“I should have let her die”: a Posthuman Future between (Re)-Embodiment and Cyborgian Concepts

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Abstract:

The scenarios invoked in science fiction literature derive from imaginative concepts and futuristic technologies, and set out to fabricate and explore a potential future. Whereas the early development of science fiction stories showed a stronger emphasis on scientific and technical accuracy–hard science fiction–this has in the present day become increasingly dispensable, coining the expression of soft science fiction. Science fiction is the umbrella term for a wide range of genres which share various recurring themes including futuristic time settings in the future, scientific achievements that challenge state-of-the-art physical laws, and alternate social systems that depict a post-apocalyptic or post-scarcity world. Especially soft science fiction allows for the close investigation of social circumstances, philosophical reevaluations of what it means to be human, and contesting gender roles, while simultaneously emphasizing their impact on an imaginative society or even a posthuman state. Therefore, the depiction of gender roles functions as an important theme in science fiction literature, as it allows for a critical evaluation of stereotypes and underlying disparities. Focusing on the three short stories, C. L. Moore’s “No Woman Born” (1944), James Tiptree, Jr.’s “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” (1973) and Shariann Lewitt’s “A Real Girl” (1998), this paper illustrates the notion of gender and embodiment, with particular consideration of the advantageous influences the posthuman state has on female gender roles. Each of these short stories serves as examples of enhancement in the portrayal of the female gender in science fiction literature and the different representation lays bare its struggles within the genre. Whereas “A Real Girl” addresses the issue of the female gender as a sexually desirable object as perceived through the eyes of the self-appointed female AI, “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” and “No Woman Born” thematize becoming a cyborg, the oppression of the female body by a dominant sovereignty, a desired ideal state of femininity and the imprisonment of gender, set in a highly technologized society. Whether in the form of exclusion through otherness based on differences between computers and humankind, or gender marginalization, these short stories depict social standards which the main characters fail to fulfill. However, the futuristic worlds the stories are set in allow for adjustment in order for the characters to take part in society. This paper, hence, will explore what could be called science fiction standard, its relation to gender roles and also investigate the thought-provoking–and uncanny–aspects of the cyborg figure and a critical evaluation of the posthuman-state as such.

Key Words: Gender, Science Fiction, Female, Cyborg, Posthumanisn, James Tiptree, Jr., Shariann Lewitt, C. L. Moore, Embodiment, Post-Apocalyptic, Post-Scarcity

1 “I will be a real girl” (Lewitt 518). Thus ends Shariann Lewitt's short story “A Real Girl” (1998), which presents a female 200-year-old AI that is obsessed with the idea of becoming an embodied human girl, instead of being a mere disembodied online personality. Whereas she eventually desires a body for perceiving the world more fully, her initial

aspiration is to experience a genuine romantic relationship: "But I wanted, craved, needed to be loved. For myself. I wanted to know what it was all about" (511). Despite the risks that come with her unprecedented transformation from machine to (post)human, the nameless AI is willing to give up her immortality that enables her to exceed human physical abilities: "I am trading a good, secure, and fulfilling eternity for nothing but risk, and the potential for pain and disaster" (517). The idea of attaining a physical body is implemented in her consciousness after multiple love affairs with female scientists that are studying the AI. Men, however, are not interested in her and deny her wish to become human – for which she collectively discredits them as narrow minded. The short story questions what it means to belong to a female gender and its accompanied discriminatory state in society. By drawing on Lewitt's story and two other works from different writers and periods, this paper aims to lay bare the liberating scope of science fiction literature for the gender discourse and to evaluate the beneficial aspects of a futuristic setting for commenting and criticizing on unequal past and presents circumstances. Whether for whitewashing the past, picturing alternate timelines or mapping out a new future: the genre of science fiction holds the potential to fabricate old and new in an intriguing uncanny symbiosis.

2 Both dreaded and desired in "A Real Girl", the inferior pain-filled human state sets the starting point in James Tiptree Jr.'s "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" (1973) and C.L. Moore's "No Woman Born" (1944)[1]. In "The Girl Who Was Plugged In", the seventeen-year-old Philadelphia Burke (P. Burke throughout the story) – born physically deformed – is no longer able to cope with living as a social outcast, for which she is repulsively described as "one rotten girl" (Tiptree 546) and "the ugly of the world" (547), by the mischievous narrator Weasel Face, eventually resulting in her attempted suicide. Her brain is then disembodied from her "own grim carcass" (556) and linked to a "flawless" (552) female artificial body, called Delphi[2], which is used to advertise products for the repressive GTX company. By using Delphi's body, P. Burke is allowed to join the ranks of celebrities, who are elevated to a god-like status: "This whole boiling megacity, this whole fun future world loves its gods" (546). However, P. Burke realizes that her new life is equally depressing as

[1] James Tiptree, Jr. is the pen name Alice Bradley Sheldon used from 1968 to 1987 to publish numerous science fiction short stories as well as two novels. Currently, the *James Tiptree, Jr. Literary Award* is given annually to science fiction and fantasy works of literature that contribute to the further understanding of gender roles. The acclaimed science fiction author Connie Willis concludes that the few successful women writers had to disguise themselves as men by using pen names, mere initials or androgynous names and even adapt their style in order not to be identified as females (Davin 2).

