



Cristina Masters

Cyborg soldiers and militarised masculinities

Increasing military interest in the body cancels the transgressive potential of the cyborg. Where humans become the weakest link in contemporary warfare, the cyborg represents a desire for total masculinist control and domination. Machines, not human bodies, are now the subjects of the text.

Feminisms, technology and the military

The absence of bodies in the discourse of a discipline that was born of a concern with war and hence violence against bodies, itself raises curiosity as to the conditions of possibility that enabled this absence.
Vivienne Jabri (2006: 825)

In "Fact and Fantasy: The Body of Desire in the Age of Posthumanism", Renée C. Hoogland (2002: 214) argues that "in the increasingly technologized age of posthumanism, bodily matters are, quite simply, too substantial to be left to the 'empirically' inclined minds of natural scientists", and therefore calls on cultural theorists to take up the weighty issue of bodily matters. Recent developments indicate, however, that bodily matters are more and more coming under the ambit of the "strategic" and "security" inclined minds populating military institutions and government administrative offices, in ways perhaps far more troubling and disturbing in all of its potential and real implications. In the post-9/11 context of the war on/of terror, one can scarcely overemphasize the dangerous possibilities signalled in this shift. Dangerous, in that bodily matters are being taken up by institutions primarily concerned with the defence and security of the nation-state in an increasingly biopolitical architecture of power.

For many, it is right that such matters should be taken up by the entity with which we have authorised to act in our name and in our defence — the state. Others, in particular critical theorists of international politics, have expressed grave concern over the deadly security practices at work in the US-led war on/of terror, including not only the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq, but also and significantly, the new security measures around immigration and asylum, individual freedoms and liberties, search and seizure, and the power to detain indefinitely, to name but a few.

Feminists, as much as militarists, have pointed to the virtues of advanced technology in addressing some of the pressing issues of our day, whether explicitly those of identity politics or that of war. With regard to the latter, nowhere is this more apparent than in the US military, where technology has

been lauded as the answer to the question of security and terrorism. With regard to the former, feminists such as Jean Bethke Elshtain (2003) have linked advanced military technology to just war practices, and a number of feminists have advanced arguments in favour of technology's transgressive potential both in terms of challenging the strictures of gendered regimes of power, and in support of women's participation in institutions such as the military.

Donna Haraway, the well-known feminist advocate of the transgressive potential of technology, has critically engaged the possibilities of technology in enabling the subversion of binary structures of gendered knowledge. She contends that the human/machine interface, captured in the figure of the cyborg, can fundamentally challenge traditional dualistic western discourses by making apparent the social construction of unitary and exclusionary identity. The cyborg, she argues, can reveal the multiplicity, contextuality, and contingency of gendered subjectivity by blurring distinctions between, for instance, mind/body, self/other and man/woman. At the same time, Haraway (1991: 151) recognises that "the main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism [...] But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential."

It appears, however, that the problem persists: in contrast to Haraway's hopeful observation, the figure of the cyborg remains rather faithful to its origins. Thus, while the cyborg may provide new grounds upon which to reveal gender representations as contingent and historically grounded social constructs, we need also to attend to the ways in which the figure of the cyborg may continue to represent a desire for total masculinist control and domination.

While there are a number of critical issues at stake in thinking through advanced technology and war (such as questions of legitimacy and indiscriminacy), the central concerns of this text are driven by a feminist curiosity around questions of gendered subjectivity and the representative practices at work in the interface between man and machine in the military, and the ethico-political implications thereof. It traces the constitution of the cyborg soldier in the US military through both techno-scientific and masculinist discourses of power. Since feminists are fundamentally asking after power, it is essential to critically engage the constitution of the cyborg and the implications this has for our understanding of the body.

The more that bodily matters are taken up by military and government institutions, the more bodies are disappeared and thus made absent. Navigating the ethical possibilities and implications of inscribing military technology with masculine subjectivity requires thinking through the processes by which the cyborg has been constituted as a legitimate political subject to the detriment of the living, laughing, loving body. What, then, are the conditions that enable — and indeed demand — the absence of fleshy bodies in contemporary configurations of techno-war?

What is a cyborg?

A cyborg is [...] a hybrid of machine and organism,
a creature of social reality as well as a creature of
fiction.

Donna Haraway (1991: 149)

At present, advanced technologies constitute an integral component of the

American military apparatus and necessarily shape, inform, and (re)produce military techno-scientific discourses. As such, American soldiers have had to be (re)made to fit into, operate, and function in this ostensibly new technological age — new times seem to require new soldiers for the "job" of defending the nation. Conversely, military discourses have given birth to what we have virtually only witnessed in sci-fi novels, Hollywood productions and Star Trek episodes — the cyborg soldier. Neither old nor new, neither worldly nor out-of-this-world, neither entirely man nor machine, the cyborg soldier represents the "juncture of ideals, metals, chemicals, and people that makes weapons of computers and computers of weapons and soldiers" (Gray 1997: 8).

