Human - 1 / Cyborg - 0: A Personal History of a Human-Machine Relation.

By Grayson Cooke

In 1995, when I began my doctoral studies on what I then called 'cyborg theory', it seemed as if I had found a new 'outcast' to champion. The shifting border and contamination between what I referred to as 'humanity' and 'technology', seemed like a suitably fresh and adventurous border-crossing for the skirmish I was planning. In the manner of all good budding academics, I had been searching for, and thought I had found, my 'area of specialization', my 'object of study', the cultural figure or character I was going to rescue from the margins of academic and cultural discourse. The cyborg. Perhaps here I could 'make my mark'. Here I would take my stand.

I also knew that this object of study was simultaneously something out there - in the world, in discourse, in culture - as well as in here, within me, my own becoming-cyborg, the marks of my pre-occupation with technology. It appeared that I was already marked, and this in some way seemed only fair; why be tricked into thinking your studies don't relate to your self? What foolishness that would be; of course I was a cyborg, it was too late to turn back and I didn't want to anyway, I had already seen what Terence McKenna so baldly describes as "the wiring under the board" (McKenna).

It was a heady time. Cyberpunk was well into its reign as the subculture *du jour*; I had spent the previous few years in Wellington, New Zealand, going to warehouse parties, bathing in, and contributing to, the noise of heavy guitars, throbbing bass and trash-can drums. Bands like *Laibach* and *Einstuerzende Neubauten* had left the indelible imprint of European techno-nihilism in me. A visiting scholar to Victoria University of Wellington, Timothy Luke, had earlier introduced me to the work of Bruno Latour and Deleuze & Guattari, who together presented a worldview in which humans and machines co-existed in a networked symbiosis of meshing limbs and gears; a cyborg theory for a cyborg world. At numerous gigs around Wellington I played my drums and, under the lights, in

the midst of sound, in the middle of rhythm, always in between one time or another, I theorized my relation to the drums, my becoming-rhythm, the abstract-machine of player, stick and skin, my self as purely a conduit for other phyla.

In popular culture, the cyborg frequently appeared as the much-maligned figure of 'technology out of control', the offspring of some Promethean delvings into the unknowable, or some Faustian bargain with the devil in the machine. Like many others, I had basked in the apocalyptic musings of Japanese filmmaker Shinya Tsukamoto in the cult classics *Tetsuo: Iron Man* (1989) and *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* (1992). Metal shards projected through bulging flesh, the grimy muzzles of weapons emerged from bloodied wrists. I watched, fascinated and enthralled, as the cyborg became a mechanism through which cultural attitudes to and fears of technology were expressed, romanticized and purified, frequently being projected onto scapegoat figures of a dubious rhetorical status. *Robocop* (1987), *The Terminator* (1984) *Terminator II* (1991), and more prosaically but of equal importance, *Cherry 2000* (1987); a horde of shiny figures erupted across our screens, both feeding and allaying concerns about the increasing technologization of everyday life.

The predominant attitude among academic theorists of the time was that the figure of the cyborg heralded a grand new era of emancipatory and transgressive posthuman subjectivity. A renegade in the halls of subjective power, the cyborg was touted as a border-crossing figure, a new form of outcast needing to be brought in from the cold – Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles and others put forth the rallying cry to take note of the cyborgs all around us, and within us. The Extropians and the Children of Mind were revelling in their newfound status as unlikely seers of an uploaded future, a stark or glorious future (depending on how you chose to look at it) in which human beings left behind the 'meat' and uploaded their brains to live in the miasmas of the Net. I remember the calculated cool of these Extropian meat-haters, raised on an ascetic diet of William Gibson and Marvin Minsky; the debonair abandon with which they shucked off all that the rest of the human race held so dear; their bodies, their flesh; salt, sweat, scent. How little did they hold these fundaments of existence, that they could so blithely, and with

such futurological certainty, speak of a time to come when bodies would be 'immaterial' – that is to say, when bodies as physical things would be both irrelevant, and 'virtual' (in the pop-culture understanding of the word at least), re-fantasized on the other side of the cyberspatial divide, brighter, brainier and (*quelle surprise*) with bigger muscles and dicks.

