

## Book Reviews

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Thierry HOQUET (2011) *Cyborg Philosophie. Penser contre les dualismes* [Cyborg Philosophy. Thinking against Dualismes] Paris: Seuil.

An effective way of getting into Thierry Hoquet's project could be to stop at page 304, section 12.2: 'Slash Philosophy':

Cyborg looked at the ground in astonishment: the road was paved with bricks divided into two parts like dominos. On each of the rectangles were inscribed two words. Cyborg set about reading them, engaging on a long litany: night/day, self/other, culture/nature, nature/artifice, male/female, active/passive, form/substance [...]

What do these pairs mean? Cyborg wondered. What do they represent for philosophy?

The Cyborg – the object *slash*<sup>1</sup> subject of the book – acts as a character who literally questions the categories that its existence *slash* invention brings up *slash* authorizes. Cyborg or cyber-philosophizing thus involves calling up, mobilizing, giving shape to, varying, that Harawayan monster, that Latourian 'being', that entity whose ontology is assuredly uncertain. Its material *slash* semi-otic texture is an opening.

A workshop of potential philosophy:<sup>2</sup> such is the cyborg mission. This mission was first *manifested* by Donna Haraway in her *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985). That is to acknowledge that it has been laid out in its expectations, whether philosophical or political, and to the benefit of the thought around the potentiality (or the posterity) of a utopia (socialist and feminist, Gardey 2009). Like the second man to tread the surface of the moon, Thierry Hoquet is walking in the footsteps of Haraway to attack, 'philosophically' the cyborg constellation. He thus maintains as much with Haraway's work as with the material *slash* discursive reality of his own a vampire-like relationship in order to 'think against the dualisms'; in short, and to justify my take on the matter, to think about what the *slash* does to the thinking.

Clearly, presented that way, my response does not allow the reader to get a proper idea of the importance of Hoquet's project and the fact that it takes a timely place in the history of philosophy as a proposal to think through the notion of hybridity: relations between humans themselves and between humans and non-humans, and thus to characterize the texture and range of the contemporary techno-scientific worlds. Others have taken up this challenge before Hoquet: the aforementioned Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour along with multiple historical empiricists, sociologists and other practitioners of cultural, gender and science and technology studies of whom it would take too long to draw up a list. Hoquet proposes to raise the exercise to the level of the fine arts, and, as the chronicler of our contemporary intellectual marketplace, to draw on material from all sides to explore the cyborg constellation and its potentialities. From the role of philosopher (in the early academically ratifiable chapters) he turns to being an entomologist of artefactual species and

proposes in the form of vignettes (less academically recognized) a series of philosophical ‘post-its’ which lay out as much the range of facets of cyborg reality as those of his cyborgian fantasy. One must concede to the author the merit of clearly declaring his hand: ‘As is appropriate for a reflection on dualism, this book is divided into two, organized around a binary tension (core/limbs; centre/periphery). But as is equally appropriate, one can take it by any part at all, and even open it in the middle if you want’ (p. 48). As to the freedom given to the readers who are women, it is primary and total: ‘Welcome, women readers! For in this Gigantomachy you are the heroines’ (p. 17).

It is out of this that I understand and define my freedom of analysis, as a woman reader/actor<sup>3</sup> engaged with the book/device.

