The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction

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Abstract: In her article "The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction" María Goicoechea explores the posthuman tendencies of Anglo-American popular culture as they are manifested in the representations of the cyborgs, clones, and artificial intelligences that populate cyberpunk science fiction. Choosing the figure of the cyborg as the central myth of cyberculture, Goicoechea exposes the underlying tensions and contradictions present in cyberpunk prescient visions of humanity's evolution. Goicoechea reviews the variety of contradictory meanings that have been sedimented over this hybrid creature, using as ideological framework the digital narratives of "Technoromanticism" and "Cybergothic," respectively the dominant and the countercultural trend inside cyberculture. Goicoechea postulates that although cyberpunk narratives have been associated traditionally with the subversiveness and rebelliousness of the more dystopian Cybergothic, they are also prey to the mesmerizing promises of the technoromantics. Goicoechea argues that the discourses of Technoromanticism and Cybergothic run parallel in many of the cyberpunk novels explored, provoking a schizoid and paranoid tunnel vision in characters and readers alike. Cyberpunk visions coincide in diagnosing the cyborg with the illness of Narcissus. In their quest for immortality, humans that have fused too intimately with the machine seem propelled towards a solipsistic free fall, a movement which tries to avoid any form of ideology but which entraps them instead in their own contradictory impulses for control and freedom.

María Goicoechea, "The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction"   page 2 of 11
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 10.4 (2008): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/9>
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The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction

Before starting with my discussion of cyberpunk science fiction, I would like to explain briefly the use "posthuman ethos" in the title of this article as it serves to focus my discussion. When discussing the posthuman ethos, I refer to current attitudes towards what it means to be human, attitudes that science fiction narratives under discussion only mirror, distort, and/or project into the future. My point is that these current notions of the meaning of "human" have been forged through practice, habit, everyday rituals, fashions, and attitudes towards our bodies and selves that have less to do with intellectual disquisitions and philosophical debates about essences and souls than with the way technology and science have intruded into our everyday lives and the manner in which we have naturalized certain of their assumptions about our fundamental nature.

According to its original meaning, "ethos" is the character or disposition acquired through habit. If habit is born out of repetition of similar acts, the ethos is then, through habit, the origin of all action. However, ethos, habit and act form a correlated cycle, each giving shape to the other, and in this circular triad it is impossible to establish a starting point. Human beings, as they live, they realize acts, the repetition of which generates habits that in turn will produce attitudes. In this view, man, through living, makes himself. Martin Heidegger incorporated a similar view of ethos in his rethinking of ethics. After revising the original Greek notion of ethos, Heidegger's thought shifts our understanding of ethics away from a set of theoretically constructed norms, principles, or rules governing practice towards an understanding of the ethical as our concrete way of Being in the world (on this, see, e.g., McNeil). But whereas Heidegger's consideration of the ethical focuses on time: the time of biological life, the time of human life as biographical and historical, I focus on place: the place of biological life and the contemporary Anglo-American assumptions with respect to such a place.

When Leonardo da Vinci drew his Vitruvian man, he delineated his idealized figure with admiration towards the perfect symmetry of the human body. Nowadays, however, science fiction narratives present us with an image of the human body which is liable to suffer such quantity of manipulations and technological transformations that it can no longer be considered a reference model but rather a malleable material of amazing plasticity, penetrated by all sorts of instruments and substances. The shapeless batch of human parts seems to reach perfection only through its union with the machine, growing dangerously dependent on all its technological extensions, and letting its structure, through successive operations, to be slowly invaded by inorganic elements. But this scenario is actually the future made present since never than today have the enthusiastic statements of chemist Humphry Davy been truer. The voice that inspired the conception of Mary Shelley's famous creature expressed itself thus: "Science has ... bestowed upon [man] powers which may be called almost creative; which have enabled him to change and modify the beings surrounding him, and by his experiments to interrogate nature with power, not simply as a scholar, passive, seeking only to understand her operations, but rather as a master, active with his own instruments … who would not be ambitious of becoming acquainted with the most profound secrets of nature; of ascertaining her hidden operations; and of exhibiting to man that system of knowledge which relates so intimately to their own physical and moral constitution?" (Davy 16). The miracle of life is now being reproduced artificially, manipulated, and the very concept of life is being redefined, driven to unfathomed extents of technological intervention. Fields of knowledge such as genetics, nanotechnology, microelectronics, and communications have produced such spectacular scientific advances that they produce anxiety and fear in those individuals that are aware of the way in which humans have surpassed their previous limits regarding their dominion over nature. Similarly to that first cyborg created by Dr. Frankenstein, others have arrived at the wake of cyberculture, this time not to exorcise our fears regarding electricity and the Industrial Revolution, but to canalize the anxieties of popular imagination towards the uncanny world of computers and biotechnology. The cyborg is the essential myth of cyberculture, the metaphor of the self that has become the receptacle for all sorts of fantasies and nightmares regarding our

