

RESPECT FOR THE BODY

& MECHANICAL BEINGS

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At my first job in engineering, I heard a coworker describe himself – pressed for time between projects – as “several interrupts deep.” An interrupt is what happens when a microprocessor puts aside one task in favor of another one; it involves a great deal of memory shuffling and internal reorganization to complete. The small company I was working for made residential solar equipment – this meant, as it often does at small companies, working odd hours and across departments, so hopping between several tasks was routine. There was a certain mysticism to our work. Each of the inverters in the lab had a name (after a small island), and each had their own personality to go with it. I would think not so much of programming them as speaking to them. This mysticism, I think, is why his statement etched itself into my memory: there was such a congruence between our machines and ourselves that the metaphor required no further explanation. Being active in STEM circles, I constantly witness this equation of the self with the machine.¹ We describe ourselves as “low on free memory” and “long on uptime,” terms more directly applicable to computers. The ease of this equivalence comes from long hours spent studying, working with, and thinking alongside computational processes. If the mind of a computer is that much a part of your life, it becomes a part of your own mind.

Nor is that relation with technology restricted to those who create it. We entwine ourselves with machines (and the inanimate) in myriad ways – through sheer proximity, through prosthetics, through surgery, through tailored chemicals, through the dispersion of our identities and thoughts over the internet. Even if not interfaced directly to our nerves, technology interfaces with us *indirectly*, through our pocket computers² if nothing else. This alters us, mentally and physically, in fundamental ways. That alteration is the hallmark of... well, the cyborg.

¹Not that this is a recent phenomenon. For an example from the dawn of the mechanical age, take Héroutard’s account of a young Louis XIII, preoccupied with machines: he playfully said “he [had] a faucet in his ass and another in his willie: ‘fs fs.’” (Riskin p. 36) This choice of body parts is telling – he chose parts that particularly challenge the boundaries of the self.

²For stylistic reasons, we should drop the name “phone” and redefine “PC” to mean “pocket computer.” Or we should call those magic glass blocks we carry around “computers” with no further qualification.

The intercourse of body and machine that begets the cyborg has two predicates: one, the existence of sufficiently complex technology to integrate machine parts into an organic body; and two, the view that the body is not a sacred form but something that can – and should – be improved. As Donna Haraway notes in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, this cleaves the cyborg from any supposedly sacred plan: “the cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden.” (Haraway p. 9) We have the dangerous blessing of a cyborg identity: the means and the moral permission (since we continue to advance without being smitten) to explore entirely new ways of being alive and reconstructing ourselves.³ Mark O’Connell believes so, and states that the perceived advantages of becoming part machine are *already* shaping Silicon Valley culture (and, by extension, technology culture at large). Even if we do not yet have extra robotic limbs and ultrafast reflexes, the cyborg is with us in spirit and burgeoning practice.

This spirit is not always a healthy one. The same man who spent his time several interrupts deep had a habit of curling up with machines to the exclusion of all else – friends, family, sleep. So did I, spending longer hours than were good for me at the lab bench. The tech industry is notorious for such habits; so, for that matter, is any industry with a fusion of the human and the inanimate. Those industries tend to exploit a desire to speak to machines, encouraging workers to spend ever-longer hours programming and soldering. This led to a tricky question: I wanted to know how to respect a being you have the power to alter, be that another or yourself.

I would not look to Silicon Valley for guidance. So what *should* I look to as a standard for how to live a cyborg existence? We have the power to change bodies, but all power requires direction, so which one?

Given that the cyborg body asks to be changed, what does it mean to respect that body?

I should note: my methodology is itself cyborg-like. Haraway describes her *Manifesto* as “an effort to *build* an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism.” (p. 5, emphasis mine) This is fitting for a cyborg: she makes explicit that her goal is not to derive but to *construct* her mythology. Kenneth Gross’ *Puppet* carries out the same sort of work implicitly: a restructuring of what “the body” is and how we relate to being alive that relies on Gross’ perception and creation of narrative as much as anything else. The necessity of such a personal mythos – and the need to crate it carefully – is perhaps more in

³“Readers of the Lost Art” by Elisabeth Vonarburg, for instance, is a story about taking someone else apart – consensually – and interchanging your skin with theirs, which is nearly within the bounds of what humans already like to do with each other, so...

the case of the cyborg, as the cyborg is itself a constructed being. There is nothing fundamental in the work that I do here; I present it merely as one way to address the question of how the cyborg works, what it means, and how we can construct it.

