

Research Article

The Problem of the Sexy Cyborg: The Aesthetics and Tropes of Cyborg Imagery

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Abstract: In this article, I discuss two popular tropes about the cyborg in speculative fiction visual media: apotheosis — the pinnacle of human form and function; and grotesquerie — the violation of that perfection through fascinating horror. I look at these tropes in service of discussing the effects of such images and cultural understandings on actual cyborgs. The everyday or common cyborgs that are disabled people; the ones with prosthetics, who use wheelchairs, hearing aids, beta blockers, and Ritalin, who have artificial valves, knees, and pacemakers. I argue that the imagery of perfection and horror that surround cyborgs in media reinforce problematic tropes about disabled people, specifically the tropes of the super crip, pity, and bitter cripple narratives, and the ugly is evil trope where physical disfigurements and disabilities are often shorthand for moral failing. I connect these tropes to longstanding beliefs that were foundational to the eugenics movement of the 19th and 20th centuries, and that still cause resistance to robust social services for disabled people.

Citation: Earle, Joshua. 2024. The Problem of the Sexy Cyborg: The Aesthetics and Tropes of Cyborg Imagery. *Journal of Ethics and Emerging Technologies* 34: 1. <https://doi.org/10.55613/jeet.v34i1.146>

Received: 10/09/2024
Accepted: 08/11/2024
Published: 13/11/2024

Publisher's Note: IEET stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Keywords: Disability, Cyborg, Media, Aesthetic, Apotheosis, Grotesquerie, Eugenics

1. Introduction

Cyberpunk 2077 is a video game that was released for several systems in 2020. Among its most striking pieces of promotional art was an image of a young woman with wavy brown hair wearing a white bustier sitting on her knees in the middle of your average cyberpunk street: lots of rain-wet asphalt and neon signage. She is covered in blood and surrounded by the (presumably) dead bodies of at least two other people. From her arms extend long praying mantis-like blades. She is a cyborg. Human in surface appearance — slim and attractive — but holding within her mechanical pieces which violate the usual expectations of human appearance and function, and which exist for the sole purpose of violence and harm (it can be found in the header of this news story about the game: <https://www.pcgamesn.com/cyberpunk-2077/sales-pre-orders>).



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The lighting draws your eyes to a traditionally attractive (for the “West”) face, and a slim body scantily clad in a tight white or silver bustier that enhances modest cleavage. She is the very picture of the Western ideal of beauty. Then, as one’s eyes move to other areas, the blood, bodies surrounding her, and her non-human arms produces the horror-fascination that comes with reveals of cyborg villains throughout films and media.

In this paper I discuss how cyborg imagery reinforces several problematic social tropes in the United States:¹ from Western beauty standards, to ableist expectations of bodymind² function, to disability stigmas, to eugenic ideals and racialized hierarchies. I do this through examining two seemingly opposing sets of aesthetic tropes around the cyborg: apotheosis — the idealized bodymind form and function; and grotesquerie — the fascination with the ugly and violations of expectations of the human form. I use mainstream depictions of cyborgs across several media for this project, including the *Terminator* (Cameron, 1984, 1991; Miller, 2019; Mostow, 2003) series of films, the animated film *Ghost in the Shell* (Oshii, 1995), the film *Alita: Battle Angel* (Rodriguez, 2019), and the manga from which it was adapted (Kishiro, 1990), the DC comic character Victor Stone (aka Cyborg), the video games *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Dugas, 2011) and *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2020), the animated series *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* (Jaki, 2022), the film and book versions of *Dune* (Herbert, 1965; Lynch, 1984; Villeneuve, 2021), and the tabletop war game *Warhammer 40,000* by Games Workshop.

“Cyborg” is a portmanteau of “cybernetic” and “organism” first coined by Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in their 1960 *Aeronautics* paper *Cyborgs and Space* (Clynes & Kline, 1960). They used “cyborg” to describe the kinds of technological alterations people would need in order to survive for long periods in space. They envisioned hormonal and chemical alterations via pills and supplements as well as robotic or mechanical replacements of organs or limbs. Some authors, like Andy Clark (Clark, 2004, 2010) and Donna Haraway (Haraway, 1991) argue that humans have always been cyborgs, that our building and reliance upon technology is what makes us human. While I have some affinity for Clarks claim, and certainly with Haraway’s formation, for this piece I hew closer to the

¹ I focus on the US in this piece for several reasons. First, the media I am focusing on is predominantly American made. Those that aren’t I am discussing within an American context. Second, the foundations of much of this critique stems from the eugenics era laws and policies enacted in the United States in the first half of the 20th century. Other countries had eugenics programs, but they functioned differently than those in the US. And finally, the particular context of the medical industrial complex, individualized and employer-based insurance, and government disability assistance makes the US context for disabled people significantly different than even other Western advanced countries like those in the EU or eastern Asia.