María Goicoechea, "The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction"   page 3 of 11
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 10.4 (2008): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/9>
Thematic issue *New Studies on the Fantastic in Literature*. Ed. Asunción López-Varela

growing intimacy with technology. The interpretation this myth receives will depend greatly on the type of humanity we have envisioned, where have we located its essence, its uniqueness, how we have defined its boundaries, and towards which ideal of the perfect human we let our science and imagination direct its steps.

Cyberpunk fiction is also the place where popular culture meets visionary science. However, there is a tendency to actually oppose these two different types of discourse, the scientific, on the one hand, and the fictional and popular, on the other (on this see Graham; Dinello). This division seems necessary because of the different types of attitudes towards the future each fosters, one more inclined to a technological utopia and the other to a technological dystopia. I argue that even though this separation seems useful in many instances, it is more accurate to describe two forms of discourse that run through both scientific and fictional narratives, in unequal doses. I employ the terms "Technoromanticism" and "Cybergothic" to refer to the technoheaven and the techno-hell, using Daniel Dinello's notions, respectively.

Technoromanticism is a mixture of technophilia, idealism and nostalgia for a utopian virtual future that will reproduce the pleasures of a lost Eden (see Coyne). As its dark twin, we find cyber-gothic dystopianism, a satiric and burlesque vision of the near future which condenses a variety of nightmares and terrifying fantasies which have been projected onto the scenario of cyberspace, populating it with demons, vampires, tyrants and heroic hackers (see Alexander). As two sides of the same coin, both narratives project a transcendental reality onto the technological plane, either producing the divinization of technology or demonizing it. In the vein of the Romantics, Richard Coyne recognizes a type of discourse that informs many of the actual scientific narratives about digital technology, as well as other types of narratives, such as science fiction. In Coyne's opinion, "Technoromanticism" expresses a desire to liberate the mind from the body, but its release is dreamt in profoundly materialistic terms, the soul being replaced by the mind and the transcen-dental quest for unity supplanted by a mental immersion in a seamless information fabric made of zeros and ones: "Romanticism was also idealist in orientation … Certain digital narrative is idealist and has taken to heart the Neoplatonic concept of ecstasis -- release of the soul from the body-though here the soul is replaced with the mind, the means of ecstasis is immersion in an electronic data stream, and the realm of the unity is cyberspace. Cyberculture invokes a romantic apocalyptic vision of a cybernetic rapture, a new electronically induced return to the unity, an age in which the material world will be transcended by information" (Coyne 10-11).

The underlying assumptions of this technoutopia are based on a Western conception of the su-premacy of mind over body, of a favouring of the mental processes associated with abstractions and virtual realities, rather than on a more holistic understanding of our bodies as porous channels of communication with the outside. Our contention is that underneath the façade of liberalism that protects a large part of the projects of humanistic research dealing with the digital culture, we find theoretical roots clearly in favour, not just of capitalism, but of a revived Puritanism with respect to the body. This perception coincides with the observations Grant Harvers has made in relation to one of the prophets of Technoromanticism, Marshall McLuhan: "A close hermeneutical reading of McLuhan's major writings reveals a type of conservatism that anticipates the emergence of a more tribalistic, stringently moralistic and technologically sophisticated age" (512). The tribe which con-cerns us here is the cyberpunk community of science fiction writers, who, as I hope to show, have inherited the contradictions of their society with respect to the body, but, at the same time, also help to unmask some of them through their grotesque prophesies and phantasmagoric visions of a posthuman future. With its characteristic apocalyptic and pungent tone, cyberpunk science fiction provides a perfect testing ground in which to experiment with new technologies, extrapolating from present possibilities and projecting them over the near or far away future. At once a reservoir of popular assumptions and prejudices, and an avant-garde critical front, popular science fiction maintains an attractive balance between offering the audience an escapist form of entertainment, and the raw material for intellectual evaluations of the unforeseen consequences that the imple-mentation of new technologies could bring. The advantage of popular culture over scientific narra-tives is that it seems to intuitively recognize the sign of the times and transmit it in a direct, pene-trating manner. A perfect parody, for example, of how the cyborg has come to replace Da Vinci's

María Goicoechea, "The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction"   page 4 of 11
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 10.4 (2008): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/9>
Thematic issue *New Studies on the Fantastic in Literature*. Ed. Asunción López-Varela

Renaissance symbol is Tomb Raider's advertising poster: Lara Croft inside the circle and the square but only reaching their perfect boundaries with the Uzi guns in both her hands as extensions.

