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1

Cycles, Sub-Genres and Cyborg Cinema

This chapter looks in more detail at the concept of film cycles and sub-genres, evaluating how cyborg narratives have evolved over the last thirty years and asking what themes they have incorporated over this period. By situating the cyborg film within a specific cycle, and assessing the modifications such narratives have undergone, a greater understanding is hopefully yielded of the way in which films adapt in order to keep audiences interested. As Thomas Schatz has argued, 'the genre approach treats movie production as a dynamic process of exchange between the film industry and its audience'¹ and while careful not to exaggerate this 'exchange' unduly, an acknowledgement of this relationship and its influence on the formation of a given genre is nevertheless held to be key. Particular attention is given to the theory of generic development put forward by Schatz in his book, *Hollywood Genres*, questioning the extent to which cyborg films reinforce or refute this model of cyclical transition, yet it is not simply linear development that is assessed, but the interrelation of differing themes within cyborg cinema, asserting that we not only need to explore transformations within specific genres, but across them as well. Although genre analysis is gaining greater critical attention today, the subject of cycles and the emergence of new hybrids remains woefully under-theorised within film scholarship. The chapter outlines the difference between a cycle and a sub-genre, summarising the cinematic cyborg's evolution and speculating on the factors that prompted this to occur.

Schatz has proposed a four-stage life cycle for film genres; beginning with the 'experimental', becoming established as 'classic', going through a period of 'refinement' and finally ending in the 'baroque' or self-reflexive.² Cyborg cinema partly corresponds with this outline, having evolved beyond its initially radical features, becoming ever more familiar and eventually taking some markedly new directions. As its budget grew, together with increased commercial expectation, serious questions regarding identity, alienation and exploitation became eclipsed by a more parodic tone. *Terminator 2* (1991) marks the beginning of the 'baroque' process, subverting the previous film's formula with a reformed villain and expensive state-of-the-art effects. The films that have appeared since have varied wildly in terms of creativity and narrative concerns, yet although Schatz perceived this stage to auger the inevitable demise of a given cycle, the cyborg

film's fate has consisted of ongoing change, thus inviting us to question Schatz's model and its assumptions.

Such deviations are perhaps only to be expected, particularly given the fact that Schatz based his theory on films produced within the Hollywood studio system. By the 1960s the established conventions of existing genres were deemed to have been fully played out, yet not only have many of these genres since been revived, new generic hybrids have emerged also. (While Schatz understood this interrelationship, calling for a mode of analysis that acknowledges the kinship between various genres,³ it is an area that clearly requires further investigation.)

Over the course of this chapter, not only are the thematic developments of the cyborg cycle assessed, but the influence of related cycles are evaluated also. Hence the concerns surrounding masculinity and the family found in Hollywood thrillers and comedies of the 1990s are shown to be reflected in cyborg films of the same period, while a darker tone signalled by serial killer films and the 'cyberthriller' that emerged alongside it provides another example of generic cross-fertilisation – an area that has met with relatively little critical analysis. Although it is the nature of any such task to be fairly general in terms of films cited, with the accompanying realisation that results will be dated before they have even gone to print, the advantages gained by this endeavour hopefully outweigh its limitations, charting the cyborg film's development from 1979 to the present in order to evaluate what specifically changed and why.

The fact that more recent films share many of the themes and concerns first broached by cyborg cinema attests to the ongoing significance of key themes. *The Matrix* (1999), for example, assesses the troubling interface between humanity and technology, investigating our dwindling ability to differentiate between reality and illusion, and questioning the capacity of individual consciousness to survive in a world of mass conformity. While the look of the film may be new, the inclusion of such themes demonstrates the cyborg's continued legacy. An exploration of cyborg cinema provides a context for evaluating such releases, as well as better understanding the films they have drawn upon. Finally, the cyborg's transition to blockbuster status is assessed, and its impact speculated upon.

What differentiates a cycle from a genre or sub-genre is a matter of some debate. Steve Neale defines the cycle as 'groups of films made within a specific and limited time-span, and founded, for the most part, on the characteristics of individual commercial successes'.⁴ This suggests that any films linked by thematic content and produced within a specific time-frame are intentionally derivative, designed to 'cash in' on the popularity of a specific box-office hit. While this assertion wryly comments on the motivations of mainstream film production, inferring that all such films are a bald attempt to profit from the appeal of a given success, it ignores the intentions of specific directors and additionally fails to explain why it is that cycles change over time. Alan Williams has argued that all genres are restricted, for the most part, to ten- and twenty-year cycles,⁵ thus suggesting that they are all, in a sense, cycles. Thomas Schatz refines such a claim by asserting that the life cycle of any genre fits a particular pattern of transition, with films becoming more self-conscious as their audiences become more familiar with specific

conventions – a transition he describes as moving from ‘transparency to opacity’ and from straightforward storytelling to ‘self-conscious formalism’.⁶ While this view has been strongly contended, not least by both Neale and Williams, it remains the most useful articulation of how films both alter and respond to changing expectations. However, while Schatz concurs with Williams in stating that all genres are cyclical, he fails to address how new genres have developed in recent years.

