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FROM FRANKENSTEIN TO MATRIX: CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF CYBORGS

por

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ABSTRACT

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What man's mind can create, man's character can control."

Thomas Edison

This work deals with the literary genre of science fiction. Combining the principles of "Cultural Criticism" and "Reader-Response Criticism," it discusses and interprets two Western narratives: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and The Wachowski Brothers' *The Matrix*. It is concerned with two major issues: (1) Western culture's overwhelming reliance on science and technology and (2) the role of narratives as an instrument of both strength and defy in regard to the values and truth proposed by the dominant or paradigmatic cultural discourse.

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RESUMO

Este trabalho lida com o gênero literário de ficção científica. Combinando os princípios do "Cultural Criticism" e "Reader-Response Criticism," ele discute e interpreta duas narrativas ocidentais: *Frankenstein* de Mary Shelley e *Matrix* dos irmãos Wachowski. O trabalho se preocupa com dois aspectos relevantes: (1) a profunda dependência da cultura ocidental em relação à ciência e à tecnologia e (2) o papel das narrativas como um instrumento de apoio ou de mudança em relação aos valores e verdades propostas pelo discurso dominante.

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INTRODUCTION

Twentieth Century Western society and culture are distinguished by a heavy dependence upon technology and science laced with a fundamental secular belief in both progress and, as the quotation from Thomas Edison used in our epigraph suggests, man's ability to master them. We call this belief the "Western technological creed."

Technological dependence has increased in a fast pace since the age of the Industrial Revolution and deeply changed society and culture. Narratives have changed accordingly. Western society has produced an increasing number of narratives – literary works, cultural studies, films, comics, videos, computer games, and theme parks – that simultaneously [1] express the ways culture deals with technology, imagine its outcomes, and conceive of their impact on human life, consciousness, behavior and society, [2] create composite beings half-human, half-machine (the cyborgs) to embody these cultural concerns regarding technology, and [3] reveal the ambiguous way in which our culture deals with the Western technological creed. We call these narratives – that deal with the ways in which machines, computers and the human body and mind have been imagined and that discuss the Western technological creed – as cyber-literature. We understand that cyber-literature comprises narratives of the science fiction genre as well as philosophical treatises and cultural studies on the essence and impact of technology upon mankind.

This dissertation is concerned with cyber-literature, the fictional beings, and the actual beings it creates: its cyborg personae and its "cyborg-minded" readers. I intend to understand how cyber-literature constructs its subjects, what messages it conveys, how they are understood by its audience, and how they affect the way its audiences see and conceive

of both the world in which they live and the role technology plays in it. In other words, I am questioning the status of cyber-literature in society and culture: is cyber-literature as a narrative a reinforcement or a challenge to the fundamental secular belief in technology, science, progress and men's ability to master them? Is it a reinforcement or a challenge to the Western technological creed? In addressing these questions, I will also be discussing whether one can or cannot find in cyber-literature a kind of guiding dominant or an unchanging master-narrative. If there is a dominant master-narrative guiding most of science fiction genre, it must be examined in the way it affects our culture and society.

I

I understand narratives in the sense proposed by Scott Bukatman in his *Terminal Identity*. Narratives are "acts of emplotment" that permit "imaginary resolutions of real contradictions that are crucial conduits of ideological suppositions", render reality meaningful and cognoscible, and offer "a structure that provides connectives in the form of causal relations, sequentiality, and most importantly the teleological satisfaction of an ending, a final steady state through which all other elements will retroactively assume a full significance" (*Terminal Identity* 106). Besides, I am using the concept of the "dominant" in the sense that Bukatman appropriates it from Roman Jakobson. Thus, "the dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines and transforms the remaining components" (*Terminal Identity* 161). As Bukatman explains, "the dominant is not the sole characteristic of a text, but, it exercises a determining influence over the rest," and, indeed, it serves "to guarantee some structural integrity" (*Terminal Identity* 162). Finally, I am employing the concept of master-narrative to refer to a narrative that "structures our understanding of the social structure" and guides the operation of social hegemony (*Terminal Identity* 106).

The concept of hegemony was originally defined by Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci employed it to describe "the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group." He developed the concept of hegemony in his analysis of political domination as a historical concept, a process, never fixed and always in the making. He conceives of that domination as simultaneously requiring force and consent. Force is applied in subduing or eliminating enemies or opposing forces; consent is built in the acquisition of support from allied groups through compromises in which the hegemonic group recognizes and takes into account the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised. In his view, the normal exercise of hegemony "is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent. Indeed, the attempt is always made to ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority."[1]

This concept of hegemony parallels both the currently prevailing notion of culture and Michel De Certeau's concept of strategy. On the one hand, social sciences and cultural studies have replaced the traditional concept of culture, in which a whole society was represented as having only one culture, and all the symbolic representations produced within this culture were seen as always conveying the same "central, coherent, communal meaning". They have empowered a more political and historical view of the culture of each society as being composed by a set of subcultures that coexist in it. Cultural manifestations made by each social group have as many variations in intended and perceived meanings as there are social differences within the society. Thus, culture is the collection of multiple ways of dealing with the world of the smaller groups that compose it: a collection of "subcultures". Now, these composing "subcultures" are perceived as

involving different ways of seeing, representing, feeling and acting in a world that is always in the making. Each "subculture" lives in a perpetual struggle to reproduce itself against the others and to impose itself upon the others. The social and cultural predominance of one of these "subcultures" within the culture of the whole group always reflects the temporary imbalances of economic asymmetries and political power within the group. Therefore, culture is a political phenomenon and the subculture that prevails in each moment is hegemonic. It is the particular and contextual arrangement of prevailing social and cultural forces within society that allows one of its composing fractions to define and to impose (by its cultural force and its reliance as representation of truth as well as by the concrete political and economic power of the group that holds it) its particular way of seeing the world as truth to the entire society.

Michel De Certeau's concept of strategy is similar to the other two that I have considered. The concept of strategy is understood in its relationship with the concept of tactics. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau developed a theoretical system to understand the ways in which people involve and interpose "themselves into the technocratic systems of power which hold sway in the present, and to answer the monolithic structures of power that ground Michel Foucault's theories of disciplinary technologies." As Scott Bukatman explains, Certeau recovers "a more heterogeneous practice than is inscribed in Foucault" (*Terminal Identity* 211-212). In his system, tactics are opposed to strategies. Certeau states:

> I call a strategy the calculation or manipulation of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats can be managed (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 35-36).

Therefore, strategies are associated with space and operate in space. The space in which they operate are "owned and operated by powerful dominant forces" and its operation consolidates the power of these dominant forces "over others who impinge on that space." Tactics must be seen against such strategies and, for Certeau, they refer to:

> The set of practices performed by subjects upon and within these controlled fields. A tactics is equivalent to a speech act." [...] It is temporal, a trajectory across the spaces of strategic control which uses that space as its foundation. [...] The result is not the overthrow of a system recognized as massive and monolithic, but instead a nibbling at the edges of power and thus an elision of control (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 33).

Thus, strategy is quite similar to the exercise of hegemony, tactics to that of challenging subcultures.

Adhering to these views of culture, strategy, and hegemony, I propose that the dominant and master-narratives are deeply related to culture and politics. Narratives provide representations, explanations, perspectives and/or models of reality that render both reality meaningful and action upon reality possible and prescient; the dominant connects and renders meaningful the component parts of each narrative, providing its structure; the master-narrative defines a common structure or reference to all the narratives produced within a social and cultural context, connecting them one to another and each one of them to both the whole set of socially produced narratives and the cultural structure in which they appear and operate as a whole. The master narrative is a plot that acts as the dominant that connects all the narratives as part of a whole and, in doing so, empowers an authoritative or hegemonic representation of the world described. In this view, culture is a matter of politics; narratives are political instruments; master-narratives define reality for the social group that shares it. Narratives can conform and contribute to the endurance of master-narrative, hegemony and strategy, but they can also challenge them and be part of

tactics of denial and defiance of them. As Bukatman argues in regard to Certeau's view of the function of narratives:

> A theory of narration is indissociable from a theory of practices, as its condition as well as its production.' Far from existing apart from the tactical struggle, narrative is fully embroiled in the articulation of resistance. [...] Narratives produce heterogeneity and resistance. [...] Narrative produces a movement – the kinesis of tactical resistance. [...]
> For Certeau the function of narrative is to demarcate boundaries: precisely to locate a space which may not be geographic. 'What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.' Frontiers and bridges also function as part of the narrative, serving as the sites of exteriority and the space in-between: in other words, they represent the other spaces against which the space of the story emerges. The passage into the frontier lands, or other spaces, and the subsequent return to one's proper space, comprise an archetypal narrative structure for Certeau which frequently reveals the ambiguity of the proper space itself (*Terminal Identity* 212-213).

In this dissertation, this theoretical construction of the concepts of culture, master-narratives, hegemony, strategy and tactics is crucial because, as Bukatman concludes, from his analysis of Certeau's theoretical framework and from his review of half a century of science fiction narratives, "cyberpunk fiction can be understood as a narrative of tactics: corporations and the military control cyberspace, so that the cowboys become infiltrators, deceivers, and tricksters. Cyberpunk narratives construct trickster tactics within the machineries of cybernetic culture" (*Terminal Identity* 212).

II

For my conception of the science fiction genre, I also draw on Scott Bukatman. In his view, the function of science fiction as a narrative genre can be conceived of as dramatizing the superimposition of technology on the human. Making use of the spectacular excesses and special effects, insisting upon the future as its structuring principle, forcing its readers to an experience of continual defamiliarization in regard to the world it presents, but which is still their world, making ancient but man-made dualities (such as day and night, up and down, masculine and feminine) disappear, attempting to

redefine the imperceptible realms of the electronic era (the virtual and disembodied electronic spaces of data and bits of information) in terms of the physically and perceptually familiar, and metaphorically rendering possible our presence and intervention in these disembodied spaces, science fiction has produced a space of accommodation to an intensely technological existence. In this space, the shock of the new is aestheticized and examined, the strategies of power are reinforced and challenged by narratives that include both utopian and dystopian views of technology, science and progress, and their impact upon the human and society.

Thus, Bukatman proposes that science fiction as a genre has made an effort to represent phenomenally, and in a way susceptible to human perception, the nonspace created by cyber-technology in terms of "a narrative compensation for the loss of visibility in an electronically defined world", allowing it to be experienced by humans and providing the referential dimension that is absent from these new, disembodied, electronic spaces. It has also proposed new images of the city or the complex industrial human environment, which was first projected as claustrophobic and isolated, and now, echoing the transformation of the urban space that occurred in post-modern cities, has been imagined by its boundlessness and directionless – simultaneously a micro – and a macro-cosmos. Furthermore, science fiction has addressed the emergence and hegemony of the spectacle as a way of ordering society and has been ambivalent in regard to it. Science fiction of the 1950s, for example, has resisted the advent of the spectacular society. In the last twenty years, however,

> The science fiction of the spectacle has moved from the resentment regarding the infantilizing function of the media to a deeper recognition of the powerfully controlling force of the spectacle; from the depiction of the passive consumer of images to the image-controlling hero; from a rationalist rejection of the 'false consciousness' engendered by the spectacle to the ambivalent postmodern strategies

> (barely introduced as yet) involving simultaneous acceptance and resistance through the proliferation of a spectacular noncoherence. In the end, image addiction is no longer posited as a disease; it has instead become the very condition of existence in post-modern culture (*Terminal Identity* 69).

Bukatman considers that it is only in science fiction that we meet heroes who distinguish themselves by their voluntarism – that is, their ability to control image addiction, to master technology, to remain human (redefined human but still human) beings although living in a cyberspace, a virtual realm, a machine-oriented and machine-made world. Thus, he proposes that science fiction must be understood in its importance to the present cultural moment, as a narrative genre that has kept a more ambivalent perspective in regard to the structures of power that permeate and shape the spectacular society in which we live, as well as in regard to the master-narrative of late capitalism.

Bukatman concludes that science fiction narratives have challenged as well as reinforced the Western technological creed and its central myth of the human ability to control and overcome the machines man creates; they have challenged and reinforced the arguments used to describe, criticize and fear the emergence of the society of the spectacle. Above all, they have remained ambivalent in regard to technology and the society of the spectacle it has engendered. Remaining ambivalent in regard to these issues, the science fiction genre remained tactical (insofar as we may think that Certeau's strategy is unilateral and one-directional) and has created a new myth: the myth of the cyborg. This myth can be characterized as a form of new utopianism: it is a utopia that stresses the belief in being human, a utopia that affirms the possibility of remaining human in spite of the supreme danger imposed to humanity by technological dependence. It is this utopia that we meet time and again in science fiction narratives. It is this utopia that we encounter in both Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the Wachowski Brothers' *Matrix*.

In this dissertation I am addressing and questioning the conclusion Bukatman draws from his analysis of Certeau's concepts of strategy and tactics as related to the science fiction genre. I am proposing that the science fiction genre and/or cyber-literature as an act of narration do not necessarily challenge the master-narrative, the hegemony or the strategy of our cybernetic culture and the post-modern world. On the contrary, they seem to be ambiguous. Indeed, they seem to endorse both utopian and dystopian views of our cybernetic society. The possibility of remaining human and remaining in control of technology that science fiction narratives dramatize time and again is also the ideology that ultimately reinforces the Western technological creed.

I am also proposing that acts of narration are marred by a perverse effect. When we narrate facts and events, at least when we narrate them as fictitious, we risk to tame the social criticism with which we intend to impregnate our discourse, we risk to reinforce the belief on the values and views that we are trying to defy. I am proposing that strategy, hegemony, culture or society reserve the symbolical but bounded realm of narratives to expressions of discontent and criticism that are not harmful to them and to their reproduction. Narration ultimately tames social criticism.[2]

III

Having as it main objective understanding cyber-literature in its relationship to the master-narrative represented by the "Western technological creed" or cultural hegemony, as acts of narration and reading, as tactics or pieces of the prevailing strategy, this dissertation centers on the interpretation of two Western narratives chronologically distant. These narratives are, respectively: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the Wachowisk brothers' film, *Matrix*. They are considered as paradigmatic – or, at least, representative – of the ways in which the issue of the relationship between technology, science, culture and human

beings, as well as the Western technological creed, have been treated from the time of the Industrial Revolution to the Information Age.

The choice of these narratives is not accidental. It follows from both practical and theoretical reasons. In choosing them, I was aware that, in the scope of this dissertation, I could not aim at an encompassing analysis of the science fiction genre as a whole. I had to focus on a small number of case studies. This practical reason reduced the universe of research. As for theoretical reasons, it has been argued that *Frankenstein* is one of the first and foremost narratives of the science fiction genre, and Frankenstein's creature is the first prosthetics cyborg conceived.[3] Conversely, *The Matrix* is one of the latest narratives of the genre to reach worldwide audiences. They are at the opposite poles of science fiction's time frame. The first tells how the genre and/or the literary concern with technology and science begun; the second describes the current state of the art. In my comparison of *Frankenstein* with *The Matrix*, I am searching for both similarities and contrasts between their different ways of conceiving of the impact of technology upon who we – human beings – are, how we deal with other human beings, culture, technology and reality. Similarities would provide fine clues to the existence of a master narrative underneath, guiding cyber-literature (the Western technological creed); contrasts will reveal how the genre has changed and how these changes reveal new patterns of relationship between technology, culture and humankind.

IV

This work combines procedures from two prevailing approaches in literary criticism: cultural criticism and reader-response criticism. Cultural criticism serves to unveil the social and cultural meanings of cyber-literary works. Reader-response criticism,

more restrictedly, serves to identify how people who are actually experiencing the electronic technologies of the Information Age respond to them and to cyber-literature.

These ways of reading differ significantly insofar as while cultural criticism centers on the interpretation of texts in reference to the cultural context in which they were written, reader-response criticism connects the meaning of the text to the reader's response to it. In the first approach, the text reveals the moment in which it was written, the prevailing values, beliefs and systems of knowledge; in the latter, it reveals the moment in which it is being read, the prevailing values, belief and systems of knowledge of the particular readers involved. As I am dealing with pieces of a cyber-literature that are in the making, both approaches can become complementary in an attempt to unveil the broad cultural meaning of cyber-culture, by confronting what was apparently intended by cyber-writers (or what we can call the strategic meaning intended by the producer of the message) and what is apparently perceived by cyber-readers (or what we can call the tactical interpretations of the receivers of the message).

The purposes, concerns and methodologies of cultural criticism are guided by the currently prevailing or post-modern concept of culture as a collection of subcultures, which remain politically laced together in a struggle for domination, authority and hegemony.[4] Thus, cultural criticism avoids rating cultural events and products. It aims "to oppose Cultural with capital C" and to expose the politics behind the evaluation of aesthetic products. It endorses a descriptive and comparative approach rather than the evaluative approach of cultural manifestations. It does so by: [1] considering woorthy of analysis the manifestations of what is called popular culture (i.e., aesthetically less valued products) as well to the classics; [2] reading each cultural manifestation (be it popular or erudite) in reference to the broad social, economic, and political context of its production, within

which it makes sense; [3] comparing popular and erudite manifestations of each historical period, understanding the classics "in light of some more common forms of reading material, as the reflection of some common cultural myths or concerns, or as an example of how texts move back and forth across the alleged boundary between low and high culture"; [4] emphasizing the complex relationships between literary texts, ideology, the reproduction of society, discourses, practices, culture and power; and, [5] paying attention to the multiplicity of voices or discourses.

Reader-response criticism, which emerged during the 1970s, focuses on what a text does to the mind of the reader, rather than on the exclusive properties of the text in itself.[5] It sees texts as being full of gaps and argues that these gaps or blanks powerfully affect the readers, who are forced to explain them, to connect what they separate, and, literally, to create in their minds a text that is not in the text, but the result of what the text suggests by means of its gaps. It departs from the principle that any text requires a reader actively involved with it, because literature only exists when it is read. Reader-response criticism is thus interested in the variety of readers' responses to the text. Central to it is, therefore, the idea of meaning as an event, not as something embedded in the utterance or verbal object as a thing in itself. A text exists and signifiees while it isbeing read, and what it signifies or means will depend, to no small extent, on when it is read. These meanings can reinforce the opinions that readers already hold or prod and provoke other opinions, challenging the readers to discover new truths.

Nevertheless, despite this conception of literature as something that only exists meaningfully in the mind of the reader and this concurrent redefinition of the reader as an active producer of meaning rather than as the passive recipient of the ideas that an author has planted in a text, reader-response criticism raises theoretical questions about whether

our responses to a work are the same as its meanings, whether a work can have as many meanings as we have responses to it, and whether some responses are more valid than, or superior to, others. It also faces two major questions: one asks if any text has as many appropriate interpretations as it has readers; the other, considering the subjective character of the process of rendering the text meaningful, points to the paradox of the stability of interpretation (why so many readers interpret the same text in the same way?). In response to both questions, reader-response criticism proposes the concept of interpretive communities – i.e., groups of readers who have in common interpretive strategies, which exist prior to the act of reading, and, therefore, determine the shape of what is read. Reader-response criticism is thus based on a methodology of provoking, collecting and analyzing readers' responses to a text as a condition to identify the meaning they produce and the uses they will have for it. In this process of response, provocation and register, the reader-response critic considers the features of the social scenario in which the reading of the text is made as a context that affect the readers' responses.

V

My main purpose is to discuss the impact of technological dependence on culture, narratives and human beings. I focus on two paradigmatic narratives – *Frankenstein* and *Matrix* – which keep in common a concern with this issue and the creation of cyborgs. The cyborgs created by Western literary writers, filmmakers, and computer games designers (i.e., cyber-writers) dramatize, embody and synthesize the values, habits, anxieties, fears, and hopes related to technology and science in our cybernetic world. I intend to reveal the cultural meaning of cyborgs and of the cyberspace in which they inhabit: What do they say about our way of perceiving the world and our peers and our way of dealing with them? What do they say about our way of thinking and our ability to know and to act? What do

they say about our beliefs on progress, technology, science and the human ability to master man's creations? What do they say about our habits, about our values and behavior, about our ability to deal with difference, otherness and change?

