The Prosthetic Body: Semiosis and Survival Beyond the Cyborg

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In 1998, Paralympic athlete Aimee Mullins posed on the cover of *Dazed and Confused* magazine (fig. 1)**. Clad in athletic running tights and carbon-fiber sprinting prostheses, she is a vision of high-tech, functional sleekness. Her prosthetic legs seem to meld into her calves, the intimacy of the connection between the sprinting blades and her body rendering her a seductive fusion of human and machine—that is, a cyborg. Cultural studies scholar Marquard Smith echoes this reading when he observes that tabloid and reputable news sources alike portrayed Mullins as the "figure of the quintessential Cyborgian sex kitten."[1] As this reception of Mullins as a cover girl suggests, the conflation between the amputee and the cyborg is seductive for its suggestion of seamlessness, implying, as Smith puts it, "the ultimate victory of technology over deficiency."[2] As new technologies continue steadily toward making the fictive cyborg a reality, this depiction of the amputee as cyborg has proliferated in American pop culture, coming to symbolize a contemporary technological paradigm.**

1 Marquard Smith, "The Vulnerable Articulate: James Gillingham, Aimee Mullins, and Matthew Barney," *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 58.

2 Ibid.

A cybernetic organism generally understood as a hybrid between human and machine, the cyborg pervaded visual media just as science-fiction blockbusters were heavily shaping the

zeitgeist; in films like Blade Runner (1982) and The Terminator (1984) and across television series like Star Trek: The Next Generation (1987–94), the cyborg materialized as a figure of anxiety about the consequences of our increasingly intimate relationship to technology. As network technologies increasingly pervaded everyday experience and the enmeshments between the body and these technologies tightened and multiplied, the cyborg came to represent a challenge to the definition of "human."

Amputees and their prostheses appear to be particularly potent figurations of the cyborg, their already uniquely intimate relationship to technological apparatuses evocative of the complete integration of flesh and circuit. Oscar Pistorius, who took the modern version of Mullins's bladed prostheses to the Olympics in 2012 and was nicknamed "The Blade Runner" after the eponymous sci-fi film, was even turned into a chromed bionic man for Thierry Mugler's A*Men Fragrance in 2011 (fig. 2). Three-dimensional printing technology has allowed cosmesis to be taken to new extremes by companies like Bespoke Industries, The Alternative Limb Project, and Alleles Design Studio, each of which offers their own version of highly customized and elaborate prostheses and prosthesis coverings to their clients, and 2015 alone saw the release of three major films featuring female characters with prosthetic limbs—Kingsman: The Secret Service, Ex Machina, and Mad Max: Fury Road. At first, this proliferation might seem like an extension of the cyborg imaginary. But the figure of the amputee with prosthesis maps a different kind of subjectivity and carries very different ontological implications. Rather than be seduced by the technological promise of the wholly hybridized cyborg, Mullins, Pistorius, and the fictional characters that they inspire in fact demonstrate a preoccupation with, and anxiety about, the limitations of the technologized body. The sudden influx into mass media of stylized prosthetic limbs is indicative of a broad visual cultural interest not in the seamlessly integrated cyborg but in the prosthetic body—the composite configuration of human bodies plus prosthetic devices.

When Donna Haraway first published her groundbreaking essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" in 1985, she was responding to a dramatic shift in the cultural milieu of the United States: the development of the Internet. Affecting everything from biology to economics, the Internet encouraged a cybernetic mode of thought that reconfigured structures of knowledge as networked communication systems. Rather than studying the discrete human and machine, for instance, cybernetics invests itself in the system that emerges from the flow of information between the two; the individual units themselves are, to an extent, irrelevant. The fundamental consequence of this shift is a divestment from the imperative to

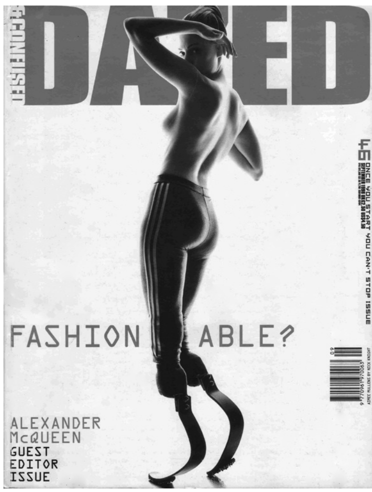

fig. 1 Aimee Mullins on the cover of *Dazed and Confused*, September 1998. Photo: Nick Knight.

fig. 2 Oscar Pistorius ad for Thierry Mugler A*Men fragrance, 2011. Photo: Ali Mahdavi.

define the borders between entities. What does it matter what the system's components are when the meaningful data is determined by what the system produces? Within a cybernetic framework, boundary-drawing practices that differentiate between the organic and the synthetic appear obsolete. The cyborg was a response to this precarious position, and, for Haraway, this figure offers the possibility of a utopian future. As an always-already in-progress amalgam of socially constructed meanings, the cyborg subverts the Christian genesis myth of pure origin, and therefore also the myth's necessary teleology—that is, Armageddon, the return to dust. Haraway argues that the cyborg is "outside salvation history," outlining "a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end."[3] By embracing hybridity and a fusion between the human and nonhuman so complete that the very categories lose their meaning, Haraway thought to obviate the obsession with purity of origin and the corollary anxiety of its pollution.