² I use the term “bodymind” in the tradition of Disability Studies (Price, 2015, who brought the term from Trauma Studies) and Black Feminist scholarship (Schalk, 2018), as a rejection of the western philosophical split between the mind and body; a philosophy that has been used to marginalize women and people of color for centuries.

definitions of Disability scholars like Jillian Weise and Muireann Quigley and Semande Ayihongbe (Quigley & Ayihongbe, 2018; Weise, 2018) who argue for a narrower definition, one that foregrounds disabled people as the true cyborgs. So, for this piece, my cyborgs are the people with insulin pumps and pacemakers, artificial hips and port-a-caths, wheelchair users, prosthetics users, those with cochlear implants or hearing aids, and – following Clynes and Kline – those on Ritalin or Adderall, Beta-Blockers, and SSRIs.

These two aesthetic tropes of apotheosis and grotesquerie line up generally with major attitudes around the use of technology in our bodyminds. Some see technological replacements as upgrades, steps on a new path of human evolution, directed by those traits and abilities we want more of. Engineers and transhumanists alike foresee a utopic cyborg future, full of people free to choose the kind of bodymind they want, specifically designed to help them do what they most want to do, be it make music or play sports or run a business (Clark, 2004; Kurzweil, 2005). These bodyminds will lead to the elimination of all social, scientific, technical, and political problems via a more intelligent populace,³ and may also lead to the elimination of death, disease, disability, and poverty.

Others see technological intervention as unnatural or marks of hubris (Steckler & Bartkowski, 2018). Dystopian media is full of the cyborg as an allegory for the overreach of the scientists, as an affront to the creative power of God. An embodied tower of babel, whose faults will lead to humanity's destruction, often in horrific ways (see: the nuclear holocaust in the Terminator film series). Our fiction and imagery of the cyborg often paints such a picture: one of power and influence for the wealthy elite, and abjection for those not so lucky.

In this article I reject both. They assume too much, simplify too far, and produce harm for all of the current cyborgs already among us. The real cyborgs who stand, sit, and roll subject to media-created expectations, forever failing to live up to the super versions, and also forever expected to be revealed in their hubris for attempting to live a “normal” life.

In Section 2, I describe how the aesthetics of apotheosis, both in form and in function, work to reinforce racializing and ableist expectations of bodyminds. In Section 3, I describe how the nearly opposing aesthetic trope of grotesquerie undermines disability as a metaphor for hubristic overreach or moral failure. Then, in Part 4, I unpack the problems with these tropes, from whence they come and what they tell us about those who do not fit our normative expectations: disabled people.

³ There is (some) disagreement among this group. Some, like Steven Pinker, imagine that prejudice exists because people aren't intelligent enough to see why it is illogical, writing “enhanced powers of reason—specifically, the ability to set aside immediate experience, detach oneself from a parochial vantage point, and frame one's ideas in abstract, universal terms—would lead to better moral commitments” (Pinker, 2012: pg. 656), whereas others, like Martine Rothblatt acknowledge that “[m]aking better people does [not] make a better world... making a better world makes a better world” (Rothblatt, 1997: pg. 166).

2. Apotheosis

Cyborg imagery reinforces bodymind expectations. Bodyminds are expected to look a certain way (or among a limited set of ways), and to be able to do certain things. We are expected to have four fully-formed limbs with ten (of each) properly formed and functioning fingers and toes. Bodyminds are supposed to walk with a steady, limple gait. Bodyminds are expected to have a face without deformities, and a mind able to do all the things necessary to participate in today's world. Bodyminds are expected to be able to see, hear, and communicate verbally, without stutter or slur. A body is expected to be flawless. This is evident not only in how society is built to favor the able-bodied, the thin, and the attractive, but also in the imagery that is produced about our potential futures (Garland-Thomson, 1997, 2009).

The cyborg image is usually the apotheosis — the maximalized vision — of what human form and function should be. Beyond simple idealization, the cyborg is often all but deified; the god-like telos of the human form, freed from all of its biological fragility, forever upgradeable, repairable, and immortal (Clark, 2004; Kurzweil, 2005; Savulescu & Bostrom, 2009). This is the image of the transhumanists; an image of tying human ability to the exponential “improvement” of technology. Even those cyborgs who may be visually different, breaking from beauty norms, even when they feel resentment toward their technological complement, are functionally superhuman.

Very few of us live up to society's expectations. When we don't, we run into all sorts of disabling social attitudes and hostile architecture. Disabled people run into many more of these barriers as their bodyminds vary more drastically from our expectations. As such, disabled people are highly stigmatized. Disabled people are also actual — i.e. not science fictional — cyborgs. What, then, do the images and expectation of our fictional cyborgs do to the expectations for the disabled cyborg and the nondisabled alike?