One way to do so is out of disparate fragments. Haraway sees the cyborg as “a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self,” (p. 33) a being partially human, partially reconstructed, and far from natural. Indeed, she states that “any objects or persons can be reasonably thought of in terms of disassembly and re-assembly; no ‘natural’ architectures constrain system design.” (p. 31) The cyborg is a being constructed piecemeal, a bricolage. When building this sort of body, of *course* we will lose the idea of any “natural” architecture: the body ceases to be an artifact and becomes an assemblage of interchangeable parts, in which the only limits to change lie at (and possibly beyond) that body’s biological limits. There is little so fundamental to the body that we cannot change it with a bit of tinkering.

Haraway notes that the machine infrastructure of the late twentieth century⁴ was what made this tinkering possible, in that those machines “have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body.” (p. 11) The literal nature of this statement is debatable, but Haraway is less concerned with the literal of the cyborg than its symbolic, feminist nature. The state of being female (and the state of feminism itself, in her view) is one of fracture; its associated suite of identities seems “contradictory, partial, and strategic.” Choosing the cyborg as the central character in her mythologization of feminism is, then, an appropriate choice – represent a strategically constructed identity, an identity in pieces, with an artificial body assembled piecemeal. While Haraway is more interested in the cyborg as a metaphor for feminism, the metaphor of *course* holds true for any sort of constructed body. Haraway’s invocation of machines is similar to mine: she notes how they dovetail themselves with us.⁵

Jillian Weise, a woman with a robotic knee, very much understands how machines can dovetail with humans: she states “In the last decade, I’ve been wearing a leg with a computerized knee... I vacuum seal into my leg, so the boundary where I end and computer begins is imperceptible to me.” She has claimed the cyborg identity for herself,⁶ as she has seamlessly integrated technology into her body – and by choice, and for good reason, as it allows her to walk. Because of her experience as a literal cyborg and a disabled person, Weise finds Haraway’s work distasteful, stating that it “co-opts cyborg identity while eliminat-

⁴Read: back when the iPhone was a pipe dream. These words ring rather truer now.

⁵This phrasing is borrowed, but I cannot recall wherefrom.

ing reference to disabled people on which the notion of the cyborg is premised. Disabled people who use tech to live are cyborgs. Our lives are not metaphors.” (Wong p. 135) Weise makes clear the centrality of the question of respect for the modified body (in the context of disability, sexual objectification, and in its own right as part machine). She highlights one of Haraway’s failings: though Haraway attempts to create an overarching mythology of the cyborg, her work ends up using that identity to her own ends, erasing “real” cyborgs. In Haraway’s appropriation of the cyborg as a feminist symbol, she ignored the cyborg as practical fact.

Weise also notes the connection between sex, attraction, and the cyborg body, and how this connection can become problematic. Modification of the body will naturally affect sexuality, that of the body in question or of those around them; she approaches this from the perspective of someone living it. She does not want her cyborg identity to simply be a front to make her more palatable.⁷ As she says: “I worry that the cyborg is just a sexy way to say, ‘Please care about the disabled,’ and why should I have to say that?” (p. 126) In asking this question, Weise notes that the perceived sexiness of the cyborg⁸ can overshadow its humanity. The robotic body becomes, inevitably, the sex robot.

This is often the case in fiction, especially when the cyborg is female: the figure of Molly from William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* is deeply sexualized in ways that essentially relate to her mechanical parts. At one point in the novel, she is the subject of a holographic performance by another character, Riviera, in which she (by illusion) has intercourse with him, then tears him apart with her implanted claws. Thomas Foster reads this as “a classic fetishistic stance toward women’s sexual difference from men, which is both desired and disavowed as a threat.” (Foster pp. 71–72) This is obviously an unhelpful way to view body modification, greatly due to its negative effect on Molly immediately afterwards (she did not consent to the use of her image in this manner). In true Gross fashion, the holographic puppet took on both the life of the puppet and the puppeteer, affecting both at once.

