

# The Figure of Cyborg as ‘Political Hauntology’

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The paper examines the actuality of Donna Haraway’s concept of the cyborg under the conditions of ‘capitalist realism’. Following the technological optimism of the 1980’s, Haraway’s theory of the cyborg contains strong emancipatory implications which capacities have been challenged recently by the paralysis of the political imagination. The impossibility of considering the alternative to capitalism puts under the question the heuristic potential of Haraway’s conceptualization. However, considering the political theory of the cyborg as an implication of the ontology leaves the possibility of returning the emancipatory function to the cyborg’s figure. My suggestion is to redefine the relevant ‘ontology’ in Haraway’s work by its substitution for ‘hauntology’ in Mark Fisher’s sense. This theoretical shift allows not only to reassemble the political theory of the cyborg but also to regain its actuality.

*Cyborg. Political ontology. Donna Haraway. Hauntology. Mark Fisher. Emancipation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

‘Cyborg’ is a polemic concept. Its origins date back to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the increasing speed of the technological development was constantly exceeding the conceptual apparatus of the theory. An appropriate theoretical strategy was in search for new languages of description, implicitly opening the frame to the interventions from the future. Apparently, such conceptual inventions were regarded as emancipatory: they could be considered as a theoretical tool facing the darkened futuristic visions. Now then, the idea of cyborg may seem heuristically useless. If we take into consideration the classic definition of cyborg as the intermediate subject between a human and a machine, we have all become cyborgs. Technologies have integrated in our lives to the extent of replacing the inherent human functions:

e.g. communication abilities. Several years transformed the meaning of the word ‘cyborg’ from a future-open to a desperately old-fashioned one. Nowadays, it is only associated with a certain utopian/dystopian perspective from the end of the past century or, even more likely, with some science-fiction centered on alternate histories. But, as James Ballard wrote, ‘what the writers of modern science-fiction invent today, you and I will do tomorrow’ (Ballard 2014: 237). Thus, my essential question is: is there any potential in a cyborg’s figure today? And if yes, how can it be used *politically*?

## 2. FROM POLITICS TO ONTOLOGY

I would like to begin from a short preface to the cyborg’s history. The moment of its conceptualization and further theorization goes back to the 1980’s. It matches the change in a

capitalist way of production which is still being analysed by the philosophers of post-operatism (Negri Hardt 2000) and which Andre Gorz has called 'cognitive' (Gorz 2010). This way of theorization has certain possible outcomes; here we are especially interested in the technological integration to a human consciousness. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, a German writer and philosopher, predicted this situation by coining the term 'consciousness industry' (Enzensberger 1982), consequently substituting the 'cultural industry' popularized by Adorno and Horkheimer in the postwar years (Adorno Horkheimer 2002). He claimed that the consciousness is not given but produced with a help of some tools. Evidently, the most important point of Enzensberger's views was its influence to the study of ideology as it represented the basis of the described industry, but, nevertheless, the 'tools' of production referred not to some abstraction, but to some material objects integrated to a human consciousness. None of those historical figures used the term 'cyborg', but their work created implicit metaphysical groundings for its further denotation of a mixed condition between a human and a machine.

Such a notion anticipated a strong critique of all of the binary oppositions which take the category of the 'human' as a starting point. The most powerful conceptual framework was set by Donna Haraway in 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (Haraway 1991), which I would take for the foundation of my work. Her emancipatory project consists of the invention of the cyborg as a coming political subject, the main function of which is to release the political power of the oppressed groups (feminist, in particular) by using science and technology. Haraway insisted that the technological acceleration will blur the essentialist oppositions causing oppressive hierarchies. She emphasized the three main oppositions that should be defeated:

organic/machine, human/animal, physical/non-physical. All of them have to be overcome by the increasing progress in the construction of technologies, especially in the developing cyber-culture and the researches of virtual spaces. As a result, the non-binary language would allow to reassemble new political subjectivities, the most important one being cyborganic subjectivity. Haraway's theoretical approach influenced the cyber-feminist movement which gained popularity in the mid-nineties.

Haraway's work contains one important metaphysical claim which substantiates her cyborganic project as a whole. 'The cyborg is our ontology: it gives us our politics', she writes in the text of the 'Manifesto' (Haraway 1991: 151). The term 'ontology' here means the structural transformation of the political subject implied by the developing technologies. We should not invent any cyborganic political theory: it is already incorporated into the new way the subject is given. Otherwise, the technological progress contains all the necessary emancipatory political foundations of theory in its own mode of being. In Haraway's project, the political ontology gives us our political theory, and the emancipatory political subject is not what is produced by theory, it is what produces. The political theory here *is a vision of the future*; the ontology *is* the future.

