

**Gendered Cyborgs Within Film: Confronting
Social Realities of Gender Ideology and the Body
Politic.**

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.



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Abstract

This thesis aims to research cyborgs within film as a vessel for gender ideologies reflected from societal norms. It also explores what it means to be a cyborg in this day and age where technology is intrinsic to everything we do in our daily lives and how that begins to affect our bodily autonomy. What defines a cyborg and how? How does one draw the line between mecha and orga, property and civilian? Using three characters for three different films, *Blade Runner* (1982), *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) and *Titane* (2021), they guide the way through these complex cyborgian narratives to insightful truths about gendered bodies. These films and characters are explored through the lens of gender philosophers such as Donna Haraway and Judith Butler, to analyse what these characters' lives might tell us about our own preconceived notions of gender and sex.

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Introduction

Cyborgs in film have a lengthy history, from *Metropolis* (1927) to *Ex Machina* (2014), humans have put their all into creating worlds where robots, androids and cyborgs live and work alongside us. The speculation of what these cyborgs would do if they were made real has ranged from military and security, such as *The Terminator* (1984), to sex and pleasure machines, such as *Companion* (2025), with mundane jobs in between, such as in *I, Robot* (2004). Gender manages to play a unique role in the way cyborgs are portrayed; female cyborgs often cast as pleasure machines and male cyborgs, killing machines. The gender dynamics that permeate cyborg fiction is anything but subtle yet somehow naturalised. However, when we get to the bare biomechanics of a robot cyborg, there is nothing gendered about it. So why is it that we feel it is completely necessary to make these machines so much like us? Are we afraid of the power one might wield if they were able to differentiate themselves completely from the gender binaries and mechanics of the world we built? Where would such a person in society find themselves?

Another aim of this thesis is to speculate on the definition of a cyborg.

Throughout science fiction tropes we have seen a lot of different variations to what one might deem a cyborg, an android, or a robot. For the purposes of this thesis, I am using a broad definition of what one could identify as a cyborg to display my full scope of ideas. Donna Haraway, a leader in the cyber-feminism discourse, defines a cyborgs as “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction”, (2016, p. 5), in her essay *The*

Cyborg Manifesto, originally published in 1985 and then republished in a book of her essays, *Manifestly Haraway*, in 2016, which is what I will be working with. Haraway's definition here is the most succinct and informing to what makes up a cyborg. Not only is a cyborg something mechanical intertwined with the organic, but it is also something that represents a societal influence and bias, even and especially when it is not trying to. This is what my thesis sets out to explore most thoroughly, what biases, prejudices, dynamics and issues do cyborgs evoke for humans through the gendered body and lens.

Using the works of Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, Chris Hables Gray and others, I try to gain a truer understanding of cyborg figures in film and find out what they can tell us about ourselves. The cyborg makes for a perfect blank slate to project with our own personal truths, lies and lived experience, unknowingly yet undoubtedly. I use primarily three films to conduct my thesis. Beginning with *Blade Runner* (1982), Rachael becomes my primary case study for Chapter 1. Rachael's anachronistic nature alongside her tenuous circumstances allows me to perceive her feminine gender in new light. I have decided not to look at the more recent *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), partly due to not wanting to be repetitive but mainly because of its flattened nature. While Joi's character, the cyborg girlfriend of the main character, can tell us a lot about women's perceived jobs in society, ultimately, Rachael's character discerns the same information in more nuanced ways with subversive themes. There is something to say about the idea that a female character from the 1980's has more nuance than one from the 21st century but it will not be discussed in this thesis. Moving

onto *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, David's perilous journey to try to become a human boy coincides with an interesting metaphor about the transgender experience. I use theorists such as K. Surkan and Chris Hables Gray to explore how a cyborg differs from a human and use David as the catalyst. Finally, Alexia from *Titane* (2021), marks for me an exploration of our bodily reliance on technology and the ways in which it harms our minds and bodies, while also being a stability and a certain type of power that can even be the difference between life or death. This parallels with Haraway's ideas neatly and confronts the themes of *Titane* (2021) optimally. I hope that those who read this will come away being able to understand cyborgs in more nuanced terms and perceive them not only as villains of science fiction, but as a pathway into our own psyches to acknowledge our prejudices and preconceived notions about gendered bodies and technology.

Chapter One: The Performance of Gender Through the Female Cyborg

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) is likely one of the most studied films in cinema history. This dystopian sci-fi, set in the now past 2019, has a vast commentary on capitalism and society's growing dependence on technology, which of itself could be analysed repeatedly and has been done so prolifically, such as Sean Redmond's, *Studying Blade Runner* (2008), and *Blade Runner* (2000), by Nick Lacey. In this analysis however, the focus will be on Rachael Tyrell, the female replicant (cyborg) embedded with the memories of her

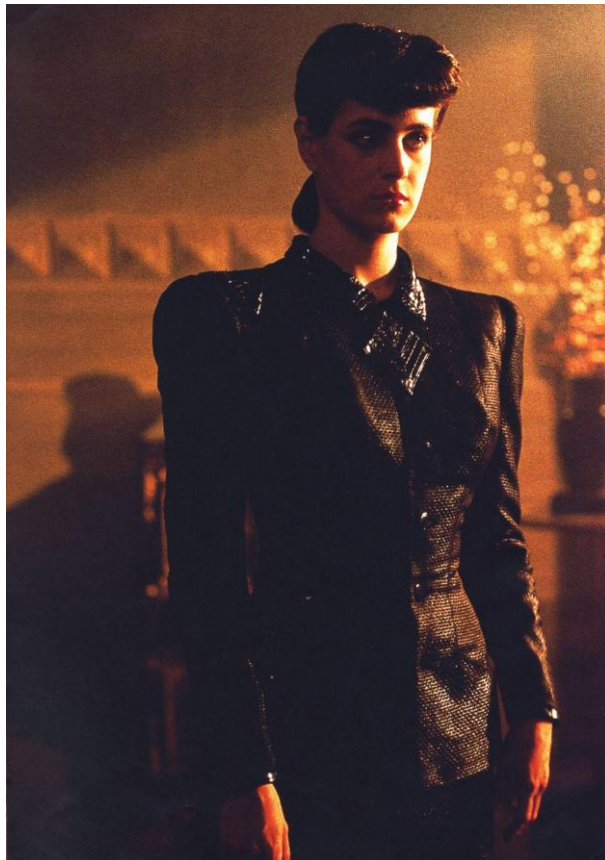


Figure 1 Rachael's hair, make-up and clothing, Blade Runner (Scott, 1982).