Rick Altman suggests that a cycle is the initial stage of any new genre, one that only achieves genre status once it has achieved ‘industry-wide’ recognition and adoption, adding that only a handful of cycles ever make this transition.⁷ In his view a cycle is ‘produced by associating a new type of material or approach with already existing genres’⁸ – a definition that suggests a ‘spin-off’ or variation of an existing genre. In Altman’s assessment, the distinction between genre and sub-genre appears to have been eroded altogether by the constant variations and inter-mixing of elements in contemporary cinema. As he argues, ‘with the development of each new genre, films go through a predictable pattern in which they are initially identified with two or more different categories before eventually stabilizing into the generic identity with which they are associated today’, affirming that this process has significantly increased in recent years.⁹ This contention has obvious ramifications regarding the use of the term ‘sub-genre’, implying that the notion of a ‘pure’ genre and its immediate offspring is no longer true. While the origins of any new thematic development can still be traced to specific sources, the continuous merging of generic elements makes the distinction between genre and sub-genre less valid.

The cyborg film is an apt example, for although it is clearly a sub-division of SF cinema, combining several generic motifs within a new format, it borrows from other genres also. The sentient computer and robot that feature in numerous SF narratives coalesce within the specific fusion of man and machine embodied by the cyborg, while a dystopian legacy is equally apparent in the futures that tend to be presented in such films. Yet a further level of generic inter-mixing is apparent from the cycle’s earliest examples. *Alien* (1979), for example, places a conventional horror motif within an SF setting, *Blade Runner* (1982) makes deliberate allusions to Film Noir conventions, *The Terminator* (1984) is arguably as much an action film as it is SF, and *RoboCop* (1986) is filled with satirical stabs at American culture, using SF as a veil by which to ridicule cultural mores. Later films incorporate additional elements from other genres, acquiring comic overtones, traces of melodrama, and so on. From the outset then, such films exemplify and even anticipate what Jim Collins has referred to as ‘hyperconscious eclecticism’ – a tendency he specifically aligns with films produced in the late 1980s and 1990s, and views as reflecting ‘changes in terms of audience competence and narrative technique, as well as a fundamental shift in what constitutes both entertainment and cultural literacy in the “Information Age”’.¹⁰

This mutability has clear ramifications for conventional genre analysis, forcing critics to abandon the notion of clear-cut divisions – with new narrative developments occupying more complex terrain than had previously been assumed. Altman’s concept of the cycle offers an alternative term by which to understand groups of

films linked by their thematic preoccupations and the period in which they were produced, and remains particularly helpful in addressing the fact that new cycles are continually being formulated in contemporary cinema, while also pointing out that 'for every dozen cycles, only a few genres ever emerge, and even fewer endure'.¹¹

Although it could be argued that the cyborg film has endured to the extent that it has achieved 'genrification',¹² I opt to use the term 'cycle' over that of 'genre' or 'sub-genre' because it implies a continuous state of transition, questioning the extent to which generic establishment is ever truly achieved today. For all its relative familiarity, the cyborg film has never quite achieved the status of a definitive genre, mutating instead in its features and forms. Using the term 'cycle' emphasises the fact that it is still experiencing a continuous process of revision, merging with other cycles as it does so, and consequently proving the difficulty of retaining discrete genre divisions. As Robin Wood has argued, 'one of the greatest obstacles to any fruitful theory of genre has been the tendency to treat the genres as distinct'.¹³ The cyborg film illustrates that such a tendency is simply unworkable, as its numerous transitions demonstrate.

Yet if the very notion of genre is now in question, why should differing stages of their development be applicable, particularly given the rate at which new plot motifs are adopted and abandoned? The simple answer is that it is precisely because of this level of experimentation that mutability remains a key feature of any cycle, and any attempt to understand them thus involves tracing a specific path of development. Ironically, despite being written in 1981, and basing his criteria on genres formed within the classic studio era, it is Schatz whose work seems to be most useful in comprehending contemporary cinema and the ways in which certain themes and trends evolve. His analysis is not without its faults however, including the limited selection of films discussed, the fact that he bases his analysis on only six genres, the overly simplistic emphasis on discrete stages of evolution, and above all the tendency to place undue emphasis on the audience's power to alter the shape of a given genre. As he states, or perhaps overstates in this case: 'the contemporary mass audience ultimately is in good part responsible for the development of the studio system . . . it is as if with each commercial effort the studios suggested another variation in cinematic conventions, and the audience indicated whether the inventive variations would themselves be conventionalised through their repeated usage', claiming a reciprocal relationship between artist and audience in 'celebrating their collective values and ideals'.¹⁴

Such contentions have led Alan Williams to respond that 'audiences are not uniform masses, reacting with uniformity and consistency',¹⁵ and of course this is true, yet Schatz's point is nevertheless important in reminding us that films do not exist in a vacuum, but are designed to anticipate and meet changing audience expectations. Neither does he praise Hollywood genre films unreservedly, as Williams implies, perceiving them instead as a 'contemporary myth' whose function is 'the ritualization of collective ideals, the celebration of temporarily resolved social and cultural conflicts, and the concealment of disturbing cultural conflicts behind the guise of entertainment'.¹⁶ This is an important point to make, indicating

that he clearly understands that conflicts exist in society, and therefore among audiences also, even if Hollywood pretends that they do not. Indeed, Schatz ably sums up the ambivalence inherent in the cyborg film when he states that ‘what is so fascinating and confounding about Hollywood genre films is their capacity to “play it both ways”, to both criticise and reinforce the values, beliefs and ideals of our culture within the same narrative context’.¹⁷

Judith Hess Wright claims that even critical elements are contained, arguing that ‘genre films produce satisfaction rather than action, pity and fear rather than revolt. They serve the interests of the ruling class by assisting in the maintenance of the status quo, and they throw a sop to oppressed groups who, because they are unorganised and therefore afraid to act, eagerly accept the genre film’s absurd solutions to economic and social conflicts.’¹⁸ If Schatz is guilty of allowing too much power for audiences, Hess Wright denies them any motivation other than sheer escapism. She fails to allow for any differing meaning or satisfaction that might be afforded by such films, is unable to imagine the possibility of any radical features within a given genre, or to explain why it is that they change, yet these are all important considerations. The fact that genres alter over time, increasingly merging together, and undergo periods of popularity and demise would seemingly refute her contention that they exist solely to maintain the status quo, or to pacify audiences, indicating a continual need to maintain audience interest and to modify themselves accordingly.