It might seem an exaggeration to use the term "cyborg" to refer to a person carrying a gun or wearing glasses. However, inside the critical discourse of cyberculture, the use of any technological extension is automatically associated with the idea of the cyborg. As we will see later on, this concept has in the last decades amplified to such an extent its semantic field that it runs the risk of being completely emptied of meaning. Because of this, I would like to make a brief overview of the most important ideas that have been generated around this word. The word "cyborg" (blending of "cybernetic" and "organism") popularly represents the symbiosis of the mechanical and the biological. Its close kin is the robot, which was conceived around the 1920s as a purely electromechanical entity at the service of human beings. The term "cyborg," which emerged after World War II, has been far less frequently used than the term "robot." Nevertheless, it has regained notoriety in the last years since its definition agglutinates a great number of contemporary preoccupations in relation to the growing convergence between biology and technology.

Since Norbert Wiener published his *Cybernetics* in 1948, the analogy between living organisms and artificial systems capable of self-regulation has become habitual. Cybernetics was defined by Wiener as the study of control and communication in the animal and the machine. His main interest focused in the manner any system (digital, mechanical, or biological) processes information, reacts towards it, and changes or can be changed to improve its subsequent processing. That is, he studied the feedback and self-control capacity of communication systems, be they among humans, animals, molecules, or chips. Wiener placed his emphasis on the idea that cybernetic systems are constituted by flows of information. From this perspective, a blind man and his cane, for instance, fuse in a single system in which the cane provides the man vital information about his environment. This type of examples were the ones that underscored the fusion between the biological and the mechanical, the organic and inorganic, although *a posteriori* the term "cybernetic" was associated mainly with the world of machines, computer scientists, and artificial intelligence. Nevertheless, a fundamental implication provoked by Wiener's cybernetic theory was the revolutionary idea that the boundaries of what constitutes a human being are not given by nature, but that they are culturally constructed instead (see Hayles 84). Thus, in this context, a cyborg would be any person wearing glasses or a hearing aid, a blind person with a cane, a handicapped person that needs a computer to communicate, etc. By extension, the word "cyborg" is used to refer to the unions between the biological and the mechanical that are normally the product of restorative technology, which returns to the organism its lost functions.

The main concern regarding the hybridization between the biological and the mechanical has to do with the technological capacity that human beings have acquired to transform nature. The barriers between the artificial and the natural begin to blur as scientific advances progressively make apparent the existing permeability between both poles. Nowadays no one is alarmed about the use of contact lenses or even about the implantation of a pacemaker or artificial crystalline lenses. Labelling these people as "cyborgs" or not depends on the degree we demand of this prosthesis to regard as cyborg the resulting compound. Normally, it is thought that in order to use this term with propriety, that artificial cybernetic prosthesis must incorporate not only mechanical elements but also some of control or of communication. The meaning of "cyborg" has also evolved progressively to include any entity that behaves as an enhanced human, no matter if it began its "life" biologically or not (an artificial intelligence would be a cyborg since it performs functions comparable to those of a human being, and a person who increases his physical or mental power using artificial substances can also be considered a cyborg). To make this concept even more confusing, in cyberculture critical discourse, the term "cyborg" has become a metaphor that encompasses all those uses of the environment that function as an extension of the human being (from the use of language, to the remote control, the mobile phone, or the computer). This implies that from the moment a human being becomes a cultural being he is already a cyborg. This is the definition of cyborg that David Hakken uses in his ethnography of cyberculture: "Because they have always been technological and biological, and therefore cyborgic, unities, I use 'cyborg' to refer to

María Goicoechea, "The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction"   page 5 of 11
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 10.4 (2008): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/9>
Thematic issue *New Studies on the Fantastic in Literature*. Ed. Asunción López-Varela

all the entities that carry human culture" (5). Therefore, from this perspective, the cyborgs are the true objects of study of anthropology, and consequently, we are all cyborgs.