creator's niece, making her non-human, unbeknownst to herself. Rachael's status as a woman and also a replicant can tell us a lot about what it means to be

a gendered cyborg. Through Rachael we can analyse what our own perceptions of gender are and how we reflect them onto something inherently ungendered. She dresses like a woman from the 1950s amplifying the stereotypical subservience that is fundamental to both roles. Her neat yet complicated hairdo, red lip and business attire two-piece comes right out of a post-war secretary's office (see Fig. 1). Yet this is a character who was made in the 1980s but is supposedly living in the future 2010s. Rachael's anachronistic nature makes her an especially important symbol for a certain type of woman living throughout all of time, that of a white woman of a wealthy background. This is said not to invalidate the real struggle of these kinds of women, but to restrain from putting her forward as a representative of all women because frankly, she is not. She is in fact most likely made to be the way she is because she is in the Western tradition of an everyday woman. In Donna Haraway's *The Cyborg Manifesto* (2016), Haraway remarks that white liberal feminists being silent about race was a "major political devastation" (2016, p. 26) for women from other racial groups. By ignoring race and class disparities amongst women it makes it harder for those who do not have the same privilege as white women to gain genuine equality. It must be observed that Rachael is not always going to be a relatable gendered experience for women, especially those who are not white and not wealthy. In Audre Lorde's essay collection, *The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (2018), Lorde identifies clearly that for feminism to be inclusive for all, it is necessary to take into account the differences between women including and especially, race, class and sexuality (Lorde, 2018). Although Rachael is a character written and directed by men, there is

still a huge amount of subversive nuance imbedded in Rachael's character and Ridley Scott has done an excellent job in representing her as a woman with her own conflicting thoughts while she traverses life altering decisions. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) has managed in this book to deeply identify what it means to be gendered and the paramount of influences that our creation of gender has now embedded in our society, and becomes quite relevant for the case of Rachael Tyrell.



Figure 2 Rachael's family pictures, Blade Runner (Scott, 1982).

Rachael's relationships to the men around her define her character greatly. Her creator/uncle is someone who has made her out of selfishness, grief and greed and has lied to her about what and who she truly is. Tyrell's pride lies within the fact that Rachael does not yet know she is a cyborg and not a real human. Her whole life literally depends on the men around her when we consider that Deckard's job is to retire replicants and therefore retire her, her uncle created her and gave her life and even Gaff who was sent to retire her at the end of the movie, lets her live. Nothing in Rachael's life is her own, not even her memories. Butler's theories of a phallogocentric economy become quite prevalent in Rachael's case, the idea that she must weave through these men who hold her

life in their hands in order to keep on living is familiar to that of a housewife who must spend her life catering to fathers and husbands to keep a roof over her head. Yet this economy is not about Rachael or the symbolic woman necessarily, but almost entirely about the man and the power that she gives him. Butler analyses Luce Irigaray's belief in that men's bonds with each other are reliant on "the heterosexual exchange and distribution of women" (1990, p.55). Which then brings us onto her relationship with Deckard, which comes after she figures out that she is in fact a replicant. With this fact, their relationship becomes convoluted. They are able to form a bond over their shared feelings of being outcasts and struggling with the role of empathy, specifically for each other. In Philip K. Dick's, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), the book *Blade Runner* (1982) is based off, the role empathy plays in their relationship is more evident. In the book Deckard struggles openly about having empathy for Rachael because she is a replicant and his society explicitly disavows feeling any emotions but contempt for these replicants. For Rachael it is more complicated as she is outwardly an antagonist in the book and their relationship is far less romantic. The way empathy is presented in the



Figure 3 The Tyrell's owl, *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982).

book is hugely important as it is what defines the people of this world, specifically their empathy for animals is seen as a social status. I believe Ridley Scott wanted to translate these themes of the book to the film mostly with motifs of animals, but also by putting Deckard and Rachael into situations where they truly must confront their own empathy, which is one of the reasons they fall for one another. However, it is not to be dismissed that this is a romance with strange and upsetting power dynamics. Butler talks about how marriage can be considered a type of currency passing the bride from one man to another to “effect a symbolic intercourse between clans of men” (1990, p.53). In Rachael and Deckard's subversive exogamy they are almost doing the opposite, but still with the same logistics. Deckard here has entered this interrelation as almost a sexual retaliation towards Tyrell and his tyrannical corporation as a type of revenge.

When looking at Rachael's place within this phallogocentric economy, both her status as woman and cyborg are important as both lack the phallus. To investigate the cyborg aspect of Rachael's womanhood we must look back to Butler and their understanding of genders. Femininity and lack thereof is something that defines a woman's, but also a man's, place in society, therefore making it so the male gender is not something that particularly exists, but is instead something that is ultimately presumed and the female is the extension (Butler, 1990, p.27). So, if the male is the default and the female is the extension, every other type of gender expression is extensions of extensions and so on.

This now brings us back to the cyborg who on its own is not an inherently gendered thing, but something we perceive gender unto. Haraway postulates



Figure 4 Rachael and Deckard, Blade Runner (Scott, 1982).

that “the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world”, (2016, p.8) which does not rely on prior gender dynamics or social norms to live its life. The female replicants of this film are all defined by their gender in some way despite being non-human. Rachael is made in the place of another woman, Pris is a “pleasure model”, and Zhora although being trained for a “kick-murder squad”, is described as “beauty and the beast” and finds herself working as an exotic dancer back on Earth. This is an interesting array of what we can see as the limits of women back in the 1980s, with Rachael being the only one seemingly worthy of life. Then there is the male replicant, Roy, who, although throughout the film is an antagonist, his final famous lines creates in him this sort of anti-hero as the audience is shown he is justly fighting for his right to life. However, we never see this expressed from Rachael apart from some small hinting lines and actions. It is not surprising that this introspective philosophical speech comes from the man, as Butler puts it, “reason and mind are associated with the

masculine and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute facticity of the feminine” (1990, p.50). Although both are cyborgs, Roy still seems to have more agency than Rachael or any of the other female replicants and is certainly not defined or restricted by his gender, only his cyborgian status. The cyborg in this matter is merely a reflection of society’s value of gender hierarchies.



Figure 5 Zhora running from Deckard, barely clothed, Blade Runner (Scott, 1982).

Delving deeper into how one becomes gendered, Butler looks at Simone de Beauvoir’s theory on becoming a woman and then queries, “are there ever humans who are not, as it were, always already gendered?” (1990, p151). Although not human, the cyborg can become the symbolic for the ungendered, it is something that is able to tower over such a concept as gender and be above it, yet rarely is such a case made in cyborg film. So, what is it that makes Rachael a woman? If it is not her biological organs, is it merely the way she looks? No, someone’s looks cannot configure their gender identity status, but neither can their biology. Transgender, intersex, nonbinary people, cross dressers and drag

queens stand as living proof of that. No matter how one may feel about it, people can choose to do as they please with their gender expression and identity.

Unlike transgender people, Rachael as far as we know is not someone capable of “feeling” like a woman, she is merely placed in this role most likely due to her memories of someone else's life. Butler hypothesises what it would mean for one's gender if their sex were not fixed nor coherent and becomes something so subversive “it no longer makes sense”, (1990, pp.172,173). They ultimately argue that this is where we form a crisis of identity, if we, as a society, were to accept cyborgs are more than gendered, even transcending the non-binary, we would be forced to question the authenticity of gender all together. When discussing gender under a microscope like this we must question where sex plays a role. When discussing Beauvoir's ideas about sex they state, “for Beauvoir, sex is immutably factic, but gender acquired” (1990, p.152). This tells me that if gender was acquired of one's own will, it would leave a myriad of possibilities into what could be one's gender. Rachael serves as a perfect example of how this is not the case. Rachael can be seen as a metaphor for the gendered experience, she has acquired her womanhood through the force of others, her gender is served to her because of the body she was given and the way that she was made to be, and whom she was made for. It is up for debate as to whether Rachael could possibly have feelings about her own gender, though this is irrelevant to the argument. The fact here is that one will always be gendered firstly by outwardly defining forces and not by themselves, only later as having lived in one role may they then decide themselves.

There is an argument to be made that Rachael is in a form of drag, a performance of gender that isn't really there. There is no original gender for Rachael, which may cause invalidation for this theory depending on one's definition of drag. Is drag to be in performance of an opposite gender or is it merely a performance of a stereotyped gender? Butler claims there are three things to the art of drag; the anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance (1990, p.187). There is no anatomical sex to Rachael merely a facade of one, her gender identity is given to her not by her and her gender performance is entirely female. She is simply a parody of what it means to be a woman. When analysing Joan Riviere's "womanliness as a masquerade" (1929), Butler postulates Riviere's theory that women's masquerade of womanliness is to acquire the phallus or to take the place of the father as to be taken seriously within society but also to relinquish any consequences that, may come from acting or dressing like a man (1990, pp.69, 70). This theory is originally intended to look at homosexual women and the ways in which they tend to hide their homosexuality, this is a dated understanding of female homosexuality, which is something Butler recognises through their argumentative analysis of this theory (1990, pp.68-73). However, there are points we can take from this. For one, it is interesting to see femininity to be presented as something that holds power within itself, as it most commonly, especially throughout *Gender Trouble* (1990), is to be characterised as something that is only preserved due to its inherent subservience to men. In Rachael's case, there is another light here

we can cast on her situation, as Rachael's femininity is ultimately what allowed her to live. Without it, a relationship could never have been formed with Deckard, certainly not a romantic one, and through the actions that eventually stem from that she becomes somewhat free in her life specifically from her uncle/creator, and the corporation that owns her.

Rachael, in the world of *Blade Runner*, is the perfect example of a good woman. She is docile, passive, and facile. She is the correct amount of challenging, and her thoughts are not her own. Butler says, "we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (1990, p.190). For Rachael, her personality is so deeply entwined with her gender that to fail to do so would possibly cost her life, only her cyborgian status makes her life worth very little. However, many women before have been put in the situation of life or death due to not exemplifying their womanly duties correctly, so it begs the question, would Rachael's life be much different if she was not a cyborg? We could hypothesise that she would never have run away from her uncle if she was not a cyborg, but her being a cyborg is just one reason that could be swapped out for many more reasons that would have thrown her into the arms of Deckard once again. She personifies this perpetual theory that women always need to be saved from something and only a man is capable of doing so. The agency she carries throughout this film is virtually non-existent. Rachael is a character who spans about 7 different decades of women's lives. She did not ask to be such a woman, yet this is where she stands in the memories of a former life, is this all femininity is? What we

describe today as what it means to be a woman and display femininity is merely a simulacrum of what it was 50 years ago and the same 50 years before that. Rachael ultimately exposes the cracks of gender politics through her cyborg experience, then and now.

