Science Fiction and Bodies of the Future: Alternative Gender Realities in Hollywood Cinema

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Abstract

The science fiction genre has traditionally exemplified alternative forms of sexuality and/ or gender identities, providing with the ideal forum for any criticism on gender biased societies and behaviors. Taking into account that futures are always based on the present and the ways it is envisioned, we will focus on how gender identities are constructed in contemporary Hollywood cinema, an hegemonic discourse that dictates how femininity and masculinity should be (subjected on many occasions to mere marketing strategies). For this purpose, we will adopt a critical post-structuralist perspective on how images of the body are represented in popular science fiction films released in the last few decades. We further aim at illustrating how some science fiction films released at the end of the millennium and current century propose alternative gender realities, suggesting at the same time the idea that the oppressive patriarchal structure that govern most contemporary societies can be deconstructed and changed, or at least silenced, in these movies.

Keywords: Science Fiction Film, Gender, Body

Introduction

Science fiction cinema reflects future situations and, at the same time, visions of the future are scrutinised through the lens of cinema. Science fiction has traditionally offered alternative forms of sexuality and/or gender identities, becoming the ideal forum for any criticism on gender biased societies and behaviours. The alternative worlds and microcosms represented

in the genre become the perfect sites for challenging portrayals of gender. In our contemporary panorama, popular science fiction films propose a collision of gender features, visible in the external appearance of its protagonists. Thus, androgynous bodies, cyborgs, humanoid robots and hybrid beings contribute to a visual non-differentiation of the sexes.

Nevertheless, taking into account that futures are always based on the present and that science fiction presents ideas that are polemical in the present day by setting them in future and far away contexts, we will attempt to illustrate how certain gender identities are challenged in contemporary Hollywood cinema, in spite of the fact that they are framed by an hegemonic discourse that dictates how femininity and masculinity should be (subjected on many occasions to mere marketing strategies). For this purpose, we will adopt a critical post-structuralist perspective on how images of the body are represented in popular science fiction films released in the last few decades. This approach, which draws on the Foucaultian idea that the self has become a subject of various disciplinary structures, commits to the deconstruction and analysis of visual images of bodies of the future. According to Sohail Inayatullah, the critical post-structural perspective on futures research emphasises the idea that alternative histories challenge the present, and alternative futures make the present remarkable. (Inayatullah, 1990, pp.129-130). In other words, this approach is concerned with the recovery of true self and culture, "the recovery of alternative futures that have been silenced by various oppressive structures, by a false consciousness" (Inayatullah, 1990, p.128). In line with Inayatullah's ideas, we aim at illustrating how some science fiction films released at the end of the millennium and current century propose alternative gender realities, suggesting at the same time the idea that the oppressive patriarchal structure that govern most contemporary societies can be deconstructed and changed, or at least silenced, in these movies. With this, it is implied that the present way of constructing identities is not the only possibility in terms of gender representation. As Inayatullah argues, alternative futures can mean "new configurations that challenge our notions of conventionality" (1990, p.135). Science fiction can be regarded, then, as an alternative language for deconstructing present structures of power.

Gender and Science Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium

The science fiction genre has traditionally offered alternative sex and gender models, becoming a useful tool for engaging with these ideas critically. By employing certain narrative, visual and technical strategies, the genre presents ideas about sex and gender that are controversial and/or polemical in present day, and sets them in future and unfamiliar contexts for readers/spectators. Therefore, science fiction films would make ideal candidates in offering new gender proposals and in including instances of unconventional masculinities and femininities. Indeed, they are populated by human-machine hybrids, heroes terribly frightened by menacing "others", androgynous characters trapped in cyberspace, and, after all, images that can be categorised as "out of the norm". For instance, films dealing with space exploration and conquest like *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* normally present the white heterosexual hero, yet in close consonance with "other" types of masculinities and femininities, which are of great importance for the future of the hero and of humankind. In *Star Trek,* the contradictory pressures towards recognisably familiar

structures—like the conquering white hero Picard—and the new definitions of manhood depicted in the film—the sensitive prosthetic character Data—lead to a complex process of negotiation in this cultural product. Transgendered, posthuman and challenging depictions of gender coexist with more traditional representations.

