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The Posthuman

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'Posthuman' is a multivalent and multidisciplinary term that references a complex, sometimes conflicted reconceptualization of the body and subjectivity resulting from developments in biology, technology and ecology, which highlight human animals as fundamentally relational and mutable. Biotechnology, genomic and transplantation sciences, microbiome research, climate science, cybernetics, and a host of other research areas have effectively cast doubt on the integrity and unity of 'the human' as a discrete material and conceptual entity. The posthuman and its attendant philosophies emerge out of this reconceptualization of the human as a malleable material entity interconnected and inter-related with a whole host of 'others', human, animal, environmental and technological.

In cultural texts, posthuman bodies are frequently represented as those that have been enhanced and augmented, both functionally and aesthetically, by prostheses, implants or other assistive technologies. Posthuman bodies abound in contemporary literature and film, where the posthuman imaginary of the cyborg figure -- 'a hybrid of machine and organism', to use Haraway's formulation[1] -- enact two visions of posthuman discourse. First, a transgressive and liberatory vision, via thinkers such as Haraway, where entanglements with 'others' -- machines, animals, technologies etc. -- overthrow limiting categories of humanism and a 'way out of the

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[1] Donna Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s', in *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*, ed. S. Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 83.

maze of dualisms' that categorise Western thought'.[2] And second, a transhuman vision, where entanglements with others -- primarily enhancement technologies -- produce post-human beings who have overcome the limiting realities of flesh-and-blood human bodies.

In this chapter, we explore the tensions and contradictions between these competing visions and discourses of posthumanism through an exploration of how the posthuman frequently converges with two embodied motifs: the hyper-sexualised female body and the 'supercrip', a 'disabled' body which has overcome impairment to achieve mastery and 'success'.[3] The sexualized representation of female 'supercrips', such as athlete and model Aimee Mullins and pop singer Viktoria Modesta, has become commonplace; visual culture is replete with images of attractive and accomplished women sporting their prostheses as part of a broader assemblage of aesthetic choices.[i] The public fascination with attractive women who are also prosthesis users produces multiple effects (often all at once), empowering, normalizing, and fetishizing prosthetics and their users.[4]

A more recent twist in these representations of 'cyborgian sex-kittens,' to use Marquard Smith's phrase,[5] is the incorporation of deadly weapons into prosthetic limbs, transforming cyborg sex kittens into sexualized cyborg assassins. In this chapter we take a feminist and disability studies approach to examine a particular imaginary of the posthuman cyborg. We

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[2] Alison Kafer, *Queer Feminist Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 103.
[3] A. Kama 'Supercrips Versus the Pitiful Handicapped: Reception of Disabling Images by Disabled Audience Members', *Communications,* 29 no. 4 (2004): 447-466.
C. F. Silva and P. D. Howe, 'The (In)validity of *Supercrip* Representation of Paralympian Athletes', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 36 no.2 (2012): 174–194.
[4] L. Dolezal, 'Representing Posthuman Embodiment: Considering Disability and the Case of Aimee Mullins', *Women's Studies* 46, no.1 (2017): 60-75.
P. D. Howe, 'Cyborg and Supercrip: The Paralympics Technology and the (Dis)empowerment of Disabled Athletes', *Sociology* 45, no. 5 (2011): 868–882.
[5] Marquard Smith, 'The Vulnerable Articulate: James Gillingham, Aimee Mullins and Matthew Barney', in *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future,* ed. M. Smith and J. Morra (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 58.

explore cultural imaginaries of the posthuman hyper-sexualized supercrip as expressed in two contemporary films, *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (2014) and *Planet Terror* (2007), which feature deadly weaponized lower limb prostheses.[ii] The chapter will explore the posthuman through the intersection of the prosthesis and the military-industrial complex in these contemporary representations of deadly female cyborgs, arguing that these characters embody the posthuman cyborg's ambivalent and sometimes contradictory position, at once radical and regressive.

**The Posthuman Body**

The concept of the 'posthuman' has enjoyed prominence in academic research and popular culture for several decades. It is frequently deployed as a means to understand how interactions with technology can modify the human condition and put into question what counts as 'human'.[6] At the core of the posthuman position is an unsettling and decentering of the self-contained, sovereign subject that characterises the liberal humanist position. The central posthuman revelation – that human bodies and ontologies are not fixed, contained or reliable – destabilizes the unity of the liberal human subject as a singular, sovereign, self-contained consciousness that operates with rationality and mastery over its world and environment. Instead, the posthuman subject is conceived of as radically relational—with technology, with the environment, with other humans, and with other species—and, as a result, has fluid and multiple identities.[7] In other words, a refiguring of the human body is central to the posthuman position.

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[6] P. K. Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

[7] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Maldan, MA: Polity, 2013).

