

Collective Body (P)Arts: Female Cyborg-Subjectivity in Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the tension between humanistic ideas of subjective wholeness and the networked and fragmented, conceptualization of female cyborg subjectivity presented in Mamoru Oshii's anime *Ghost in the Shell* (1995). The article argues that the anime exposes the mediated nature of female cyborg subjectivity through its treatment of its protagonist in three key moments in the film: in the title scene, the dream passage through the city and in the final confrontation between the Puppet-Master and Major Kusanagi. This article suggests that the always already split and alienated consciousness of women due to their objectification both creates anxiety and tension, as well as enables the recognition of the fragmented and networked status of female cyborg subjectivity in the anime.

Keywords: Anime, cyborg, female, *Ghost in the Shell*, Oshii, subjectivity

ARGUMENT

In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Judith Butler, in tracing the connections between the materiality of the body and the performative nature of gender, asks the question, "If the subject is constructed, then who is constructing the subject?" (p. 6). This is a question that seeks to interrogate the notion of the humanist subject, or rather, the idea

of the self-determined subject (one that makes its presence sharply felt in much of male cyberpunk writing¹). Butler (1993) points out that "the subject is produced in and as a gendered matrix of relations... [which] ask[s] after the conditions of its emergence and operation" (p. 7). In other words, the subject is constructed both as a network and within a network of forces that determine its existence and functioning within these networks. To put it simply, subjectivity cannot be viewed as isolated, unified and self-determined but rather as irremediably bound up in the

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circumstances of its production, with the body as the juncture at which the economic, technological, political, cultural and sexual intersect. This idea of subjectivity being constructed by networks of forces rather than being self-determined is particularly visible in Mamoru Oshii's 1995 anime, *Ghost in the Shell* through images of surfacing and mirroring associated with the main character. These images are used in part to set the stage for the exploration of Motoko Kusanagi's consciousness and also to suggest the sense of the fragmentation and multiple influences that work towards constructing her subjectivity. There are three key sequences linked to water which involve diving, surfacing and mirroring in some form, and which suggest the way in which Kusanagi's subjectivity is constituted: i) the opening credits where the process of her birth as a cyborg is documented, ii) the scene when she goes diving in the ocean only to rise to the surface of the water and merge with her reflection and finally iii) the dream sequence in which she sees herself mirrored in others, both animate and inanimate, ending with a rainy day shot into a display window full of limbless female mannequins. I wish to examine these three scenes and sequences – the birth/construction of the cyborg self, the dream sequence, as well as the final confrontation between Kusanagi and the Puppet Master – and what these scenes suggest about the construction of subjectivity, in particular female subjectivity, in this article.

SYNOPSIS OF *GHOST IN THE SHELL*

First, a brief description of *Ghost in the Shell*: *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) directed by Mamoru Oshii is based on a futuristic manga series authored by Shirow Masamune. Oshii's anime is set in 2029 a time when networks of information, data, machines and humans are inextricably linked. The protagonist, Major Motoko Kusanagi is a senior officer with Section 9, a cybernetic governmental security agency that operates above the law. Section 9 operatives are cyborg, having undergone various levels of machine/human interfacing to make them more efficient at their jobs. Kusanagi and her team become involved in hunting down the Puppet Master, a computer-based criminal who hacks into the minds of his victims in order to manipulate them into doing his dirty work. As Kusanagi gets further into the case, it becomes apparent that the Puppet Master is not human, but rather a computer program/virus created by another section (Section 6) of the government, that has achieved consciousness and views itself as alive. Section 6 wants to contain the Puppet Master and manages to kidnap it. In her attempt to find out what the Puppet Master is, Kusanagi and her team launch an attack to get hold of the Puppet Master, which results in Kusanagi's bodily fragmentation and her ultimate merging with the Puppet Master in order to become something new.

