POSTMODERN FEMINISM AND
FRANKENHOOKER

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For the writer today it has become increasingly important to investigate the inconsistencies and innovative applications that are made visible when two seemingly unrelated or oppositional theoretical discourses are brought together. In fact, Frederic Jameson points out the current popularity of “Theoretical Discourse,” which is the study of the simultaneous and interwoven operation of any number of viable discourses within a single text. Thus, for instance, an analysis of a given cultural element may be done from a scientific/psychological/Marxist perspective, which may prove to be more “enlightening” than any single approach. This is a particularly postmodernist trend: a trend in which Postmodernism itself can be used as one of a number of combined discourses. One particularly interesting fusion is that of Postmodernism and Feminism. In this linkage both the weaknesses and unique potencies of each discourse are brought to focus in their criticisms of each other. Furthermore, a postmodernist approach provides new tools that can be used by theorists/writers to talk about feminism in terms that are entirely more empowering than previous applications. Although there is currently no formal postmodernist/feminist film theory per se, one can use the principles of postmodernism to provide insight into feminist film theory, and vice versa. In this paper I will venture to talk about the filmic text as instrument and manifestation of postmodernist-feminist theory, and will use Frankenhooker (1990) as an example.

The scholarship of modern Western culture can be described as the construction of general, all-encompassing principles which would lay bare the basic features of natural and social reality. These principles attempted to provide a “God’s eye view” of humanity, and would be applicable across cultures and across time. Postmodernism can be described as an uncovering of the fact that previously honored principles, not to mention “laws,” were in fact constructed, and as such could not possibly apply to all cultures and all periods in history. This resulted in the realization that the “God’s eye view” that modernity afforded humanity was of course only the “white, bourgeois male’s” point of view, which was dedicated to the interests and political agendas of the bourgeois white male. Postmodernists are committed to the representation of a multitude of points of view in every discourse, and the construction of theories that acknowledge their specificity in historical time and geographical region, as well as their political biases.

Modern feminism sought to find a single cause that would explain the oppression of women, and argued that when women’s oppression ceased, all oppression would cease. An example of this can be found in Shulamith Firestone’s invocation of biological differences between women and men to explain sexism. This idea is problematic from a postmodernist perspective because appeals to biology to explain social phenomena are essentialist (insofar as they project onto all women and men qualities which develop under historically specific social conditions) and monicausal (insofar as they look to one set of characteristics, such as female physiology or male genitalia, to explain women’s oppression in all cultures). These problems are only compounded when appeals to biology are used in conjunction with the dubious claim that women’s oppression is the cause of all other forms of oppression. Needless to say, this approach placed feminism in opposition with any other discourse which sought to overturn the oppressive relationship between the Western, white, bourgeois male and the rest of the world. This resulted in fragmenting the “rest of the world” into factions which, each unto itself, did not create a very strong opponent for Uncle Sam (American patriarchy).

On the other hand, feminists critique postmodernism in its androcentrism and its political naivete. They especially find Lyotard’s discussions, which are the originators of “postmodernism,” to be in the interest of the male. Some feminists suspect that in effect postmodernism is an attempt on the part of the male underprivileged masses to antique feminist arguments and therefore eliminate that discourse as competition. Furthermore, feminist writers such as Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson argue that Lyotard’s assertion that theoretical discourse need forswear both large
historical narratives and analyses of societal macrostructures is overstated. Since sexism has a long history and is deeply and pervasively imbedded in contemporary societies, historical/sociological tools are important for feminists, and, argue the two writers, are not contradictory in the idea of postmodern theory.4

Hence, a postmodernist-feminist theory might be forged. Such a theory would be specifically historical, attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and periods and to that of different groups within different societies and periods. It would be nonuniversalist, eschewing ideas of cross-culturalism and transepochal applications. Finally, postmodern-feminist theory would replace unitary notions of woman and feminine gender identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, ethnicity, race, age, and sexual orientation.5

