

Ghost in the Shell: A Cyborg-Feminist Review of Mamoru Oshii's Animated Film

Marie Deanne Therese O. Correa

A Review of
Mamoru Oshii's Film *Ghost in the Shell* (1995)

Ever since humans were able to solve the problems of survival through intellect, adaptation and evolution shifted from genetics to technology. Through the use of machines, we are able to cope with the harsh conditions of the physical world. However, the question is whether technology can be used to do the same with sociopolitical issues such as inequality in class, gender, and ethnicity. There is great potential in answering this question in the examination of the hybridization of humans and machines, otherwise known as the cyborg.

In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway (2006) explores the potential of technology to address social issues. She begins with saying that “blasphemy protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the need for community... At the center of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg” (p. 117). Haraway admits to the irony of the cyborg within feminism. How can a cyborg be feminist if it has no gender to speak of? The cyborg theory suggests to us the notion of the language of humanity being rewritten in a higher form of consciousness, wherein humans are better versions of themselves because they have transcended the social notions of class, gender, and ethnicity. It suggests a new universal language to encompass everyone within its use. However, Haraway argues that cyborg politics is a “struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism” (p. 142). The fusion of animals and machines is a political act that should not create a new language but only destroy the existing one. By transcending gender through its fusion or elimination, the cyborg creates pollution and noise that celebrates

“illegitimacy.” In this way, it concurs with postmodern skepticism. There is no one truth, there is no one language; there is no one gender.

The cyborg itself is not at all a new concept in films. The anime platform has been a favorite breeding ground for cyborgs, even as early as two decades ago. It is interesting to review the conception and perception of cyborgs in past films in order to see how cyborgs were able to overcome the problems of society and to understand how cyborgs function in society today. One such film is Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell*, which was first released in Japanese theaters in 1995. The film explores the application of cyborgs in curing the ills of human society. It is based on the first book of a popular Japanese manga comic-book series created by Masamune Shirow. The manga has also been adapted in different media forms. To date, it has been made into a television series directed by Kenji Kamiyama, two video games, two novels, and five animated films (Anime Japan Ltd., 2013). Moreover, Steven Spielberg bought the rights to produce a live action adaptation in 2008, but up to now it still has not materialized. The most recent animated film of the franchise was released in Japan just on June 22, 2013 (Dreagen, 2011). It is part of another series of animated films, which will serve as prequels to the first film, and more animated films are expected to come in the near future.

Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) is a futuristic film set in Hong Kong in 2029. In this world, most humans have been enhanced with cyborg bodies and augmented brains that allow them to communicate with each other through an interactive network. The plot revolves around Major Motoko Kusanagi, who works for a branch of the government created to protect the interactive network. Due to the demands of her work, Kusanagi is supplied with a specialized cyborg body, and almost all of her body is already machine. Her only remaining link to her human self is a few of her human brain cells that contain her ghost, or her human soul. Because she is almost all-machine, she begins to question the meaning of humanity and whether humanity is the limit that hinders her from moving forward.

Kusanagi's idea of moving forward is the transcendence of the flaws of human society. The film begins with the text “In the near future—corporate networks reach out to the stars, electrons and light flow throughout the universe. The advance of computerisation, however, has not yet wiped out nations and ethnic groups” (Oshii, 1995). The film recognizes the power of computerized networks to transcend human concepts. However, these dividing concepts still survived despite computerization.

The persistence of gender is seen in how all the cyborg characters retain their respective birth gender. The humans are supplied with artificial bodies that correspond to the gender they are born with, carrying over the human concept to the supposedly new entity of the cyborg. Kusanagi is obviously female; she has a female voice, a female body, and female proportions. However, her body's strength is supposedly equal to (or even greater than) that of the male cyborgs,

even though their bodies appear different. The equality of strength despite the differences of anatomy may be the embodiment of Catherine Belsey's notion that feminism is a political stance of equality of power rather than equality of anatomy (Belsey, 2000).

However, the notions of drag and performativity (Butler, 2000) are still distinct in the fusion of the best male and female qualities in Kusanagi's cyborg body. While technology can enable equality between the male and female bodies, Kusanagi is still assigned female powers, such as stealth and agility, as compared to her male cyborg partner who specializes in big guns and brute strength. The male and female characteristics of the powers are still identifiable, such that Kusanagi's strength is like a man's despite her female body. The cyborg's capabilities are still presented as male in the female (otherwise known as drag), which, as Butler puts it, "reflects mundane impersonations" (p. 161).

The question being raised here is of identity: should a cyborg have a gender, given that it is no longer human? If it should have a gender, then what should its gender be? It seems that the cyborg's gender is no different from that of humans. In fact, cyborgs only have two genders in the film: male and female. The persistence of gender in cyborgs is rooted in the distinction between human and machine. The cyborgs do not recognize themselves as new entities but as humans with improved capabilities.