I discuss two kinds of apotheosis in this section: appearance and function. Both serve problematic interests based on what we deem “normal” and “desirable,” and both have gendered, racialized, and ability expectations of disabled and nondisabled people alike.

2.1. Appearance

Cyborgs are usually depicted as slender and well-muscled, hewing as close to current Western white beauty standards as the movie casting director or the image's artist can get. Often the only clue that these cyborgs have artificial parts will be the color or apparent material out of which they are made; usually chrome or a pure white plastic reminiscent of the design

stylings of Apple's iPhone, perhaps with some glowing electronics visible underneath a seam (blue for the good guys, red for the villains). Some, like the titular Terminators in their respective films cannot be visually differentiated from an unenhanced human. Male-coded cyborgs are well-muscled, toned like professional athletes or fitness influencers. Female-coded cyborgs are slim, tending less toward the athlete and more toward the image of a fashion model. A quick Google image search for the term "cyborg" — with or without a gendered modifier — brings up pages upon pages of bodies that perfectly align with Western, white beauty standards.

I say "white" very intentionally, here. It is not enough for a cyborg in media to simply appear nondisabled, they must also — usually, with specific exceptions — be attractive, often using their technological compliment in service of enhancing their attractiveness... a singular, specific expectation of attractiveness that aligns explicitly with white media expectations.

Very few cyborgs in media are coded as Black: The DC character Cyborg, Will Smith from *I, Robot*, and Anthony Mackie from *Altered Carbon* are the only⁴ exceptions I have been able to find outside of very niche artist depictions. A google image search for "black cyborg" returns hundreds of versions of the DC character, with a smattering of fanart of him and other original characters. And until anthologies like N.K. Jemisin's *How Long till Black Future Month* (Jemisin, 2018), academic work like Sami Schalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined* (Schalk, 2018), and a rise in Black women speculative fiction authors (like Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor), even fanart in this vein was super rare. Around 2017-18 when I first began looking at this topic, I literally could not find images of cyborgs that coded black and female. Nowadays, it is relatively easy to find up to several dozen images on google, usually through the "related content" recommendations when clicking on an image. The search itself only shows maybe a dozen or so images, all almost identical. They depict a black woman from the shoulders up in profile with a short afro or braids and some sort of mechanical facial prosthesis. Mainstream depictions of black women cyborgs are almost nonexistent.

Most of the characters, cyborg and not, in the *Terminator* series (excepting the most recent one as of this writing, *Dark Fate* (Miller, 2019), which had a Hispanic lead in both the human and cyborg villain roles, though the good cyborg is played by a white woman) are white. Almost all

⁴ The Matrix series of films is a huge exception, here (h/t to my reviewer for pointing this out). The people who have escaped the Matrix are all, necessarily, cyborgs. Most of that cast, especially in the the second, third, and fourth films, are diverse in both race and gender. In fact, most of Zion are depicted as people of color. Many are depicted as old, fat, disabled, and infirm. Switch was depicted as nonbinary in the film, but was originally called Switch because they were supposed to switch genders based on if they were in the Matrix or in the real world. In fact, this film series (and other projects by the Wachowskis, such as *Sense8*), is a rich enough counterexample of how to avoid many of the tropes I describe in this piece as to necessitate a whole other paper unpacking it.

of the characters in every version of *Ghost in the Shell* are Asian or white (or white-passing in the Anime style). Almost every character in the *Deus Ex* series of games is white, and even in the games where one can create Black cyborg characters for oneself — like *Cyberpunk 2077* — there are few black NPCs, and many times the character models have problems depicting skin tones properly. *Cyberpunk 2077*, for instance, simply had a skin shader for the entire body, with no color gradient for the palms of hands, soles of feet, fingernails, or lips, which often have different levels of melanation in darker-skinned people.

Similarly, very few images exist of a fat cyborg in popular media, excepting perhaps the Baron Harkonnen from *Dune* (Herbert, 1965; Lynch, 1984; Villeneuve, 2021), and the footnoted example of The Matrix series. But Baron Harkonnen more readily exhibits the grotesquerie angle of cyborg imagery, where his fatness is a functional part of his physical unpleasantness (which itself is problematic) and is meant to be a visual metaphor of his moral corruption.

That this slim white depiction of the cyborg is the dominant one reflects further the disconnect between social expectations of how people become disabled, and further reinforces the exclusion of those we deem unsightly from public spaces (see: Section 4). For example, the most common cause of amputation is circulatory issues arising from diabetes: a set of conditions that are highly correlated with poverty, obesity, and nonwhite communities. That so few cyborgs in media align with this image further marginalizes the common and everyday cyborgs who do.