It is from this stance that I will begin to talk of a postmodernist-feminist theory of film. Using the tools of postmodernism (which applies directly to all products of culture) and feminist film theory (which invariably invokes psychoanalytic theory), and in the most incorporative and experimental way possible, I will pull apart the text of Frankenhooker in search of a postmodernist feminism. As an introduction to this inquiry I refer to the work of Judith Butler, postmodernist-feminist writer:

Within psychoanalytic literary criticism, and within feminist psychoanalytic criticism in particular, the operation of the unconscious makes all narrative coherence suspect... In this sense, the text always exceeds the narrative; as the field of excluded meanings, it returns, invariably to contest and subvert the explicitly attempted narrative coherence of the text.6

The film at hand certainly defers to this notion. The film moves along traditional narrative lines, and much of the plot exists for the sole purpose of moving the story along. It seems as though the entire film were constructed as a build-up to the film’s last ten minutes, and therefore anything of value in the first hour and a half is simply icing on the cake. But it is in this icing that we come to understand the film, its context and its purpose. And so in this analysis I will consume it all, cake and icing together. The snippets of plot summary that ensue comprise a great deal of the essential "text" of Frankenhooker.

Jeffrey Franken works for the New Jersey Electric Company. He considers himself to be, however, a bio-electro-technician, a doctor of sorts. Currently he is working on a special project, a brain with an eye embedded in its frontal lobes, which he has brought to life with electric current. We learn Jeffrey’s overweight fiancee, Elizabeth, is going to let him staple her stomach someday.

At this point it will be beneficial to borrow the tools formulated in Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980’s.” In this essay Haraway proposes the Cyborg as mythical symbol of the postmodern feminist. A Cyborg, she explains, is a fusion of human, animal, and machine, and would represent everything constructed and exploited by Western patriarchal capitalism. The Cyborg would, at once, stand for the Indian working-class woman, the Asian lower-class man, and the African starving child. Jeffrey’s “brain-eye” is a Cyborg, made of human parts, brought to life by man and machine with electricity, and animalistic in nature (later in the film the creature is kept in a fish tank, and swims around happily). This construction is actually the ultimate introduction into corporeal post-modernity, as Baudrillard argues:

This body, our body, often appears simply superfluous, basically useless in its extension, in the multiplicity and complexity of its organs, its tissues, and functions, since today everything is concentrated in the brain and in genetic codes, which alone sum up the operational definition of being.7

The first shot of the film is a close-up of this
Cyborg, staring at the viewer in bewilderment. The second shot of the film is a monitor on which we see Jeffrey’s image. He motions to the camera in direct address, coaxing his addressee to look at him. We realize that he is talking to the creature and that this shot is of a video representation of the field of vision of the Cyborg. Thus we are placed in identification with this being, but only through an electronic simulation device. And thus we are thrust into the postmodernist stance of dealing with representations of representations, and with multiple and complex subjective positions. Jeffrey’s status as half-doctor, half-electrician establishes him within the realm of postmodernism, in which: “there is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic.”—The first two shots of Frankenhooker introduce us to its two main characters: the Cyborg, which will take many forms in the narrative but which is textually persistent, and Jeffrey—creator and exploiter of the Cyborg, who can only relate to it through the means of creation and exploitation, through high technology. Haraway argues that these would be the two main positions in the postmodernist feminist future, and that their relationship would definitely not be one of oppression and compliance.

I draw specific attention to the Protean nature of the Cyborg, in contrast to the Promethean nature of a creature such as the monster in Frankenstein. The postmodern Cyborg has the power of assuming different forms, whereas the modern symbol of the Other is monolithic, unable to represent more than one aspect of subjectivity in a single text. Baudrillard draws this same sort of distinction when talking of postmodernism and its predecessor.9

At a birthday party for her father, Elizabeth shows off the remote control lawn mower that Jeffrey invented just for Dad. She doesn’t pay attention to what she’s doing, however, and ends up getting chopped to bits.

