



Book Review:
Being Bionic: The World of TV Cyborgs

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The cyborg has been a contentious entity for the entirety of its existence, as has its definition. Can the nomenclature of “cyborg” be applied retroactively? Is Icarus an early cyborg because of his prosthetic wings? What about the Roman legionnaires with their armor and weaponry, including the ballistae and tormenta? Currently, the images and actuality of the integration of the machinic and the organic have become both more systemic and homeostatic, such as the classic Terminator, Cable from *X-Men*, or even bodies utilising prostheses and vaccines. Regardless of the time period in which it exists or is portrayed, the cyborg’s image has typically evoked fear, as the repercussions of blending body and technology can create nightmarish figures, especially when those figures so closely resemble humans but lack some common element of humanity normally accessed to serve as a marker. They are uncanny, resembling us but somehow not fully us.

Science fiction extrapolates from the interactions of current technologies how future societies may construct their own uncanny socio-technological integrations; as such, it provides an avenue to understand the implications of the cyborg. As Chris Hables Gray, Steven Mentor, and Heidi Figueroa-Sarriera observe, the complete “cyborgologist must study science fiction as the anthropologist listens to myths and prophecies. Science fiction has often led the way in theorizing and examining cyborgs, showing their proliferation and suggesting some of the dilemmas and social implications they represent” (8). Untangling these cybernetic creatures and the possibilities they represent via science fiction provides opportunities to understand how the finely balanced socio-technological systems that create us as cyborgs can malfunction. For example, there has been a strong emphasis on STEM in recent

years and a de-emphasis on the humanities; this imbalance leads to tremendous power to mold the world around us, with little wisdom to shape that authority.

Bronwen Calvert's *Being Bionic: The World of TV Cyborg* provides an overview of representations of these not-fully-human hybrids. These images are crucial to understanding the technological evolution of humanity. Bruce Clarke notes that because of the increasing influence of the cyborg in modern society, the way we narrate our reality has shifted. Systems cannot be separated from the environments that allowed their creation. "It is as if the environments of systems had long occupied cognitive blind spots from which they have now been shifted into view" (14). Calvert's work gazes deeply into this previously ignored cognitive blind spot, examining cybernetic images over several decades. Beginning with a chapter on the iconic Daleks and Cybermen of *Dr. Who* and ending with a discussion of beings from opposite universes in *Fringe*, Calvert makes stops in well-known worlds such as *Battlestar Galactica* and *Star Trek*. As Calvert delves into the complexity of the cybernetic systems in these worlds, she describes how the cyborg operates as both mirror and monster, simultaneously threatening humanity while reflecting and magnifying its flaws. Because of their hybridity, both embracing the organic while using technology to enhance and modify functionality, cyborgs create leaks in traditional concepts of identity, such as gender and race (3). These images of the cyborg, Calvert argues, can subvert such traditional markers, although even within this subversion, there is sometimes a simultaneous fortification of them. By taking a chronological approach to these images, she shows the evolution both of their conformity and resistance to such orthodoxy.

One of the high points of Calvert's analysis is her contention that television cyborgs reinforce traditional roles and dichotomies when an embodied cyborg not only does not call for such constructions in areas such as gender identity and sexual orientation, but also fundamentally opposes such entrenched versions of the cyborg as created by western sociocultural morphology. For example, her analysis of Seven-of-Nine, the rescued Borg drone, from *Star Trek: Voyager* points out her obvious sexualisation for the sole purpose of ratings with this particular Borg. Seven-of-Nine's blatant sexualisation is a stark contrast to all the other Borg, who are portrayed as clunky amalgamations of flesh and harsh (almost steampunk) mechanics. Additionally, she is rendered in this manner despite her innate asexuality. Playing her explicit physical sexualisation against her disinterest in physical intimacy allows the producers of the show to have their cake and eat it, too: a hypersexualised image without the need to put the actress in overtly sexual situations while still hinting and teasing about sex through her naivety; as the series continues, she explores romance and sexuality from a position of "innocence" like a teenager, but in a very adult body (55–57). Likewise, in *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, Summer Glau plays Cameron, a cyborg designed to infiltrate human society and assassinate designated targets; she has a mechanical endoskeleton encased by organic tissue to better serve this function. Producers released advertising for the series that fetishised Summer Glau's cybernetic body in their advertising, using scenes that didn't appear in the show (147). Calvert's lines of inquiry into the western cultural necessity to gender and sexualise beings that fundamentally resist gendering are consistently solid, unabashedly pointing out our cultural prejudices.