Chapter Two: The Gender Politics of a Cyborg Citizen

Similar to *Blade Runner's* Rachael, David from Steven Spielberg's 2001 film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* was also created to replace another human. David the



Figure 6 David having dinner with his adoptive parents, A.I. Artificial Intelligence (Spielberg, 2001).

lifelike cyborg is the first of his kind with 'emotions', he is made to love his adoptive mother unconditionally leaving him with a chronic yearning never to be satisfied without one. David is brought home by a couple to fill the void left in their hearts after their one and only biological son, Martin, is left in a coma, that is almost certain he will never come out of. However, after Martin makes a miraculous recovery, the family begins to no longer have a need for what David's uncanny childish love and dependence had once offered them, and so they leave him stranded, to fend for himself. Consequently, David begins his quest to become "a 'real' boy". K. Surkan's Essay *I Want to Be a Real Boy* (2004), delves into David's character as a metaphor for the transgender experience and

expertly so. Surkan details how David, who was made in order to be the perfect boy, seemingly at the height of health, lacks in comparison to his differently abled brother, who humanistically has developed a limp after his coma (2004, pp. 116, 117). Although disabilities in our world are often discriminated against it is also what makes someone distinctly human in comparison to a perfectly engineered robot. Surkan compares this to a transgender person's need to pass and in doing so "conforms to the gender stereotype of the target sex" (2004, p.117). To use the notions of this metaphor in tandem with the cyborgian experience, Chris Hables Gray's theories from *Cyborg Citizen* (2000) identify more narrowly David's metaphorically transgender life in terms of a cyborg citizen's property right, consent and the body politic. Gray's ideas, although written 25 years ago, show an ambitious, yet somewhat accurate prediction of what technology would look like for us today and humanity's growing reliance on such. His theories on what it means to be a cyborg citizen and his "Cyborg Bill of Rights" (2000, p.26), tell us an embodiment of human flesh is not needed to qualify as a cyborg citizen. For David this bill of rights would most likely allow for his citizenship, so David will be referred to as a cyborg citizen. David's qualifications for this kind of citizenship yet being denied any sort of human rights in the film is what makes him so apt as a vessel for the transgender experience.

Although *A.I.* is not a film about gender nor is David's gender as a little boy even all that concerning, as previously mentioned, his status as a cyborg looking for a way to become human is an experience many transgender people can relate to.

To look at David's experience through the transgender lens we need to break down the cyborgization of gender. Much like Butler who does not believe in the binary gender system, the fictional cyborg citizen would not either. As Gray puts it, "[s]implistic male/female categories cannot stand against the polymorphous desires of so many people mobilized by so much cyborg technology" (2000, p.89). As looked at in Chapter 1, the cyborg has no need for gender and ultimately is completely removed from it until humans step in. The transgender experience feels much like being a cyborg in a similar way, in the sense that one feels completely removed and undesired to one's own biological gender and can feel as though something has been assigned to them even if they don't feel suited to the category and can/will reassign themselves. David's programmed emotions to feel love and attachment removes himself from the label of 'robot', thus he does not understand why his 'mother' would not love him as much as she does her biological son. On his quest to find how he can become a 'real' boy he knows that he cannot rely on humans to help him as they don't understand his search, like how many humans don't understand the cyborgian idea of being outside the binary gender categories and he figures out quickly "only the synthetic... can be trusted in the pursuit of this dream" (Surkan, 2004, p.119). As cyborg citizens, only other cyborg citizens can be depended on to understand that "cyborgism could well be a bridge to different types of posthumans" (Gray, 2000, p.159), therefore arguably transgender and genderqueer people are cyborg citizens. This also lends itself back to the idea of transgender people aiming to be the stereotype of their desired gender to not be mistaken for the other gender (Surkan, 2004, p.117). David is as close as one can possibly get to

being a real boy while also being a cyborg. The fact he has emotions, even programmed ones, is a feat in of itself, but it is his mecha biology that differentiate him, much like that of a transgender person.

The 'flesh fair' segment of the film is quite akin to that of a freak show, where cyborgs are tortured and killed for the entertainment of humans. This is where



Figure 7 Flesh fair, A.I. Artificial Intelligence (Spielberg, 2001).

David is almost brought to his end, until his lifelike disposition rescues him from his fate and he is brought out of his cage to be tested if he is mecha or orga. It is not just his realistic features, but his quite convincing mind that tricks people into doubting his cyborgian status as he “has passed the Turing test of artificial intelligence” (Surkan, 2004, p.121), but it is the x-ray that tells the truth about what he really is. “The cyborg Turing test” is also how Gray prefaces his own cyborg bill of rights, which Surkan is also referencing. “The Cyborg Bill of Rights”, proposes that citizenship must be granted if they pass it (Gray, 2000, p.26). The dichotomy of these two ways of to tell if someone is deserving of citizenship, one being to verify what they are made of and the other testing if

their mind is human enough to pass a citizenship test, is quite parallel to the issues many transgender people are facing today. It is becoming quite relevant in countries like America where it feels as though transgender people have been lured into a sense of false security and acceptance only to have their own government and society turn their backs on them. For David, this is his family who he has been programmed to be intrinsically a part of, yet they have all the mental autonomy to reject him if/when they please. The witch hunt of trans people has become almost a trend considering its uprise on social media with the likes of J.K. Rowling and other TERFs (trans exclusionary radical feminists) calling for the 'transvestigations' (investigations in order to prove someone is



Figure 8 J.K. Rowling posting about Imane Khelif on X (Rowling, 2024).

trans, usually that of an assumed cisgendered person, by dissecting and analysing the shape of their body, face, mannerisms etc.). We have seen this with Imane Khelif most prominently in recent past. Khelif is a female born boxer, who found herself wrapped into a controversy surrounding her gender

when there was speculation about her testosterone levels which had vague and little transparency from the IBA (International Boxing Association) which did the testing (Beacham, 2024). Yet the reactionary TERFs called for her title to be taken away while posting pictures of her winning her boxing match and titling it as a man beating a woman (see Fig. 8). The internet has now become the 'flesh fair' for trans and gender queer people. Surkan calls this "scanning for the truth" (2004, p.121) when talking about David's human status being questioned in comparison with airport security being able to question the gender expression of someone if it doesn't fit the gender on their passport. Although the idea is relevant back then, I think it is more relevant today with rights being actively taken away after a long battle to secure them. We see this now with the new American Trump administration that has readjusted Biden's previous position which allowed for people to identify their own gender on their passports has now been altered to call for all passports to have their assigned sex at birth (Saad, 2025). This makes life harder for transgender people who do not look like nor have the genitalia of their assigned sex at birth (Saad, 2025) which could lead to further complications again in environments such as airport security (Surkan, 2004, p.124).