Elizabeth is first established as the average, submissive, gossipy American woman. She chats
with her girlfriend about all the diets that she’s been on. She is willing to submit to Jeffrey’s staple gun, in order to conform to his ideal. She begs for her Daddy’s attention. The last shot of her is the traditional, campy, blonde-bimbo scream of terror. Jeffrey’s lawn mower, member of the Cyborg race, gets rid of her. She is done away with by a shining example of her fiancee’s expert technology, a remote control lawn mower, which in itself is characteristic of postmodernism in that it involves the “displacement of bodily movements and efforts into electric or electronic commands.”\(^\text{10}\) The Cyborg eliminates the Woman, a being which on its own is much too monoglossial and monolithic.

Jeffrey was recovering Elizabeth’s head and is keeping it in an estrogen-based liquid in a meat freezer. He plans to rebuild her body, using the “parts” of another woman. Jeffrey is sure his lover will be happy when he finishes, telling her, “I can make you into anything you want. I can make you the centerfold goddess of the century.”

What he most likely really means is, “I can make you into anything I want.” Here we have the clear-cut, unmitigated desire of the male to construct the female body. The Freudian and Lacanian implications of this are endless. I would rather concentrate on the two inherent statements here: first, that gender is a construction, and second, that the direction and content of that construction is determined for the “female” by the “male.” Butler’s essay on “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse” argues that:

*If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.*\(^\text{11}\)

Thus if in postmodernism we attack notions of a coherent, stable subject then traditional, constructed gender roles come into question. Who is doing the constructing here? The feminist, of course, would argue that it is the male. We are not just talking here about Jeffrey’s desire to reconstitute a body for his mate: her presence is transcendental for him; he speaks to her severed head. What is of interest is Jeffrey’s need to make Elizabeth into a *Playboy* centerfold. This all ties in, of course, with the myth of the Cyborg. What ties the varying forms of the Cyborg together is their status of being constructed by the Western, bourgeois male. *Frankenhooker’s* hyper-real approach to this long-suffered notion of constructed gender is unique in a postmodern sense:

> What was projected psychologically and mentally, what used to be lived out on Earth as metaphor, as mental or metaphorical scene, is henceforth projected into reality, without any metaphor at all, into an absolute space which is also that of simulation.\(^\text{12}\)

We do not merely see an instance of a man dictating the sexual identity of a woman (à la *9 1/2 Weeks*), we see a man actually constructing the body of a woman and deciding for himself what that woman will look like (à la *Weird Science*). We see him formulating an actual map of the female body, and designing the wiring needed to keep him satisfied. Another interesting aspect of this scene is the absence of a voice for Elizabeth in the matter, an actual nonexistence of Elizabeth, except as the product of Jeffrey’s desire. This ties in with the radical feminist standpoint of Catherine MacKinnon, which constructs a nonsubject, a nonbeing in the place of “woman.” MacKinnon argues that because man constitutes and appropriates woman sexually, then anything that counts as woman’s experience is something that names sexual violation by man.\(^\text{13}\)

Jeffrey realizes, “If I need female body parts, then I’ll buy female body parts. And there is a place across the river where there are thousands of women anxious to sell their parts, no questions asked...of course with the right amount of cash.” Jeffrey finds a prostitute in New York who takes him to the “Huevos Grande” bar and introduces him to Zorro, her pimp and drug dealer. In exchange for the tip, Zorro gives her a
baggie full of crack, which Jeffrey notices makes her very excited.

Here the dialectics of high capitalism, Marxism, and feminism are spelled out in a similarly hyper-real sense: the woman is a hooker, trading sexual passivity (or aggression) for money or drugs. Woman is only as valuable as she is a good fuck; and if she is a good fuck, she can get exactly what she wants. Ironically, it seems that what she wants are objects that also have been created by Western, bourgeois men: money and crack. When coming into contact with a great amount of either (money, in Jeffrey’s hands; crack, in Zorro’s), the hooker goes crazy. It becomes evident that she will do just about anything for one or the other, and thus can be manipulated quite easily. Hence: Man has created something that is of great value to Woman; Man controls her access to that object; Man has unlimited power over Woman, to which she is more than happy to acquiesce. Here we have modern Woman, thinking that she is liberated by selling herself to men.