Therefore, science fiction engages in post-conventional gender traits by transgressing the system of binary oppositions that has characterised most societies for centuries, and that has privileged men over women. Oppositions are essential for creating images of the "other" but are also crucial for defining the "one" in science fiction. The most striking opposition is that between the familiar and the "other", the latter being an alien, a cyborg, a mutant or a computer. As many critics recognise, these oppositions are frequently gendered and provide much of the dramatic and ideological tension (King & Krzywinska, 2000, p.39). Science fiction provides the perfect scenario for boundary breaking at various levels, as it will be illustrated in this section. Indeed, alien invasion movies normally show male characters that are threatened and weakened by a destructive "other". In these films, otherness can be regarded as encompassing metaphors for threats or challenges to traditional social order, and has been consequently read from many different perspectives. Heroes may fight against the "other", as in *The War of the Worlds,* or become the site of otherness themselves, as it happens to the main protagonist of *The Fly*, who undergoes an identity crisis. Likewise, the "cyborg" character acquires popularity in films of the 1980s and portrays mechanically or genetically created (normally male) characters that reflect contemporary debates on the construction of gender and the posthuman body. Clones like the one at work in *Blade Runner* or mechanical cyborgs like Robocop illustrate this tendency of representation. Additionally, films showing virtual realities offer androgynous characters that, like the protagonists of *The Matrix* or *eXistenZ*, are trapped in virtual scenarios and normally suffer from identity crises as a resut of their inability to discern reality from fiction.

It is interesting to note how, from the second part of the 20th century onwards, there is a trend of science fiction movies in which sex, gender and identity are not portrayed in binary terms. Indeed, the consequences of the integration sameness-otherness are explored in uncountable Hollywood films released at the turn of the millennium. Apart from the alien invasion theme, other metaphors of boundary breaking, such as time-travel, replication or mutation help to undermine binary structures. Specially in more recent films, postmodern thought has influenced the way the genre deals with boundary breaking and we are offered computer-simulated spaces where the frontier between the real and the imaginary is blurred, affecting the characters' identities and the way gender is depicted on screen. For instance, in *Tron: Legacy* (2010) characters eventually enter a computer program and their bodies interfere with computing media, becoming part of it. The female hero, Quorra, adopts traits traditionally associated to masculinity, only to show that she is a strong, resourceful and accomplished female warrior. This context of blurring frontiers offers opportunities for questioning familiar categories of gendered bodies and practices, while functioning as sites where to reflect our intricate relationship with the computing and information technologies.

In this sense, the science fiction genre holds the power to deconstruct the sad reality of women's marginalisation in present day technologized societies. As Ivana Milojevic and Sohail Inayatullah (2010) argues when analysing visions of the future and virtual reality technologies: "women's images and selves are being

created and valorised in the minds of adolescent net surfers", the net being "a place for the gathering of sexual harassers and paedophiles" (2010, p.39). Milojevic and Inayatullah foresee a future world "where women will no longer be needed at all, creating the womanless real world and women-filled virtual world". They praise the power of contemporary feminist utopias, which can give us a higher sense of freedom, possibility and optimism, by imagining a world in which there is a more balanced distribution of power among genders (2010, p.39).

Likewise, cyborgs appearing in many films from the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century can be read as key figures for the exploration of new values ascribed to gender. Especially, virtual reality films, in which technology plays an essential role, contribute to this idea of innovation. As commented above, the virtual reality domain represented in films like *eXistenZ* (1999) or *The Matrix* (1999) can be regarded as a place for the enjoyment of the senses. In these films, men and women are both creators and users of the new technologies.

