Psychology and Sociology of Ghost in the Shell

What does it mean, exactly, to be human? In a world where humans are relying on technology ever more increasingly, this question focuses on the idea of cyborgs or cyborg enhancements. Mamoru Oshii’s cyberpunk masterpiece *Ghost in the Shell* focuses not only on the possibility of mechanical enhancements on humans, but also of full-fledged cyborgs. In a world dominated by technology and connected by a vast network, Major Motoko Kusanagi is plagued by the question of her identity and is hesitant about whether or not she is an autonomous individual or rather an automated creation. As cultures around the world continually surrender to technology, Motoko struggles not only to find the infamous computer hacker The Puppet Master, but to find the Ghost, or soul, within her robotic body. From a different perspective, the film examines the positive and negative effects of a society relying on technology. *Ghost in the Shell* examines not only the effects of cyborg technology on Motoko herself, but also on the sociological scale.

Throughout the film, the Major is inundated with problems. She is pestered with the tasks brought about by her job as a police officer and she must complete them if she is to retain her physical body. These annoyances, however, are minimal with respect to her psychological complications. Once a human with nothing but natural organs, she has since been manufactured by Megatech into a super-powerful cyborg with enhanced physical characteristics. The only natural organs she has left are a few brain cells within her titanium skull (Penicka-Smith). Although it is believed that the brain cells retain the Ghost within a cyborg body, Motoko refuses to believe that she is an individual:

"Maybe all full-replacement cyborgs like me start wondering this. That Perhaps the real me died a long time ago and I'm a replicant made with a cyborg body and a computer brain. Or maybe there never was a real 'me' to begin with."

Motoko doesn't believe she is free, but rather that she is being, and has always been, controlled. Her body is just a shell that is open for manipulation and, despite claims made by others, she is far from being even partly human (*Ghost in the Shell*).

While Motoko’s internal struggle is an important aspect of the film, it must also be noted that the film carries a heavy sociological meaning. With its cyborg superwoman Motoko, *Ghost in the Shell* raises the possibility of the positive influence of technology on society by undermining gender identity. Unlike most sci-fi movies that valorize men and devalue women, *Ghost in the Shell* shows a future that praises technology and renders humanity and its gender prejudices obsolete. In her “Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway claims that gender is constructed socially rather than determined biologically. When someone is born, there are expectations placed upon that person depending on their biological gender. These expectations aren’t natural, but rather social constructions that have evolved over hundreds of years. The female cyborg – an unnatural body without reproductive organs – undermines biology as the source of gender identity. This hybridized female machine destroys sexual distinctions as well as stereotypes based solely on the body (Haraway). Although gendered a female, Motoko amazes the viewer with her abilities rather than her female attributes. The enhanced strength, speed, and agility granted by Motoko’s cyborg body best with competence and power while positioning her male counterparts in the more inferior roles that would be associated with women. Motoko, a leader figure, treats the males as if they are sidekicks rather individuals with important roles. By creating a cyborg that is both a female and strong, Oshii obliterates conventional prejudices associated with specific genders.

The sociological aspects of *Ghost in the Shell* are not limited to gender profiling, however. The movie also toys with the idea of society’s loss of individual choice. With brain implants becoming a norm, it is becoming more and more likely for individuals within society to be manipulated by some outside source. This is demonstrated in the movie when The Puppet Master hacks into the ghosts of people in order to achieve tasks that he sees fit. He can not only control their physical actions, but also their thoughts and memories. The brain implants that were meant to improve peoples’ lives, then, are actually making them vulnerable to complete control by an outside source. Here, we see Oshii’s thoughts about reliance on technology made clear; society’s use of technology may improve quality of life, but at what cost? Will a society based on technology still be free, or rather manipulated by the technology itself (Ruh)?

Mamoru Oshii’s *Ghost in the Shell* portrays the effects that a reliance on technology can have on both the individual and society as a whole. More often than not, these effects, being both positive and negative in nature, completely defy conventional thinking. Oshii’s film encourages the viewers to question their individuality and ask themselves what it is that makes them human. Is it the fact that they were born naturally or rather that being treated as a human has made them human? On a more sociological level, the film defies the unwritten laws of society to make prejudices about a person based on gender. The film implies that a human isn’t considered a male or a female based on biology, but rather based on how they act. The limitless interpretations of the many themes in *Ghost in the Shell* leave the viewer not only to wonder about life, but also to praise Oshii’s masterpiece of a film.

Works Cited:


