The Cyborg Figure in Relation to Femininity, Humanity and Technology: A Literature Perspective

Wanwei Zheng

Yew Chung College of Early Childhood Education, Hong Kong, China

Abstract: The essay gives a brief evaluation of two representative cyberpunk works of fiction on the identification of femininity and humanity. They shed light on the image of the cyborg and examine, respectively, Haraway's cyborg manifesto and the initial recognition of the cyborg figure in China. The essay argues that both have extended the traditional gender identity beyond the scope of the physical human body and in different ways. Haraway's cyborg manifesto offers a comprehensive and innovative view of the social identity of the cyborg figure and its close relationship to actual human society. Meanwhile, such cyborg-related narratives are starting to emerge into the society in modern China.

Keywords: A Literature Perspective, Humanity, Technology

1. Introduction

In a broad sense, literary genres have demonstrated their central role to literature's meaning. It is argued that they not only represent the system that controls free articulation of social attitudes but serve as a mechanism to present resistance and appropriate extension of relevant social implications. [1]Of all the genres, due to its incorporation of critical reflection on issues of feminism and humanity, science-related fiction, and especially cyberpunk science fiction, has most challenged the conservative stance on social identification and recognition. By contrast, conventional science fiction, along with traditional, realistic works of fiction, has been historically regarded as a male-oriented field in which discussions of feminism, humanity and other issues related to social construction are ignored or simply presented in a way that conforms to society's traditional patriarchal and hierarchical structure. In this sense cyberpunk fiction, an innovative genre, has drawn the attention of a great number of feminist and humanist writers since the 1970s because it offers a platform for them to articulate freely their views on the current situation and expectations of future life. [2]In these literary works worlds with utopian views are established to create an ideal society that runs in parallel to the dystopian reality. In these imaginary worlds, gender inequalities and other problems that are closely tied to feminism and humanity are addressed and resolved by metaphorical assimilation of controversial social concepts, such as male vs. female and human vs. machine.

2. Reflections on femininity and humanity in selected works of cyberpunk fiction

2.1 The implications of the prevalence of cyberpunk fiction

It has been argued that a distinct purpose of science fiction is to explore the correlation between technology and humanity.[3] As a result, cyberpunk fiction, which appeared in the early 1990s, is regarded as a sub-genre of science fiction to investigate human couplings by means of technology, especially "cyborg technologies". However, it appears to be different from the conventional categorisation of science fiction, since it aims to illustrate how technology may function in future society through three primary themes: futuristic extrapolation; tech-paradigms; and the ubiquity of the cyborg.[4]

First, in contrast to the portrayal of the future by science fiction writers from the previous Cold War era through post-apocalyptic or pre-apocalyptic nuclear scenes, the view of the future by cyberpunk authors is usually non-apocalyptic, based on the current situation.

The second theme of cyberpunk fiction is that it redefines the boundary between the separate elements of dichotomies such as female vs. male, nature vs. science and physical body vs. mind.[4]This can be initially observed in the term "cyberpunk", itself an artificial combination of the cutting-edge

notion of cybernetics and the aesthetic concept of punk, indicating a lack of adequate technology.

Since, in contrast to other genres of cyberpunk, it is the female cyborg who is the prominent character in cyberpunk fiction,[5]issues of gender identity and humanity are raised. To be specific, although the application of technologies in cyberpunk literature already challenges the traditional dichotomy of gender and acknowledges new restrictions on the cultural and social context, such fictional cyborg characters are still described by the traditional category of social gender .[4]

2.2 "No Woman Born": The binary opposition between cybernetic ascendance and the achievement of social identity

The famous cyberpunk fiction work "No Woman Born", by C.L. Moore, was first published in 1944. It depicts a perfect human-cyborg hybrid image of a world-famous performer called Deirdre. The tale begins with the description of Deirdre's "death" and, most importantly, the destruction in a theatre fire of her beautiful and fragile physical body.

In a great number of cyberpunk fiction works, such as William Gibson's "Neuromancer" [6]and Pat Cadigan's "Mindplayers" (1987),[7] the cyborg image is within the scope of the concept of femininity from a masculine perspective. By contrast, it should be noted that in the story of "No Woman Born", although in the first place such a self-consciousness is conducted out of the male-dominated position of social identity, Deirdre's conscious performance goes beyond this restriction. Moreover, it is worth paying close attention to the relationship between Maltzer and Deirdre. As the designer and architect of Deirdre's technologically devised body, Maltzer believes that he has the absolute right and power to determine Deirdre's decisions and, further, affirms his complete control over her by repeating that he created her.[8] This conviction is not presented arrogantly but inversely, in a struggling sense.