The cyborg was touted for some years as the ideal figure around which many of these transgressive and posthuman figures could crystallize. With the advent of what has popularly been referred to as 'virtual reality', 'virtual' communication and the internet, the cyborg as a hybrid of human and machine seemed the perfect 'mechanism' through which the array of technologically-mediated subjectivities could be theorized and thus 'actualized'. The cyborg became some kind of saviour from the strictures of identity and identity politics; fluid, changing, malleable identities fast became the principle conduits of exchange in 'virtual' realms.

After a few years in this mode of study, I put my studies on hold to pursue experience in the IT and Web industry. The debate was still going strong. The process of bringing cyborg studies to the fore of cultural studies was well under way; theorists from many disciplines and inter-disciplines were finding the cyborg a useful figure through which to describe the hybrids appearing almost daily in our magazines, newspapers, screens, bodies and lives. Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern,* a highly important text of its time, begins with an account of the profusion of hybrid subjectivities and forms encountered during a simple read of a daily newspaper:

> On page eight, there is a story about computers and chips controlled by the Japanese; on page nine, about the right to keep frozen embryos; on page ten, about a forest burning, its columns of smoke carrying off rare species that some naturalists would like to protect; on page eleven, there are whales wearing collars fitted with radio tracking devices; also on page eleven, there is a slag heap in northern France, a symbol of the exploitation of workers, that has just been classified as an ecological preserve because of the rare flora it has been fostering! (2)

Like Latour, I too saw hybrids everywhere. The medical industry, the biotechnology industry, the pharmaceutical industry, the beauty industry, the fashion industry, the computer industry; all these industries and many others proliferated what I saw as cyborgs and forms of hybrid being at an astounding rate. The recognition that 'we are all cyborgs' became my catch-cry, my way of showing that 'humanity' and 'technology' were never as simple and monolithic as the larger commercial and media powers would have us believe. The recognition that humankind has always lived in relationships of reciprocity with technologies and machines of many sorts became the founding understanding for my emerging 'cyborg theory', because it allowed me to in some way work around the dominant ideology of the 'human' and all that this concept has been used for. Indeed, the cyborg seemed to promise the end of the human, the apocalypse of the human, and many scholars took this promise at face value and began to theorize a 'posthuman' world.

A small problem soon arose: Now that we are all 'cyborgs'; now that the 'human' has been so elegantly gifted a postmodern end, what does it even mean to be a cyborg? What does it mean to use that term to encapsulate all that we are, to have found something we can all be, to attempt to install the cyborg in the place of the human? Has anti-totalizing thought not turned back on itself and re-totalized? Now that the cyborg has been brought to the fore, now that it appears it was always there, that 'humans' have always been 'cyborgian', to what use can we put this figure? And more importantly; in the interest of *who* or *what* does the ideology of 'we are all cyborgs' work?

It was at this point, this ontological impasse, that I put my studies on hold, and began working with a web and multimedia design company. I wanted to experience a life lived inches from the screen, as if I could somehow manifest the cyborg within, bring it to the fore, experience it at the core and on the surface of my being, and in so doing, gain some fundamental insight into what it might mean for us all to be cyborgs. Enough of this writing, enough of this reading! BECOME what you see around you, find out what it does to you, how you will be re-written, how your body and mind will be re-shaped. Live

the code, touch the pixels; life at 72dpi. This was 1999, the height of the dotcom boom. In fact, it was almost past the height, the balloon was nigh to bursting, the fruit rank and overripe, the fantasies beginning to crumble. The VC funds were drying up, the big investors were cannily jumping ship and leaving the small investors to squabble over an eternally deferred return, which predominantly took the form of debt.

Friday the 14th of April, 2000, the day the tech bubble finally burst. Wall Street experienced its biggest ever fall in one day, ending a week in which the market lost over $2 trillion in what was briefly known as 'value'. Ironically, I have no memory of that day because I never experienced it. As Friday the 14th of April unfolded around the terrestrial world, I was in an aeroplane bound for New Zealand, adrift in that characteristic no-time of 30,000 feet; I spanned 3 calendar days in this fashion, returning to earth on the 15th. I should, perhaps, have taken this as some kind of omen, for as it turned out, I wasn't a very good cyborg. I didn't like the other cyborgs I met and I didn't like doing business with them. Like a tin-man trapped in the lion's den, I didn't have the heart for it. I was also concerned for the state of my brain; I began to wonder whether my own obsession with technology, and with this vision of myself as the dutiful dotcomborg beetling away in my dotcomborg world, wasn't so much anything particularly deep, any cataclysmic ontic shift, but was more a matter of fashion, a matter of certain narratives of technological transcendence and nihilism. What was the nature of my love-affair with technology, and did this have anything to do with my desire to 'merge' with it in this fantasy of a civilized capitalist cyborgian future? To what degree did my obsession with technology and the technological lifestyle play into the hands of an ICT industry that functions on the exploitation of such obsessions? From this standpoint, my motives began to look a little suspect.