Binary opposition has been defined as "the theoretical model on which language makes its sense: black/white, male/female, left/right, dark/light, night/day and so on. Every signifying term has its opposite, against which it defines itself" (Tauchert, 2001, p.181). This abstract model can be applied to any cultural language and it exposes a tendency to polarise categories in order to make sense of the world and one's identity. Many debates on the nature of the binary model conclude that in order to oppose it there are three possible responses:

- to invert binary weightings and values (…)
- to disturb the binary process by introducing a third term (…)
- to undermine the binary as an allusion imposed on a more general and de-hierarchized web of 'difference' between a whole range of embodiments and identities, and replace it with the floating free-play of the signifier that is the hallmark of postmodernism. (Tauchert, 2001, p.182)

Taking into account the binary model, many theories have condemned the subordination of women in different discourses. Women are placed as the "other", the term of the system of binary oppositions that is considered as marginal or alien. Hence, within the polarities white/black, masculine/feminine, hetero/homosexual, there is one term, which is always dominant, and another one that is subsidiary, as French feminism made clear.[1] Influenced by poststructuralist theory, many critics propose responses to the binary gender model. In this sense, science fiction can be considered as a positive response to the rigid system of binaries, in so far as it proposes futures in which frontiers are dissolved at various levels, as commented above.

The rupture with binaries should be also understood as a typical postmodern device. Postmodern thought has gradually influenced U.S. culture, especially from the mid 20th century onwards. Postmodernism has arguably become the dominant theoretical vantage of science fiction film (Telotte, 2001, p.54). Despite its complexity, it can be affirmed that, in general terms, postmodernism is characterised by the decentralisation of hierarchical values that used to privilege one term of the binary opposition system and marginalise the other. This has provoked a general sense of uncertainty, dissolution, loss of boundaries and fragmentation, evoked by many science fiction texts. In his essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1991) Fredric Jameson takes a neo-Marxist perspective and

considers postmodernism as the dominant cultural of late capitalism. Postmodernism is characterised by a "schizophrenic temporality" and "spatial pastiche" (Jameson, 1991, p.184). In his book *Terminal Identity* (1993) Scott Bukatman applies postmodernism to the dissolution of the "self". Many other theoreticians have adopted different approaches, which show how the concept can be analysed from very different perspectives. Specifically, the science fiction film has proved to be open to the postmodern thought since, as Telotte affirms, it focuses on technology and because its fantastic nature helps to subvert our sense of reality (Telotte, 2001, p.54-6). The postmodern concern on deconstruction has been applied in the analysis of science fiction films, enriching their analysis. Indeed, films like *The Matrix* (1999), *Inception* (2010), or *Surrogates* (2009) focus on the characters' confusion and disorientation as a result of their intimate connection with the latest computing technologies and their inability to discern reality from fiction.

Especially relevant is Jean Baudrillard's account of simulacra, exposed in his 1981 influential essay "Simulacra and Simulation". There, he establishes three orders of "simulacra". To the first order, he considers, belongs the imaginary of the "utopia", and to the second corresponds what is considered as "science fiction". As for the third order, simulacra of simulation, he refers to something else that "is in the process of emerging", once the distance between the imaginary and the real is abolished. When our world used to be controlled by the reality principle, the imaginary was considered "the alibi of the real". However, it is controlled nowadays by this principle of simulation, and, consequently, the real has become "the alibi of the model" (1994, p.122). The most difficult task today in science fiction is, according to him, to "unravel what still complies (and a large part still does) with the imaginary of the second order, of the productive/projective order, and what already comes from this vagueness of the imaginary, of this uncertainty proper to the third order of simulation" (1994, p.126).