As mentioned above, in general, "real" cyborgs usually are the product of a restorative technology, which returns to the organism its lost function through organ transplant or prosthetic implantation that replaces the damaged members. In this manner the organism returns to normalcy; however, there are also cyborgs whose technological transformation is somewhat destabilizing or transgressive, since it has transformed them into creatures similar to the rest but already outside normality. They find themselves in a state that receives the appellative of "posthuman": the posthuman creature has crossed "normality"'s threshold, lending its body to a techno-scientific colonization that will enhance or intensify its qualities beyond what characterizes the human species: be it for military purposes, such as eye implants to facilitate nocturnal vision or for other purposes such as pharmacological adjustments to adapt the body to space travel (see Miller). Inside this type of transgressive cyborgs, we can include body transformations for aesthetic purposes in their two versions: hypermasculine (muscle enhancement via hormones, steroids, transdermics, amino-acids, etc.) and hyperfeminine (accentuation of feminine attributes through silicone breast implants, hormones, colagen, botox, etc.).

According to the definition of philosopher Max More, physically, we will have become posthuman only when we have made such fundamental and sweeping modifications to our inherited genetics, physiology, neurophysiology and neurochemistry, that we can no longer be usefully classified with *homo sapiens*. From the psychical point of view, More confers to the posthuman conscience a different motivational structure to that of humans, or at least, the capacity to make modifications if they choose to be able to control the forces governing moods and behavioural patterns. Thus, the posthuman being would have absolute control over its emotional responses through the manipulation of neuronal chemistry. In this respect, there has been a long distance covered towards the realization of this posthuman ideal in the design of antidepressive drugs. Although body transformations and drug use to alter states of consciousness has been part of human cultures since antiquity (tribal tattoos, scarification, hallucinogenic drugs, etc.), it is the acceleration of the rhythm and repercussion of contemporary transformations what makes us think of a qualitative leap versus all the previous evolution. In its hybridization with technology the human being surpasses his humanity, since science places within human reach the "conscious" manipulation of his own evolution.

The popularization of certain practices such as cosmetic surgery, sex change operations, the ingestion of anabolic steroids and hormones, produces the impression that we can become human beings *à la carte*, that we do not have to resign ourselves to the gifts and the limitations with which we have been granted by nature. What precisely gives free reign to the fabulation and fantasy of artists and writers alike is this sensation that, thanks to the technological advances, an infinite range of possibilities opens before our eyes. The cyborg becomes thus the creature Donna Haraway had envisioned: "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (149). In accordance with the most up-to-date tendencies, the cyborgs of fantasy narratives and popular cyberculture (computer games, films, TV series, etc.) transgress the limits of the possible to incarnate the wildest posthuman fantasies -- fantasies that to some extent have already become true for some. Nevertheless, what is interesting of these representations is that they give another turn of the screw to social posthuman tendencies, posing essential questions to the development of the human being: If humans have the power to modify the course of their evolution, which is the path to follow? Where should we locate the essence of our humanity? Or, how will we measure it? The scientist can dream with moulding the future of humanity, but inevitably his fantasies will be built on the basis of his neurosis, in the same way that a writer cannot help projecting his own assumptions and prejudices onto his work. Also technology is founded over narratives, dreams, or myths of transcendence that visit humans since their origins. Thus, mythology and technology converge in the figure of the cyborg, the postmodern representation of an ancestral dream that, through the metamorphoses of the body, liberates the human being from his limitations. According to Dani Cavallaro, cyborgic fantasies find their roots in the primitive *shaman*, Dionysian rituals, gothic legends about vampires and

María Goicoechea, "The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction"   page 6 of 11
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 10.4 (2008): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/9>
Thematic issue *New Studies on the Fantastic in Literature*. Ed. Asunción López-Varela

were-wolfs, etc. (44). These myths represent the fantasy of transgressing, through the legitimacy granted by the unavoidable transformation of the body, the social and moral norms that apply for the rest of humans. The cyborgic transformation participates of these transgression fantasies, at the same time that it gathers an accumulation of nightmares and feelings of guilt, which emerge from the repressed awareness that these desires in fact represent a deviation from the ideals of Humanism and the Enlightenment. Thus, as it will become apparent, the figure of the cyborg is also the contesting ground for the discourses of Cybergothic and Technoromanticism.