Until now in Moore's work, a binary opposition is observed between Deirdre's capabilities and ascendance to her external form of cyborg and her feelings of isolation that are driven by her humanity and femininity. Despite her attempts to achieve contact with her audience by returning to the stage, it seems impossible for her have any real connection with her public due to Maltzer's accidental success in designing her cyborg body.[8] Unfortunately, she is still positioned outside of the framework of the existing social network, and is able to realise neither her personal potential nor a communal creation of gender and other social identities. [9]In other words, the image of Deirdre in "No Woman Born" developed Deirdre's gender identity and humanity into cyborg form yet failed to achieve constant interpersonal interaction due to the lack of others who are like her. The work confirms the great potential of the cyborg form to be treated as human, yet leaves space for discussion on how, in the long term, it is to achieve its gender identity and humanity.

2.3 "The Girl Who Was Plugged In": The illusory integrity of femininity and humanity

The final cyberpunk fiction work to be addressed in this essay is "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" by James Tiptree, Jr. Similar to "No Woman Born", the story is articulated from the perspective of a male third party. At the beginning of the work this anonymous narrator introduces to the audience a disfigured woman called P. Burke. Interestingly, this female of an "unsatisfactory" appearance later works as a company's commercial spokeswoman, having been reincarnated by means of technology and embodied as a perfect form of the feminine in the stereotypical image of a woman. The author depicts that scenes in which P. Burke undertakes the traditional courses in the laboratory to teach her how to behave in order to shape a brand new and perfect version of herself, which is later known as Delphi. [10]In this sense, P. Burke has achieved her radical reformation after the re-embodiment, whereas the previous version of her is placed out of the scope of the social contexts due to her physical malformation. Yet there are differences in how Moore and Tiptree approach their story. Compared to Moore, Tiptree portrays most creatively the atmosphere in which the story unfolds, specifically addressing an unnamed "you" as listener. This could be presumed to be male, as males constitute the majority of cyberpunk fiction fans.[11]

For the plot, Tiptree imagines a future view of life in which direct marketing strategies, such as advertising, are illegal. To develop their businesses commercial corporations have to look for alternatives, and the Delphi body is an effective spokeswoman for GTX products. The narrator draws attention to this by describing it as "the sweet little body", "the darlingest child", "honeypot" and pornography for angels.[10]This further implies that the readers' focus has shifted from the often-distracted description of P. Burke's original monstrous figure to Delphi, the walking embodiment of beauty and an enviable example of femininity. In other words, Tiptree establishes a confrontation

between the characters created P. Burke and Delphi, in the sense that it is due to her grotesque appearance that P. Burke loses her audience's attention and even her own social identity, while Delphi is an idealised presentation of femininity and herself establishes cultural norms by promoting the best clothes to wear and products to purchase. [12]

For this reason it seems unreasonable to define P. Burke as pure victim, despite reincarnation having offered her the liberation from normal interaction with society and restricted her basic sensations. On the one hand, although it is claimed that P. Burke's existence in the Delphi body stands not for humanisation but merely confusion, since P. Burke's key addiction is distant social interaction rather than close relationships, it can also be observed that P. Burke does indeed realise her access to human emotional experience. She achieves it from various perspectives and attains personal growth through mixed social interpersonal connections, developing a social identity and humanity that would be unimaginable to her original version. In other words, taking into consideration the public's empathy for and inclusion of others, it can be boldly argued that at that initial stage P. Burke cannot even be considered to be a real human being.[9]

3. From a postmodern perspective: Cyber feminism and humanities

3.1 Social implications of Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs"

As analysed above, the cyborg serves as one of the most influential models in the public's contemporary fantasies about post-human portraits. It can be seen that the previous narrative description of cyborg images sheds light on the correctness of a series of conventional dichotomies in the western world, such as emotion vs. rationality, female vs. male and humanity vs. technology.[13]Cyborg fiction further aims at establishing a futuristic world with non-dualistic standards, in the post-gender and post-human sense. In response to such a bold attempt, Haraway offers her comprehensive understanding in her classic work, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs",[14]in which she argues that the cyborg is such a kind of existence that is closely correlated with "united front politics" yet at the same time does not depend on the community on the basis of an organic family.[15]In other words, the cyborg has natural feelings for affinity, rather than any identification.

