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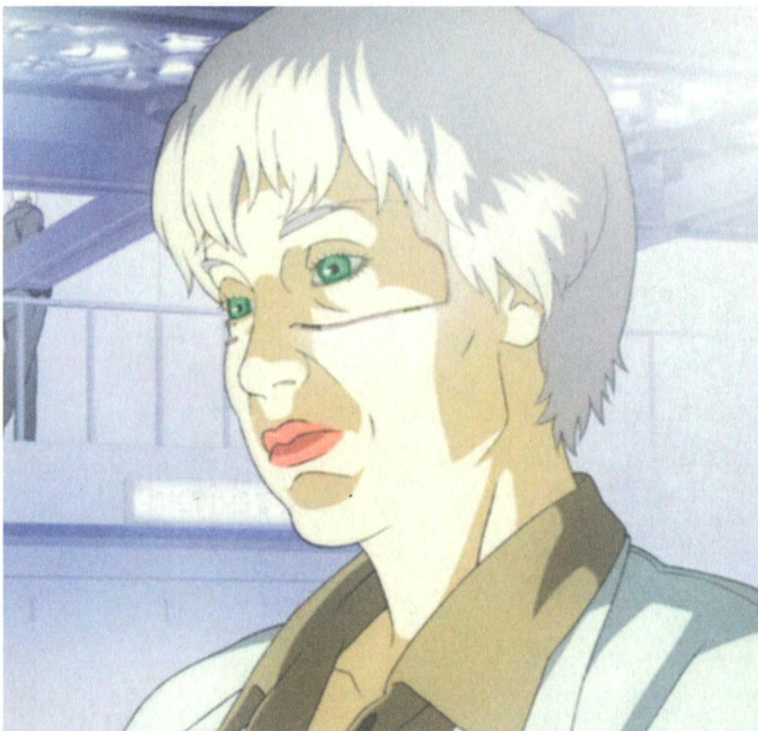
The Persistence of Complexity

Re-reading Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto

Matthew Gandy

*A cyborg is a cybnetetic organism,
a hybrid of machine and organism,
a creature of social reality
as well as a creature of fiction.*

Donna Haraway¹



**'Dr Haraway', a police forensic scientist
in Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*
© Kodansha/Dreamworks**

Donna Haraway, professor and chair of the History of Consciousness Programme at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is one of the most influential cultural commentators of the last 30 years. Among her many insights, ranging from primatology to immunology, it is perhaps her 'Cyborg Manifesto' that has resonated most widely across a panoply of different fields including cinema and popular culture. Haraway's cyborg essay is one of those rare instances where a piece of writing both reflects and ultimately shapes the momentum of a critical area of thought. Haraway herself has become a focus of intrigue within this emerging intellectual drama with her persona even adopted as an anime character in the sequel to Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), set in an eerie future urban landscape populated by a mix of humans, androids and cyborgs.

Writing five years after the publication of her manifesto, Haraway notes how the essay had by 1990 already acquired a 'surprising half life', so that it had become effectively impossible to rewrite. 'Cyborg's daughter', writes Haraway, 'will have to find its own matrix in another essay, starting from the proposition that the immune system is the biotechnical body's chief system of differences in late capitalism, where feminists might find provocative extraterrestrial maps of the networks of embodied power marked by race, sex and class'.³ In 2010, 25 years after the manifesto was first published, we find that its impact has hardly diminished. Haraway's initial sense of the essay's 'half life' registers now as ironic understatement.

The first version of Haraway's cyborg essay was completed in October 1983 and published in 1984 in the West Berlin-based journal *Argument*.⁴ Its title, 'Lieber Kyborg als Göttin' ('Rather Cyborg than Goddess') – taken from the final sentence of the original manuscript – reveals Haraway's intention to take issue with essentialist, anti-technological and anti-modern strands of feminist thought. The essay emerged in the context of a perceived disjuncture in the 1980s between the gathering momentum of technological change in fields such as micro-circuitry, robotics and genetic engineering, and the limited theoretical and political response of feminism. Haraway recalls that she had first used the term 'cyborg' at the international socialist conference in Cavtat, in the former Yugoslavia, where she also met one of the editors of *Argument*, Frigga Haug, a leading figure in the West German Marxist feminist scene. Haug encouraged her to publish her essay as part of a special issue of the journal devoted to the theme of George Orwell's *1984*. It was not until the following year that an extensively revised and elaborated English version of the essay, now re-titled 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s', appeared in the *Socialist Review*. But its publication had met with determined resistance from parts of the journal's editorial collective who viewed Haraway's arguments as 'reactionary or worse'.⁵