DISCUSSION

I will concentrate on looking at certain segments of the birth sequence, in particular the section in which the cyborg body moves

through passageways, when it is made flesh and finally the actual emergence of the body from its technological womb. In the opening of the birth sequence we are first shown shots of the insertion of a cyber/organic brain into a titanium skull from above and behind and also the metal and muscle composition of the cyborg body. Subsequently, we see the body; this time fully encased in what looks like an exoskeletal layer passing through passageways filled with liquid into a chamber monitored by two men. The body then rises face up towards the opaque surface, passing through or rather emerging through the opaque liquid surface which coats it and turns it completely white, floating upwards and above the surface only to be exposed to some form of setting process by exposure to what appears to be a kind of laser treatment before being plunged back (in foetal position) into a clear liquid which aids the peeling away of the white surface to reveal the skin beneath. Finally, the camera shows the rising of the body out of a round portal set in the ground, a rising that is preceded by the overflowing of the liquids from the chamber below into a circular channel surrounding the portal, a scene suggestive of the breaking of water prior to birth and the passage of the body through the birth canal. The effortless rising of the female cyborg's body from the round liquid hole in the floor is not only reminiscent of the process of birth but also of the image of Venus (spawned into instant adulthood) rising from the sea in a kind of mythic birth narrative that suggests the transcendence or superfluity of the natural

system of human reproduction. There is no pain, violence or trauma to the body involved here unlike in a normal human birth: the cyborg rises unconsciously and peacefully out of the her "womb" for the final process in her genesis – a gentle disembodied air drying that parallels the cleansing away of birth matter from the newborn infant's body.

In this narrative sequence, very little human participation is portrayed in the making of the cyborg body. The only human beings shown are the two men who passively watch the shell rise through the opaque synthetic flesh liquid. For the most part, the rest of this sequence hides the human participation in the process of cyborg making, appearing instead to suggest that the cyborg body is almost autonomously produced by the technology itself. To be born is to be, as the sequence implies, engendered as instantly adult through the complex circuitry of machinic (and human) intervention – to be created through multiple processes and assemblage, to recognize the multiple interventions that shape the production of the body and its subjectivity. The cyborg birth narrative of the protagonist in the opening credits of the anime with its emphasis on disembodied and almost autonomous technology which practically seems to run itself intimates a decentering of both the humanist notion of the unified subject and the place of the human being at the heart (or as the master) of the technology. In other words, the sequence suggests that human beings are a part of rather than the controllers of the technological process that

produces the self-subject. How does this then play into the conception of Motoko Kusanagi's subjectivity? By revealing her creation to be composed of many processes and parts, her body thoroughly mediated by technological and human intervention, the opening credits deconstruct any possibility for sustaining the idea of a unified self-determined subject, revealing it to be a fiction that Kusanagi tries to cling to in order assert her humanness and which she must give up at the end of the film.

In the dream sequence which happens somewhere in the middle of the anime, Kusanagi is shown moving through the crowded cityscape to the same music that accompanied her birth sequence. As she is carried through the canals on a boat past many buildings, she chances upon the perfect copy of her own face on a woman dining in a restaurant. She looks down as Kusanagi looks up at her in passing. Later, the camera shows a close up of a fashionably dressed mannequin with Kusanagi's face in a store window. The camera then moves slowly through the city, finally ending up by focusing on a window displaying the limbless bodies of several female mannequins. Despina Kakoudaki (2000) describes Kusanagi in this scene as practicing "active looking...seek[ing] and '[recognizing]' a number of women who have (or seem to have the same body and face as herself" (p. 185), and goes on suggest various interpretations that can be made from this scene. She asks, "Is this sequence an externalization of existential dilemmas? Does the sequence portray the