The cyborg appears as a constant in cyberpunk science fiction in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, for example, in the short stories and novels of Philip K. Dick (whose texts were adapted to films such as *Bladerunner* and *Minority Report*), William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, or Pat Cadigan. In many cases, the cyborg represents the dream of immortality that appears within reach by means of scientific knowledge and technology. The Olympus of popular cyberculture is filled with omnipotent beings, invulnerable war machines, and all-powerful artificial intelligences. Facing this image of omnipotence, the cyborg also symbolizes the degradation of the human, man turned into semi-robot by man, the image of bondage with neither soul nor will. The technological invasion of the body is one of the main themes of Gibson's narrative. In numerous occasions, the bodies of his protagonists are mere objects at the disposal of their superiors. For instance, Johnny Mnemonic, protagonist of a short story of the same name, offers his brain as rental space for the storage of confidential data. Turner, the main character of *Count Cero*, is a mercenary that awakes one morning to find himself in a borrowed body, courtesy of Hosaka Company, for which he is forced to work. To this cast of characters, it is added a whole train of recombined cyborgs, for whom the body becomes, in the most literal way conceivable, a simple work tool. The human being has accepted this fact and has carried it to its most extreme consequences, transforming his body in an irreversible manner in order to adapt it to the work it performs. In general terms, inside the Gibsonian universe the cyborgic hybridization is associated with notions of impurity and degradation, a transformation that awaits the subjects of the lowest social classes. Sometimes, this hybridization is voluntary and participates of the cyberpunk taste for revolt by means of a provocative and savage aesthetics, as we can observe in the description Gibson makes of one of the members of a street gang called "Lo Tek" ("low technology") in "Johnny Mnemonic": "He regarded us with his one eye and slowly extruded a thick length of grayish tongue, licking huge canines. I wondered how they wrote off tooth-bud transplants from Dobermans as low technology. Immunosuppressives don't exactly grow on trees. … He might have been fifteen, but the fangs and a bright mosaic of scars combined with the gaping socket to present a mask of total bestiality. It had taken time and a certain kind of creativity to assemble that face, and his posture told me he enjoyed living behind it" (Gibson, "Johnny Mnemonic" 118).

The plasticity of the cyborg becomes a means for exploitation, not only in labor but also in sexual terms. In what seems a rewriting of the Pygmalion myth, the figure of the cyborg metamorphoses itself in sexual fetish: man builds his perfect woman with the help of robotics. In fact, the first android (robot with human form) that appeared in a film, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926), has the shape of a woman. In its most popular modern version, we find, for example, the provocative feminine cyborg played by Jeri Ryan in the Star Trek series, or the famous "ginoids" and "sexy robots" by Japanese artist Hajine Sorayama (see <http://www.sorayama.com>). The term "ginoid," which underscores the masculine etymological root of the term "android," makes reference to the robot with feminine shape. It was actually coined by Gwyneth Jones, a science fiction writer, and it was later developed by Richard Calder. In some cases, however, the metaphor of the cyborg seems to allude to an androgynous and ambiguous being, which manipulates at pleasure the various connotations derived from its condition. For example, the companion of Case, protagonist of *Neuromancer*, the "street Samurai" Molly Millions, is at once a sexual fetish and a lethal warrior. Molly has claws that spring automatically from her fingers like a cat, her reflexes are artificially enhanced, and a pair of special glasses covers permanently her eyes to allow her to see in the dark. Her cat movements and her tight clothing emphasize her role as fetish, whereas her independence and masculinity hinder in some way the maintenance of an erotic tension. In sum, the cyborg represents the body penetrated or colonized by the machine, by artificial substances,

María Goicoechea, "The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction"   page 7 of 11
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 10.4 (2008): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/9>
Thematic issue *New Studies on the Fantastic in Literature*. Ed. Asunción López-Varela

turned into a fetish, a lethal weapon. The cyborg is that character that every one makes to meas-ure, in this vision of the future that is already the present, in which the body no longer is a physi-cal barrier to be respected, but one out of the many that are daily crossed and manipulated, by oneself or others. That is why other body modifications (tattoos, scarification, piercings) are so intimately connected to cyberculture.

