



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

---

Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

## **Female Cyborgs in Film: Heeding the Siren's Call**

Leighann Neilson, Queen's University

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT** - This paper adopts a visual consumption approach to consumer research, by analysing the role of cyborgs, especially female cyborgs, in film in order to interpret the ways in which these representations both mirror/reflect and shape possibilities at the gender/technology intersection. The analysis is structured around two guiding frameworks, the first a typology of fear of technology, and the second, the notion of a 'cyborg continuum.' Borrowing from Leiss, a typology of (western) society's fear of technology is developed that involves three inter-linked forms: 1) inversion of the machine/master relationship; 2) prosthetic fear/fear of death, and; 3) challenge to the social order. This is juxtaposed with the idea of a cyborg continuum, stretching from 'pure' machine to 'pure' human and composed of intermediate stages that represent varying forms of human-machine fusion and accord with the notion/metaphor of the cybernetic organism, or cyborg.

### **[to cite]:**

Leighann Neilson (2004) , "Female Cyborgs in Film: Heeding the Siren's Call", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 31, eds. Barbara E. Kahn and Mary Frances Luce, Valdosta, GA : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 158-158.

### **[url]:**

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/8873/volumes/v31/NA-31>

### **[copyright notice]:**

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at <http://www.copyright.com/>.

## Female Cyborgs in Film: Heeding the Siren's Call

Leighann Neilson, Queen's University

### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper adopts a visual consumption approach to consumer research, by analysing the role of cyborgs, especially female cyborgs, in film in order to interpret the ways in which these representations both mirror/reflect and shape possibilities at the gender/technology intersection. The analysis is structured around two guiding frameworks, the first a typology of fear of technology, and the second, the notion of a 'cyborg continuum.' Borrowing from Leiss, a typology of (western) society's fear of technology is developed that involves three inter-linked forms: 1) inversion of the machine/master relationship; 2) prosthetic fear/fear of death, and; 3) challenge to the social order. This is juxtaposed with the idea of a cyborg continuum, stretching from 'pure' machine to 'pure' human and composed of intermediate stages that represent varying forms of human-machine fusion and accord with the notion/metaphor of the cybernetic organism, or cyborg.

The female cyborg presents a threat to hegemonic beliefs about the condition of women: "In our culture, to be in command of the very latest technology signifies being involved in directing the future and so it is a highly valued and mythologized activity" (Wacjman, 1991, p. 144). Female cyborgs, who are 'in command' of, or embody, the latest technology act as metaphors for 'what cannot be spoken' and pose a threat to the social order.

The body of the paper consists of a discursive analysis of how both male and female cyborg characters in science fiction films, themselves occupying various positions along the cyborg continuum, serve as visual representations of the three levels of fear of technology. Film images are seen as not only reflecting the society within which they were produced, but also shaping conceptions of possible gender/technology roles. Johnston has suggested it is not enough to say that film acts as a mirror, or as the propaganda arm of hegemonic ideologies. Such an approach does not explain how ideology is inscribed in the process of filmmaking. Instead, we must pair a "knowledge of the way a film text functions... [with] an analysis of [the] ... ideological, political, economic and ... social relations which determine the text at the time of its production" (Johnston 1975, p. 124). Similarly, we can theorize about the effects that consumption of these visual images would have on consumers.

It is as a challenge to the social order that female cyborgs present the greatest threat to patriarchy and it is through an examination of female cyborgs in particular that we can begin to get at the constraints and opportunities that these images offer to consumers. Four films will be examined as 'case studies' of the portrayal of female cyborgs in film: *Metropolis*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Star Trek: First Contact* and *Eve of Destruction*.

The role of the Borg Queen, from the film *Star Trek: First Contact*, is specifically examined in this context. The extremely gendered nature of the Borg Queen, in particular, defeats Haraway's (1985) suggestion of the cyborg as a 'potent fusion', useful for illustrating the possibility of egalitarian social arrangements in a post-gender world. However, the paper argues that the film does 'call to' a certain portion of the audience and that the female cyborg can offer the potential for liberation from patriarchal philosophical paradigms as well as from oppression experienced in everyday life.