[2] The name refers to the Greek oracle of the ancient classical world, which was considered all-knowing and therefore consulted on important decisions. Similar to the oracle of Delphi in ancient Greece, the character of Delphi is denied true ownership of her own body as P. Burke's brain exercises control over it.

she is condemned to maintain the mindless cyborg body of Delphi and follow the order of her 'fatherly' figure Mr. Cantle, without the right to voice her opinion. Merely loved for her new outward appearance, the story culminates in P. Burke's gruesome death by the hands of her lover Paul.

3 Like P. Burke in "A Real Girl", the main character in "No Woman Born" is also confronted with her own mortality. The world famous Deidre is presumed dead after falling victim to a theatre fire, and is subsequently mourned by the masses. Her manager Harris considers her "the loveliest creature whose image ever moved along the airways" and claims that there has "never been anyone so beautiful" (261). The scientist Maltzer resurrects her by transplanting her brain into a metallic golden body, which, although featureless and solely resembling the silhouette of a human being, allows her to ultimately perform and enthuse the audiences yet again. Upon careful study by her creator and Harris, Deidre is able to reproduce her old voice and unmatched talent to fool them into believing that she is submissively following their orders, when she really has no desire to be forced to match the expectations of her oppressors and longs for an empowered state, which she validates with her "superhuman" (299) qualities.

4 These selected short stories function as popular examples of how the relationship among techno-scientific innovations, gender, embodiment, and reevaluating humanistic ideals is communicated in the science fiction genre. All three stories are centered around the means of overcoming dystopian male dominated hierarchies and the longing for gender equality. It is at their core at which all stories portray a modern approach to the (post)human considerations that entered the literary world with Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818), and present the notion of being human and what remains of these superhuman qualities in either the AI's or Deidre's and Delphi's cyborgian state. By selecting three female authors who serve to emphasize in how far the formerly male-dominated genre has changed, this paper will consider significant feminist approaches at posthumanistic concepts of desired gender equality varying from re-embodied imaginations of an artificial intelligence to female cyborgs, set in futuristic scenarios and (proto)cyberpunk worlds.

5 Despite the fact that Shelley's *Frankenstein* is now considered the first science fiction novel, the feminist American science fiction author Pamela Sargent argues that little was contributed by female writers in the years between *Frankenstein's* release and the twentieth century. However, the gained momentum of rising gender equality and interest in gender studies during the twentieth century also lead to significant rediscoveries such as Lydia Maria

Child's time travel tale *Hilda Silfverling* (1845) and broader possibilities for women writers within the genre (Franklin 312). As a result, Eric Leif Davin points out that the 1960s showed a rise in the number of women writers in science fiction literature. He has collected a list of approximately 1,000 stories published by 203 female-identified writers between 1926 and 1960 in *Partners in Wonder* (2005), providing insight to how gender roles were perceived in science fiction literature (6). In this way, these here presented non-contemporary examples show that gender issues have in fact ever since been an (external) aspect of science fiction literature, which not only exists in the fiction of women writers per se, as Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) for instance demonstrates.

6 Consequently, while commenting on present social circumstances and anti-humanist ideals, the genre is able to shape the increasing human-machine relationship and to map a possible future (Booth and Flanagan 2). In contrast to other genres, science fiction is – despite its more or less hard sciences[3]-loaded origin – not dependent on the knowledge of physics and natural sciences or accuracy, which allows writers to speculate upon new and old topics (Thiess 2). Therefore, cyberpunk[4] is not only the subgenre to put forth anti-humanist sensibility as such; rather, the theme is also a prominent aspect of fragmented narratives of feminist science fiction.[5] However, whereas women's science fiction in particular explores regulated conceptions of hierarchical structures in a patriarchal society, the movement of cyberpunk, initiated by William Gibson, transformed into a rather masculine identified genre (Booth and Flanagan 7). The aspects of on the one hand female oppression by male sovereignty and on the other autonomous liberation are vital parts of these selected short stories and can be regarded as mirroring this shift. Initiated by the New Wave period of the 70s, the recent movement in the genre shows a rather liberal approach in regards to gender relations by both male and female authors, and in particular criticizes its uneven perception. Often times the scope of handling the issue of gender identity is centered around strong female characters, a hyperreal post-gendered world or even the ability to change gender

[3] Science Fiction literature can be broadly divided into hard and soft science fiction, with the former carefully basing its futuristic ideas on existing and/or possible scientific achievements.