The film begins to blur the distinction between human and machine when Kusanagi encounters the fugitive known as the "Puppetmaster." The Puppetmaster is a rogue computer program that gained notoriety by infiltrating the interactive network. The people in the government refer to the Puppetmaster as "him," but they explain that this reference is only by convenience; they acknowledge that the Puppetmaster does not have a gender because it is a completely artificial being. Also, the Puppetmaster, despite having a male voice, takes up a female body. In this way, the identity of the Puppetmaster relies solely on arbitrary choices that could have been made any other way (Oshii, 1995).

The Puppetmaster more closely resembles the Harawayan cyborg that is capable of transcending gender. However, the Puppetmaster is a machine and not a cyborg. In the film, many of the cyborg characters begin to feel uneasy when the Puppetmaster claims to be a completely artificial sentient being. The sentience of cyborgs is attributed to their ghosts—the human part of them. The Puppetmaster claims that ghosts are no longer needed to be alive, and that claim shakes the very foundations of humanity. Kusanagi begins to realize that humanity is not rooted in the existence of her human brain cells, but on how she is treated. If so, then humanity is a very unstable concept. She discovers that "human," much like the terms "male" or "female," is merely an insistence of a noun. As Haraway (2006) puts it:

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 the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. (p. 122)

We now see the analogy that the film makes between humanity and gender. The cyborgs depict the anatomical battle of gender, but the cyborg is not transcendent because of the idea of the "ghost in the shell." There is still that distinct separation of what is human (the ghost) and what is machine (the shell), and this distinction prevents them from realizing that they are new entities altogether. The film tries to remedy this when the Puppetmaster convinces Kusanagi to merge her human ghost with his artificial one, thereby creating a cyborg ghost and further blurring the distinction between human and machine. The cyborg entity is now complete. After the Puppetmaster and Kusanagi merge their ghosts, the new entity they form introduces itself as neither Kusanagi nor the Puppetmaster.

The cyborg's existence pollutes and bastardizes the central dogma of humanity by proposing a state of being wherein the cyborg is both human and machine and neither at the same time. Applying this consciousness to gender, the male becomes female and the female male, defeating the dilemmas of performativity and gender roles. However, the irony here is that the cyborg creates a new gender—the non-gender. It is able to disrupt the current dogma of gender by trying to become all genders or neither at once, but by doing so, it replaces it with its own dogma. However, this is not to say that the cyborg tried in vain. The cyborg was a necessary step towards understanding our identity. When Kusanagi expressed her qualms about humanity, she said she cannot help but "feel confined—only free to expand myself within boundaries" (Oshii, 1995). The cyborg may not have crossed the boundaries of humanity, but it managed to blur them.

The film acknowledges that the cyborg has a long way to go before it is truly able to transcend humanity. In the end, the fusion of Kusanagi and the Puppetmaster occupies a child-like machine body, and it asks "Where does the newborn go from here?" (Oshii, 1995). The cyborg is still young, and it can go in any direction. We have yet to see whether it will take a direction that will allow it to finally cross the human limit.

References

- Anime Japan Ltd. (2013, February 9). 'Ghost in The Shell: Arise.' Anime series set for release this year. Retrieved from The Asahi Shimbun. http://ajw.asahi.com/article/cool_japan/anime_news/AJ201302090041
- Belsey, C. (2000). A future for materialist feminist criticism? In A. Tripp (Ed.), *Gender* (pp. 29-41). Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave. (Original work published 1991)
- Butler, J. (2000). Critically queer. In A. Tripp (Ed.), *Gender* (pp. 154-164). Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave. (Original work published in 1993)
- Dreagen. (2011, March 21). Steven Spielberg Takes on Ghost in the Shell. Retrieved from Twisted Manga. http://www.twistedmanga.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=197:steven-spielberg-takes-on-ghost-in-the-shell&catid=3:everything&Itemid=7
- Haraway, D. (2006). A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century. In J. Weiss, J. Nolan & J. Hunsinger (Eds.), *International handbook of virtual learning environments* (117-158). The Netherlands: Springer.
- Oshii, M. (Director). (1995). *Ghost in the Shell* [Motion picture]. Japan: Palm Pictures.
- Oshii, M. (Director). (2005). *Ghost in the Shell 2 - Innocence* [Motion picture]. United States: Dreamworks Video.

MARIE DEANNETHERESE O. CORREA is a student of the College of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman. She is taking up Broadcast Communication with a focus on writing and production (corresponding author: deniseocampocorrea@gmail.com).