The cyborg manifesto not only exposed the limitations of feminist thought in relation to science and technology but even questioned the role of gender as a coherent basis for collective political action. Haraway combined her exploration of the role of technologies as potentially liberating dimensions to human experience with a wide-ranging critique of assumed political collectivities and their associated essentialist or metaphysical underpinnings. In prescient fashion Haraway focuses on two aspects of technological change in particular: first, the development of 'electronics' and the growing power of 'circuitry' for the exchange of information; and second, the implications of genetic engineering, including the deciphering of all life as 'code', so that the production of life enters a new phase that renders existing gender relations largely obsolete. 'There is nothing about being "female" that naturally binds women', she writes, 'There is not even such a state as "being" female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other practices'.⁶

Science and technology take centre stage in Haraway's reassessment of the human subject as a contributory element in the fracturing of modern consciousness as well as a potentially liberating set of possibilities. The technological monsters that stalk modernity are not determined by science itself – any more than they can be ascribed a teleological dynamic of their own – but are simply projections of human interests. Echoing the Frankfurt School – but shorn of their innate pessimism – Haraway reframes the question of technology as a matter of interpretation and democratic control: the positive possibilities of enlightened technological change are simply too great to be ignored, and if we're ambivalent we risk being marginalised in the shaping of the future.

A distinctive feature of Haraway's essay is the extensive deployment of irony in order to challenge various forms of political and theoretical orthodoxy. In this sense her analytical method is her writing; in the place of test tubes we have sentences, and as readers we become active participants in her experiment:

*Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method, one I would like to see honoured within socialist-feminism. At the centre of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg.*⁷

To suggest that Haraway's essay is literary or experimental is not to diminish its intellectual seriousness but to emphasise that the understanding of metaphors is central to scientific discourse. Writing around the same time as Haraway, the philosopher Richard Rorty approaches the importance of irony from a similar angle, defining it as 'the power of redescription'.⁸ Where Haraway differs from Rorty, however, is in her sense that

irony can play a didactic role in the public arena, as a strategy for creative disruption. Rorty, by contrast, insists that irony resides within the private realm of the imagination and has little practical utility. The playful, and at times erotic, tone of Haraway's essay also marks a significant contrast with more sober writings on similar themes appearing at the time: the 'replicative baroque' of cyborg sexuality is played off against the limitations or restrictions of existing theory.⁹

It is ironic, however, that Haraway's own doctoral research in the history of science rested on the largesse of NASA (at a time when more exploratory or clearly non-military types of research were supported) yet her own development of the cyborg concept was not a direct response to the earlier NASA-supported research of Manfred E Clynes and Nathan S Kline, whose work she was not aware of until after her essay was published. In 1960, for example, Clynes and Kline had used the term cyborg to refer to a technologically enhanced human body capable of space exploration, comparing an astronaut with an intelligent fish that had acquired the necessary technical apparatus to move from water to land: the NASA cyborg was a human body augmented in readiness for inhospitable environments.¹⁰ Haraway's cyborg marks an ironic extension – an unexpected theoretical prosthesis – to this earlier 'aeronautical' phase of cyborg theory that remained rooted in a rudimentary conception of the relationship between the body, society and technology.