2.2. Function

But it is not just form that follows our normative guidelines, function is expected to meet or exceed what we consider “normal.” Cyborgs in our media are almost always super-human. From Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Terminator to the DC comics superhero Cyborg. Fictional cyborgs as functional apotheosis feeds into and reinforces the supercrip trope around disabled people (aka nonfictional cyborgs).

The supercrip is the person who is extraordinary because of or in spite of (and both are problematic) their disability. You can often see this trope in inspirational media where a disabled person is running along a beach on prosthetic legs accompanied by text like “what’s your excuse?” Athletes like Oscar Pistorius, models and actors like Aimee Mullins and Marlee Matlin, or even everyday disabled people who make themselves visible in public are all considered to be doing incredible things... because their disabilities *should* render them invisible or *un-able*, according to social expectations.

The subtext is that since their disabilities haven’t rendered them *un-able*, well... why haven’t *you* become an Olympic athlete, a model, an actor or a superhero? You, nondisabled person, don’t have that extra hurdle to

jump over. It should be easy, right? The supercrip becomes a vector of both inspiration and shame for disabled and nondisabled people alike. If a disabled person isn't super, they must fall into one of our other boxes (usually the bitter cripple, the moocher, or the shameful sinner). And if a disabled person can do a thing, if you're nondisabled and can't, well... you should be ashamed of how lazy you are.

In fiction, this trope is magnified. In the video game *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Dugas, 2011), the main character Adam Jensen is nearly killed in an explosion, and rebuilt as a cyborg who now has abilities that no mere meatbag can have. He can hack almost anything with only a thought, fight in unique ways due to a prosthetic arm that has greater strength and a wider range of motion than a biological arm and can leap off of tall buildings without fearing any damage (depending on what upgrades one chooses as the game progresses). Similarly, the DC comic book character Cyborg was rebuilt after an accident and can now fly and is a regular on various teams of superheroes.

These stories then get reflected back onto the real world. News stories around Oscar Pistorius — a double-amputee who ran in the Sydney Olympics, but who also murdered his girlfriend — likened him to a superhero. They dubbed him the “Blade Runner” as both an homage to the type of prosthetic he used and to the sort of cyborg super-human future he was supposed to herald. There was a flurry of news stories a few years ago about a young blind boy who has developed a sort of echo-location that is precise enough for him to identify objects and go skateboarding in the street (Merriman, 2016). Those stories often likened him to Daredevil, the Marvel superhero who is blind, but has super-hearing which allows him to navigate and fight crime. Even in general, we kind of assume that if someone is disabled in one way, they “make up” for that deficit by being exceptional (if not super-human) in some other way. This is not how bodyminds work, and only reinforces inspiration narratives, in an endless cycle of shaming and normativity policing.

Transhumanists are a group of people who believe we can—and should—produce cyborg technology that is as good or “better” than our biological complement. They believe we can build a perfectible human through technology: the apotheosis. Members of this group such as Julian Savulescu (Savulescu & Kahane, 2009) and Zoltan Istvan (Istvan, 2015), want to eliminate disability altogether using technology. Istvan argues that even doing something as simple as fixing broken sidewalks is a waste of resources, when those resources could instead go towards technologies that would make wheelchairs unnecessary. But even if exoskeletons became functional for everyday use, and cheap enough for disabled people to afford, stairs, curbs, and broken sidewalks should still be maintained (especially in the time between an exoskeleton's hypothetical use and its actual use). Hostile architecture is both an effective way to keep “certain” people out of public spaces, as well as an effective tool for eliding

responsibility for accepting those people into them (Rosenberger, 2017). How we build the world assumes a certain kind of functioning bodymind. Cyborg imagery feeds into that idea, that through technological innovation and integration, disabled people can regain these expected functions, and thus no assistive or accessible areas need to be built.

The expectation that cyborgs are super-human because of their technology is not only about physical ability, but also about mental ability. The two main goals of transhumanists are immortality and tying human cognition to the exponential growth of information technology. I.e. to integrate computation into our minds such that our brains will then follow Moore's Law (i.e. double in computation power every two years).

I, and others, have written previously on the computational model of the mind which transhumanists use. This is where a mind, or a consciousness, is the emergent result of sufficiently complex computation (Earle, 2021; Schneider, 2019; Stamm, 2022). Transhumanists believe that if we can merge the speed at which our silicon-based computers work with the massively-parallel (and stunningly energy-efficient) way our brains work, currently-difficult problems will become trivial to solve. Improve enough people, and solutions become both obvious and politically viable (Kahane et al., 2012; Persson & Savulescu, 2012). Setting aside, for the moment, the manifold problematic assumptions which transhumanists make about the brain and the mind, this view of intelligence tends to conflate intellect with morality. In other words, they argue that we will be better able to know what "good" is, and more likely to do it, once we're "smart" enough. "Smart," here, being some arbitrary, measurable number of operations per second.