The mere act of puppeting, however, is not what Molly finds abhorrent. She earns part of her living as a specialized type of sex worker,

⁶Her website, <http://jillianweise.com/>, bills her as “The Cyborg Jillian Weise.” She would like us to remember that “being a machine poet is different than being a cyborg poet.”

⁷This is a nasty way to phrase this, but it feels in line with her worries, so I’ll leave it here.

⁸If you permit me to cite Tumblr, there’s a conception of the “eroticism of the machine” that cropped up there which speaks to me. The interesting bit is that it seems to be more related to decidedly *inhuman* machines than machines that look at least partly human.

called a “meat puppet” in the book: she disconnects her consciousness from her body, which is set to run whatever sort of program her customer desires (within reason) (Gibson). This makes the concept of respect, both of the self and of others, more complicated – this is by choice her existence, and is legitimate business, so is it respectful to all parties involved?⁹

I do *not* claim an absolute answer for what respect looks like – such an answer may not exist. People and their preferences are extremely varied even when they are entirely of biological origin. The concept of respect as something absolute is practically self-contradictory: due to the highly constructed nature of cyborg identity and the ability (and often desire) to modify every aspect of the self, even *consciousness*, there is no external standard by which we may determine the nature of respect. Respect for a cyborg body necessarily must take into account the reality of the being inside it, which by *definition* does not conform to any one plan. For the cyborg, abstract respect has no meaning.

And yet it *must* have meaning. We can see disrespect of the cyborg body so plainly in the examples above. Molly’s reaction to Riviera’s performance makes that clear: she does not wish to be sexualized,¹⁰ on-stage, completely by surprise. Gibson makes that much perfectly clear. Weise finds Haraway’s depiction of the cyborg identity distasteful in that it reduces her existence to a metaphor. Neither of these acts were respectful. We know that. But the only standard by which we know they were disrespectful is based on the reactions of the subjects to whom something was done. Since Weise raised concerns about sexualization of the cyborg, we might interrogate its sexuality first.

The cyborg body is a queer one. Since that body is so easily changed, it is a short hop from slight modification to a completely transformed ideological and sexual identity: “technology makes the body queer, fragments it, frames it, cuts it, transforms desire;...” (Halberstam and Livingston p. 16) Halberstam and Livingston consider a semi-technological body to be inherently queer by virtue of being a posthuman body: technology frees the body from the “Great Chain of Being,” (p. 11), the same departure from Eden that Haraway makes, and thus makes the body posthuman. H. & L.’s investigation of those bodies, cyborg-like in their own right, finds that they are “the causes and effects of postmodern relations of power and pleasure, virtuality and reality, sex and its consequences;” such a body is inherently “a queer body.” (p. 3) Queerness ties to fragmentation and reconstruction of identity, and thus to tech-

⁹These questions have of course been raised about non-cyborg sex work; cyborg sex work, even fictional, simply makes the question of bodily autonomy fuzzier.

¹⁰And degraded – Riviera was not kind in his performance.

nological integration with the body. The cyborg is queer in the sense that *all* aspects of its identity are queer.

We might then be able to translate respect in sex to respect in general.¹¹ I propose that sexual respect is not based on an abstract notion of what should be done to the body, but based on one's individual preferences and allowances. (This is due to nothing so much as my informal knowledge of queer sex practices, though it holds far more generally.) The queering of the cyborg suggests this notion of respect applies to more than just its sexuality. Sex (especially for the cyborg) is a place where the boundary between self and other is particularly permeable; practices which are deeply important when navigating boundaries in a sexual capacity could reasonably be expected to show up when navigating broader boundaries of cyborg identity, the self, and how to define and modify those boundaries. The queer nature of the cyborg lies in its construction of *all* aspects of its identity: if you build your own body, it can become that much more your own, and that much more particular in its wants and needs. Presented with an unknown, in-flux body, there is pretty much only one way to find out those needs: to ask it what we may do to it.

If we define *consent* as a stated allowance for a given act to take place, then respect for the cyborg is, by definition, accordance with consent.

If we are dealing with consent as a basis, we have to be careful; since literal consciousness is in question, as it is for Molly, discerning consent requires serious attention. The cyborg body, at first, makes this more difficult. Halberstam and Livingston mention one author who “[video-taped] the death of his friend [from AIDS] in order to give the man a virtual existence beyond the grave...” (pp. 15–16) They go on to argue that technologies that “remake the body” also complicate our notion of what is real, going so far as to say that “the real is literally unimaginable... within a technological society;” there seems to be an implicit argument here that “real” slips away specifically as technology multiplies available modes of expression and the means to extend one's own body. Which leaves us no place to stand at all.

