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## AN ANALYSIS OF THE TECHNOSCIENTIFIC IMAGINARY IN THE REMAKE OF *THE STEPFORD WIVES*

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**Abstract:** Each new technology and the products and practices it generates involves us in a rethinking and re-situating of ourselves and our world. Technologies are narrativized, enabling us to situate and locate them within our everyday lives. This article explores the promissory and threatening aspects of the technoscientific imaginary, the proliferation of its images and reproductions as depicted in the 2004 remake of *The Stepford Wives*. By taking seriously the transformation of women into 21<sup>st</sup> century technologically enhanced fembots, this film illuminates the wider problems of using technoscience as a solution to current political issues and strained power relationships.

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Remakes are always risky business. And never more so than when the original is regarded as a classic. That some of Hollywood's most gifted directors have suffered their most extravagant flops whilst practicing filmic recycling is evidence of just how treacherous is the realm of the remake. Just ask Gus Van Sant, Tim Burton or Joel and Ethan Coen. However sweet the occasional remake success—*The Fly* (Cronenberg 1986), *Ocean's Eleven* (Soderbergh 2001), *3:10 to Yuma* (Mangold 2007)—it's never quite enough to neutralize the bad taste left by the worst of the failures—*Psycho* (Van Sant 1998), *Planet of the Apes* (Burton 2001), *The Ladykillers* (Coen and Coen 2004).

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the 2004 release of *The Stepford Wives* (Oz 2004), starring Nicole Kidman, Better Midler and Glenn Close, met with lukewarm reviews. Like Forbes' original 1975 feminist horror film, the 2004 version focuses on murderous patriarchal

domination of women, but surprisingly, the 2004 remake was a comedy. The majority of the reviews of the 2004 film, both popular and academic, bemoan how the parody sacrifices the heart of the original movie (Dow 2006, Dowd 2004, Ebert 2004, Griffin 2004, Pollitt 2006, Pulliam 2005, Vint 2007). Critics also argued that the remake's farcical allusions, nostalgic references to the 1950's, and inconsistent narratives amounted to a meditation that failed to offer any coherent critique of gender relationships in the 21st century.

While we accept that the film ultimately fails where the original succeeded, the 2004 film, we argue, bears scholarly consideration for its treatment of the relationship between technoscience and 21<sup>st</sup> century gender relations, and is thus more thought-provoking and substantive than those critical reactions warranted. By taking seriously the reconfiguration of women into 21<sup>st</sup> century technologically enhanced fembots, the film illuminates the wider problems of using technoscience as a solution to current political issues and power relationships.<sup>i</sup> It is technoscience, in the end, that makes possible the film's configuration of gendered domination. It is the promissory and threatening aspects of the technoscientific imaginary, the proliferation of its images and reproductions in *The Stepford Wives* that is the focus of this article.

Each new technology and the products and practices it generates involves us in rethinking and re-situating ourselves and our world. Technologies are narrativized, enabling us to situate and locate them within our everyday lives. The technoscientific imaginary consequently is not solely based on or grounded in science's products or technology's functions. There is no "real," or "original" or "whole" science and technology that lies hidden waiting to be revealed behind the imaginary. Significantly, the remake of *The Stepford Wives* acknowledges just this imaginary quality of constructions of technoscience, often via references to the very artifice of film and other highly technologized media forms, as when Joanna, the film's protagonist, insists, without irony, that her network's newest reality show "is not just a TV show" but rather a "reality phenomenon." Her assertion not only exposes the fiction of filmic representation generally, but also foreshadows the film's critique of slavish acceptance of the putatively positive characteristics of technoscience, of which film, especially in its most postmodern forms, is a part.