Therefore, I focus on two historical moments in the development of technologies experienced in Western societies and in the cyber-literature that characterizes them. The first moment roughly coincides with the Industrial Revolution; the second comprises the Information Age. Thus I deal with two paradigmatic cyborgs – the Monster in *Frankenstein* and Neo in *Matrix*, which each cyber-literary-moment has imagined as an embodiment of the technology then available. One represents early science fiction; the later is representative of current cyber-literature.

In the first chapter, I consider the technological culture of contemporary Western Society and the most characteristic narratives it has produced: the science fiction genre and cyber-literature. What has actually occurred in contemporary Western society in matters of technology, cultural and human dependence upon technology? How are these historical events represented in contemporary Western narratives such as philosophy, social sciences, cultural studies, and, particularly, science fiction? My purpose in writing this chapter is to review the theoretical literature that will provide support for the following interpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the Wachowski Brothers' *The Matrix* in terms of the relationship between technology, culture and definition of the human in our post-modern, cybernetic and spectacular society. In the last chapter, I will summarize my findings and conclusions.

NOTES

[1] Thus, Gramsci relates hegemony and the consent in which it is based with the intellectual and moral leadership of the dominant class and sees this leadership being produced and reproduced through a network or institutions, social relations, and ideas which are outside the directly political sphere (*Hegemony*).

[2] I am drawing this hypothesis from the reader-response analysis of cyber-literature I have developed with undergraduate students at the Universidade para o Desenvolvimento do Alto Vale do Itajaí (UNIDAVI).

[3] Thus, according to Ana Claudia Giassone, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* presents neither the characteristics of the Eighteenth Century gothic genre, nor the characteristics of the Nineteenth Century fantastic literature. Being basicaly a "look towards the future" that questions its age's optimism in regard to progress, *Frankenstein* is one of the first examples and a precursor of the literary genre known as science fiction (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein* 35-36). On the conception of "prosthetics cyborg" and the view of the Creature as the first being of this breed, see below, Chapter 3.

[4] My discussion of cultural criticism is based on Johanna M. Smith's essay *What is cultural criticism?*

[5] My discussion of reader-response criticism is based on Johanna M. Smith's essay *What is reader-response criticism?*

Chapter I

TECHNOLOGY, CULTURE AND MANKIND

Two historical moments – spread in a time span of more than two centuries – mark the limits of my study. Each one of them is contemporary to each one of the narratives I am analyzing. They are: the Eighteenth Century Age of Revolutions and the late Twentieth Century Information Age. From the Age of Revolutions to the Information Age, from modernity to post-modernity, from the society of market commodities to the society of the spectacle and simulacra, technology has gained space and importance both in the Western World and globally. Economy and politics, production and consumption, work and leisure, information and knowledge, health improvements and housing, food producing and wars, life and death, the way we see, represent, think and act in the world in which we live, the way we conceive our world and its time and spatial structures, our bodies and identities. We have become increasingly dependent upon technology.

I

The Age of Revolutions shook Western society in the late Eighteenth Century. It comprised and added together the effects of three revolutions: The first revolution was eminently economic; the second was eminently cognitive and cultural; the last was eminently political. They were the Industrial Revolution, Enlightenment and the Democratic Revolutions.[1]

The Industrial Revolution radically transformed the economic mode of production. It started in Europe, expanded in a fast pace, and established the domain of a few Western countries over the whole globe. Old civilizations and empires declined when confronted with

the power of Western businessmen, steam machines, steam ships, goods manufactured at reduced price, and guns. The Industrial Revolution replaced handcraft by manufactured, and, later, manufactured by factory products. It also transferred the center of the economic life from the country to the city, from rural production to industrial production, from the primary to the secondary economic sector. To fully grasp its impact, it is necessary to emphasize the rural (in contrast to urban) and agrarian (in contrast to industrial) character of the world before 1789. Hobsbawm argues that, before 1789, four out of five Europeans lived in the country. In Britain, the urban population only surpassed the rural one as late as 1851.[2] In this rural and agrarian context, the Industrial Revolution caused land concentration, broke traditional forms of social organization, and provoked a huge emigration from the country and to the cities.

The Industrial Revolution caused three major social transformations. First, it caused a complete reordering of the productive relationships between those few who owned the means of production and those many who, in the daily conquest of their survival, only owned their bodies, their strength and their capability to work. Productive relationships became purely economic and were deprived of all the social values and principles they had been embedded with. Work became another commodity in the market, felt under market rules of supply and demand, and workers became easily replaceable. Second, the Industrial Revolution brought the industrial bourgeoisie definitely to a hegemonic position within society. As such, it became the source of patterns of behavior, values, ideals, principles of judgment and worldview to be followed by the whole society. Third and most important to my concerns here, it increased in an unimaginable way mankind's dependence upon technology. Industrial technologies made products cheaper; new technologies of transportation rendered them more available; the new social division of labor and tremendous specialization rendered them needed.

The second revolution of the age was taking place at the level of mentalities. It is related with the philosophical, scientific and literary movement that came to be known as Enlightenment. Roughly, it consisted on the conviction on the progress of human civilization, knowledge, science, reason, wealth and control over nature. As Ana Cláudia Giassone points out, "the idea that mankind inexorably makes progress and moves towards the fulfillment of a better and prosper future belongs to the Enlightenment's tradition and was recurrent throughout the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries" (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein* 34). Its champions came from the classes most representative of economic progress and more directly involved in the technological and economic advances made at the period: men from the financial and commercial circles, manufacturers, entrepreneurs as Benjamin Franklin, and inventors of technological devices as James Watt. They questioned political and religious authorities and promoted the disenchantment of the world, denying a supernatural worldview, abandoning superstitions, condemning non-rationally based beliefs and, particularly, rejecting the doctrine on God's original revelation of truth to His followers. The scientific method of research substituted the theological view of reality; human reason substituted dogma and divine revelation; a view of society as a product of human activity substituted its view as a divine gift or grace. Furthermore, they fought against traditional hierarchies of social status that defined men's places within society according to their birth and blood, proved their irrationality, and replaced them with an ideal of social ascension and status according to their individual merits and abilities, which was based on the notion of the individual, his will and freedom, as the central organizing principle of the new modern society.

The man of the Enlightenment was also a new human individual. He was a being freed from original sins and curse, freed from God's ancestry, condemnation or blessing. As Lee Heller points out in her *Frankenstein and the Cultural Uses of Gothic*, the man of the Enlightenment was conceived of as a *tabula rasa* at his birth. He was a being whose

character, behavior and nature would be influenced by education, habits and mechanisms of social control. As Ana Cláudia Giassone suggested, the man of the Enlightenment was also conceived in terms of another major myth: the Rousseaunian myth of the "noble salvage." Thus, it was a man conceived of as being naturally good, but open to evil influences from society.

Finally, the third revolution that shaped the Age of Revolutions, at the aftermath of which Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, was political. It is related to the American Independence (1787) and the French Revolution (1789) and the whole set of democratic revolutions and nationalistic movements that shook Europe and the Americas throughout the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries. These Democratic Revolutions were triggered by the emergence of liberal ideals and represented the entrance of the popular element in politics. It also raised fears and reactions among the middle and upper classes.

The consequences of the Age of Revolutions were immediately felt and addressed by the intellectual elites of Europe. As Hobsbawm points out, in the short run, lacking in urban infrastructure, sewage and job opportunities, cities swelled and became the scenario of increasing social problems. While the factories watched the shameful spectacle of abusive journeys, children and women working for a lower pay than the insidious wages of men, the shantytowns of industrial cities got ridden by prostitution, high indexes of suicide, alcoholism, crime, rampant violence, and epidemics. As Warren Montag points out, it was "a time when the oppressive and dehumanizing effects of capitalism were all too obvious" (*The Workshop of the Filthy Creation* 311). Thus, an era of social demands by the working classes and social turmoil was open; socialist and anarchist utopias surfaced, class confrontations blossomed.

The intellectual elites of the middle and upper classes – who produced the narratives I will be discussing – reacted with concern and anguish. As Johanna Smith points out, they

were driven by opposite impulses and nurtured ambivalent feelings in regard to the lower classes (*Biographical and Historical Contexts* 16-17). They endorsed human rights, abominated class oppression, believed in the progress of mankind, related science, technology and material prosperity with social justice, and abode to the Western technological creed. Nevertheless, they observed that social wealth and material progress, science and technology were not enough to guarantee the improvement of living conditions for all, or to reduce social unrest, and felt nostalgia for the stability, order and peace of mind they experienced under the older regime. They felt pity for the miserable conditions of life people endured in urban, industrial shantytowns, but they feared the mobs and the mobilization of the working classes. They were both revolutionary and conservative and they produced both narratives that reveal their faith in technology, science and progress and narratives that reveal their concerns with regard to the impact of technology, science and progress upon the human condition.

In the long run, the Age of Revolutions meant the hegemony, in a global scale, of the capitalist mode of production. It opened an era of irreversible industrialization, urbanization and rationalism. Patterns of production and consumption changed radically; standards of living and social organization changed accordingly. New commodities became available in massive scale, fueling dreams and desires; technological improvements, reducing the costs of their production, made them affordable. Thus, Ernest Mandel concludes that modern and post-modern Western societies went through three economic revolutions, which have been governed by revolutions in technology (*Late Capitalism*). First, there was the steam engine of 1848, which introduced the mechanical age, shook society, and opened a new mode of production. Then, there was the rise of electricity and the combustion engine in the late nineteenth century. Since the 1940s, there has been the development of nuclear and electronic technologies, which reached its peak by the end of the twentieth century and brought up the Information Age and the "society of the spectacle" in which we live.[3]

From one stage to the following, human dependence upon technology has grown and technology itself has become a highly demanded commodity. The rudimentary steam machines that prompted the Industrial Revolution have given place to the electrically powered machinery; mechanical technologies opened space to electrical, electronic, digital and nanotechnologies. In the mechanical age, technology was restricted to working places, a public domain from which the domestic world was radically separated. In the electrical age, the machines went from factories to streets and invaded our houses; they reshaped daily habits from the accomplishment of everyday household tasks to leisure time; they also transformed the way our ancestors perceived the world. Finally, in the computer age, technology has emulated our brain; it has invisibly invaded our beings, reshaping the ways we think and write, creating a new space in which we can live free from our bodily limitations (cyberspace), and redefining our sense of humanity. Initially, technology essentially meant instruments of wealth and power. Later it added the meanings of affluence and comfort. Nowadays, technology equals information and knowledge. Technology has never rested and its impact on society, culture and narratives has steadily risen.

II

As Westerners' dependence upon technology has increased, western narratives on the issue of the relationship between mankind and technology have changed accordingly. Now, being produced within a society ridden by electronics, nanotechnologies, digital technologies, genetic engineering, mass media and world wide webs of information, our narratives imagine and depict a world full of cyborgs – hybrid beings, half biological organism and half machine– which deeply change the way we are used to conceive the humane.[4] When doing so, our narratives continue to be ridden by opposite views of the relationship between technology and humankind, artifacts and nature. They continue to see technology and artifacts as both threatening and liberating for humanity.

Martin Irvine has recently called attention to the contradictory myths involving technology in Western societies. He has not only pointed out the existence of three definitions of technology in the current social discourse – the definition of technology as instrumentality, its definition as industrialization and its definition as novelty – but he has also, and principally, identified the existence of two major and opposite cultural traditions: a utopian tradition that relates technology to sublime power and beneficial influence and a dystopian tradition, which relates it to a fall from grace, innocence and nature. Furthermore, Irvine has shown that utopian and dystopian views of technology were born together (Technology, *Ideology, and Social History*). How do these so opposite views of technology and its relationships with human nature, culture and society continue to be carried in our modern and post-modern ages?

*

Technology has revolutionized our imaginary even more profound than as it revolutionized our economy. Technology has from the onset of the Industrial Revolution generated a kind of "sublime euphoria" in respect to progress and the future. Our actual dependence on technology has empowered a utopian view of technology and science and has put to work – as a master-narrative that has prevailed in Western society for the most part of the last two centuries – a fundamental belief in progress and in man's ability to master their own creations. Throughout modernity, this belief became the socially hegemonic narrative in which we believed. It is still hegemonic in our post-modern age. It has guided our perceptions and explanations of reality, it has modeled our practices, and we have unconsciously accepted and followed it, as we have rarely been able to defy it consciously. Indeed, this hegemonic narrative has remained able to accommodate our few challenges. Technological dependence and technological creed continue to shape the way we think of

society, culture and humanity, as they are reproduced in everyday talks, literature, films, cultural theory, philosophy and the social sciences.

Throughout the last two centuries, Western society watched the emergence and consolidation of scientific explanations of society and culture as heavily dependent upon technology. David Bell proposes that technology fulfills a major role within human society. While culture guards continuity in human affairs, technology governs change and "always creates a crisis for culture."[5] In his recent analysis of the cyberspace created by the electronic technology of the Information Age, Mark Slouka proposes that technologies are central in human and social development, and they are never neutral forces from a human, social and cultural standpoint. On the contrary, they order behavior and establish rules by which people live; they redefine people's values and reconstitute lives in unpredictable ways; they alter our sense of reality and have social and cultural implications, because they entail unpredictable risks and pose broadly ethical questions. Slouka argues that these ideas are mostly valid in regard to cyber-technology, which he perceives as having both positive and negative implications, utopian and dystopian overtones (*War of the Worlds*).

A theoretical paradigm that relates both mankind's evolution to tools and socio-cultural formations, as well as men's self-imagination with regard to the technology available in each historical moment also emerged in early anthropological theories. They used to distinguish humans from other animal as tool users and to stress that, during hominid evolution, the reliance on tools increased. Tools have become more numerous, more diversified, functionally differentiated, and have been designed for more specialized tasks.[6] This theoretical paradigm underlies the conception of culture as the defining characteristic of mankind. In this context, Serge Moscovici has argued that culture is both the result of a process of rendering nature artificial and the cause of the emergence and supremacy of the human gender above the other species. He has also argued that throughout its evolution, the

human species has never been exclusively dependent upon its organism and instincts; on the contrary, it has always relied on the artificial order of culture and society, which have to be defined as a counter-nature. Reinforcing this view, Ezio Manzine has also proposed that every human action relates to cultural facts that have artificiality as their essence. Their arguments are a major source for the analysis of the process of "cyborgization" that marks our contemporary culture, which is, therefore, seen as the inevitable continuation of this process of artificialization of life that characterizes human evolution.[7] Furthermore, Western culture has become used to constant and daily reminders of how our fast-changing technologies can alter our lives.[8]

This view on the determination of society, culture and mankind by artifacts and technology has remained hegemonic in our modern and post-modern imaginary. Nevertheless, hegemony never means exclusiveness. As Bukatman argues, the initial sublime euphoria in regard to technology, science and progress has increasingly given place to a sublime terror and to a view that demonizes technology (*Terminal Identity* 4). The euphoria and the utopian view of technology have been increasingly mugged by dystopian representations of it. They have given way to historically increasing trends to bring progress, science and technology into question, to consider them as both fact and illusion, and to see them as the source of problems that afflict Western society and culture: alienation, environmental degradation, the threat of nuclear destruction, and, crucial for my purposes in this thesis, the redefinition of our representation of humanity and the limits of the human.

Michael Heim has called this trend to perceive technology as terror "technoanxiety," and Scott Bukatman has made technoanxiety and the questions it raises both the core of science fiction narratives (including cyberpunk) and the outstanding characteristic of post-modernity.[9] Twentieth Century philosophy, social sciences, and cultural studies have been packed with dystopian narratives on technology and challenges to the Western technological

creed. When dealing with technology, historians have increasingly refuted its autonomy and have increasingly supported the proposition that they are "social products, susceptible to democratic controls". When dealing with the Western myth of progress, they have brought it under heavy fire.[10] Even the notion of science as truth has been attacked by post-modern criticism.[11] Western technologies have thus generated both utopian and dystopian views of its social and human consequences.[12] This ambivalence occurs because, as Bukatman states, "the technologies of the Twentieth Century have been at once the most liberating and the most repressive in history, evoking sublime terror and sublime euphoria in equal measures" (*Terminal Identity*).

III

Social and cultural studies on the Information Age are intensely ridden by both utopian and dystopian views of technology and the process of cyborgization of humanity. I will consider here the arguments that shape these opposite views as they are proposed by Michael Heim and André Lemos. On the one hand, the work of Michael Heim represents a number of scholars who have argued that Western dependence upon technology is a fairly recent experiment in the history of mankind, and have stressed that our overwhelming dependence renders our civilization quite specific and dangerously de-humanizing. On the other, the recent works of André Lemos speaks for a number of scholars who have defined our civilization as the realm of cyborgs, but have proposed an interpretation of the relationship between mankind and technology as a long-lasting process in which the civilization of the cyborgs represents a new stage on human evolution rather than a radical revolution.[13]

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In Heim's view, technology imposes a threat more sinister than the revolt of machines against mankind that was conceived of under the "computer as opponent" paradigm. It "infiltrates human existence more intimately than anything humans could create:"

> The danger of technology lies in the transformation of the human being, by which human actions and aspirations are fundamentally distorted. Not that machines can run amok, or even that we might misunderstand ourselves through a faulty comparison with machines. Instead, technology enters the inmost recesses of human existence, transforming the way we know and think and will. Technology is, in essence, a mode of human existence, and we could not appreciate its mental infiltration until the computer became a major cultural phenomenon (*The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* 61).

Technology has definitely changed the way we conceive both reality and ourselves:

> Now we are wedded to machines. ...] So closely do we work with devices that we seldom notice them – until they breakdown. Machines are no longer merely machines but have become electromechanical appliances. Applied technology fills our lives with familiar routines. ...] Devices attach to every aspect of life, creating a technological culture. Our marriage to technology embraces production, transportation and communication. ...] Our selves plus the machines constitute a feedback loop (*The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* 74-75).

As Scott Bukatman states, from the social point of view, technology has changed more than the spectacular representations of society. It has transformed social actions in spectacles themselves. From the human standpoint, technology is now "pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next to us. Under our skin; often inside our minds." **D**

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On the other hand, in the new utopian view supported by Lemos's interpretation, to become cyborgs appears as the achievement of the evolutionary fate inscribed in mankind since its emergence and its rise to supremacy among the animal species rather than a de-humanizing turn of events.[15] The triumph of this natural destiny obliges us to reach for a new conception of the relationship between mankind and technology and brings with it the

potential to free ourselves from the traditions of oppression, social exploitation and cultural prejudices. In this alternative view, technology involves a process of synergy and we have to consider that the following three phenomena have been so universal and ordinary for mankind that they have to be considered as natural or deeply human. They are: the dependence on technology and artifacts or the building of an artificial order imposed to the natural world; the virtualization of reality; and the imagination of cyborgs.

Initially, referring to the works of Bernard Stiegler and André Leroi-Gourhan, Lemos shows that the production of the artificial is an activity totally natural for mankind. Indeed, the production of the artificial and/or the development of technologies have provided solutions for the zoological evolution of the human specie. The technical phenomenon is the first manifestation of the human dimension; the production of the first technical artifacts is intimately related to the development of the cortex and the invention of language; and, mankind cannot be defined or understood without the technical and/or artificial dimension. Thus, Lemos emphasizes that the essence of the human nature is shaped in a process that can be perceived as of human de-naturalization set in motion by the emergence of pre-historical techniques.[16]

André Lemos also argues that the process of virtualization of reality does not mean the end of reality, nor is it historically recent as the conception of a post-modern civilization of the virtual may suggest. This process of virtualization creates the virtual and, from this perspective, the virtual does not mean a false, illusory or imaginary dimension. The virtual opposes the current rather than the real. It represents another kind of reality – the reality of what is possible to exist, the reality of what exists as a potentiality. In consequence, the virtual always contains a questioning of the current, it always means a form of freeing human beings from the physical and symbolic limits imposed by the situation in which they currently live (the here and now), and it always refers to the human ability to imagine other possible

realities rather than falsehood. Virtualization is a process inherent in human language and technology. In consequence, it is inherent in every artistic expression, every artifact, every tool and every machine mankind makes. From this perspective, every form of art is an operator of virtualizations – provisions of ways out of the limited situations of a physical and/or symbolic here and now and attempts to question the real and to broaden the limits of the possible. What distinguishes the electronic arts of our post-modern world from their predecessors is only an unprecedented radicalization of this process of virtualization through the digital technologies that no longer attempt to represent the world, but, instead, create digital, algorithmic simulacra of the world. These do not represent the world, but they work as models for shaping a new world. They do not try to simulate nature; instead they replace the world with the new realities of the virtual.[17]

Finally, Lemos points out how common and old is the process of conceiving unnaturally born beings by human beings, questioning also the novelty of the process of cyborgization in terms of the imaginary. He stresses, however, three different historical moments on this imagination of artificial beings. First, men imagined artificial beings that came to the world animated by a divine act. They represented life entering the artifacts by God's will. Later, men imagined robots, which were animated by mechanical and electric powers and represented the simulation of life through mechanical movements. Robots imitated life in its movements and were endowed with (logical) intelligence; nevertheless, they remained different from the human being, because they were perpetually imprisoned by its mechanisms and lack of sentiments and emotions. The imaginary of robots kept intact the border between the artificial and the human. Finally, men came to imagine cyborgs – hybrid beings whose organisms melts together mechanical and biological elements, who blur the distance and erase the difference between the human and the machine, and (insofar as they cross over the borders traditionally built to order the world and to think about the world) who

hold the ability to revolutionize culture and society, liberating mankind from the prejudices that have imprisoned and enslaved it (*A Página dos Cyborgs: (4) O Imaginário do Cyborg*).

