

The Co-opted Cyborg: Self-Construction and the Reproduction of Power in Female Technological Bodies in Popular Visual Culture

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Abstract. As science-fiction imagery, video games, and cosmetic technologies permeate everyday culture, female bodies are increasingly presented as cyborgs, mechanical bodies, virtual avatars, and beautified bodies. Against this background, this paper examines whether these technological bodies truly realize the emancipatory promise of cyborg feminism. Drawing on Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism, Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, and Anne Balsamo's theory of gendered body technologies, this study adopts close reading, case analysis, and textual comparison to analyze popular cultural works including *Frankenstein*, *Love, Death & Robots*, *The Substance*, *The Plastic Surgery Game*, *NieR: Automata*, and *Cyberpunk 2077*. The paper argues that female cyborg bodies do not automatically achieve post-gender liberation. Instead, they are often reabsorbed into patriarchal and capitalist structures through traumatic empowerment, aesthetic discipline, and the illusion of free choice. This oppressive reproduction of power takes different forms across literary texts, animated shorts, media representations of cosmetic enhancement, and open-world video games, yet these varied forms together constitute a unified cross-media logic of discipline directed at female technological bodies.

Keywords: cyborg feminism, female body, male gaze, cosmetic technologies, visual culture

1. Introduction

Donna Haraway defines the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" [1]. For Haraway, the cyborg is a post-gender figure that challenges the boundaries between human and machine, male and female, nature and culture. Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory unpacks how classical mainstream cinema positions women as passive vessels of visual pleasure under patriarchal systems of representation [2]. Anne Balsamo further reminds us that technological bodies do not naturally escape gender coding; rather, the technological shaping of the body is deeply involved in cultural constructions of gender [3]. Existing scholarship has either emphasized the liberatory potential of the cyborg or criticized female robot figures in science-fiction films. However, fewer studies place mechanical women, cosmetic bodies, gaming bodies, and the Frankensteinian genealogy of created beings within a single analytical framework.

This paper therefore addresses three questions. First, why does the female cyborg body so often begin with trauma? Second, how do beautification technologies transform bodily freedom into standardized discipline? Third, why does the "freedom of customization" in digital culture remain vulnerable to the male gaze and capitalist aesthetics? Drawing on qualitative analytical tools, principally close case study and cross-textual comparison, this paper expands the scope of cyborg feminist critique beyond conventional science-fiction androids to cosmetic bodily modification, digital gaming, and virtual embodied forms. Its significance lies in revealing the ambivalence of "technological empowerment" in contemporary visual culture: technology may offer new forms of embodiment, but it can also reproduce older structures of gendered power.

2. Theoretical framework: cyborg feminism and the male gaze

This paper takes Haraway's cyborg feminism as its central theoretical framework. In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway conceptualizes the cyborg as a hybrid archetype that rejects fixed, essentialist gender identities. The cyborg suggests that gender, species, embodiment, and technology are not fixed categories but can be recombined and reimagined [1]. This makes cyborg feminism a useful tool for analyzing mechanical women, cosmetic bodies, gaming avatars, and virtual female figures in popular visual culture.

However, the emancipatory potential of theory does not necessarily translate into cultural practice. Accordingly, this study further integrates Mulvey's male gaze theory alongside Balsamo's scholarship on gendered bodily technologies. Mulvey shows that mainstream visual culture often organizes looking around an active masculine subject and a passive feminine object [2]. Balsamo, in turn, demonstrates that technologies of the body are not neutral but are shaped by cultural assumptions about gender, beauty, and embodiment [3].

These three perspectives form the analytical framework of this paper. Cyborg feminism offers the possibility of dissolving boundaries, while theories of the gaze and gendered body technologies show how this possibility can be pulled back into older structures of power. The key question, therefore, is not simply whether women can possess technological bodies, but who designs, narrates, evaluates, and consumes those bodies. If the cyborg body is still required to be beautiful, wounded, obedient, or visually consumable, then its apparent liberation may become another form of discipline.

3. The genealogy of created beings: from *Frankenstein* to traumatic empowerment

3.1. Creation without a mother: from mythological archetype to literary prototype

The narrative archetype of "creation without a mother" is deeply rooted in Western cultural imagination. In Genesis, God creates Adam from dust and Eve from Adam's rib, establishing a symbolic hierarchy in which divine or masculine creation is placed above female or natural childbirth. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* can be interpreted as a secular rewriting of this foundational myth. Victor Frankenstein bypasses the female body and creates life through male scientific ambition. His experiment is therefore not only a story about scientific transgression, but also a fantasy of appropriating reproductive power without women.

The novel's underlying gender politics emerge most sharply in the subplot centering on the female creature. The Creature demands a female companion, and Victor initially agrees to create one. Yet he destroys the unfinished female creature because he fears that she may possess uncontrollable desire, reproductive capacity, and a future beyond his authority [4]. The female

creation is denied life before she can become a subject. She is feared not for what she has done, but for what she might become.