For Haraway, the cyborg is both a material artefact and a powerful metaphor through which to explore corporeality, technology and the human subject. Her concept of the cyborg remains closer to the androgynous body collages of the modernist avant-garde than many of the more recent and often literal inscriptions of the cyborg figure as a symbol of the 'superhuman' that we might encounter in literature or cinema. In the introduction to her collection of essays *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, published in 1991, Haraway elaborates on her original definition of the cyborg:

*A cyborg is a hybrid creature, composed of organicism and machine. But cyborgs are compounded of special kinds of machines and special kinds of organicisms appropriate to the late twentieth century. Cyborgs are post-Second World War hybrid entities made of, first, ourselves and other organic creatures in our unchosen 'high-technological' guise as information systems, texts, and ergonomically controlled labouring, desiring, and reproducing systems. The second essential ingredient in cyborgs is machines in their guise as communications systems, texts and self-acting, ergonomically designed apparatuses.*¹¹

This expanded definition reminds us that the idea of the cyborg is a historically situated as well as technically produced phenomenon. The specific context of Haraway's cyborg manifesto – the extended reach of the military-industrial complex and the associated rise of neo-liberalism in the 1980s – reveals the centrality of the cyborg

metaphor to political discourse. Haraway highlights two possibilities for a 'cyborg world': a first scenario based on a militaristic orgy of destruction; and a second, emerging through a 'joint kinship with animals and machines'.¹² Like J G Ballard, the writing of Haraway narrows the horizon between the reinterpretation of the present and the creative impulse of science fiction.

The work of Haraway forms part of an emerging post-Heideggerian critique of technology in the 1980s that provided a bridge between Marxian political economy, feminist epistemologies of science and post-structuralism. Haraway seeks to challenge an 'anti-science metaphysics' that fails to acknowledge 'how science and technology are possible means for great human satisfaction, as well as a matrix of complex dominations'. In this sense Haraway allows the idea of technology as a means for bodily and creative liberation to encompass a political agenda that extends across a range of fields, from feminism to anti-racism, that were either ignored or rejected in the earlier Cold War versions of cyborg discourse.¹³ It also sets her intellectual project at variance with eco-feminism and the welter of 'truth in nature' discourses that have permeated environmental politics.

Haraway depicts cyborg politics as 'the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication' so that 'cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine', thereby challenging a whole array of dualisms running through western philosophical and political traditions.¹⁴ The 'noise' that Haraway refers to can be interpreted as the degree to which the full complexity of social reality exceeds the grasp of any single theoretical framework. But in developing her critique of universalist modes of analysis Haraway does not advocate a form of relativism: she is careful to differentiate between the ontological characteristics of material bodies or technological artefacts and the social and historical

contexts in which knowledge is actually created. These arguments parallel the efforts of philosophers such as Roy Bhaskar and Andrew Feenberg to develop new kinds of insights that can take greater account of developments in the bio-physical sciences and avoid the pitfalls of both positivist and relativist modes of analysis. Bhaskar's 'critical realism', for example, displaces mechanistic models of causality with a far more heterogeneous and uncertain landscape in which the relationships between science and politics are made explicit.¹⁵ Similarly, Haraway's 'standpoint epistemology', influenced by feminist philosophers such as Sandra Harding, seeks to establish a more socially and politically grounded understanding of human agency.¹⁶ The idea of the cyborg as a refusal of epistemological simplicity also holds a degree of theoretical commonality with the 'quasi-objects' of Michel Serres (a term later elaborated by Bruno Latour) and the 'assemblages' of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, yet Haraway's materialist cyborg cannot be easily subsumed within the firmament of post-structuralist thought.

Haraway's insistence on the blurring or evisceration of boundaries introduces a spatial dimension to cyborg discourse. The distinctions between 'public' and 'private', for example, begin to lose their analytical utility. 'If it were ever possible ideologically to characterise women's lives by the distinction of public and private domains,' she writes, 'it is now a totally misleading ideology, even to show how both terms of these dichotomies construct each other in practice and in theory'.¹⁷ Her emphasis on the cyborg as a 'boundary figure' recasts space and its 'idealised social locations' as a technological and institutional matrix that is both malleable and open to new forms of experience or interpretation.¹⁸ A cyborg interpretation of space is one that recognises the fragility of relations between the body and technology ranging from small-scale medical interventions to large-scale infrastructure networks.

The cyborg figure also displaces dichotomous ideas of nature and culture with graduated 'fields of difference'.¹⁹ In tandem with late modernity, for example, the relationship between nature and human societies is undergoing successive reformulations in arenas ranging from the epidemiology of disease to the ecological restructuring of urban space. What connects these differences is the presence of networked interactions between sentient and non-sentient elements so that processes cannot be reduced to a few simple mechanisms but involve a myriad of intersections operating across different spatial scales.