self hoping to be reflected in others? Is Kusanagi attempting to communicate with other women? Are these identical women just similar 'models' created by the same cyborg company? (2000, p. 185). While the initial part of the sequence shows the exchanged looks between Kusanagi and the woman in the restaurant, the close up of the well-dressed mannequin with Kusanagi's face, the rainy scenes of the rest of the city and the shot of the window display full of truncated female mannequins exclude her completely. The scene is presented through the scopophilic eye of the camera passing slowly over disjunctive scenes of the city. Kusanagi's "active looking" is constructed rather as the camera's, and consequently the viewer's "active looking" at what the replication of Kusanagi's face on different female bodies, both animate and inanimate could signify. Thus, the three gazes, Kusanagi's, the camera's and the viewer's function together as a system which can be read as determining her state of mind. It is significant that Kusanagi's gaze is absented from the sequence after her exchange of looks with the woman in the restaurant, and that the camera's eye takes over, suggesting a conflation between all three gazes, Kusanagi's, the camera's and the viewer's which work together to create her subjective state of mind in this scene. Furthermore, although this conflation is suggested especially in the shots moving at eye level or looking upward from the ground within the cityscape, the camera also looks down upon the city suggesting a broader view, which Kusanagi, moving through

the city, may not have access to. Thus, the reading of her state of mind is one that is performed by the viewer in conjunction with the camera, suggesting also that Kusanagi's consciousness can be seen as being only a part of a network that determines her subjectivity.

My reading suggests that Kakoudaki's first question may well be an accurate interpretation of this scene. Kusanagi's reaction to the appearance of her face on a living woman implies her distress at the idea that she may not be the only one with her face and body. The scene then sets up through the gaze of the camera and the viewer a reading of her fear that she might be only a copy of the real by focusing on the dress mannequin. Moreover, the final scene in this sequence of the limbless torsos in the shop window (one that Kusanagi's gaze has no access to) ends on the point of the song from the birth sequence just before we see an active Kusanagi waking up, getting dressed and leaving her room, thus recalling her lifeless cyborg shell prior to any engagement of her "ghost" to animate it. This reinforces a connection between the truncated fragmented mannequins and the artificiality of Kusanagi's assembled cyborg body implying a rupture in her imaging of her self as "human." Additionally, this scene cuts from an overhead shot looking down on the building where the mannequins are housed to a ground shot looking upwards to the display window and finally a direct eyelevel shot into the window suggesting that the association of the fragmented mannequin bodies with

Kusanagi's inanimate cyborg shell is one that the viewer makes in tandem with the camera. Kusanagi's subjectivity in this sequence is thus constituted by a system of different perceptions rather than only by her own. Importantly, this last shot of the limbless mannequin bodies foreshadows the fate of Kusanagi's cyborg shell – in her battle with the armoured tank protecting the kidnapped Puppet Master she tears her body apart, ending up as a limbless trunk that mirrors the exact state of the Puppet Master's own cyborg shell that has been taken apart and reduced to a head and torso by the technical staff in Section 9.

In "Exaggerated Gender and Artificial Intelligence" (2000), Kakoudaki refers to the gaze on the female body in *Ghost in the Shell* as pornographic, and so it is – the gaze or the camera seeks to penetrate beneath the skin to seek out what lies beneath, to reveal the fragmented constructed nature of embodiment particularly for the female figures in the film. It is interesting to note that all the figures that are presented in physically fragmented form are women (except for Batō whose arm is blown off when he tries to protect Kusanagi's head from the explosive bullet intended to destroy it).² The easy fragmentability and penetrability of the female body by technological intervention is highlighted in this anime in a way that makes it inescapable.³ One can choose to read this bodily penetration of the women by the scopophilic gaze of the camera as pornographic in its desire to get under their skins, and to rip them apart to find out what makes them work or to fix what does not,

as in the case of the Puppet Master and the translator, respectively. This is a reading that is readily apparent in the film.