The policing of one's gender on official government documents is not a new phenomenon but does raise queries on ideas of property and consent. Gray's "Cyborg Bill of Rights" (2000, p.26) is suitably based off the "International Bill of Gender Rights" (Roberts, *et al.*, 1996), which was created to fight for the human rights for transgender people and specifically working transgender people.

However, Gray's bill is proposed as to create a distinction between citizen and property for so called cyborg citizens. This is a controversial idea in of itself, as it seeks to define what it means to deserve citizenship and sovereignty from an abstract point of view, and of course not all people have always been defined as citizens in recent past, such as Jewish people or African Americans. In fact, Gray defines the first citizens as "male, adult, property-owning members who had fought in the military" (2000, p.22), with women, children and the impoverished being exempt. Believing Gray's point to be that with evolving societies we need evolving laws surrounding citizenship in order to accommodate those who may be considered cyborg citizens, it also must be expected that these laws are also creating an object that is more cyborg than citizen and drawing the line will in turn create a class that is dominant over those who have not passed the cyborg Turing test. We can correlate this with David's mission of becoming a 'real' boy and redefine it as a quest in procuring his own citizenship and the rights that come with it, namely not being executed for the pleasure of others at the 'flesh fair'. When looking back to the transgender experience, it is not difficult to see how trans people can battle with the identity of citizenship or property, especially in the working trans community. Trans women are disproportionately subjected to sex work to make a living, so much as 70% of trans sex workers are transgender women (Action for Trans Health, 2016). Sex work can be seen as an act of renting ownership of another person's body for sexual acts which we also

see with another character in *A.I.*, aptly named, Gigolo Joe, a cyborg sex worker (see Fig. 9). Gray explains that in a libertarian economic system the only limits of property rights are “where your rights... run into someone else’s right” (2000, p.51), which feels lacking in this scenario. In the case of Gigolo Joe and trans sex



Figure 9 Gigolo Joe, A.I. Artificial Intelligence (Spielberg, 2001).

workers, the similarities in their lack of citizenship rights may be what therefore drives them to sex work both voluntary and involuntary. This makes yet another case of transgender people being alike to cyborg citizens.

Surkan has allowed for the story of David to be studied through a context of gender transition and to look and compare the rights of a cyborg citizen and a transgender person. While previously looking at women’s autonomy in their own gender right, we can see similarly with transgender people, although for different reasons, their distinct lack in citizenship and property rights is what defines them as cyborgian in the first place. It is, however, important to contrast

that cisgendered women have always had a confirmed sex to begin with and haven't had their womanhood denied to them in the same sense as the trans community, whose problems lie in unaccepting societies and a lack of access to gender affirming care. We can look to places like Tennessee, America, that are upholding bans on gender affirming care which does not only affect the transgender community, but also people born intersex (HRC Foundation, 2025), who are another group we see classified as cyborg citizens (Gray, 2000, p.155). Gray's ideas on info-medicine and "the medically modified" (2000, p.72), tell us that our reliance on technology, specifically medical, is something we should embrace to benefit us. The state of transgender healthcare and surgery has advanced and will further advance with more technological development. This may mean our future will look a lot more cyborgian than one may have predicted, certainly Gray overestimated his predictions of what would happen in the twenty-five years since 2000, however, this does not rule out more progress to come. We can postulate from this that a cyborgian future may be a resolution to a transgender future.

Chapter Three: Technology and the Maternal Body

Julia Ducournau's *Titane* (2021), follows its main character Alexia on her murderous rampage and then subsequent hiding from the police by pretending to be a man's missing son returned home after 10 years. We are told at the beginning that as a child Alexia was in a car crash and now has a titanium plate

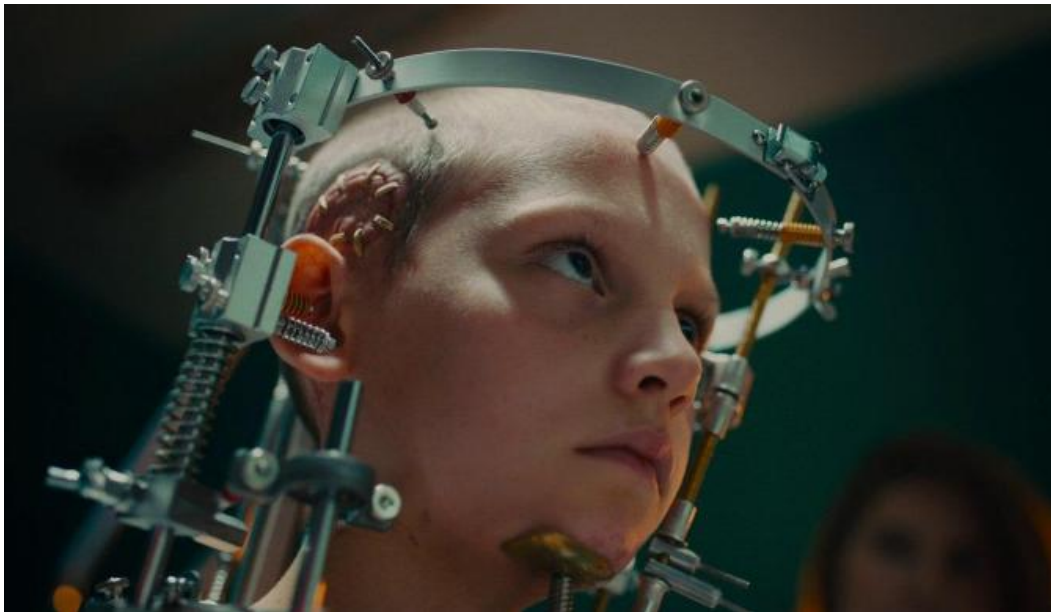


Figure 10 Alexia after getting a titanium plate inserted into her head, Titane (Ducournau, 2021).

