

The Enlightenment Cyborg: A History of Communications and Control in the Human Machine, 1660-1830. By Allison Muri. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. viii + 308 p., ill., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 0-8020-8850-3 \$60)

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ouvrages incontournables pour qui s'intéresse à l'histoire de l'utilisation de l'eau au Canada et aux États-Unis. Il n'en reste pas moins que le livre de Benedickson est une contribution originale et constitue, à ce titre, un apport important à l'historiographie.

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***The Enlightenment Cyborg: A History of Communications and Control in the Human Machine, 1660-1830.* By Allison Muri.** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. viii + 308 p., ill., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 0-8020-8850-3 \$60)

Allison Muri's *The Enlightenment Cyborg* sets out to achieve two main goals: to address "the surprising absence of an adequate history of the cyborg figure in the figure of the human machine of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" and to correct what she calls the "misappropriation of the Enlightenment in post-modern readings of the cyborg" (p.6-7). Muri is successful in her first aim and this volume provides a compelling and thoroughly researched account of the 17th and 18th century discourse on the human machine, drawing attention in useful ways to "the shared assumptions concerning the perceived relationships of human to mechanism, material embodiment to human spirit, and mind to matter in both the early modern and the post-modern conceptions of the human machine" (p.5). Thus, from the point of view of the history of technology, this is a useful and timely contribution to discussions of the cyborg so central to recent humanities scholarship on the post-human, providing a rich intellectual background for this figure and deepening our understandings of the concerns regarding subjectivity and embodiment that it articulates. The second objective, however, is less convincingly accomplished. Muri does offer pertinent amendments to the impoverished image of the Enlightenment that circulates within some post-modern discourse and thus enhances our understanding of this period in intellectual history as dialectical and complex rather than monolithic. Yet at the same time, in her impassioned defence of this more complicated view of the Enlightenment and of the relevance of the human machine to more recent discussion of the cyborg, Muri's work can, ironically, take on an a-historical tone. At times her desire to stress the continuities between the human machine and the cyborg causes her to pay insufficient attention to differences of context between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries; as well, she sometimes indulges an unhelpful polemic too anxious to insist that there is nothing

new in post-modern discussions of the cyborg figure and her work fails to account for the differences as well as the continuities between the human machine and the cyborg. Therefore, the book is thus at its strongest when it traces the human machine figure and its relation to earlier historical conceptions of subjectivity, technology and the relation between the two, and at its weakest when trying to critique more recent discussions of the cyborg and their failure to take this history into account.

It is divided into six chapters. The introduction provides an overview of “cyborg theory” and articulates her theory of the “enlightenment cyborg.” “Matter, Mechanism, and the Soul” traces continuities between writings on the cyborg and seventeenth and eighteenth century discussions of the ‘Man-Machine’ especially in relation to an understanding of the body as something composed of particles that are governed by mechanical motion. “Some Contexts for Human Machines and the Body Politics” links the command-control-communication nexus in cyborg studies with earlier notions of clockwork which informed understandings of the Man-Machine. “The Man-Machines: Communications, Circulations, and Commerce,” the strongest chapter, usefully contextualises discussions of Muri’s “enlightenment cyborg” within contemporary struggles over the nature of sovereignty and political organisation and thus offers an important context for more recent politicised uses of the cyborg image. “The Woman-Machine: Techno-lust and Techno-reproduction” offers an extensive history of the gendering of technology and insightful readings of eighteenth century texts, but unfortunately then produces what at times seem to be anachronistic readings of contemporary images of sexualised female cyborgs as they rely too directly on the parallels between the Woman-Machine and the cyborg, thus ignoring the intervening periods of Victorian culture and modernism which also have significant influence on the recent texts. Finally the conclusion “Cyborg Conceptions” defends the continued relevance of the human body and the physical text even in an era of virtual electronics. Here she argues

our texts, electronic or otherwise, are still engaged in very human themes of life, love, sex, and death; we still, as ever, make war and make love; there are still those who traverse boundaries, and those who erect them. There are and will continue to be good and bad citizens, good and bad students, avid and apathetic readers. Whatever difficult choices the computer age will necessitate, electronic textuality will not change these very human traits. What *has* changed is our analogies for the page as body and the text as thoughtful reflection (p.231).