It would seem that “real” events almost by definition cannot be literally unimaginable, though. More likely, the proliferation of modes of expression make the notion of a “true” expression a meaningless one; we could just as easily communicate through voice, or touch, or radio waves. As we remake ourselves, our available avenues for communication multiply: Haraway notes that, for the cyborg, “any component can

¹¹ As a queer person who is not formally a queer theorist... we'll see where this goes.

be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language.” (Haraway p. 32) Determination of consent, then, becomes more complex due to a language barrier. We can ask if consent is given, but interpreting the response requires listening *very* carefully to multiple avenues of communication. If I send a request through touch, I may be prepared to receive a response through email. But complexity goes hand in hand with expressive power, as any poet knows. If you speak the *right* common language, so much can be said so very elegantly, so long as you understand the nuance of it¹² – hence the care.

Assuming, of course, that there is anything to say. Defining respect in terms of consent requires that the object of our respect have agency: it must have wants, needs, or preferences, from which consent or non-consent flows. So what preferences does a machine have?

If not done carefully, bringing the concept of the body closer to a machine will erode the rights of that body. Haraway proposes that one facet of a cyborg world could be “the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet” (p. 154), a dystopian image of exploitation and war in which everything and everyone, indiscriminately, are thrown into the fray. She imagines bodies becoming more like machines, and thus easier to objectify and easier to commodify. And yet integrating machines into the body cannot help but make it more permeable, more machine-like, more able to be morphed by others to their ends. Either a positive or negative view blurs the line between what is a machine and what is a human. Working out a way to live as a cyborg necessarily means living *as a machine*, yet still keeping respect for oneself as a human.

Haraway’s other proposal, in the same paragraph, takes a more positive view: she imagines a world in which “people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, [nor of] partial identities and contradictory standpoints,” a world better for its inhabitants but also fraught with the question of respect. Haraway asks what this world would look like: “what kind of politics could embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves and still be faithful, effective...?” (p. 157) The uncertain, partial politics of the cyborg, especially since its hinges on advanced technology and industry, calls to mind Marx & Engels: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned...” The body has lost whatever sacred

¹²This is rather in accordance with the discussions I have had about “enthusiastic consent” with other queer folks. There are so many avenues of communication open in that department, and so much implicit in that communication, that one expressed *annoyance* at being asked outright if they consented to every minuscule act. I doubt I would express the same annoyance, but I understand why they did.

nature it once held, and is now a platform we (and others, of course, if they give us a job for it) may modify at will. In light of this connection, Haraway's optimistic stance feels naive: the cyborg suffers from the same lack of definition and respect that capitalism itself does. In integrating the machine into the self, the self inevitably becomes more like a machine.

The cyborg is also only *possible* because of industrial capitalism. It requires industry to create it, as industry (and war) beget the technologies necessary, as well as the drive towards ever-increasing efficiency. Electronics, mechanics, materials, and fabrication technologies – all of which are necessary to create a cyborg – are a direct result of (and cannot currently exist without) an industrial structure.¹³ There is good reason my leading anecdote came from a coworker: since work is an integral part of one's life, we are most likely to integrate with machines *at work*. This is as much to build them as it is to improve efficiency – I would never deprive an accountant of Excel. This ties to disability and military narratives, as well: a robotic knee would both improve one's quality of life and one's efficacy as a laborer. Both the means and the ends of the cyborg are tied to production, though not exclusively. The more machine-like the self, the tighter that tie.

Machine laborers are, of course, characterized by their absolute subservience to their creators. So how do we keep a consent-based model of respect when we are dealing with them?