The making of humans into machines, however, is not a new phenomenon. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault (1977: 138) argued that by the eighteenth century, the human body was becoming a primary site of technological inscription. In his words:

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A "political anatomy", which was also a "mechanics of power", was being born, it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines.

This machinery of power signalled a profound shift from the coercive power of old to a new form of power as a productive force; a power that was not negative but rather positive in its constitutive strength. Disciplinary power no longer operated as a simple external force on the body, but rather was taken up by the body to produce a particular subject: in the prison, the model prisoner, and in the asylum, the insane, abnormal and deviant. As Foucault described, the military has been exemplar in this constitutive process, where through its disciplinary techniques it came to produce the subject desired — the soldier. In approaching the human body as machine, boot camp training exercises, drill sergeants, and the barracks became the processes, figures, and architecture by which the mechanical could be inserted into the biological to construct the practiced and performative "killing machine".

In our contemporary context, the human body continues to be a key site of technological grafting in the American military. "Today the basic currency of war, the human body is the site of these modifications, whether it is of the 'wetware' (the mind and hormones), the 'software' (habits, skills, disciplines), or the 'hardware' (the physical body)." (Gray 1997: 195–6) These arguments however, do not fully capture the reconfiguration of the twenty-first century cyborg soldier. A few modifications are necessary to follow, complicate, and contextualise contemporary reconfigurations of subjectivity within the American military. While historically, humans could be and have been disciplined into fine-tuned fighting machines, now they no longer seem able to meet the demands of advanced technology. Instead, humans have implicitly been constituted through contemporary military techno-scientific discourses, and as is evident in the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), have hit a developmental wall that seemingly cannot be surpassed (US Department of Defense 2003, 2005; Alberts and Hayes 2003; Ullman and Wade 1996). The "be all that you can be", the well-known motto of the US Army, is seemingly insufficient. No matter how much the mechanical is inserted into the biological, humans still need to respond to the "mundane" tasks of the flesh.

This is evident in the ways human soldiers are more and more cast as problems (frequently vulnerable and sometimes troublesome) in need of solutions. The growing number of soldiers living with post-traumatic stress disorder, which the military works hard to hide and deny, are narrated as part of the problem to which technology implicitly appears to be the perfect solution — computers do not get "stressed out" (Whitworth 2008). In the context of cyborg desires, perhaps most significant is the reality that human soldiers meet death on the battlefield — deaths no longer acceptable in the eyes of the public.

Cast as unreliable and unruly, the human body in the age of technology is less and less the primary site/cite of military representational practices. The triad more is appropriately understood as such: the *hardware* has come to represent a whole range of advanced high-tech weapons; the *software* represents information and communication technologies; and the *wetware* represents the embodied human soldier, which significantly is the weakest link (see Der Derian 2003; Kundnani 2004; Harris 2003). Thus what constituted the cyborg in its earlier manifestations, as explored and detailed by Foucault, no longer fully captures the shifts motivated by the current fetishisation of advanced technology in the military. Alternatively, what we are witnessing, and indeed participating in, with the constitution of the cyborg soldier is a radical rearticulation of subjectivity. Contemporary military techno-scientific discourses have profoundly altered the subject of discursive power productions, with the fleshy body of the soldier no longer standing in as the agent of politics by other means, or in this case, war by other means. With the discursive positioning of military technologies as superior to the human soldier, machines are now the subjects of the text.

In response to the failure of human soldiers, twenty-first century military techno-scientific discourses have reconstituted the soldier in such a way as to dispel the susceptibility of the human body. Technology, not the male body, becomes the subject capable of the discursive transcendence of embodiment. High-tech weapon systems, state-of-the-art computer systems and information technology, artificial intelligence, complex virtual reality simulated training exercises, digitised battlefields and so on, animate the current debate surrounding the RMA and form integral components of existing US military war doctrine. Command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, information and interoperability — certainly a stretch from the Cold War days of C3I — inform, shape, and constitute contemporary techno-scientific military discourses (Gray 1997; Harris 2003).