[4] Cyberpunk's focus lies on the juxtaposition of high and low technology and allows for speculating about advanced technological achievements, which are confronted with (hierarchical) changes in current societal orders. In contrast with other fields of science fiction, the genre sets forth a pessimistic perception of the future, which is supposedly filled with violence and decay. The plot frequently revolves around post-industrial settings in a not-too-distant future, and presents a dystopian notion of cultural achievements and abysses.

[5] Just as "No Woman Born" allows for a cyberpunk-reading due to Deidre's beneficial juxtaposition of machine and human parts, "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" can be considered as a proto-cyberpunk text due to its adverse depiction of a body being run by a satellite computer. P. Burke's transformation can be understood as 'loosing' against a technologized society – which is oftentimes the case in feminist cyberpunk texts; contrary to cyberpunk's absolute necessity of this usually empowering technologized process, it enriches the notion of (female) oppression by hierarchical disparities (Bukatman 316).

(Baldwin 20). Nevertheless, science fiction's highest-grossing works of the past often put forward a prominent unilateral, namely heterosexual, perception of sexual preferences in the future, which can be ascribed to the cultural pressure originating from heteronormative values and the reluctance to perceive oneself differently from social norms (Hollinger 302). As queer theorist Michael Warner argues in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993), this is due to the means of envisaged inter-gender relations, which comprises reproduction and is the core for a society, as society would not be able to exist without it (Bell and Valentin 163).

7 On the contrary, the AI's homosexuality in "A Real Girl" is yet another liberating and novel aspect the short story puts forth, as it alters the ideas of a romantic relationship and what it means to be a desirable feminine girl, which represents an ideal state of humanity and emotional satisfaction – via homosexual ties – in her mind: "And I knew that emotionally it was women who drew me, who enticed me, whose attention I desired and whose approval I preferred" (Lewitt 511). By perceiving the female gender in a sexually desirable manner, the AI eventually becomes rather dismissive and stereotypical in her judgement of men who do not interest her, who she accuses of solely talking "about beer" (507) as they disregard her instead for being anything but a machine: "Men never saw me as even possibly alive. I am always a machine when I work with them, and while it hurts terribly there is never any chance the lines will be anything other than clear" (508). Likewise, the AI herself challenges the stereotype of female technical ineptitude when it antagonizes the perception of women, who are dismissively attributed to be not as skilled as men with technology. Subsequently, she considers that to "become a human" (513) implies to be a girl, which further enhances the role of the female gender. The act of becoming human is at the same time depreciated as to gain life would mean to "lose all" (518), and the AI wonders whether it is "worth dying for" (517). At this point without a gender, the AI's endeavor to become human is about achieving the female gender and a 'beautiful' body. Thus, it would mean that she would lose her superior state of not belonging to either gender and – due to having a functioning yet fragile biological body – the aspects of her unending capabilities of gaining knowledge and subsisting.

8 Cyborgs – an acronym of cybernetic and organism – generate their superiority to humans from being part machine and part human organism. The symbiosis of these elements illustrates the notion of social reality[6] and fiction. This, therefore, evokes a condensed image

[6] A process that is no longer solely existent in the fictional world, as for instance the augmentative aspects of

of an imaginative thought process and a material reality, which subsequently reflects the tradition of science and progress, while also drawing on the traditional perception of appreciating nature as a foundation of cultural achievements. Hence, in terms of reproduction, the notion of a cyborg emphasizes the creation of the self, based on a reflection from the other, which is essentially the relation between organism and machine (Haraway 150 f.). On being accused of not having a heart – and therefore not being real – the AI responds that it has a mechanism resembling the human heart by stating that "'I have hydraulic pumps,' […] '[w]hich is the same thing you've got'" (Lewitt 511). Consequently, the cyborg figure shares similarities with the same formal dynamic as the monster figure in literature, as it is based on the combination of culturally opposing elements that are custom-tailored in order to be compatible. Whereas both share the aspect of a certain monstrosity, the reservedly coded cyborg evokes the archaic monster in its inability to emerge from nature into a humanoid culture at which the cyborg struggles to overcome the gap of being humanlike and representing the nature as a hypermachine. The role of the cyborg marks another difference; oftentimes – despite its superior coding – the cyborg is a slave to its creators rather than vice versa, a circumstance which Deidre and Delphi also fall victim to.[7] Hence, its role can be considered as liberating, as it does not have to conform to an ethical notion or predetermined existence and the lines between humanlike and machine can become vanishingly low (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 199). Therefore, it is the aspect of the unknown and thus a novelty of the grotesque, which is to Harris and Maltzer fascinating at first but makes them resist Deidre's threatening superhuman potential. Thus Maltzer concludes that, "[w]e who bring life in the world unlawfully, […] must make room for it by withdrawing our own. That seems to be an inflexible rule. It works automatically. The thing we create makes living unbearable[8]" (Moore 292).