The cyborg film demonstrates how such transitions occur, incorporating themes that question specific cultural assumptions and conditions. However, its ability to challenge existing mores appears to have been noticeably reduced as the cycle has progressed. The satirical nature of the cyborg film is arguably its most interesting feature, drawing upon a rich tradition in SF as a whole, yet the capacity to provoke and question can also be seen to have become diluted over time, particularly as the cycle has acquired greater status and popularity – a fact that makes the nature of generic transition all the more relevant in understanding such films.

Although Schatz limits his assessment to genres produced during the studio system, the stages outlined and the governing tendencies observed can still be noted today. That is not to say, however, that this model can simply be mapped onto more recent films without meeting certain problems, not least because the industry itself has changed considerably since this period, along with the types of films being made. Typifying his tendency towards generalisation, Schatz claims that all ‘American cinema’ had entered the ‘baroque’ phase by the late 1950s,¹⁹ suggesting a uniform transition in which existing genres had reached their final stage of development. Yet this assessment fails to consider new genres that were emerging at the time, or those that have appeared since. It also begs the question of whether any new cycles are destined to repeat the same evolutionary pattern discerned in the studio era, whether a ‘classic’ stage is still valid in ‘post-classical’ cinema, or whether they are more likely to skip the preliminary stages by drawing upon pre-established conventions and audience familiarity. After all, although fewer films are now produced, there is greater pressure on each to do well commercially and a correspondingly greater emphasis to find a

definitive formula that will prove to be successful, a strategy Schatz terms as 'the blockbuster syndrome'.²⁰

Given this situation, one might assume that all films now have a tendency towards the baroque, exhibiting a certain level of 'self-conscious formalism' in openly borrowing and mixing diverse elements. The cyborg film, as has been argued, showed this tendency from its beginning, while additionally demonstrating a level of ingenuity and experimentation that was clearly instrumental to its success. In fact, the cyborg film has followed much the same process of innovation, establishment and parody as Schatz's model suggests, with some notable variations. Popularity and imitation may have led to a dissipation of creativity yet far from culminating in the eventual decline of the cycle, the cyborg film proves that certain themes may become transmuted instead into other forms, while more recent indications suggest that even when seemingly exhausted, given the passage of time and a new slant on a specific formula, a cycle may be regenerated.

Although it is hard to establish a clear beginning, particularly with early precursors such as *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926) and *Westworld* (Michael Crichton, 1973), the first stage of the cycle – its period of experimentation and innovation – began at the dawn of the 1980s when a new group of films emerged, including *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) and *RoboCop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1986). This was cyborg cinema at its most interesting in terms of set design, characterisation and action, accompanied by a narrative critique of Capitalist values as ruthless, exploitative and hostile to humanity. Produced during a period of mergers and mass redundancies, it is corporate entities such as the Company in *Alien*, The Tyrell Corporation in *Blade Runner* and Omni Consumer Products (OCP) in *RoboCop* that are held to be accountable for the poor conditions in which humans live. It is partly to ease unrest (and serve their nefarious purpose) that these organisations have created cyborgs, programming them to fulfil specific functions in the interests of commerce and territorial acquisition. However, while such narratives may question existing tendencies, they also question the viability of revolt, along with any belief in social progress.

The experimental phase is not without certain problems in this respect and although undoubtedly innovative in terms of the themes addressed it would prove to be decidedly short-lived. *Short Circuit* (John Badham, 1986) and *D.A.R.Y.L.* (Simon Wincer, 1985) transpose similar themes into family entertainment, combining anti-militarism with heart warming scenarios as technological life-forms, designed to kill, refuse to comply with their programming and install themselves into happy domestic settings instead. Although these narratives recognise the importance of human values they also provide somewhat conservative resolutions. The early acquisition of the cyborg as a comic hero for children indicates that a 'classic' stage was already being reached, with innovation giving way to convention. Anxieties surrounding dehumanisation were met with reassurances that humanity itself, based as it is on a specific set of emotions and values, will somehow prevail.

The Terminator (James Cameron, 1984) stands as an important exception to these films on a number of counts. While it also includes a corporation (Cyberdyne Systems) that is responsible for nothing less than the downfall of humanity, it opts

to blame machines rather than any particular social system. American defence policies may be obliquely criticised for having inadvertently led to a nuclear holocaust yet the idea that machines get smart and plan the eradication of their creators effectively creates a new species upon which to transpose our fears. Like *Alien's* Ash, the T-800 has a patent disregard for human life, with a mission to annihilate any chance of resistance and thus secure machine rule. Although this figure is ultimately destroyed, *The Terminator* would initiate a host of imitators, introducing a new narrative strand into the cycle in which bad cyborgs go on the rampage and must be thwarted.

