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# Cyborg Theatre

## Corporeal/Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance

Jennifer Parker-Starbuck

palgrave  
macmillan



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# Preface: Remembering

*One can consider any body a cyborg body that is both its own agent and subject to the power of other agencies.*

(González, 1995, 268)

I can still hear the sound, the metallic “zh-zh-zh-zh-zh-zh-zh-zh-zh-zh” when the Bionic Woman, Jaime Sommers, performed her slow motion, super-strength leaps, jumps, and kicks. The original *Bionic Woman*, a 1976 spin-off of *The Six Million Dollar Man*, was a fusion of body and technology, a cyborg. In 1976, although Apple and Microsoft had been founded (1976 and 1975 respectively), personal computers were still a thing of the future. It was a time of technological breakthroughs, shifting the world into its globalized economy. The first test-tube baby was born in 1978. The first heart transplant had taken place in 1967 and by the mid 1970s technology seemed to promise invincibility, as well as longevity (the facelift was made widely accessible in the 1970s). A technological interest and fervor contributed to the creation of the television series *Star Trek*, which premiered in 1966, and from its popularity arose programs such as *The Six Million Dollar Man* and *The Bionic Woman*, shows featuring characters with governmentally controlled robotic prosthetic augmentation, but more importantly capturing the imagination for what bodies might become. The late 1970s were also my teenage years, and were marked for me by all too typical bodily dysmorphia, as well as by the feminist movement, which for me, growing up in the States, was my mother’s feminism. Fighting for natural childbirth and breastfeeding, desiring women’s rights as she raised her own family, these were all crucial steps emerging from her experiences of the rigid attitudes of the 1950s, but unreal to me as a teenager. I was more drawn to what now might be considered the precursor to a cyber-feminism – Jaime Sommers, augmented with super-powerful body parts, became a light at the end of my (the) proverbial, bodily troubled, teenage tunnel. For those times, Jaime was an influential figure for many young women, including myself, caught between their mother’s feminism and what was to be their own. Although I knew little of technology then, I recognized its (theatrical) potential for change. Jaime Sommers could leap tall buildings *and* choose a career path.

Bodily associations with twentieth- and twenty-first-century technologies, in a time called post-human have now made the idea of the cyborg a reality, but in 1976, the concept was, for most, still a fiction. Bionics then stood in for possibilities that have now, in many ways, become reality. Through physical exercise, reproductive or plastic surgery, and medical advances in prosthetics and artificial body parts, the notion of building or augmenting the body has radically changed ideas about aging, sexuality, health, and beauty. As Anne Balsamo frames it, “bionic body recrafting already allows people to change their physical sexual characteristics. As these medical procedures become more advanced and sexual body parts technologically refashioned, a visual reading of gender, or any other cultural marker of identity, off the surface of the body will be hopelessly confounded” (2000: 155). Bracketing off the troubling aspects of this refashioning for the moment, for her time the Bionic Woman was perhaps a catalyst toward a more positive recrafting. The bionics allowed her to break free from traditional gender stereotyping of marriage and create a new identity. “I’d rather be a cyborg than a goddess,” professes Donna Haraway.

The *Bionic Woman* series began as a completely traditional heterosexual love story between the Six Million Dollar Man, Steve Austin, a former astronaut, and tennis star Jaime Sommers. As they fall in love and plan their wedding, their story reinscribes traditional roles and is peppered with lines such as, “she’ll make a great wife,” and “who will give me away?” After Jaime is fatally injured in a sky diving accident, Steve appeals to the government agency he works for to arrange for bionic implants to keep her alive, promising he will allow her to work as an agent once she is recovered. She recovers, of course, and dives right in, “I have an obligation to the government for making me whole again.” The bionics, however, are slowly rejected and she actually dies in this episode. The television audience response was enormous and the producers brought her back, but with (what I read as) a somewhat feminist twist. Perhaps Steve’s controlling nature was irritating even then, because Jaime was brought back with limited memory, freeing her from the romantic ties with Steve and granting her agency over her human, female side – even if the government took hold of the technological side, internalizing the notion of male control by giving her bionic body replacement parts. This tension between Jaime’s own agency and the governmental control of these bionic technologies reappears through many narratives of technological control through the present. However, technologies once controlled and funded strictly by governmental and corporate agencies are gradually making their way into the public arena,