9 In *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), Donna Haraway proposes the notion of emancipation contained by the fictional cyborgian composition. Due to the futuristic perception of a gendered cyborg "in a post-gender world" (150), which is said to be neither only female nor only male, the cyborg does not fall in line with stereotypical concepts of a monolithic perception of either gender. Despite Haraway's reading of the cyborg as a feminist icon and her critique to move beyond the standardized limitations of traditional gender norms, the

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medical achievements contribute to prolonging life and overcoming inevitable disabilities.

[7] Whereas Deidre is assigned to remain off-stage in order not to be crushed by the audience's reaction to her new look, Delphi is imprisoned by the dominant GTX Company and their plan to exploit her beauty for economic purposes.

[8] Which, in response to *Frankenstein*, implies the notion of monsters that necessitate its makers' death.

cyborg figure in pop culture milestones such as *Terminator* (1984) and *RoboCop* (1987) emphasizes pure male power and mass destruction (Adam 163). With that said, technology permits the cyborgs to reject the notion of a constructed state of femininity and to turn away from this repressive approach to furthermore reject an idealized outward appearance (Stevenson 87). Haraway points out that gender roles are first and foremost constructed. In her opinion science fiction is capable of altering the rigidity of gender norms as it neither has a predetermined form nor must obey ethical charges; this innate possibility to change concepts turned into a prominent theme in numerous pieces of science fiction literature[9] (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 198-199). However, as several famous adaptions of cyborgs indicate[10], their standardized representation frequently includes an adherence to ideals of beauty, with a certain tendency to exceed them. This is of particular importance in P. Burke's cyborg Delphi who is "[s]itting up in the bed [and] is the darlingest girl child you've EVER seen. She quivers—porno for angels" (original emphasis Tiptree 550). C. L. Moore's "No Woman Born" can – in constructing a cyborg that is not in accordance with this image but nevertheless has an intriguing and uncanny beauty to her body – be read as a comment on this standardized perception of cyborgs in the genre of science fiction. Namely the story counteracts the idealized perception of merely constructing beauty from scratch and lays emphasis on Deidre's remaining human qualities and intriguing posthuman-qualities. Therefore, the initial idea of beauty in "No Woman Born" derives from approaching her personality and being able to see beyond her cyborgian body. When compared with Delphi's and the AI's scenario, Moore's decision to take the focus off her outward appearance can be read as her criticism of the exploitation and admiration of ideal beauty as opposed to personal qualities.

10 The two classic short stories of cybernetic re-embodiment by C. L. Moore and James Tiptree Jr. are early pieces of science fiction literature that explore the figure of a re-embodied female cyborg and its powerful traits (Booth and Flanagan 236). In both instances, the brain of the female character is being linked to a body powered by a machine in order to secure her viability and to enhance her value for societal pleasures – the brain being of greater value than the body stresses the feminist potential of the stories and implies what it means to be a woman, which is at its core not about a (desirable) body. A critical analysis of

[9] See for instance Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Octavia E. Butler's *Bloodchild* (1984) or Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991).

[10] This becomes especially evident in Motoko Kusanagi of *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and Rachael and Pris of *Blade Runner* (1982). The former is a cyborg constructed in accordance to the beauty specifications of anime femininity, the latter are female replicants bioengineered after Aryan prototypes.

the two stories either allows a technophilic praise of the cyborg state with its liberating powers and potential, such as Moore's Deidre has achieved, or, in the case of Tiptree's P. Burke/Delphi, places emphasis on the disdainfulness of female bodies in particular and their ability to participate within an oppressive society. In addition, despite the fact that both cyborgs are superior to their oppressive creators due to their artificial state, their impelling loneliness and desires are, for the majority of the story, on a narratorial level not sufficiently dealt with (Stevenson 87). Therefore, both stories contrapose the augmentative aspect of having a cyborg body, with the issue of not being able to be oneself. Maltzer further stresses this notion when he claims that he "should have let her die in it" (Moore 279).