Two discernible projections of cyborgs are thus in evidence, those with whom audiences are asked to sympathise (frequently because they are heart-warming and comic rather than any oppression they might experience), and those represented as a threat to society (for various different reasons). Demonstrating a continual attempt to refine its own formula, the cycle then placed these two archetypes in opposition to one another. Schatz describes a period of 'refinement' as formal and stylistic details being added. As he puts it: 'we no longer look to the form to glimpse an idealized self-image, rather we look at the form itself to examine and appreciate its structure'²¹ – suggesting a withdrawal from narrative content and greater focus on how the story itself is conveyed. This emphasis on stylisation was particularly evident as the 1990s approached, with 'good' cyborgs being juxtaposed against 'bad' versions in films such as *RoboCop 2* (Irvin Kershner, 1990) and *Universal Soldier* (Roland Emmerich, 1992). A propensity towards either virtue or villainy is simplistically delineated between each figure and although science has created cyborg monstrosities who do not care about human life, this is balanced by more idealised cyborgs given the task of eradicating these malevolent entities. OCP and the US military may variously be at fault for trying to play god, but they have also safeguarded their own position through these figures, while additionally providing the battlefield in which cyborgs can slug it out in the ultimate gladiatorial contest.

As critic, Steven Keane, summed up such films: 'When it became apparent that real men weren't man enough to carry an action movie, the robots moved in. You could fire bullets into them, blow them up, rip their limbs off, and still they came back for more – even as they dropped wise-cracks from half-demolished jaws.'²² Good ultimately triumphs over evil in these films but the thoughtfulness of the earlier period is effectively sidelined also. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991) is a variation on the same theme, with a mega-budget sequel and special effects that effectively broke new ground for the cyborg film, yet which also heralded a new stage in its development.

Seemingly reacting against the fatalism of its predecessor, *Terminator 2* makes a swift U-turn, insisting on a 'no fate but what we make' message, despite its cyclical plot necessitating that events must occur precisely as they have been predicted. It is because of this ideological reversal, including the reprogramming of its former villain into the film's new hero, that *Terminator 2* has been described as 'more a remake than a sequel and less an homage than an obliteration' of its original²³ – a point that is evidenced not only in the reversed stance taken on

technology but by having lines of dialogue initially spoken by the original's hero now repeated by its former villain. Because of these obvious twists, its self-referencing, and the state-of-the-art technologies used to create the film's morphing sequences, *Terminator 2* has earned interest as an archetypal postmodern text, and it is also due to these factors that it inaugurates the phase Schatz terms as 'baroque' – characterised by excess and extremity. Schatz describes this period as having occurred 'when the form and its embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the "substance" or "content" of the work'.²⁴

This is amply demonstrated by the attention paid to its effects, with the budget necessitated by such spectacle rendering it the most expensive film ever made at the time, at a cost of almost a hundred million dollars.²⁵ It is also proven by the subversion of *The Terminator's* premise and the recycling of 'family cyborg' clichés utilised in *Short Circuit* and *D.A.R.Y.L.*, indicating the extent that the cycle was self-consciously playing with existing formulas. The fact that paternal issues were featured in comedies such as *Kindergarten Cop* (Ivan Reitman, 1990) and *Mrs Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, 1993), and thrillers such as *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1992) indicates a similar concern in various contemporary narratives. *Terminator 2* uses this motif as part of a deliberate attempt at blockbuster status, with the 'humanising' of its cyborg, reduced certification, a modification of its violence and the introduction of family values all seemingly designed to reach as wide a target audience as possible. Subsequent cyborg films copied this strategy, such as *RoboCop 3* (Fred Dekker, 1993) and *Solo* (Norberto Barba, 1996), yet failed to generate the same level of profit or acclaim.

According to Schatz, once a cycle has reached the excess and parody of the baroque stage its appeal tends to wane, a stage he perceived as marking the end of its existence. However, what seems to be the case instead is a mix of repetition and innovation in the struggle to reinvent itself. Many of the films that followed *Terminator 2* failed to take the cyborg anywhere new. *Bicentennial Man* (Chris Columbus, 1999) epitomises the increase of sentiment in the cycle, adapting Asimov's moving novella into a mawkish Robin Williams vehicle in which an android becomes humanised over the course of two hundred years. *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001) betrays conflicting aims in portraying a world where people hate and fear 'mechas' yet in which a child robot retains his belief in love. While these films suggest that reassuring clichés about technological life-forms and the endurance of human ideals was the last possible ground to be covered by the cyborg film, seriously questioning what else it had to offer, if the cyborg has one exemplary feature it is in adapting to survive, and the cycle duly underwent further transition and re-invention, incorporating diverse elements from films that developed around it. As Geoff King has argued, cycles are 'subject to the gravitational pull of other genre and sub-genre identities',²⁶ and it is indicative of this influence that cyborg cinema's revival can be attributed in part to the success of other explorations of human identity occurring in related films, explorations that were in clear contrast to the reassuring urge found in the cycle.

Juxtaposed against the image of the 'caring, sharing nineties' a new nihilism had started to creep into cinema, indicating a sea-change in how humanity was

perceived. This was particularly evident in horror films of the decade. Romantic rewrites of the gothic monster had occurred in films such as *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992) and *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (Kenneth Branagh, 1994) – each intent on humanising former monsters and accordingly regarded by John Clute as indicating 'nostalgia for lost innocence'.²⁷ Yet horror cinema also started to evince a darker interest in the human psyche during this period, one that was evidenced by a growing fascination with serial killers as the new monster in our midst, and through which the limits of humanity itself were tested.

The serial killer film first became popularised at the beginning of the 1990s, instigated by the success of *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1990) and the controversial *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1990). A spate of films followed, such as *Kalifornia* (Dominic Sena, 1993), *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), and *Se7en* (Fincher, 1995) – all of which featured charismatic killers who defy authority. Like *The Terminator's* relentless cyborg killer, *Silence of the Lambs'* Hannibal Lector (Anthony Hopkins) knows how to survive and will not be compromised by petty officialdom or the taboos of wider society. As such, he and his fellow killers represent a mode of transgression that bears a striking resemblance to a dark attraction held by the cyborg.

