

“The Gender of Technology”

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The dualism of materialistic embodiment and the enlightenment of the mind in our society is illustrated by a schism of masculinity and femininity. The masculine and feminine are constructs of society that have determined the relationship men and women have had with technology. During the industrial revolution, and, expanding into the early twentieth century, machines have been equated with embodiment and, thus, played the feminine role of submission. The information and digital age and the birth of the cyborg challenge the gender role of machines as they establish a level of intimacy with humans.

Man/other, agent/resource, civilized/primitive producer/consumer, strong/ weak, technology/nature, machinist/machine, creator/created, industrial/domestic, art/craft, etc. are dichotomies that demonstrate the antithetical relationship between the masculine and the feminine. Feminist art historian Griselda Pollock explains that feminism “confirms the patriarchal notion that woman is the sex, the sign of gender, perpetually the particular and sexualized Other to the universal sign Man, who appears to transcend his sex to represent Humanity” (25). She explains that within a patriarchal tradition the Man, or the masculine, is the norm to which the feminine is other. Historically, other has referred to the African, Jewish, Islamic, Oriental and Feminine heritages and traditions that are not patriarchal, Western and white.

The perception of the machine, particularly during the Industrial Revolution, became that of the other with the onset of automation. Together machines and women formed the “other” labor force that supplemented the skilled labor and management positions of men. Before the industrial revolution, slave women of the southern United States were forced to be sewing “machines” that created quilts for their masters (Behuniak-Long 154). In 1826, women were also “living” machines as the first factory workers in the United States in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts (Chadwick 207). Similar instances of hegemony can be traced throughout the history of textiles.

Embroidery became a popular woman’s activity as the idea of the leisured middle class woman emerged alongside the Renaissance man. The feminine connotation of textiles began to emerge during the sixteenth century focus on domestic arts, however men still served as embroiderers to royalty until the eighteenth century (Parker 60). A woman who embroidered signified the selfless, loving, obedient, docile, patient, leisured (although cooking, cleaning, and childrearing is not exactly relaxing) wife (Parker 5-12). Embroidery was the sign of a good woman, and thus, a good family. “The purpose of making a quilt is to express love. Rather than demonstrating mastery over what is, by any standard a difficult medium, the effort and time required to make a quilt beautiful are valued not for their own sake, but as tangible evidence of an abiding affection” (Bernick 141). Because creative expression that went into quilts and textiles was irrelevant to the love needlework symbolized, women were able to successfully inscribe messages to fight slavery, promote equality and successfully distribute the secrets of the Underground Railroad (Chadwick 207). Needlework often served as a sanctuary of expression, a way to communicate and share stories of “herstory,” because the social structure forbids most other forms of outcry. Heroines from Greek mythologies like Polymela who told her story of violent rape through tapestries (after her tongue had been cut out to prevent her from telling her story) became inspiration for the voiceless feminine.

Needlework, tapestries and quilts, although an important creative outlet for women, remained a domestic activity and labeled nothing more than a craft. Despite the innovative practices of many women who pieced stray fabrics together, quilts remained a “low art.” The use

of patterns, although recombined and adapted in original and meaningful designs, historically discredits embroidery from consideration of the title “art” (Parker 12). Traditionally many of the patterns were created by men as one more attempt to control all domains other to them and to disregard woman as artist. Utilitarian craft like basket weaving, quilting, and embroidery were not seen as art objects like painting and sculpture. Both a painting and a quilt may be unique objects, however, the location (studio/gallery versus the home) and the creator (man versus woman) remain different, and, therefore, determine their hierarchal rankings (Parker 5). Pollock asserts that

“such cultural practices that are typically downgraded because they are (mis)-identified with the domestic, the decorative, the utilitarian and the dexterous- that is with what patriarchal logic negatively characterizes as quintessentially ‘feminine’- appear as merely instances of difference, and paradoxically confirm (rather than afflict) the canonical – normative – status of other practices by men” (25).

Those that are other to the masculine canon are not considered worthy of gallery walls or the title of art, but, rather, are labeled as craft or decorative art. Russian Constructivism and the American and British Arts and Crafts Movements are of the limited few that sought out utilitarian and “domestic” art. Each of these movements capitalized on the idea of equality and the empowerment of the other. By giving value to craft, women’s art left the realm of the domestic and gained economic value. Morris, the founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement believed in a “day when the sexual division of labor within the arts would vanish and even domestic life would be equally shared by the sexes” (Chadwick 244). Morris may have preached equality, however, the few women he employed in his workshops remained in traditionally domestic fields of lace and needlework and adapted his wallpaper designs as patterns. The focus in his workshops, however, was holistic and emphasis was placed on quality rather than repetitive, machine like production of factories. Perhaps women are repeatedly pushed into the domestic realm because of some sort of primitive taboo men fear. A man sewing would lead to a feminine label, which would be a detriment to his identity as the masculine.

Patriarchal culture is dependent upon man’s domination over the other. The construction of towns and cities, the destruction of forests and trees, the establishment of laws, the invention of technology, the ability to produce and reproduce objects empower the man to feel as though he controls all that is other to him. If the masculine is associated with the agency of industry, technology and science then nature becomes subverted as does the feminine. Stacy Alaimo suggests “whereas men mark their own transcendent subjectivity by separating themselves from the natural world, women, seen as the embodiment of nature, are doomed to immanence and otherness” (3). Alaimo goes on to explain that women should embrace nature as a source of empowerment, rather than try to transcend it, and look at culture and the masculine as a signifier of desire to role-play creator/God.