11 To then draw a line from this juxtaposition found in Deidre's and Delphi's case, to the desired notion of being an embodied girl in Lewitt's "A Real Girl", the AI concludes that being a human would not only mean that "[t]here is so very much to lose" (Lewitt 517) but extends the line of thought by considering the negative psychological side effects of being a human girl. These include giving up the posthuman aspects of connectivity – which holds the potential to refer to an immeasurable amount of knowledge and freedom of being bound to an emotionally charged persona, trapped inside a fading human body. The concession of these posthuman features would lead to newly achieved anxieties and insecurities, which to her constitute a crucial aspect of being human, explicated in statements such as: "And I had never really known love. I thought I have loved, but I had never had the things that humans seemed to about most. I had never had a house, a lover who worried about taxes and arguments over dinner. I've never had dinner." (515). Nonetheless, the AI is eager to explore what out of her superior perspective seems to be a limited state and craves for the sub-state of being human, postulating that "[i]t was worth death and loss of power to know these things" (515).

12 Moore's and Tiptree's early cyborg stories further display the notion of withstanding to lose all in the moment of inevitable death and to gain a liberating – and what contemporary cultural theory calls *posthuman* – state. Although the prefix *post* implies the concept of occurring immediately after the human, the present understanding of the posthumanities can be regarded as a protracted thought process which is immanently rooted in the ideology of humanism itself (Herbrechter 7). Therefore, the introduction to the posthuman inevitably involves the critical evaluation of what it means to be human – and in particular regards to the three selected short stories – laying bare its struggles. Thus authors, scientists, artists and philosophers alike concluded that the recent decades, with their technological and cultural developments, have exacerbated the search for the significance of being human, which transformed into a far more complex answer than what modern early Enlightenment thinkers

such as René Descartes in his *Discourse on the Method* (1637)[11] already considered (Graham 2). However, the neologism of posthumanism also involves anti-humanistic ideals of a techno-critical movement of the 1970s and 80s that revolves around a recurrent cultural image of self-hate and its perception of the end of the human species due to the technological progress of machines, which surpass human beings in an increasing number of subject areas (Herbrechter 7). Hence, as Ihab Hassan points out, the movement would helplessly transform the many years of humanism into a posthumanistic world (Badmington 2). In the late 1960s, the genre of science fiction literature became the preferred medium to address contemporary culture, and its intersection of technology and technocratic social practices. The genre additionally showed a growing interest in popularity among eager readers, critics and researchers for the consideration of a possible utopian, dystopian and/or posthuman future, and established its own domain by associating literary, philosophical and scientific fields. Besides, the integration of state-of-the-art scientific achievements and concepts in contradistinction to societal merits and inequalities further influences the readers' conception of what for one thing is imaginable, and for another thing could be plausible (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 4). The inducement of critically evaluating a posthuman future focuses on eliminating a certain perspective humanism puts forward, which is contingent on the anthropocentric ideology of humankind itself, and attempts to consider the human after the dreaded end of the human species, proclaimed by the existing techno-critical movement (Herbrechter 7).

13 In the same way, the cyborg Deidre represents a posthuman state made possible by technological achievements and labels herself as "superhuman" (Moore 299) as opposed to "subhuman" (293), a term she vigorously rejects. In doing so, she emphasizes the augmentative possibilities technology can have on humanity, manifests its overarching superiority and addresses that she, as a cyborg, is not designed for male desire (Booth 32). Moreover, Deidre's superhuman state poses the question for both Maltzer, her 'creator', and Harris, the adoring manager and point-of-view character, of whether or not Deidre can still be considered a woman, or, a human being at all. Thus, both men are confronted with instances in which Deidre is more human than ever: "Then she put her featureless helmeted head a little to one side, and he heard her laughter as familiar in its small, throaty, intimate sound as he had ever heard it from her living throat" (Moore 269) or not at all human – perhaps even

[11] The renowned phrase "Cogito ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am") has become a fundamental element of the Enlightenment movement and argues in favor of one's own mind, as long as the existence is motivated by doubt, which stresses the value of the self as a thinking entity.

inhuman – "[n]othing she had done yet had been human. The dance was no dance a human being could have performed. The music she hummed came from a throat without vocal cords" (Moore 283). Therefore, both men are faced with the influences of technology on a human interface, which makes it henceforth an ethical question whether Maltzer should have "let her die" (279), as Deidre "isn't a human being any more" and fears that "what humanity is left in her will drain out little by little and never be replaced" (Moore 279; cf. Hollinger 308).

14 Besides, the consideration of whether she is human (and has therefore feminine traits) or machine (and is as a consequence intersexual) revolves for Harris around Deidre's unconventional beauty, which he recalls when she is displaying certain behaviors that are linked to her past: "Then the machinery moved, exquisitely, smoothly, with a grace as familiar as the swaying poise he remembered" or when she makes use of her "sweet, husky voice" (Moore 266) to remind him that it is actually her: "It was Deidre" (266). However, this observation shifts whenever he sees her metallic body: "She isn't human […] but she isn't pure robot either. She's something between the two" (279). Deidre's vaguely humanoid condition exposes the recurring struggle for Harris, and thus the reader, to finalize what is beautiful and feminine about her. Whereas Maltzer considers her inhuman and unable to compete since "she isn't female anymore" (278), her performance proves him wrong, as the audience is overwhelmed by her beauty and applauds her "[t]he accolade of their interruption was a tribute more eloquent than polite waiting could ever have been" (284). Hence, the praise supports the notion of Deidre's special beauty and stresses her femininity, without answering the omnipresent question of the state of her humanity (Vertesi 76 f.).