Advanced military technologies have now been constituted as superior in almost every way to the human male body. They are superior at information and intelligence gathering, superior at remote sensing, they are stronger, faster, more agile, and have much more staying power. The apparent effect has been the circumvention of the emotional and biological limitations of bio-bodies through the interface. The insertion of the biological into the mechanical has ensured that techno-scientific discourses can discriminately pick and choose what does and does not get inserted into the mechanical. For instance, the twenty-first century cyborg land soldier will be outfitted with technologies that in essence replace his "senses" through technological prostheses that replicate biological senses while circumventing human biological limitations: poor eyesight, hearing and discernment. "His helmet will be fitted with microphones and earphones for communication, night-vision goggles and thermal imaging sensors to see in the dark, along with a heads-up display in front of his eyes to show him where he is on the ground and give him constant intelligence updates." (Waller 1995: 38) The US Defense and Advanced

Research Projects Agency (DARPA) is also developing technology that can "regulate" emotions: "By linking directly into the sense and remotely monitoring a soldier's performance, feelings of fear, shame or exhaustion could be removed. What was once achieved by issuing soldiers with amphetamines could now be done remotely with greater precision." (Kundnani 2004: 123) With such developments, the "eyes" and "ears" of the military would no longer be susceptible to human error and emotion, not least because computers are not at the mercy of bodily functions even while they do not function without the presence of humans. The computer programmers who "man" computers can always be replaced with relative ease, and without disrupting "their" capabilities: "The computer recommends the targets he should attack and even keeps watch on the skies when he's away from his screen." (Waller 1995: 38)

As such, the human/machine interface represents the privileging of technology over biology and therefore locates power and knowledge in the cyborg. This relationship between knowledge and masculinity is articulated in techno-scientific epistemological commitments to rationality, objectivity and abstract disembodiment, effectively separating the "knowers" from the "known" through hierarchal dualisms of masculinity and femininity. Artificial intelligence (AI) scientists within the American military apparatus "explicitly are working for exactly unsituated, disembodied intelligence through research on pure AI and in 'downloading', putting a specific human's consciousness into an artificial brain." (Gray 1997: 72) In effect, these attempts to master knowledge are slowly closing critical spaces in which to contest how knowledge is discursively and exclusively constituted. Indeed, the cyborg soldier signifies the desire to acquire maximum, if not total control precisely by escaping the imperfections of the human body. As Sara Cohen Shabot (2006: 226) argues, "such a figure represents no less than the omnipotence of the *more-than-human*. It is a body which overcomes the *failures* and the *problems* of the *old* and the *obsolete* organic body."

Abstract disembodiment has "virtually" disembedded cyborg soldiers from the very material realities inscribed in the interface, where the Gulf War became,

the ultimate voyeurism: to see the target hit from the vantage point of the weapon. An inhuman perspective [...] Seeing was split off from feeling; the visible was separated from the sense of pain and death. Through the long lens the enemy remained a faceless alien, his/her bodily existence derealized [...] Perversely, war appeared as it really was. (Robins and Levidow 1995: 121)

The distinctions between simulation and reality, training and battle, have been breached to the point that there is *virtually* no distinction, where the critical distinction should be that people are killed in the *real* world of war (see Der Derian 2003, 2009; Harris 2003; Kundnani 2004). A telling example is the description of the Combat and Maneuver Training Center in Hohenfels, Germany, by an American Colonel: "Once a unit goes into the Box, with the exception that they're shooting laser bullets, and that a guy, instead of falling down with a gunshot wound, will read from a card he's carrying in his pocket how badly hurt he is, virtually everything we do is real. There's nothing simulated in the Box." (Der Derian 1997: 121) The discursive collapsing of reality and simulation has deadly ramifications for the bodies violently inscribed by cyborg soldiers in real wars. The disciplining of soldiers to believe that simulations are reality, and conversely, that reality is a simulation, "produces 'a kind of isolation' from the violence of war that allows for its

unrestrained prosecution [...] removed from the bloody results of their decisions" (Gray 1997: 200). Simultaneously, it rationalises and mystifies the disappearance of the body from war, and the denial of the "sentient physicality of human embodiment" (Gusterson 1998: 124).

The denial and suppression of embodiment is indicative of the inscription of military technology as the subject of techno-scientific masculinity and of human bodies, both soldier and civilian, as objects of power and knowledge. The discursive positioning of military technologies as superior to the human soldier has constituted machines as the subject of the text. Technology has become the surface upon which power has been inscribed — inscribed with the power to "write the world" through violent inscriptions and domination (Haraway 1991: 175). The transference of subjectivity onto technology has fundamentally grafted military technology with agency and power through the discursive reinscription of hegemonic techno-militarised masculinity as representative of machine. The language of the cyborg is the language of violence, a language that has the power to generate meaning and knowledge about the bodies upon which it acts. The *other* — gendered, racialised, and sexualised — is constituted as less human, as object, as different, as a "code problem" in need of techno-scientific solutions, as bodies-of-danger. The language of the cyborg necessitates the denial of the body of the self so that it can act upon the body of the other. Necessarily, this has required the naturalisation of the machine-man interface through techno-scientific discursive practices in order to legitimate practices of dominance, and thus the ethicality of the interface.