The posthuman body is not a self-contained and discrete entity controlled by an autonomous, self-governing and rational subject. Instead, the posthuman body is relational, fluid, and multiple, characterised by multiplicity, assemblage, and becoming.[8]

Under the paradigm of the posthuman, two diverging imaginaries and discourses of posthuman bodies have emerged. The first can be characterized as 'transhuman', which aligns with the intellectual and social movement of 'transhumanism'. Transhumanism sees engagement with technology coupled with aspirations to 'morphological freedom'[9] as a means to 'evolve' beyond our current 'limitations': 'overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and [ultimately] our confinement to planet Earth'.[10] The central aim of the transhuman position is to create post-humans that are invulnerable to illness, frailty and aging, and who use technologies -- such as implants, nano-technology, prostheses, genetic engineering, surgery, uploading -- to transcend the ordinary limitations of human bodies. While recognising the human body as technologically malleable, the transhuman position ultimately reinforces the liberal humanist idea of the sovereign subject being characterised by self-determination, individuality and self-mastery, and engaged in projects of self-improvement, self-actualisation and enhancement.[11] As the 'Transhumanist FAQ, version 2.1,' summarises, the transhumanist

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[8] Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingstone, 'Introduction: Posthuman Bodies', in *Posthuman Bodies*, ed. Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1-22.
[9] A. Sandberg, 'Morphological Freedom – Why We Not Just Want It, but Need It', in *The Transhumanist Reader: Classic and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology and Philosophy of the Human Future,* ed. M. More and N. Vita-Mor (Oxford: Wiley–Blackwell, 2013), 56-64.
[10] 'Transhumanist Declaration (2012)', in *The Transhumanist Reader: Classic and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology and Philosophy of the Human Future,* ed. M. More and N. Vita-More (Oxford: Wiley–Blackwell, 2013), 54-55.

[11] L. Dolezal, 'Morphological Freedom and Medicine: Constructing the Posthuman Body', in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities*, ed. A. Whitehead, A. Woods, S. Atkinson, J. Macnaughton, and J. Richards (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 310-324.

position 'affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition … especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical and psychological capacities'.[12] The aim of the transhumanist conception of the posthuman body is to use augmentation, via the incorporation of technology into the body, to ensure both invulnerability and superhuman capability.

In contrast to this transhuman vision of posthuman bodies, is Donna Haraway's conception of the 'cyborg', a 'hybrid of machine and organism'.[13] As a portmanteau of 'cybernetic organism,' the term 'cyborg' invokes a biotechnological fabrication that accentuates the deep imbrication of organic and machine bodies. In Haraway's enduringly provocative manifesto, she treats the cyborg as the posthuman figure *par excellence*, a perpetually emerging 'naturalcultural' assemblage that challenges and rejects the limiting binaries that traditionally define femininity and embodiment.[14] In short, Haraway uses the cyborg to illustrate the malleability, affectivity and radical relationality of the posthuman body. In contrast to the transhumanist position, which reinforces the sovereign, self-contained subject, Haraway's posthuman conception of the body as expressed in the cyborg figure, offers 'enthralling promises of possible re-embodiments'.[15] As Rosi Braidotti argues, cyborgs as 'Multiple, heterogeneous, uncivilized, … show the way to multiple virtual possibilities…the classical "other than" the human are thus emancipated from the category of pejorative difference and shown forth in a

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[12] N. Bostrom, 'Transhumanist F.A.Q.: A General Introduction, Version 2.1 – World Transhumanist Association' (2003). Available online: <http://www.transhumanism.org/resources/FAQv21.pdf> (accessed 30 March 2015).
[13] Haraway 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', 83.
[14] Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.
[15] Rosi Braidotti, 'Posthuman, All Too Human', *Theory, Culture and Society* 23, no. 7/8 (2006): 204.

more positive light'.[16] In other words, for Haraway the cyborg offers a transgressive potential for feminist politics. Rather than positioning technology and the posthuman as oppressive and limiting patriarchal structures, feminist thinkers like Haraway reconceive them as a means to redefine and liberate the sociopolitical meaning and significance of the category 'woman'.

In contrast to Haraway's feminist and transgressive reconception of the cyborg, the prototypical cyborg figure in popular culture has frequently embodied a stereotypically heteronormative masculine identity aligned more closely with the transhuman paradigm, using technological enhancement to ensure invulnerability and superhuman capabilities. As Sara Shabot Cohen notes, 'Since its first apparitions in fiction ... the cyborg is not intrinsically challenging or liberating'.[17] Cohen argues that the cyborg has served to reinforce 'traditional categories of gender' and 'stereotypes of masculinity and femininity,' which ultimately limit and disadvantage women and other marginalized subjects, rather than serving any sort of transgressive or liberatory potential.[18] Prototypical fictional cyborgs, such as Robocop, Terminator and the Six Million Dollar Man, embody this patriarchal and transhuman cyborgian imaginary, where technological prosthetics have been incorporated into a flesh and blood human body, extending and enhancing its capabilities, usually for the purposes of law enforcement or military combat.[iii]