15 With that said, this portrayal also shows that Harris' and Maltzer's dominant male gaze is solely focused on Deidre's outward appearance, which is in particular for Harris sufficient enough to judge what she has become. In addition, Harris concentrates on excessively analyzing Deidre's new body and outward appearance when he first meets with her and does not remember her for any significant personality characteristics. Rather, he remembers her for her beauty and performative abilities, which he repeatedly points out in the course of the plot "[S]he had been so intimately familiar in every poise and attitude, through so many years" (Moore 273). Nevertheless, by referring to her as "the loveliest creature whose image ever moved along the airways" (261) in the first sentence of the short story, while appreciating her outward appearance, he also routinely degrades her for being a "creature" (260) and "subhuman" (293) throughout the story, which she vehemently refuses to accept. Thus, Deidre is imprisoned by the scope of Harris' perception of her, as he denies

her personality, and her appearance is merely analyzed by his superficial way of thinking. By not addressing her character in any way, the narration criticizes the perception of gender roles in science fiction literature and highlights its distinct male gaze and dismissive attitude of men towards women. This can also be found in the distribution of their roles in society: whereas Deidre's function as a singer is to entertain a wide audience, Harris – as her manager – has the power to judge her actions and to even decide over her career. Subsequently, Maltzer – Deidre's creator – artificially designed her and is thus aware of her capabilities, thoughts and desires: "I created you, my dear. I know. I've sensed that uneasiness in you growing and growing for a long while now" (290). By asserting his role in her creation, he denies Deidre the ability to form a reflected assessment of her own needs and desires[12], which underlines his patronizing attitude towards her. When Deidre insists she is "not a Frankenstein monster made out of dead flesh" (293) [13], towards the end of the story, it is not only the first instance in which she is being recognized for her character and humanity instead of the body, but also an indication of her self-empowering approach to overcome Maltzer's and Harris' control and their interminable attacks on femininity. She surprises both men by moving with inhuman speed, which further serves to stress the advantages brought by her cyborgian state as "even thought was slow, compared with Deidre's swiftness" (296). This, additionally, serves as evidence of the influence of her posthuman state on her abilities, and as such, can be understood as her contribution to challenging patriarchal norms.

16 In regard to the female characters' self-perception, and as a consequence of their desire to alternate their situation, all three stories are centered around the AIs' and cyborgs' wish to overcome the discrimination they are faced with. Either being a hierarchically structured, less valuable member of society – "A Real Girl", "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" – or, being oppressed by self-proclaimed superior men, in "No Woman Born". Deidre, however, successfully embraces the urge to be recognized for her humaneness and consequently behaves in a self-liberating manner as she reflects critically: "I'm not a robot, with compulsions built into me that I have to obey. I'm free-willed and independent, and, Maltzer—I'm human" (Moore 293). By choosing to view her situation in this light she

[12] Aside of the desire to perform, Deidre longs for the appreciation of her newly achieved life and wishes to be respected and not told what to do by either of the two men.

[13] The intertextual reference to *Frankenstein; Or, the modern Prometheus* (1818), is a prominent element in all three stories and is used to either repulsively describe women or the process in which a cyborg is being created. The scenarios invoked by this reference derive their horror among other things from the nightmarish qualities of thematising the process of galvanism and a technophobic perception of the posthuman state. Furthermore, it can be read as a reference to Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, who in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), expresses the need for women's equality and education.