Money and crack have special significance in this postmodern world. Money is a sign that has been disconnected from its referent. It no longer represents a specific amount of gold which is being kept in Fort Knox. It is merely a symbol whose exchange value changes relative to other symbols on a day-to-day basis. Crack is a drug formulated in laboratories by chemists, a completely artificial product. After it is consumed it is gone, with absolutely nothing to show for it. And it provides one with a sense of schizophrenic hyper-reality, a simultaneous escape from and propulsion into the simulacrum we call “reality.”

Jeffrey goes home and uses his scientific knowledge to create a lethal form of “super-crack.” He plans to leave it in the presence of the hookers at his “beauty contest,” so that they will smoke it and die. Although he has some moral doubts about this, he reasons, “If they don’t want any, they can just say no.” He tries the stuff out on a gerbil in his lab and it explodes.

Jeffrey uses this drug-bartering manipula-
tion to an exaggerated end. His "just say no" excuse aligns him with that great symbol of the Western, bourgeois male, Ronald Reagan. As Reagan allowed an entire race of people to be subverted and opiated by crack, Jeffrey will allow an entire gaggle of hookers to be killed by it. This makes palpable the direct relationship between Jeffrey and what he represents: the Reagans, Bushes, Falwells, Wildmons, and Helmses of our country. As long as you make it look like it was their choice, you are void of responsibility. This evokes the phallogocentric Genesis myth, in which Woman is created by the Father and then is made guilty by eating from the tree of Knowledge. Jeffrey's action essentially aligns him with the "God's eye view," which modernity sought to hold, and which postmodernity seeks to destroy. Jeffrey's exploitation of the gerbil parallels his exploitation of the hookers, and confirms the direct relationship between animal and woman (creating Cyborg). In this scene Jeffrey actually talks to the gerbil as if it were a hooker, taunting it, telling it how sexy it is. The "super-crack" itself can be considered a form of Cyborg, as it was constructed by Western, bourgeois man in order to serve his interests; it will destroy the hookers, as it destroyed Elizabeth, because modern woman works against the interests of the Cyborg.

In a hotel room, Jeffrey is introduced to a large group of prostitutes, varying in race, skin tone, hair color, and personality. They refer to him as "doctor." He scientifically evaluates the various parts of their bodies, measuring the circumference of their thighs, the buoyancy of their breasts, the density of their buttocks. But when he is finished he cannot bring himself to kill them. While searching for his money the first hooker finds a large bag of "super-crack." The girls have a party, and then explode.

In this scene the retelling of Genesis is further played out. After smoking the crack (the tree of Knowledge) the girls are thrust into a series of "sinful" behaviors: taking off their G-strings, turning on some rock music (which Jeffrey proclaims is "the devil's music") and dancing. Two of the girls climb onto a bed and begin to kiss one another (Jeffrey reacts by saying, "Stop that! It's unnatural!"). All are enjoyable and liberating activities for the women, but are considered "bad" by Jeffrey. This again aligns the "doctor" with figures such as Jesse Helms, who would offer conservative political practice to liberated women. Finally, the women explode, forced to a rethinking of their discourse by the Cyborg Crack, by the technological manipulation of Western bourgeois male—by Jeffrey. In this same way postmodernism has forced an explosion of feminist thought, as it has forced the "immense fragmentation and privatization of modern literature—its explosion into a host of distinct private styles and mannerisms." As E. Ann Kaplan describes it,

As an aesthetic, postmodernism constructs a decentered, fragmented text; the breaking up of traditional, realist forms sometimes entails a deconstruction of conventional sex-role representations that opens up new possibilities for female imaging.  