Ray Kurzweil has written at least five books that deal with this idea: *The Age of Intelligent Machines* (Kurzweil, 1990), *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (Kurzweil, 2000), *The Singularity is Near* (Kurzweil, 2005), *How to Create a Mind* (Kurzweil, 2013), and most recently *The Singularity Is Nearer* (Kurzweil, 2024). They all begin from the assumption that once machines have enough computational power or complexity, they will become what we might call intelligent or minded. Kurzweil believes that morality or spirituality will necessarily follow, and in proportion to their measurable intelligence (i.e. operations per second). Transhumanists continue to reinvent the cognitive science wheel, only to reproduce computationalism (Fodor & Pylyshyn, 1988), a theory that has been abandoned by modern cognitive scientists for the 4E model (Newen et al., 2018). Also, that, as a species, there seems to be little evidence of a positive correlation between intellect and morality (arguably, there's a negative correlation), such an expectation of our cyborg future seems dangerously naive.

The elimination of disability is also a key goal, here. For example, Elon Musk's Neuralink brain chip is being developed specifically to "cure" a set of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD), as well as degenerative and neurodivergent conditions like Alzheimer's, Parkinsons,

Schizophrenia, and Autism (Brueck, 2019). Ignoring for the moment the many investigations into Neuralink for problematic research ethics (Levy, 2022), it is unclear how a neural chip could cure conditions as disparate as these. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that Autism could be “cured” at all as it is not a disease, it is a different functionality that only manifests as a disability because of how autistic people run up against architectural and attitudinal barriers to participation in life. Many autistic people (and many disabled people more generally) don’t want a cure, they want acceptance (Clare, 2017; Williams, 2021). And nondisabled people continually trying to “cure” conditions that people with them are fine with having,⁵ while simultaneously failing to make the world more accessible to those people is part and parcel of the technoableism (Shew, 2023) that the apotheosis image broadcasts.

3. Grotesquerie

When not depicted as the apotheosis of the human form, the cyborg is often a grotesque violation of that idealized human form. The cyborg as grotesquerie has its roots in stories long preceding the cyborg itself. Grotesquerie is all about the fascination with the ugly and disfigured. It is the driver behind our fascination with horror films and rubbernecking at car crashes. It is also based on a longstanding belief that outward ugliness is an indicator of internal moral rot, combined with a trope of the hubris of the scientist. Ever since Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1869), tying grotesque visages with scientific overreach has been a common shorthand, illustrating the inability of man to contest God’s creative ability.

In this section, I discuss some examples of cyborgs who follow these tropes, from those whose hiddenness is revealed, often in horrifying ways, to dystopian cyborgs whose images are grotesque from the start.

3.1. The Cyborg Reveal

One of the main ways that the cyborg as grotesquerie is used in film and media is through the revealing the cyborgness of a particular character. For villains, this is often a way of illustrating the danger or moral corruption of that villain. For protagonists, this is sully used to reveal the limitations of their technology, or the hubris of themselves or their makers to imagine being able to improve on the human at all.

In *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984), as the movie nears its climax, the machine parts of actor Arnold Schwarzenegger’s titular character are revealed as he becomes damaged. The bloodless damage to his fleshy shell

⁵ To be fair, Musk has said that he is autistic, himself. So Neuralink may be an attempt to fix something about himself that he sees as a problem. One wonders if the world were more accepting of his autism, if he would feel the same need.

reveals the metal underneath, and one eye begins to glow red. In *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (Cameron, 1991), the cyborg reveal happens much earlier when Schwarzenegger's (now friendly) character shoots Robert Patrick's villainous T-1000 and the bullet passes through him with only a small shiny cone of liquid metal left behind which quickly closes, revealing the T-1000's true nature. This is ramped up a couple of times in the film, each instance showing that the T-1000 is even more dangerous than previously thought, each more grotesque than the previous. First, it takes a short-range shotgun blast to the face, splitting its head into a chrome-and-flesh colored flower before it easily reforms into Patrick's visage. Second, when the T-1000 is frozen, breaks off a leg and an arm before being shattered by a pistol shot from Schwarzenegger's character, then melting and reforming with no visible damage. And finally, when the T-1000 is shot with an explosive round, which tears its entire body into a larger version of that shotgun-produced flower before falling into a smelting pool where it rapidly morphs through all of its previous forms before being reduced to a shiny puddle and destroyed.