What Mark Crispin Miller refers to as the 'fantasy of robotism'²⁸ explains this attraction as a psychological tendency to emulate what we most fear, including an abandonment of emotion, arguing of the robot that 'if we could only become like it, we too might exist forever'.²⁹ The same rationale can equally be used to explain the fascination held by the serial killer, who may have jettisoned the niceties of human morality but has what it takes to survive nonetheless. It is almost as if such figures fulfil a need to explore humanity at its most attenuated extremes, even to the point of its greatest depravity, while some were also invested with certain ethical principles. Hence, Lector melds the taboo status of the cannibal with being a highly educated and refined man – one who even becomes a vital ally to Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) – while *Se7en's* John Doe (Kevin Spacey) is presented as the film's morally just, equally educated avenger. Although set apart from humans in their hatred and murderous judgement of others, these men are also oddly portrayed as anti-heroes. The murderers in *Kalifornia* and *Natural Born Killers* are more arbitrary in their killings yet caused controversy precisely because they play on this rebel outsider status. This only added to the appeal of such figures however, and as serial killer films attracted both critical and public attention, inviting renewed speculation on the subject of human nature, a darker tone entered SF also.

A new wave of films appeared that questioned human identity and the impact of new technologies, subverting the faith in technology that the cyborg film had so hurriedly established. *The Lawnmower Man* (Brett Leonard, 1992) showcased Virtual Reality as a dangerous realm in which megalomania and murder were bound to follow. Variations on a similar theme followed, and as further indication of the extent to which cyberspace was now conceived as the new 'scary place', serial killers merged with computers in SF/horror vehicles such as *Ghost in the Machine* (Rachel Talalay, 1993) and *Virtuosity* (Brett Leonard, 1995). Reflecting the origins

of this new hybrid, these films were dubbed by critics as 'cyberthrillers'. Appearing among them, and similarly questioning technology's debilitating effects, *Johnny Mnemonic* (Robert Longo, 1995) looked like an anachronistic throwback to cyberpunk, with a plot involving a high-tech smuggler of corporate data who uses his memory to store merchandise, and ultimately saves the world from a deadly computer-generated virus. Both story and setting were hackneyed in the extreme, seeming to signal the death of the cyberthriller within a few years of its birth. However, proving that some ideas simply take some time to get started, another attempt was made four years on which merged high-tech paranoia with souped-up spectacle.

Interestingly marketing itself as a 'cyberthriller', *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) captured audience interest and revitalised the theme of humanity's intersection with technology. Innovative design effectively concealed the derivative subject matter and skeletal plot, and commercial success led to blockbuster status (along with prompting two sequels and a host of other off-shoots). The impact created would revive the industry's interest in SF, yet it was another blockbuster, released the following year, that would additionally cause a resurgence of popularity for the genre, featuring an array of heroes equipped with super human powers, and creating the climate needed that would effectively mark the return of the cyborg.

X-Men (Bryan Singer, 2000) dusted off a comic strip creation of the 1960s, and emphasised action and special effects in showcasing its band of mutants. Taking the premise of sudden evolutionary mutation, a new breed of humans are born whose difference provokes intense alarm among humans, causing these 'mutants' to become sharply divided in the face of prejudice. One figure among them, known as Wolverine or Logan (Hugh Jackman), has been tampered with at some point in his forgotten past with the insertion of adamantium in his skeleton. Like *RoboCop's* Murphy and *Blade Runner's* replicants, he is consequently not only a cyborg, but one for whom memory is a crucial marker of lost identity.

It is on the strength of these high-profile releases and the popularity they garnered that the long-awaited sequel to the *Terminator* franchise appeared, *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (Jonathan Mostow, 2003), with a noticeably older Arnie describing himself with some pathos as 'an obsolete model'. The statement could be interpreted on a number of levels. In one sense it refers to the fact that tough action heroes, epitomised by Schwarzenegger's lead roles in the 1980s, became virtually defunct a decade later, even ridiculed by the actor himself in later films. The fact that he makes the comment with regard to an advanced female cyborg, who functions as both his replacement and his adversary could be interpreted on another level, however, because the T-X (Kristanna Loken) has superseded him. In this sense *Terminator 3* seems to stage an ultimate battle of the sexes as male and female cyborgs fight it out – a confrontation that *X-2* (Bryan Singer, 2003) similarly deploys in a fight scene between Wolverine and his female counterpart, Lady Deathstrike (Kelly Hu). In both examples, the male cyborg is given a nominal humanity, while the female is simply an inhuman threat, following a trend in the cycle in which female cyborgs are largely disapproved of (and accordingly disposed of!)

There is another reading also, with regard to the Terminator's suggested obsolescence, for although he is a revamped model to that shown in the previous two films (newly equipped with a psychology sub-routine and hydrogen fuel cells), the film nevertheless parallels his position to that of humanity, asking if determination and the will to succeed are enough to beat a technically superior adversary and ultimately championing the underdog by granting him the ability to destroy the T-X. That he does so with a modification of the finale from *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), detonating one of his fuel cells to blow this hi-tech monster up, is part and parcel of a film that is played very much for laughs and which borrows so copiously from other sources. Although he also opts to destroy himself, echoing *T2's* finale, we are informed that Arnie must return at some point in order to kill John Connor, thereby whetting the audience's appetite for what may be the ultimate nostalgia-driven cyborg film: a return of the original Terminator as his former 'bad' self. However, with the fourth instalment, *Terminator Salvation* (McG, 2008), radically breaking with preceding instalments we cannot be sure what to expect, although in opting to cameo Arnie in CGI form, we have an illustration of the new form taken by the cyborg film, lending the idea of an 'obsolete model' still further significance.