3 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 150.

We have been living with the Internet for more than thirty years now. The enormity of its influence can hardly be quantified and certainly could not have been anticipated as early as 1985. As technological integration has become ubiquitous in Western culture throughout the early 2000s and into the 2010s, the question has no longer been whether or not we would become cyborgs: with smart devices, wearable tech, and near-continuous Internet connectivity, that question is precluded by technological suffusion—the normative contemporary subject has become a good cyborg indeed. Rather, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, we are facing an anxiety about what has been given up in order to make room for the very technologies that pervade our everyday experience, always so close at hand. This shift in focus is manifested, as the cyborg was, in the collective imagination of pop-cultural visuals: the prosthetic body, and with it, new ontological implications for a new age.

The prosthetic limb, for all its high-tech styling and intimacy, presupposes the fundamental trauma of loss. While cyborg embodiment presumes the potential for a complete fusion between organic and synthetic, prosthetic embodiment marks the rupture. To have a cyborg body is to meld human and machine to the point of obviating such categories; to have a prosthetic body is to maintain their separation. The boundary between body and prosthesis is rendered as a highly visible disjuncture, drawing attention to the site of amputation and the trauma that occasioned it, perhaps even emphasizing the possibility of technological substitution. However, the varying success of the prosthetic substitute produces very different

effects. Effective substitution can work to reify normative subjectivity by asserting its resilience to radical fracturing, be it physical or psychic. Conversely, the incomplete or contingent incorporation of the prosthetic object into the body can provide opportunities for a more dynamic figuration of feminist becoming, one that does not depend on a belief in the fundamental wholeness of the human subject. The prosthetic body can iterate the anxious desire to recuperate fragmented subjectivity, but it can also offer ontological possibilities for those who fall outside such reactionary projects.

The effective substitution of the prosthetic limb for the amputated is part of a holistic project that involves using technology to reproduce the normative, "complete" subject despite traumatic loss. In this process, some representations of the prosthetic body attempt not only to ameliorate trauma but also to suggest a recuperation of wholeness through the acquisition of, and social relationships to, material objects. This hope is especially available to masculine subjects, for whom the threat of emasculation is unendurable within patriarchal capitalism. Such a project can be seen in Lionsgate marketing director Ted Palen's use of the model Alex Minsky in his 2014 Hunger Games "District Heroes" ad campaign (fig. 3). Utilizing a marketing technique known as "world-building," the campaign depicted portraits of fictional characters from the film's dystopian future, and was intended to be read as propaganda from the fascist nation-state Panem that features in The Hunger Games franchise. Panem is broken up into Districts, with each being responsible for a specific form of labor and production. This emphasis on labor works in tandem with the prosthetic body to reify the formation of masculine subjectivity. Minksy, a soldier-turned-model who lost his right leg below the knee in a roadside bomb explosion as a Marine on tour in Afghanistan in 2010, appears in Palen's image as Elias Haan, the "hero" of District 7, the lumber district. As a male subject, it is important that Minsky is a real amputee—his amputation is a war wound and therefore patriotically "productive," both within the diegetic framework of The Hunger Games and in the United States. The potentially emasculating fragmentation of his body is a reality to be mitigated, not a fantasy to be imagined.[4]

4 Lenore Manderson, *Surface Tensions: Surgery, Bodily Boundaries, and the Social Self* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011), 111.

Minsky/Haan's character is positioned as an archetype of outdoorsmanship and physical prowess, a lumberman and wood worker. He holds in his lap a beautiful wooden prosthetic leg, which he presumably carved. The photo's staging emphasizes a recognizable code of male ability, sexualizing the physical power and fortitude required to achieve the mastery of such manual work as

fig. 3 Alex Minsky for *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* "District Heroes" ad campaign, 2014. Photo: Ted Palen.

chopping wood and the skilled craft of woodworking. Palen's photo of Minsky intentionally codifies such markers of male prowess and desirability. Minsky's body and subjectivity are intended to be understood as heroically damaged but already remade as whole. The character Haan's wooden prosthesis becomes a phallic symbol that at once asserts male virility and situates the prosthetic body as a complete figure, his lack substituted through the effective production and consumption cycle of capitalism in service to the state. In this case, prosthesis becomes a project of reasserting masculinity and wholeness in the face of real, physical loss. The still image fixes the fantasy, rendering it a fetishistic reification of normative desire.[5]

5 Smith, "The Vulnerable Articulate," 67.

In contrast, the female body, already perceived within a patriarchal social structure as lacking, can claim the ideological space to explore more productive imaginings. While this lack subordinates female identification to male, it also allows for a critique of wholeness that the male body cannot offer and for an enunciation of the prosthetic body as a figure of feminist becoming. This generative framework can be seen in the protagonist Furiosa, an amputee with an easily removable robotic arm played by Charlize Theron in Mad Max: Fury Road (2015) (fig. 4). George Miller's post-apocalyptic film extrapolates not a cyborgian interdependency but rather a contingency and partial becoming. For Furiosa, the limitations and separability of various technologies provide opportunities for a new, survivalist vision of futurity.