As a narrative, the technoscientific imaginary can be utopian or dystopian. For example, as a component of the American Dream, it offers the promise of greater efficiency in domestic management and thus more leisure time for Americans. *Stepford* 2004 regularly parodies

ideological linkages between domesticity and technoscience, especially in representations of the Smart House, the brainchild of screenwriter Paul Rudnick. In scripting *Stepford* 2004, Rudnick approached the project as “a comic take on the American dream, on the American suburbs, visualized as a “mall world,” because “what makes the planet so mesmerized by America and often contemptuous of it is Stepford. Having it all and yet wanting more” (Rudnick 2004). The film explores a fabricated history of such impulses in the opening credits, a pastiche of images of domestic bliss rendered through technological advance. The montage summons the post-War period during which women, who had found both employment and some degree of liberation in filling the shoes of men gone to war, were lured back to conventional gender relations via the promise of the white-picketed, pastel-gilded world of domestic bliss wrought via technology. Highly ironized, the opening scenes juxtapose shots of women stroking and admiring ovens, refrigerators, dishwashers, toasters, washing machines and vacuum cleaners with images of women dancing, sunbathing, water skiing and otherwise enjoying the leisure such domestic technological innovation promised.<sup>ii</sup> The contrasting use of black-and-white and vibrant color works to evoke the pre-feminist and technologically naive past in contradistinction to the putative postfeminist and technologically sophisticated present. Yet such a positivist vision of gendered technology is undercut in the film’s “Clairobics” scene, in which Stepford women exercise by mimicking the motions of their domestic appliances. Chugging and spinning like washing machines, the women, in short, become the very technologies that are said to be the source of their liberation from household drudgery.

In keeping with the opening credits’ ironic tone, Rudnick’s exploration of the American Dream begins with an American nightmare, with the firing and emotional breakdown of Joanna Eberhart (Nicole Kidman). Dismissed from her high-powered position as a television executive when a disgruntled reality-show contestant pulls a gun at the network launch of the new fall schedule, Joanna agrees to move to Stepford in order to recuperate and work on repairing her marriage to Walter (Matthew Broderick).

A *mise-en-scène* tracks Joanna and Walter’s entry into the mall world of Stepford. After passing through a manned security gate, the couple and their two children drive by McMansions, as the soundtrack bellows an equally ostentatious waltz, on their way to meet Mrs. Claire Wellington (Glenn Close) from Stepford Realty. A wide, establishing shot gives us our first glance of Walter and Joanna’s enormous new, mock-colonial, home, as well as our first glance of

Claire, as she awaits her new clients afront the home's grand entryway. A cut to a long shot that frames Claire squarely centre-screen accentuates her rigid, mannequin-like posture, and reinforces the sense of Stepford as a mall world. Claire provides a guided tour of their new home, highlighting its "smart" features, including a computerized security system that locks all doors and windows at the touch of a button, a refrigerator that monitors food stores, and toilets that measure bodily functions and report levels of blood sugar, protein and body fat. Walter is immediately smitten with the home, gushing "Isn't that great kids?" Claire's house tour features all the new "cool" high-tech functions "an American family could ever need." She presents the domestication of the high technology as easily accessible and productive, providing security, grocery monitoring and health scrutiny for the entire family.

The performative work of the smart house makes it, according to Claire, "top of the line." Houses that secure themselves, refrigerators that keep track of consumables, toilets that measure dietary deficits, form a ubiquitous ecosystem that watches us, informs us and protects us. But the "us" here is not everyone. Indeed, Walter's new house is an example of a distinctive American style of the latest cutting-edge technology, and of the exclusionary practices inherent in the technoscientific imaginary. Represented as trendsetting and desirable, this high-tech smart house displays the increasing divide, in terms of both economic and knowledge capital, between the technologically rich and the technologically poor. In this sense, high technology is a "tool" for distinguishing social classes and arranging social relations.

While *The Stepford Wives* might seem to simply celebrate this high-tech version of security and exclusivity, the film also simultaneously challenges these claims. Security, initially represented as desirable for the women in Stepford, is revealed to be a proliferating array of brutal and brutalizing networks of technology, knowledge and power that increasingly ensnares women. In fact, the security feature in the exclusive smart house actually disempowers Joanna later in the film. Troubled by suspicions that her friends are undergoing inexplicable and radical transformations, feeling unsafe and threatened and not wanting to remain vulnerable, Joanna gives Walter an ultimatum stating that she and the kids are leaving, with or without him. In exasperation, she walks to the front door to leave but finds it locked. In an over-the-shoulder shot, Walter, mimicking the house's panoptic perspective, looks on as Joanna, unable to open the door, turns and glares at her husband in frustration. Joanna then attempts to use the smart house's computer panel to free herself, but presses the wrong buttons, prompting the house's male

computer voice to announce “Secure.” Joanna remains securely locked inside. In response to Joanna’s angry demand, Walter enters the proper code into the computer panel, moving aside and gesturing for Joanna to leave.