To be specific, the cyborg theory in the "Manifesto" is presented in three dimensions. First, it focuses on the hybrid feature of cyborg existence. Second, it sheds light on how it well combines with and conforms to the rapid technological development that is taking place all over the world. From these two aspects, Haraway offers a view of post-capitalism from both sides, stating that cyborg existence not only reflects the part, of the world exposed to cutting-edge technology but reveals its weakness, in the sense that it fails to speak for the underprivileged parts. Lastly and most importantly, such a theory is articulated from an ethical perspective. A newly established relationship between technology and humanity is articulated in the "Manifesto".

Additionally, Haraway states that unlike traditional technical tools, the complicated characteristics of the cyborg figure do not exploit and manipulate the non-human part of nature. A crucial sub-opinion of Haraway's cyborg theory, from a philosophical perspective, is that technology, the internet and cyberspace, as means to merge the human body with a machine, also set humans free from social and historical constructions such as race, gender, sexuality and class.

Issues of postmodern feminism and gender identity represent a further significant implication of Haraway's cyborg theory. This is notably illustrated by her challenging position on the male–female dichotomy. At the same time, it is argued that Haraway questions the conventional denial of females' ability to take part in society's scientific and technological life.[13]

3.2 Critical reflections on Haraway's cyborg theory from the feminist and humanity aspect

Criticisms have been raised against Haraway's approach, and one of the most influential is that it is dangerous to explore her cyborg theory since this may establish a further system of manipulation and domination. It is stated that Haraway's doctrine is based on a Marxist framework and cannot be regarded as widely applicable since, to a great extent, only those who have been oppressed and marginalised are relevant to the discussion on this controversial issue.[16]

In response to this, on the one hand it is necessary to reclaim Haraway's aim to propose such a manifesto: namely, to form alliances within female society.[15] Her theory recognises that cultural distinctions within female society have been ignored in categorising and identifying females in pointing

out women's concerns. On the other hand, the figure of the cyborg in Haraway's doctrine is a hybrid feature in an open, built system. In this sense, it serves to remind the female community of the existence of both their cultural differences and the de-naturalisation of their identity and categorisation due to those differences. It is proposed that Haraway's cyborg theory is a voice both for those who are deeply oppressed by the patriarchy and for those who expect to obtain liberation from it.

At the same time, a counter-argument is that the female body has been undervalued, implicitly to support the male-dominated technological society of Haraway's narrative. This means that she is questioning whether the cyborg image might have any emotional feeling, considering its extensive assimilation into technology. As a result, the chances of liberating the cyborg body seems slight. [17]

This view is further refuted by Haraway's emphasis on patriarchy's threatening position to nature, indicating that it contributes to its domination and manipulation as an essential part of the social construct and will further undervalue it. Consequently, due to their connection with nature, both masculinity and femininity will be devalued. In other words Haraway is not in pursuit of undervaluing the status of either the female or male body, and this clarifies how society's conventional hierarchical structure is beneficial to neither party. On this account, rather than whole-hearted support for the patriarchal social arrangement her cyborg theory serves as a new way to examine and adjust the traditional dualisms immersed in the disadvantageous implications of hierarchy.[18]

It is also claimed that liberal, autonomous self and bourgeois individualism are reflected in the figure of the cyborg, within a monadic and discursive framework. Haraway further explains that the duty of postmodern feminists should be to establish a new interactive textual platform upon which both writers and audience have the opportunity to form alliances with each other in order to break the deadlock of technological determinism and social constructionism. In this sense, Haraway's theory, as another kind of articulation of middle-class white females' desire to act as women's agency, is considered inconsistent with such a requirement and seems supportive of patriarchal capitalism in the Western world.[19]

In response, although it may be acceptable that Haraway's cyborg theory represents an expectation of female agency, it should be noted that this is not to be achieved through absolute pursuit of individualism at the expense of community concerns.[18]

4. Initial recognition of the cyborg manifesto in the modern Chinese context

So far, the differences between the image of cyborg and that of a human being have shed light on the topic from both a literary and an academic perspective. It is argued that the cyborg figure, which originated in the imagination of authors of cyberpunk fiction and was developed by Haraway's critical reflection concerning issues of feminism and humanity in "A Cyborg Manifesto", transcends the traditional boundaries between human beings and conventional machines and has stepped onto the stage of being a postmodern quasi-human.[20] This predicts a near future in which it is less feasible to define behaviour patterns through so-called gender discrepancy and, consequently, it is irrelevant to determine people's nature and social identity on the basis of humanity's physical essence.[21] In this sense, the cyborg, as a unique form of the external body, has been transformed into a cultural symbol that, further, results in heated discussion on the recognition of feminism and humanity.[22]

