that the cyborg cannot be protected from illicit, anarchic and random liaisons, for no absolute control over the cyborg is possible. Instead, only "degrees of control, resistance, rates of stability and changes of flow" (Marsden 1996:14) are feasible. Depending on whether the cyborg becomes an agent of distributed late capitalism or a cyberfeminist fleshy machine, this may make the difference between a disembodied or embodied, immortal or mortal, hyper-violent or life-affirming cyborg. In the end, the who question remains pertinent. In other words, the political agency matters (quite literally) even in a virtual age of postmodern, fragmented and interspersed identities. These are relevant questions for cyberfeminism, namely to whom does the technology belong? Who makes it? Who uses it? And how is it used? A cyborg always represents embodiment in a specific, situated socio-political context, positioned very pertinently in terms of sex and gender.

Endnotes:

¹ Norbert Wiener first defined the field of cybernetics in *Cybernetics: or control and communication in the animal and the machine* (1948). Basically cybernetics entails the study of the control and regulatory properties of complex systems as it pertains to both machines and living systems or organisms. According to Katherine Hayles, cybernetics was born from the joining of nineteenth-century control theory and the nascent theory of information in the 1930s and 1940s (1999:8). The following three fields form the main focus of cybernetics: information, control and communication.

² The cyborg-rat also became an example of the processes of autopoiesis and homeostasis. Both are concepts developed within cybernetics and on a crude level can be understood to refer to the ability of an living organism to sustain itself under difficult circumstances. Obviously, both terms are far more complex than can be explained or elaborated within this space. Therefore I refer the reader to Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's

Autopoiesis and cognition: the realization of the living (1980), and to Walter Cannon's "Organizations for physiological homeostasis" (1929).

³ I have selected artist Rick Berry's work for this section dealing with the cyborg, not only because the content of the work deals precisely with cyborgs, but also because Berry collaborated on the images for the climax scenes in *Johnny Mnemonic*, discussed in chapter four.

⁴ See "A Brief History of the Internet and Related Networks" by Vint Cerf (2001) for more detail on the history and government involvement in the early developmental years of the Internet. Available at: <http://www.isoc.org/internet/history/cerf.shtml>

⁵ Jill Marsden speculates that Haraway's readers may perceive the cyborg fusion between humans and animals as less culturally threatening due to a species prejudice or a belief in the uncontested superiority of the rational animal (1996:9). The fusion with the machine is, on the other hand, still positioned as qualitatively distinct from carbon-based life forms and in the end the cyborg is "[...] badly misconceived as the triumph of instrumental technology over the natural realm" (1996:9).

⁶ Haraway is citing Adrienne Rich here. In Rich's poem "Culture and Anarchy", she makes reference to the existence of a "common language" existing among women. I quote from the poem: "How you have given back to me/ my dream of a common language/ my solitude of self" (Gilbert & Gubar 1996: 2039).

⁷ Jeffrey Fisher reiterates this point when he compares Haraway's cyborg body with those constructed by Anne Balsamo and Sandy Stone. According to Fisher, neither Balsamo nor Stone provides us with cyborg bodies in the "truest" sense of the term, because they persist in reinforcing the opposition between natural and cultural (technological) bodies. For them, cyborg bodies are experienced in a liminal state known as cyberspace, after which one returns again to an unchanged and technologically innocent natural body. Haraway on the other hand "[...] gives us cyborgs, bastard humans or bastard posthumans for whom the body itself is altered. For cyborgs, the body itself is no longer sacred, but it is not rejected either. The body is not transcended or left, out of hand" (Fisher 1997).

⁸ One of the literary sources that is, according to Mary Anne Doane (2000:111) most frequently cited as the exemplary forerunner of Fritz Lang's female robot, is Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's novel *L'Ève future* (1886), wherein a mechanical woman, named Hadaly, is created by Thomas Edison. Lang's film is, however, directly based on the novel by his wife, Thea von Harbou, also entitled *Metropolis* (1926).

⁹ It is important to note that Fritz Lang's Maria is a robot and therefore, not technically speaking a cyborg. Claudia Springer distinguishes as follows between cyborgs and robots, and between cyborgs and androids: "Robots are completely mechanical figures of any shape or size. Androids are human-shaped robots or genetically engineered synthetic humanoid organisms, but they do not combine organic with technological parts. Androids look like, and sometimes are indistinguishable from humans" (1993:87). However, it is only the cyborg that represents the fusion of particular human beings with technologies (1993:20). In my analysis I am, therefore, stretching the strict meaning of the cyborg to include Maria in that category.