Lemos states that our technologies have breed three types of cyborgs, who constitute the real picture of our humanity. There is, first, the prosthetics cyborgs, who refer to the human use of technological (mechanical, electric and electronic) devices to extend both body and mind abilities. In his view, prosthetic cyborgs symbolize a symbiosis between organic and inorganic, the biological and the technological, and their existence emphasizes the bodily fusion of meat and machinery. Prosthetic cyborgs are every person whose physiological functioning is aided by, or dependent on, a mechanical or electronic device and, in accordance with Lemos, there is some consensus in regard to the view of the Creature on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as being the first literary prosthetic cyborg. In contradistinction, there is, secondly, the interpretive cyborgs. They appeared with the technologies of mass communication, virtualization of reality and spectacularization of society. They do not emphasize the bodily fusion of meat and technological devices, but represent our submission to, control and transformation by the technology of spectacles as Guy Debord has conceived of them: the most subtle and ruthless weapon of late capitalism, able to produce continuous alienation and oppression. They meant a technologically controlled and enslaved subjectivity. Finally, Lemos argues that the new technologies of information and the world wide web, which are not based on a totalitarian and centralized system of provision of one message for all users, but allow that every user build his/her own connections with the information and/or message centers, have engendered the advent of a third kind of cyborgs: the netcyborgs. They can escape the control of the media and, thus, the domination of the spectacle by using the new media of communication socially available.[18]

Thus, for Lemos, the dichotomy between the artificial and the natural is meaningless in human matters and the existence of the cyborgs has to be conceived of as part of the

development of mankind. In consequence, the civilization of the virtual and the world of the cyborgs – which have become possible because of the development of information, electronic and digital technologies, and were ridden by processes of virtualization of reality and "cyborgization" of the body – become only a natural sequence in human evolution. This view often involves a utopian conception of technology, which is seen as able to freed mankind to reach new and more democratic individual and social experiences.[19] It considers that the new information, digital and electronic technologies **make us cybors ho o exper e ce e orms o tech o-soc ab ty that a o us to escape rom the soc ety o the spectac e.**

IV

In conclusion: both the dystopian view of technology and the new utopian view of electronic, digital and information technology have in common a view that technology has become visceral to and synergic with contemporary mankind. Human beings became cyborgs. They disagree, however, in regard to both the origin of this synergy and visceral relationship between technology and mankind and its consequences for the fate of mankind. Dystopian viewers see it as a historically recent phenomenon and emphasize its danger to humanity. They stress that artifacts and technology have always been opposite to the human nature and consider that the current synergy established between information and electronic technologies and mankind represent a danger to mankind. The cyborg – who embodies this synergy – means a denial of the human essence. On the other hand, drawing on archeological findings, the new utopianism has reversed this view. Its proponents point out that the synergy that exists between man and artifacts, mankind and technology is a defining zoological and anthropological characteristic of mankind. Thus, they have stated that the extraordinary development of the human species is related and overwhelmingly due to human reliance on tools, techniques and technology, insofar as "la pro-thèse n'est pas un simple prolongement du corps humain, elle est la constitution de ce corps en tant qu'humain."[20] To become a cyborg

means to achieve man's destiny. It is not a supreme danger to the human essence. The two views also disagree in regard to the kind of society in which these cyborgs now have to live. This issue is the object of the next chapter.

NOTES:

[1] In the following paragraphs, I am heavily drawing on Eric Hobsbawm's *Era das Revoluções*.

[2] Obviously there were provincial towns and there were huge differences between their population and the properly rural one. Nevertheless these towns were completely different from the cities that emerged with industrialization and capitalism. They heavily depended on rural economy, belonged to rural society, and held rural values and worldview.

[3] Quoted by Scott Bukatman (*Terminal Identity* 3-4).

[4] According to André Lemos, *A Página dos Cyborgs: (4) O Imaginário do Cyborg* , the term "cyborg" entered the science fiction genre in Arthur Clark's short story "The City and the Stars", from 1965. It was invented in 1960 by Manfred Clynes, a scientist in biomedical engineering, who wrote an article entitled "Cyborgs and Space" and defined it as "the melding of the organic and the mechanical, or the engineering of a union between separate organic systems."

[5] Thesis proposed by Bukatman, quoting Daniel Bell (*Terminal Identity* 3).

[6] In this issue, see Conrad Kottak (*Cultural Anthropology*, 72-87).

[7] See: Serge Moscovici, *La Societé Contre Nature* and Ezio Manzine, *Artefacts:*). These authors have been referred to and quoted by André Lemos, in his analysis of the central place of cyborgs in our contemporary culture. As I will consider below, one fundament of Lemos's interpretation of the contemporary society consists on the conception of a process of synergy between mankind and technology (*A Página dos Cybors: (1) Cyborgização da Cultura Contemporânea*).

[9] Thus, Bukatman says: "Cyberpunk is about how our increasingly intimate feedback relationship with the technosphere we are creating has been, is, and will be, altering our definition of what it means to be human itself" (*Terminal Identity* 234). I will return to this issue later in this chapter.

[10] On the first issue, see Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx (*Does Technology Drive History*). And, on the second, consider Leo Marx and Bruce Mazlish (*Progress: Fact or Illusion?*).

[11] On this issue, consider Katherine Hayles's course description (*How to do things with narratives: literary methods and scientific legitimation*).

[12] This thesis has been proposed by Bukatman (*Terminal Identity* 4) and Martin Irvine (*Technology, Ideology, and Social History*).

[13] See André Lemos: *A Página dos Cyborgs*; *Tecnologia e Vida Social na Cultura Contemporânea*; *Arte Eletrônica e Cibercultura*; and, *Santa Clara Poltergeist*.

[14] Thesis proposed by Bukatman, interpreting an assertion of Bruce Mazlish (*Terminal Identity* 8) and by Michael Heim, when interpreting Heidegger's essay on technology (*The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* 70).

[15] For an introduction on this view, see André Lemos, "*A Página dos Cyborgs – (1) Cyborgização da Cultura Contemporânea.*" Lemos draw most of his argument from: Bernard Stiegler (*La Technique et le Temps*); Serge Moscovici (*La Societè Contre Nature*); and, Ezio Manzine (*Artéfacts*).

[17] André Lemos addresses this issue in *A Página dos Cyborgs: (2) Civilização do Virtual*" and *Arte Eletrônica e Cibercultura.*

[18] André Lemos, *A Página dos Cyborgs: (6) Cyborgs Protéticos e Interpretativos* and *A Página dos Cyborgs: (7) Netcyborgs e BodyNet.*

[19] André Lemos dedicates a large part of his comments to Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, which states that the cyborgization of mankind is revolutionary insofar as it enables the questioning of traditionally, culturally and politically built and imposed dichotomies and social identities. The advent of cyborgs renders possible to escape from the Western phallocentric myth, racism and sexism. It also allows the criticism of Marxism and Feminism that have failed as strategies of social identification. Thus the cyborg is a type of myth on social identities and their borders. See Lemos (*Arte Eletrônica e Cibercultura* and *A Página dos Cyborgs: (5) O Discurso dos Cyborgs*).

[20] Thus, Bernard Stiegler states: "The prosthesis is not a mere extension of the human body; it is the shaping of this body as human" (La *Technicque et le Temps* 162).

CHAPTER II

FRANKENSTEIN:
A MODERN APPROACH TO MANKIND'S DEPENDENCE ON TECHNOLOGY

Mary Shelley was born on August 30, 1797, in London. She was the daughter of feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft and radical philosopher Willian Goldwin. Her mother died at her birth, but left Mary Shelley a legacy of ambivalent rather than contradictory thoughts on feminist and political issues referring to the working classes. She was concerned with the improvement of women's position as members of society and citizens, but she saw it as being related to the fulfillment of women's traditional domestic roles. The thought of William Goldwin was not free from contradictions. He welcomed the French Revolution and fought for extending the French example into England, but always kept great reservation in regard to the entrance of the popular classes or lower orders in politics. Johanna Smith reminds us that Shelley was rereading two of the major works of her parents at the time she was writing *Frankenstein*, and states that her novel was influenced by these ambivalences between revolutionary and reformist impulses (*Biographical and Historical Contexts* 7-9). Mary Shelley met her husband, Percy Shelley, in 1812. Percy was married, but in 1814 they fled to France and Mary became his mistress. They married after the suicide of Percy's wife in 1816. The same year, she started writing *Frankenstein* as a short ghost story.

She first published it, anonymously, in 1818. She returned to England after Percy's death in 1822, reprinted *Frankenstein* in 1823 and devoted herself to publicize her husband's writings and to educate their surviving child. The revised version of *Frankenstein* was printed in 1831 and contains several changes and a preface in which Shelley presents the history of the novel. Shelley wrote a travel book, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817) that contains information on the summer she spent near Geneva, when she wrote *Frankenstein*, and other novels, among which *The Last Man* (1826), an account of the future destruction of the human race by a plague, is still ranked as her best work. Shelley died in 1851.

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There is a huge amount of literature on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. It embraces Marxist criticism, Psychoanalytic criticism, Feminist criticism, Cultural criticism and Reader-Response criticism. These readings multiply the intended messages and meanings of Shelley's novel. Some of them provide clues on the historical context in which *Frankenstein* was written. Some of these readings will be here considered as sources that can help us grasp the meanings of Shelley's novel. I see these readings as guides to my study and as narratives that belong to *Frankenstein*'s master-narrative or symbolic universe.

My reading of Shelley's novel (chapter III) centers on a few basic questions. How has she dealt with the issue of the influence of technology upon culture and humankind? What has she to say in regard to the increasing dependence of mankind upon technology? Why has she chosen to give birth to the first "prosthetic cyborg" in literature – Frankenstein's Creature? I read *Frankenstein* as a modern approach to human dependence on technology and as the cause of a profound technological impact on the definition of the human essence. From this reading, I will proceed to consider

how the imaginary of cyborgs has evolved in contemporary Western society, in general, and in the science fiction genre, in particular; to comprehend how it has shaped our definition of the human and our imagination of the relationship between technology and mankind; and, then, to analyse the power of narratives as instruments of reproduction, challenge and transformation of social structures and cultural models.

I

The different readings of the novel can be classified into two broad categories: those that pay close attention to the historical context within which the novel was written, and those that neglect it. On the one hand, the readings produced according to the closer theoretical references that guide both the French Feminist criticism and the psychoanalytic criticism lack on historical concern and lose most of *Frankenstein*'s historical references. They center on the discussion of issues that transcend Mary Shelley's life and hold universal validity: the distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic orders, the Oedipal crisis, the Father's Law, the androcentric social order and its exclusion of women, the stages of development of mind and so on. On the other hand, readings produced according to the theoretical references provided by British Feminist criticism, Marxist criticism and Cultural Criticism disagree on the aspects of the historical, social and cultural context that they emphasize in their attempts to interpret *Frankenstein*, but they agree that historical references are crucial to fully grasp its messages, its intention and its endurance.

The readings that belong to this second category point to the historical moment that confers meaning to the original writing of *Frankenstein.* Mary Shelley was contemporary of the Age of Revolutions, which was a moment of transition and radical cultural transformation; it was an age in which a new order – marked by industrialization, urbanization, rationalization, liberalism and individualism – was

overthrowing an older order, which was agrarian, rural, enchanted and ruled by tradition and heritage; it was a historical moment of social and cultural turmoil – particularly in Britain – that Mary Shelley experienced as a member of the intellectual elite.

Johanna Smith argues that *Frankenstein* is contaminated by the ambivalence that prevailed among British intellectual elites between revolutionary and conservative impulses "during the years 1789 (the beginning of the French Revolution) and 1832 (the passage of the Reform Bill [in England], which enfranchised sections of the English middle classes for the first time)" (*Biographical and Historical Contexts* 4). She insists that this ambivalence was present on the thoughts of Shelley's parents and is expressed in *Frankenstein.* Johanna Smith (*Cooped Up*) *and* Mary Poovey (*My Hideous Progeny*) discuss the separate spheres doctrine, which split off the social world in two gender related social spaces: the public space is related to manhood and the domestic domain is conceived of as a feminine shelter. Thus, Smith considers that *Frankenstein* discusses the advantages and hazards of the predominance of an old pattern of indebted gratitude or a new pattern of affective protection in the relationships between parents and children. Margaret Homans, in "*Bearing Demons*", discusses the cultural power that the Romantic Quest still held as a worldview and as a guiding model for gender relations. Warren Montag in *The Workshop of the Filthy Creation*, Lee Heller in *Frankenstein and the Cultural Uses of Gothic*, and Ana Claudia Giassone in *O Mosaico de Frankenstein* define the cultural scenario in which Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* in terms of the age of the revolution that shook Europe with the advent of manufactures, the growth of cities and urban population, and the expansion of literacy and school education.

Drawing a picture of the historical context in which Shelley wrote her novel, *The Workshop of Filthy Creation* focuses on the Age of Revolutions and stresses the events of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the British Industrial Revolution, and

how they gave birth to contradictory social forces and conflicting ideological beliefs. These events generated the hegemonic belief that industrialization had put in motion a process in which scientific knowledge, technological development, and the improvement of the condition of mankind were interwoven. Nevertheless, they also opened up an era of social instability and chaos geared by the ambivalent feelings that the new elites nurtured with regard to the industrial working class – namely: a generalized fear in regard to its mobilization (which had been required to overthrow the OId State, but now threatened the new order) and a widespread sense of pity, because of the decrease of the living standards that followed the substitution of men by machinery. Montag also emphasizes that "the progressive artists of Shelley's milieu" were unable to identify with the proletariat and to adopt its point of view; they came to portray it as a monster that causes fear but deserves pity. In this historical context, Montag equals *Frankenstein*'s Creature to the emerging industrial working class and *Frankenstein* is here perceived as an allegory of the entrance of the popular classes in the political scene of the French Revolution.[1]

Meanwhile, Heller stresses three interconnected elements of this cultural scenario as being crucial for the understanding of *Frankenstein.* First, there was the emergence of new theories in regard to the formation of the human character, which defied the paradigms of hereditary and innate features, empowered a view of the human mind as *tabula rasa*, and implied the possibility of controling and creating human personality and conduct. These were related to the philosophical works of Locke and Rosseau. Second and consequently, an increasing role was attributed by social and intellectual elites to education and reading in the shaping of people's lives, in controlling the social groups they conceived of as most vulnerable to the age of social instability and most dangerous if ill-formed – middle-class children, women, and the working class

– and in redefining human nature as a whole. Finally, there was the emergence and popularization of a new kind of fiction – the horror Gothic genre – that developed in response to the extension of literacy to new classes of potential readers: women, schoolboys, and the labor class.

The Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the First Industrial Revolution are also the historical references emphasized in *O Mosaico de Frankenstein.* Giassone understands *Frankenstein* as a result of Shelley's questioning of the age in which she lived and defines this age as "the painful transition of Western society towards modernity" (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein* 42). In this transition, Giassones emphasizes the process of rationalization and disenchantment of the world which were closely related to the Enlightenment and a consequence of both the consolidation of the process of Christianization of Western society and the rise of science and technology, which have reduced the influence that the supernatural dimension – magical practices, pagan rituals, beliefs in witches and devils, curses, benedictions and miracles – have always exercised upon daily life. Giassone questions, however, the conclusion reached by historians Jean Delumeau and Keith Thomas, who propose that rationalization and Christianization worked together to eradicate fear. On the contrary, Giassone argues that fear has been transformed, but remained and has even increased in the face of the wonders science and technology created. Thus, she shows that medicine and anatomy were looked at with distrust, doctors conceived of as charlatans or thieves of corpses. In this context, a wave of fear related with the issue of pre-death burial shook the Nineteenth Century Europe (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein* 47-48). Giassone also exemplifies the terror science and technology generated in Shelley's time, when the social representation of electricity as one of the most terrifying inventions of the time provoked both reverence and fear (O Mosaico de Frankenstein 52-54). Rationalization

and desenchantment of the world, Giassone concludes, did not mean the end of fear. On the contrary, they raised new fears related to the transgression of divine and natural laws among those common people who watched with perplexity the dynamic changes society and the world were experiencing. They remained afflicted by both the loss of references provided by tradition to understand reality and by the impossibility of conciliating religious dogmas and new scientific paradigms. These people, nonetheless, remained unable to make sense of the wonders science creates without making use of the traditional idiom of magic and religion.

Giassone also calls attention to the industrial revolution, the growth of cities, the desintegration of traditional structures of social organization that prevailed in rural settings, and the entrance of the popular classes in politics during the French Revolution. Finally, she stresses the conceptions held throughout this age by British intellectual elites of the natural state, society and the lower classes - namely: their revolutionary and conservative impulses; their support to human rights and liberal governments coupled with their concern with the disorderly, violent and dangerous character of the lower classes; their belief in progress and civilization coupled with their idealization of the noble savage and the values it stands for; their criticism of social injustices coupled with an idealization of traditional values and patterns of social organization, now endangered by industrialization and urbanization (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein* 72-73).

These readings, of course, share the view that the historical context of the novel was a time of transition in matters related to the prevailing mode of economic production (the emergence of industrial capitalism), the dominant social class (the rise of the bourgeoisie), the predominant political ideologies (liberalism), and the hegemonic

worldview. It was also a time of new cultural values and patterns of social organization (rationalism, individualism and the Western technological creed).

II

Despite the consensus as to the historical context, readings of *Frankenstein* disagree with respect to almost every aspect of the novel. They disagree in regard to what is the novel's genre. Lee Heller proposes that Frankenstein is exemplary of late Horror Gothic and, more specifically, Phylosophical Gothicism, while Ana Cláudia Giassone rejects this classification and proposes that Frankenstein is a precursor of the science fiction genre. Thus, Lee Heller argues that Horror Gothic transferred to print oral stories of the supernatural and the sensational, had a controversial cultural status, earned popular approval but hostile reviews from the literary elite, and provided the conventions for Philosophical Gothicism. Philosophical Gothicism referred to a group of novelists who were interested in politics and human psychology, "explored the horrific elements of human personality, and the forces – including education and reading – that goes into their creation", and "offered a kind of scientific study of the making of human beings" (*Frankenstein and the Cultural Uses of Gothic* 329). Ana Cláudia Giassone agrees that Shelley intended to provoke an effect of terror, but she disagrees with the classification of *Frankenstein* as a late exemplary of Horror Gothic. She proposes that Shelley's novel evinces all the characteristics of the science fiction genre. Thus, the novel is a glance at the future that questions the optimism of the prevailing theories of progress. It critically deals with the issue of the relationship between mankind and scientific development, as well as with the consequences of their relationship. It also addresses the issue of the tension between the artificial and the natural, the insertion of the mechanical within the human (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein* 27-38).