Returning to my chosen 'object of study' after a hiatus of a few years, I found the landscape much changed. Early in 2003, when conducting online searches on 'cyborg theory' or 'cyborg identity', I uncovered page after page of dead links; cyborg resource pages long dead and gone, Trans-Human and Extropian dot-orgs folded, having fallen out of favour with the digi-telligentsia. The Web had morphed irrevocably, leaving the tiled-

backgrounded, bullet-pointed, Times-New-Roman-fonted, plain-text-edited 'Cyborg Links' page twitching pointlessly in the margins of the screen. My own 'Cyborg Pages', once hosted at the address provided for me by my university, poorly constructed using a text-editor and my feeble 640x480 monitor as testing environment, were but a scrap of archival webjunk simmering quietly somewhere in the cramped bowels of the WayBack Machine at Archive.org; images missing, links all broke, tables misaligned. The fantasy of uploading one's consciousness had been replaced by the far more 'egalitarian' lowest-common-denominator fantasy of downloading someone else's consciousness from Amazon.com, or having your own consciousness pre-determined there in stripped down, agent-led shopping-preference form. The cyborg, that gleaming herald of a posthuman world, had lost the sheen it once had, no longer a worthy vehicle for encapsulating the fears and fantasies of a culture enmeshed in a global technological becoming. Imagine; cyborgism *was* about capital after all! Let us not forget; *Terminator III* was a *bad movie*.

Thinking there may be hope yet, I boldly keyed in the URL for Cyborg.com. Surely by now, in this glorious age of futurological speculation and rampant cyber-squatting, some canny soul will have identified the powerful connotations of such an address and will be holding it in reserve, keeping its excess in check, awaiting the true coming of the defining hybrid of our time, the hybrid that will lay waste to our feeble hold on ontological and phenomenological distinctions once and for all. Surely the name, the proper name itself and its rightful property, will have been claimed by its rightful owner. Surely the progeny and progenitor of the postmodern, late-capital, bio/techno/logos will have stood up to be (bean-)counted?

As of this writing, Cyborg.com is the URL for a Human Resource management tool called eCyborg, an offshoot of Hewitt Associates, "a global HR and outsourcing consulting firm" (Hewitt Associates). I searched for some time, but could come up with no concrete explanation of what was particularly cyborgian about Hewitt's eCyborg application – even the page entitled 'Why eCyborg?' was strangely silent on the question of 'why e-*Cyborg*?'. "Hewitt's eCyborg HRMS combines an unparalleled administrative foundation with the latest collaborative, Web-accessible technology. As a result, we

enable our customers to leverage the power of their most important asset—their employees." Ironically, this is probably the purest and most honest expression of the cyborg I went looking for in 1999; steeped in the platitudes of the private sector, humanistic at the same time as it is completely technical, networked, web-savvy, and thoroughly vapid. The cyborg is now so harmless, so lacking in revolutionary fervour or transgressive power, that 'global' HR companies have been able to harness it for its brand-potential. The cyborg is tech-talk, sign value. Let us be brutally honest: the cyborg is bullshit.

Like so many other deaths; like so many of the 'ends' and 'posts' critical theory has proliferated during the past hundred years, do we now have on our hands the death of the cyborg? What has happened to our glorious enquiry? It has gone from speculation to autopsy.