Haraway herself acknowledges the cyborg's doubleness, which maps on to the two diverging imaginaries of the posthuman body: first, the transhuman position which aspires to an invulnerable masculine body, crystallized in the cultural imaginary through impervious

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[16] Braidotti, 'Posthuman, All Too Human', 204.
[17] S. S. Cohen, 'Grotesque Bodies: A Response to Disembodied Cyborgs' *Journal of Gender Studies* 15, no. 3 (2006): 224.
[18] Cohen, 'Grotesque Bodies', 224, 226.

militarized cyborgs, and second, the radically transgressive posthuman body which is deeply relational, contradictory, impartial and imperfect. As Haraway writes:

> From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defense, about the final appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war. From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters.[19]

Haraway's invocation of the (often overlooked) patriarchal and militaristic origins of the cyborg figure draw attention to another, often unspoken, progenitor of the posthuman body, namely disability. Many militarized cyborg figures are rendered cyborg, or man-machine hybrids, through the incorporation of prostheses and other technologies of disability: Robocop is transformed into a cyborg law enforcement officer through the use of what is essentially a

[19] Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', 90.

complex exoskeleton, a technology that has been developed to restore mobility for those with stroke or spinal cord injuries; the Terminator is a robotic assassin that uses prosthetic eyes to enable his sight; the Six Million Dollar Man is an injured astronaut rebuilt with bionic implants and prostheses which replace his legs, left eye and right arm. These cyborg figures are far from unique in their reliance on prostheses and other technologies of disability. However, the relation between the posthuman, cyborgs and disability often remains elided in both theory and popular culture.

Stuart Murray has highlighted this surprising omission in posthuman discourses in his book *Disability and the Posthuman* (2020), arguing that disability is the site where the origins of the posthuman cyborg body come into focus--these are bodies that are intertwined with prostheses and technologies and demonstrate a wide range of physical diversity in terms of appearance and ability. Indeed, Haraway herself points to disability as a site of cyborg experience: '[p]erhaps paraplegics and other severely handicapped people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization' because of their use and reliance on technologies.[20] Indeed, it is through the integration of prostheses, a technology of disability, that many transhuman imaginaries of cyborgs, such as Robocop and Terminator, enact their potential, transforming vulnerable, incomplete bodies into post-human uber-beings. In what follows we discuss the intertwined histories of the prosthesis and the military-industrial complex as a means to elucidate some of the enduring imaginaries that coalesce in transhuman-inflected posthuman cyborg figures.

[20] qtd in Kafer, *Queer Feminist Crip*, 105.

**The military-industrial complex and prostheses**

The military-industrial complex is one of the primary sites of the technological realization of the posthuman body through limb prostheses, implants, exoskeletons, and other assistive technologies. The innovation and development of these typically 'posthuman' technologies has a long history of entanglement with military efforts.[21] Throughout the twentieth century, returning war veteran amputees drove the development and technologization of prosthetic technologies, where innovations in prostheses during the immediate postwar period of the 1940s and 1950s were intrinsically tied to restoring the male body to engage in productive labour, ensuring self-worth and employment for disabled veterans.[22] Hence, throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, military agencies and military-funded enterprises developed prosthetic technology to 'repair' returnee soldiers in an effort to restore them to 'ordinary' citizens who can return to employment and daily family life through rehabilitating their bodies, their masculinity and their social identities.

The development of prostheses by the military has arguably intensified in the 21st century as a result of an increasing number of returnee soldiers in the US, the UK and other developed countries surviving combat with grave injuries that result in arm, hand and lower limb amputations.[23] As such, limb loss injuries, in military and combat contexts, are directly correlated to technological innovation in the field of prosthetics and other embodied technologies. The US military's Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA) has been

[21] K. Ott, 'Carnage Remembered: Prosthetics in the US Military since the 1860s', in *Materializing the Military,* ed. B. Finn and B. Hacker (London: Science Museum, 2005), 47-64.
[22] D. Serlin, *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[23] Ott, 'Carnage Remembered'.

a pioneer in limb prostheses development and also in the development of human exoskeletons in recent decades.[24] Former soldiers are often the first to trial and receive high-tech limb prostheses, whose prohibitive costs often render them inaccessible to civilian populations. Furthermore, while limb loss for soldiers previously heralded a discharge from active service, advancements to prosthetic technologies have meant that some amputee service members have been able to remain on active duty.[25] At present, the US Army has dozens of soldiers who have suffered major limb amputation (complete loss of an arm, leg, foot or hand) that have remained on active duty in combat and support roles.