Besides, these readings strongly disagree with regard to the values and principles held by Mary Shelley. She successively appears as a proper lady searching for happiness in a domestic life marked by self-denial, a rebel young lady searching for social recognition through acts of self-assertion, a woman divided between juvenile and adult impulses, and a defiant feminist writer. She is described as endorsing conservative views of the society of her age and the social turmoil it faced, as a supporter of a radically liberal heritage, or as a thinker holding ambivalent views and mixing revolutionary and conservative impulses. Thus, Poovey proposes that *Frankenstein* shows that Shelley was a woman divided between her juvenile crave for self-assertion and social recognition through acts of imaginative creation, on the one hand, and her adult view of home as the proper place for women who must believe in self-denial as the proper behavior of women in society, on the other. For Smith likewise, *Frankenstein* holds the same ambivalent position in political issues that characterized the writings of Shelley's parents: a radical defense of individual rights against State and social conventions, a philanthropic sentiment of pity in regard to the miserable conditions of life of the lower classes in industrial cities, and a conservative fear with regard to the dangers to social order that would be represented by the rise, empowerment or even enfranchisement of the lower classes.

Finally, these readings radically disagree with regard to what the novel means and what its major characters symbolize. In the readings I have considered, *Frankenstein* has successively appeared as a debate on the separate spheres doctrine that emerged with the rise of the bourgeoisie as the socially dominant class in late Eighteenth Century Europe; a metaphor of the concerns, fears and pity that the European intellectual elite of the early Nineteenth Century felt in regard to the industrial working class; an expression of the view of man as both a *tabula rasa* and a "noble

savage," and an expression of the concerns with the impact of reading and education on character building of young men, women and the lower classes; a criticism of the Western utopia in regard to progress, science and technology (the "Western technological creed") motivated by fears regarding the loss of humanity amidst the optimism that followed industrialization, which holds, however, utopian elements; a symbol of woman's fate in an androcentric society or a metaphor of the destiny of the working class. The novel appears, therefore, as a comment either on issues of historical or universal relevance; and its major characters and their relationships metaphorically represent diverse social agents, situations, or phenomena. As Giassone points out, the novel is a mosaic.

For Giassone, the question of fear is crucial for understanding *Frankenstein*. She argues that, in *Frankenstein*, fear fulfills the role of triggering a broader and deeper questioning in regard to the years in which Shelley lived, the values and utopias generated by the rationalization and desenchantment of the world, the development of science, and the faster pace of technological progress. This questioning proceeds by pointing out the limits of science, progress and technology, and the risks involved in dehumanizing mankind expressed through the introduction of the idea of the machinic man.[2] The risks that science, technology and man's attempts to exercise rational control over nature bring to mankind are expressed through the monstrosity of the Creature. He is monstrous because he cannot be classified: he is neither human, nor machine; neither natural, nor artificial; neither dead, nor alive; neither completely scientifically produced, nor magically; neither naturally bad, nor socially innocent (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein* 57-58).[3] These rissks are also epressed through the monstrosity of Victor Frankenstein. Indeed, Victor is monstrous insofar as he is unable to control and balance his rationality and his histerical impulses towards the creation of a new being and, further, towards its

elimination. He has a monstruous ambition and craving for knowledge, control over nature, defiance of religious dogma, and social recognition, which are fed by science and technological rationalism themselves and, thus, reveal the risks that science and technological rationalism bring to humanity (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein* 49). In Giassone's view, Victor is even more monstruous than his Creature. The ugliness of the later is only physical, but we cannot avoid to symphatize with his sufferings, his feelings, his initial claims for human symphaty and social acceptance. We cannot avoid to considering him much more human than the men that condemn him because of his physiognomy. We cannot avoid considering him much more human than his creator, who is only able to fear, to hate, and to condemn him (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein* 57-58).

Giassone concludes that *Frankenstein* transfers to the future the doubts raised by its cultural context. Furthermore, as the fear and terror it generates still endure, she proposes that we have not been able to answer the questions Shelley proposed in regard to science and technology, machines, and our human nature. Therefore, although *Frankenstein* is a dated interpretation of the tragic contents of modernity with its industries, railways, cities that rose overnight, machinery that make wonders but can threat and destroy everything, its monster continues to terrorize us, because we have not been able to escape from this demoniac face of modernity.

In Giassone's interpretation, *Frankenstein* becomes a piece of social criticism that questions prevailing values and ideologies; it is a discourse full of skeptcism in regard to the theories of progress and the cult of revolution, which counters the prevailing ideologies; it is a dystopian view of progress, science and technology, which is exemplary of the view and discourse of British conservatives of Shelley's age, who questioned the naïve certainties of progress because they shared a fear: the fear that,

without limits, science and the advance of human omnipotence would endanger mankind (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein* 24-25). However, in its skepticism, social criticism, and ideological dystopia, *Frankenstein* never proposes the destruction of machines and the return to a pre-industrial era. On the contrary, Giassone persuasively argues that the novel contains two utopian elements. The first element that renders utopia possible is related to the De Lacey's family as well as the values of communal life, the ideals of social cohesion and solidarity they stand for. In her treatment of the De Lacey's family, Giassone proposes that "Mary Shelley points out the risks of scientific, industrial and urban development when they are not restrained by the simultaneous development of the structural qualities of communal cohesion among men" (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein* 83-84). The second element that renders utopia possible is related to the late decision of Victor Frankenstein's symmetrical but reversed double: Walton. Giassone persuasively argues that when Walton abandons his enterprise, achieving what Victor was unable to accomplish (i.e., to restrain his ego and to control his crave for personnal accomplishments), he symbolizes Shelley's hopes for the future of mankind (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein* 100). Significantly, the utopias that bring hope to Shelley – who has also a dystopian view of her age – are based on both the conception of the recovering of traditional sociality (the older order) and the conception of the recovering of human control and rational decision-making (the fundaments of the new order and the Western technological creed).

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To this point, I have reviewed the historical context in which Frankenstein was written and some paradigmatic readings that scholars who adhere to different theoretical orientations have made of the novel. I have particularly emphasized the readings that relate the novel to the Age of Revolutions, which suggest that the novel addresses the

social changes that were haunting and frightening the imagination of ordinary people and the intellectual elites – philosophers, social analysts, politicians – of Europe. In the interpretation of the novel that follows, I will emphasize the readings related to the historical events experienced by Shelley. These readings see the novel as an expression of the different values and ideas of the Age of Revolutions. I intend to propose that the novel refers not only to the Age of Revolutions, but also includes a metaphorical representation of the phenomenon of social and cultural transition. It addresses two questions: What is contradictory and paradoxical in moments of transition? What do they provoke on people's mind, views, feelings and attitudes? In my interpretation, to consider *Frankenstein* as a representation of the transitional is a first step to understand what it has to say about mankind's increasing dependence upon technology since the Industrial Revolution.

III

Frankenstein is a novel that deals with transition: its major characters are ambivalent and its meaning may be paradoxical. In other words, Shelley's *Frankenstein* is characterized by ambivalences, conflicting values, multifaceted characters precisely because it is centered on the issue of social and cultural transition. A transition is a passage from a previous to a next stage, place, condition, social position or order, biographical or historical age. It is a passage after which the new replaces the older. Crucially, it is a passage during which the old no longer exists as it had been, the new does not fully exists yet. Therefore, from a social and cultural standpoint, it is a moment during which the older structures and patterns of social organization, the older cultural values, beliefs and references are no longer in effect and the new ones have not been completely established yet. It is the moment in between two different social orders. Universally, theses moments are socially ritualized. Studying rituals of passage

(such as baptisms, marriages, burials), anthropologists have defined these moments of transition as liminal and the people they involve as neophytes. Indeed, they have defined a three stages flow on the rites of passages: an initial stage during which people are separated from their previous condition; a second stage characterized by a condition of limbo, liminality or marginality, during which "people have left one place or state but haven't yet entered or joined the next"; and, a final stage of reintegration to society in a new condition, position or status (*Cultural Anthropology* 242). They have also characterized the liminal period as a social moment in which society is at risk because its structures of ordering the world and its patterns of social classification of people and events do not apply insofar as social hierarchies have been temporarily suspended (all neophytes are equals), and because cultural references have become unstable insofar as values and beliefs are mixed up. Thus "liminal people occupy ambiguous social positions. They exist apart from ordinary distinctions and expectation, living in a time out of time. They are cut off from normal social contacts" (*Cultural Anthropology* 242).
3

The Age of Revolutions that shook the late Eighteenth Century Western Society created a long moment of transition and passage that involved most of the Western society or, at least, of its most prominent and affluent social sectors and nations. During the Age of Revolutions, common people were so shocked with fast pace changes that they looked terrified by scientific and technological inventions meant to rationalize the relationship between man and nature and to provoke the disenchantment of the world. Intellectuals in this period – such as Shelley and her parents – had ambivalent thoughts in regard to the new social order, marked by the presence of science and technology and how it would affect mankind's condition and future; the industrial working class – one of the major "inventions" of the age – provoked mixed feelings and anxieties, inspired

fear and pity. It was during this period of limbo and insecurity, in which people were trying to understand both the demands and advantages of the new social order, and the values and beliefs of the older, that *Frankenstein* was written.

I would suggest that the novel focuses on the transitional or liminal character of the age and argue that the importance of transition in *Frankenstein* is revealed in different ways, all of them related to the new cultural and technological values. In my attempt to understand what the representation of transition has to say about human increasing dependence upon technology, I will consider three questions: the contradictory, ambivalent, and marginal nature of its three central characters, all of them insecure in their travels, which are closely related to science and technology; the resource to the symbology of traveling; and the mixing of things that are ordinarily thought as being distinct, separated and opposed.

*

In *Frankenstein*, three major characters hold ambivalent feelings and contradictory sentiments. Walton dreams with adventures that send him far away from home and human society. Nevertheless, when he actually involves himself in his adventure, he is moved by the desire of being recognized by his personal abilities and merits rather than by the prestige of his family. Thus, he is proud because he renounced ease and luxury and "preferred glory to every enticement that wealth placed in [his] path" (*Frankenstein* 17). And yet, Walton dreams to meet a friend with whom he could share his adventures and feelings. He also writes letters to his sister and, through his narrative, builds cognitive bridges through which she and all of us (readers) -- i.e., society – learn the lessons he teaches.

The Monster has a good nature; indeed, he is both a "noble savage" and a "tabula rasa". Nevertheless, he commits abominable acts of violence upon the

undeserving: the murders of William, Clerval and Elisabeth. He admires and craves for acceptance among men, but nurtures resentment in regard to human society. He is aware of his despicable creation and his monstrousity, but revengeful against those who fear him – "I will revenge my injuries; if I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear" (*Frankenstein* 125). He both hates and loves his creator; he knows Victor has failed him, blames his faults, but assumes his errors and represents Victor's death as the sin that he committed and mostly regrets:

> No guilt, no mischief, no malignity, no misery, can be found comparable to mine. When I run over the frightful catalogue of my sins, I cannot believe that I am the same creature whose thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the beauty and the majesty of goodness.[...]
> You, who call Frankenstein your friend, seem to have a knowledge of my crimes and his misfortunes. But, in the detail which he gave you of them, he could not sum up the hours and months of misery which I endured, wasting in impotent passions. For while I destroyed his hopes, I did not satisfy my own desires. [...]
> But it is true that I am a wretch. I have murdered the lovely and the helpless; I have strangled the innocent as they slept, and grasped to death his throat who never injured me or any other living thing. I have devoted my creator, the select specimen of all that is worthy of love and admiration among men, to misery; I have pursued him even to that irremediable ruin. There he lies, white and cold in death. You hate me; but your abhorrence cannot equal that with which I regard myself (*Frankenstein* 183-184).

In his case, as Lee Heller has pointed out, ambivalence derives from the contradiction between his nature, the social values he admires and the social experience he has:

> What makes the monster's case hopeless is that there is no way to reconcile what he learns from books with what he experiences in his social relations. (...) In this the monster is a symbol of the violent potential of social instability, and of the danger posed by the discontinuity between the ideals that books imagine and the reality that such readers must confront.
> (...) The monster represents the criminal potential of the uncontrolled, perhaps uncontrollable lower classes, formed by the contradictory lessons of social and literary experience (*Frankenstein and the Cultural Uses of Gothic* 337).

Victor is also a contradictory character. He narrates his childhood as a heaven and acknowledges that it was so because of the love, affection and care with which he was provided by his parents, but, from the onset and although he compares himself to a

"father" and his creature to a "son", he thinks of his relationship with his creature in terms of the gratitude the later should owe him. In one word, he brings together patterns of thinking and dealing with parent-child relationships that the Age of Revolutions had clearly separated: the indebted gratitude model from the past and the love-and-caring model for the future. Thus, referring to the new species he was breeding, he concludes: "No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs"[3] (*Frankenstein* 55). He knows he is responsible for the creation of the Monster, but blames the Monster for his monstrosity. He learns from the Monster's confession that his decision to abandon the creature caused the Monster's crimes, but he intends revenge and lacks self-criticism. Victor learns from the Monster that he was good and compassionate, admired the virtues of social life and deprecated the vices of mankind. He also looked for human comprehension, helped other people (among the De Lacey and rescuing the girl who was drawning), and was rejected because of his appearance. He only committed crimes and violent acts after being harmed by society. Nevertheless, poisoned by his desire for revenge the deaths of William and Justine, Victor denies his responsibility for the Monster's acts and cannot comprehend his feeling of revenge. He only in part acknowledges that the Monster is right and feels some compassion for him when they make the pact – "I consent to your demand, on your solemn oath to quit Europe for ever, and every other place in the neighbourhood of man, as soon as I shall deliver into your hands a female who will accompany you in your exile" (*Frankenstein* 127). Victor, of course, will infringe the pact.

*

The main characters of *Frankenstein* are also marginal figures in regard to the society in which they live, and marginality is not only characteristic of liminal periods, but also a condition intrinsically marked by ambivalence. Walton's journey is taken in

isolation from his fellows; he travels with men of lower classes that he regards with prejudice and parental benevolence. Victor's experiments are involved with mystery and kept in secret until he meets Walton; none of his parents and friends learn about the existence of the Monster or Victor's responsibility for his breeding. They die in ignorance. The Monster is quintessentially marginal. He has no place among men. He learns "the strange system of human society," hears of "the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty; of rank, descent, and noble blood." He understands that a man is respected only if he holds "high and unsullied descent united with riches" and, if he lacks on them, he is considered "as a vagabond and a slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profits of the chosen few!" He learns these lessons and he denounces social conventions. Nevertheless, he is aware that men follow them and humanity is mostly defined through them. So, being aware that "of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property" (Frankenstein 106), he tragically asks for the first time: "what was I?" He also learns the difference of sexes, the birth and growth of children, and "the various relationships which bind one human being to another in mutual bonds." Nevertheless, he is aware that he has no friends, no father, no mother, no remembrances of childhood, and then he will repeat the question that reveals his feeling of marginality and ambivalence once more: "What was I?"

As the Monster's answer reveals, the use of the interrogative pronoun "what" (instead of "who") in both questions is not coincidental. On the contrary, it reveals the Monster's sense of himself as both, a thing or object and as a humanlike being:

> I was, besides, endued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they, and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs. When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned? (*Frankenstein* 106)

Thus, his answer states his marginality (and, therefore, his ambivalence – which is the ambivalence of the cyborg species as a whole) in regard to human society, his monstrosity among men. Every character in the novel, including the Monster himself, shares this view: the Monster is monstrous. As Ana Claudia Giassone has argued, the idea of monstrosity is related less to aesthetic evaluations than to the singularity that renders its classification impossible (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein* 9, nota 1). We may add that the idea of monstrosity is also connected to the idea of ambiguity. Like everything that is singular, everything that is ambiguous is impossible to classify. Thus, singular or ambiguous, the figure of the Monster reveals the limits of the prevailing system of classification and the limits of the order of the world it generates. It is, therefore, deeply related with the idea of transition – the idea of a stage, place or condition in which classifications do not apply and the order of the world is temporarily suspended. Monstrosity makes the Monster adequately representative of both what is generally associated with transition and what was being specifically related to the transition represented by the Age of Revolutions.

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Throughout the novel, Shelley makes frequent the use of another ordinary symbol of transition: travels. She not only multiplies the number of travels, but also presents travels as a structuring principle of her novel's plot. Walton, Victor Frankenstein and the Monster have at least this characteristic in common: they are travelers and they wander around. They are neophytes involved in adventurous journeys: Walton's conquest of the pole, Victor's conquest of knowledge and rational control over nature, the Monster's conquest of who he is. They do not know from the onset what they will find at the end of their journeys. At the end, they will not be what they were before.

Thus, Walton was looking for actual adventures and meets the narrative of an adventure in face of which his adventures in the North Sea become pale: the story of the Monster told by Victor. He was expecting to remain isolated and finds a friend. He was searching for personal gratification and social recognition through acts of self-assertion and finds them through an act of self-renunciation and altruism. Victor was also searching for personal gratification and social recognition through acts of self-assertion, but meets personal suffering and promotes the destruction of all the others who are socially significant to his life. He was searching for rational control over nature and human subversion of the laws of destiny (both nature and destiny represented by the irreversible cycle of life and death) and encounters forces he does not control and which guide his life – he meets destiny in the figure of his Creature. He intends to breed a new and fitter species of beings, but comes to a compromise with the preservation of mankind (God's creatures) – so he destroys the monsterette and consciously faces the Monster's revenge. He craves for knowledge, but realizes that ignorance is the condition of happiness. The Monster was seeking to understand what or who he was; he finds the contradiction between his good nature and feelings and his monstrous appearance and social image. He craves for being socially defined, to find his place in society, but discovers that the monstrosity of his origins makes him unclassifiable, uncomprehensible, unacceptable and dangerous to society and mankind. Then, he seeks revenge, but finds himself torn to shreds by its accomplishment.

Surely their travels follow different paths. Travels have a crucial meaning in Victor Frankenstein's life and I shall distinguish his travels from his journey. Since he becomes a grown up man and chooses to pursue his dreams, Victor is always on the move. It is not coincidental that his first departure from home, which he later sees as an omen of his fate, is delayed by his mother's death. On the contrary, departure from

home and mother's death clearly mean a rupture with childhood and Victor's passage from the condition of a child – protected and dependent upon his parents – to manhood – self-responsibility for his actions. This first trip is paradigmatic to the others he makes, because of the ambivalence of feelings that affect him. His sentiments are mixed up: he is afraid because home seclusion and protection had made himself "totally unfitted for the company of strangers," but he is pushed by the ardent desire of acquiring knowledge and the sentiment that he had to enter the world and take a "station among other human beings" (*Frankenstein* 45).

His travels will always be described in terms of a sense of freedom and loss; they will have the emblem of monotony and delirium related with the fevers he feels; when traveling, Victor seems to be suspended in a time beyond time. Whatever happens to him is of lesser importance than what is happening to his beloved ones. He is unaware of the danger, but the reader of the novel comes quickly to connect his travels with a family tragedy in the making. Thus, Victor's trips always present a specter of danger; a tragedy is always related with them: his mother's death, William's murder, and Clerval's assassination. In Victor's life, traveling – i.e., transition – is a dangerous event. While he is traveling, while he is making a passage, his society is destroyed. When he makes a trip, his family world and social life change radically. Travels annihilate the past paradise in which he was born; present life is mean; future is threatened.

His journey reproduces this scheme. It is a complete passage from heaven to hell. Victor starts by breaking the bonds with his paradisiacal family environment. Later he will be nostalgic and he will feel peace only at the mountains and lakes that surround the provincial scenario of his childhood. Meanwhile, the process of growing into manhood makes him to leave his home, to come to town, to defy God and nature, to

create the Monster (by creating the creature and abandoning it) that will hunt him,

world to fall apart without being able to do whatever is needed to protect and preserve it. He loses most of what he cares for; he loses his past and he keeps secret with regard to the reason of his misery. It is a quite anti-social phase of his life; he remains alone and isolated; he only chats with the Monster, who is as isolated as himself. They make a pact through which both will be able to come back to society and have a future; but, then, Victor re-encounters society and mankind through an act of sudden awareness and personal sacrifice. He does not protect the word he gave for his anti-social fellow, destroys the monsterette, condemns Clerval and Elisabeth (friendship and family) to destruction, and both lose their future in society. Like the Monster, Victor Frankenstein has no one special to care for. He cares for mankind as a whole and dies as altruistically as he has egoistically lived.

