

The Politics and Aesthetics in the Cyborg Era

Aylin Kalem

The technological age in which we are living marks a turning point in the evolution of mankind. The human kind undergoes a mutational period, a process of transformation towards the "posthuman". This transformation is determined by the *high technē* that expands into every layer of culture. *High technē* is different from the modernist understanding, which defines technology in its mere instrumentality. This aspect stands as the marker of the cyborg era. Thus, this essay will try to lay out the cyborg politics and aesthetics under the notion of *high technē* by referring to the fields of theory and performance.

N. Katherine Hayles states: "Cyborgs actually do exist; about 10% of the current U.S. population are estimated to be cyborgs in the technical sense."¹ This report is taken from a book edited in 1995. The term "cyborg" is not a recent one. It was coined by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in 1960, "to refer to the enhanced man who could survive in extra-terrestrial environments."² However, it enters into the field of cultural studies with "A Cyborg Manifesto" written by Donna J. Haraway in 1989. For most people this term may seem to be taken from a science fiction movie, yet, we are thought to be actually living in a world of cyborgs, we may even be considered to be falling into one of the cyborg categories.³ What does this term exactly mean? How does it determine the human condition?

A cyborg is a cybernetic organism (cyb/org). It is the outcome of the union of the human with a machine. However, it is not a simple union, for they become inseparable within the cyborg. A cyborg functions with an ongoing interaction of the two. Hayles states:

For some time now there has been a rumor going around that the age of the human has given way to the posthuman. Not that humans have died out, but that the human as a concept has been succeeded by its evolutionary heir. Humans are not the end of the line. Beyond them looms the cyborg, a hybrid species created by crossing biological organism with cybernetic mechanism. Whereas it is possible to think of humans as natural phenomena, coming to maturity as a species through natural selection and spontaneous genetic mutations, no such illusions are possible with the cyborg. From the beginning it is constructed, a technobiological object that confounds the dichotomy between natural and unnatural, made and born.⁴

Thus, it seems as if mankind, for the first time in history, has the chance to observe its own evolution. This evolution, aside with the technological advances, is due to the fact that Postmodernism has led to the deconstruction of every principle that had ruled and determined the human condition, and that now every principle seems to be dissolving into a hybrid and fluid ground. Therefore, a cyborg is not just a body of cybernetic organism but an open system that functions without fixed boundaries. It allows for an endless interaction and an ongoing transformation.

This aspect is extremely important in terms of shaping the cultural and social structure. As Haraway argues “the cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics.”⁵ The constant bodily state of openness to new operations is reflected in the openness to the differences within the society, or rather vice versa. The issues of class, race, and gender are no more defined in relation to the ‘Western’, ‘white’, ‘patriarchal’ system. There is no more a fixed unity that would consider each category outside this system, as the ‘other’. The boundaries are erased, thus, the cyborg society is a process of endless fusion and transformation.

Haraway points out that the cyborg leaves out the Western myth of original unity shaped by psychoanalysis and Marxism:

Both Marxism and psychoanalysis, in their concepts of labour and of individuation and gender formation, depend on the plot of original unity out which difference must be produced and enlisted in a drama of escalating domination of woman/nature.⁶

However, there is not an original unity in the world of cyborg, but rather fluidity, or a constant disclosure. The patriarchal system is challenged not through a replacement by the female alternative, but rather, it is destroyed mainly because of its proposition of a fixed model.

This state of fluidity and the process of transformation stand in opposition to modernism in its political as well as in its aesthetic aspects. While Haraway analyzes the cyborg phenomenon in terms of politics, and mainly within the feminist context, R. L. Rutsky treats the cyborg condition also in relation to art and aesthetics.⁷ He focuses on the definition of *high technē* to demonstrate that the term “technology” comprises the notion of “art” as well. By referring to Heidegger’s formulation of the “essence” of technology, he analyzes the aesthetics of techno-culture, and explains how the understanding of technology in modernism is different from that of the techno-culture.

Heidegger, in “The Question concerning Technology”, argues that “the essence [*Wesen*] of technology” is, in fact, nontechnological, and that this aspect has been “obscured by the

commonly accepted definition of technology as instrumental, as a means to an end.”⁸ Technology as instrumental is a modern concept, and Rutsky points out that this definition prevents us from seizing the “essence” of technology. This modern concept started to rule from the Renaissance onwards, and produced in the humanity an aim of mastering and controlling the world. Thus, this kind of perception allowed the Western, patriarchal cultures to identify themselves as having privileges over the nontechnological “others,” making the distinction of ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures. Here, Rutsky makes a very important point by differentiating *high technē* from the modern conception of technology:

Thus, although the sense of a cultural, technological mutation may itself be specific to “highly technologized” cultures, its implications are not; for, if in high technology the modern conception of technology has changed, so too has the relation of “techno-culture” to those supposedly nontechnological “other” cultures and discourses that modernity has always devalued, excluded, or repressed.⁹

Thus, the removal of the boundaries that has set a separation among different cultures, races, genders, and other elements of differentiation, seems to be the main aspect of the cyborg politics. The world opens up to endless possibilities of reorganization of social structure, not to end up in one fixed possibility, but rather, to continue with the process of assembling, disassembling, and reassembling. The established social norms are challenged and replaced by simply the ‘possibility’ of many complex rearrangements.