On-going developments in a range of prosthetic technologies (involving techniques such as: osseointegration, the process of attaching prosthetics directly to the skeleton; re-routing nerve endings for so-called 'mind-controlled' limbs; and brain-computer interfaces (BCI) or neural implants for the telepresence control of robotic limbs and exoskeletons) are heralding an age of military 'enhancement' that will potentially allow combat soldiers to be faster, stronger and more durable than their peers. Exoskeletons, while having a variety of uses in medical contexts, are being developed by DARPA and other military-funded agencies to give soldiers the capacity for increased stamina, strength and productivity. Ocular Implants and auditory enhancement are predicted to give soldiers heightened sensory capacity. In 2016, DARPA announced a research project Neural Engineering System Design (NESD) which aims to develop an implantable chip that would act as a neural interface, connecting humans directly to computers, which would result in a range of technological enhancements including the ability to control and move robotic

[24] R. Bogue, 'Exoskeletons and Robotic Prosthetics: A Review of Recent Developments', *Industrial Robot* 36, no. 5 (2009): 421-427.
[25] W. D. Nichels, 'Soldier amputees have more options than ever for redeployment', *US Army,* 27 July 2018.

limbs remotely. As Cristina Masters argues, 'the twenty-first century cyborg land soldier will be outfitted with technology that in essence replace his "senses" through technological prostheses that replicate biological senses while circumventing human biological limitations: poor eyesight, hearing and discernment'.[26] Through prosthetic enhancement, creating transhuman 'cyborg soldiers' has become an explicit aim of the US military with a recent Department of Defense Report, 'Cyborg Soldier 2050', detailing how implants and other technologies have the potential to create the 'cybernetically enhanced super soldier' within 30 years.[27]

In short, military innovations in prostheses are no longer merely about repairing returnee soldiers to reintegrate into a productive civilian life, but instead about creating more efficient and effective transhuman soldiers and weapons *through* prostheses. This trend in prosthetic weapons harks back to a history of rudimentary limb prostheses (such as peg-legs) used as improvised bludgeons in 19th and 20th century literature. As Ryan Sweet argues, 'prosthetic body parts were conceptualised as devices that were not necessarily capable of restoring the appearance and function of a lost body part but were able to provide their user with a close-to-hand deadly weapon'.[28] Following this long history of weapon prostheses, the contemporary intertwining of disability, cyborg bodies and 'prostheticized, posthumanist military capability'[29] creates a particular form of the contemporary 'supercrip' figure: one that is glamorized, enhanced,

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[26] C. Masters, 'Bodies of Technology', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7, no. 1 (2005): 122.
[27] K. Mizokami, 'The U.S. Army Expects to Field Cyborg Soldiers by 2050', *Popular Mechanics*, 26 November 2019.
[28] R. Sweet, 'Prosthetic Body Parts in Literature and Culture, 1832 to 1908' (PhD Diss, University of Exeter, 2016), 119.
[29] Stuart Murray, *Disability and the Posthuman: Bodies, Technology and Cultural Futures* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 156.

militarised and gender-coded.[30] As Masters notes, the 'cyborg soldier has blurred particular distinctions between machine and man, where *technology* embodies *masculinity*'.[31] These militarized cyborgs embody transhuman fantasies of superhuman invulnerability.

The development of transhuman 'cyborg soldiers' manifests Haraway's warnings about cyborg ancestry. As the 'illegitimate offspring'[32] of violence, militarism and patriarchal capitalism, the cyborg inevitably carries traces of its patriarchal legacy. Haraway's reimagining of the cyborg signifies a break with this patriarchal, militaristic, anthropocentric legacy. As described above, her 'cyborg world' is instead 'about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities'.[33] In contrast, the real-life development of posthuman cyborgs via the military-industrial complex advances patriarchal domination: the 'tele-thanatological machines created by our own advanced technology' enable posthuman wars that 'breed new forms of inhumanity'.[34] Through the "post-anthropocentric weaponry" and technologies reshaping contemporary warfare,[35] the transhuman cyborg soldier is not radically relational to the 'other' (other people, machines, animals, the environment), but instead effects 'a distance and disassociation from the other so that it can engage in practices of domination, subordination and subjugation'.[36] Violence becomes 'insourced,' so to speak, incorporated into the sphere of personal embodiment through the creation of weapons that are literally incorporated into transhuman bodies, or bodies are literally transformed into weapons.

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[30] D. McGillivray et al., 'Repurposing the (Super)Crip: Media Representations of Disability at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games', *Communication and Sport* 9, no.1 (2021): 3–32.
[31]Masters, 'Bodies of Technology', 115.
[32] Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', 85.
[33] Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', 90.
[34] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Maldan, MA: Polity, 2013), 9, 122.
[35] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 127.
[36] Masters, 'Bodies of Technology', 125.

In what follows, we analyze fictional 'post-anthropocentric weaponry' in the guise of machine guns and sabres as prosthetic body parts, weapons incorporated into the posthuman cyborg bodies that employ them. The particular (and particularly heightened) gendering and sexualization of these deadly, weaponized bodies leads to additional insights regarding both the patriarchal transhuman and transgressive posthuman potential of cyborg figures. Following Haraway's intuition that the 'illegitimate [cyborg] offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential',[37] we explore how contemporary cultural imaginaries of the posthuman cyborg have abandoned their 'inessential fathers', namely the impenetrable transhuman militarized masculine figure, in favour of the vulnerable civilian female. Exploring the trope of the hyper-attractive female 'cyborgian sex-kitten,' our analysis focuses primarily on the characters of Gazelle, from Matthew Vaughn's 2014 film *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, and Cherry, from Robert Rodriguez's 2007 film *Planet Terror*.