Postmodern feminism proposes the replacement of unitary notions of women and gender identity with plural conceptions of social identity (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990, p.35). The term "gender" itself becomes troublesome and unstable. In this sense, science fiction texts and movies seem to offer the perfect site for this innovative representation of gender. Rosi Braidotti (2013) uses science fiction as an appropriate way to illustrate the complex cultural context and emphasises the importance of "fantasy" transformations to erode traditional binaries. Also, the future worlds and alternative microcosms represented in science fiction become the perfect sites for this challenging portrayal of gender. Thus "domed spaces colonies, orbiting space stations, subterranean cities, cities in flight and the like" (McHale, 1992, p.248) have been the privileged sites for gender reflection. Tauchert, for instance, offers a model that she calls "fuzzy gender", that is, "a conception that moves beyond the binary either/or, without collapsing into the chaos of free floating subjectivity in difference. Gender is not totally essential, but somewhere in between (Tauchert, 2001, pp.183-185). Yet, this new imagery proves problematic after a closer look, as the supposed "deviant" depictions of men and women offered in most Hollywood films still show to be at the service of normative gender. With some exceptions, images of masculinity and femininity do not account for the wide range of genders present in U.S. society. Instead, they tend to be constructed depending on conventional patterns of representation. In line with this, Milojevic argues in "Timing feminism, feminising time" that in the "postmodern era", hegemonic time begins

to break down, becoming contested from multi-gendered spaces and from the new sciences but, however, many of the old narratives remain (Milojevic, 2008, p.333). This is not to say, however, that science fiction does not depict contemporary gender concerns or that it does not allow for any innovations. On the contrary, and in clear opposition to other genres, science fiction films manage to offer notable gains that are worth mentioning, as this article aims to illustrate.

Science fiction films set in the future reflect this postmodern idea of gender as a constructed and artificial aspect of our subjectivities. Indeed, a typical device in films like *Chappie* (2015) or *Wall-E* (2008) is to show bodies in which sexes and identities are intermixed in bodies where humanity interacts with technology at dangerous levels. This fusion with the latest technology is but a typical postmodern device. In her famous "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985) Donna Haraway used the image of the cyborg for social purposes as she considered it not only as a fictional hybrid of machine and organism, but also as a "creature of social reality" suggesting "some fruitful coupling". In its figure, the boundaries between body and technology are socially inscribed. By the late 20th century in the U.S. scientific culture three boundaries have been dissolved: that between human beings and animals, that between animal and human organism and machines, and that between the physical and the non-physical (Haraway, 1991, pp.149-153). It is precisely this dissolution of boundaries that leads to a positive image of the cyborg identity as its condition transgresses gender dualism that privileges man over woman. This transgression of boundaries and change of perspective evoked by the cyborg body means a break with the traditional dualistic thinking that positioned women as "other". The technological world, then, frees women's representations, in a sense, from patriarchal domination, and hence her last remark "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (Haraway, 1991, p.181). Haraway's cyborg image has become a key concept for academics dealing with gender, postmodernism and science fiction.

Many gender specialists have followed this utopian association gender/technology proposed by Haraway. Indeed, the concern about cybernetics, postmodernism and gender has been recently matter for a discipline known as "cyberfeminism", which celebrates computing technologies and considers cyberspace as a realm for women's liberation.

In the last few years, there has been a proliferation of works that view gender as existing along a *continuum*, proposing a fluid and hybrid identity that breaks with the binary male-female (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 1998). Specifically, scholars like Braidotti (2013), Hayles (2012) and the "New Materialism" propose detailed analyses of the impact of computation on embodiment and subjectivity, aiming to move toward the posthuman, understood as a hybrid or fluid body that troubles the information/material separation. Their writings open up a new tradition of critical feminism that addresses the complexity of our subjectivities in technologized cultures.

However, a common agreement among contemporary feminists is that science fiction offers in many ways a traditional vision of gender relationships, and even in future and unfamiliar contexts women are still relegated to a secondary position. This awareness has partly caused the emergence of a strong feminist concern about these issues—especially about gender representation in science fiction texts. Even in cybernetic contexts, where the blurring of frontiers is taken to an extreme, gender inequalities are to be found, as it will be shown in the next section when dealing with

some popular science fiction films set in the future. Hence, the relationship between science fiction, feminism and postmodernism, and their mutual intersections, has led to many contradictions and, therefore, the task of feminist science fiction is to explore how gender is reflected within this complex context.