Fortunately, the inherent objectification of a mechanized self relies on an unspoken assumption (which we may exploit): that the inanimate has no stake in its own future. The mechanization and thus objectification of the cyborg is possible *only* if we are able to fully objectify machines. I do not mean, however, that we should treat machines (and computers) as human *per se*.¹⁴ But humans may not be the only beings deserving of consideration. To prohibit the treatment of half-machine humans as machines, we should develop some basic respect for those machines. The intersection between machines and consent, however, relies on *agency*: in order to consent to an interaction, a modification, or maintenance, you must be able to act of your own volition. Machines, in their usual conception, have no agency whatsoever. They simply operate as they were designed, or as we (their creators) design to use them. If we are to guarantee machine-organisms their own agency, one way to do so is to imbue the machines themselves with it.

¹³This is elaborated on in someone else's paper which has not been written yet. The claim stands by itself, though.

¹⁴I am obliged to quote Andrew McAfee: "Don't anthropomorphize computers – they hate it."

Jane Bennett's work on vital materialism may shed light on how we can appreciate the agency of machines.¹⁵ Her work is intended to allow so-called "vital materialists," those who appreciate the power of supposedly base substance, to "linger in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects," hopefully inducing them to "treat nonhumans—animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities—more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically." (Bennett pp. 17–18) Bennett advocates for a (re)conceptualization of matter that invigorates it and gives it its own agency. Our lingering, allowing one to feel at a sense level the aliveness of an object, is critical to understanding it as vital. To understand a system involving inanimate (or simply non-human) parts, it is not sufficient to assume those parts have no agency; we must account for them as actors in themselves. Bennett sees vital materialism as a means to this end: "[materiality] draws attention sideways... toward a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans." (p. 112) Conceiving of matter as an actant in its own right means that, by extension, *everything* is an actant and should be understood as such.

Lest this seem out of left field, I should note that Bennett herself connects her work to the cyborg: she states that one can "cite other instances [than a parasitic worm] of our cyborgization to show how human agency is always an assemblage of microbes, animals, plants, metals, chemicals, word-sounds, and the like..." (pp. 120–121) While her concept of "cyborg" is not inherently technological, she touches on the same notions of fragmented identity that the cyborg is built on. She then advocates for the suppression of the impulse to say the *human* component of that identity is anything particularly special. Matter, the machine, and the human are each an actant in their own right.

The best engineers I know understand this. They *linger*. They live their lives alongside the machines they work on, they talk to them, and they learn how the machine itself likes to operate.¹⁶ Matter becomes something not so much to be used as something to be understood. For electrical and electronics engineering (the sort that we think of when we think of cyborgs), this is especially necessary: the systems we make are complex, intricate, in which every part affects every other, through unintended code paths or (so-called) parasitic capacitance. The terminology is telling: unwanted circuit effects have intricacies much like mysterious life forms, living in electromagnetic fields. Those fields are also invisible, and you have to look very carefully to find something you can't see. This complexity and this alien nature stress a deep intuitive

¹⁵Many thanks to a dear friend for connecting me with this text!

link with the machine.

The mechanization of the self, discussed above, stems from this intuitive link. When thinking alongside a machine, the machine becomes a part of you, and you become a part of it. You learn to speak the others' language with all the inflection that language is due. One of my professors, discussing what makes an excellent programmer, referred to this trait as mechanical sympathy: the ability to not just understand but empathize with a machine. With that empathy, you learn its preferences, establishing what it consents to and what it does not. This sort of communion is machine respect, and could well be human respect. Careful observation and conversation in a being's own language is *the* way to understand it – this just looks a little different for machines.¹⁷

This careful observation, in turn, implies mechanization of the self. The cyborg nature of a man several interrupts deep is not an unintended effect – it is a necessary one. Developing an intuition for matter along the lines of Bennet's work *requires* that you change how you view the self. If thinking like a computer is natural, those patterns of thought will be natural when applied to the rest of your life. To respect machines, we ourselves must change. This can be, ironically, an anti-capitalist move, given how much engineering is tied to the apparatus of production: it creates sympathy with base material and thus disgust at its wasteful overuse. I would like to mythologize it as such. The power of the right mythology could sway the field of engineering in favor of a revolution for the sake of its own artistry.

Perhaps the fates of machines – and thus ourselves – depend on that.

¹⁶I was indeed thinking of Konrad Lorentz and the ethnologists when I wrote this!

¹⁷A case could be made for how careful engineering connects to UI/UX design and/or respect for those using a machine, not just the machine itself. Since use is inherently part of the identity of a machine (or is it?), allowing the machine to interface well with its users might constitute good communication.

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