At a deeper symbolic level, the myth of the cyborg agglutinates many of the contradictions and ambiguities that characterize Anglo-American attitudes towards the body. On the one hand, it is an impure being, a monstrous hybrid whose physical capacity surpasses that of the human. Such is the monster of Frankenstein, abominable as well as incredibly strong and resistant. On the other hand, the cyborg symbolizes an ideal of purity. The different representations of the cyborg mani-fest to opposed fantasies, that of the impure body (a violated body, penetrated by metal), and that of the pure body, sealed, clean, hard, uncontaminated, an ideal of a body that does not eat, drink, cry, sweat, urinate, defecate, menstruate, ejaculate (see Cavallaro 47). In sum, a body that does not suffer any disease and that does not die, that is not subject to the laws of nature. According to Cavallaro, this puritan body, "without secretions or indiscretions" expresses a fantasy of omnipo-tence. We can add that this ideal of purity, incarnated for example by the character of the prosti-tute Kitsune in Bruce Sterling's novel *Schismatrix Plus* (1996), reflects a patriarchal fantasy pro-jected onto the feminine body: "They gave me to the surgeons," she said. "They took my womb out, and they put in brain tissue. Grafts from the pleasure center, darling. I'm wired to the ass and spine and the throat, and it's better than being God. When I'm hot, I sweat perfume. I'm cleaner than a fresh needle, and nothing leaves my body that you can't drink like wine or eat like candy. And they left me bright, so that I would know what submission was" (31).

The violation of the feminine body, penetrated by wires, transformed into a refined and steril-ized pleasure machine, underscores the manner in which the technological metamorphosis is ori-ented to purify what was previously considered impure. The ideas of purity and impurity connected to the technological manipulation of the body pose crucial questions regarding the consequences of great scale scientific intrusion in human evolution. Projecting possible options into the distant fu-ture, the historical narrative of Sterling, *Schismatrix Plus*, separates the development of humanity in two opposed directions, the "Shapers" and the "Mechanists," two evolutive paths that have di-verged due to two different visions of what means to maintain the purity of the human essence. The shapers reproduced by means of cloning, their manipulation of nature at the genetic level with the objective of creating perfect beings is not considered a violation of the human spirit but, on the contrary, a necessary effort in order to bring humanity to its perfection as a species. Their ideal of purity leads them into a never-ending struggle in order to maintain virus-free artificial ecosystems in which the clones can live. But the battle against the laws of nature is arduous and it often has unforeseeable consequences. The *Mechanists*, on the other hand, use all sorts of prostheses, al-lowing the mechanic elements to slowly invade their bodies. According to the *Shapers*, the evolu-tionary path selected by their opponents will lead them to a dead end, since at some point every-thing will be transformed into metal and programming, leaving aside will power and imagination, in sum, life. However, it is the beautiful and super intelligent *Shapers* who end up exalting the power of science and intelligence over emotions, becoming enslaved brains at the service of an ideology.

In most popular science fiction narratives, science seems to advance blindly, allowing its at-tainments to be manipulated by the most perverse minds. The criticism about the scientist's lack of perspective is a cliché in all cyberpunk narratives, as it is ironically made plain by Sterling's saga, who ascribes the coldness of the machine to the *Shapers* and their idealization of the scien-tific method, whereas the vital *Mechanists*, notwithstanding their alliance with cybernetic technol-ogy, are the ones who do not try to avoid those feelings that make them vulnerable. Distinguishing without a margin of error, a human from a machine and eliminating the rebellious machines is the job of the "Blade Runners," a problematic objective sought after the protagonist of the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick. Dick has himself acknowledged, the main theme in all his works is the search for a definition of the human: "My grand theme -- who is hu-man and who only appears (masquerades) as human?" (Dick qtd. in Fitting 132). This question also brings with it a moral dilemma that demands the positioning of the reader before an interpre-

María Goicoechea, "The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction" page 8 of 11
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 10.4 (2008): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/9>
Thematic issue *New Studies on the Fantastic in Literature*. Ed. Asunción López-Varela

tation of the novel can be reached. The setting of the novel is clearly dystopian; the earth after the Terminal World War is a desolated place. The survivors have settled in colonies created in outer space, except a small number of "specials" that do not meet the physical requirements necessary to emigrate (due to their exposure to radioactivity) and other people that decline abandoning their lives in the old planet. To make life in the colonies bearable and to compensate the extinction of numerous animal species on earth, various multinational companies have launched a business creating synthetic replicas of the many forms of life that once inhabited the planet, including organic androids nearly identical to humans. To encourage humans to leave the planet, the UN gives each emigrant an android as servant. However, some androids fabricated with an above-human intelligence rebel and search for their autonomy returning to earth and mixing with the human population. To avoid a mass desertion, the international police are organizing themselves to eliminate them using the special body of Blade Runners, which is in charge of getting them out of circulation.