The Monster's also portrays his search for an identity as a trip. He awakes, is abandoned and immediately flees the town in which he was created and repelled. He finds himself in the midst of the forest. There he becomes aware of his senses, feelings, body and life, but he is an urban made cyborg rather than an animal or a primitive human being. His needs cannot be provided by wilderness and nature. Perhaps he is noble, perhaps he is monstrous, but he is definitely not a savage. He needs to be nurtured and to be sheltered. He leaves the forest and finds the first human made structure he remembers: the small hut of the old shepherd – significantly a transitional place between the isolation of the wilderness and the social world. He does not care that the old man fled terrified, he eats his food and sleeps. He arrives to a rural village that amazes him, but whose dwellers are terrified by his presence and attack him. He flees to the open country and takes refuge in the hovel beneath the De Lacey's cottage.

There, he will finally meet society, learn its good values, and know who he is. Thus, he went through stages from forest to shepherd's ground, to cultivated fields, and to peasant villages. He left nature to enter society and to be repelled by society. He was condemned to be socialized without fully entering or being accepted by society. He relates to society through a hole in the wall of the De Lacey's cottage: near but segregated, present but unperceived, there but paradoxically not completely there.

What society is this that the Monster admires? I agree with Giassone that the Monster considers that the De Laceys have taught him the good values of a traditional and rural way of life, the solid social references provided by an ancient social order and a stable pattern of social organization. Nevertheless, I disagree from her description of the De Laceys as exemplary of this traditional pre-revolutionary rural society. On the contrary, they are an urban upper class family trapped in a rural setting because of deceiving and betrayal. In this sense, the De Lacey parallels the Monster, because they are as dislocated as he is from their original setting. Besides, they are not happy with their conditions of life in the field. What matters, however, is that the Monster thinks the De Laceys represent the best human and social values he has learnt from the good books he read, and he hopes they will accept him by who he thinks he is and in spite of the appearance and origins he knows he has. He expects they (the good society) will give him the identity and the social place he deserves for his good nature and feelings.

As his monstrosity is abhorred, the Monster learns that he has no place in human society. Through stages he has come from the animal who lives in the wilderness to the humanlike being that craves for companionship and understanding and back again to the wilderness. No wonder he burns the De Lacey's cottage to the ground. Thus, the Monster is in the move anew. Now he travels to fulfill his revenge against his creator. He travels "only at night, fearful of encountering the visage of a human being"

(*Frankenstein* 121). The gunshot that wounds him after he saved the life of the girl who had fallen on the stream corroborates his marginality, and he vows "eternal hatred and vengeance to all mankind" (*Frankenstein*122). Human aggressions have finally rendered the Monster monstrous.

However, when he meets Victor Frankenstein, he asks for comprehension and forgiveness. He had killed William and framed up Justine. He wants Victor to understand his deeds, to accept his responsibility for them, to keep his promise to give him a mate, and to trust that he will leave mankind in peace because he is aware that he does not belong to human society, but to the wilderness. Victor does believe him, for a while; but he does not deliver the monsterette. Revenge is accomplished. Elisabeth is murdered, the future of Victor is destroyed, and both Victor and the Monster are condemned to be the only reason for each other's life. Destiny is fulfilled and the Monster re-encounters his good nature after Victor's death. Having no more reasons to live, he vows to die. The silence of the author in regard to his actual death transfers this decision to the readers, who might understand it as both necessary and unjust.

Among the main characters, Walton is the one who is involved in the most conventional journey: he is going to conquer the pole or to die! Nevertheless, if Walton travels because he is moved by a desire for knowledge, self-fulfillment, and social recognition, he departs from his origins, but he does not want to lose completely the bonds with them. He writes letters to his sister and only family member alive. No matter how far away from human society he intends to go, he is not renouncing society and he makes a narrational effort to keep in touch with family. It is a narrational effort to preserve his ties with the world he comes from. He conceives of traveling as adventurous and risky, but his travel implies a return. Society remains referential and unscathed. Meanwhile, his travel brings him something he does not expect, he has

never had before, but he has always longed for: a friend, a man with whom he feels intimacy, communion and equality (as we saw, defining characteristics of the neophyte in the liminal period). He will lose his friend and he will be back to society, becoming a new man. He is no longer the mirror of the early Victor Frankenstein, who craves for more than human powers, but a mirror of the late Victor Frankenstein, who dares to face the Monster's rage only to protect mankind. As Giassone points out, Walton comes back to give hope to mankind; a hope related to men's capacity to be in control of their ambition and impulses, acts and creations. Of course, this is a hope that embodies a profound ambivalence with regard to technology, science and progress as both a threat and a perfect salvation.

*

The importance of transition and ambivalence is finally expressed insofar as whatever is ordinarily conceived of as separated and opposite, *Frankenstein* brings closer and mixes together: noble origins and humble living conditions, rural and urban life, science and magic, reason and mystery. Thus, women of noble or affluent origins – as Caroline, Elisabeth and Justine – are encountered and rescued from humble homes and miserable situations to which they do not belong and which they do not deserve. Furthermore, when the Monster meets the De Laceys, they are living in a humble cottage in the countryside, as rural laborers, but the old man was "descended from a good family in France, where he had lived for many years in affluence, respected by his superiors, and beloved by his equals. His son was bred in the service of his country; and Agatha had ranked with ladies of the highest distinction," and "they had lived in a large and luxurious city, called Paris, surrounded by friends, and possessed of every enjoyment which virtue, refinement of intellect, or taste, accompanied by a moderate fortune, could afford" (*Frankenstein* 107). In short, as their unknown guest and

apprentice, the De Laceys are urbanites exiled in the countryside. The De Lacey family and the Monster mean a penetration of the rural by the urban, and it is not merely coincidental that rural dwellers cannot comprehend the Monster's gestures of kindness, feel terrified in his presence, and react violently. In this sense, the Monster seems to represent the new urban, industrial, and progressive world that – according to Giassone – ordinary people of rural origins and references face with perplexity, astonishment and terror.

Finally, Victor's thirst for rational knowledge and control upon natural laws always mix elements of different and opposite realms or categories of the system of social classification that prevailed in the age. Victor learns both the earthly-based modern sciences of an enlightened age and the ancient chimerical philosophical theories of Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus. He is trapped by the secular and the disenchanted world that science announced. Hence, after his meeting with professor Krempe, Victor states: "the ambition of the enquirer seemed to limit itself to the annihilation of those visions of which my interest in science was chiefly founded. I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth" (*Frankenstein* 46). Science ultimately forces Victor to meet his fate. He learns that the modern sciences – curiously sciences that should have promoted the rationalization and desenchantment of the world – have penetrated "into the recesses of nature" and have shown "how she works in her hiding places"; they have "ascended into the heavens, discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows." Thus, Victor will choose to return to his ancient studies and to "pioneer a new way, [to]

explore unknown powers, and [to] unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation" (*Frankenstein* 49).

Between science and alchemy, reason and mystery, desenchanted and enchanted worlds, Krempe and Waldman, Victor makes no choice. He brings both together and builds his creature. Although the process of breeding the monster and the monsterette is never fully described, I learn from Victor's description that it involved a public stage and a hidden one; the latter can be divided in two phases: the phase of discovery of the causes of generation and life and the phase of creation of a living being. The early public stage is plainly rational, technological and scientific; Victor discovers "improvements of some chemical instruments" that render him "great esteem and admiration at the university" *(Frankenstein* 53). In this sense, he is a scientist. Nevertheless, he attributes the discovery of the causes of generation and life and his capability to "bestowing animation upon lifeless matter" to a miracle – i.e., a mysterious element. Furthermore, he is reserved about this subject in spite of the eagerness, the wonder and the hope he observes in Walton's eyes, and he argues that he will keep the secret because of the danger involved with the acquirement of such knowledge.[4] Victor, who craved for knowledge, praises ignorance as happiness: "how much happier that man is who believes that his native town to be the world, that he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow" (*Frankenstein* 55).

Victor's early discovery involves mysteries and miracles; his science engenders dangers; his knowledge requires secrecy and is better forgotten. It is the consequence of the application of his discovery that changes Victor's mind. The process of building the being of gigantic stature is never revealed; but we know that Victor adheres to technical, rational and scientific attitudes and procedures:

> I prepared myself for a multitude of reverses my operations might be incessantly baffled, and at last my work be imperfect; yet when I considered the

> improvement which every day takes place in science and mechanics, I was encouraged to hope my present attempts would at least lay the foundations of future success" (*Frankenstein* 55).

Nevertheless, secrecy involves these procedures with an aura of mystery and both Victor's and the Monster's recollections are surrounded by an aura of horror. We know that Victor has described it step by step and was horrified with it through the Monster's narrative and because, when Victor is trying to reproduce it for building the monsterette, he describes it as a filthy, horrible, irksome process to which he was early engaged because, as he puts it, "a kind of enthusiastic frenzy had blinded [him] to the horror of [his] employment", but which now, in cold blood, made his "heart often sickened at the work of [his] hands" (*Frankenstein* 139). The process is so horrible that the Monster himself is disgusted with his accursed origin:

> The whole detail of that series of disgusting circumstances which produced it, is set in view: the minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given, in language which painted your own horrors, and rendered mine indelible. I sickened as I read. "Hateful day when I received life!' I exclaimed in agony. 'Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow-evils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and abhorred' (*Frankenstein* 113).

Victor's creature, of course, is monstrous because ambivalent – half a thing technologically built, half a human being; half generated by science, half generated by miraculous powers; half modern and disenchanted, half archaic and mysterious; the highest conquer of civilization and the wildest beast. Victor's experiment and his creature reveal Shelley's conception of science as mysterious and, therefore, as less scientific than it intended to be; it reveals her conception of science as able to engender dangers and, as I shall see soon, her conception of these dangers as threatening to mankind.

IV

Frankenstein is a story of transition, in general, and the transition represented by the Age of Revolutions, in particular. The novel dramatizes the transition to modernity and industrial society and the perplexity of those experiencing it. As a representation of mankind's dependence upon technology in the last centuries, the novel deals with a few important themes: (1) the generation of the first prosthetics cyborg in literary history; (2) the focus on the limits between the human and the mechanical; (3) the representation of technology as adversarial to mankind; and, (4) the presentation of dystopian views of technology, science and progress amidst a cultural universe and a historical moment that comprise the early phase of the hegemony of the Western technological creed.

The first element – the generation of one prosthetics cyborg – justifies my interpretation of *Frankenstein* as Shelley's attempt to represent the transitional ambivalences of the age in which she lived. Shelley chose to represent her transitional age through two men who craved for social recognition of their scientific achievements and, especially, through the Monster who brings them together and changes their destiny. This choice is not coincidental. On the contrary, it serves to represent and to criticize the Age of Revolutions and the emergence of Modernity. Victor and Walton are men who aim to go beyond the limits traditionally imposed on mankind, but ultimately monstrosity is their major achievement. For both repentance is necessary as a condition that makes possible a return to mankind.

The Age of Revolutions was a turning point in the history of Western societies. It was the takeover of the Ancient Regime, its beliefs and values, its worldview, and its traditional referential guidances. The universe was re-centered and the sources of truth and knowledge changed. Man took the place of God, reason replaced belief, science

replaced religion, and human will replaced human compliance. Last but not least, a sense of human mastery and control over nature and its forces replaced the bondages of fate. New limits were set for human reason, will, capacity of production, freedom, desires for power and control, and these new limits were deeply related to rationality, science, technology and machines. Indeed, machines in particular, technology and science, in general, were major determinants of the expansion of the limits of the human for men who were entering Modernity and, as we have also seen, throughout the Age of Revolutions, machines, in particular, technology and science, in general, achieved a major importance in human life because they defined the new horizons for mankind.

Frankenstein does more than state and represent the limits of Modern Man. Through the figure of the Monster, the process of his breeding, and Victor's repentance, achieved through Walton's abandonment of his endeavor, *Frankenstein* criticizes the dangers and ambivalences of technology and machines. The novel suggests that they amount to a threat to mankind, and reveals a conception of human beings as hostile to machines. Finally, the novel points to the path mankind must follow to avoid the dangers of technology.

No matter how important machines, technology and science became in the Age of Revolutions, they remained ambivalent and frightening for most people at least throughout the early stages of Modernity. Machines, technology and science were able to promote material wealth as well as social injustice, good as well as evil. They filled people with wonder, perplexity and terror. Electricity is the best example of these early ambivalences towards technology. An invisible natural force, it could make good and evil things occur (from the lighting of a lamp to the killing of a man), but it could not be seen. Visible in its effects and invisible in its working, electricity was both scientific

and mysterious. Throughout the Age of Revolutions and the early stage of Modernity, science, technology and machines, in general, shared this ambivalence of meaning.

The Monster dramatizes both the expansion of the limits of the human through science and technology and the risks and dangers involved in the use of technology. Both the Creature and the process of his generation are critical issues in the transition to Modernity, because they suggest the ambivalence and perplexity that characterized the Age of Revolutions, question the consequences of the historical process of redefinition of the borders that had traditionally defined mankind, and point to the risks related to their crossing. The fabrication of the monster implies a criticism of scientific modernity. The Monster Victor has created is half man, half machine. Better, the Monster is man made as a machine or commodity, but replicates man's process of development of mind, education, cravings and feelings. The Monster is a cyborg – a crossover of the boundary between nature and artifact, human and machine – whose generation is related to science and technology, especially in that his generation involves the use of electricity (with its aura of mystery and science).

I have already shown how adequate the choice of a monster is as representative of transitional ages in which cultural references are lost, blurred, or mixed up, criteria of social classification and comprehension of beings, events and phenomena are temporarily suspended, and ambivalence prevails. Ambivalence is also characteristic of cyborgs. Choosing to create a monster that is a cyborg, Shelley not only finds a precise representation of the ambivalences that characterize any transitional age, but she also reveals and renders problematic the only principle of social classification that the Age of Revolutions had left unscathed: the discontinuity between the human and the machine.

Like any cyborg, the Monster erases the distance between man and machines. As Bruce Mazlish has pointed out, the actual erasure of this discontinuity is a recent phenomenon. Indeed, it is an erasure still in the making in our cyber-age. But *Frankenstein*'s Monster is an imaginative or literary presage of such an erasure. He announces its possibility and, crucially, he does so in a way that makes it horrifying and dangerous. In doing so, he reveals the way the Nineteenth Century conceived of the relationship between mankind and technology. In the man/machine relationship, the two sets of value are exclusive: a human being could not be a machine and vice-versa.

The Monster stands for a criticism of Modernity and of the Western Technological Creed because his existence or, at least, the possibility of his existence is thought of as a risk and a danger that the increasing reliance and dependence upon science and technology brings to humanity. Two facts in the novel deserve particular attention. First, there are three reasons that make the Monster as a cyborg successively to appear monstrous and terrifying to his Modern creator. Secondly, these reasons add their effects together and bring a change on the beliefs, behavior and attitudes of the Monster's Modern creator.

From the moment the Monster opens his eyes, he scares his creator because he erases the discontinuity between the human and the machine that the Age of Revolutions had emphasized in its redefinition of the human. By bringing together what should remain apart, the Monster produces a blurring of frontiers that threatens to destroy the very concept of humanity.

Later, from the moment the Monster starts to haunt and to destroy Victor's life, he becomes terrifying to his Modern creator for another reason. Now he is scary not only as a result of his ambivalent and disturbing nature; he is scary also because he intends to take charge, to be in control, to subdue the man who created him. This form

of terror reveals that the discontinuity between the human and the machine involves a hierarchy as well as a classification. Human and machines are not only different or opposite; they should also be conceived as being in a relationship in which machines are subordinated to man. When the Monster – the artifact – starts his revenge, Victor – the Modern man – fears him and cannot put an end to his deeds. On the contrary, Victor finds himself in the position of a man who has to comply with the demands of his artifact and has to work for him. Modern man has become the slave of his creature and the hierarchy conceived of by Modernity is reversed. Hence the relationship between Victor and the Monster, the claims and threats the later makes, and the fact that Victor has to comply with them, bring up the specter that science and technology can breed a new world in which machines would seize control.

Finally, from the moment in which Victor complies with the Monster's demand for a companionship and starts the filthy process of creation of the Monster's companion, the Monster becomes horrifying to his Modern creator for another but still complementary reason. Now, the Monster becomes the half machine, half human being, the prosthetic cyborg who brings not only the specter of a world in which machines seize control and power and submit mankind, but also the specter of a world in which machines are endowed with the demiurgean power of creating and breeding themselves, become fully independent from mankind, and can move a final war against mankind. It is the specter of a world in which the demiurgean power that the Age of Revolutions transferred from God to His creatures would be seized by the creatures of these lesser gods: men. It is the specter of a world Victor cannot accept. Thus, Victor suddenly becomes altruistic to the point of sacrificing his hope, happiness and future, his science and wisdom. It is the specter of this world that will definitely reverse the

perspective and the endeavors of the Modern man, causing both Victor's and Walton's repentance.

From the perspective of a study of the representations of the human dependence upon technology, Victor's dilemma during the process of creation of the female monster, his awakening to the scope of the terror he was creating, his transformation from selfish to socially concerned man, and his final decision to "tear to pieces the thing" are the climax of *Frankenstein.* Moved by the Monster discourse, Victor has worked on the creation of the monsterette "with a tremulous and eager hope." Suddenly, however, he is struck by a revelation:

> I sat one evening in my laboratory; the sun had set, and the moon was just rising from the sea; I had not sufficient light for my employment, and I remained idle, in a pause of consideration of whether I should leave my labour for the night, or hasten its conclusion by an unremitting attention to it. As I sat, a train of reflection occurred to me, which led me to consider the effects of what I was now doing. Three years before I was engaged in the same manner, and had created a fiend whose unparalleled barbarity had desolated my heart, and filled it for ever with the bitterest remorse. I was now about to form another being of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighbourhood of man, and hide himself in deserts; but she had not; and she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation. They might even hate each other; the creature who already lived loathed his own deformity, and might he not conceive a greater abhorrence for it when it came before his eyes in the female form? She also might turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man; she might quit him, and he be again alone, exasperated by the fresh provocation of being deserted by one of his own species.
>
> Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I a right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations? I had before been moved by the sophisms of the being I had created; I had been struck senseless by his fiendish threats; but now, for the first time, the wickedness of my promise burst upon me; I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace at the price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race.
>
> I trembled [...] and trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged. The wretch saw me destroy the creature on whose future existence

> he depended for happiness, and, with a howl of devilish despair and revenge, withdrew (*Frankenstein* 140-141).

At this climatic moment, the Monster becomes frightening to Victor essentially because he intends to become able to reproduce himself and to become equal to man. From the Monster's perspective, no matter how far in the wilderness he would live with his companion, having a mate would awake the best feelings and sentiments he had learnt from the ideal narratives of social life. A mate would make him human. This hope and belief are the sophisms that move Victor to comply with his demands. Nevertheless, when Victor reflects upon the future, the generation of the female monster becomes scary precisely because she would provide the Monster with the power of breeding a new race that would constitute a double, a challenge, a threat, and a natural contender to mankind. The monsterette would provide to the Monster with the last requirement he lacks to expand his power to the point of the full emulation of mankind: the ability to generate other beings like himself rather than human feelings and values.

As machines were seen as opposite to the human, and technology was feared as an opponent to mankind, the cyborg with the power of breeding other beings of its own species appears as modern man's worst nightmare. When Victor destroys the Monster's mate, he not only denies the Monster the right and the power to replicate human feelings, sentiments and life, but he also denies him the right and the power to become independent from mankind and to seize definitive control upon his destiny. He accepts his personal curse to save mankind. Indeed, when he tears to pieces the monsterette, he renounces his early endeavor to become Godlike and he completes his journey – his passage – back to human society. He becomes aware of social problems, announces Walton's return, and defines the hopes of mankind in a Modern world: man must remain in control of his creatures; machines must remain at his service.

V

The reading I have proposed has as its central concern the way Shelley's *Frankenstein* dealt with the issue of the influence of technology upon culture and humankind, exploring how it portrayed the emergence of this primitive "prosthetics cyborg" – the Monster. I read *Frankenstein* as a modern approach to human dependence on technology. I see the novel as an early answer to the increasing dependence of mankind to technology, and the hopes and fears it awakens.