allowing greater accessibility and freedom to imagine identities beyond merely the performative. Body recrafting, radical sexual reassignment, and mechanical replacement body parts are beyond fiction and play out on material bodies.<sup>1</sup> Technological imaginings are often played out in worlds of film, literature, television, and theatre before becoming realities. Although multimedia theatre is my ultimate focus, the work discussed within this book would not be possible without broader cultural reflections of the myriad popular cultural, scientific, and media-based references that contribute to this form of performance.

This book emerges directly out of 15 years of investigation into performance that purposefully uses multimedia on stage – television monitors, slide and data projections, projected backdrops – as an integral visual or conceptual component of the piece. Although experimentation with emerging technologies has always been a component of historical narratives, as I will explore further in Chapter 1, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries it has erupted into its own genre of performance. This study gives shape to a historical moment in body/technology exploration on stage through which a “cyborg theatre” form emerges as a site for the examination and experimentation of the interconnected relationships between bodies and technologies forming through the cyborg poetics of the twenty-first century. The inclusion of on-stage technologies has given rise to the now historical “liveness” debate between Philip Auslander and Peggy Phelan, which for me signified both (1) a need for more specific, and feminist inflected, languages of analysis to describe corporeal relationality to technology as it has become more prevalent and invasive, and (2) that what has happened in the contested theatrical space of this debate – artists beginning to grapple with the technologies, such as computer interfaces, telepresence, wireless connections that are now ubiquitous – is a historical moment worth reflecting on. Recent scholarly overviews of the “field” demonstrate a desire to claim this new “genre” of multimedia performance and this book is an attempt to satisfy a deeper need for theorization while itself representing a historic moment.

The figure I propose as the metaphoric structure for my analysis is the cyborg, created through an intertwining and negotiation between organic and non-organic materials, the body and technology. Envisioned historically as protector in the Jewish Golem stories, or as a monster in the Frankenstein narrative, these organic/non-organic couplings have always manifested a fear and fascination with technologies. Resurfacing in the last decades of the twentieth century, cyborg predecessors also stand in for feminized others, militaristic senses of

control, as well as producing hope for joint kinships and political repositionings. The cyborg allows for multiple readings and captivates the imagination of a particular time. The case studies that represent the cyborg theatre of this study are themselves historical. I construct the cyborg theatre initially through a taxonomy providing vocabularies for an analysis of specific structures between the body and technology comprising the cyborg theatre but which also might support other forms of multimedia performance. The case studies analyze specific aspects of the structural mergings of the taxonomy, focusing on historically constructed categories of the abject, object, and subject body as they merge with what I call a subject technology, terms which capture questions and problematics of ability, identity, and a struggle for embodied agency in relation to technologies that are the sweeping concerns of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Moving through the late 1990s and into the twenty-first century the cyborg theatre form emerges as a site for testing out technologies with, on, and beside bodies, technologies often newly in the hands of the public – hand-held video, final cut pro and other computer movie-making programs, or 3-D technologies, for example. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Web 2.0, Blackberry technology, Facebook and social networking systems, iEverything are the way of life for large percentages of developed nations. We live in a world of cyborg poetics – a world in which technology is our dance partner, yet also still a heady contagion, it gets under our skin, we want more. The Conclusion to this volume projects the cyborg theatre into the now, into its future, allowing for possibilities of the structures to continue to evolve as technologies do, around us, beside us, within us.

For the purposes of this book then, Jaime Sommers took shape as my first real understanding of the intersecting lines of body and technology that represent a “becoming-cyborg.” The Bionic Woman’s character and, more specifically, her character’s body contain theoretical aspects of the body that I will explore in greater depth in each chapter of the project – the abject, object, and subject. Sommers and her abject, phantom limbs become cyborg through the augmentation with technology/bionics, disrupting her former subject self to claim a cyborg subjectivity with which to combat objectification as the Six-Million Dollar Man’s fiancée.

And so, “zh-zh-zh-zh-zh-zh-zh-zh-zh . . .”