implanted in her head which supposedly is what makes her think differently to those around her. Although Alexia is not a cyborg in the same sense as David or Rachael, she can be used in order to explore a different understanding of the term cyborg. Donna Haraway describes a cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism" (2016, p.5), which captures the reality of Alexia who could not be currently living without machinery. Looking back to Gray and his cyborg citizens, he believes that anybody who is living due to or in part because of technology, like Alexia, certainly achieves cyborgian status

(2000, pp.72, 73). Beginning after her crash, Alexia shows an unnatural affection for machinery and technology, when we see her hugging the car that almost killed her after she is released from the hospital. Throughout the first half of the film we see she has no reliance on human affection nor connection, even going so far as murdering anybody she shows affection or attraction to. The only genuine pleasure we see her derive is from the cars she dances on as her job and the car which she is impregnated by in the psychosis-like sex scene. Her pregnancy is incredibly disturbing and gory, watching her belly expand with dark motor oil veins and her nails scratching open wounds into it (see Fig. 12), it is a blasphemous depiction of pregnancy. This is quite reminiscent to Haraway's ideas about the cyborg in *The Cyborg Manifesto* (2016), she describes, “[a]t the centre of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the

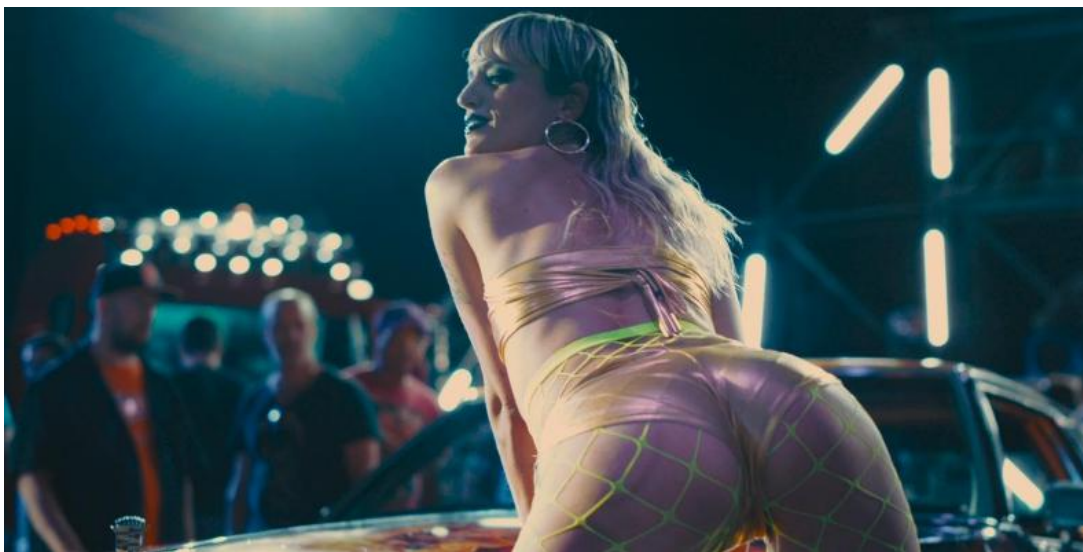


Figure 11 Alexia dancing on cars for work, Titane (Ducournau, 2021).

cyborg”, (2016, p.5), as this is something no longer human nor non-human, it is the in-between, the nuance, the grey area of what it means to be human.

Alexia's maternal body is metaphorically aligned to Haraway's ideas on technology and its duality with man. Although Alexia is more attuned to her cyborgian nature, her pregnancy is where we begin to see her rejection of such. Although the main reason for her hiding her pregnancy is to keep pretending that she is a boy, in some sense it is also her way of attempting to avoid the cyborg growing inside her. She does this through tightly and severely binding her stomach and her chest leaving marks when undone (see Fig. 12 and Fig.13). The bodily horror of Alexia's pregnancy comes across as a perversion of the maternal body as she constantly fights with it, willing it to disappear. Alexia's reliance on the technology around her has begun to rely on her back while literally feeding from her body from inside her stomach. Haraway is ultimately arguing that we must accept the cyborg and accept the dichotomy between man



Figure 12 Alexia scratching wounds into her belly, Titane (Ducournau, 2021).

and machine to derive pleasure from it, but to do so we are responsible for the boundaries we put in place (2016, p.65). Looking at Alexia's pregnancy through the Haraway lens, we can view it as the struggle of humanity's growing reliance on technology in our daily lives while we also seek to reject it. Although humanity's most urgent and necessary reliance is with medical technology, we

use to keep us alive and healthy for longer, our day-to-day reliance is with our phones. Social media addiction studies show our addictive relationships between technology and mental health make it so that social media becomes “a cause of anxiety as well as a coping method” (Amirthalingam and Khera, 2024). This continuous cycle is reflected in Alexia’s obsessive battle in the relationships she has around her when she rejects real human connection for machines, when it is also her lack of human connection that drives her to the machines.



Figure 13 Alexia's body after binding her stomach and chest, Titane (Ducournau, 2021).

It also brings into question the cyborg sex that Alexia has with one of the cars at her work. This scene, like a lot of the film, is hard to tell what is literal or metaphorical. Cyborg sexual reproduction is a very nuanced subject matter that both Gray and Haraway remark on. On the face of it, cyborg and technology-based reproduction is a question of ethics and eugenics. Gray theorises that the use of technology to produce a so-called perfect baby with perfect genes would mean women and men become merely genealogical, hierarchical contributors rather than the creators (2000, p.91). If we could create technology like this therefore, we would have no need for sexual reproduction in the sense that we

do now (Haraway, 2016, p.30). Sex as a pleasure would possibly become obsolete in a vein similar to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), where sex is only used for reproduction and seen as a gross perversion outside of that need. In Alexia's case however, her cyborg sex is derived completely out of pleasure, rather than this sterile necessity that it is usually portrayed as. This speaks to the idea that people could stop looking to other humans for sexual pleasure and instead seek it out through technology to live out their fantasies. Gray understands how advancing technology could be used for "the proliferation of sexual choice" (2000, p.160), and to explore personal fetishes and curiosities that some may not be comfortable admitting to people in their personal lives (2000, pp.159, 160). While this may be a good way for like-minded people to connect over sexual desires, it also may be a slippery slope into higher risk sex and porn addictions. In either case this leaves us with an isolation of human connection and a stronger reliance of technology for our sexual needs whether that be pleasure or reproduction.