In my reading, I propose that while Victor's and Walton's endeavors state the new limits set by Modernity to mankind, the breeding of the Monster criticizes the a-critical euphoria and optimism with which these phenomena were conceived of by the emerging but already prevailing ideology – the Western technological creed. The conception of a Monster being created through science and technology introduces an element of criticism, doubt, concern and fear in regard to both the new limits imposed on mankind and to the euphoria that followed the Age of Revolutions with regard to man's control over nature, the inevitability of progress and civilization, and the advantages of technical evolution and scientific development. In doing so, *Frankenstein* sheds light on the perspective of the iintellectual elites in relation to Western society, and its increasing dependence and reliance upon rationality, science and technology. It shows that this perspective was ambivalent. It was shaped by both the utopia of the Western Technological Creed – the belief on material progress, on the evolution of mankind towards civilization, on the emancipating role of science and technology – and a dystopian view of progress, Reason, science and technology – in which machines might become opponents to mankind and capable of breeding other machines.

In the novel, as I have suggested, this double allegiance to dystopian and utopian views produces radical instability and ambivalence. The Monster appears monstrous to modern men precisely because he brings together what they think has to remain apart: the human and the machine. And his breeding is dystopian because dangerous to mankind – they bear the frightening threat of machines able to seize the control man should keep upon them and, worse, to create new machines that would contend with mankind. As symbol of these threats, the scientifically and technologically manufactured Monster condemns science and technology. Nevertheless, through the decisions and fate of both Victor and Walton, Shelley suggests that the way out of this dilemma rests on the possibility that human beings have of reencountering the good values of society. Not surprisingly, throughout the novel, these good values are held, cared for and supported by the Monster himself. Victor and Walton, in fact, only find them at the end of their passage and because of the terror they faced throughout their passage.

How this view of the relationship between mankind and technology has changed from Modernity to Post-Modernity, from *Frankenstein* to *The Matrix* is the object of the next chapter. Indeed, through the comparison between *Frankenstein* and *The Matrix*, I intend to consider how the imaginary of cyborgs has evolved, how it has shaped our sense of humanity and our imagination of the relationship between technology and mankind. I also intend to be able to analyze the power of narratives as instruments of reproduction, challenge and transformation of social structures of power and of hegemonic cultural models.

NOTES:

[1] Johanna M. Smith supports this position (Biographical and Historical Contexts 15-17). She sees the association between the Monster of Frankenstein and the working class as explanatory of the ambivalence between revolutionary and conservative impulses that characterizes Shelley's *Frankenstein*. This issue is considered in more detail, below.

[2] Giassone argues that science was involved in the early Nineteenth Century with the construction of automatons and states that automatons were source of great fear among the population (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein*, 54). She also refers to other literary works of the same period – such as Blake's poem The Tiger – that addressed the issue of the social concern and fear that involved the figure of the automaton and shared Shelley's perspective of a fundamental contradiction between industrial, technological and scientific progress towards a richer world, on the one hand, and moral progress towards more justice in human relations, on the other. She points out that Blake's poem represents the process of industrialization as both a magnificient and a perverse phenomenon and emphasizes the risk of mechanization (or desumanization) of all human relationships (*O Mosaico de Frankenstein* 74-79).

[3] In this sense, the central statement on Johanna Smith's *Cooped Up* is quite accurate. By comparing the pedagogies followed by Victor's parents and by Victor in relation to the Monster, Shelley seems to be debating the issue of good and bad

pedagogies and confronting the pattern of indebted gratitude with the pattern of parental affection.

[4] Indeed, there is no reference to how Victor bestows animation upon lifeless matter, except for those presented at the preface Shelley wrote for the 1831 edition of the novel and for the narration of the terrible thunderstorm Victor watched as a child (*Frankenstein* 41).

CHAPTER III

MATRIX:

A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH TO MANKIND'S DEPENDENCE ON TECHNOLOGY

In Chapter II, I have proposed that, as a modern approach to mankind's dependence upon technology, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* dramatizes concerns related with the erasure of the discontinuity between the human and the machine. The novel heavily criticizes man's arrogance and illusion of omnipotence; includes both utopian and dystopian views of progress, science and technology; reveals concerns in regard to artifacts and machines that hold the power to create other artifacts and machinery – thus, Victor Frankenstein denies to his creature and Mary Shelley denies to her cyborg, in particular, and to machines, in general, the demiurgean power that man has attributed to Gods and to himself; and portrays machines as opponents to mankind and technology and as a danger to human essence. *The Matrix* addresses these questions from a different perspective.

I

In Chapter I, I argued that the overwhelming dependence of our contemporary post-modern society upon technology changed human beings into cyborgs and our identities into terminal identities (to recover Scott Bukatman's expression). Utopian and dystopian views of the information, digital and electronic technologies seem to agree on this respect. Their initial agreement with regard to the cyborgization of the human being, its society, and culture spurs,

however, problematic views of: (1) the forms of sociability in which we can now engage, (2) our capacity to protect individual freedom, independence of mind and will in face of the new structures and strategies of the exercise of power to which we are submitted within society, and (3) our capacity to remain human. On the one hand, dystopian views argue that our society has become the realm of the spectacle in virtue of the operation of highly developed technologies of information and communication, and we have become imprisoned within the spectacle. Becoming cyborgs, we become "buttonheads".[1] On the other, utopian views suggest that the new technologies have enabled cyber-human beings to engage in new forms of techno-sociability that defy the power of the media. Becoming cyborgs, we also become "hackers" or "cyberpunks".[2]

On the one hand, and according to Scott Bukatmann's review of the major literature on the issue of the social impacts of mass communication and information technologies, the dystopian point of view conceives of the society in which we live as a social world in which we have lost the sense of the difference between what is real and what is simulation.[3] Indeed, "what we regard as reality stands revealed as a construction – a provisional and malleable alignment of data" (*Terminal Identity* 30). The concepts of "spectacle" and "reality" have become indistinguishable, because "reality has moved inside an electronic nonspace" (cyber-space), society has become the mirror of television, and individuals have lost their ability to distinguish image from reality, have surrendered themselves to the spectacle, and have become addicted to images. Furthermore, the society in which we live looks like a social world that only exists as "a proliferation of semiotic systems and simulations which increasingly serve to replace physical human experience and interaction." Simulations have become more real, more familiar, more authoritative, and more satisfying than physical reality itself. "It is the onslaught of images, the bombardment of signals. The pervasive domination by, and addiction to, the image" that "might be regarded as a primary symptom of terminal

identity" (*Terminal Identity* 26). Therefore, I find that we are ourselves terminal beings, plugged in our technological devices of information and un-communication. Wired-up, addicted to information, spectacles and simulacra, we have become "buttonheads".

On the other hand, the new utopianism proposes that spectacular controls are not unquestionable and alienation is not necessary.[4] On the contrary, technology has managed to provide mankind with a new space – cyberspace – in which human beings can escape spectacular controls and can expand their human essence. The acceptance of this proposal only requires the awareness of the human character of the processes of artificialization of nature and virtualization of reality, and the abandonment of traditional conceptions of the separation between nature and artifacts, mankind and technology. Becoming netcyborgs, men are becoming hackers. They remain human because their relationship with technology is one of synergy (rather than one of dependence), in which they socially appropriate and take control of technology. Therefore, the new utopianism sees technology as the condition for the appearance of a new form of humanity.

In his *War of the Worlds*, Mark Slouka sees cyberspace as both a positive and a negative technology. He argues that recent computerized technology has provoked a growing separation from reality and has destroyed the old world in which we, as a collectivity, had a place within an actual local community and a connection to a particular physical landscape. He claims that computerized technology has become the real force behind a general trend toward massive abstraction from reality and alienation from the local. He concludes, in short, that [1] supersonic speed, if not in transportation, at least in communication, divorces us from the real landscape and community in which we live, and [2] that computers induce hallucination and create a strange nonplace beyond the computer screen in which people are increasingly preferring to live, to choose their peers, and to establish their relationships. The name of this nonplace is Cyberspace.

Slouka, however, also claims that cyberspace promotes an escape from the traditional limitations of the human life: space and time. Freeing human beings from their physical circumstances, cyberspace has also liberated humans from their bodies and has made them "to value quickness of mind over beauty, wit over physical power, the content of our characters over the color of our skin". Thus, in his view, cyberspace has freed individuals from the obligation of presenting the appearance of a unified personality, which is required by the primary community of local neighborhood, and has allowed them to play different identities, blurring the boundaries "between self and other, between the imagined world and the sensual one, between reality and illusion". Furthermore, Slouka emphatically proposes that cyberspace has also blurred the traditional boundary between animal and mechanical qualities by connecting the human nervous system to a computer and has transformed the proper computer user into a cyborg: half man, half computer, the unbreakable synthesis of the man and machine.

What kind of relationship between mankind and the technologies of the spectacle of late Twentieth Century is portrayed in the Wachowski Brothers' film The Matrix? What kind of cyborgs are we: buttonheads or cyberpunks? Proesthetics, interpretive, or net-cyborgs? These are the crucial questions I will be dealing with in this chapter.

II

The Matrix was written and directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski (who have previously been writers of the *Marvel Comics*) and produced by Joel Silver (producer of The Lethal Weapon and Die Hard series) for the Warner Brothers Studios. It was shot in Sidney, Australia; released on April 2nd, 1999 in the United States and then worldwide. It became a blockbuster, earning more than one hundred million in the U.S. market alone and receiving dozens of awards for its special effects. Since then, Warner Brothers Studios keeps an official web site of the film, which contains behind the scenes information, information on cast and

crew, interviews with cast and crew, a photo gallery and trailers of the film, a chat archive, a list of the awards the movie has received, information on the studio, samples of the storyboards, and a gateway for comic books sale and computer games.[5] Other unofficial sites bring information and critical reviews of the film.[6]

The official web site describes the plot of the film as follow:

> What if reality was false and your nightmares were true? Is the present the past and the future happening now? Thomas Anderson begins suspecting these questions. Anderson is a young man trying to live his life in the hustle and bustle of your typical modern-day metropolitan city. He has good friends, a loving family and ambitions to succeed in his job - working for the multi-national computer company 'METACORTECHS'. But lately he has been plagued by a nightmare, a horrific dream of himself being physically wired against his will into a vast futuristic computer system – and every night he wakes up screaming at the point the electrodes pierce into his brain. As the dreams continue, his life suddenly begins taking a strange turn – most surrounding a leather clad woman whom seems to be determined to find something in the corporation. Anderson now begins having doubts about reality. Is he really here in a present day city, or is he wired up with millions of others into the massive 'Matrix' in the future – all blissfully unaware of where they really are? If the latter is true then how and why is he there? Who is he really? Is everyone else around him trapped like he is, or are they just computer projections? And most important of all – Who put him there and what will they do if they realize he suspects the truth? (http://www.whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com)

This description is somewhat inaccurate. First, it reduces Neo to Thomas Anderson. *The Matrix*'s hero is not portrayed in the film as a technocratic employee; he is also a hacker. Secondly, it reduces Neo's adventures in the real world to Thomas Anderson's nightmares. By converting Neo into Thomas Anderson, this summary takes the reality experienced by Thomas as real and sees the reality experienced by Neo as merely Thomas Anderson's nightmare and/or delusion. In establishing this discontinuity between reality and fiction, the summary occludes what the film has of most intriguing, as well as the references it proposes in regard to our society and way of life. It reinforces the principles, values, beliefs and utopia on which rests the Western technological creed. To conceive and to present Neo's world – a world in which machines seized control of mankind by inducing a collectively shared illusion,

thus putting it to work in behalf of their own agenda – as a delusional or nightmarish element of Thomas Anderson's world essentially means to dismiss the significance of this world.

*

Inaccurate as it is, this official description of the plot of *The Matrix* is neither arbitrary nor absurd. The experiment in reader-response criticism I conducted with my students is relevant in this context. Their response to the film is congruent with the Warner Brothers Studios' description of its plot. Thus, before considering the reasons that led me evaluate this description as inaccurate, I will briefly consider the results of this experiment.

Thirty-one undergraduate students participated in this experiment. We watched the film together and debated how it defines three relationships: (1) the relationship between reality and virtual spectacles in the film, (2) the relationship between the fictional world of the narrative and our real world, and (3) the relationship between human beings and machines. Initially, my students diverged in regard to the relationship between reality and virtual spectacles and the borderline that separates them. Most of them consider the interior set of the Nebuchadnezzar (Morpheus' hovercraft), the gutters in which it navigates, and the power plant in which human beings are wired up as being the real world of the film, the matrix being the virtual one. Nevertheless, a representative number of my students (8 out of 31) answered that the real world could only be the city in which human beings have hairs instead of holes in their skulls. In their view, to see as reality the gutters in which the few human beings find refuge and the power plants in which the multitude of human beings remain alienated, as power sources for working of the machines, is unthinkable. One could perhaps see this perception as ideologically conservative: to be human is to walk in flesh and blood on city streets, whereas to be a cyborg is to be a machine.

Besides, there was also some discrepancy in their views of the relationship between the fictional world of the narrative and our real world. Most of the students agreed with the view of the matrix portrayed by the official description of the film's plot. They saw the

narrative as delusional – a kind of dream or a fiction with no links with reality. They thought this fiction was a hypothesis quite impossible in both the present and the near future. They justified this evaluation in terms of the unreality of the conception of machines that think independently, seize control of the world and dominate mankind. They argued that in spite of all recent advances in digital technology and artificial intelligence, machines would always be limited and vulnerable to the intervention of the men who programmed them. They rejected the notion of a self-sufficient machine and, principally, the conception of a spectacle which is so overwhelmingly persuasive and powerful that it is able to make every human being to share its illusions as well and to dream, see, perceive and feel the virtual as actual. A few of them (2 out of 31) established a relationship between the narrative and the reality we experience, making references to addiction to the web, its illusions and virtual realities, which causes the rupture of primary social relations. Only one of my students, however, considered that the narrative of the film was closely related to our reality, which he defined in terms of "a system that controls the multitude through an infinity of illusions." Once again, here, human reality tends to involve a resistance to the machine and the cyborg and an affirmation of the centrality of the idea that man is separate from, and in control of, his creations.

They were, however, almost unanimous in seeing machines as instruments of progress and development, tools that cooperate to the welfare of mankind. They radically rejected the possibility of machines coming to seize control and asserted man's control over technology. Only a few (3 out of 31) pointed to some degree of competition between mankind and machines, by referring to the reduction of job openings in consequence of automation.

Thus, the reading most of my students made of *The Matrix* – as well as the official description of the film's plot by the Warner Brothers Studios – is shaped by the utopian principles and values of the Western technological creed. Machines are instruments of progress, they are useful and controlled by men; indeed, they are useful because they are

controlled by men. Only in fiction it is possible to see machines dominating men. Both the official description of the film and the prevailing reading among my students – all of them deeply involved with digital technologies – reveal the overwhelming power that the Western technological creed still holds in our society. They also reveal that the meanings of *The Matrix* are reduced and tamed by the predominance of this creed, its principles and values. When the narrative challenges the beliefs most deeply shared by its audience, it is rejected as delusional.

III

In their reliance on the utopian principles of the Western technological creed, my students tend to miss crucial aspects of the film. These can be best perceived when one distinguishes three phases within the narrative of *The Matrix*. The first involves the insistence on the delusional character of both Anderson's world and, by analogy, our world. This real world is contained by the spectacular reality generated by the matrix and, in it, spectators remain, as the film's hero, unaware of what the matrix is. Furthermore, as the spectacular reality generated by the matrix is quite similar to the world in which the spectators live, they take it as the true reality. This phase goes from the beginning of the film until the moment when Morpheus offers Neo the red and the blue pills. The second phase starts when Neo takes the red pill and ends when the Agents capture Morpheus. It is a tutorial stage in the strict sense of the term. During this tutorial, the spectators follow Neo's learning of what the matrix and the real world actually are. It is a tutorial on the spectacular nature of both the matrix and of Neo's fate. While Neo learns how to breathe and to walk, to jump and to fight within the spectacular reality, we (the spectators) learn about the spectacle. The final phase of the narrative is proactive. It starts when Neo decides to save Morpheus's life and makes possible his destiny as the Chosen One, Morpheus's destiny as the believer, Trinity's destiny as a woman, and mankind's destiny as the controller of machines and the master of the world.

It is a tutorial in the sense of rendering Neo the paradigmatic model of how we shall behave within the society of the spectacle to recover our freedom and will.

The first two stages of the narrative are concerned with the description of the spectacular society of the future in which Thomas Anderson lives as an interpretive cyborg (in Lemos's definition of the concept), but also as a hacker. During the first stage of the narrative, this future world is quite similar to our present, so we can identify his world with our society. During the second stage, his reality becomes the opposite of ours; it becomes something we can only imagine insofar as he gains – as a prosthetics cyborg – control over cyberspace. The last stage of the narrative is concerned with the behavior that makes Neo a hero and a net-cyborg. How can this plot be less reassuring of the Western technological creed and utopia when we consider that, at the end, mankind finally regains control of the high-developed machines that created the Matrix – that is to say, the spectacle?

It can be less reassuring of tecno-utopianism precisely because it reveals the power of technology as instrumental in the constitution of human beings. Thus, in its description of the world of the future/our contemporary society, *The Matrix* metaphorically reproduces both the utopian and the dystopian views of the society of the spectacle that has been proposed by critical theory. On the one hand, the references to Marshall McLuhan's utopian view of technology as an extension of man, media culture as a natural and evolutionary stage in human development, mechanical technologies as a means to ease the stress on the body, and electronic technologies as extensions of the central nervous system that further empower the human brains are quite explicit in the training of Neo to face the Agents of the matrix. Technological reality is, in a sense, more real than "natural" reality. "What is real?" Morpheus asks, "How do you define real? If you're talking about your senses, what you feel, taste, smell, or see, then all you're talking about are electrical signals interpreted by your brain" (*The Matrix*).

On the other hand, the film portrays the world in which Thomas Anderson lives as a simulacrum, in which people collectively believe and act according to a delusional and overwhelmingly persuasive representation imposed by the power of the spectacle. Inhabitants of this world are buttonheads who remain unaware of reality and alienated. It is, to a certain extent, the world inhabited by most of my students. Inhabitants of this world take for granted what is only a representation constructed for the purpose of dominating human beings. The film's imagery draws heavily on Debord's and Baudrillard's theories.[7] This imagery is particularly significant in the episode in which Neo and Morpheus finally meet and Neo takes the red pill that opens the road to reality:

> MORPHEUS – Do you believe in fate, Neo?
> NEO – No.
> MORPHEUS – Why not?
> NEO – Because I don't like the idea that I'm not in control of my life.
> MORPHEUS – I know exactly what you mean... Let me tell you why you are here. You are here because you have the gift.
> NEO – What gift?
> MORPHEUS – I've watched you, Neo. You do not use a computer like a tool. You use it like it was part of yourself. What you can do inside a computer is not normal. I know. I've seen it. What you do is magic.
> NEO – It's not magic.
> MORPHEUS – But it is, Neo. It is. How else would you describe what has been happening to you?
> MORPHEUS – We are trained in this world to accept only what is rational and logical. Have you ever wondered why?
> [Neo shakes his head.]
> MORPHEUS – As children, we do not separate the possible from the impossible which is why the younger mind is the easier to free while a mind like yours can be very difficult.
> NEO – Free from what?
> MORPHEUS – From the Matrix. Do you want to know what it is, Neo?
> [Neo swallows and nods his head.]
> MORPHEUS – It's that feeling you have had all your life. That feeling that something was wrong with the world. You don't know what it is but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad, driving you to me. But what is it? The Matrix is everywhere, it's all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out your window, or on your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.
> NEO – What truth?

> MORPHEUS - That you are a slave, Neo. That you, like everyone else, was born into bondage... kept inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste, or touch. A prison for your mind (*The Matrix*).

The matrix is, therefore, a prison that simulates freedom. It is quintessentially a spectacle.