In some way, the cyborg was 'killed' by becoming so cleanly imbricated into the concept of the 'human'. Humanity has an incredible ability to incorporate new forms of being into its matrix. So much that has at one time been considered beyond the pale, outside the realm of the human 'true', has now been incorporated into popular knowledge of what 'we' are; it has been brought inside, domesticated, domiciled, nomologized. And yet 'we' remain a 'we', and 'we-ness' remains unthreatened as the structure of consciousness and being, and thus of power. By now, it should almost go without saying that the concept of 'humanity' has been far too frequently co-opted by powers of various sorts with an interest in peddling and producing their own version of 'the human'. Far too many deaths, far too much exclusion and far too much suffering has already been caused in the name of the 'human', which has frequently served to obscure or stand-in for a much more conservative vision of white, male, Western, Christian, heterosexual middle-class being; the 'human' was and continues to be a 'supplement' (a dangerous one at that) of and for a vast number of Western ideals.

Perhaps that has always been the point. The human as a semiotic category has always served as a normative device, a rhetorical sorting technology designed to weed out

difference, marginality, and monstrosity and either 'brand' it with the stigma of the non-human or, like *Star Trek*'s Borg, incorporate it in order to grow. This act of substitution, whereby the external, technological object becomes internalized, purified and in so doing 'humanized', marked the death-knell of the cyborg as any kind of politically useful vehicle for examining the power relations of technoscience, biotechnology and global capital. Biotechnology, as the most public face of the becomings-cyborg all around us, is so far into its ascendancy that any serious questioning of the bio/techno relation is uneconomic, retrogressive and, frankly, passé. As Donna Haraway notes, "[t]he capacity for multisided, democratic criticism and vision that fundamentally shapes the way science is done hardly seems to be on the political agenda in the United States, much less in the R&D budget of universities, in-house government labs, or industries" (94). Cloning and stem-cell research may be currently considered contentious *avant-gardes* of technoscientific possibility, but they are contended on the basis of ethical and religious concerns, both of which have to do not with 'what is human' but 'what is *right* for humans'.

The cyborg, as the 'end' of the human and as the possibility of the 'post'-human, was always going to be subject to the same obsolescence as any theory of the end. Endings are notoriously dangerous things to theorize; after a brief turn under the forgetful academic sun, they generally come back to bite the theorist on the hand, admonish them for their naïveté, their bad faith, their failure to believe in the impossibility of endings. There are no ends, no endings. The imagination of the cyborg is part of the imagination of the end that apocalyptic fantasies are the primary example of. Endings are land-grabs, apparatuses of theoretical capture, and they are 'virtual', not 'possible', they find their truest manifestation in the expectation that fuels investment, not in arrival. Endings are not postulated in order that they will come and someone will have the glory of having predicted them; they are postulated in order that they never come, that they are always yet to come, that they come by not coming, and that someone is there to capitalize on this *revenant*, this apocalyptic *revenue*. Thus it is in this economy that the cyborg and the posthuman, quite simply, lack value, for they have come and gone. To announce the posthuman; to track its progress; to state its arrival, its distribution through the populace;

this is at the same time to announce the absurdity of such a concept, for it is to obviate the necessity of any kind of investment which would then allow for a return.

I also suspect, as I mentioned, that the cyborg simply went out of fashion. Certain words, phrases and concepts exhibit immense staying power in culture; often they signify concepts that change, Proteus-like, as they need to. For example, the sign of 'science' has, since its inception, denoted widely differing fields, knowledges and understandings. In the medical field, it has encapsulated the Hippocratic theory of the humors, blood, phlegm, black and yellow bile, speculative substances which governed the ease and dis-ease of the body. It has encapsulated theories of the body as a clockwork mechanism, which in turn have echoed visions of the universe as a vast clockwork, stars attached to rotating spheres just waiting for the unlikely event of a comet to tear through their fragile bonds and expose them to the cruel light of an emerging Copernican logic. Understandings of 'nature', too, have at times encapsulated such mechanistic visions of the world, combining simultaneously the biological and the mechanical (Roach 60). More recently science, within the field of molecular biology, has come to represent the body, and thus humanity and life itself, as a function of the information-processing and inscriptions of DNA and RNA (Mackenzie 178-179). Science survives, it lives on, as does capital, as does humanity. The cyborg was never going to be such a stayer, always too speculative, never able to throw off its science-fiction cloak, always returning to paddle in the shallows of Hollywood blockbuster entertainment. In some way the cyborg was always going to be destroyed, re-incorporated into the human, rolled back into some future-retrogressive model. Temporally troubled, the cyborg lived in the past and the future at the same time; nostalgia for the cyborg, would be nostalgia for the future.