However, I would like to suggest that another meaning might also be read from the deliberate focusing on the fragmentation of the women's bodies. By introducing the final shot of the limbless mannequins in the display window in the dream sequence, my reading suggests a refusal of female embodiment as whole or seamless, revealing that embodiment itself, especially female embodiment is full of ruptures and mediations. It is my contention that this resistance to wholeness results in part from the double consciousness that comes from women's "to-be-looked-at-ness" as John Berger discusses in *Ways of Seeing*. Berger (1972) points out that, "A man's presence is dependent on the promise of power which he embodies. If the promise is large and credible his presence is striking. If it is small or incredible, he is found to have little presence" (p.45), suggesting that subjectivity and presence for men is bound up in their ability to project self-wholeness or unity and self-determination. Berger continues, however, that women's subjectivity and presence, whose social presence is subject to "the keeping of men, ... comes at the cost of a woman's self being split in two" (1972, p. 46). He elaborates,

A woman must continually watch herself...From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so, she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within

her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman...Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated in herself by another (1972, p. 46).

Women's being is then already split, both inside and outside the self. Women's subjectivity, thus, for Berger, is always already fragmented and constituted by networks of forces both within and outside of themselves. When we add to this idea Teresa de Lauretis's theorization of the subject in her article "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness," (1990) we can begin to see the resistance to wholeness that underlies female subjectivity that is so vividly depicted in Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell*. De Lauretis urges an understanding of the "interrelatedness of discourses and social practices, and of the multiplicities of positionalities concurrently available in the social field [which can be viewed] as a field of forces" (1990, p. 137). She points to "not a single system of power dominating the powerless but a tangle of distinct and variable relations of power and points of resistance – within which there is constant intersections and mutual implications of axes of identity (1990, p. 137). Understanding identity and subjectivity for de Lauretis is based on a process of "continuing re-negotiation of external pressures and internal resistances, multiply organized across positions on several axes of differences and across discourses and practices that maybe, and

often are, mutually contradictory” (1990, p. 137). What de Lauretis suggests, and *Ghost in the Shell* can be seen as depicting, is the processual nature of subjectivity and embodiment that is in constant re-negotiation and flux due to its interactions within the world in which it exists. It is important to understand that we are not merely looking at intersections between axes but intersections that are also in constant flux. This being the case, it becomes possible to see Kusanagi’s journey through the cityscape as a sequence that plays out these re-negotiations based on the multiple positioning and mediations to which her subjectivity and embodiment are subjected.

The final encounter between the Puppet Master and Kusanagi with its inevitable reminder of the limbless mannequins in the window display would perhaps a good place also discuss the constructed nature of embodiment. A consideration of this scene via Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage would be useful here. Lacan (1977) comments:

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark

with its rigid structure the subjects entire mental development. (my emphasis, Écrits, p.4)

What Lacan suggests here is the idea that the subject’s viewing of its image in the mirror constructs for it, through mis-recognition, an ideal self-image, one that papers over its fragmented body experiences with an image of an external wholeness that presents embodiment and subjectivity as complete and unified. This image is one the subject is profoundly conflicted over largely because it suggests that the subject can only constitute its body image through self-alienation. Kaja Silverman in *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983), commenting on Lacan’s mirror stage highlights the fictional nature of the subject’s perception of its wholeness and points to it as an attempt to conceal the “crisis of alienation around which the Lacanian subject is organized” (1983, p. 158) because the subject defines itself entirely in relation to the mirror image. She states,

as a consequence of the irreducible distance which separates the subject from its ideal reflection, it entertains a profoundly ambivalent relationship to that reflection. It loves the coherent identity which the mirror provides. However because the image remains external to it, it also hates that image (1983, p. 158).

Silverman continues by pointing out that Lacan, in linking the mirror stage with the Oedipus complex, attempts to sever the construction of this image from its socially determined roots. She states, “Lacan suggests that the image the child discovers in the mirror is ideologically neutral, that it has no social determination. At the same time, he tells us that the child’s identification with that image stakes exactly the same form as subsequent identifications with images which are socially determined” (1983, p. 160). Silverman then suggests that “the question we are thus obliged to ask is whether the mirror stage is not in some manner culturally induced” (1983, p. 160), an acute observation that points to the importance of the network of social, cultural and material conditioning and disciplining involved in the constitution of the subject – and which the mirror image with its totalizing fiction seeks to conceal. Bearing this in mind, it becomes possible to read the mirror stage as an attempt to constitute subjectivity and body image within a socio-culturally acceptable norm. And, in *Ghost in the Shell*, the norm or standard for imaging the subject is the human and what constitutes being considered human. For those whose subjectivity is irredeemably mediated and networked, like Kusanagi, this norm causes grave tension and anxiety as it is the fiction that she desires which runs counter to her entire being.