The masculine role of creator is ubiquitous in science and technology. The industrial revolution exemplifies the masculine need to create, mass-produce and reproduce. Businessmen created numerous factories creating and selling everything imaginable. Doll making became a popular industry (women were thought of as weak and easy targets as consumers) controlled by men, without any consideration for what girls may need or want (Formanek-Brunell 112). The common approach was to create “indestructible” dolls out of steel, pewter, wood and rubber and designed after machines that they (the businessmen) admired (116, 117, 120). Most of these dolls were extremely mechanical, housing eerie, poor recordings of women’s voices, and assembled with adhesives like cement and glue (120). Dolls had traditionally been reinforcements of

motherhood and the domestic, however their physicality remained cold and hard. Steel dolls seem to reinforce the idea that the creator, the masculine, does not sew and will not sew, rather than to remind women to sew. “In Edison’s plant dolls were made into machines, so were doll makers, who repetitiously performed one operation in the manufacturing process, developing little relationship to the end product” (124). To further distance the feminine doll from the masculine creator, patents of doll parts, rather than whole dolls, became popular (117). Parts rather than dolls sounded like a more masculine item to manufacture.

Differencing the masculine from the feminine in all areas of manufacturing became imperative to the businessman. In the car business C.H. Claudy Electric Cars were promoted to the “feminine half of humanity” whereas the more versatile, longer gas powered vehicle was marketed towards the man (Scharff 141-143). Electric cars were extremely limited in their earliest years (and still are), whereas gas powered engines provided the ability to travel further and faster. (141-143). The simplicity of the electric cars encouraged marketing towards women who were thought to be intellectually inferior. The gas-powered engine not only was more complex, but dirty and required physical labor, which was not suited for a “lady.” Differencing of physical strength and mind of men and women was the primary tactic to distance the feminine from controlling or producing technology and machines.

Whereas women and machines are analogous to one another as other to men, women and machines are still distanced by an otherness between them. As more and more women enter scientific and technological fields, barriers between machine and women are breaking down. Sewing machines, for example, entered the traditional domestic realm and have been used in combination with traditional needlework to reduce the labor of creating quilts. Quilts continue to have a strong social value by providing the opportunity to connect via quilting circles, as well as to connect to her to a long tradition of feminine expression (Behuniak-Long 165-166). The use of the sewing machine has offered a way to reduce the labor of hand stitching quilts, offering many women the temporal opportunity to experiment with new ideas and techniques. Sewing machines today have even gone digital and can be used in conjunction with a computer to expand the function and possibilities of feminine thread and needle. Quilters look to technology as a way to continue their tradition and expand their future.

In today’s world many more women interact with machines and digital technology. Many aspects of our lives have become automated or assisted with analog and digital technology.

“Male, white, Western philosophers suddenly identify with body, with animality, when they feel their human identity threatened by the decision procedures on computers. For them, to be human is now less mind than body, because machine seems to threaten mind in the late 20th century (and early 21st) in the way it threatened the body in the 19th century” (Haraway 3).

Male and female differencing seems less important to the masculine when faced with a common “other” the machine. The development of cyborg and biogenetic technology has challenged the dichotomic nature of our society to evolve into a dualistic experience. Many women have entered “masculine” fields and still participate in motherhood and the domestic world of the “feminine” and, therefore, embody both the natural and the technological world. This duality has begun to blur gender lines to create a “post-human” or at least post-‘man’ experience.

Virtuality has offered the ability to disembodiment from a physical entity. The virtual world offers a constructed existence and an absence or transcendence of gender. Your identity as male or female in cyber world is independent of your biological makeup and existence.

“New reproductive techniques, medical and cybernetic fusions of humans and machines and the advent of new information technologies all reveal the constructed nature of the fault-lines dividing humans from non-human animals, what we call nature and machines” (Graham 304).

Prosthetics, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality have forced a new kind of interaction with computers that seemingly begins to flatten the hierarchy of man over machine.

The invention of the cyborg, a hybrid of biology and technology “serves as a metaphor for the way in which humans and machines are increasingly becoming assimilated and interdependent” (307). Although a true cyborg existence is still off in the future, the concept holds promise to an overhaul of hierarchal binaries and provides a new opportunity to name without gender. Donna Haraway advocates the cyborg as an “integrated circuit” in a “polymorphous, information system” (2). The cyborg experience theoretically would provide a common language rather than enforce the current a patriarchal system of signs and symbols. A cyborg would put “mind, body, and tool on very intimate terms” (3). The integration of the masculine mind, the female body and the machine tool would level pre-existing gender hierarchies to establish one super-gender. Haraway also explains that the cyborg “has no myth of origins because it has no parents and, significantly, no divine creator” (Graham 308). Without a myth of origin there are no pre-established notions of superiority or hierarchy to separate men from women.

Genetic engineering, on the contrary establishes a technology that is very problematic for the feminine. Rather than establishing equality between genders, genetic engineering serves as a “triumph of phallogocentric lust to recreate the world without the intermediary of fleshy women’s bodies” (Haraway 3). This science is way for man to play creator and “perfect” human existence without regard to nature. Engineering humans can be looked at as another attempt by the masculine to invent the perfect machine and control reproduction, which is one of the few areas the “feminine” is empowered. Although cybernetics and genetic engineering have common ground, cybernetics seems to offer a hope for a new, gender free dialogue.

Cybernetics offers many promises of a future that establishes a new history separate from the masculine-feminine antithesis of present and past. As humans become more integrated with technology, dichotomies will emerge into dualities that will promote a commonality between the feminine and the masculine and climax at a gender free existence.

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