In *Planet Terror* and *Kingsman*, prosthetics, and the posthuman paradigm, function not as a means to restore damaged masculinity, but as a means to exoticize and sexualize a potentially violated and wounded femininity. The posthuman potential, hence, is radically undermined by the 'spectacle of excess' through which these characters and their prostheses are portrayed.[38] The empowerment and agency generated for the disabled female characters 'accompanies militaristic and gangster- style violence where prostheses— and disabled bodies—become contemporary fetishizations of violence as power'.[39] Our own reading transposes Ewart's analysis into a posthuman register in order to suggest the two films enact a perverse and problematic

[37] Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', 85.
[38] C. Ewart. 'An Arm Up or a Leg Down?: Grounding the Prosthesis and Other Instabilities', in *The Matters of Disability: Materiality, Biopolitics, Crip Affect,* ed. D. T. Mitchell et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 161.
[39] Ewart 'An Arm Up or a Leg Down?', 161.

literalization of the cyborg's heritage -- the militarism and patriarchal capitalist legacy described by Haraway -- discarding any illusion of the feminist potential inherent in these cyborg figure.

**Sexy Cyborg Killers**

*Planet Terror* and *Kingsman: The Secret Service* feature female characters whose bodies have been transformed into efficient killing machines via prosthetic augmentation. Both films are self-aware, yet nostalgic re-creations of genres that flourished in the 70s and 80s -- 'grindhouse' exploitation films in the case of *Planet Terror* and Bond-style gentleman spy films in the case of *Kingsman* -- genres that, despite their contrasting aesthetics, depend on violence and sexualized female bodies for their thrilling appeal. In Rodriguez and Vaughn's reinventions, the titillating power of hypersexualized bodies and violent destruction are combined in the figures of Cherry Darling (played by Rose McGowan) and Gazelle (played by Sofia Boutella).[iv] In *Planet Terror*, Cherry is a stripper and go-go dancer who loses a leg after a flesh eating zombie attack. The stolen leg is eventually replaced by a high-powered machine gun, which she wields as a deadly weapon in the war between humans and zombies. In *Kingsman*, Gazelle is billionaire villain Richmond Valentine's (played by Samuel L Jackson) deadly sidekick. Gazelle's lower legs have been replaced by blade prostheses reminiscent of the 'cheetah legs' used by elite athletes. However, Gazelle's prosthetic legs are literal blades, which she uses to slice enemies and adversaries into pieces, killing loyally to serve Valentine's evil plan for global domination. While both characters are disabled women reliant on lower limb prostheses, their disability is unsettled by the incorporation of technology, in this case deadly weapons, into their bodies. Ultimately, Cherry and Gazelle are not presented as disabled characters, but as posthuman figures whose more-than-human power is enabled through their technological enhancement.

*Planet Terror* oscillates between glorifying the transhuman power of prosthetic enhancement and hinting at the transgressive 'cyborg' potential of posthuman bodies. When Cherry first wakes in the hospital to find her right leg amputated above the knee, the film highlights her distress at the discovery through a series of close ups of her shaking, gagging, crying face. The film's opening credit sequence features Cherry's titillating pole dancing; without her leg, her mobility and desirability are disabled. "I have no leg," Cherry shouts at her boyfriend Wray when he urges her to flee the hospital, which is under zombie attack, and he responds by smashing a table and roughly thrusting its wooden leg onto the metal stud protruding from Cherry's stump. Though it provides limited mobility, this improvised peg leg begins the process of Cherry's posthuman weaponization: after escaping the hospital, Cherry is held hostage by psychopathic military operatives and her improvised prosthetic proves not only enabling, but triumphantly lethal. When one of her captors forces her to dance at gunpoint, Cherry bashes her abuser's head with her prosthetic before using the splintered remains to stab him in the eye. The symbolism of the triumphant vengeance is obvious: his ogling eye is literally penetrated by her prosthesis and this prosthesis-enabled act of revenge is clearly coded as a victory to be relished. When Wray arrives to rescue Cherry, he provides another, more unconventional prosthesis: a customized machine gun that is somehow engineered so Cherry can fire it at will. As he shoves the new prosthesis onto Cherry's stump, Wray looks into her eyes: 'I believe in you, I always have…right now I need you to become who you were meant to be,' he tells her, before commanding her to 'stand' and 'open that door will you baby?' Cherry rises triumphantly on her new limb and blasts her attacker's disintegrating body through the locked doors with her machine gun prosthetic. She marches proudly through the open doors, head held high, before using the gun to kill the remaining military personnel who have been holding her

hostage. The narrative message is clear: Cherry is enabled and empowered by this new weapon prosthesis, which, unlike the improvised peg leg, is specifically designed for violence. Cherry is no longer 'disabled' by her limb loss, and no longer at the mercy of the men (whether human or zombie) around her; she has become a transhuman killer who no longer needs to suffer the degradation of dancing for leering men.