Since the 1970s there has been growing concern over the recognition and integration of the cyborg image in the Chinese context. The Chinese term to refer to the figure of cyborg should first be elucidated. In Michel Foucault's understanding of the notion of "discourse", if the analysis of any theme is conducted in a new cultural context or environment, different subject matter and episteme are formed. At the same time, multiple aspects of the public's knowledge are defined and developed by this creation of varying subject matter. As a result, a discourse is formulated and, in turn, this determines how a specific theme or topic is articulated, discussed and criticised. Further, it has an impact on common practice and the general regulation of people's actions. Consequently, it is of great importance to collect relevant instances from Chinese forums, such as the China National Knowledge Infrastructure, to generate a plethora of opinions and subsequently illustrate the transmission and identification of the figure of cyborg in the Chinese context.

From a historical point of view, the first time that the term "cyborg" appeared in discussion on the appropriateness of entitling a cyborg with humanity was in a paper called "Would Cyborg Revolt?". This argued that in the former Soviet Union and the USA the cyborg theory, which vests the cyborg with the right to be independent from the humans who design, create and control it, appears to threaten

humanity.[20]In Foucault's notion of discourse, the publication of such an article seems to conform to the internal requirements of opposed views in between modern China and other parts of the world currently. Accordingly, in the mid-1990s another study on how the technological tools that were applied to cyborgs had invaded human society was translated for the Chinese audience.

The release of the famous science fiction film, The Matrix, launched a heated debate on the recognition of cyborg in China. Two articles discussing the movie were published at that time. Qi depicted a futuristic view of the world under a prospering of cyborgs, while Zhong stated that cybernetic tools such as computer chips would take control of human beings, taking the form of cyborgs.[23]These articles offered a classification of cyborgs into semi-cyborgs, passive cyborgs and cyborgs with manipulative power. The first two to a great extent promote humans' learning and perceptual skills and processes, widely argued to be both credible and non-devastating for humanity. By contrast, the last type seems to be helpful yet is threatening to society.[24]In other words, it can be observed that neither work has carried out any deep or comprehensive examination of recognition of cyborgs in the Chinese context within the scope of humanity, as opposed to describing the application of cyborg-related technology. To date, critical reflection on whether the introduction of the cyborg image could reshape or even destroy the normal functioning of Chinese society has not been attempted, and in the Chinese context most works on the topic are at an elementary level.

Considering the trajectory of studies related to the cyborg manifesto in the modern China context, it can be argued that there is a tendency for the Chinese public to some extent to accept the integration of cyborg theory into social intercourse, recognising its negative effects. Additionally, it can be seen that the issues concerning humanity and cyborg's social identity in the near future have been gradually sensed by both scholars and authors in China, such as the author of "I am a Cyborg". As a result, relevant research into the cyborg image should be conducted on the basis of amalgamating the concept with traditional and historical culture in order critically to examine further, in the Chinese context, the possibility and rightness of a cyborg's entitlement to gender identification and humanity.

5. Conclusion

As shown above, Moore and Tiptree's cyberpunk fictional works have demonstrated a profound influence on public discussion about the relationship between humans and technology. To be specific, on the one hand Moore's story extends the conceptualisation of gender identification and humanity to the cyborg body. Also, the perfect presentation of Delphi's technologically devised body in Tiptree's fiction seems to help the character to achieve gender identity and humanity through connecting P. Burke's internal consciousness to Delphi's external form. In the other hand, there is a difference between the two tales. In the story of "No Woman Born", the author represents Deirdre as failing to have sustained interpersonal connection with her equals and, consequently, does not address the issue of femininity and humanity identity in the long term. By contrast, in "The Girl Who Was Plugged In", P. Burke has been entitled to normal interaction with society – at the cost of basic sensations.