It is within the disclosure of limitation that the semiotic powers of prosthesis and the prosthetic body are revealed as a kind of contemporary ontology. The visual truncation of the body and clear difference between Furiosa's arm and prosthetic limb mark the amputation even when the prosthesis is employed (fig. 5). This distinction is maintained visually and functionally; the prosthesis is neither enhancement nor handicap, and Furiosa is shown to be just as capable of existing in the wasteland without the prosthesis as she is with it (fig. 6). Unlike Mullins, whose cyborgian depiction seamlessly joins her prostheses to her body, Furiosa's prosthetic is not integrated; it is worn, much like a piece of clothing, attached via leather straps and metal buckles. The ease of its removal highlights the limitations of both Furiosa's body and her prosthetic limb, continually reasserting not only their separation but also the incompleteness of the substitution (fig. 7). This incompleteness serves as a marker of trauma and operates as the driving force in Furiosa's narrative—the most emotionally charged scenes for her are marked by the detaching of her prosthesis.

One such instance of this important removal occurs when Furiosa is finally reunited with her kin, the Vuvalini. This should be

fig. 4 Furiosa and War Rig in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). Film still: Jasin Boland.

fig. 5 Detail of Furiosa.

fig. 6 Furiosa without prosthesis in hand-to-hand combat in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). Film still: Jasin Boland.

fig. 7 Furiosa and the wives in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). Film still: Jasin Boland.

fig. 8 Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). Film still: Jasin Boland.

the triumphal scene, as she, after a lifetime of oppression, finally returns to the home from which she was stolen, the mythic Green Place. Instead, Furiosa learns that the "earth turned sour" and the Green Place is no more. At this news, she stumbles into the desert in a daze, simultaneously uncoupling herself from her prosthesis. Once she is free of the arm, Furiosa drops to her knees and screams (fig. 8). This moment of intense emotional release requires that she remove the prosthetic in order to reveal the trauma of her experience. The decoupling of the robotic limb from her body reiterates the fact that the prosthesis is a symptom of a larger condition, an imperfect substitute for what she has lost. Unlike Minsky's triumphantly masculinist profile in The Hunger Games ad campaign, this configuration of prosthesis asserts that, whatever the promises of technology, it cannot ever replace or reproduce wholeness.

In fact, Fury Road goes so far as to suggest that, even as the traumatic loss of wholeness is mourned, such a loss is itself a phantasm. For Furiosa, the Green Place represents a time before trauma. By attempting to return to a place that does not exist, Furiosa was in fact hoping to return to a time that does not exist. It is actually the Citadel, the place from which Furiosa was trying to escape, that is the rare oasis in the vast wasteland; it is only when she decides to go back to the Citadel and defeat her original oppressor that she achieves any kind of fulfillment. This is a different narrative structure from that of Haraway's cyborg, which offers a kind of optimistic "out" from the apocalyptic teleology of cybernetic integration: "The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust."[6] Haraway's ontology claims that if we are successful in accepting our cyborgian non-origins, we will have no desire to return to a place of purity; the very notion of "return" would be rendered incomprehensible. Rather than aligning with Haraway's cyborgian prophecy of a world without genesis, without the garden, Furiosa's failed return to the Green Place actually results from a misplacement of desire within the ontological structure that the movie posits. The very place that first produced her psychic trauma is also the most productive site for reconciling it. For the prosthetic body, it is not that there is no garden, but that the garden can in fact be found through the reclamation of the site of trauma. The key to prosthetic embodiment is not holism but redemption from the trauma of desiring the mythic unattainable—that is, the myth of purity and wholeness.

6 Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 151.

The prevalence of the prosthetic body in the current Western visual-cultural imaginary can be read as a manifestation of new beliefs about how technology operates in relation to human

subjects. Depictions of prostheses like Alex Minsky's in The Hunger Games advertisements and Furiosa's in Mad Max: Fury Road outline a new configuration for subject formation, one that distinctly feels the loss of the naturalized human and questions the effectiveness of a substitution technology that attempts to compensate for that natural organism. But rather than trying to sidestep disaster, as Haraway's cyborg and its obviation of the mythological Fall once strove to do, prosthesis embodies a possibility for reconciling us to a destruction that has already occurred. At a time in our history when every summer sets a historical heat record, when the daily news reads more like a body count than a narrative, the utopian promise of the cyborg feels febrile; refusing apocalypse is not a viable survival strategy if it is already in progress. But fragmentation and partial integration also produce plurality, though perhaps not as evenly or seamlessly as full hybridity. Having survived trauma, prosthesis proves that there is life after apocalypse. The prosthetic body is not a rejection of possibility but rather an assertion that futures are available to us only by acknowledging trauma and disjuncture: let us not forget the cyborg, but let us see the seams.