The illusion of the coherent, independent subject is dead—exploded. Also dead is any prior identification between the female viewer and the modern woman, either in Elizabeth or the hookers. All are now a jumble of arms and legs. Jeffrey collects the pieces into trash bags and hauls them home. He separates the body parts, then selects which parts he wants, connecting them together with paste and finally sewing on Elizabeth's head. He throws the unused parts into the freezer, promising the hookers that he will reconstruct all of them someday.

When Jeffrey picks up the various female body parts and considers them separately we are reminded of Freud's theory of fetishism. Translated to film, we speak of fetishistic scopophilia, in which "the beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylized and fragmented by closeups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look." In Frankenhooker, this style (valorized by von Sternberg) is thrust into the hyper-real: one can no longer talk about the 'real'
in an external or objective way, so we are left with the sign itself and its two components (signifier, signified). These scenes are filled with imagery of actually fragmented body parts, fetishized to the point that they are literally separated from the rest of the body to which they were originally attached. Furthermore, the “props” that are used for legs and breasts (which are the most fetishized areas of the female body and which are the focus of the “part-choosing” scene) of the hookers are so fake, so obviously plastic, that they become blatant and purposeful signifiers for what they represent.

Jeffrey brings the body to life a la Frankenstein. Jeffrey removes the sheet to reveal Frankenhooker, clad in purple miniskirt and a skimpy, bra-like top under which excessively protruding nipples can be seen. She seems to be in some sort of trance, repeating lines that the hookers said when they were alive, such as “Ya wanna date?” and “Looking for some action?” The voice is not Elizabeth’s; her hair is purple, her face stark white. She has scars all over her body. She punches Jeffrey’s lights out and steps down from the gowny, revealing thick-soled black shoes like those that Frankenstein wore, only more feminine. She walks away.

At last we have our ultimate Cyborg—part woman, part machine, part black, part Chinese, working class, housewife, gerbil. Frankenhooker has enough strength to subvert the power that her Creator assumes over her, more than any one hooker or animal could ever muster. One could say that it is because of physical strength that Man has always dominated Woman. But this doesn’t apply to the combination of Animal, Machine, and Man of Color. Hence with all of these elements combined, the Cyborg can begin to dominate, or at least create some balance of power. “Cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate; in our present political circumstances, we could hardly hope for more potent myths for resistance and recoupling...The Cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code.”

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Spectator
Frankenhooker is both pastiche and schizophrenic, the two characteristic styles of postmodernism, according to Jameson. Whereas the hookers and Elizabeth were essentially a parody of the modern woman, in the form of "bimbo," this Cyborg figure is a "neutral practice of such mimicry...without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic." The purpose of Frankenhooker's construction is not to poke fun at the Frankenstein monster or at the hookers and housewives whose parts comprise it. Frankenhooker is made up of all of those, but its message involves the failure of these modern forms of political and aesthetic expression to free the woman, and all other forms that the Cyborg represents, from her imprisonment. This sort of mimicry is actually quite poignant. On top of this is a schizophrenia that seems to come straight from the postmodernist canons of Jameson:

What the schizophrenic breakdown of language does to the individual words that remain behind is to reorient the subject or the speaker to a more literalizing attention toward these words...As meaning is lost, the materiality of words becomes obsessive, as is the case when children repeat a word over and over again until its sense is lost and it becomes an incomprehensible incantation...Schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence.  

Frankenhooker's endless repetition of the hookers' words, "Ya wanna date?" and "Looking for some action?" after a while has the effect of forcing the meaning of those words into the purely symbolic. It exposes the transparency of those phrases, the pure meaninglessness of the words even in the context that they were originally used. The creature's trance-like state reveals the actual inner nature of the hyper-constructed female, or hooker. Frankenhooker is also a hyper-real representation of Bakhtin's postmodernist notion of heteroglossia, the incorporation of the voices of more than one person in one discourse. The lines it speaks are lines we recognize from earlier on, and are lines that were spoken by more than one character in the film. Heteroglossia is one tool which is used by postmodernists to understand multiple points of view.