Bodies of the Future in Popular Science Fiction Films

In this section, we will examine how popular Western science fiction films released in the last thirty years or so and that are set in future and imaginary contexts propose the erosion of conventional gender traits and the consequences of such dissolution, which further accounts for contemporary debates on sex, gender, the body and identity.

The dichotomy one/other has served different and varied purposes in science fiction. There is a tendency of films that focus on the exploration of the danger of boundary breaking, and depict the "other" as an evil alien, threatening to break with the repressive structures of dominance and subordination. In this context, one can argue that the divisive dichotomies of gender are endangered. The disruption of order suggested by the binary opposition system becomes indeed a basic feature of many films. The confrontation of the male hero with "difference" works at large in many science fiction movies. The male leading character occupies the privileged term of the binary system and U.S. hegemonic white patriarchy is threatened by the cultural metaphor of the alien and/or monster. Significantly, the fear of female sexuality is frequently suggested in these films, especially in those in which there is an association between the monster and women's reproductive functions. In "Gender in Nineteenth-Century Science Fiction: The Female Alien and the Woman Ruler", Robin Roberts argues that it is the female alien's ability to reproduce that makes her so threatening to the male protagonist and to patriarchal society (1993, p.120).[2] By encountering the female alien, the male hero recognises and defines his own masculinity and that of the dominant culture (1993, p.26).

The *Alien* saga (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997, 2012) illustrates this anxiety produced by the alien woman invading heteronormative power systems in future contexts. Feminist film criticism has largely dealt with both the figure of Ripley (Weaver) and the monstrous alien in the *Alien* series—Creed, Newton, Hills, Church Gibson, Tasker, Sobchack, among others—providing us with different and contradictory readings. Ripley is a powerful woman who does not simply adopt traditional roles assigned to men and "imitate them", she becomes a rather different and positive type, a new representation of woman as a female hero. This new image of woman is what threatens male hegemony, since traits normally associated to male characters (like subjectivity, activity and resolution) are "taken up" by a female character. In the *Alien* films, men are doubly menaced: by the alien/aliens and by Ripley's supremacy and courage as a strong female hero.

As the movies develop, fear of hybridisation becomes more and more apparent. The fourth film of the saga—*Alien Resurrection* (1997)—proposes a commodification of the "other" by means of two feminine hybrids: Ripley and Call (Ryder). Their bodies, containers of alien genes and mechanisms respectively, suggest gender ambiguity. Hybridisation remains a constant threat, especially for the male characters in the film. Ripley's identity is ambiguous and even her motherly condition is presented as disturbing and connected to the alien's. Hence, issues of

hybridity become the main source of threat in the movie, combined with a rather traditional representation of the monster. The difference with other invasion movies is that Ripley has assumed partly the monstrous nature of the alien. This new kind of "familiar" alien, or in Linton's words, "an alien who is and is not other" (1999, p.185), depicts society's absorption of the alien. Contrary to other science fiction movies based on the opposition one-other, Ripley's more than intimate link with the monstrous "other" is not, as it has been suggested here, exempt from danger.[3]

In this sense, the alien presence can be used to define the Western civilisation, as we know it. Hierarchical divisions with the white American hero occupying dominant positions are to be found in many science fiction films set in outer space in distant futures, like *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*. In them, patriarchal values remain intact and women are relegated to secondary positions, in spite of their attempt to include challenging future contexts. These films offer conquering heroes in search of mythical quests. These heroes are considered at all times as powerful and dominant, yet they do not show, as opposed to the traditional action hero, an extraordinary—and artificial—body. Hence, his superiority is stated in the accomplishment of his mission, the domination of space-travel and technological development and his ability to defend and protect people from malevolent alien forces.