In terms of the aesthetics of techno-culture, Rutsky refers again to Heidegger in order to reveal the origin of the word *technē*. “*Technē*,” the Greek root for technology, meant also “art”, “skill”, or “craft”; hence, art and technology were concepts related to each other. In other words, for the Greeks, not only technology, but art too was called *technē*. However, in the modern definition, art and technology has always been in opposition to one another. Rutsky suggests that high tech reveals the aesthetic aspect of technology, which has been obscured by the modern conception, for it emphasizes representation, style, and design. In fact, “in high tech, the very “function” of technology becomes a matter of representation, style, aesthetics –a matter, that is, of technological reproducibility.”¹⁰ What Rutsky, here, means by “reproducibility” is, as mentioned above, the reassembling aspect. In high tech, modification and collectivity of stylistic and cultural elements are not a means but an end. Therefore, the aesthetic logic lies in the process of replication, recombination, and proliferation. In short, the aesthetics of high tech is the “process of pastiche,” a “process that leads to the increasing technological reproduction and digitization of the world” by the multiplication of data.

The politics and the aesthetics, then, become 'one' in the cyborg era. The cyborg politics is determined by the high technology, and the high technology is inseparable from the aesthetics. Its function undeniably embraces its aesthetics. Its mere existence forms its design, a design in which everybody takes part in an incessant interaction with each other and with other systems.

Cyborgs, then, are "networked" entities; they do not exist simply as autonomous individual subjects, but through connections and affinities, including their connections to technology. Indeed, cyborgs are never entirely separate from technology, from the complex technocultural world in which they live. Neither the masters of technology nor the victims of it, they are participants in the chaotic mix of techno-culture, surfing its unpredictable waves and flows, taking part in its recombinant processes of (technological) reproduction, mixing random elements, unsettling and recontextualizing old meanings, generating new codes and new patterns of complexity from within technology itself."¹¹

The connectivity of the body is expressed in a similar fashion in the *Wired* magazine of cyborg culture:

Modems are at the center of cyborg politics. You are a collection of networks, constantly feeding information back and forth across the line to the millions of networks that make up your "world".¹²

The notion of cyborg, thus, is a fundamental issue in feminist and postmodernist cultural theories. However, this metaphor is also present in performances, and most entirely manifested in Stelarc's performances. His performances make excessive use of prosthetic devices, electrodes and wires, transforming the "obsolete" body into a "technology attached", "technology inserted", and "Net-connected" body. He calls the human body "obsolete" because of its incapability to adapt to new, extraterrestrial environments. In turn, he urges the objectification of the body. For Stelarc, "what becomes important is not merely the body's identity, but its connectivity- not its mobility or location, but its interface."¹³ In his performances, the body becomes an object to which a technological tool or limb is attached or inserted, or, an object that functions in connectivity.

For instance, in his "Stomach Sculpture" performance, a metal sculpture is inserted 40cm into the stomach cavity not as a prosthetic implant but as an aesthetic addition. In this performance, the skin no longer signifies closure. What is essential is the act of the body shedding its skin, the process of hosting an outside element. In this manner, the body becomes extruded; it denies the distinction of public and private.

In other performances, the body is connected to other bodies via Internet. He allows his body to become a “fractal flesh”:

Consider a body that can extrude its awareness and action into other bodies or bits of bodies in other places. An alternate operational entity that is spatially distributed but electronically connected. A movement that you initiate in Melbourne would be displaced and manifested in another body in Rotterdam. A shifting, sliding awareness that is neither "all-here" in this body nor "all-there" in those bodies. This is not about a fragmented body but a multiplicity of bodies and parts of bodies prompting and remotely guiding each other. This is not about master-slave control mechanisms but feedback-loops of alternate awareness, agency and of split physiologies.¹⁴

Thus, in one of his performance, people at the Pompidou Centre (Paris), the Media Lab (Helsinki) and the Doors of Perception conference (Amsterdam), were able to remotely access and actuate his body in Luxembourg.