The invocation of what seem to be notions of universal human values and timely aesthetic standards in this conclusion is one of the ways the book betrays a curious a-historicism even while it provides a cultural history.

Thus, *The Enlightenment Cyborg* is an uneven book. Part of the difficulty seems to be an insistence on reading the cyborg figure in recent theory solely from the point of view of Enlightenment concepts. On the one hand, this does result in an enriched understanding of the intellectual history of this figure that is a significant contribution to scholarship. On the other, this also results in an insistence upon ‘correcting’ aspects of recent theory in ways that seem at times to miss the point. For example, in critiquing the tendency of recent theorists to equate understandings of subjectivity with Descartes’ *cogito*, Muri argues that such accounts fail to acknowledge that accounts significantly different from Descartes’ became dominant, particularly in medicine, and hence such “notions of cyborg identity [are] primarily constructed through textual tradition and therefore subject to the whims of theoretical vogue rather than the relationships of actual machines and real bodies” (p.14). This argument is valid and thus expands our understanding of the history of mind/body relations and complicates our understanding of such images as they appear in recent cyborg theory. Yet at the same time, whatever the relevance of Descartes’ theories to the history of “actual machines and real bodies,” his conception of subjectivity has been absolutely fundamental to the history of philosophy and its conception of subjectivity. Muri’s concept of recent cyborg theory minimizes this important fact and thereby tends to mistake or conceal the degree to which such theory responds to a dominant metaphysics of subjectivity rather than to ‘factual’ matters of mind/body relation. Muri’s addenda are valuable interventions into this conversation, but her tendency to overcompensate for what she perceives to be the one-sidedness of such theory and its image of the Enlightenment undermine this contribution. Donna Haraway—who is often credited with ‘inventing’ cyborg studies—speaks of the cyborg as a powerful myth and metaphor as much as a material object, and Muri’s work too often neglects the degree to which the cyborg image is over-determined.

Other aspects of the book are indispensable contributions to our understanding of the cyborg figure and its use as a political metaphor. For example, one of its main contentions is that “the material extension of the nervous system creates a new paradigm for the governing mechanism of the body—human consciousness” (p.83), a shift which Muri demonstrates dates not to the development of microprocessors and Norbert Wiener’s theories of cybernetics, but rather to the “the revolution in paradigms from humans as clockwork machines to humans as homeostatic machines” that were “evident from around the time that feedback mechanisms were being developed and used for alchemical experimentation” (p.91). Yet again there is a tendency to exaggerate the degree to which her approach is innovative. She writes:

The cyborg merely reiterates well-established clichés about the much-contested grounds of identity and human nature. It is striking how so many media theorists took the ubiquitous analogies of nervous and computer communication to mean that electrical communications devices literally have altered our nervous system, and thus also foreshadow new forms of social decay or democracy (p.97).

This critique is true of *some* claims of media theorists, but such oversimplification by no means characterizes all that is published under the rubric “postmodern cyborg theory.” Further, while the introductory chapter is quite thorough in its review of the positions of recent critical theorists who use the cyborg image, this nuanced understanding of their work is not evident in the later chapters that outline analogous ideas in earlier writing and present Muri’s critique of the recent theory. Thus, it is unclear against precisely whom such attacks are being launched—a tendency to disparage ‘many’ theorists guilty of such errors but no specific links between her critique and specific thinkers. There are also some omissions in her literature review that would require her to qualify such claims as this one regarding what she seems to regard as an evidently ridiculous idea that interaction with computers has physically altered our nervous system. A book such as N. Katherine Hayles’ *My Mother was a Computer* (2005), for example, does offer compelling evidence as to why and how computers are changing the way we think—evidence that goes beyond taking the computer as merely a metaphor for consciousness.

In the final analysis, despite its many merits, *The Enlightenment Cyborg* sweeping claims about the limitations of recent cyborg theory are not supported effectively, which is a significant flaw. The more restricted argument that such theory does not draw upon an adequate historical understanding of the cyborg figure is, however, well supported and a major contribution to scholarship in the field. Had the book more effectively modulated its claims to keep them in line with what is actually achieved, it would have been a much more satisfying volume. What it does accomplish is worthy, but unfortunately Muri’s tendency to exaggerate the innovation of her sources and her own work undermines the presentation of what is valuable in this book.

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