The work of the philosopher/entomologist tracking everywhere the real/imagined contemporary manifestations of the cyborg (from Robocop to the OncoMouse, and passing through a series of ‘mutants’, whether attested or fictional) does have a certain interest. This enterprise takes the form of a cartography of historical (and philosophical) forms of human/machine relationships. The term ‘cyborg’ appears then as the way of labelling a previously unknown state of artefactuality which goes beyond the present moment and the preceding and contemporary forms of instrumentation, extension and technical mediation. The specifying of these forms is apprehended through calling upon authors like Canguilhem, Baudrillard, Hacking, Deleuze and Guattari. But if the pioneering work of Siegfried Giedion and the propositions of the technical philosopher Gilbert Simondon are equally picked up and commented on, the contributions of the history and sociology of the technical are for the most part neglected, which is rather a pity. The historicity of technical regimes, the way human/object relations have been characterized, the analysis of the situated and contextual forms of technical embodiment fall within a very broad field of research in history, sociology and technological anthropology. It is surprising that neither a Laurent Thévenot nor a Madeleine Akrich rate a mention. Is this a question of ‘keeping firm hold of the boundaries’ which are nevertheless trying to be challenged? Could not ‘the philosophical order’ tolerate some broader contamination? The author’s general drawing upon the field of English-language published research on cyborgs, which collectively constitutes a sort of ‘cyborg theory’, nevertheless stresses the desirability of new ideas, eclecticism, the mingling of genres and the abolition of boundaries. It is from out of this eclectic and foreign intellectual space while still grounding his work in a certain ‘French philosophical tradition’ that the author constructs his discourse. But is it any real saving in energy and time to therefore make the choice of not accessing major authors in the field of reflection on science and technology, whether it be the movement of the social studies of knowledge, of science and technology studies, or even more astonishingly, given that the project is defined and aimed at ‘thinking against the dualisms’ and that he is doing so in French and in the philosophical context of the French tradition, to completely ignore, for example, Bruno Latour’s *Politiques de la nature* (1999)?

Another issue raised by this project, and no doubt one related to the preceding remarks on the referential regime and the thought traditions invoked, arises from the way in which the author embraces/fails to embrace the modes of emergence and the forms of life of the technological elements in society. The work put forward is for the most part placed under the sign of evocation and bears a marked preference for figuration. The way cyborgs are figured are evoked, instanced and reinstanced as much in the more academic chapters as through the device of vignettes and philosophical ‘post-its’ of the second part of the book. We can no doubt follow the author when he writes: ‘The Hollywood manifestations of Cyborg or those of the mangas are monsters in the sense that Francis Bacon gives to the term: things that are extraordinary, relatively rare and quasi-mythological, which reveal to us the functioning of that which is ordinary, of the normal in the statistical sense of the most frequent or general cases’ (p. 45). Yet, would not trying to understand the both real and fictive weight of these figurations and the way that they operate in reality and in fiction

to transform our worlds or otherwise have been a more difficult yet ultimately more significant project to carry through? How does one go from motifs, from metaphorical and meaningful registers, from those icons which seem to float in an unquestioned social/discursive reality to a different form of reality? What are we to make of cyborg practices, appropriations and contextualized meanings? Who are the players in this new cyborg landscape, what are their strengths and what imprint do they (the players and/or cyborgs) effectively leave on our lives, our bodies and our worlds?

Thus, the investigative device put forward opens up and interrogates the issue, but it leaves in the dark and ungrasped (as not truly apprehended) numerous social phenomena (and indissociably scientific and technical ones) that deserve to be further (and no doubt differently) explored and characterized.

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Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

### Notes

1. The reader will have realized that ‘/’ means (*forward*) slash and will have also recognized the significance of expressing it in *full word form*.
2. The original French of this phrase, *Ouvroir de philosophie potentielle*, echoes the appellation of the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or *Oulipo*, founded by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais to explore the use of constrained writing techniques [*Translator’s note*].
3. To facilitate reading, we will from now on replace slash with /.

### References

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Sylvie LARGEAUD-ORTEGA (2012) *Ainsi Soit-Ille. Littérature et anthropologie dans les Contes des mers du Sud de Robert Louis Stevenson*. [Isle: Let it Be. Literature and Anthropology in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *South Sea Tales*] Paris: Honoré Champion.

For the so-called general public, the name of Robert Louis Stevenson is associated with two novels which very swiftly assured that writer great success: *Treasure Island* (1882) and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). It is a Stevenson still poorly known, especially by the French reading public, that Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega has chosen to study: the author who would finish his short life in the South Pacific, the one who had been dubbed *Tusitala*, the ‘teller of tales’ by the Samoans among whom he lived.

An Anglicist by training and lecturer at the University of French Polynesia, Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega provides in this book a remarkable work derived from her consideration of a few ‘tales’ inspired by the ‘South Seas’. Without sacrificing anything to a properly literary analysis and by intentionally choosing fictional texts, she very convincingly brings to light a Stevenson who was