The first page of the novel confronts us head on with the conflict that will dominate the whole work. Its protagonist, Rick Deckard, one of the most experimented Blade Runners, awakens happily one morning - he has programmed his mood organ to feel so- to meet the open hostility of his wife Iran, who despises his job and feels pity for "those poor andys" (1). Even if the author does not warn us when we are actually going to encounter an android, the reader easily recognizes one of the first replicants to appear in the novel. It is not just her physical description that calls our attention ("her bare upper body sleek and trim, without an excess gram of fat" [58]), but her strange behavior, selfish and cold, is what helps us to identify her as an android. The "special" Isidore, who lives alone in a big apartment building, tries to befriend her offering his help to find furniture. When the android realizes that it is easy to manipulate Isidore accepts his help but refuses to make dinner for him in return: "No, I have too much to do." The girl shook off the request effortlessly and he noticed that, perceived it without understanding it. Now that her initial fear had diminished, something else had begun to emerge from her. Something more strange. And, he thought, deplorable. A coldness, like, he thought, a breath from the vacuum between inhabited worlds, in fact, from nowhere: it was not what she did or said but what she did not do and say" (58). The lack of empathy and solidarity of the android, who acts without recognizing herself in the other, is what reveals her inhumane and monstrous nature. Nevertheless, the paradox that the Blade Runner must face is that, whereas there are some humans that, due to mental disorders, also lack the capacity to feel empathy, not all the androids are deprived of characteristics that we would categorize as human, such as their thirst for life and their concern to help their equals. Iran's scarce desire to live offers a contrast with the attachment the androids manifest towards their own "lives."

The difficulty of distinguishing the true identity of the beings that surround the main character generates a paranoid perception that permeates the reading experience, inciting the reader to reflect upon the vacuum of humanity, this spectral haze that separates the self from the other when there is no feeling of communion between them. Besides paranoia, schizophrenia, an illness diagnosed to the author himself, is the other mental disorder that appears in several of his novels as the trigger for an abnormal and inhuman behavior, which affects humans and androids alike. In *Martian Time-Slip,* the anti-hero Jack Bolen suffers from schizophrenia and goes into exile to Mars for this reason. In this novel Dick describes with great insight the experience of the schizophrenic patient:

The first step in Schizophrenia is isolation: the utter alienation of perception from objects of the outside world, especially the objects which matter -- the warm hearted people there. And what takes their place? A dreadful preoccupation with the endless ebb and flow of one's self; the changes emanating from within which affect only the inside world. It is a splitting apart of the two worlds, of inner and outer, so that neither registers on the other. Both still exist, but each goes its own way. It is the stopping of time, the end of experience of anything new. Once a person becomes psychotic, nothing ever happens to him again. And he realized, "I stand on the threshold of that." A coagulated self fixed and immense which effaces everything else and occupies the entire field. … A monumental selfishness. (qtd. in Anne R. Dick 94-95)

María Goicoechea, "The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction" page 9 of 11
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 10.4 (2008): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/9>
Thematic issue *New Studies on the Fantastic in Literature*. Ed. Asunción López-Varela

This monumental selfishness or narcissism is closely linked with the solipsistic tendency that Sterling imagines as the disease of the cyborg. As one of the cyborgs in *Schixmatrix* says: "The wires bring changes … It all becomes a matter of input, you see. Systems. Data. We tend to solipsism; it comes with the territory. Please don't resent it if I doubt you" (Sterling 146). The cyborg becomes thus a symbol of contemporary solitude, of the inaccessibility and hermetism of the human psyche. Nevertheless, new ways of life will inevitably bring changes to our mental processes. Through his bonding with the machine, the human has constructed just another protective wall around him. And, as these narratives seem to imply, our minds without bodies will necessarily become narcissistic as they start to inhabit the cyborgic world of computer nets and lose the direct contact with the other as point of reference.