In *Ghost in the Shell*, the final encounter between the Puppet Master and Kusanagi effectively deconstructs any notion of wholeness and any attempt Kusanagi

has previously made to constitute herself as whole through her merging with her reflection in the ocean diving scene. The Puppet Master and Kusanagi, both limbless cyborgs lie side by side, establishing the images of their embodiment via their mirroring of each other’s fragmentation. In other words, Kusanagi and the Puppet Master’s bodies become mirrors for each other, constituting their embodiment, not as “unified and unifying” but as irremediably fragmented. This sense of mirroring is further enhanced by their cyberbrain connections with each other, especially so when the Puppet Master speaks through Kusanagi’s voice and she sees through her eyes.⁴ Kusanagi sees herself through the Puppet Master’s eyes, and because what she sees is her own speaking body in fragments and what she hears is the voice of the Puppet Master emerging from her own mouth, any illusion of wholeness and humanistic self-determination is stripped away. Her inability to control what she says, and her inability to constitute her own body as anything but irreparably fragmented through her gaze at herself suggests the reading of subjectivity and embodiment as a symbiosis of networks, ruptures and mediations pointing to the idea of female embodiment as irremediably fragmented. In “Towards the female sublime” Livia Monnet (2002) focuses on the moment in the laboratory when the Puppet Master is revived after its accident and fixes her gaze on Kusanagi. She suggests that this is a moment in which Kusanagi and the Puppet Master mirror each other as doubles (2002,

p. 246), suggestive of the Lacanian mirror stage in which the body image is created through a recognition of self-representation in the mirror. Indeed, the Puppet Master reminds Kusanagi in their final conversation that they are very alike, practically “a mirror and its reflection.” Here, the mirroring of the fragmented female bodies reflects their ruptures, fractures and disintegration. Female body image or embodiment is thus constructed not as a “unified or unifying” wholeness but as partiality, fragmentation and truncation, reminiscent of the limbless mannequins in the display window in Kusanagi’s dream sequence. This vision of female embodiment is a powerful one as it refuses any notion of essentialism or fiction of wholeness, insisting on connecting the fragmented, mediated and distributed nature of subjectivity and agency to an equally fragmented sense of embodiment.

CONCLUSION

The figure of the female cyborg that Mamoru Oshii’s *Ghost in the Shell* presents us is perplexing, contradictory, and subject to forces and desires over which she has no control and yet desiring in her own right. Her subjectivity, agency and embodiment are thoroughly mediated and partial. Her depiction is often pornographic. Nevertheless, *Ghost in the Shell* offers us a vision of the networks of complex and often incongruous factors that are at play in constructing cyborg subjectivities.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See, for example, the work of William Gibson, Neal Stephenson, and Bruce Sterling.
- ² I am not including the humans that are assassinated or killed as a result of Section 9’s cleanup jobs for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We are shown very briefly, the moment of Batō’s sacrifice of his arm to save Kusanagi’s life, unlike the extended displays to which we are treated of both Kusanagi and the Puppet Master’s naked and fragmented bodies. Furthermore, the next time we see Batō, his arm has already been fixed.
- ³ For example, towards the beginning of the anime we see the female translator with her head opened up so that the technical team can attempt to repair the damage caused by the Puppet Master to her consciousness. Also, both the Puppet Master and Kusanagi’s cyborg shells are female and subject to fragmentation.
- ⁴ The cyborg shell inhabited by the Puppet Master is female.

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