Significantly, to tell him the recent history of the world, Morpheus turns on a television set:

> [He picks up a remote control and clicks on the television. We drift through the Windy City circa 1996.]
> MORPHEUS – This is the Chicago you know. Chicago as it was at the end of the twentieth century. This Chicago exists only as part of a neural-interactive simulation that we call the Matrix. [We glide at the television as he changes the channel.] You have been living inside Baudrilaurd's vision, inside the map, not the territory. This is Chicago as it exists today. [The sky is an endless sea of black and green bile. The earth, scorched and split like burnt flesh, spreads out beneath us as we enter the television.] The desert of the real. [In the distance, we see the ruins of a future Chicago protruding from the wasteland like the blackened ribs of a long-dead corpse.] We are, right now, miles below the earth's surface. The only place humans can survive outside the Matrix is underground.
> NEO – What happened?
> MORPHEUS – It started early in the twenty-first century, with the birth of artificial intelligence, a singular consciousness that spawned an entire race of machines. [In his sunglasses, we see storm clouds gather.] At first all they wanted was to be treated as equals, entitled to the same human inalienable rights. Whatever they were given, it was not enough. [In the circular window of the glasses, EXPLOSIONS light up a bloody battle field.] We don't know who struck first. Us or them. But sometime at the end of the twenty-first century the battle was joined. [We MOVE INTO his glasses and the war surrounds us.] The war raged for generations and turned the face of our planet from green and blue to black and red. It scorched and burned the sky. Without the sun, the machines sought out a new energy source to survive. They discovered a new form of fusion. All that was required to initiate the reaction was a small electric charge. Throughout human history we have been dependent on machines to survive. Fate, it seems, is not without a sense of irony. [We return to the power plant that Neo escaped from where we see human beings looking almost blissful in their gelatin cocoons.] The human body generates more bio-electricity than a 120-volt battery and over 25,000 B.T.U.'s of body heat. [Outside, spreading all around the power plant, beneath a breathing greenhouse, are the growing fields.] We are, as an energy source, easily renewable and completely recyclable, the dead liquified and fed intravenously to the living. [Huge farm-like reapers are harvesting the crop.] All they needed to control this new battery was something to occupy our mind. [We see inside a clear tubular husk. Floating in viscous fluid, there is a human fetus; its soft skull already growing around the brain-jack.] And so they built a prison out of our past, wired it to our brains and turned us into slaves. [We PULL BACK to find the image is now on the television and we are again inside the white space of the Construct.]
> NEO – No! I don't believe it! It's not possible!
> MORPHEUS – I didn't say that it would be easy, Neo. I just said that it would be the truth (*The Matrix*).

The same imagery of a world dominated by the machines is once again presented when Agent Smith tutors Morpheus on the history of the matrix:

> AGENT SMITH - Have you ever stood and stared at it, Morpheus? Marveled at its beauty. Its genius. Billions of people just living out their lives... oblivious. [...] Did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world? Where none suffered, where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster. No one would accept the program. Entire crops were lost. Some believed we lacked the programming language to describe your perfect world. But I believe that, as a species, human beings define their reality through suffering and misery. The perfect world was a dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from. Which is why the Matrix was re-designed to this: the peak of your civilization. (*The Matrix*)

Thus, *The Matrix* repeatedly portrays the world of Thomas Anderson as a simulacrum and, in doing so, the film endorses the criticisms that have been addressed to the society of the spectacle, and reveals the ways it works and how it serves to reinforce the structures of power and oppression through persuasive means of alienation. Endorsing the criticisms towards the prevailing strategy (in Certeau's sense of the concept), *The Matrix* is a narrative endowed with tactical elements. It denounces the spectacular nature of our society; it intends a rebuttal to the non-communication process that the means of communication at service of spectacles and simulacra create. Those tactical elements are lost in both the readings of my students and the Warner Brothers Studios' official description of the film's plot, but these tactical elements are crucial for the comprehension of *The Matrix* in the context of the Western Technological creed.

*

The Matrix does not portray its central character as a well-adapted and self-realized bureaucratic worker at a computer company, or a happy young man cared by his loving family and enjoying his good friends. There is no mention to his family and the film essentially presents Thomas Anderson as a lonely hacker. He knows and admires the victories that other hackers have reached, so he recognizes Trinity, in their first encounter, as the hacker who "cracked the I.R.S. Kansas City D-Base." He lives secluded in a small room

full of computer devices, sells unauthorized software as a drug dealer, and spends long evening hours in front of his personal computer trying to figure what is the matrix. Indeed, hee works at *p 4Xa computer company (which has the suggestive name of METACORTEX), but he is often late to work and his superior describes him as having a behavioral problem.[8] Thus, the ultimate company man, Rhineheart, lectures Thomas Anderson after another late arrival, the day after he met Trinity:

> You have a problem with authority, Mr. Anderson. You think that you're special. You believe that somehow the rules do not apply to you. Obviously, you are mistaken. This company is one of the top software companies in the world because every single employee understands that they are a part of a whole. Thus, if an employee has a problem, the company has a problem. The time has come to make a choice, Mr. Anderson. Either you choose to be at your desk on time or you choose to find yourself another job. Do I make myself clear?

His first contact with the Agents, after he was arrested at METACORTEX's office, renders totally clear this dual dimension of Thomas Anderson's life. Agent Smith brings to their interview a file in which the Agency keeps track of all activities Mr. Anderson has accomplished as the hacker called Neo, and which he will use trying to coerce Neo to cooperate for the capture of Morpheus. Reinforcing the issue of the ambivalence of Anderson-Neo's identity, he says:

> As you can see, we have our eyes on you for some time now, Mr. Anderson. It seems that you have been living two lives. In one life, you are Thomas A. Anderson, program writer for a respectable software company. You have a social security number, you pay your taxes and you help your landlady carry out her garbage. The other life is lived within computers where you go by the hacker alias Neo and are guilty of virtually every computer crime we have a law for. One of these lives has a future. One of them does not (*The Matrix*).

This ambiguity in the identity of the central hero will be preserved throughout the narrative and will serve to distinguish the two worlds in which the hero lives his adventure. So, Morpheus and his crew will never address the hero by his name, but only as Neo. It will reach its climatic expression and find its final solution when Neo and Agent Smith, who stubbornly calls him Mr. Anderson, fight in the El Station, by the end of the narrative:

> [Agent Smith grabs hold of him, lifting him into the air, hurling him against the curved wall of the train tunnel, where he falls inches from the electrified third-rail. The Agent is about to jump down, and press his attack when he hears something. From deep in the tunnel, like an animal cry; a burst of high-speed metal grinding against metal. The sound of an on-coming train. Neo tries to get up. Agent Smith jumps down onto the tracks and drop kicks him in the face. The world begins to shake, rumbling as the train nears.]
> AGENT SMITH – Do you hear that, **Mr. Anderson**?
> [Agent Smith grabs Neo in a choke-hold, forcing him to look down the tracks, the train's headlight burning a hole in the darkness.]
> AGENT SMITH – That is the sound of inevitability.
> [Neo sees it coming and he starts to fight.]
> AGENT SMITH – It is the sound of your death.
> [There is another metal screech, much louder, closer, as Agent Smith tightens his hold. Neo is unable to breathe.]
> AGENT SMITH – Goodbye, **Mr. Anderson**.
> [The train roars at them, swallowing Agent Smith's words. The veins bulge in Neo's head, as he grits through the pain. He is not ready to die.]
> NEO – **My name is Neo**.
> [Impossibly, he hurls himself straight up, smashing Smith against the concrete ceiling of the tunnel. They fall as the sound and fury of the train explodes into the station. Neo back-flips up off the tracks just as the train barrels over Agent Smith. Neo stands, knees shaking, when the train slams on its emergency brake. With an ear-splitting shriek of tortured rails, the train slows, part of it still in the station. Neo turns, limping, starting to run, racing for the escalator. As the train comes to a stop and the doors of the last car open, Agent Smith bursts out in furious pursuit, his glasses again intact] (*The Matrix*).

The whole narrative of The Matrix can be reduced to this transition from Anderson to Neo's identity, from interpretive cyborg to net-cyborg, that is completed when Neo insists on his identity as Neo rather than as Thomas Anderson. This is also the moment when he definitely defeats Agent Smith. The opposite route is taken by the narrative's more despicable villain – Cypher, who knows the truth, but prefers alienation, who became a netcyborg, but chooses to be a interpretive cyborg (a buttonhead) again, and betrays the human race.[9] Clearly the film's hero is not the self-realized bureaucratic worker at a computer company. On the contrary, his identity is not so easily defined. It is full of ambiguities and, in its ambiguity, reflects the connections between the paradoxical worlds in which he lives.[10]

On the one hand, he is, indeed, Thomas Anderson. Anderson is a strategic identity. It is the authorized identity the hero has within the matrix. It is the identity provided by the matrix, reliable, but alienating. It is socially acceptable, but individually unfulfilling. It is the identity suited for daily and public places. It is who he thinks he is, but who he vaguely feels he is not and intensely dreams he is not. On the other hand, Neo is an unauthorized identity; itis risky and kept in secret; it is assumed at night, it is lived in the underground, and it is only known by a handful of costumers and Morpheus's crew. This, however, is finally his true identity.

Insofar as *The Matrix* privileges Neo's rather than Anderson's identity, it is a challenge to our well-established sense of reality. Instead of presenting the matrix as being merely Thomas Anderson's delusion, the narrative of *The Matrix* makes it real – fantastically and unbelievably real, but still real – and, in consequence, makes us wonder about the place and role of mankind in a future and a society heavily dependent upon technology. It makes us question the utopian character of the Western technological creed, and makes us wonder if this fantastic future it describes is not already present. The film becomes, then, less reassuring of the Western technological creed, which usually favors a view that separates men from machines.

IV

Most of the narrative of *The Matrix* is the narrative of its hero's search of who he is. This quest for the hero's identity is inseparable from the process of learning in which the audience follows the path of the film's hero. At the beginning, like Thomas Anderson, the audience is unaware of the spectacular nature of reality, and, of the way control and power are exercised on people by the pervasive presence of the spectacles that render them alienated from reality. Like Thomas Anderson, the viewers remain wired up and unaware of the power of the spectacle. The virtual becomes part of reality and, as buttonheads, audience and

Anderson live a delusional dream. Later, those characters who have already been freed from spectacles and simulacra make contact with Neo. He is unplugged and awakes to a nightmarish reality, to which he drags the audience and through which he reveals, by the power of analogy, how we (the spectators) have been kept under control, alienated and exploited – the hero by spectacles that serve machines, we by spectacles that serve power. Having known reality, Neo learns that the future of mankind requires the struggle against the spectacle and the machines that control it. He learns, but he does not believe that he is the Chosen One: the man who could regain control upon the matrix, change it, free mankind from the control exercised by machines. He ultimately responds to the wishes of the three major characters of the narrative: Morpheus, who believes that Neo is the Chosen One; Trinity, whose destiny would be to fall in love with the Chosen One; and his own destiny to die within the matrix and to resurrect as a human being who would gain control over the matrix. We are plugged to him throughout this period of learning.

*

Throughout the whole narrative, Neo's search for his real identity is portrayed through a rhetorical resource: the multiple choices he has to make with regard to his life, future, and self. He always has to choose his path between alternatives that are presented to him. Thus, in the first phase of the narrative, Rinheheart gives Thomas Anderson the alternative of complying with METACORTEX's rules or find another job. Agent Smith gives him the rhetorical alternative of having a future – by abandoning Neo's activities as well as by helping him to capture Morpheus – or having none. And his first contacts with Morpheus and other members of his crew also involve his need to make a choice. Prior to his capture by the Agents within the METACORTEX building, Morpheus guides him through an escape route. Afraid to fall, Anderson refuses to go outside the window and to climb the scaffold to the top of the building. As Morpheus explains, "there is only two ways out of this building. One is

that scaffold. The other is in their custody. You take a chance either way. I leave it to you" (*The Matrix*). After he was taken in custody by the Agents and released, when Trinity, Apoc and Switch take him to meet Morpheus, they give him another choice:

> SWITCH - Right now there is only one rule: our way or the highway.
> [Anderson hesitates, but decides to leave the car.]
> ANDERSON – Fine…
> [Trinity interferes.]
> TRINITY – Please Neo, you have to trust me.
> ANDERSON – Why?
> TRINITY – Because you have been down there, Neo. You know that way. You know exactly where it ends. And I know that it is not where you want to be.
> [Neo closes the door and the automobiles run away] (*The Matrix*).

This rhetorical resource is used twice again, later in the narrative. It serves as an introduction to each one of the other phases I have distinguished within the plot. First, by opening the tutorial phase of the narrative, Morpheus gives Anderson the choice of taking the red or the blue pill:

> MORPHEUS – Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself.
> NEO – How?
> MORPHEUS – Hold out your hands. [In Neo's right hand, Morpheus drops a red pill. In his left, a blue pill.] This is your last chance. After this, there is no going back. You take the blue pill and the story ends. You wake in your bed and you believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill and you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes. Remember that all I am offering is the truth. Nothing more (*The Matrix*).

Later, opening the proactive phase of the narrative and closing one of the central sequences of the film, the Oracle gives Neo the choice of saving Morpheus's life or his own – i.e., the choice of behaving or not as the Chosen One, which is also the choice of accepting or denying his fate:

> ORACLE – And don't worry about the vase.
> NEO – What vase?
> [He turns and pushes the vase, which falls down and brakes.]
> ORACLE – That vase.
> NEO [collecting the pieces of the vase] – I'm sorry.
> ORACLE – I Said, don't worry about it. I get one of my kids to fix it.
> NEO – How did you know?

ORACLE – Oh... What really going to burn your brain later on is would you still have broken it if I didn't say anything?... You are guilter than I thought. I see why she likes you.
NEO – Who?
ORACLE – But not too But not too why Morpheus brought you to see me?...
So, what do you think? Do you think you are the One?
NEO – Honestly, I don't know.
ORACLE [pointing out a sign in the wall above Neo's head] – Do you know what that means?... Latin! Means: know thyself... I will let you know a secret. Being the One is just like being in love. None can tell you are in love. You just know it, without doubts... Well, better I have a look at you. Open your mouth, say ah!
[Neo says "ah" and the Oracle look at his mouth and, then, at his hands.]
ORACLE – Okay! Time to say: "Humm!!! That is interesting, but..." And you say?
NEO – But, what?
ORACLE – But you already know what I am going to tell you...
NEO – I am not the One.
ORACLE – Sorry, kid. You got the gift, but it looks like you are waiting something...
NEO – What?
ORACLE – Your next life, maybe? Who knows? That is the way these things go.
[Neo smiles and the Oracle asks:]
ORACLE – What is funny?
NEO – Morpheus... He almost has me convinced.
ORACLE – I know... Poor Morpheus. Without him we are lost.
NEO [surprised] – What you mean... without him?
ORACLE – Are you sure you want to hear this?... Morpheus believes in you, Neo. And none, not you, not even me, can convince him otherwise. He believes so blindly that he is going to sacrifice his life to save yours.
NEO [astonished] – What???
ORACLE – You are going to have to make a choice. In the one hand, you will have Morpheus's life. And, in the other hand, you will have yours. One of you will have to die. Which one will be up to you... I am sorry, kid. I am really sorry. You have a good soul and I hate to give good people, bad news... No... Don't you worry about it... You just step outside that door and you will start feeling better. You will remember you do not believe on this fate crap... You are in control of your own life. Remember... Here, take a cookie. I promise you: by the time you have done eating it, you will feel just right (*The Matrix*).

Neo's choices are always related to his identity; they allow him to evolve from who he thinks he is to who he actually is. Like *Frankenstein*, *The Matrix* is pervaded by transitions. Throughout the narrative, the hero asks again and again about his identity. His answer always involves a degree of disbelief. As in the case of *Frankenstein*'s Monster, Neo's search for his identity initially reveals the unpleasant circumstances of his condition. Rather than being a free human being in control of his own life, he discovers himself being enslaved by the matrix; he is the victim of the "prison he cannot see, feel or taste", which reduces him to a

battery that feeds the machines that had taken over the world. His world, his memories, his body, himself, his utopia of a mankind being in control of the technology it uses, everything he always took for granted prove to be an illusion. He is none; his world is dystopian. As in the case of the Monster, Neo's search ends with a terrifying revelation: the nightmarish truth related to his condition.

Unlike *Frankenstein*'s Monster, however, Neo is not abandoned in his misery. On the contrary, he is freed and he is provided with a new utopian identity – indeed, so utopian that he cannot believe it: the identity of being the Chosen One with the mission of recovering the human utopia of controlling the world and the artifacts men create. Furthermore, after giving him freedom (and the images employed – the naked and bald Neo immersed in a womblike cradle - comprise the meaning of a new birth), Morpheus and Trinity stand by his side and try to bring him some relief.[11] They give him support and they believe him. Suggestively, the narrative ends when the hero assumes his unauthorized identity and converts his disbelief in faith. Thus, like the characters of *Frankenstein*, the hero of *The Matrix* also undergoes a transition. His travel, however, drives him towards who he actually is and to his humanity. He starts being Thomas Anderson – the buttonhead or interpretive cyborg who has a double life as a hacker – and ends being Neo – the paradigmatic netcyborg that everyone, living in a society of spectacles and simulacra, must become to remain human and to retain control of the technology that has subdued mankind. Reality, thus, replaces virtuality, awareness replaces alienation, freedom and will replace a simulacrum of freedom and will. This transition occurs through a process of re-enchantment of the secularized world and, thus, the skeptical Anderson at the beginning or his journey, because he cannot stand the idea of not being in control of his own life, becomes the Neo who achieves control of his own life precisely because he fulfills his fate.

V

Identity is, thus, a major issue in *The Matrix*. How identity is built and defined is also crucial for understanding the story. The questions of identity involves coming to grips with reality and illusion, faith and will, body and memory, senses and feelings. Lets go back to the episode in which Agent Smith questions Anderson. After describing the double life Anderson has lived and stating that only the life of the well-adapted bureaucratic officer at METACORTEX has a future, Agent Smith tries to cut a deal with Anderson:

> I'm going to be as forthcoming as I can be, Mr. Anderson. You are here because we need your help. We know that you have been contacted by a certain individual – a man who calls himself Morpheus. Whatever you think you know about this man is irrelevant to the fact that he is wanted for acts of terrorism in more countries than any other man in the world. He is considered by many authorities to be the most dangerous man alive. My colleagues believe that I am wasting my time with you, but I believe you want to do the right thing. It is obvious that you are an intelligent man, Mr. Anderson, and that you are interested in the future. That is why I believe you are ready to put your past mistakes behind you and get on with your life. We are willing to wipe the slate clean, to give you a fresh start and all we are asking in return is your cooperation in bringing a known terrorist to justice (*The Matrix*).

Neo refuses to comply and Agent Smith states: "You disappoint me, Mr. Anderson. The irony of your situation is that you have no choice." Neo is, however, confident in the liberal creed of the democratic rights, which are protected by the Constitution – "You can't scare me with this Gestapo crap. I know my rights. I want my phone call." Smith replies with a glimpse of crude power: "And tell me, Mr. Anderson, what good is a phone call if you are unable to speak?" He makes Anderson's lips melt, his mouth disappears, his confusion grows into panic. The Agents rip open Anderson's shirt and Smith takes from a case a fiber-optic wiretap that becomes an organic creature, which probes into Anderson's navel and worms its way inside his abdomen.

In the next scene, Anderson awakes as if the interrogatory and the electronic worm were pieces of a nightmare. At this stage of the narrative, the sense of reality is totally a function of body sensations: Anderson awakes as he is having a nightmare, his mouth has lips, teeth and tongue, his navel has no scars, he breathes easily. This sequence represents the

only moment in which the narrative of the film makes an association between the unbelievable reality it describes and Anderson's nightmares. This is a moment in the narrative in which the conception of reality as delusional serves to keep unchallenged the delusional reality generated by the spectacular matrix (it veils the actions of its Agents and hides the way they subdue Anderson to get what they want from him). The power of the matrix here has no regard for freedom, civil rights, independence of will. Anderson is coerced to obey a will is not his own. Therefore, the only moment in which *The Matrix* portrays Neo's reality as Anderson's nightmare corresponds to the moment in which such confusion between reality and delusion has a purpose within the strategy of power that the narrative denounces and its hero challenges. *The Matrix* intends to make us aware that among the strategies available to power and society in their attempts to control individuals, we find the tools of rendering reality delusional and making delusion real.