effectively overpowers her oppressors, yet the same cannot be said for either P. Burke's or the AI's case. P. Burke, who is rather self-critical to begin with, considers suicide as her last option. However, when being asked why a seventeen-year-old would want to end her life, she cannot provide an answer. Her lack of speech stresses the desperation she succumbs to, leading her to believe that suicide is her only means of escape. Lack of conventional attractiveness results directly in discrimination: "No surgeon would touch her […] She's also quite young, but who would care?" (Tiptree 547). In addition, her new personality as Delphi puts an end to the persona of P. Burke, who is "legally dead" (549), and forces her to lead two half-lives. Consequently, the perfect Delphi on the one side, and the disfigured P. Burke on the other give rise to the intricate situation in which she is not capable to distinguish her mind, which belongs to Burke, and her body, which is Delphi's, and ultimately leads to the increasing loss of P. Burke's original personality: "The fact is, P. Burke can no longer clearly recall that she exists apart from Delphi." (568). Finally, "[t]he little thing in his arms stirs, says plaintively, 'I'm Delphi' (575), being her last words, suggest the final stage of the technological disembodiment of P. Burke and problematize the notion of the transcendence of the body. Thus, P. Burke's pleasure of being the empowered Delphi, who chooses not to look back at her past, conceals her introductory remark on her, P. Burke's, death itself: "She's deciding she really did die" (549). This further stresses the aspect of disembodiment for the sake of personal fulfilment. Therefore, Tiptree's short story in particular highlights the degradation of the physical body for the benefit of gaining a virtual body: "If you cut the transmission cold you'll kill the Remote […] If you pull Burke out you'll probably finish her too. It's a fantastic cybersystem, you don't want to do that" (572). The connection between a mind and a body that is not its own also problematizes notions of romantic love (Booth and Flanagan 459). In this way, Tiptree's narrative functions as a comment on the value of individual personalities and aims to expose the patronizing and sexist treatment of women in society, which, due to the death[14] of P. Burke, can be read as a cynical remark on the prospect of the future. This is illustrated when Face's voice directly addresses the reader at the very end: "Believe it, zombie […] You can stop sweating. There's a great future there" (Tiptree 577).

17 In Lewitt's short story, the AI glorifies the imagination and creation of a physical body, from which she promises herself to have a singular consciousness and to be able to

[14] P. Burke has just been killed by her lover Paul and he will go on to support the discriminatory system of the GTX Company of his father. By the end of the story the beautiful Delphi is "nothing but a warm little bundle of vegetative functions hitched to some expensive hardware" (577), thus reducing P. Burke to Delphi's outward appearance and ignoring her gruesome death.

embrace her feelings and desires, which are not being recognized due to her inhumanness "[a]nd because I didn't have a body the entire question of my sexuality and orientation was completely superfluous" (508). The story explores the consequences of such a process, which endangers the AI's life: "I'm ready to die, if I have to. If that's the price of being real" (506). Additionally, the inferiority of being human in comparison to being a "megabrain" (507) is being emphasized when she says: "In all my life I have never known physical pain. I have never been hungry. I have never been cold or wet or had a charley-horse in my leg or a runny nose. All my life I have never slept. I have never lost consciousness" (517). Therefore, the story questions the value of being a cyborg superhuman, and in contrast to Tiptree's approach – in which P. Burke finds initial happiness outside her body by means of a new personality – highlights the necessity of living among mortal human beings in order to be truly living (Booth and Flanagan 458). In the process of developing a new body, the AI is critically monitoring the process and shows signs of vanity by commenting on her re-embodied outward appearance: "The hair is dark brown too, almost black, and straight. I had wanted curls, but I was told quite crossly that I would get whatever came out of the DNA mix just like a real person, and just like a real person I would have to put up with it" (Lewitt 505). By showing her desire for a specific look, the AI is presented as being solely interested in the outward appearance and thus shows signs of superficiality – which she ought to rise above since she is otherwise portrayed as having superior mental faculties. It is Lewitt's comment on the stereotypical perception of women, who are supposed to conform to society's beauty ideals. This preoccupation with looks diverts from the AI's genuine desire to really live among and as part of the human society. The AI considers being an adult woman as having achieved an empowered state which is to say "a woman, an adult who is in her full power" (508), and represents another aspect of Lewitt's approach to argue in favor of gender equality. Depicting an AI that chooses to be a woman, it implies a societal desirability of this gender which is shown as challenged in the other two short stories by Moore and Tiptree.

18 In light of seeking a liberating and ultimately empowered state of the female gender in the stories, it is vital to point out that none of the short stories displays an actually independent character; instead, they are forced to obey the order and perception of a male superiority. In the case of "A Real Girl", it is due to the AI being forced to remain stationary, namely by being "four pounds of neural computing circuitry in a box" (Lewitt 507) and being obligated to wait for humans to communicate with her in the interface: "She kept coming back and I kept waiting, hoping, that she'd return soon. That I'd catch a glimpse of her in the video monitors, that I'd hear someone else mention her name" (516). Furthermore, the AI's

profession – and thus what she likes and strives for – is in fact fulfilling work for others, which underscores the unequal conditions she has to face and stresses the role of dependence for women: "I am always a machine when I work them" (508). Therefore, in the process of creating her body, the AI is consequently not in power to do so herself; rather, she is dependent on others and is forced to rely on trusting the "DNA mix" (505). When considering that she is a two-hundred-year-old AI, whose purpose in *life* is to collect as much knowledge as possible and to function as a database for people to have access to, this aspect functions as a limiting basis, which ties in with the notion of the cyborg's struggle to overcome the gap between being humanlike and rising to become a hypermachine. Hence, the AI, despite its superior coding, is forced to become a slave to its creators rather than the other way around (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 199).