At the same time the constitution and production of the cyborg soldier is rearticulating the ever-present relationship between techno-scientific discourses and masculinist discourses. The characteristics traditionally inscribed on male bodies have been rearticulated by military techno-scientific discourses and remapped onto military technologies. So while the cyborg soldier has blurred particular distinctions between machine and man, where *technology* embodies *masculinity*, the distinctions between the cyborg soldier and the traditional soldier have become discursively formalised along the lines of masculinity and femininity. The effect is that military technologies have been *techno-masculinised*, while human soldiers apart from technology have been feminised and reconstituted within the realm of those needing protection.

As such, techno-militarised masculinity has come to symbolise the *model* American soldier represented in the machine-man interface where technology constitutes soldiers and militarised masculinity constitutes technology. In so many ways, the machine-man interface is literal in the American military where everyday experience is characterised by constant interaction with advanced technology from weapons to computers, surveillance, reconnaissance, delivery systems, and from training simulations to real battle. However it is also significantly metaphorical, in that clearly it is not only *male* soldiers that interface with technology. Rather, the interface represents the discursive *unhinging* of male subjectivity from the physical male body and the reinscription of male subjectivity on/into military technologies. Put differently, masculinity does not necessarily coincide with the bio-male body. "It is not that the soldier is influenced by the weapons used; now he or she is (re)constructed and (re)programmed to fit integrally into the weapon *systems*." (Gray 1997: 195) The significant effect is that advanced technologies are now the subjects of discursive constructions, and thus one of the key signifiers that perform and represent American identity.

In many ways, the inscription of technology with masculine subjectivity is easily recognised in military techno–scientific discourses: phallic shaped missiles, precision–guided missiles that easily find the target, and aerial bombings that leave one with the impression of an "orgasmic ejaculation" impregnating targets with death and destruction rather than life. These are only a few of the more obvious representations of the discursive inscription of masculine subjectivity on/into military technology. What is less obvious, but fundamentally crucial, is the transference of masculine intelligence (knowledge) on/into military technologies, particularly military technologies that are not overtly gendered in shape, size, and overall appearance, but gendered in capabilities, for instance computer and information technologies. "At the heart of most dreams for absolute information there is the ideal of pure intelligence. It is a peculiar version of rationality that is masculine, mathematical, emotionless and instrumentalist." (Gray 1997: 195) While masculine subjectivity has historically represented the mastery of mind over body, rationality over irrationality, and intellect over emotion inscribed on the white, heterosexual male body, the human male body has proven to be a serious liability to achieving if not absolute, at least superior intelligence.

Considering this, the cyborg can be read as fundamentally post–human, and significantly represents a profound rearticulation of the political; in other words, the constitution of the cyborg soldier can be read as a radical rearticulation of human subjectivity (see Springer 1998; Hoogland 2002; Shabot 2006). This post–human subjectivity is represented through the cyborg in the very processes of transferring human reasoning and thinking from human subjects onto technology. The infusion of technology with the ability to reason and think, without being interrupted by emotions such as guilt or bodily limitations such as fatigue, is indicative of the constitution of the fleshy body as no longer capable of producing and projecting desired representations of the American self.

Significantly, the constitution of the soldier as cyborg has also altered who is constituted as a soldier. Traditionally, the signifier *soldier* was confined to combatants, in other words, men who actually engaged in physical battle. The fusion of technology and masculinity has significantly blurred this traditional distinction, where now civilians can be considered soldiers, and more specifically, *cyborg* soldiers (Armitage 2003). Military personnel who will likely never be in physical battle, who literally sit in front of computer screens, have now been constituted as soldiers through the interface, effectively enlarging and reconfiguring the representations of soldiers. In the words of US military Colonel Ehrhard: "It is the software engineer who kills now." (Beal 2000) Cyborg soldiers, almost by definition, may never have to lay *human eyes* on their enemy again — the gaze will be that of the gun sight, the computer screen, and global positioning satellite targeting systems. On the continuum of traditional discursive depersonalisation and dehumanisation, the cyborg soldier represents the extreme of abstract disembodiment, in that the discipline traditionally required to remove oneself from the reality of war (if even possible) is no longer necessary. A mental image of an air fighter's "bomb's eye view" during NATO's humanitarian intervention in Kosovo, frighteningly captures this: "Killing people does not go through your mind [...] From the air, the human factor doesn't mean what it would in an army guy. When you're a fighter pilot, you don't see eyes. You see things — a building, a truck, a bridge, a dam. It's all so technological. I had no Serbian in mind [...] I was shooting at a radar pulse." (Wallace 2000)