Other villainous reveals also fit; from *Alita: Battle Angel* where Lana Condor's character Koyomi takes off her cloak to reveal a bladed, spider-like form in an early fight scene; to Marvel's *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) when Andy Serkis' Ulysses Klaue's prosthetic hand splits apart to reveal an energy weapon hidden inside. But it need not only be a villain that the grotesquerie reveals. It might also be a reveal of hubris or overconfidence, or even just overexertion of a character, such as when Major Motoko Kusanagi — protagonist of *Ghost in the Shell* (Oshii, 1995) — tears her body apart trying to disable a tank that is protecting her target; the target that she believes will finally help her tell if she is really still human. We already knew that Kusanagi was a cyborg, but her physical appearance up to that point had been almost entirely human (barring the opening credits scene). Watching her muscles flex and move in ways that a human's wouldn't, then seeing the metal and silicon bones, muscles, and flesh tear apart in slow-motion sakuga detail is the "all is lost" moment of the film. Kusanagi's body failed. The technology failed. It wasn't enough to get to her goal. This is meaningful in the story of the film as it is a physical representation of the limitations that the Puppetmaster — a purely technological being — is trying to overcome through its proposed merger with Kusanagi, and a representation of Kusanagi's own limits in finding and understanding her own nature.

3.2. The Dystopian Cyborg

Cyborgs are not limited to shiny utopic futures. Some live in gritty dystopias where their technologies are forever wearing down, breaking, and driving them mad. I discuss how two properties, Games Workshop's Warhammer 40,000 universe, and *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*, an animated

show on Netflix in the Cyberpunk universe, depict the cyborg as a dystopian figure, often as an emblem of hubris or corporate greed (or both).⁶

In Games Workshop's miniature wargame (and its various spinoffs) Warhammer 40,000, the Imperium of Man — at least those folks who find themselves written about in the literature — are almost all technologically enhanced in some way. Many are incredibly so, including the elite Space Marines, who not only have technological implants, but additional biotech organs that give them various abilities. Technology, however, has become an almost religious mystery, whose mechanisms and effects only a few high-level priests know. These are called Tech Priests, and their mechanical complement is so pervasive that their humanoid forms are often merely hinted at. The models used in the tabletop game are bad enough, with tentacular mechanical conduits and multiple additional mechanical arms evoking a kind of steam punk body horror aesthetic. The promotional artwork goes much farther even than the models, depicting tech priests as mostly shapeless, robe-covered mechanical monstrosities, some without even a recognizable face.

These images depict rusting technologies, glommed haphazardly with little regard for aesthetics. Conduits and cables evoke cthulhu-like cosmic horror; nearly every piece of art has characters adorned by skulls and skeletal imagery. Flesh, if it is visible at all, is often ghostly pale with an almost zombie-like green tint. Religious iconography also abounds, with censers, candles, scrolls, and purity seals covering nearly every character (especially for certain factions like the Adeptus Mechanicus, and Adeptus Sororitas (Sisters of Battle)). The religious (particularly Catholic) theme of the Imperium is further reinforced by the style of their architecture, with nearly every building, vehicle, and spaceship formed to look like a gothic cathedral. In fact, even the tactical space battle game in this universe is named *Battlefleet Gothic*.

The corrupted, dying, religious colonial empire image is intentional; a critique of England's (the country where Games Workshop was founded) and the Catholic and Anglican Churches' roles in world affairs, especially during The Crusades, and Britain's colonial era. The cyborgs in this setting are those trying hardest to hold on to a former glory, to impose their will on the "uncivilized," and to follow an "emperor" who has ruled for so long, he is essentially only being kept alive through magic. They are a fascist, fractured empire who can only keep control through the application of technology that is now revered as magic, and the suppression of all dissent, to the extremes of *exterminatus*, an order that ends all life on a planet. This game, with its religious iconography referencing the degeneracy of the Anglican church, using technology to artificially extend the lives and

⁶ There are more I could use, such as David Cronenberg's technologized body horror in films like *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, or Lincoln Michel's book *The Body Scout*, but for space, I am limiting my examples.

powers of its ruling class, once again evokes the technological intervention as an affront to God. These grotesque people have been brought so far from the light of the good that they literally bring forth daemons through their hubris.

Disabled people find themselves similarly posed in media and the public psyche. The trope of the disabled person as a shameful sinner is underneath the “ugly is evil trope,” and finds its roots in early Christianity. The shameful sinner is disabled because of something they, or someone else, has done. Things like the debunked “refrigerator mother” “cause” of autism, or stories of villains who become disabled or disfigured as a direct consequence of their villainy (Shew, 2023). The religious connection here is explicit, and feeds into the idea that disability, AND the technology used to “fix” it, is the result of hubris against God’s plan. Harriet McBryde Johnson, a disability activist and scholar, examines this in her novel *Accidents of Nature*, when her protagonist Jane opines that she “yearns for a Bible story about a cripple who isn’t cured,” and describing therapy as akin to an exorcism (Johnson, 2006, pg. 74, & 184).