Joanna, once president of a successful television network, is thwarted by an automated locking system in the elite house. Even in the private sphere of the home where women are presumably domestically masterful, Joanna is alienated by household technologies, by doors opening and closing of their own accord, and by her inability to control the technology that is supposed to protect her. Against the illusion of total security, Joanna’s actions contest the possibility of a perfectly controlled, coherent security, a technology that is universally reliable and responsive. Her frustration at her inability to control her own security and her home’s technology is shown in opposition to and as dependent upon Walter’s competence. Indeed, Joanna must ask Walter to unlock the door, leading to the question of just who is being secured by Stepford’s high-tech security. Joanna’s dependence upon Walter’s technological proficiency reinforces gender norms and the entwining of securitization and everyday technologies. Their opposing technological capabilities are power displays that are continuous rather than exceptional. Indeed, security for women struggling with everyday patriarchy, as Christine Sylvester observes, “is always partial ... elusive and mundane” (Sylvester 1994: 183). The overall effect of Joanna’s inability to unlock her front door reveals technology and security as interlocking systems of material objects, knowledge, representations, practices, and institutional forms that imagine, direct, and act upon bodies, spaces, and other objects. In the most concrete terms, technology and security (re)produce social relations. In Stepford, those social relations are enacted through men and importantly, the Men’s Association.

As in the original film, the Men’s Association members in the remake are social misfits, as signalled in part by their outlandish costuming in ill-fitting plaid shorts, knee-length socks and otherwise unflattering and unfashionable attire that contrasts radically with the Laura Ashley-inspired couture of Stepford women. The 2004 version adds a comic twist through updating their 21<sup>st</sup> century technological work identities. Stepford’s power elite is still composed of security and communication infrastructure personnel, but reflecting the entwinement of industry and technology, the 21<sup>st</sup> century Men’s Association members are computer geeks. They proudly self-identify with Microsoft, AOL, NASA, and Disney.

We first meet the members as a group when Walter interacts with them at the Men’s

Association's Victorian mansion. The mansion is described by Rudnick as a kind of fraternity house for "middle-aged geeks" suffering from "arrested development," and provides the space for the display of stereotyped male-immediate-gratification-patterns materialized in technologies inaccessible to most of the middle class. Walter's first visit to the Men's Association begins with a point of view shot of all the iconic "cool" sports cars – Corvettes, classic Mustangs, GTO Chargers and Porsches – and Harley Davidson motorcycles that Walter ogles as he ascends the mansion's long driveway. Inside, the walls of the huge lounge/bar/games room are lined with multiple flat screen televisions streaming sporting events. Gathered are groups of men, a few playing cards, a few drinking at the bar, but most standing in a circle facing inward, yelling and cheering as if at a cockfight. A bird's-eye shot, emphasizing the collective pursuit of the men in the circle, works to emphasize their homosocial bonds. Below, a battle between two miniature robots is in process; one spherical, nameless, decorated with pink stripes and wearing a pink bra, the other square in shape, labeled Zeus, with flames on its sides. Walter has a remote control in his hands, controlling Zeus. While the crowd chants "Zeus! Zeus! Zeus! Zeus!" one man yells, "Only one can survive." Another yells, "Let's go baby! Rip her bra off." Zeus/Walter wins, the robot doing a victory dance swirling the pink bra above its arms. Mike (Christopher Walken), the head of the association, states, "Zeus rules the universe! And Ted owes Walter twenty big ones." Another man states, "Ah, to be a man." It is evident that these men identify with a gendered technology and have formed bonds with one another through this identification process.

Much like the male culture Sherry Turkle (1984) described at MIT, the Men's Association invokes mastery, individualism and consumption enacted in and through technology. The Stepford robot duel mythologizes leisure activities in terms of the traditional "warrior ethic" and heroic masculinity. Victory and heroism are constructed around matters of combat and violence between men, and around dominating the feminine, all of which is acted out with technology.