This tendency engages with socio-political change, although in a rather veiled way. This depiction of the conquering man is to provide the heroic characterisation of popular blockbuster films of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, like the *Star Wars* and the *Star Trek* movies. In the late 1970s, the film industry experiences a general backlash as gender representation is concerned. In this sense, movies like the *Star Wars* trilogy (1977, 1980, 1983), the *Star Trek* movies (launched in 1979, and continued up until our times) or *Dune* (1984) offer this peculiar version of traditional heroes in control. These conquering figures reinforce U.S. conservative rules yet in a different way from the over-muscled heroes of other genres. Because of their resourcefulness and ability to dominate outer space, conquering heroes are considered superior and, as such, do not need to show off by means of muscles or huge weapons as other Reaganite heroes do (Terminator, Robocop, etc.).[4] Although we see an inclusion of women aboard the space ships and multicultural teams fighting a common enemy with the help of friendly aliens on their side, conquering heroes are ultimately the ones who accomplish their mission, which mirrors the supremacy of men in future and far away contexts.

Another strategy employed by popular science fiction films dealing with future contexts is to collapse the categories of "normal" bodies and monstrous bodies, by making the monstrous "other" familiar and friendly. This breaking of frontiers makes us think that what or who is labelled as the "other" varies according to the prejudices of those who project the "other" onto the margins. In this sense, it is interesting to note the gradual assimilation of "otherness" by U.S. popular culture. Spielberg's mega-hit *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) became a significant step in introducing new topics in filmed science fiction, providing us with an unusual yet positive image of the alien: the pleasant and cuddly extra terrestrial. The old fear of the "unknown" alien is parodied in more contemporary movies (*Men in Black, Mars Attack!* etc.), which signals that the extra-terrestrial has been assimilated by U.S. popular culture and that the boundaries between "them" and "us" are not so clearly cut. Indeed, an indication of this incorporation of the alien into popular culture is its reiterated appearance in the media. The alien "sells" from toys to snacks and

has become a marketing product. The absorption of the alien further implies U.S. gradual tolerance towards the "other".

The many changes that have taken place in U.S. contemporary society have redefined the perception of gender and have opened up questions about gender identity. Tania Modleski argues that male power is consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolutions, whereby men deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it (1999, p.7). The different crises of masculinity and men's responses to them are suggested in science fiction films, in more or less obvious ways.

Our contemporary panorama has been considered a key moment for the interrogation of traditional gender marks. In the 1990s and 2000s we get a plurality of new cultural anxieties that affect the way femininities and masculinities are understood. The 90s Gulf War crisis, the threat of the new biological and chemical weapons, the terrorist attacks to New York's Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, the Iraq intervention and the fear towards infectious diseases, among other events, reveal a situation of social and political unease. Once more, the paranoia of an attack from the non-Western "others" promotes a general feeling of uncertainty. Moreover, these are times of economic and social change, which cause, according to many critics, a feeling of loss and anxiety in men, a crisis in identity. By the 1990s, men were no longer the ones that dominated economic activity, which caused a feeling of loss of male supremacy at certain levels in society, and provoked a change in the understanding of certain male roles. This era is also witness to the appearance of the so-called "New Man". Masculinity has become a topic of discussion in many fields.[5]

Much more positive is, however, the depiction of sensitive robots that appears in contemporary science fiction. *Wall-E* (2008) stars an android with no visible gender marks. Yet, as movie develops, audiences consider him as a male robot, especially after his romance with the gendered robot, Eve. Far from being the brave indestructible hero who saves the girl, he is a unique robot who trembles with fear when there is danger, which is unable to rescue his lover, who proves naïve and weak on many occasions, and who loves watching musicals. His feelings are insistently emphasised throughout the whole film, he feels an identity crisis for feeling different and/or a freak. At this point, they can be regarded as mere reflections of the contemporary crisis of masculinity that, according to Kimmel (2005) and many other scholars of Men's Studies, affect Western societies in the 21st century. This film shows the supremacy of feelings over technological rationality, which accounts, among other issues, for the humanisation of the robot. This device is not new but it is seen in characters like the monster created by Dr. Frankenstein, the replicant Rachael of *Blade Runner*, C5 in *Short Circuit*, C3PO or R2D2 in *Star Wars*, the clone Call in *Alien: Resurrection*, among many others.