Indeed, until this moment, the narrative does not provide many clues – besides Trinity's unnatural athletic abilities to flee from the police's pursuit – with regard to what is real and what is delusion. This ambiguity is maintained until Neo takes the red pill that Morpheus offers him. Until then, reality and delusion will remain mixed up and Anderson's body will be the center of this delusion. Thus, when Trinity, Switch and Apoc extract the electronic worm from his abdomen, they treat his body as a real body rather than as an image of the body created by the matrix. At this moment, it is the reality of Neo's body that gives Anderson the sense that the interrogatory actually happened: "Jesus Christ, it is real!" Anderson says when Trinity extracts the electronic worm from his abdomen. The episode of the surgery suggests that the spectacular world generated by the matrix is a real world in which people move, breathe, sense, and have a body that can be the object of direct and material interventions.

It is the trip provoked by the red pill that undermines the idea of the matrix as reality. It reveals a new image of Neo's body as well as of his identity. From now his physical body will become the memory of a body that the matrix had generated equipped with memories, sensations, that have also been produced by the matrix. But, while memories might be perceived as delusional, the body maintains a degree of reality. Although his real body has no hair, his atrophied muscles have to be rebuilt, and his skull is plugged to the matrix, it remains a kind of anchor to his reality or, at least, a kind oof anchor to hs sense of himself. Although he has the body of a prosthetic cyborg, it is still a body. Furthermore, it is his body that, in the final combat with Agent Smith, renders possible what the matrix conceived of as impossible – i.e., the destruction of agents. As a symbolical reconstruction of the human, Neo's resurrection acquires more significance insofar as it is propelled by a bodily sensation: Trinity's kiss. The kiss is suggestive of other meanings as well, as it points to the relevance of destiny (because her destiny was to be in love with the Chosen One, and, therefore, was a requisite of his fate), faith (because their success, the viewers are told time and again, depends on their ability to believe), primary social relationships, emotions, and feelings in the definition of the human self.

VI

Like Shelley's *Frankenstein*, *The Matrix* is about transition. It represents the transition from a state in which machines seize power, control the world, and subdue mankind to a state in which mankind recovers power upon machines and the world. This transition is dramatized through the path followed by the life of the central character, who goes through a complete change of identity (from Thomas Anderson to Neo), and of self-image (from a wired up buttonhead to a daring netcyborg). There is also a change in his sense of reality (from the belief on the spectacle to the knowledge of the nightmarish reality), and in his attitude in the face of fate (from "rational" and arrogant disbelief to emotional and complete acceptance).

Thus, the final message of *The Matrix* is actually one of reassurance of the central tenet of the Western technological creed – the idea of the human need to control technology. And yet, in *The Matrix*, there is also the suggestion that man's control of technology does not necessarily, naturally and unavoidably occurs as the creed claims. Indeed, *The Matrix* is more emphatic than Shelley's *Frankenstein* in pointing to the fact that we live in a reality in which mankind has lost control upon the technologies of the spectacle it has created and has been subdued by them.

Finally, unlike Shelley's novel, the narrative of the film does not represent machines as necessarily opposed to men. Certainly, machines and technology that go out of control are represented as dangerous; however, technology is also presented as the human tool to regain control of machines. Thus, not only Morpheus's crew keeps a synergic relationship with them, but the Chosen One is also a prosthetic cyborg. The only two human beings that are one hundred percent human in the story are precisely the ones who cannot enter the matrix. Only cyborgs can now control technology. The most relevant point is, therefore, that this synergy is presented in terms that bring together what the dystopian views of technology insists to keep apart: the artifact, the natural and the supernatural; technology, humanity and some kind of supernatural gift that can only be comprehensible in terms of magic. Thus, all the hackers in the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar (Morpheus, Trinity, Apoc, Switch and Cypher), the children at the Oracle's house and the Oracle herself, and, particularly, the Chosen One are prosthetic cyborgs endowed with some magic powers that make them able to control and use technology for their advantage. Thus, Morpheus explains to Neo their meeting in the following terms:

> MORPHEUS – Let me tell you why you are here. You are here because **you have the gift.**
> NEO – What gift?
> MORPHEUS – I've watched you, Neo. You do not use a computer like a tool. You use it like it was part of yourself. What you can do inside a computer is not normal. I know. I've seen it. **What you do is magic.** (*The Matrix*)

Furthermore, during Neo's tutorial, Tank would define him as a machine:

MORPHEUS – How is he?
[Tank looks at his watch, rubs his eyes.]
TANK – Ten hours straight. **He's a machine.**
[Neo's body spasms and relaxes as his eyes open, breath hissing from his lips. He looks at Morpheus.]
NEO – This is incredible. I know Kung Fu (The Matrix).

Thus, in *The Matrix*, technological devices are the means through which Neo develops and enhances the abilities that allow him to defeat the Agents and to change the matrix. The hero is a netcyborg – he is a human being that keeps human feelings, sensations, freedom and will, and, at the same time, is plugged in technological devices that enhance his power. He is a netcyborg who redeems the human species because he accomplishes the erasure of the distance between man and machine. Nevertheless, he accomplishes it in a very particular fashion: he promotes the re-enchantment – by both his faith in human destiny and his recovering of human primary relationships – of an overwhelmingly secularized, artificial and technological world in which humanity has become enslaved to technology, alienated, or inhuman.

NOTES:

[1] That is to say, beings so addicted to technologies, information and spectacles that they lose their control upon them, their self-reliance, their free will and their non-dependency.

[2] Scott Bukatman argues that, in the 1980s, two techno-myths – opposed to technocratic mythologies of centralized control and referred to a process of de-massification of personality – arose: cyberpunk and hippie-hacker. He explains: "While cyberpunk substitutes the ethos of personal control and individual empowerment through the simple mastery of the benign interface, cyberpunk enacts the end of controls – depicting a world where technology circulates more or less freely and, where, as is the case in Neuromancer, technology has its own agenda" (*Terminal Identity*, 199). Be this as it may, three myths have been reenacted by the scholar's analysis of the society of the spectacle: the buttonhead or addict myth, the hippie-hacker myth, and the cyberpunk myth. These three myths are crucial for understanding the Wachowski Brothers' *The Matrix*.

[3] I am heavily drawing on Scott Bukatmann (*Terminal Identity*, chapter I), who centers his analysis on the theoretical work of Marshall McLuhan, Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard.

[4] I am considering the ideas developed by André Lemos as exemplary of this new utopianism.

[5] The official web site of The Matrix is: http://www.whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com.

[6] Consider, for example: http://members.nbci.com/_XMCM/matrix_code/matrixe.htm.

[7] On the one hand, for Guy Debord, the society of the spectacle is characterized by the domination of the image, the bombardment of signals, the onslaught of images. He considers that spectacles are substitutes for the world; they define a new mode of phenomenological, political and commercial existence in which "life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles" because "everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation" (*The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 1). He conceives of the media as instruments of the spectacle. They are unilateral forms of communication that intrudes human reality, change human beings, and generate non-communication. He also proposes that the metaphor of image addiction is the best way to describe the alienated citizenship from the society of the spectacle insofar as it reveals the nexus commodity-addiction-control. In Debord's view, the high technologically developed forms of unilateral communication related with the spectacle promote the addiction and the passivity of the audience in face of the spectacle and are controlled by the modern State and its extensions (the media) – which exercises spectacular forms of control that work through seduction rather than coercion with unprecedented effectiveness (*Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 24). On the other, Baudrillard describes social processes that find their best representation on the viral infection (rather than image addiction) metaphor. In his view of our society, "all power to act has been transformed into the power to appear" or reduced to an act of viewership, which is considered as an act of surrender because resistance and response are irrelevant – insofar as there is no one to respond to – and, principally, because the proper means of resistance and response have become spectacular in their forms. As "the world has passed into a pure simulation of itself," even power "has been subsumed by technological forces" and "has itself become a simulation." He argues that high-technologically developed unilateral or one-directional forms of communication not only are one-directional and promote the passivity of the audience, but

they also promote non-communication. He also argues that the simulacra are no longer under the control of either state or mass media corporations: "the real power now resides in a technology that holds humanity in its thrall" (Simulations, 23-26). Thus, reviewing Debord's and Baudrillard's views of our society, Scott Bukatman states: "the passage from Debord's spectacle to Baudrillard's simulation is precisely a shift from a state which constructs the spectacle, to a spectacle which now constructs the state" (*Terminal Identity*, 68).

[8] The name of the company (METACORTECHS or METACORTEX) is suggestive insofar as (1) it promotes a phonetic and semantic association between technology and the human cortex, (2) it suggests that the company, which defines itself as one of the top software companies in the world, is in the business of enhancing human cortex and its capabilities, and (3) it suggests that such enhancement is reached through digital technologies.

[9] [CHAMBER MUSIC and the ambiance of wealth soak the room as we watch a serrated knife saw through a thick, gorgeous steak. The meat is so perfect, charred on the outside, oozing red juice from the inside, that it could be a dream.]

CYPHER –That's what he said to me nine years ago. The real world. Ha, what a joke.

[We recognize the grating voice, the insidious laugh.]

CYPHER – You know what real is? I'll tell you what real is.

[A fork stabs the cube of meat and we follow it up to the face of Cypher.

CYPHER – Real is just another four-letter word.

[He laughs, shoving the steak into his mouth. The restaurant is located on the top floor of a Chicago skyscraper where the view is breathtaking and the menu has no prices. Sitting across from Cypher is Agent Smith.]

AGENT SMITH – Do we have a deal, Mr. Reagan?

[Cypher chews the steak loudly, smacking it between his teeth.]

CYPHER – Mmm, so, so fucking good.

[Smith watches him shovel another hunk of meat into his mouth.]

CYPHER – You know, I know that this steak doesn't exist. I know when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, do you know what I've realized?

[Pausing, he examines the meat skewered on his fork. He pops it in, eyes rolling up, savoring the tender beef melting in his mouth.]

CYPHER – **Ignorance is bliss.**

AGENT SMITH – Then we have a deal?

CYPHER – **I don't want to remember nothing.** Nothing! You understand? And I want to be rich. Someone important. Like an actor. You can do that, right?

AGENT SMITH – Whatever you want, Mr. Reagan.

[Cypher takes a deep drink of wine.]

CYPHER – All right. **You get my body back in a power plant, reinsert me into the Matrix and I'll get you what you want.**

AGENT SMITH – Access codes to Zion (*The Matrix*).

[10] One of the characteristics that Scott Bukatman uses to define the science fiction genre is precisely this ability to render strange the familiar and to render familiar what is strange (Terminal Identity, 317). In *The Matrix* such effect is obtained by presenting what is like our ordinary daily life as virtuality and what is illusory and absurd as the real world.

[11] After teaching him the history of the real world and briefing him on the war between mankind and machines, Morpheus apologizes:

NEO – I can't go back, can I?

MORPHEUS – No. But if you could, would you really want to?

[Neo isn't sure of that answer. Morpheus continues:]

MORPHEUS – I feel that I owe you an apology. There is a rule that we do not free a mind once it reaches a certain age. It is dangerous. They have trouble letting go. Their mind turns against them. I've seen it happen. I broke the rule because I had to.

[He stares into the darkness, confessing as much to himself as Neo.]

MORPHEUS – When the Matrix was first built there was a man born inside that had the ability to change what he wanted, to remake the Matrix as he saw fit. It was this man that freed the first of us and taught us the secret of the war; control the Matrix and you control the future… When he died, the Oracle at the temple of Zion prophesied his return and envisioned an end to the war and freedom for our people. That is why there are those of us that have spent our entire lives searching the Matrix, looking for him… I did what I did, because I believe we have been brought here for a reason, Neo. You are here to serve a purpose, just as I am here to serve mine.

NEO – I told you I don't believe in fate.

[Morpheus smiles, leaning towards him.]

MORPHEUS – But I do, Neo. I do. Get some rest. You're going to need it (*The Matrix*).

CONCLUSION

In his review of the science fiction genre, Scott Bukatman (*Terminal Identity*) stresses the visceral relationship between this literary genre, the society of the spectacle, and the emergence of the cyborgs. He shows that the transformation of human individuals in cyborgs or terminal beings only took place within a society of the spectacle and proposes that the image addiction and the viral infection metaphors have been replicated as a major theme of cyber-literature. He also argues that the heavy dependence upon technology that characterizes our contemporary society erased one distinction traditionally set as defining of humanity: the distinction between man and machine. Cyborgs, of course, erase the distinction between men and machines. And Bukatman considers this erasure as another major theme in cyber-literature.

Bukatman also suggests that the strategy of the society of the spectacle has not remained unchallenged, and science fiction as a genre includes tactics of evasion and resistance, which are exemplified by sci-fi heroes, who distinguish themselves by their ability to control image addiction, to master technology, to remain human beings although living in a cyberspace, a virtual realm, a machine-oriented and machine-made world. Bukatman explains:

> The idea of being literally addicted to technology has real durability in science fiction. The advent of these plug-in cyborgs, these techno-addicts who are physically wired into the computer system, indicates that human and machine have indeed become coextensive, but addiction is presented as neither positive nor unavoidable; it is described from the seemingly exempt position of the nonaddict. For these writers, and perhaps for much of the discourse on addiction as well, the addict is constructed as the opposite of the subject. The subject is defined through a mythos of self-reliance, free will, and nondependency. [...]
> To merge with data, then, is acceptable only as long as the subject remains the locus of control. While the subject is thus defined as a willed and (relatively)

> autonomous force, the addict (as elad, buttonhead, wirehead, or "persona bum") is portrayed as radically de-centered – passively buffeted by the data rather than remaining proudly (if only partially) resistant to its lures (Terminal Identity, 285-286).

Bukatman concludes that science fiction must be understood in its importance to the present cultural moment as a narrative genre that has kept a more ambivalent perspective in regard to the structures of power that permeate and shape the spectacular society in which we live, as well as in regard to the master-narrative – the technological creed and its stubborn myth of human control and voluntarism – of late capitalism. Science fiction as a genre has made an effort to represent phenomenally the non-space created by cyber-technology, has addressed the emergence and hegemony of the spectacle as a way of ordering society, and has remained ambivalent in regard to it. In the 1950s, it resisted as a literary genre to the advent of the society of the spectacle and criticized the image addiction it creates as a disease; nowadays it has adhered to more ambivalent postmodern tactics that simultaneously involve acceptance and resistance to the powerfully controlling forces of the spectacle (*Terminal Identity* 69).

In his view, science fiction proposes that we are not condemned to be "buttonheads" by the society of the spectacle. Science fiction has thoroughly addressed the issue of the definition of the autonomy of human subject, which was traditionally anchored in the consciousness we have of our bodily existence. It has redefined the human body and the relationship of the human subject to his/her body. This redefinition has not redeemed or privileged the eternal soul, but has made the subject to be defined in terms of a mutable body, a thinking mind, a recalling memory that is no longer opposite to a machine, but has, instead, become continuous in relation to the machine. It has created the myth of the cyborg – a metaphorical subject redefined to permit its presence and existence as a biological being within an electronic world, and still retaining the older notion of the subject as being based on mastery of rather than

symbiosis with the machine. Its language simultaneously expresses "the postmodern crisis of a body that remains central to the operations of advanced capitalism as a sign, but has become entirely superfluous as object" (because it is no longer a requisite for the survival of the technocratic system), and retains the body and the organic as the sign of an unchanged, non-terminal human existence (although often avoiding the realities of reproduction and the presence of women). Bukatman describes concisely this postmodern crisis of the body in the conclusion of his book:

> What I have described in the preceding chapters is a set of fictions – in literature, philosophy, cinema, television, comics, and theme parks – that present a movement away from the traditional experience of the body and toward some sort of ecstatic activity of cybernetic fusion. The discourses of science fiction and philosophy have constructed a metaphorical subject redefined to permit its situation as a biological being within an electronic world. But this rarely occurs without a simultaneous retention of an older notion of the subject based on mastery rather than symbiosis, a subject that ultimately retains power through the displacement of cybernetic reconstruction. Within the fictions of terminal identity, the subject is brought to the limits of self-definition, but the metaphorical solutions to the problems posed by a postmodern existence often re-center subject power as an untested, unchanging, and eternal phenomenon (*Terminal Identity* 301).

Thus, the function of science fiction as a narrative genre can be conceived of as dramatizing the superimposition of technology on the human. Bukatman believes that, when doing so, science fiction narratives have challenged as well as reinforced the Western technological creed and its central myth of the human ability to control and overcome the machines man creates; they have challenged and reinforced the arguments used to describe, criticize and fear the emergence of the society of the spectacle. They have remained ambivalent and, therefore, tactical; they have created the myth of the cyborg, which represents a new form of utopia: a utopia that stresses the belief in being human and the possibility of remaining human in spite of the supreme danger of technological dependence.

I have considered two outstanding examples of the science fiction genre, keeping in mind the existence of a Western technological creed – the central belief of which is the affirmation of man's mastery of technologies he creates – and focusing on what they have to say with regard to the relationship between mankind and technology: Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* and The Wachowski Brother's film *The Matrix*. I have shown that they have at least a major feature in common: they deal with transitional ages, with transition as a social phenomenon, its ambiguous situations, and its marginal characters. I have also shown that their messages radically differ with regard the relationship between mankind and technology.

Frankenstein brings a dystopian view of the heavy dependence of our culture and our society upon technology and science. It renders its half-human and half-machine monster in the sinister specter of the danger technology means to the human essence and relates the future hopes of mankind to a repression of the desire to control nature. In Shelley, this denial is expressed in a nostalgic attempt to bring to the new industrialized world the principle and values of pre-industrial societies. It treats the machine as the enemy of man. *The Matrix*, on the other hand, portrays a new world in which the hopes of mankind to keep control upon electronics, nanotechnologies, digital technologies, genetic engineering, mass media and worldwide webs of information technology are invested on a new breed of heroes: prosthetics and net-cyborgs – i.e., half-human and half-machines heroes. It treats the machine as inseparable from human beings.

In the course of less than two centuries, the monster that haunted the imagination of the Western society at the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution has become the hero it roots for in the brink of the Digital Revolution. The "thing" that, less than two centuries ago, was conceived of as ominous and frightening, because it brought together

what should remain apart, now has been conceived of as paradigmatic for human behavior, because it finally brings together what had been erroneously kept apart. This change is crucial to understand our contemporary society and our relationships with technologies.

From *Frankenstein* to *The Matrix* there is still another significant difference. Mary Shelley exposed a radically dystopian view of the increasing human dependence upon technology. She devised a way through which man could recover his control upon the world: it was Victor's and Walton's denial of their technical and scientific conquests and of their search for social recognition and glory. Thus, she stated her fear of a world in which men would lose the control of their artifacts and she flirted with a world that had not been totally disenchanted yet: the rural world of the pre-revolutionary years. Certainly *The Matrix* denounces and condemns the spectacular society in which we live, but at least two reasons render its message more ambiguous with regard to the Western technological creed. On the one hand, it endorses both a dystopian view of the society of the spectacle and the new utopianism that recovers the older utopian belief that man can, at the end, master its artifacts. Indeed, the film suggests that we have no way out of the technological spin in which we are swirling unless we become more technologically savant. On the other, the experiment in reader-response criticism I worked with my students shows that the criticisms towards the society of the spectacle that are contained in the dystopian view of *The Matrix* are not necessarily perceived by its audiences, which rephrase its messages so they become a reassurance of the Western technological creed. Faith in science, it seems, is not unlike religious faith. Thus, unlike Bukatman, who emphasizes the tactics of evasion and resistance presented by the science fiction genre, I suggest that this genre has not only generated narratives that both strengthen and defy the prevailing cultural values and worldview, but has also allowed both

strategic and tactical readings, utopian and dystopian views of life in an human world ridden by technologies.[1]

NOTES:

[1] Bukatman refers to Michel de Certeau's conceptual distinction between "strategy" – which means social praxis that create and reinforce hegemonic values, beliefs and views through which power and authority are exercised in society – and "tactics" – which mean social praxis that serve to evade hegemony and elude power, expressing the relative freedom of will and act human individuals possess.

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