

# Reality and Subjectivity: Digital Films as Cyborg Texts in a Post-Modern World

Tan Meng Yoe  
Institute Advertising Communication Training  
myoe.tan@gmail.com

In recent years, a new breed of films has emerged. *Mirrormask*, *Sin City*, *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, *Casshern*, and *Immortel: Ad Vitam* are among the world's first 'fully digital' films. These films are shot almost entirely on blue/green screen environments, utilizing digital effects to create new and fully artificial worlds and characters. Furthermore, digital animation has taken huge steps beyond its initial *Toy Story* years, most recently resulting in *Beowulf*, which raised the debate of whether such a production should be categorized merely as 'animation'.

These cinematic advances are indicative markers of where society is today. The film industry has played an important and influential role in charting human concerns and conditions throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With globalization, digitalization has become today's key phenomena. Digitalization is increasingly a part of everyday life; citizens are becoming *cyborgs* with vast new possibilities. Digital films are perhaps an expression of post-modernism and cyborgism as it deconstructs the barriers of reality and fiction.

The cyborg is a 'cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction'<sup>1</sup> It is a combination of the organic and machine, creating a symbiotic relationship between two seemingly irreconcilable things. The social cyborg relates to discursive formations present in culture and society and inhabits the spaces of irony, hybridity, and binaries. The concept of the cyborg implies a capacity to question and deconstruct binaries and norms. It is an expression of post-modernism because of its nature to be resistive of grand truths and meta-narratives. Historical binaries underpinning ideas of gender, race, status and others can be dislocated: this is the promise the cyborg offers.

In practice and reality, however, the cyborgian ideal may remain unattainable as it is itself reliant upon binaries to exist. It is still dependent on contexts and discourses, and the cyborg is still be trapped within binaries<sup>2</sup>. This is because the cyborg is forced to identify itself with

the binary that it resists. Ironically, the cyborg seeks to destabilize the dualism that gives it its very purpose and meaning.

This paradox is apparent in the digital arena. The internet, for example, is populated by individuals with multiple identities. Digital animation carries the innate objective to become more plausible and more 'believable'. Digitalization tests the boundaries of reality and fiction, and subconsciously tests the boundaries of humanity's social beliefs. The result of such testing, however, is not entirely romantic, but in fact exposes society's discomfort of such deconstruction. Digital films, with their tension between 'real' and 'virtual', are good examples of the cyborgian dilemma. Films like *Mirrormask*, *Sin City*, and *Beowulf* may vary in genre, but carry similar thematic veins. They feature alternative worlds, chimaeric 'living' creatures, and blatantly break down cultural barriers.

*Mirrormask* tells the story of Helena Campbell, a young girl who travels into her own dreams and drawings in a quest to save her mother as well as the Kingdom of Light. The setting of the film revolves around two worlds: The 'real' world, and Helena's dream world, which is constructed of her personal drawings.

The relationship between reality and fiction is critical to the film's narrative. The film's narrative and its other themes use the conflict between what is real and what is imaginary as its cornerstone. The fate of Helena's dying mother is reliant on the result of Helena's quest to save the Queen in her dreams. The dream is also dependent on the real world. When Helena finally returns to her own world and hears that her mother is declared safe, the subjective relationship between the 'real' and 'unreal' ceases to exist. The convergence of reality and fiction is merely temporal as the binary resurfaces.

The second film, *Sin City*, is set in Old Town, and deals heavily with the themes of gangsterism, corruption, and the reversal of morality's role in society: in particular, the discourse of prostitution.

The ideological position of Old Town's prostitutes is uniquely cyborgian. They resist norms and redefine power. Traditionally, the sex industry portrays female prostitutes as 'immanent, material, and passive, supposed to experience guilt and shame for possessing a female body'<sup>3</sup>. In this film, the prostitutes are the violators and dominators, possessing firearms and killing policemen. Such portrayal gives the prostitutes a dramatic and almost unreal shift in representation.

However, despite such reversal, the prostitutes suffer from the cyborgian paradox. The social reality that stigmatizes the prostitute resurfaces through Becky, a young prostitute. In two separate scenes, she participates in a plot to kill a cop, and betrays her own kind because she is ashamed to be a prostitute. The 'different' representation of the prostitute would not have existed without the traditional stereotypes.

For Robert Zemeckis' *Beowulf*, the contention between reality and fiction is slightly different. From a technical perspective, *Beowulf* is designed by Robert Zemeckis to be a 3-D animated film that appears extremely realistic, using motion capture technology to create life-like animation<sup>4</sup>. Technicalities aside, the release of this film generated heated debate about Angelina Jolie's character (the mother of Grendel), who appears practically naked in this 'cartoon' which children are allowed to watch (with parental guidance).

Angelina Jolie herself did not expect her digital self to be portrayed thus, stating that she was shocked by the reality of the film. The motion capture looked real, being virtually indistinguishable from the real person<sup>5</sup>. At the

outset, the debate is about whether Angelina Jolie's nakedness is genuine, but the underlying discomfort comes from the film's effacement of what is 'real' and what is 'fiction', which treads on the moral grounds of what is acceptable for children. Sexual expression has never been blatantly tested in mainstream Hollywood animation until *Beowulf*. *Beowulf's* cyborgian nature experiments with the boundaries of digital technology, and encounters a barrier via audience reaction. Viewers do not seem ready to accept a fiction that replicates reality so intimately, and appear still unprepared for the cyborgian freedom that is promoted.

Above is a glimpse of how these films help raise the question about cyborgism in the modern world. For this paper I have chosen the perspective that our society is transforming into a cyborgian world because of the increasing collapse between fiction and reality. Technically, digital films are extremely prominent manifestations of cyborgism and can give us a hint of where the world's heart is at.

But this transformation is not all smooth, and faces inevitable ideological resistances, as demonstrated by these digital films and their reception by audiences. These films are unique attempts to blur binaries and barriers, but this movement is faced with opposition from both within and beyond, as is the case of these digital films. As these films have shown, there are aspects about this collapse of binaries that society is not entirely comfortable with yet, in both thematic and literal forms. The next ten to twenty years will be both interesting and crucial for digital films as they seek to explore more intriguing and socially challenging frontiers.

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1 Haraway, Donna J. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, London: Routledge, pp. 151-155.

2 Short, Sue. 2005. *Cyborg Cinema and Contemporary Subjectivity*. Britain: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 116.

3 Brock, Rita Nakashima and Susan Brooks Thistlewaite. 199. *Casting Stones: Prostitution and Liberation in Asia and the United States*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, p. 234.

4 Von Riedermann, Dominick. 2007. "Beowulf an Animated Film", in *Suite101.com*. [http://animatedfilms.suite101.com/article.cfm/beowulf\\_an\\_animated\\_film](http://animatedfilms.suite101.com/article.cfm/beowulf_an_animated_film), last accessed 11/4/2008

5 McKay, Hollie. 2007. "Pop Tarts: Angelina Freaks Out Seeing Herself Naked In Beowulf", in FoxNews, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,308077,00.html>, last accessed 11/4/2008.

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