What, then, are the ethico–political implications of this masculine desire to transcend the organic body by constructing the perfect technological subject? In the words of Claudia Springer (1998: 484):

by escaping from its close identification with the male body, masculine subjectivity has been rearticulated, suggesting that there is an essential masculinity that transcends bodily presence [...]. What this reconfiguration of masculinity indicates is that patriarchy is more willing to dispense with human life than with [masculine] superiority.

To put it bluntly, it is *life* that is at stake when abstract disembodiment — made possible through masculine desires to transcend the body — has all but erased the very material realities inscribed in the interface. The effect is the rationalisation of the disappearance of the body from war.

The affinity between machine and masculinity within the American military apparatus has been made to appear as a natural process deepening and reinforcing the split between mind and body "which effectively disembodies ethical deliberation" (Haraway 1991: 175). In so doing, questions of responsibility to the other — the constitutive outside to the cyborg — are all but ignored and denied. As Chris Gray (1997: 103) argues: "Technology not only becomes a shield for humans but in many ways it seems headed toward 'literally replacing human responsibility'." Or in the words of Arun Kundnani (2004: 125): "What has gone is any restraint of humanity towards the subjugated." In so doing, the cyborg is fundamentally a masculinist project in that it represents a masculine desire to overcome death by making obsolete a body that must die. Indeed, the cyborg represents the ultimate masculine fantasy: the cyborg as the colonisation of the last vestige of feminine power — *the power of giving life* — wherein the fetishisation of technology signifies this very possibility. Constituted through the omnipotent masculine gaze of dominance, the cyborg can seemingly live forever. The question that lingers is what exactly is the cyborg giving life to? What politics, if any, does the cyborg signify?

The pain of the interface

Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we
ourselves frighteningly inert.
Donna Haraway (1991: 152)

To answer the question of whether or not the cyborg represents a transgressive political subjectivity in an increasingly biopolitical architecture of power, the answer is no, it cannot. Not only has the constitution of the cyborg soldier discursively flattened difference, multiplicity, contextuality, and contingency, it has also rearticulated a masculine aesthetic of war that is even more violent. The enduring problem, however, is that we cannot even see this; violence has been rendered invisible in the interface. We are not witness to complex realities and experiences, but to a *virtual* reality that more often than not has very little association with lived fleshy realities. Did we see, for instance, the complex, multidimensional realities of the people of Iraq in the Gulf Wars? More specifically, did we see anything at all through the masculine gaze of American military technology that indicated any life, any *other* bodies?

While the construction of the cyborg soldier has blurred some distinctions, those distinctions have been extremely particular — primarily between

masculinity and machine — not, however, between masculine/feminine, self/other, and mind/body. More importantly, the constitution of the cyborg has reconstituted and resolidified distinctions between masculinity and femininity, mind and body, and self and other. The cyborg soldier has not blurred the hierarchical binaries of dominance and control that inform American sovereign power, but rather has served to reinforce them. So while the cyborg has been read as a possibility for resolving and/or dissolving gender and difference. The cyborg in fact is reworking, replaying, and rewriting gender in significant and dangerous ways. There is little transgressive potential to be found in the figure of the cyborg as it leaves intact and further embeds gender as a regime of power.

We can read cyborg desires as dominated by anxieties around threatened masculinity, indicating a deep crisis in American representations of self in its attempt to construct an invulnerable subject position by ridding itself of the fleshy body. This desperate, anxious, fearful, and violent attempt to make possible what can never be — the mastery of an American self. This has had profoundly violent effects on the fleshy bodies upon which American representations of self have been articulated and inscribed (see Lingis 2006). In signalling a desire for, and a figure of, total control, the cyborg soldier is eviscerating and erasing the messiness and excess that makes embodied experience potentially subversive. This text is an attempt to bring forth experience and embodiment through a challenge to the very figure that is replacing the fleshy body as the subject of politics. As Vivienne Jabri (2006: 823) argues, "When war is spectacle, experience and its materiality in the body are somehow occluded for discourses that merely see the aesthetic in its technological rendition. Any discourse that brings forth experience and its embodiment comes to constitute a moment of resistance." This text thus calls for a reengagement with the fleshy body — a call to take up the body as a critical site of "embodiment in all its complexity and irreducibility" (Hoogland 2002: 214).

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