The obsession for the security of the ego and its internal division, the old symptoms of paranoia and schizophrenia, are also the main themes of cyberculture's nightmares, which have transferred them to a new media environment each time more saturated and dangerous. Pat Cadigan's novel, *Synners* (1991), explores in depth the consequences of the cyborgic transformation that humans have undergone to be able to experience a complete fusion with the computer nets that form cyberspace. Cadigan reaches similar conclusions when she identifies paranoia and schizophrenia as the by-products of the digital man's new status, now that he is immersed in pure, decontextualized information. However, her feminine vision harshly criticizes the masculine utopias of autonomy and escapism that predominate in male fiction. As feminist critic Jean Pfaelzer has also remarked, the solipsistic tendency can be found among the characteristics of the American masculine utopia: "I find that American utopian communities and literary utopias, when defined by men, have sought to realize the ahistorical, antiestablishment and antisocial elements of romanticism. These solipsistic tendencies emerge in the patriarchal shape of utopias erected by men" (Pfaelzer 94). Cadigan, on the contrary, advocates for a dystopia in which people still need one another despite the imperfection of that contact. With its hunted houses, cybervampires and killer viruses, the cybergothic repertoire of *Synners* is put at the service of a modern fable, of ambiguous moral, about the perils that prey on individuals that have chosen the computer labyrinths over the personal and social relations of their physical entourage. *Synners*' unknown evil is a killer virus unconsciously produced by somebody who, in his desire to abandon definitively his body to inhabit the computer circuits, began to neglect his vital needs until he suffered a brain attack that infected the Web. The cerebral modifications to which the "sinners" (read "sinners") have been subject to, and that allowed them to access via telepathy the global computer web, turn them into the first victims of the virus, which infects them by sending them subliminal messages of an irresistibly bewitching and hypnotic power.

Similarly to *Synners*, Neal Stephenson's novel, *Snowcrash* (1992), warns us from the dangers behind trying to transform us into cyborgs, be it metaphorically (transforming our communicative habits to adapt them to the vertiginous rhythm imposed by the machine) or literally (transforming our bodies to communicate with them). The "Snowcrash" virus has been designed by the most powerful man on earth, owner of the communication nets that form the metaverse (a cyberspace made of virtual reality), with the purpose of controlling his own workers, the programmers. In a universe where information is the most valued good, it is difficult to have absolute control over its sources unless one controls the very minds of the people that operate it. "Reading" becomes a dangerous activity, especially if the person doing it is used to deal with computer codes. Hackers and programmers become the victims of the Snowcrash virus, which attacks the brain by bombarding it with zeros and ones at high speed, a binary language that only computers can read. Behind this virus various fears are kept in disguise, among them the fear to be exposed to a constant overdose of information, whose effects at a subliminal level can be catastrophic.

It is probably as icon of the alternative and critical cybercultural discourse that the figure of the cyborg receives its more redemptive form, representing the subversion and blurring of a large number of borders, including that of gender. As Haraway already exposed, "the most terrible and perhaps the most promising monsters in cyborg worlds are embodied in non-oedipal narratives with a different logic of repression, which we need to understand for our survival … The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world" (Haraway 150). And we need to understand it not only to be safe

María Goicoechea, "The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction" page 10 of 11
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 10.4 (2008): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/9>
Thematic issue *New Studies on the Fantastic in Literature*. Ed. Asunción López-Varela

from the monster, but to be able to face the changes that the monster represents outside fiction: an identity more and more confusing, masked and protected by the Web, each time more abstract and individualistic. The cyborg is the last being, without umbilical cord, completely liberated from all dependence, alone in space. This creature has skipped the state of unity with the mother / nature, and, thus, it finds itself outside the concepts of individuation and gender, since they depend on this idea of primeval unity from which difference must be produced. It is also outside the idea of labor and sexual differentiation from which emerges the drama of increasing domination against woman/nature. Haraway contends that the cyborgic body poses a challenge to the myth of a stable identity, of the Cartesian subject, since it implies the interpenetration between self and other. By crossing the borders between the human and the machine, the cyborg also splits other dualities, such as nature/culture, man/woman, original/copy, reality/appearance, etc. She also acknowledges the contradictory messages that are projected onto the image of the cyborg. On the one hand, a cyborg world can be one of domination and control, war and appropriation, or it can be "about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (Haraway 154).

Cyberpunk science fiction narratives of the last generation coincide in their depiction of cyberspace as the location where fantasies and nightmares about the body are realized, warning the reader/user of the dangers of both technoromantic and cybergothic extremes. An exaggerated need for control can paradoxically isolate the cybernaut, who is bedazzled by technoromantic promises of total connection but who remains alone, like Narcissus, in front of the computer and cut off from his immediate surroundings. Cybergothic lures into the uncanny spaces of cyberspace a crowd of new believers who are ready to abandon themselves to its new pleasures, but who can be turned into soulless slaves at the service of the hypnotic power of its subliminal messages, crushed by its endemic information overload, sucked of their blood by more experimented vampires, or just merely transformed into the very medium they inhabit, minds without bodies. What kind of cyber-readers we become will depend of how aware we are of the fantasies and desires that govern us, so say the cyberpunks.

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María Goicoechea, "The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction"   page 11 of 11
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 10.4 (2008): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/9>
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