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Monsters in Pop Culture

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Cyborg’s Fight for Humanity

In the age of newfound discoveries and technology, we are able to constantly toe the line between what a human is and is not. New medical implants are being used more and more commonly in surgical practice, sometimes drastically improving the lives of the recipients - other times lowering the quality of life (Dick). Robots themselves are becoming more prevalent in our lives, as we welcome cleaning robots like the Roomba and helpers like Alexa and Siri into our everyday realities. Stephen Asma ponders our new world by asking the important question, “Are we still playing God too much, with all this new power to manipulate nature, [...] robotically enhancing our bodies, chemically enhancing our minds, and designing our babies?” (Asma 257).

The original show *Teen Titans* attempts to answer this question in the fifth episode of the first season, titled “The Sum of His Parts”, which refers to the Gestalt psychology belief that the whole is worth more than the sum of its parts (Sum). One of the *Teen Titans* main characters is Cyborg, a teenager whose body consists mostly of robot parts, with some remaining human pieces. In this episode, his battery dies, resulting in him shutting down and falling into a hole, where a human-robot hybrid named Fixit attempts to remove the rest of Cyborg’s “biological imperfections” (Sum) in order to perfect him and make him fully mechanical. This episode wrestles with ideas regarding what makes us human, as well as the extent to which technology and AI can be considered better or more monstrous for human beings.

What exactly makes us human? Post humanists believe that it is only our ability to think, or our brain that makes us human, saying that, “the human mind, and therefore self awareness, can be theoretically and metaphysically divorced from the body. It’s only a couple of short steps [...] to downloading a human mind into a digital and robotic substrate.” (Asma 267). Cyborg and Fixit argue this point, with Cyborg saying that removing his biological components removes that what makes him who he is. Fixit responds reassuringly with, “Your memories, yourself, will be preserved” (Sum). Cyborg takes the view that his human body parts are what keep him human, and not his mind or his memories. Fixit’s view aligns with the post-humanist thought that Cyborg will still be the same person, just with better abilities and upgrades that will improve his life and functions. However, we learn later in the episode that Fixit used to be human, until he replaced all of his own parts (Sum). His memories did not stop him from becoming a recluse, with only his robot creations for company. His memories also did not stop him from gaining a cold and calculating demeanor, seemingly having lost all of his humanity.

Fixit believes that Cyborg is hindered by his human parts, and repeatedly tells him he is in need of repairs and fixing. Cyborg resists, stating that he likes himself the way he is. Fixit responds by stating that, “Such thoughts come from your imperfect biological components” (Sum). By saying this, Fixit is introducing the concept that we cannot even tell how imperfect we are as a people, because we have not experienced the freedom that comes with being made from technology. Our own bodies make us believe that technology and cyborgs are inhuman, when in fact they could be what propels our society forward. Asma touches on this post-humanist concept when he muses that, in the future, “our intellectual aspirations will no longer be hindered by the wet sacks we currently call home.” (Asma 262). This presents the idea of cyborgs and robot-based humans as freeing, and not restricting as Cyborg views it. When Cyborg’s battery originally begins to die, he shrugs and says it’s, “Just a natural part of being unnatural” (Sum). He views himself as monstrous because of his metallic pieces, yet he fights crime with a high-tech blaster arm mere minutes later - perhaps proving Fixit’s point that being a robot is more freeing than we allow ourselves to believe.

This argument of whether or not humans are threatened or uplifted by robots is prevalent in people’s minds today, just as it was in 2003 when the episode first aired. According to a recent report regarding our attitudes towards AI, “experts predicted networked artificial intelligence will amplify human effectiveness but also threaten human autonomy, agency and capabilities.” (Anderson). Both of these ideas are addressed within this episode in the form of Fixit’s technopathic abilities. Both Cyborg and Fixit used to be fully human, and they now both have powers that humans could never possess. Cyborg has sensors and weapons attached to him, while Fixit has technopathy, the ability to control the technology around him. The potentially controlling aspects of AI is one of the most prevalent fears that experts have for growing technology today (Anderson). Due to Fixit’s ability to control technology, he is able to stop Cyborg from leaving, and attack the rest of the Titans with robots as they attempt to reach their friend. In today’s world where technology is everywhere, the ability to control each and every laptop, phone, roomba and drone is terrifying. Our personal information in the form of data has already proven to be a powerful tool in controlling the fates of countries (Amer), which gives new fear to the idea of technopathy and what it could do in the hands of the wrong robot. This episode taps into a growing fear of a loss of autonomy due to AI and controlling cyborgs like Fixit.

In the end, what stops Fixit from upgrading Cyborg completely is the moment when Fixit attempts to download his memories. Fixit catches a glimpse of Cyborg’s day, in which he went to the park with his friends. Together, the Titans enjoyed their food, laughed, played football with each other, and generally appreciated both each other’s company and the beautiful day at the park. Asma put it best when he said, “technology may alienate us from ourselves, dehumanizing us and turning us into self made monsters of a new sort all together.” (Asma 263). Although Fixit may see himself as superior to people due to his ‘upgrades’, he has isolated himself from society in order to be with his machines. As he resides in a hole underneath a junkyard, he literally lives in the dark, kept away from the joys of life and never seeing the light that is humanity. Upon seeing Cyborg’s memories of his friends, he stops, and remarks that he had forgotten how beautiful the world is. This moment allows him to admit to himself that he had gone too far in his own self improvements, and he then realizes what it truly means to be human.

At the end of the episode, Cyborg is approaches by a little boy with a prosthetic arm, saying he looks up to him because he is just like him. Cyborg responds by touching the boy’s chest and saying, “It’s not your arm that makes us the same, it’s the stuff connected to it.” (Sum). This episode does not discount the advancements that technology has allowed us to make to our health and well being, as both Cyborg and the little boy need their metallic limbs in order to survive. Yet it argues that we are more than the sum of our parts - technology is amazing, but it can never truly replace us as human beings. We require much more than thoughts and self awareness in order to be human.

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