Another strong line of analysis is the conflict Calvert examines between humanity and hybridity. Calvert is at her best when she examines the ways in which

various images of the cyborg are embraced or rejected by both “full” humans and embodied cyborgs. This question of embodiment and the loss or gain of humanity is central not only to our future, but to our present. Calvert returns to this question repeatedly through several chapters, particularly in terms of what different sociocultural entities consider the “acceptable” degree of hybridity and how these entities attempt to enforce their restrictions on hybridity. There are beings such as the Borg and Cyberbermen who fight to not only create more fully integrated versions of themselves, but also to impose hybridity on others. Conversely, some characters reject any aspect of hybridity for themselves while fighting to destroy all cyborgs that cannot be used as tools; even those which can be used are often viewed with suspicion. Sarah Connor is the archetype of this kind of character, only reluctantly using Summer Glau’s Cameron to achieve her anti-cybernetic goals while never fully embracing the cyborg. Calvert’s exploration of this false dichotomy between technology and the human is both a fruitful and intriguing line of inquiry.

An area that I would have liked to see Calvert explore a bit more is non-traditional cyborgs, such as large-scale sociocultural technorganic integration or nanotechnologically manipulated organisms; the majority of her analyses focus on very traditionally embodied cyborgs. The one notable exception to this trend is Chapter 4, which focuses on *Caprica*, the prequel series to *Battlestar Galactica*, and how the cyborg can be formed through a virtual existence. In many ways, this is the strongest chapter of the text, as it expands the commonly accepted parameters of cyborgs and provides opportunities to view them through a broader lens. This more inclusive definition, one which considers human cognitive function incorporated into fully mechanical bodies, forces a reconsideration of standard definitions of cyborgs, and is a welcome challenge to more traditional perspectives. What is unfortunate about this lack of exploration into nontraditional cyborg imagery is that it is not because Calvert does not consider such boundary-pushing images. In her conclusion, she briefly considers works such as *Orphan Black* and *Humans*, both of which present alternative views of cyborgs that violate common preconceptions. In *Humans*, synthetic humans interact freely with “normal” humans, though they do so as perceived inferiors, while *Orphan Black* describes biological clones created through advanced technology as property, stripping them of their humanity and human rights. Her brief looks at these images are incredibly interesting and hint at a stronger potential for disruption than do several of her chapters. For example, at what point does technological intervention on a human body render it an object in the eyes of a legal system as in *Orphan Black*? Calvert might easily have analysed both images in full chapters, rather than spending so much time analysing images that take a more conventional view of the cyborg.

Overall, however, *Being Bionic: The World of TV Cyborgs* is an intriguing overview of cyborg imagery on television over several decades. While there are some clear missed opportunities to expand upon and question cyborg definitions, the work Calvert does do is important. By understanding the historical unfolding of the cyborg image on television, Calvert allows us to grapple with our current understanding of this figure in society. As STEM continues to dominate collegiate budgets and subsequent career paths, problems arising from technological expansion are all too often regarded as simply the price of progress; lost is the fact that technology is merely an extension of human choices, and humanity must acknowledge its intrinsic bond with its machine prosthetics in order to properly control them. Calvert’s analysis correctly rectifies this false bifurcation, stressing the interdependency of

technology with humanity rather than viewing them as separate entities. We are hybrids, reliant upon technology for our humanity. Chris Hables Gray has observed that tools are “here to stay, machines are here to stay, cyborgs are here to stay. The real issue is which tools, which machines, which cyborgs we will have in our society and which will be excluded or never created” (6). Calvert’s scrutiny of these television images demonstrates methodologies that we can use to improve or fail as hybrids, either making our world and cultures better or, perhaps, destroy them.

Biography: Mick Howard is an Assistant Professor and Director of the Writing Center at Langston University, an HBCU in Oklahoma. He has a strong interest in the manner in which combinations of bodies and technologies not only interact and function in society, but also in how particular bodies and technologies signify. Specifically, he is curious about how sociocultural approved signification of only certain combinations of bodies and technologies prevents designated bodies from interacting with particular technologies.

Works Cited

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