The revival of the *Terminator* franchise, together with new cyborg projects, invites us to question whether the cycle has effectively begun again, or is simply playing out new variations. Already its extended lifespan has surpassed the average time Williams has given for any cycle, a fact which is best explained by its ability to change – its themes having mutated the cyborg into related forms such as the cyberpunk, the virtual being and the clone. More fundamentally however, its longevity is determined, like that of any other product in popular culture, by its ability to keep audiences interested, which is by no means a simple or predictable matter. In fact, the cyborg film has undergone numerous peaks and troughs over its thirty year history, and although currently enjoying increased popularity it remains to be seen how long this can last.

A similar question might be asked of the SF genre itself, now one of the most plumbed categories for any prospective blockbuster, its commercial success being perceived by many as detrimental. While Steve Neale evaluates the predominance of horror and SF as indicating the 'juvenilization' of Hollywood output,³⁰ David Sanjek has postulated that the blockbuster status and critical interest achieved by both genres sounds the death-knell for their creativity, arguing that 'at one and the same time the parameters within which the forms operate have become the object of public and corporate scrutiny and have been virtually crippled by that very process'.³¹ Just as Schatz decried what he regarded as the 'social value' found in earlier stages of genres becoming subsumed by greater emphasis on 'aesthetic value',³² so Sanjek asserts that 'audience members are more interested in observing the genre rearticulate itself than call attention to the social, cultural and ideological fissures and fault lines that the form represents'.³³ This should not preclude the ability to evaluate such films in terms of their absences as much as their content however, for while Schatz laments the blockbuster for seeming to 'rely more on packaging, promotion and other forms of media hype than on the

movies' power as a form of collective cultural expression',³⁴ by his very own rationale these films must surely say something about the culture they are produced in.

Indeed, if generic hybridity is frequently ignored in current genre theory then analysis of the blockbuster demands equivalent scrutiny, particularly as it is now the governing feature of 'New Hollywood', as Schatz asserts, and key to its survival.³⁵ In fact, although the blockbuster would seem to epitomise the trends Schatz notes in terms of a culmination of the 'baroque', as well as the 'recycling' process that Altman is most preoccupied with, it is curious that neither critic has acknowledged this fact. While some publications indicate belated attention being given to the 'high concept' movie,³⁶ spectacle and commerce tend to be the over-riding features of any discussion, with the popularity of this new 'hyper-genre' seeming to be what has most held it in disregard. Schatz reveals open contempt in describing such films as 'calculated' – even though the same is surely true of the studio system that he looks back upon, for the most part, with patent nostalgia.³⁷ The usual comment made about blockbusters is that they are designed primarily to entertain, having elided narrative complexity and character depth in favour of visual appeal. Special effects are accused of taking precedence over any human element, severely reducing the ability to question existing social relations, a charge that has frequently been made against SF films in particular.

If an element of *deja vu* seems apparent here, recalling the critical lamentations that have been made since *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) changed the way SF films were made and marketed, then this should be no surprise. Genres are cyclical in nature, after all – always having to adapt in order to survive – like the cyborg (indeed, like humanity itself), and there are always economic pressures underlying such transformations, as much as any attempt to reflect cultural preoccupations. That is not to say that social concerns cannot be found within the form, but a tendency to avoid criticising existing structures is far more common. What Vivian Sobchack once referred to as 'marginal SF' – typically low-budget, innovative and experimental – has become increasingly rare,³⁸ with heightened commercial expectations serving to limit the range of ideas offered, and rendering serious adult-themed scenarios virtually extinct. As a mark of its own success, it is only big-budget mainstream SF films that we tend to see today and these are invariably limited, for as Hans Gerald has commented:

Costly investments lose the 'experimental' and thus possibly innovative character of entertainment movies. One can no longer sell 'contents' which carry a risk; therefore one falls back upon familiar material and reproduces traditional models, clichés and stereotypes until these reproduce themselves in dizzying succession.³⁹

In needing to attract investors with the promise of high returns, the result is that fewer films are made and fewer risks taken, with each striving for bankability above other considerations. A correlative factor has meant a diminishing of what is intended by the term 'sense of wonder',⁴⁰ from a means of expanding the

viewer's conceptual framework to now imply nothing more than impressive special effects – an aspect that has become the greatest element of SF cinema's pulling power, even if it is by no means a guarantee of its success.

Significantly, the SF films made today invest heavily in technology, not only in terms of CGI and other techniques used, but narratively also as the sole means of securing a happy ending. As such, they have tended to discredit the notion of achieving political change other than through utilising the seemingly miraculous potential of new technologies. Even cyberthrillers, which largely claim cyberspace to be a danger to human identity, reiterate the 'double vision' inherent within the SF film (and typified by cyborg narratives) in which all technological threats are inevitably redeemed, so that cyberspace is constructed, in Springer's words, both as 'an instigator of wild instability, and simultaneously as a therapeutic device used to restore conventional order'.⁴¹