Having sketched out the realm of the cyborgian domain as involving such contested 'things' as human, machine, biology, technology, organic, non-organic, living and non-living, it should also be made quite clear that not all of the aforementioned oppositions describe the same 'things', or represent exactly the same enquiry. These pairs cannot always be mapped evenly onto each other, they delineate overlapping but also distinct fields, like so many Venn diagrams escaping each others' borders. All that is

technological does not contain all that is non-human, although the technological can also be considered non-human. All that is human does not contain all that is biological, although the practices and processes of technoscience may represent a viewpoint in which the former is to be treated simply *as* the latter, that is, as biological *matter*. This same problematic also haunts any political or economic *use* of these things, whereby attention turns to what is at stake in their relation. The economic concerns of a for-profit biotechnology industry necessitate certain elisions of the physical boundaries understood to exist between things, as well as a legal apparatus to police what is done both with these things, and in the name of these things. Confusion reigns in the realm of the relations between such unruly things as human, machine, biology and technology.

Furthermore, this confusion makes it difficult to even speak of these things. How can we speak of a cyborg as a hybrid of human and machine when it is not clear that humanity is not already part machine, or in part technical? How can the cyborg cross the human out at the same time as it relies on the human for its own formulation? How can we speak of what is biological when the writing machine of Intellectual Property and patent laws allow for the patenting of living entities or elements as 'inventions', and thus technologies? Our language, in such an enquiry as this, is always delimited by language itself, cannot entirely break free of the way in which language returns us, always, to domains already inscribed in prepared forms and modes of thought. Thinking a radical exteriority to language, an outside of thought or the concept, then, is a thought that has much the same difficulty as thinking a radical destabilization of the human and the machine; there is an aporia of thought here, just as there is an aporia of being, and the cyborg all too easily slips or even dives into this abyss. Indeed, it is perhaps this fundamental unnameability or constant disappearance that has contributed also to the cyborg's demise. The cyborg is, despite its name, the being that has no name, the being that is not a being, that which *is* by being *not*, or *not yet*, or even *never*. So maybe the cyborg was killed before it even began to live; perhaps we are not at the end at all, perhaps we can begin again on this enquiry, indeed perhaps we *must* begin again; perhaps we have never been cyborgs, we have always been human, and we always *will* be human.

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While I would argue that the cyborg as a *term* has had its day, as a *concept* or as a signal towards a mode of enquiry, the cyborg remains of vital importance, and has perhaps not even begun. During the time of its 'reign', the cyborg sat at the centre of a range of enquiries and discourses, all concerned with the border wars or apparent oppositions between what has variously been described as human and machine, biology and technology, human and non-human, living and non-living, organic and inorganic, animate and non-animate, "who" or "what". Tied up with these oppositions have been concerns regarding the understanding of *tekhnē*, technics, technique and technology, each term bringing with it a different orientation, a different history, different nuances depending on the language and culture it appears in. Although the cyborg may no longer hold the caché it once had, the pseudo-objects of these enquiries have not gone away.

The realm of the cyborg; the realm of questions about the role of technics and technology in human lives and in lived experience, the *technological life(style)*; the realm of the understanding or *doxa* of biology and biological systems and of technology and technological systems; the realm, therefore, of systematicity, calculation, information, and programming in general; the realm of the complex apparatuses of power that oversee the use the human race makes of technology; the realm of the evolution of technics and co-evolution of the human, and the role of writing in this, writing as anticipation, as memory support, and as archive; all of these realms remain vital centres of enquiry for thought in the twenty-first century.

While terms such as cyborg or posthuman or hybrid will come and go according to the various fashions, academic or otherwise, under which they were spat out, the larger economic, technological and cultural contexts into which they were born retain their status as the symbolic order within which life, for many, is lived and defined, both now and in the future. We – humanity, the world, the West, the East, the minority world, the majority world – continue to think about who we are, and this thinking of who we are continues to stabilize and destabilize against what we think we are, or are not, and against

what we are, or are not becoming. We continue to research, to develop, to progress, to innovate and to capitalize, and must therefore bring our attention to, and keep watch over, these processes. We go to market, we bring ever more complex 'things' to market, and in doing this we bring ourselves to market also, for we act in the name of these things. We multiply forms of property, and these forms of property – these proper forms – are structured in the economic, political and literary fissures between humanity and its others.

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