Cyberpunk is dystopian in another way. As a genre, it began in the 1980s and 1990s through the novels of authors like William Gibson (*Neuromancer*, *The Peripheral*), Philip K. Dick (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, *Johnny Mnemonic*), and Neal Stephenson (*Snow Crash*), and films like *Ghost in the Shell*. It is much more visually aesthetically pleasing than Warhammer 40,000’s more explicit grotesquerie. There are lots of sleek cars, cybernetic implants that are visually appealing—some simply aesthetic—cool lasers and hacking. Everything a 90’s kid with a sci fi addiction could want after watching *Hackers* at an impressionable age. The grotesquerie comes in with the deeper themes of rampant capitalism and the class injustices their worlds produce. All the slick stuff tends to be relegated to the wealthy, but those we usually follow in cyberpunk stories are the, well... punks. Those who are scraping to get by, who steal their chrome (technological augments), and eventually have it break or drive them mad.

While in Cyberpunk the grotesquerie is often in the world around them, it is also revealed when the action starts. For all its flash and sleek aesthetic, there is usually a gritty realism to the action, often resulting in graphic displays of bodily damage, especially in animation. For example, in *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* (Jaki, 2022), the character Kiwi — the crew’s netrunner (aka hacker) — wears what appears to be a pink metal respirator mask over her nose and mouth (through which she is often depicted smoking a cigarette... somehow). In one scene the protagonist crew is attacked, and Kiwi’s “mask” is destroyed during the battle, revealing that it is not a mask, but in fact the technology has replaced the entire bottom half of her skull from her sinuses to her larynx.

In this instance, as in most, the failure or destruction of technology is more metaphorical than a simple tech-as-hubris story. The destruction of

Kiwi's facemask comes right before it is revealed that she is a double-agent. That it is her mouth that gets broken, the mechanism by which the protagonists' information is passed to the antagonists, is deliberate. Similarly, incidences of cyberpsychosis — a madness akin to schizophrenia, where the wearer begins to hallucinate, becomes unable to control their technological complement and begins violently attacking any and everything⁷ — come about at moments of characters' overconfidence or hubris. Cyberpunk completes the dystopia bingo card by having our protagonists lose in the end, overwhelmed by the military might of the corporate oligarchs who run the city.

4. Ugly Laws, Freakshows, and Eugenics

Grotesque villainous characters, with disfiguring and disabling conditions, have long been visual stand-ins for moral failing in literature and film. The villains in the James Bond films being perhaps the most well-known films with the “evil is ugly” trope. Bloefeld, a recurring villain in the series has a disfiguring scar across one eye; Silva from *Skyfall* is missing much of his facial skeleton, using a prosthetic which he only removes to reveal his ugliness as he is doing his villain monologue to our restrained hero. We can also look at characters like Emperor Palpatine and Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader in *Star Wars*, or Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. But this is not limited to film. Literature like *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, whose protagonist's picture does not just grow old in place of him, but also grows hideous due to Dorian's immoral actions, Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings* who is both physically and morally corrupted by the ring in his possession are indicative of this trope. Adam (the monster) from Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* is an early subversion of this trope (a trope so common, in fact, that it could be subverted in the very first speculative fiction book in 1818), as Adam is actually kind, but seen as a monster and evil by both his “father,” Dr. Frankenstein, and the townspeople nearby. The Baron Harkonnen from the book and film versions of *Dune* is another example, and one who we might also call a cyborg. He uses a mobility device due to his size, has many implants and medical devices on which he relies, and more.

Beginning in the late 19th century, and continuing until the 1970's, many cities in the United States passed what are colloquially known as “ugly laws.” These laws forbade those who had “physical and mental deformities... [or were] deformed, mutilated, imperfect or [had] been reduced by amputations, or [being an individual] who is idiotic or imbecile” (Schweik, 2009). Moral, social, and mental hygiene were also

⁷ The problematic aspect of equating mental illness or psychosis and violent behavior is one I do not have time to delve into except to mention it here. Mental illness does not tend to produce violence, and mentally ill people are more likely to be victims of it than perpetrators.

features of the eugenic era, whose targets mapped on almost perfectly with those targeted by ugly laws during the first half of the twentieth century. So, while ugly laws made no mention of the morality of those it sought to remove from public view, the overlap between who the laws targeted, who eugenics targeted, and notions of moral, social, and mental hygiene make it impossible to not connect them as a system of marginalization which cast disability and physical difference as moral failure.

But this era wasn't entirely about keeping disfigured and disabled people out of the public eye, it also had a fascination with their display, most evident in carnival freak shows. These shows displayed disfigured, disabled, and otherwise strange-looking humans to the public as objects of fascination. People like Saartje (Sarah) Baartman (aka the Hottentot Venus) were displayed due to their particularly racialized features, such as large lips and buttocks. Other institutions like traveling carnivals and circuses included freakshows along with other titillating and deliberately antagonistic to social mores displays: burlesque acts, spiritualist acts that evoked strange and racialized religious practice like voodoo, and other acts that broke cultural norms and garnered fascination from their visitors (Bogdan, 1988). Freakshows displayed disabled people for their grotesque appearances, early cyborgs such as those with simple prosthetics included.