Stelarc, in his performances, is practicing many ways of being a cyborg. As mentioned earlier within the context of high tech aesthetics, his techno-aesthetics lies in the process of performance, his act of extruding his body “on the Net or other telematic, prosthetic, and medical technologies that can activate, map, and monitor the old, “obsolete” physiology.”¹⁵

Therefore, the information technology, along with the notion of *high technē* has created a hybrid world where fluidity and transparency reign, immune from the stable unities. Postmodernism deconstructed and restructured every principle by introducing it into new and variable contexts. Hence, the firm basis of ideas has dissolved into a flowing and transgressing realities, into a virtual reality. This is a reality that is constructed out of fiction and through technology, and which transforms the human into a posthuman by mapping it according to its own pattern/process. This mapping occurs in the produced ‘environment’ where time and space become interchangeable. In other words, this technological environment is a space/time of a constant transformation and reorganization. The virtual reality is the reality of the cyborg, which is itself a perpetual re-patterning and re-processing by interaction. Thus, this constant process forms the politics and the aesthetics of the cyborg.

NOTES:

1 N. Katherine Hayles, "The Life Cycles of Cyborgs. Writing the Posthuman," *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray (Routledge, 1995) 322.

2 Donna J. Haraway, "Cyborg and Symbiots. Living Together in the New World Order" *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray (Routledge, 1995) xv.

3 Chris Hables Gray, Steven Mentor and Heidi J. Figueroa-Sarriera cite the categories of cyborg in "Cyborgology: Constructing the Knowledge of Cybernetic Organisms", *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray (Routledge, 1995) 14:

- Large cyborg entities are *mega-cyborgs*, including gigantic infantrymen wearing mind-controlled exoskeletons (a Los Alamos Labs project), gigantic human-machine weapons systems (such as "Star Wars" in some of its more grandiose formulations), or even world-wide (empire or the UN) or galaxy-wide (the United Federation of Planets or the Borg) cyborg body politic, good or evil.
- *Semi-cyborgs* are organisms that are only intermittently cyborgs, like dialysis patients linked to the life-giving machine 30 hours a week; or some small semi-industrial countries, which are only part of the world economy and world telecommunications culture at a limited number of specific places and moments.
- *Multi-cyborgs* are combinations of various types of cyborgs, or have the ability to shift among flavors of cyborgs.
- *Omni-cyborgs* make of everything they interface with a cyborg, like the omni-cyborgian theory of articles.
- A *neo-cyborg* has the outward form of cyborgism, such as an artificial limb, but lacks full homeostatic integration of the prosthesis.
- The *proto-cyborg* lacks full embodiment.
- The *ultra-cyborg* is an enhanced cybernetic organism, greater in its realm than any mere machine or all-meat creature, as with soldier cyborgs, literally, or with some athletes and mega-stars, transformed through drugs, foods, the body-sculpting of exercise, cosmetic surgery, or digital enhancement of their voice and image.
- A *hyper-cyborg* might be one where cyborg embodiments were layered or in some other way cobbled together into greater and greater cyborg bodies.

- A *retro-cyborg* would be one whose prosthetic-cybernetic transformation was designed to restore some lost form; in the case of a *pseudo-retro-cyborg*, a lost form that never was,
- The *meta-cyborg* is the non-cyborg citizen in cyborg society; it is cyborg society itself. They are not cyborgs in the strict definition of the technical term, but in context and process they are most certainly cyborgian.

4 N. Katherine Hayles, "The Life Cycles of Cyborgs. Writing the Posthuman," *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray (Routledge, 1995) 321.

5 Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (Routledge)

6 Ibid.

7 R. L. Rutsky, *High Techne. Art and Technology From the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999)

8 Ibid., p. 2

9 Ibid., p. 3

10 Ibid., p. 4

11 Ibid., p. 148

12 Hari Kunzru, "You are Cyborg". *Wired* magazine (February, 1997)

13 www.stelarc.va.com.au

14 Ibid.

15 Johannes Birringer, "*Media and Performance Along the Border* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 61

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Birringer, Johannes, "*Media and Performance Along the Border*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998

Gray, C. H., Mentor, S., Figueroa-Sarriera, H. J., "Cyborgology: Constructing the Knowledge of Cybernetic Organisms", *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray. Routledge, 1995

Haraway, Donna J., "A Cyborg Manifesto", *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During. Routledge.

Haraway, Donna J., "Cyborgs and Symbiots: Living Together in the New World Order", *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray. Routledge, 1995

Hayles, N. Katherine, "The Life Cycles of Cyborgs. Writing the Posthuman", *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray. Routledge, 1995

Rutsky, R. L., *High Techne. Art and Technology From the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999

Stelarc, www.stelarc.va.com.au