However, the quasi-messianic belief in the emancipatory resources of technology decreased as they turned out to be a tool for oppression and for maintaining the structures of domination. The developing technologies haven't reached their 'cyborganic horizon', or, at least, it was set aside. On the phenomenological level, we're still being under the influence of technologies, but on the level of theory it did not create any mixed (that is, exceeding the binary opposition of the organic and the mechanic) political subjectivities. Certain philosophers prefer taking the category of

'posthuman' rather than 'cyborganic' (Braidotti 2013), others choose 'inhuman' as the orientating limit of technological progress (Land 2011). In other words, hybrid subjectivities may seem outdated. The invention of a new political language based on technological development was substituted for the oppressive use of this language by dominating structures of power. Furthermore, the new language did not create any virtual safe-spaces: the cyber-optimism of the 1990s gave place to a way too pessimistic view of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Using the Mark Fisher analogy, it can be defined as 'cyber-realism'.

But this pessimistic view of the present moment would mean, in terms of Haraway, the fail of the *ontology* rather than the fail of the *cyborg*. Her theory was grounded in a specific, technologically grounded version of political imagination which did not manage to come to life. However, the whole conceptual construction does not prove to be totally wrong. Taking the theory as a certain number of consequently connected claims, we have to focus on those which seem outdated to the moment of contemporaneity. Here comes the theoretical strategy I suggest in this paper: to rehabilitate the figure of the cyborg, we have to *reassemble the political ontology* of Haraway's project by considering it to be an image of the future.

### **3. THE HAUNTOLOGICAL TURN**

In the given notion, the most controversial moment is the position of the future itself. The legitimacy of the very concept of the future is questioned by a certain number of theorists analyzing the recent transformations of the society. One of the most profound philosophers focusing on the problems of future is Mark Fisher. In his opus magnum, 'Capitalist Realism' (Fisher 2009), he registers the paralysis of the political imagination, immanent to the contemporary society. According

to Fisher, we cannot even think of anticipating the alternative to a capitalist world. This situation is a result of the functioning of a neoliberal political regime which subordinates all of the possible spheres of life. Following Franco Berardi's thought, Fisher claims that we're 'living in some way after the future'. It points out to the submission of the political imagination to the 'capitalist realism', the impossibility of reflection on the future.

The described impossibility leads to a notion of 'hauntology' as a way of description of alterities to the present. The term 'hauntology' (hantologie) was coined by Jacques Derrida in his book 'Specters of Marx' as a hybrid of the words 'haunting' and 'ontology' (Derrida 1994). Derrida wrote that 'to haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept' (Fisher 2012: 18), meaning a particular kind of quasi-ontologies which determine the order of things but are not given as actually existing. Mark Fisher extended this notion and introduced it to a wider context by defining hauntology as the ontology of 'what is in actuality no longer but still effective as a virtuality' or of 'what has not yet happened but is already effective' (Fisher 2012: 19). In the context of capitalist realism this would refer to the appearing signs of the past or the (impossible) future making any importance to the present. Otherwise, hauntology makes possible the ontological presence of non-existing figures in the only considerable ontology – capitalist realism.

To my point of view, hauntology can be regarded as a ground to any kind of political subjectivity nowadays. If the theory is subject to a possibility of imagination or, to be more precise, re-imagination, and meanwhile depends on what be contextually considered as ontology – basic conditions of thought, it can be represented in a spectral form. Alternatively, it operates the conceptual apparatus of what has already been

imagined, not what is being invented in the present. Moreover, as any subjectivity implies the openness to an alternative future, in the situation of capitalist realism it can only exist as a hauntological subjectivity. It operates the concepts which are disclaimed by the actual ontology, giving meaning to different specters (e.g. Marx in Derrida's work). In Haraway's political language, this situation describes 'the ontology which gives us politics' – therefore, a cyborganic subjectivity implied by theory appears here in a weird spectral form.

To give back to the figure of the cyborg its relevance, we should replace the Haraway's idea of ontology for the notion of hauntology. Elsewise, the technological future implied by Haraway as a metaphysical ground of her theory has to be considered *not as what it actually turned out to be but as what it could be*. The concept of cyborg is not subject to any transformations on the structural level, so the essential aim is to return its political meaning. As it was already claimed, the political theory in Haraway is not the product of thinking, it is a straight consequence of the ontology. Accordingly, there is a necessity to substitute the ontological model that doesn't work: instead of 'political ontology', in Haraway's words, we need '*political hauntology*' which is open to the political imagination. The emancipatory power of hauntology is in its non-presence: to quote Mark Fisher again, 'from a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again' (Fisher 2009: 81). The concept of cyborg obtains here the coincident role.

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