Invisibility and hypervisibility both produce and uphold stigmatization and exclusion. Both have been discussed in great detail in race studies (Reddy, 1998), and also in Disability Studies (Garland-Thomson, 2009). The eugenic era was all about removal of the unfit from social and biological life; disabled people and racialized people (especially racialized disabled people). But before one can remove a kind of people, one must identify them, so terms were created (idiot, imbecile, moron), types were cast (the sexually-aggressive black man, the angry black woman, the pitiable or shameful sinner disabled person), and those who didn't fit the normative expectation of cisgendered, abled whiteness were made hypervisible against that pale background. Hypervisibility leads to policing (both in the sense of State police forces, but also the general monitoring of social expectations) and overpolicing the boundaries of what is the default or the socially-expected normative bodymind.

By depicting cyborgs as both superlatively normative (i.e. apotheosis), and/or as grotesque violations of that normativity, modern media recreates these eugenic ideals and applies them to the common or everyday cyborg.

5. Conclusion

Disabled people, especially racialized disabled people, are attributed all of these tropes. Their visible (or social) differences tie subconsciously to all of the stories we have been told over the years. From the super-human overcomer who should gain powers due to their disability; to the

expectation to look like a perfect supermodel (especially if you have the money and access to morphological alteration like cosmetic surgery); to a fascinating, but disgusting, example of what needs to be excised from our societies in order to keep “us” safe and whole and thriving. Disabled people must fight against all of these tropes, every day, even when doing the most mundane of tasks. Stories abound of people coming up to disabled people in public and marveling at their bravery... for simply existing and being observed by others.

If a disabled person is just human. If they don’t like to inspire, if they reject pity, if they’re not exceptional in some way because of their disability, if they don’t have the spoons to work, or can’t be bothered with you today, or hurt, or complain, or aren’t grateful enough of ableds’ attention, or if they don’t seem disabled enough, well then they fall into the final narratives: the moocher or the burden or the bitter cripple. These narratives are often deployed in arguments over social welfare programs, as well as in discussions about care work and the value of people who need assistance. The narrative of the burden assumes an individualist notion that the nondisabled are not fundamentally dependent on our various social networks, a lie that is at the heart of most of American civilization.

The cyborg is yet another version of these tropes coming together to paint a picture of what disabled people are or should be. Images that are contradictory, impossible, and designed to marginalize and exclude them. That said, there are instances of cyborgs who do not follow these tropes, who are normal, simply existing in a world, and not some threat or problem.

Star Trek in various incarnations, is a good example, here. LeVar Burton’s Geordi LaForge in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* has his blindness “fixed” through a technological visor. That visor gave him an extra range of senses, which might lead us to think he was a supercrip, but it also did not return some of the qualia of “normal” sight that we might want or expect from this kind of futuristic technology. His vision was very computerized, abstract, and without color. In the one episode where he did have his sight returned (via the manipulations of Q) Geordi chose to go back to his previous state, rejecting the “cure” and accepting his disability as a part of himself, and not one that diminished his value. The crew celebrate, if they don’t entirely understand, his decision. In *Star Trek Voyager*, Seven of Nine is cyborg by way of the villainous Borg, and arguably disabled by her technological complement. She often codes as autistic, not understanding social situations, but is supported by the rest of the crew. Her borg implants definitely code as grotesque early on, as do the Borg themselves, hewing much closer to the Warhammer 40,000 aesthetic than the sleeker Cyberpunk versions. The prominence, and thus the grotesqueness of Seven of Nine’s implants softens as her character becomes more integrated with the crew. In *Star Trek Discovery*, there are several characters who are disabled, both speaking and background. There

are often shots of crew in wheelchairs, and Lt. Detmer has cyborg implants to repair a significant facial/skull injury. These implants are both disabling and enhancing, rarely commented on, and have little to do with her talent as a pilot.

There are few enough other examples that I struggle to come up with enough for another paragraph full of them. We need more examples in media of cyborgs and disabled people who aren't super, who aren't apotheosis, who aren't grotesque. We need more background characters with wheelchairs and crutches and prosthetics and hearing aids. We need speaking characters who use AAC, who are blind or d/Deaf, who use cochlear implants (and don't), whose disability and cyborgness are completely unremarkable. We need cyborgs who aren't perfectly beautiful but who also aren't coded as ugly or grotesque. Or if they are coded ugly, who aren't bitter or the villains of the story.

The tropes of apotheosis and grotesquerie are harmful to those we code as cyborg here in the real world. We should be more careful of those tropes and spend more time subverting them. Tropes, after all, are the most fun when subverted. Subvert them enough and they cease to function. Then, we can expect cyborgs to be... anything at all. Just like in the real world.

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