Postmodern awareness invades contemporary science fiction, where characters are normally depicted as boundary transgressors. Particularly interesting is the recurrent representation of the "virtual character" inhabiting cyberspace, which equates Haraway's third distinction of the cyborg typology. "Cyberspace", has been defined as a "computer-generated space mentally experienced by computer operators whose nervous systems are directly interfaced with the computer system" (McHale, 1992, p.252). Gibson denominates this cyberspace "matrix", and describes it as "a 3D chessboard extending to infinity" (Gibson, 2004, p.70). In fact, this new concept of space has led to a different visual representation of gender in such innovative

sites. The novelty resides precisely in the relationship between a physical and real body and its virtual realisation. Adam refers to this space as "a shared virtual hallucination where the body that one chooses to enter within cyberspace has bodily sensations and can travel in the virtual reality" (Adam, 2000, p.281).

The tension between the physical and the non-physical is a recurrent motif in contemporary science fiction, although we also find it in earlier films like *Tron* (1982), or *Videodrome* (1982). However, it is in the mid-90s when these cyborg figures are frequently represented within these new spaces. Hence, Claudia Springer released in 1995, has classified *Johnny Mnemonic*, *Strange Days*, *Hackers, Virtuosity and The Net*, *all* as "new cyber thrillers" (1998, p.204). This motif has been adapting itself to the contemporary social and cultural needs and has been represented in many recent films.

Due to the highest technology and latest scientific advances, the creation of spaces such as virtual reality, the Internet or cyberspace, has allowed for the representation of a genderless human body, conceived as pure information. We get instances of films in which a pleasurable experience is taken up by characters entering cyberspace as shown in films like *The 13th Floor* (1999), *eXinstenz* (1999), *Inception* (2010) or *Avatar* (2009), among others. In them, the difference between "self" and the "other" becomes less clear. The disappearance of physical borders that delimit the concept of space as an enclosed world has to do further with postmodern notions of the blurring of frontiers in a world dominated by chaos theory. This inability to distinguish the real from the imaginary, suggests that all forms of U.S. social and political life are fake and reduced to "simulacra" in Baudrillard's words, and, consequently, the distinctions between public and private, inner and outer, male and female can no longer be sustained in any way. This context of dissolution and uncertainty prevails in many films. In the popular *The Matrix* (1999) the existence of a wholly artificial world where everything is bound to dissolution contributes to the idea of gender blending, mainly seen in the characters' androgynous appearance and in their posthuman condition. In this sense, and as several critics have pointed out, cyber-worlds offer resistance to traditional gender roles. Yet, the Wachowskis present a fake world, called The Matrix, which is meant to be a simulation of contemporary U.S. society at the end of the 20th century, a dimension which still follows the principles of patriarchal rule. With that, the film portrays the ambiguity of gender in the hyper-real environment, which in the film is but an imitation of a globalised, capitalist and masculinist world.

In a similar way, in *Inception* characters' identities are, in one way or another, controlled and/or manipulated by the latest technologies, suggesting the dangers that the manipulation of thoughts entails. The film depicts a world where technology exists to enter the human mind through dream invasion and where characters become projections of the subconscious, undistinguishable from "real" beings. At this point, Hayles's notion of "embodied virtuality" (2005) may well be utilised here as a way of understanding the complex ways in which the screened body is interpenetrated with information patterns. The very idea of simulating a believable reality reaffirms Hayles's position when she refutes the statement that cyberspace means total absence of the body. Indeed, we get the projections of all the characters working in three different levels. Hence, the film progressively suggests that the human body is losing its private dimension to become a mere image or projection that is constantly redefined and presented for display in complex ways. By

offering instances of "embodied virtuality", the film reaffirm Hayles's position that cyberspace is a medium where materiality and information intersect, and where mutation, replication and disruption have replaced the relations between presence and absence.