¹⁰ See Peter Ruppert's (2000) "Technology and the construction of gender in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*" for a thorough analysis of the causality created between gender and technology in the film.

¹¹ See Klaus Theweleit's (1987) *Male fantasies* where he analyses the soldiers of the *Freikorps* between the two world wars and specifically their animosity towards the female and feminine.

¹² The *T-1000* cyborg-model is described as a feminised version of the cyborg, according to Bukatman, owing to its "liquid metal" configuration, which stresses its deceptive liquefying and shape-shifting ability that is mostly associated with the feminine (1993:304).

¹³ The Borg Queen's seductive strategies differ in interaction with Captain Pickard and Data. To Captain Pickard she promises power and control, and in Data's case she promises full body skin-implants so that he can experience the exhilaration of bodily senses. In other words, she finds the vulnerability in each character and focuses her seduction on their weaknesses.

¹⁴ This is rather ironic for a machine, given the debate and developments in Artificial Intelligence and the precise problems experienced in the field with computers' lack of "sensing".

¹⁵ *All New Gen* is set in "**A TRANSPLANETARY MILITARY INDUSTRIAL DATA ENVIRONMENT**". The game consists of the following characters:

1. **BIG DADDY MAINFRAME** – the enemy who must be infiltrated through **DATA LIBERATION**,
2. **RENEGADE DNA SLUTS** – who are watched over by **ORACLE SNATCH**,
3. They call themselves **PATINA DE PANTIES, DENTATA AND THE PRINCESS OF SLIME**. They must battle Big Daddy Mainframe and his agents through the contested zone in order to release the: **VIRUS OF THE NEW WORLD DISORDER**,
4. **CIRCUIT BOY** – the dangerous technobimbo (and one of Big Daddy Mainframe's agents). The DNA Sluts must disarm him by removing his three-dimensional detachable penis, and by doing so, turn it into a cellular phone and
5. **A BONDING BOOTH** – where **G-SLIME** (fuel required by the player) is replenished if stocks run low. The motto of the game is "**BE AWARE THAT THERE IS NO MORAL CODE IN THE ZONE**" (VNS Matrix 1998).

¹⁶ Circuit Boy is seduced by Cunt, the Mistress of detestable Pleasure and by Abject. I interpret all of them as incantations or different guises of *All New Gen*, and therefore it is fair to surmise that Circuit Boy is seduced in the end by *All New Gen*.

¹⁷ In "Virtual babes: gender, archetypes and computer games" (2000) I discuss Lara Croft and the archetypes at work in her construction.

¹⁸ See Margrit Shildrick's *Leaky bodies and boundaries. Feminism, postmodernism and (bio)ethics* (1997) for an excellent discussion on how the female body has been "fabricated" as leaky, specifically within medical discourses.

¹⁹ Jet Girl is a very capable technician who services Water and Power's aircrafts. She also develops a lie detector in her spare time, which comes in handy when she and Tank Girl meet up with Sub Girl. She does, however, initially lack Tank Girl's confidence and it is only in her relation with Tank Girl that she blossoms into a hardened soldier.

²⁰ Kesslee meets with a terrible fate after the Rippers, a bandit of mutant soldiers, rip him apart. But Kesslee does have the power and resources available to contract the services of a medical-technician, Che'tsai, who reinvents Kesslee. Che'tsai proudly states: "All the king's horses and all the king's men wish they had the technology I have". By means of cybernetic surgery the shredded Kesslee is reconstructed as a hologram with a prosthetic arm that can shred human flesh to pieces. Ironically Kesslee's only true weakness is water, precisely that on which his power is based. It is, therefore, very fitting that it is a mere bucket of water that causes his final shutdown by short-circuiting his bioelectronics.

²¹ One of the most well-known and compelling stories of the golem is attributed to Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (1513-1609), the Maharal of Prague. Apparently he created a golem from clay to protect the Jewish community from physical onslaughts and the golem did also assist in doing physical labour due to its immense strength (Oreck 2002). In popular media such as film and television, the golem has made its appearance in various forms, particularly in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. It may even be argued that Fritz Lang's fembot Maria is a golem, for in the film lifeless matter is reanimated and comes alive in the form of the false Maria robot.