In the film's final scene, Cherry employs her machine gun prosthetic to help a few remaining humans to escape from the zombie-infested military compound. She marches out amidst gun fire, arms pumping before using the propulsion of her prosthetic's gunfire to propel her body into an optimal position from which to eliminate her enemies with acrobatic gusto. The scene is celebratory, triumphant; Cherry's augmented body has made her a militarized cyborg more powerful than her (primarily male) human counterparts. In short, the film's over-the-top, gory, sexualized satire reproduces familiar supercrip narratives and 'inspiration porn' in its deployment of disability as a means to super-human transformation.[v] Cherry's disability is overcome via militaristic augmentation. The film's treatment of Cherry's disability and prosthetic enhancement evokes the doubleness Haraway identifies as endemic to the cyborg: on the one hand, Cherry appears to embody the transgressive, playful, posthuman cyborg figure that overturns the usual limiting categories of patriarchy and ableism, a manifestation of the 'enthralling promises of possible re-embodiment'.[40] On the other hand, her weaponized prosthesis, which renders her invulnerable, powerful, deadly, invokes the transhuman potential of the posthuman.

[40] Braidotti, 'Posthuman, All Too Human', 204.

Though less gory, *Kingsman* is similarly preoccupied with over-the-top violence. For example, the audience first meets Gazelle after she slices a man from the crown of his head to his groin, the two pieces of his body remaining upright before falling away in a comically delayed parting to reveal Gazelle in medium close-up. As the body parts fall away, the camera tilts down her body, resting briefly on her prosthetic blades before traveling back up to her face. While this is the first time the audience sees Gazelle's entire body, we have already glimpsed her in the fleeting image of her blades, a blur of glinting steel slicing a man in two. However, it is only in the camera's lingering perusal of Gazelle's body, at once unveiled and framed by the peeling away of the bisected body of her victim, that her form becomes fully visible and recognizable as human. As a result, much like *Planet Terror*, *Kingsman* introduces viewers to the film's central female warrior by immediately objectifying her; however, Gazelle's sexualized objectification incorporates, indeed highlights, her deadly prostheses from the outset. The camera's slow tilt up and down her body, which compels viewers to take in the details of her form in a series of fragmented close ups (a longstanding visual tactic that communicates the desirability of the cinematic object), lingers on her blades before returning to her face, indicating the erotic significance of her prostheses. In other words, the prosthetic blades (and their gruesome effects) are integral to Gazelle's power (she has just sliced a man in two) and sexual appeal (the camera treats the prosthetic blades with the same caressing gaze it directs toward Gazelle's more conventionally sexual physical features).

Gazelle is a perfected, weaponized transhuman, the apotheosis of beauty and power, but her power remains at the service of her male master. She rarely speaks in the film. Her primary role is as a talented helpmate, providing both domestic and homicidal services for her male master, Valentine. In every scene she wears a sleek black uniform with white collar and cuffs -- a

reference to traditional black and white housemaid's dress -- that underscores her domestic position. When, after violently eliminating all threats, Gazelle welcomes Valentine into an alpine chalet by offering him a glass of whiskey and the assurance that 'everything is to clean' (having covered a slew of dead bodies with sheets and towels), Gazelle's dual role as both maid and killer is especially conspicuous. Like Cherry, Gazelle is enhanced by her weaponized prosthetics, enabled and empowered in ways that make her uniquely useful to her male commander. While her feminine, costumed body performs domestic tasks, such as serving Valentine dinner from a silver cart with notably silent elegance, her blades enable virtuosic, acrobatic violence. In her final, spectacular battle with the film's hero, Eggsy (played by Taron Egerton), Gazelle, spins, leaps, flips and kicks, the threat of her impressive dexterity demonstrated in her quick decimation of each improvised weapon her opponent wields against her. When she is finally bested, cut with a poisoned dagger, Eggsy rips the prosthetic blade from her body and hurls it at Valentine, destroying the villain and saving the world. Unlike Gazelle, the film's male hero *wields*, rather than *merges* with the blade. In his hands, it is only a weapon, not a prosthetic; he is whole with or without it. Cherry and Gazelle, on the other hand, do not employ, but *become* weapons, incorporating guns and blades into their very bodies to become militarized cyborgs, made more powerful, more desirable, more deadly via prosthetic enhancement.