To conceal her real identity Alexia spends most of the movie pretending to be a boy. Her gender bent pregnancy is somewhat metaphorical for the idea that the cyborg is above gender (Haraway, 2016, p. 8). However, Alexia still needs to abide by her gendered world pretext. Alexia's gender swap is another example of her cyborgian livelihood and her refusal to abide by her innate humanness. Once Alexia begins presenting as a boy simultaneously the sexuality that we saw originally at the beginning of the movie when she presented as a woman also stops. Laura Mulvey and her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (2009),

first published in 1989, explores female and male castration within film. Mulvey postulates that within film the male character acts as an “active” and female the



Figure 14 Alexia dancing provocatively in front of her male coworkers, Titane (Ducournau, 2021).

“passive” (2009, p.20), and with that comes the psyche that “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification” (2009, p.20). For Alexia this is also true, while she was sexually objectified in her female form by the men surrounding her at her job and following her to her car after work, but as a man she faces none of this. Even nearing the end of the film Alexia in her male persona does a provocative dance for her male coworkers atop a fire truck, possibly trying to reclaim some of the former self she has lost, and while they do watch her, they watch in an almost shock horror instead of the erotic mystification she is used to (see Fig. 15). Alexia’s post-gender inner dynamics do not appear clear to the rest of a gendered non-cyborgian world. Although we grow closer and closer to an entirely cyborg world every day, it does not mean others are aware of that nor does it mean others are willing to abide by the

rules of such or lack thereof. For the men to watch who they believe is their male coworker do this risqué dance, it may give them what Mulvey terms; “castration anxiety” (2009, p.22). During the dance Alexia is symbolising her



Figure 15 Alexia's coworkers watching her dance, Titane (Ducournau, 2021).

lack of phallus to the men in the room which in turn implies “a threat of castration and hence unpleasure”, (2009, p.22) which the men counter with punishment or devaluation, (2009, p.22). And so, Alexia is there by isolated once again from the human relationships she had tried so hard to resist in the first place.

Vincent, the man who's son Alexia is pretending to be, and Alexia show us a glimpse of a cyborg/human relationship. Their complicated friendship is one the begins with a life altering lie and ends in a final truth. Like Alexia's pregnancy, this relationship serves as a metaphor of the symbiosis between humans and technology, again paralleling Haraway's ideas about boundaries with technology and gaining pleasure out of it rather than dismissing it all together. At first Vincent is obsessed with what he thinks Alexia is, and what he wants her to be. His long-lost son returned to him, he is enamoured and

obsessive, but Alexia's spurning of his fatherly affection is a constant battle. There comes a point in the film that it is obvious Vincent knows and maybe has all along that Alexia is not his son, however he is firmly in denial. For Alexia, it becomes clear she needs to accept some form of human connection in order to go on, as her cyborg status does not deny her human needs. Vincent in this sense is our denial of the harm technology has done to our brains and senses and since we can't stop it, we must accept it but not in whole like he has, it must come with a boundary and border of ethics and morals. Haraway states that

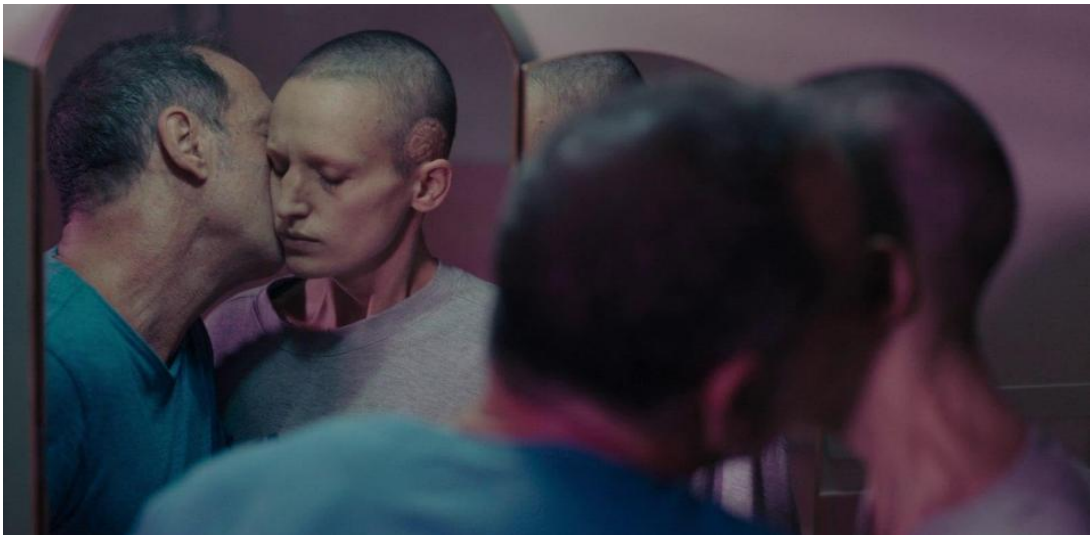


Figure 16 Vincent and Alexia, Titane (Ducournau, 2021).