Geoff King makes a similar observation in response to *The Matrix*, noting that as its hacker heroes 'penetrate the technologies of the oppressors and use them for subversive purposes... technology is transformed from threat to a source of hyper-active human agency'.⁴² Yet the fact that the 'oppressors' in question are machines, rather than any human foe, and that the film manages to efface what King terms as 'one of the gloomiest of dystopian scenarios'⁴³ via a celebration of technology indicates the extent to which political issues first voiced in the cyborg film have now all but disappeared. In Thomas Anderson's journey to become 'The One' he leaves behind the monotonous job of his former existence yet work of any nature is also rendered make-believe. This total elision of economic concerns is indicative of what Paul Smith has referred to as 'Terminator Technology' – a strategy employed by Hollywood in which 'technology becomes a sort of panacea – not just in the everyday sense that suggests that technology can solve all practical problems, but in the sense too that it has rid us of Capitalism's central antagonist, labor'.⁴⁴ In Smith's view this is indicative of the extent to which Capitalism attempts to 'transcend, elide or simply wish away the social relations of production' while any understanding of history is represented via an 'emotive humanism'.⁴⁵

An interesting point in this regard is the compromises that had to be made for the cinematic cyborg to reach blockbuster status. Redeemed of its initial threat and made safe for public consumption, with an increase in family values coinciding with a decrease in certification, the cyborg was subjected to a make-over that attempted to generate maximum profit by appealing to a mass audience, yet with the political questioning evident in earlier films, and arguably their most interesting feature, effectively neutered as a result.

In their place, a sense of reassurance about humanity's innate worth was established. *Terminator 2* can be seen to inaugurate this tendency by reprogramming its former villain not only to save the future but to reunite an estranged family in the process. Other paternal roles celebrated in *RoboCop 3* and *Solo*, like the childlike artificial humans later found in *Bicentennial Man* and *AI*, reiterate a series of clichés that human values will endure, no matter what the future brings. A similar contention is to be found in virtually all cyborg films, with romance, family kinship networks and a respect for life serving as the conventions by which human identity is

understood, and wider concerns surrounding exploitation or planetary destruction conveniently ignored.

The extent of this reassuring redemptive urge is illustrated by the low-budget SF/horror vehicle *Pitch Black* (David Twohy, 1999), which features a technologically augmented serial killer chiefly in order to rehumanise him. A cyborg in terms of having surgically enhanced eyes that allow him to see in the dark, Riddick (Vin Diesel) is initially presented as a danger to other passengers when their ship crashes on an inhospitable planet, yet his threat is eclipsed by more predatory foe found lurking in their midst. As the planet becomes subsumed by darkness, Riddick's unique sight makes him the sole person capable of seeing these aliens, granting him the ability to survive. As one character asks, 'there's got to be some part of you that wants to rejoin the human race', and although his retort at the time is to state that he 'wouldn't know how', Riddick is eventually shown the way by the Captain of the ship, whose willingness to die to save the remaining passengers teaches him the moral lesson that effectively saves his soul. Opting to put others before himself, he eventually succeeds in securing their escape and when asked at the end of the film what they will tell the authorities he suggests saying that Riddick died somewhere on the planet, for in effect he has been given the chance to start his life again.

That a cyborg serial killer is capable of redemption pushes such rhetoric to its virtual limit. Riddick may be better equipped for survival than his more human counterparts but learns that he has something more important to gain if he can help to save others instead. The two conflicting sides of human nature – our capacity for self interest and our ability to empathise with others – are each put to the test and it is our better side that the film, like the cycle as a whole, elects to champion. The idea compounded by such a motif, and reflected in the other posthumans featured in recent years, is that if we are to survive we must accommodate any fears of technology, and reassess our understanding of what it means to be human also.

The *Iron Man* films (Jon Favreau, 2008, 2010), reiterate the idea of a technologically enabled redemption for its male lead. Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr) undergoes a dramatic change due to events that lead him to acquire an artificial heart, exchanging self interest for greater ethical responsibility, aligning his physical augmentation with what is shown to be a positive transformation. *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) repeats a similar idea, while effectively taking cyberpunk to a new planet. Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) uses a remote controlled body to overcome devastating physical injuries and also proves his heroic worth by opting to put others before himself, forfeiting the chance of getting spinal treatment for his paralysis when he opposes a military mission that hinges on oppression and exploitation of non-humans. Although he dies in the process, he is effectively reborn by the film's end, albeit into an artificial alien body.

Metaphors of rebirth, regeneration and redemption are appealing not only on a metaphysical level, suggesting that humanity is neither fixed nor finite, but in practical industrial terms, with mutability serving to ensure that the cyborg has increased commercial longevity. As recent films have evidenced, even an old

formula can be revitalised if the climate is right. In fact, just when it seemed that the cyborg was a defunct overly formulaic figure that belonged firmly in the last millennium, the appearance of a new group of films in recent years suggests otherwise. On the one hand this indicates the cyborg's continued relevance in questioning such issues as human nature, our relationship to technology and how we have come to define ourselves. On the other, by capitalising on the legacy created by established films and playing on a sense of familiarity and nostalgia, it seems to reiterate the assertion put forward by Wheeler Winston Dixon that 'what audiences today desire more than ever before is "more of the same" and studios, scared to death by rising production and distribution costs, are equally loathe to strike out in new generic directions'.⁴⁶ While cyborg cinema has proved itself capable of notable variety, we have also seen an increasing ambition to launch hit franchises, with budgets raised to astronomical levels in an attempt to create effects-driven spectacles that have the potential to be spun out in different directions.