Both Cherry and Gazelle are disabled women reliant on lower limb prostheses. Their disability is unsettled by the incorporation of technology -- in this case deadly weapons -- into their bodies in ways that evoke the transgressive posthuman paradigm offered by Haraway, their impairments offering exciting possibilities for re-embodiment.. In addition, although both figures are hyper-sexualised and objectified, their powerful weaponised bodies suggest feminist empowerment, enabling them to overthrow (some) attempts at masculine domination. By

replacing their missing legs with deadly weapons, their desirability, their power and their threat seemingly 'overwrite' their disability and their passive femininity.[41] However, the specific weaponization of their cyborg re-embodiment also lends them transhuman power and significance, a triumphant invulnerability, a surmounting of the 'limitations' of flesh-and-blood bodies that renders them efficient, self-contained super-human killers**.** The interplay of transgressive and transhuman posthuman imagery in these films provides a complex, and at times, contradictory symbolic landscape -- one that is very familiar in both feminism and disability studies, where hypersexualised attractiveness can be both empowering and disempowering for women, and where imaginaries of technology, enhancement, posthumanism, hold both liberatory and limiting potentials (often at the same time) for individuals living with disabilities.

**Conclusions: Problematic Posthumanism?**

In both *Kingsman* and *Planet Terror* the celebration of the posthuman cyborg is overlaid with a tongue-in-cheek post-feminist hyper-sexualization of female bodies -- where the 'fantasy of female sexuality as a threatening weapon'[42] is moved from the metaphorical to the literal. Cherry and Gazelle are not merely 'bombshells' or *'femme fatales*' with their sex imagined *like* a deadly weapon, but instead their hyper-sexualised, attractive bodies have *literally become* weapons that

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[41] S. S. Jain, 'The Prosthetic Imagination: Enabling and Disabling the Prosthesis Trope', *Technology and Human Values* 24, no.1 (1999): 31–54.

[42] K. Oliver, *Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex and the Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 5.

kill, maim and harm men. Both Cherry and Gazelle appear empowered by their augmentations, their transformation into powerfully, violently transhuman cyborgs who eliminate would-be predators. They are presented as radically empowered women made malleable through their engagement with technology. They are hypersexualized (both visually, and narratively), yet able to evade, rebuff and punish the male violence that so frequently accompanies such hypersexualization. However, the feminist potential of their augmentation and malleability remains inhibited by their militarism. Through the incorporation of weapons into their bodies, Cherry and Gazelle invoke the dominating, closed-off, transhuman, militarized imaginary, one which is limiting, and reactionary in its efforts at violent invulnerability. In both films, posthuman and transhuman possibilities remain in tension, invoking both the 'enthralling possibilities' and the 'traditional categories' and 'stereotypes'[43] associated with the cyborg. As a result, the films demand the 'double vision' Haraway suggests is key to recognizing the 'dominations and possibilities' of each vantage point.[44]

Celebrating the posthuman potential, whether transgressive or transhuman, of Cherry and Gazelle can only come from a rather superficial reading of these films. In both films, the competing and conflicting narratives of the cyborg parallel competing and conflicting narratives of disability and gender, which the films self-consciously engage via satire, exaggeration and parody. The satirical bent of these films results in retro posthuman cyborgs that at once reproduce and subvert both the feminist and militarist potential of their augmentations, as outlined above. Indeed, Cherry and Gazelle are seemingly empowered: their vulnerability as disabled women is ostensibly overcome through weaponized prostheses. Overturning

[43] Cohen, 'Grotesque Bodies', 224, 226.
[44] Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', 90.

conventional associations between disability and vulnerability or helplessness, figures like Cherry and Gazelle appear powerful, even invulnerable in their cyborgian hybridity. However, their empowerment is facilitated by and for a legitimized masculine violence against women: they are both sexually objectified and physically assaulted. Their ostensible power as sexy cyborgian assassins is undermined by the overt patriarchal domination of their bodies. As Masters argues, 'while the figure of the cyborg may provide new grounds upon which to reveal gender representations as contingent and historically grounded social constructs, we need also attend to the ways in which the figure of the cyborg may continue to represent a desire for total masculinist control and domination'.[45]

The posthuman cyborg's ambivalent position as both radically relational and hybrid, while also militaristic and patriarchal, is a reminder of the contradictions inherent in the ideas and discourses of the posthuman; like the cyborg, the posthuman is ambivalent, even contradictory in its theory and signification. The posthuman cyborg can frequently reify and sustain classic humanist and patriarchal tendencies in its reproduction of its militaristic ancestry (where subjects are invulnerable, self-contained and gender-coded as masculine). However, at the same time, the posthuman is mobilized as a conceptual framework which destabilizes the human exceptionalism and uncovers our radical relationality to human and non-human others (subjects are permeable, vulnerable, intercorporeal and intertwined with the 'other': other humans, animals, technology, the environment).

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[45] C. Masters, 'Cyborg Soldiers and Militarized Masculinity', *Eurozine*, 2010.