Finally, there is a trend of movies that deals with biotechnology and the substitution of the organic body for a surrogate body. According to Milojevic and Inayatullah, the very essence of cloning represents an achievement within the dominant scientific paradigm, one dominated by men's worldview, and in which women's role in reproduction will be decreased with time (2010, pp.38-39). Films like *The Island* (2005) and *The Surrogates* (2009) pose this ethical dilemma, as they disturb traditional limits of the "natural" body. They generate debate concerning the ethics on the alteration of genes for certain purposes and the social consequences of gene science. Sexed and gendered identities are visibly articulated in the altered/manipulated body, instantiating familiar gender codes. *The Surrogates* is set in a futuristic world where humans live in isolation and interact through surrogate bodies, which have paradoxically been designed according to Western standards of beauty. While real humans are depicted as possessors of fat and unfit bodies, surrogates are beautiful beings nicely dressed and visually appealing, reaffirming, after all, patriarchal assumptions about sex and gender.

Conclusion

As we have attempted to demonstrate in this article, the encounter with difference is one of the most important cultural and social debates in contemporary U.S. life and, as such, it is reflected in many Western science fiction films released in contemporary USA. The problems and debates at work in each historical time, including how genders are envisioned in future contexts, is underlined in science fiction films.

The device of boundary breaking is employed in most science fiction films, affecting the way gender is understood and implying that it is a cultural construction that is subjected to alterations. The movies mentioned here have allowed us to briefly illustrate the way gender is understood at each specific historical time, being the "other"—in the shape of aliens, robots or avatars—the main cause of identity destabilisation. Although gender imagery in contemporary films is still subjected to dominant definitions of masculinity and femininity, showing up the inability to offer gender free portrayals, they mirror effectively cultural anxieties concerning subjectivities.

A different future is proposed, then, in many films released at the turn of the millennium, which offer alternative ways of understanding gender by problematising current trends of representing masculinity and femininity on the big screen. In this sense, the science fiction film genre breaks with binarisms and constructs a new reality. Indeed, in a context dominated by the culture of the postmodern, many science fiction films released at the turn of the millennium provide us with new images of masculinity and femininity which are defined in opposition to normative constructions of it, as we have attempted to illustrate. These films hint at the demise of traditional gender patterns. Yet, we should not forget that these new embodiments of sex and gender are not always free of controversy, since their condition is, as in the case of robots, androids or machines, artificial. While the erosion of traditional

genders markers is hinted in the films mentioned here, many characters (like the traditional conquering hero) still follows the conventions of mainstream cinema.

In this sense, we can conclude that science fiction is a powerful tool for reflecting about the need to find more challenging depictions of gender in popular culture, which can accurately account for the future of gender. The use of futures studies methodologies may help science fiction offer a more ethical depiction of gender in future contexts, rather than illustrating how gender is perceived in present day society, and projecting these ideas into future contexts.

Notes

1. One of the most frequently quoted sources for French feminist's critique of gender binarism is Hélène Cixous's essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975).
2. Roberts mentions *Frankenstein* as an example of how reproduction is depicted as a filthy process (1993, 20-1).
3. A similar problematic is reflected in films that portray the dissolution of sex and gender categories in bodies that have been invaded by the monstrous other. In the cycle of films that Sobchack calls the Science-Fiction-Monster film, the human being becomes a monster—normally as a consequence of scientific experiments—and, although he/she may go mad at the end of the movie, also shows instances of rationality (1980, p.50). A clear example is Newmann's *The Fly* (1958).
4. Movies starring actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone or Bruce Willis in the conservative decade of the 80s show images of a dominant masculinity linked to strength and violence. In them, the body becomes an instrument of power and control that constructs a "solid" masculine identity. Critics like Susan Jeffords (1994) have read these Reaganite "hard bodies" as signs of a masculinity in crisis. Stereotyped male bodies continue to appear in Hollywood films and spectators still see these images as cultural ideals.
5. Scholars like Kimmel or Connell advocate the replacement of the word masculine with its plural form "masculinities", precisely in an attempt to include new gender identities.

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