Frankenhooker takes the subway into town and picks up a couple of johns, who explode as soon as they come into oral or genital contact with her. Jeffrey finds her at "Huevos Grande," where her head has become partially disconnected, and takes her home. He revives her with electricity again, and this time she comes back with Elizabeth's personality. She is at first excited that she was brought back from the dead, but when she realizes that she now has a body that is not her body, she is enraged. Zorro, upset by the loss of his "bitches," has followed them to the lab; he cuts off Jeffrey's head. He takes a baggie of crack from his pocket and calls out to the hookers by name. The meat freezer opens and the leftover body parts, now reformulated into mutants, head for Zorro. They attack him, kiss him on the lips, take his crack, and disappear back into the freezer. Fade out.

The mutants are also Cyborgs, who get what they want without having to sacrifice or be manipulated by the Western, bourgeois male. They represent the possibility for alternative constructions of the female body, bringing to focus the unnatural constructions that the modern woman takes for granted, such as stapling one's stomach closed in order to stay ultra-thin. The mutants are inarguably grotesque; but then again, to some women Traci Lords is grotesque. Both are "unnatural," but the foregrounding of this issue allows us to truly question, what is "naturality" and who decides what that is? Zorro was so disgusted by the sight of these creatures, who were formerly his property, like so much cattle, that he was physically overcome. The mutants essentially devour him, or gross him out to death. He ceases to be in the picture at that point. This brings us to question the status of the "phallic" (muscular, macho) male in a postmodernist-feminist world. If the mere sight of a Cyborg is enough to do him in, then how
truly powerful is the phallic male, who until this point has obtained total domination through physical strength? Again, through the postmodernist technique of hyper-real signification these issues are readily and forcefully brought into the forefront, instead of lazily remaining in the background.

Fade in on Jeffrey’s face. He asks Elizabeth what happened. She explains that she followed his detailed “instructions” and was able to reconstruct his body. However, the process only works with female body parts...Jeffrey looks down and realizes that he has the body of a woman, with large breasts, long fingernails, and female genitals. Jeffrey can only ask where his “Johnson” is, and we end on a close-up of his horrified face.

Finally the Cyborg has found revenge, in a way that a Western, bourgeois man could not. To reconstruct a woman’s body as having had a penis and then having been castrated is one thing: a mere fantasy in the male mind, a joke in the female mind. But to reconstruct a man’s body into a woman’s is perhaps the worst thing that could happen to him, at least according to the Western, bourgeois male perspective. This ending creates an ironic parallel, between the Cyborg and Jeffrey: the first shot parallels the last, the “brain-eye” is now the same as its Creator. Frankenhooker and Jeffrey are now both Cyborgs: the new mythical race has succeeded in appropriating the Western, bourgeois male into its ranks, so as to eliminate modernism and with it many forms of oppression. As Haraway explains:

Cyborg writing is about the power to survive not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools, to mark the world that marked them as Other.  

The Cyborg characters, through multiculturalism, through fusion between human, machine, and animal, through heteroglossia and schizophrenia and pastiche, succeed in defeating scientific/technological, phallic, Western, bourgeois man with the same tools that “marked them as Other.” Frankenhooker actually uses the set of instructions that Jeffrey left behind (in the interest of empirical science) in order to re-create him in the image of herself. Now Jeffrey is forced to see the world from a different point of view, as he was unwilling to do before. Forced by a multitude of voices and interests which will finally be a force that the dominating tradition of the Western, bourgeois male will have to reckon with. This “cyborg coalition” can use the tools which the patriarchal capitalist has used to dominate the Other: television, newspapers, politics, popular film.

1Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 112
4Fraser and Nicholson 34
5Fraser and Nicholson 34
6Butler 331
7Jean Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication” 129
9Baudrillard 127
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15E. Ann Kaplan, “Conclusion,” Rocking Around the Clock, 150
16Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” 205
17Haraway 196