Computing Technologies and Science Fiction Cinema

G

Rocío Carrasco-Carrasco
University of Huelva, Spain

INTRODUCTION

The intersections of the human body with the latest computing technologies have opened up numerous debates on what it means to be human in our technologically mediated societies. Classical dichotomies body/mind, human/machine, natural/artificial seem to be dissolving in contemporary Western societies, and the limits of the "organic" body become difficult to establish. The result is a new ontology of the body. Practices such as cloning, reproductive technologies, robotics and implants, among others, have become familiar facets of our global societies that place the human body in an assemblage with technology. Moreover, the world is dominated by technological images that have become part of our daily life and that have created new spaces for representation (and eventually for living), such as the virtual world or cyberspace.

The present paper privileges the body as being key to understanding our intricate relationship with the latest advances in computing and robotics in contemporary societies. In doing so, it critically entrenches with a specific movement called "new materialism", whereby matter is not perceived as fixed or passive but rather as a dynamic and shifting process. Specifically, I will stress the importance of approaching popular representations of the so-called "body in transit", as this shifting idea of corporeality reflects contemporary anxieties and interests fueled by the relationship between physical bodies, computing technologies and gender representation. For this purpose, this work will focus on the notion of the fluid body or "body in transit" as represented in US popular Sci-Fi cinema to contend that this posthuman figuration is still informed by gendered practices and dominant structures of power, despite its hybrid nature.

Computing and media technologies are everywhere and extend to the human body, affecting the way gender has been traditionally understood. As some feminist research has highlighted, technology is affected by gender relations. Technology in general has been traditionally considered as a sign of men's power and masculinity defined in terms of technological capabilities. Nevertheless, current discourses have provided new definitions of technology, of gender identity and of what being human means. This inevitably challenges traditional power associations between men and technology. As Barbara Becker argues, the "difference between natural and artificial, real and virtual, material and immaterial phenomena is not an ontological one, but changes according to technological improvements and methods of communication" (Becker, 2000, p. 361). In the same way, definitions of gender also change with time, affected by technological developments.

Cybernetics, as a set of media technologies, offers grounds from where to analyze gender in contemporary contexts. Cyberspace has offered numerous possibilities for the redefinition of the human body outside traditional boundaries, suggesting a liberation of socio-cultural constraints. This is precisely the concern of many feminist theories that aim at deconstructing the human subject from binary polarization, implying the dissolution of sexualized identities in cyberspace.

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Specifically, the discipline called "cyberfeminism" sees cyberspace as a gender-neutral site that enables women to communicate and act outside the constraints of male-dominated physical realms. Sadie Plant and many other cyberfeminists offer optimistic—sometimes utopian—views of the relationship between women and technology in the virtual age. In her essay "On the Matrix: Cyberfeminist Simulations," Plant argues that virtual worlds "undermine both the world-view and the material reality of two thousands years of patriarchal control" (Plant, 2000, p. 265).

Yet, contrary to cyberfeminist postulates about the neutrality of cyberspace for gender relations, popular discourses like Sci-Fi cinema normally rely on this distinction when depicting the interaction between the body and computing technologies, inevitably adopting gender dualisms. Cyberspace is constructed by existing social, cultural and economic structures, and gender stereotypes and sexed body descriptions are normally employed in order to suggest authenticity to these visual texts. This is not to say, however, that popular discourses do not offer fresh instances of flesh and computing technologies. As argued here, contemporary US cinema has overcome old visualizations of static and gendered cyborg figures as represented by figures like The Terminator or Robocop, and offers instead images of fluid subjectivities as embodied by characters that live in transit between reality and virtuality, as shown in movies like *The Matrix* (1999), *eXistenZ* (1999), *Avatar* (2009), *Surrogates* (2009), *Inception* (2010), *Tron: Legacy* (2010) or *Ex Machina* (2015), among others. This idea of fluidity is achieved by a series of visual and narrative strategies that partly help overcome the obstacles posed by cultural products that, due to their conditions of production, cannot break away from the hegemonic assumptions of gender identities. It is precisely the paradoxical nature of cinematic bodies in transit what I intend to emphasize here, especially since they articulate contemporary cultural and gender concerns.

BACKGROUND

In cultures where the organic "natural" body is gradually disappearing and giving way to fruitful instances of flesh and machine, the current outburst of debates on corporeality becomes, if less, paradoxical. The body remains at the core of many contemporary analyses, proving to be a useful tool for examining culture and gender. As Arthur Kroker contends, "[w]hile the triumph of mass media, particularly television, may portend a future of pure simulation, the overriding cultural reality is that the image machine is itself haunted by memories of the body" (Kroker, 2012, p. 1). The body becomes, then, an archive from where to analyze contemporary society. Yet, the new body that emerges—also known as the posthuman body—is perceived as a contested notion linked to fluidity, hybridity and complexity. Kroker talks about "body drift" to refer to the fact that we no longer inhabit a body in any meaningful sense of the term but rather "occupy a multiplicity of bodies—imaginary, sexualized, disciplined, gendered, laboring, technologically augmented bodies" (p. 2). The idea of the fluctuating, fluid or hybrid body has been theorized by scholars like Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayles, Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti, among others. These writings open up a new tradition of critical feminism that addresses the complexity of our bodies in technologized cultures.

One of the most striking examples of a hybrid body is that proposed by Donna Haraway in her material-semiotic approach "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985). As she sets out to defend, the cyborg is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities. The popularized cyborg figure has greatly stimulated many insights into the gender/power relations with technology, leading to consider the possibilities that technoscience offers women. Indeed, as she defines it, the cyborg is a fictional hybrid of machine and organism, "a creature in a post-gender world