From pioneering examples of the 1980s that presented cyborgs as borderline figures which questioned the boundaries between human and complex machine, many of which were situated in advanced Capitalist societies where dehumanising conditions are presented as the norm, the industrial status the cyborg film has since acquired offers an ironic parallel to these early narrative concerns; largely regarded as a lucrative resource to be exploited, while the human factor tends to be overlooked. Cyborg cinema's main interest today appears to be as a vehicle for blockbuster franchises such as the *X-Men* and *Wolverine* films, *Iron Man* and *Avatar*, all of which use superhuman abilities and spectacular effects to sell themselves – and look set to continue for the foreseeable future. The potential for franchise fatigue may be affirmed by the likes of *Terminator Salvation*, proving that such ventures often yield ever diminishing returns, yet plans for further *Terminator* films also suggests that the franchise is as relentless and unstoppable as the cyborg originally at its centre. While former owner, Halcyon, filed for bankruptcy before selling the *Terminator* franchise to a hedge fund, Pacificor, the incentive for further investment is clearly built on the belief that there is further profit to be made from the concept. MGM's plans to remake *RoboCop* in 3D underscores how cyborg cinema is currently perceived in an era of remakes and reboots, where recycling established themes and reworking old gimmicks to provide a bigger box-office draw appears to be the key strategy. Neither is it just ticket sales where the cyborg film's industrial interest lies, as the acquisition of rights to adapt *Blade Runner* suggests, with new investors, Alcon Entertainment, citing 'multi-platform concepts' being explored for future spin-offs, all of which reiterates how conglomerate multimedia empires – the kind of organisations figuratively represented by the Tyrell Corporation and Omni Consumer Products – are currently regenerating cyborg cinema with the aim of exploiting popular tropes and repackaging them in new forms. The interest taken in cyborg and cyberpunk ideas lies not only in terms of appealing to an established fan-base, but potentially acquiring a new generation of fans by utilising themes that can be extended online, in game form, and on television, as well as cinematic sequels. With subject matter implicitly linking humanity's interface with technology, cyborg cinema has the opportunity

to tackle some serious considerations, yet often fails to reach this potential. Whether physiologically combining flesh and metal or more subtle incarnations, the feats such figures are capable of tend to take greater priority than any questions raised about how humanity is to be defined, although in general, far from lamenting 'dehumanisation', there is a tendency toward accommodation, and even celebration, of technology's intersection with our lives.

This trend is all too evident in the *Matrix* films in which cyberpunk themes are revamped yet also drained of any socio-political facet. The religious overtones that underpin the trilogy are still more perplexing, transforming the lead character from an ordinary downtrodden 'console cowboy' into a virtual messiah. The cautionary questions that informed cyberpunk are thus dispelled and dreams of technological deliverance disconcertingly revitalised, with an AI construct taking the apparent role of god. It is not the level of engagement with technology that is at issue here, but the complete disengagement from any form of material concern, resulting in a paranoid fantasy that toys with serious ideas only to depart in a flight of fancy, much like *Avatar*. A dystopia that is uncritical, to use Constance Penley's distinction,⁴⁷ is merely symptomatic of prevailing conditions rather than a challenge, and it is in challenging existing structures, social mores and assumptions that the cyborg seemed to have its most radical potential.

By featuring in a number of ongoing franchises the cinematic cyborg's continued appeal is proven, yet although new variations are likely, success is by no means guaranteed. After all, a number of intended blockbusters failed to yield a positive response (from either critics or audiences), and while several TV series took the cyborg in some interesting directions, they also proved to be fairly short-lived. Nonetheless, it seems ill-advised to write off the cyborg's potential altogether. A crucial test of any cycle is the ability to retain an element of surprise and the cyborg film has still managed to achieve this more than most, and for a considerable period of time also. The fact that the cyborg has gravitated to the small screen (as well as a range of other media) reiterates its remarkable diversity and dynamism; factors that will help it retain its place in popular culture, together with the fascination this figure has long inspired, and even if content may be increasingly compromised by a desire for spectacle, the ability to attain a greater level of significance remains. Describing the dilemma faced by any film associated with an identifiable genre or cycle, Graeme Turner argues that 'it is the variation from expectation, the innovation in how a familiar scenario is played, that offers the audience the pleasure of the recognition of the familiar, as well as the thrill of the new'.⁴⁸ As is attested by the most notable cyborg films the 'thrill of the new' is not necessarily found in effects, or in referencing elements from other films, but in an altogether more unpredictable quality. Audiences and film-makers are not entirely equal in terms of influencing new cyclical developments, as Schatz implies, yet films need to strike a chord of some kind, to create a sense of connection with audiences and – if they are to merit any greater status than entertainment – to cut through the apparent need for spectacle and say something people can relate to. Where the cycle first set itself apart by questioning the kind of future we were heading towards, and drawing attention to actual social conditions, the fantastic tendencies of later examples is perhaps their most worrying element.

In Schatz's view, popular cinema is the contemporary equivalent of a culture's mythology, representing 'its society speaking to itself, developing a network of stories and images designed to animate and resolve the conflicts of everyday life'.⁴⁹ As the following chapters attest, the conflicts indicated within the cyborg film have been as diverse as the theories used to make sense of them, asking a multitude of questions about contemporary existence and the criteria by which identity should be discerned. It is this last issue, specifically how humanity is to be defined and distinguished in relation to machines, that has not only led to ongoing debate, but doubtless proved intrinsic to the cyborg film's continued interest. Although a 'cycle' is typically characterised via several similarly themed films released in fairly rapid succession, and has generally been given a time-span of ten or twenty years, cyborg cinema interestingly challenges such appraisals, having established itself for over three decades and looking likely to be a fixed feature for years to come. After all, even in a business where ideas get old fast, if anything is 'future proof' it seems the cyborg fits this brief well, with its manifestations as variable as this chronology has sought to make clear, and its implications having preoccupied us for centuries, as the next chapter discusses.

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