“[m]any scientific and technical workers in Silicon Valley... do not want to work on military science” (2016, p.45) and hopes that these “cultural tendencies be welded into progressive politics” (2016, p.45). The idea that our morals should translate into how we develop our technology has truthfully not been taken on board. If we use Silicon Valley as an example, recently the US military has invested \$200 million into OpenAI, a Silicon Valley based generative AI company (Agence France-Presse, 2025), which contrasts Haraway's statement. Alexia here shows us technology's dependence on humans. We often think of

tech as something of an unstoppable force, or an animal that cannot be tamed but it is true that people are the creators, and it needs us to survive. This is the theory of technological determinism. Allan Dafoe describes this theory as “the autonomy of technological change and... the technological shaping of society” (2015, p.1052). Dafoe, however, believes it is more nuanced than this, that we should not determine whether we control technology or technology controls us but rather use the idea of technological determinism to inspect which technology and trends are more autonomous than others and learn from society’s past technological shapings to continue our future tech advancements. This push and pull and careful balancing act of technology mirrors Vincent and Alexia’s relationship. Alexia needs Vincent and his unconditional, unadorned love more than she realizes and Vincent needs to love Alexia in ways that are challenging for both of them. Human connection as well as technological boundaries must be established for an equilibrium.

The film ends with Alexia giving birth to her half-car/half-human baby in the arms of Vincent who has finally accepted her for who she truly is and Alexia has accepted his love once and for all. Haraway states “the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through the a restoration of the garden – that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate”, (2016, p. 9), and this could not be more true for Alexia who has managed to bring a pregnancy fully to term without the heterosexual reliance and a rejection of gender throughout this time. Although Alexia’s cyborg status is different to those previously explored, she proves as an example of a more realistic version that is more relatable for the average



Figure 17 Vincent with Alexia's baby, Titane (Ducournau, 2021).

person. To be a cyborg is not only to be made solely out of metal without a human conscious, but it is also to be reliant on the machinery and technology that has infiltrated their lives and bodies in more unconventional ways. Haraway queries, “[w]hy should our bodies end at the skin[?]” (2016, p.61), and Alexia is here to prove that they may not. *Titane* (2021) is an example of a maternal body, something so intrinsic to a gendered body, being able to subvert all standards and expectations of such through the cyborg experience. It is also a love letter to *The Cyborg Manifesto* (2016) due the paralleled ideas explored in both pieces of work that come to incredibly similar conclusions and complement each other beautifully. Haraway argues that to gain satisfaction from technology we must keep intact the human nature of daily life and consider the boundaries we impose in order to make that happen (2016, p.67). Alexia, Vincent and the maternal and gendered body portray to us the hardships and confusion that comes with these confines and lack thereof to bring about a

relationship between humans and technology in which we can derive love and pleasure.

Conclusion

Haraway states “[m]onsters have always defined the limits of community in western imaginations” (2016, p. 64), and I believe that idea is at the heart of this thesis. Cyborgs have always been used to define a threat to Western civilisation. Cyborgs represent a part of the human mind we cannot entertain in our daily lives, a part of us that does not care to adhere to our social realities, responsibilities, morals nor ethics. Cyborgs are free from the guidelines and status quos that we all expect from one another. When we watch these monsters on our TVs doing these terrible things to our beloved dystopian alternate realities, we can’t help but feel slightly envious of the power and control these cyborgs wield over their own wills to take what they want without anything in their psyche to stop them. Rachael, David and Alexia all have something in common and that is their will to unapologetically do what they want. Rachael tells a story of a woman who will do anything to figure out who she truly is. David goes to the literal ends of the earth to see his mother one last time. Alexia does not yield to her anger and emotions for anybody in her life.

Although the gender identities of cyborgs are usually never the point of the cyborg itself, it has been an incredibly useful tool in allowing me to explore the meaningfulness of gender expression, gender as a societal construct and the body politic. The cyborg being used in films as the outcast makes for a strong conversation in tandem with gender ideology. The ideas of Judith Butler and Donna Haraway at the forefront of that conversation has allowed me to explore the characters more deeply than I ever could have on my own. Butler’s ideas on

gender greatly formed my ideas about Rachael and how she lives her life as a woman surrounded by men without true autonomy over her own body. Haraway is, of course, the spearhead of cyborg feminism and was a major contributor to my opinions when creating this entire thesis, but with a specific voice in Alexia who I feel greatly amplifies Haraway's theories about our own bodies and their reliance on the technology we produce and how that intersects with gender. The gendered cyborg is a piece of fiction that greatly reflects our own societal values of gender politics and what we deem to be a man and a woman. Although there is not much said about adult male cyborgs in this thesis, the theories surrounding gender reflections onto cyborgs is still greatly true in 1980s movies like *The Terminator* (1984) and *RoboCop* (1987), where men are these hypermasculine killing machines. Most of what I have said can be applied to most cyborg movies, especially those about women, considering there is a concerning number of films where the female cyborg is made to be a man's girlfriend, wife, or sex toy, such as *Her* (2013), *Companion* (2025), *Ex Machina* (2014), etc. While I don't believe that these movies are bad nor do I think they are promoting what they are portraying, *Blade Runner* (1982), *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), and *Titane* (2021) are more nuanced and deliberate in the conversation of cyborgian bodies.

To Chris Hables Gray's and Haraway's credit, I was able to look at cyborgs as not only machines, but as humans as well. At first my definition of a cyborg was narrowed to just a robot with a human likeness and disposition, but now I have an understanding that all of us have a cyborgian nature. I believe to be a cyborg

is to be human and machine, mecha and orga, not just one and not just the other, which aptly fits all characters talked about previously, but does it not also describe ourselves? As a society we have become so innately entwined with our technological counterparts, whether it be our online personas or a prosthetic leg. Our devotion to technology is religious at this stage. It is engrained with our state, our jobs, our schools. We track our pets with it, we track our spending with it, we sell all our data for a scroll on TikTok and we would probably do it again. We have created our own panopticon of our lives, and it is certainly not going anywhere anytime soon. Although this sounds incredibly morbid, I don't think it always is, nor does it always have to be. In the name of Haraway maybe we should embrace our cyborgian sides to a degree and accept we will never live in a world not dominated by technology. Our genders can often be the gateways to accepting our cyborg selves as seen in Rachael, David and Alexia. More emphatically we must understand these technological advancements as a fine line between the cyborg individuals we have become and the technology ridden surveillance we are under. We must toe this line with morals and ethics above all else and use our cyborg to empower and free ourselves from those who want to use it to suppress us.

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