Blewitt and Bell argue that *Frankenstein* is haunted by maternal absence and by the tension between creation and dismemberment [5]. Hughes-Moore also suggests that the novel destabilizes gendered binary oppositions by exposing anxieties around femininity, monstrosity, and legal discourse [6]. Accordingly, *Frankenstein* functions less as a standalone theoretical framework and more as a foundational genealogical origin point for this analysis. It shows that technological creation has never been neutral. From the beginning, the created body is entangled with male creative authority, the absence of the female body, and the fear of autonomous female life.

3.2. From violent spectacle to aesthetic internalization: Sonnie and Malenia's traumatic empowerment

If *Frankenstein* reveals the male creator's desire to control life, contemporary cyborg-female narratives often show another pattern: female technological bodies are rarely born from freedom. Instead, such constructs are almost invariably forged out of violence, curses, bodily mutilation and profound trauma.

The short film *Sonnie's Edge* from the anthology series *Love, Death & Robots* serves as a pivotal case in point. Sonnie first appears to be a female fighter controlling a combat beast, but the narrative eventually reveals that her consciousness is fused with the monster. She is not simply a woman operating a machine; she is a cyborg subject formed through a body destroyed by gang rape, technological mediation, and a monstrous fighting body. Her power is inseparable from sexualized violence and bodily destruction. The narrative allows her to become powerful only after she has first been made vulnerable.

This creates a feminist paradox. Sonnie's revenge is fierce and outward: she destroys those who try to control or consume her, refusing to remain a passive object of observation. Yet the legitimacy of her resistance remains tied to the old loop of "victimhood–revenge." Özkent contends that despite its frequent deployment of posthumanist and speculative visual imagery, *Love, Death & Robots* nevertheless reproduces entrenched gender stereotypes and frames graphic violence as a primary visual spectacle [7]. In this sense, Sonnie's cyborg body is not Haraway's joyful hybrid. It is a punitive rebirth, a body that gains agency through injury.

Malenia in *Elden Ring* presents a more internalized version of traumatic empowerment. Born with the Scarlet Rot, she is marked by decay, infection, and bodily instability. Her right arm and both legs are replaced by metal prosthetics. While these prosthetic augmentations amplify her combat prowess, they simultaneously function as restraints meant to contain a body culturally coded as inherently threatening.

Malenia is not a one-dimensional victim. Through discipline and battle, her prosthetics become part of her self-identity. She removes the golden needle that suppresses the Scarlet Rot and transforms calamity into a weapon. Her difficult boss fight also reverses the player's gaze: the player is no longer simply looking at her, but is forced to confront her overwhelming power. Nevertheless, this subjectivity is finally contained by the game's narrative structure. Allen reads Malenia as a figure of monstrous feminine horror whose subjectivity remains subordinated to the requirement that she be defeated as a threat [8].

From Sonnie to Malenia, traumatic empowerment shifts from violent spectacle to aestheticized tragic internalization. Sonnie's trauma becomes a revenge spectacle; Malenia's suffering becomes an epic spectacle of beauty, decay, and defeat. Both cases show how patriarchal and capitalist narratives adapt to feminist resistance. Even when female figures are granted access to embodied agency, such

power is only rendered narratively palatable when mediated by bodily harm, self-sacrifice or monstrous otherness.

4. From aesthetic discipline to the illusion of choice: the freedom trap of digital bodies

4.1. Beautification technologies: the body as a forced object of optimization

If mechanical prosthetics represent visible bodily modification, then cosmetic medicine, filters, and plastic-surgery apps constitute more everyday forms of cyborg technology. These tools do not literally transform women into androids, yet they reframe feminine bodily forms as adjustable, optimizable, quantifiable data constructs. Under this logic, the body becomes a project that must be constantly improved, evaluated, and corrected.

The Substance powerfully dramatizes the horror of such body technologies. In the film, an aging female star injects a mysterious substance that produces a younger and seemingly perfect version of herself. This new body appears to offer self-reinvention, but it also demands strict time rules and bodily maintenance. Her bodily form ceases to fully belong to her as an individual; instead, it becomes subordinated to market-driven aesthetic benchmarks centered on youth, conventional beauty and visual marketability. Many commentators have read the film as a body-horror allegory from a female perspective, criticizing society's harsh demands on women's youth and appearance [9].

The Chinese comic *The Plastic Surgery Game* more directly digitizes bodily transformation. Its protagonist, Yi Rong, is competent at work but suffers workplace exclusion because of her ordinary appearance. Through a plastic-surgery app, she completes tasks, receives rewards, and obtains opportunities to alter her face and body [10]. At first, the app seems to offer empowerment: it gives her access to beauty, attention, and social mobility. However, she gradually becomes trapped in an irreversible bodily transaction.