In this sense, the cyborg manifesto has its own spatiality spanning the intellectual milieu of Santa Cruz, Cavtat, West Berlin and the Boston editorial collective for *Socialist Review*. The cyborg shares an affinity with related concepts such as 'cyberspace', 'cybernetics' and 'cyberpunk' yet the contemporary use of the term 'cyborg' is different from these virtual, analytical and fictional constructs in that it is grounded in the living and breathing flesh of the human body. Whilst the 'cyber-' metaphor tends to be associated with various forms of virtuality, the idea of the cyborg is closely linked to the corporeal experience of space.²⁰ Consequently, the cyborg can be read as an alternative way of conceptualising late modernity that serves to destabilise the pervasive narratives of dematerialisation, spatial malleability and virtualisation. More recently, however, the underlying materiality of the cyborg metaphor has acquired heightened significance now that the earlier polarity between virtual space and 'meat space' articulated in the first wave of cyber culture is losing its conceptual utility and now that the very idea of 'virtual reality' is itself imploding as it becomes either relocated in the context of a heightened dimension of the real, as suggested by Slavoj Žižek, or simply derided by Elizabeth Grosz and others as an inherently oxymoronic formulation.²¹

1. Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the late Twentieth Century' in Simians, *Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), p 149. I use this version of the essay, published some six years after the first version, as the definitive text for this essay. All page references refer to this version.
2. A character named Dr Haraway, a police forensic specialist, appears in the *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (2004), directed by Mamoru Oshii.
3. Donna Haraway, preface to 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s', in Linda Nicholson (ed), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990), p 190.
4. Donna Haraway, 'Lieber Kyborg als Göttin! Für eine sozialistisch-feministische Unterwanderung der Gentechnologie', *Argument-Sonderband* 105, pp 66–84. I am also indebted to Sandra Jasper for her research on *Argument* and its

editorial collective: Sandra Jasper, 'Cyborg Re/Productions: Encountering *Das Argument* in West Berlin', paper presented to the Research Conversations seminar series, Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, 19 January 2010.

5. Donna Haraway, personal communication with the author (27 September 2006). For greater detail on the genealogy and impact of the 'cyborg manifesto' see Zoë Sofoulis, 'Cyberquake: Haraway's Manifesto', in Darren Tofts, Annemarie Jonson and Alessio Cavallaro (eds), *Prefiguring Cyberculture: An Intellectual History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp 84–103.
6. Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', p 155.
7. *Ibid*, p 149.
8. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p 89.
9. Donna Haraway, *op cit*, p 150.
10. Manfred E Clynes and Nathan S Kline, 'Cyborgs and Space', in Chris Hables

Gray (ed), *The Cyborg Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp 29–33. The essay was originally published in the journal *Astronautics* in September 1960. See also Klaus Bartels, *Cyborgs, Servonen, Avatare: Über semiotische Prothetik*, International Flusser Lecture (Cologne: Walther König, 2005).

11. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p 1.
12. Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', p 154.
13. *Ibid*, p 181. See also Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti (eds), *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science, Medicine and Cyberspace* (London: Zed Books, 1996). See also Donna Haraway, 'Cyborgs and Symbionts: Living Together in the New World Order', in Chris Hables Gray (ed), *The Cyborg Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1995), p xix.
14. Donna Haraway, *op cit*, p 176.
15. See, for example, Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Verso, 1997 [1975]) and Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming*

Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy (London: Verso, 1989).

16. Donna Haraway, *op cit*, p 170.
17. *Ibid*.
18. *Ibid*.
19. *Ibid*, p 162.
20. See Matthew Gandy, 'Cyborg Urbanisation: Complexity and Monstrosity in the Contemporary City', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29 (2005), pp 26–49.
21. See Slavoj Žižek, 'From Virtual Reality to the Virtualisation of Reality', in Neil Leach (ed), *Designing for a Digital World* (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2002), pp 122–26 and Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001). In the earlier phase of the digital revolution human consciousness was widely perceived as caught between what William Gibson referred to as the 'meat space' of the body and the disembodied subjectivity of the digital or virtual realm.