19 In regard to "The Girl Who Was Plugged In", P. Burke is being preserved from death in order to fulfill work for GTX. Hence, she is not even granted permission to decide over her future or ending her life as evidenced in the line, "Our girl revives enough to answer the questionnaire without which you can't die, even in the future" (Tiptree 548). In accordance with being stationary, she is still described degradingly as "the monster, down in a dungeon, smelling of electrode-paste" (565) and a "caricature of a woman burning, melting […] the beast she is chained to […] Delphi" (565 f.) and is thus only able to remote control Delphi's cyborg body. However, even in Delphi's hinted-at versatile state "Delphi doesn't have much privacy; investments of her size don't" (556**)** and is furthermore assigned to obey all orders set by her technical creator Joe and 'fatherly' figure Mr. Cantle "a wired-up slave! Spikes in her brain, electronic shackles in his bird's heart" (570). The state of dependence is additionally supported by the working methods of the megacorporation GTX. Here, Delphi is being told to promote products to the society and in particular draws her increasing joy on the mass appeal she in turn achieves. Consequently, the narrative emphasizes the constructed ideal of femininity, which prompts P. Burke to disembody from her real body and to re-embody ultimately as Delphi in order to fit in. Thus, her entrapped physicality is used to comment on society's unrealistic expectation of gender imprisonment and women per se (Hollinger 306). P. Burke's survival is only of importance for controlling the content-free body of Delphi and emphasizes on the one hand the dismissive value of her female gender, and on the other the technophobic idea of a future, in which a loss of oneself occurs in exchange for an increasing virtual connectivity (Hicks 67).

20 With a similar origination process as Delphi, it is in particular Deidre's technological state that concerns Maltzer, and as a consequence motivates him to disallow her to return to

the stage and to question his creation: "I've done something to her a thousand times worse than the fire ever could" (Moore 279). Harris, however, is unwilling to either thoroughly accept her overly-powerful state or forbid her to return to the stage. Rather, he is much more concerned with denying Deidre's posthuman state and meticulously tries to see her remaining female human parts. He suppresses her status as a new entity and selfishly exploits the situation to indulge in reminiscences as the "illusion of the old Deidre hung about the new one" (278). It is the aspect of Deidre being imprisoned in her cyborg body over which both men obsess and which ultimately leads them to treat the ramifications of her artificial intelligence hyperconsciously. Hence, Moore's narrative is centered around a critique of the male gaze and falls into line with a sexist perception of femininity in science fiction literature, as both men are concerned with solely materializing their desires Deidre has to attain, and limiting female characters to a mere replication of an idealized notion of beauty. Even at the end, it is not Deidre's personality that enthuses them, but rather her performance that makes them recall her extraordinary beauty: "Time caught up with Harris. He saw it overtake Maltzer too, saw the man jerk convulsively away from the grasping hands, in a ludicrously futile effort to forestall what had already happened" (296). However, in Deidre's final monologue she again considers her yet-to-be-explored potentials: "There's so much still untried. My brain's human, and no human brain could leave such possibilities untested. I wonder, though … I do wonder —"(300), which could hint at a further empowerment of her status, or, a possible end-of-the-world scenario even involving the possibility of her self-replication[15]. Maltzer already hinted at such a possibility by stating that "[t]he thing we create makes living unbearable" (292). This scenario further serves as a popular theme to criticize in the science fiction genre and the prospects of a techno-laden futuristic world.

21 Although all three stories derive from imaginative concepts of the unknown, in which futuristic technologies lay the foundation of exploring a potential future, it is at their core at which they provide a systematic depiction of social circumstances of the oppressed female gender and simultaneously contribute to the reevaluation of what it means to be human. Subsequently, it is the enabling aspect of a posthuman state which facilitates the liberating possibility to overcome the patriarchy and sets forth the process of abolishing gender imprisonment with its standardized notion of ideal states of femininity and of female roles in society. Finally, it is important to note the authors' ability to manage the balancing act of

[15] Also referred to as gray goo problem in *Engines of Creation* (1986) which is a term coined by the nanotechnology scientist Eric Drexler and stands for all-consuming machines that are building more of themselves (146).

intertextually referring to Shelly's *Frankenstein*, by which they include the maddening scenario of the grotesque horror of the uncertainty of technological achievements, and map the overarching notion for a new state of gender relations, in possible future settings for human kind. Which, in response to the question of what it means to be human, could pose the answer that it "is about not retaining our humanity" (Brayshaw and Witts 461). With that said, "there's a great future" (Tiptree 577), isn't there?

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