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[i] Aimee Mullins has become an iconic prosthetic user since her shift into high profiling modeling in 1999, when she appeared in hand-carved prosthetic legs designed by Alexander McQueen. Pop star Viktoria Modesta is a similarly high profile figure, creating music, videos and live performances that highlight her wide range of custom prosthetics, promoting her posthuman body as ‘the model of the future,’ as the lyrics of her most popular single, ‘Prototype,’ proclaim. Mullins and Modesta’s fashionably aesthetic prosthetics, what Olga Vainshtein (2013) calls ‘proaesthetics’**,** have made them iconic emblems of contemporary cyborgian mutability. Both have sported imposing, even fetishistic prosthetics, including a spike that Modesta refers to as ‘a

giant stiletto heel' and describes as 'a new level of power dressing' (qtd.in Burton and Melkumova-Reynolds 200), and images of their fashion-model physiques are frequently reproduced as aspirational representations of empowerment (Dolezal 2017). Marquard Smith goes so far as to calls Mullins's public and media persona 'a quintessential Cyborgian sex kitten rather than an amputee' (Smith 2006: 58), invoking a bizarre either/or logic that prohibits amputees from inhabiting a sexualized role. Despite Smith's overstatement, the underlying point -- that culture demands the body of the amputee be amended via prosthetic augmentation in order to be acceptable and desirable -- stands. In the cases of Mullins and Modesta, and even more so in the films we discuss below, weaponized prosthetics -- spikes, blades, guns -- produce cyborgs as 'contemporary fetishizations of violence and power' (Ewart 2019: 161), a titillating posthumanism in which disability is not disguised but instead 'overwritten' as a site of danger and desire (Jain 1999: 49). The material reality of the disabled body is obscured by images of sexual, sometimes deadly 'proaesthetics,' the celebration of prosthetics that 'empower' the cyborg user according to a very narrow remit and frequently impede or even prohibit ambulation. For Mullins and Modesta (much like Cherry and Gazelle below), the prosthetic is an aesthetic, symbolic feature that perpetuates the metaphorization of disability and the prosthetic even as it draws attention to the material specificity of these extraordinary augmentations. While both celebrity prosthetic users 'frame their prosthetic body parts as fashion accessories, or as interfaces between their bodies and fashion' (Burton and Melkumova-Reynolds 2019: 203), Modesta pushes this interface toward weaponization; the video for 'Prototype' includes multiple prosthetics that threaten the malevolent government operatives that seeks to incarcerate her, including a crystal encrusted limb that redirects lasers back at her persecutors, and the

aforementioned ‘stiletto’ leg. These weaponized posthuman bodies are reminders of the prosthesis’ military origins.

[ii] While our analysis focuses on *Planet Terror* and *Kingsman: A Secret Service*, there are a number of other films that feature attractive weapon who have weaponized prostheses, including Furiosa (played by Charlize Theron) in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), Ami (played by Minase Yashiro) in *The Machine Girl* (2008), Red Harrington (played by Helena Bonham Carter) in *The Lone Ranger* (2013). This is also a trope that has long featured in Anime.

[iii] There are additional positive readings of prosthetic cyborgs and their potential to undermine what Rosemarie Garland Thomson terms ‘the normate’ body (1997: 8), exposing the ‘natural’ as always already cultural and technological. As Margrit Shildrick explains,

> prostheses contest our faith in corporeal integrity even as they are intended to restore the clean and proper body. They not only demonstrate the inherent plasticity of the body, but, in the very process of incorporating non-self matter, point to the multiple possibilities of co-corporeality, where bodies are not just contiguous and mutually reliant but entwined with one another. Against a modernist convention of fully bounded bodies, separate and distinct from one another, such modes of corporeal transformation comprehensively undo the limits of the embodied self. (2015: 16)

According to such perspectives, exposing human embodiment as mutable, contingent, technological – in short, ‘prosthetic’ – assists in destabilizing the unity of the ‘normate’ human as a unified discursive and material category. From this perspective, embodiment itself is prosthetic (Haraway 1988): manufactured, technological, ‘unnatural.’ Many have argued that late capitalist technoscience turns ‘more and more people into posthuman bodies, eroding the putatively bounded, self-determined, and supreme category ‘Man’ and offering humanity in-

stead a prosthetic existence, a '"cyborg subjectivity" which is perpetually under (de)construction' (Manuela Rossini 2016: 153). Disability studies scholars Mitchell and Snyder similarly stress the ubiquity of embodiment's plasticity, indeterminacy, and technicity; as they explain, 'the prostheticized body is the rule, not the exception' (2000: 7).

[iv] It is worth noting that the actresses who play the characters of Gazelle (Sofia Boutella) and Cherry (Rose McGowan) in *Kingsman* and *Planet Terror* are not prosthesis users, and their prosthetic limbs were inserted using digital special effects. In *Kingsman*, Boutella wore green leggings while the film was shooting, which were then digitally replaced by blades in post-production. In *Planet Terror* digital special effects were used to remove McGowan's right leg from the footage and replace it with computer-generated props, a table leg and then a high powered machine gun. McGowan wore a cast on her leg which restricted her movement to give the effect of using a prosthetic limb.

[v] The term "inspiration porn" was coined by disability activist Stella Young (Young 2012).