Here, the app functions like an aesthetic algorithm. It does not openly force women to become beautiful, but through reward mechanisms it tells them that only template-conforming bodies deserve to be loved, employed, and seen. The danger of beautification technologies therefore does not lie simply in allowing bodily change. Rather, it lies in disguising change as the only reasonable path. Capitalist beauty culture repeatedly emphasizes the freedom "to do" — to improve, reshape, and optimize — while rarely acknowledging that the freedom "not to do" is equally legitimate.

From this standpoint, beautification technologies constitute a far more covert mode of cyborg bodily disciplining. The body does not need to be visibly mechanical in order to become technological. Once it is filtered, measured, ranked, surgically modified, or optimized according to platform aesthetics, it has already entered a cyborg condition. Yet this condition is not necessarily liberating. The more modifiable the body becomes, the more it is expected to conform.

4.2. Gaming and virtual bodies: the male gaze within customization

Gaming and virtual culture often claim to offer greater bodily freedom. Players can choose gender, voice, clothing, body type, cybernetic implants, and sometimes even sexual characteristics. Superficially, this design framework appears to align with Haraway's utopian vision of permeable categorical boundaries. However, the more open the technology appears, the more easily aesthetic inertia can narrow choice to the "most desirable" images.

The open-world video game *Cyberpunk 2077* serves as an illuminating case study. The game allows players to modify gender markers, voice, body type, cyberware, and appearance. Such a

system seems to challenge fixed gender categories and offer a more fluid model of identity. However, this freedom often remains concentrated at the level of visual customization. Player communities and commercial promotion frequently redirect the system toward sexualized or conventionally attractive templates. A body can be customized, but this does not mean that it escapes cultural discipline. The interface offers choices, but the social value of those choices remains shaped by the male gaze and capitalist aesthetics.

The android 2B from the action RPG *NieR: Automata* constitutes another representative textual case. She is a powerful combat android with emotional repression, existential conflict, and philosophical depth. Yet her visual design remains strongly oriented toward visual consumption. Her short skirt, high heels, blindfold, slender figure, and maid-like black outfit keep her body available to the gaze. Her combat power does not cancel objectification; instead, it makes objectification more seductive. She embodies a fantasy of the female technological body that is both powerful and obedient, dangerous and visually pleasurable.

Virtual influencers, AI idols, and digital female figures intensify this paradox. Theoretically, digitally mediated bodily forms possess the capacity to transcend biological constraints of age, illness, racial marking and physical morphology. In practice, many of them become younger, slimmer, fairer, more emotionally stable, and more commercially adaptable. The digital body appears limitless, but its limitlessness is often used to manufacture the perfect commodity.

Thus, the so-called freedom of choice resembles a beautifully designed cage. While the digital system grants users permission to select, tweak and remodel their avatars, it fails to guarantee equal spectatorial visibility for all divergent bodily forms. Bodies that conform to dominant beauty standards are more likely to circulate, attract attention, and generate profit. Bodies that refuse optimization, aging, sexualization, or standardization are more easily pushed to the margins. Digital freedom, therefore, is not necessarily the disappearance of discipline; it may be discipline made softer, more interactive, and more pleasurable.

5. Conclusion

Grounded in cyborg feminism, this paper has examined the self-construction and reproduction of power in female technological bodies within popular visual culture. Haraway's cyborg was imagined as a figure capable of disrupting boundaries between gender, species, and technology. However, in mainstream film, animation, gaming, and cosmetic narratives, this emancipatory potential is frequently co-opted by patriarchal culture and capitalist logic. From the motherless creation in *Frankenstein*, to the traumatic empowerment embodied by Sonnie and Malenia, and onward to aesthetic bodily disciplining presented in *The Substance* and *The Plastic Surgery Game*, female bodily constructs acquire new technological forms but remain required to prove their value through injury, beauty, youth, and visual appeal.

Technology, therefore, does not naturally produce equality. The crucial question is not simply whether women can modify their bodies, but who defines the direction, value, and visibility of that modification. If women are empowered only after trauma, recognized only through beauty, and made visible only when they conform to marketable templates, then cyborg freedom becomes merely a new interface for old forms of discipline. A genuinely feminist cyborg politics must include not only the right to transform the body, but also the right to refuse optimization.

This paper has several limitations. Its selected cases are mainly drawn from Euro-American and East Asian popular culture, and the methodology relies primarily on textual close reading. This analysis lacks complementary empirical evidence, including audience interviews, video bullet-screen commentary and quantitative player community dataset records. Future research could

incorporate digital ethnography, platform algorithm analysis, and audience reception studies to examine how viewers and players understand, resist, or reproduce these technological body images. It would also be valuable to include more cyborg texts created by women, queer creators, or non-Western artists in order to explore alternative bodily imaginaries beyond patriarchal encoding.

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