To provide a more thorough and comprehensive summary of the cultural implications in these cyberpunk works, Haraway takes a well-established approach. Despite the counter-argument that such a theory may introduce a further social system of domination, the equivocal liberation of the cyborg body and the involvement of the liberal autonomous self and bourgeois individualism, Haraway's cyborg manifesto is still argued to be convincing. This is because it is based on the breakdown of the principle of essentialism and the maze of dualism and, further, the claims that the boundary between technological embodiment and the essence of nature has been blurred. This consequently challenges the conventional view of female ability and the chance of participation in society's scientific and technological life. To examine the application of cyborg-related narratives in the context of modern China, it can be seen that the Chinese public has started to recognise cyborg-related narrative and to integrate it into their social intercourse, further indicating that their concerns about the humanity and gender identification of the cyborg image are gradually being addressed. It is argued that China's authors and scholars, to illustrate the likelihood and appropriateness of the cyborg's entitlement to gender identification and humanity, should pay close attention to the amalgamation of the cyborg concept and Chinese culture. Therefore, it is evident that cyberpunk and cyborg-oriented narratives play a significant role in both Western society and modern China, and shall continue to increase their influence.

References

[1] Hodge, R. (1990). Literature as Discourse. Cambridge: Polity.

[2] Lefanu, S. (1988). Feminism and Science Fiction. Bloomington: Indiana UP, pp. 4–9.

[3] Walchak, J. (1993). "Where the street finds its own use for things," Proceedings of the Humanities and Technology Conference, Atlanta, GA: Humanities & Technology Association.

[4] Leblanc, L. (1997). Razor girls: Genre and gender in cyberpunk fiction. Women and Language, 20(1), 71–76.

[5] Cadora, K. (1995). Feminist cyberpunk. Science Fiction Studies, 22(3), 357–372.

[6] Gibson, W. (1984). Neuromance. New York: Ace Books.

[7] Cadigan, P. (1987). Mindplayers. New York: Bantam Spectra Books.

[8] Moore, C.L. (1944). "No woman born," in R. Silverberg (ed.) Science Fiction 101: Where to Start Reading and Writing Science Fiction. New York: Ibooks, pp. 134–193.

[9] Stevenson, M. (2007). Trying to plug in: Posthuman cyborgs and the search for connection. Science Fiction Studies, 34(1), 87–105.

[10] Tiptree, J, Jr. (1973). "The girl who was plugged in," in I. Asimov (ed). The Hugo Winners. New York: Doubleday, pp. 397–434.

[11] Bukatman, S. (1993). Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Post-Modern Science Fiction. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 317–325.

[12] Hollinger, V. (1999). "(Re) Reading queerly: Science fiction, feminism, and defamiliarization of gender," in M.S. Barr (ed.), Future Females, the Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Science Fiction Criticism. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 197–225.

[13] Graham, E. (1999). Cyborgs or goddesses? Becoming divine in a cyberfeminist age. Information, Communication & Society, 2(4), 419–438.

[14] Haraway, D. (1992). "The promises of monsters," in L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. Treichler (eds), Cultural Studies, New York: Routledge, pp. 295–337.

[15] Haraway, D. (1991). "A cyborg manifesto: science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century," in D. Haraway (ed.), Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature, London: Free Association Books, pp. 149–182.

[16] Harding, S. (1986). The Science Question in Feminism. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, pp. 194–196.

[17] Armitt, L. (1996). Theorising the Fantastic. London: Hodder Arnold, pp. 78–80.

[18] Smith, S. (2010). "Shifting (a) genders: gender, disability and the cyborg in American women's science fiction." Doctoral thesis, University of Leicester.

[19] Ebert, T. (1999). Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism, 4th edn. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 34–36.

[20] Yu, Z. (2014). "Recognition, dissemination and acceptance of 'cyborg' in China – A brief survey beginning from 'The Matrix'." Comparative Literature: East & West, 22(1), 1–9.

[21] Hollinger, V. (1991). "Cybernetic deconstructions: Cyberpunk and postmodernism," in L. McCaffery (ed.), Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Fiction. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 205–210.

[22] Cao, J. and Cao X. (2004). "Review of postmodernism theories," in Post-Human Culture. Shanghai: Sanlian Press, p. 5.

[23] Zhong, Q. (2007). "The robot bird and the cyborg." World for Middle School Students, [online] (6), pp. 49–50. Available at: <https://mall.cnki.net/magazine/article/ZXTD200706022.htm> [Accessed 9 April 2020].

[24] Qi, Y. (2003). Believe it or not? Information is disseminated through implanted chips. Pop Hardwares, [online] (1), 150. Available at: <https: // mall.cnki.net/magazine/article/DZYN2003 01052. htm> [Accessed 9 April 2020].