The Men's Association is a world without women, indeed, an environment hostile towards women. The only time women are seen within this technological world is as a backdrop through and against which men freely pursue their leisure, and that leisure is always mediated through technology. The entwinement of masculinist leisure-technology is evidenced with Walter's first introduction to a fembot. After the robot duel, Ted calls his wife/fembot in from another room, and gives her his ATM card. She slots the card between her lips, and produces

from her mouth, the “twenty big ones” owed to Walter from the robot contest. Walter overcomes the discomfort conveyed in the scene’s reaction shots and ultimately affirms the transaction with an enthusiastic observation: “She gives singles!” A second example occurs when Joanna, Bobbie, and Roger visit their unwell neighbor Charmaine (Lorri Bagley) [Isn’t she Ted’s “wife”?]. When their knock upon her door goes unanswered, they enter her home and overhear Charmaine and her husband, off-screen, making love. The wife/fembot Charmaine issues exaggerated, flattering orgasmic vocalizations. The scene disallows us a view of the source of the noises Joanna, Bobbie, and Roger overhear, raising the question of whether such sounds are “real” – a point reinforced by dialog.

Roger: Is that a dvd?

Joanna: No. It’s them.

The “unnatural” technoscientific source of the vocalizations are made apparent in the shots that follow. As Charmaine heads downstairs to fulfill her husband’s post-coital request for nachos, Roger accidentally activates Charmaine’s fembot remote control, increasing the size of the fembot’s breasts and causing her to walk upstairs backwards, where she falls over, sparking and twitching.

Such scenes illustrate the misogyny inherent in the technoscientific imaginary grounding *The Stepford Wives*. Conceptualizing women as ATM machines, as sexual objects without agency whose appearance can be changed at the push of a button to suit male desire, links patriarchal power with men’s fantasies of technological mastery and mediated consumer pleasures. While the film employs humor to assuage the feminist horror within this imaginary, the technological transformation of women is ultimately based on a model of male desire and control.

An apparent paradox emerges, however, in the portrayal of these men as elite 21<sup>st</sup> century technological workers. They are represented as powerful, as the elite, and as the masters of technology associated with high-tech and powerful industries. Yet, they are also depicted as geeks, unattractive, self-indulgent, petty, even pathological. Significantly, they are only granted the illusion of regaining the power and status associated with the patriarchal model through the artificiality of the fembots. They are also represented as easily controlled by Mike, the head of the association, obeying him as the alpha male.

Indeed, Mike represents everything the others lack. He is tall, genteel, good-looking,

well-dressed, and a leader, the one everyone goes to in an emergency. He is also the “high priest” of technology. When Joanna attempts to leave Stepford and looks for her children, she ends up at the Men’s Association mansion, affiliated with menace via the darkness of the interior space disrupted only by flashes of lightning, cast down through a skylight atop the octagonal rotunda to illuminate the Stepford men, threateningly emerging from the shadows. Joanna confronts the men and Mike. Mike explains his real name is not “Mike.” “Mike” is only a nickname derived from his former employer, Microsoft. The other men follow suit, linking their identities with other iconic high-tech employers such as NASA, AOL, and, of course, Disney. In an attempt to explain to Joanna the rationale supporting the creation of the fembots, Mike shows a video described as “a promotional thing for when we go global.” Crudely animated, the video suggests, however hesitantly, that the technoscientific dominance of Stepford men is, at best, inauthentic, at worst, retrograde. The video presents a re-creation of the “Stepfordization” process, using male and female cartoon stick figures. The video begins, “*Is Stepford Right for You?*” with Mike, dressed in a lab coat and surrounded by test tubes, providing the video’s authoritative introduction and voiceover. A cartoon male character places a woman with cropped short hair, glasses, droopy breasts, bad posture, frown lines and a scowl on her face on a conveyor belt running into a chamber labeled “Female Improvement System.” The illustrated improvement process brings together nano-chips and a sugar bowl, a spice jar, and another jar labeled “everything nice” drifting into and disappearing on to the caricature of the gloomy woman’s brain. After some rumbling, a sketch of the ideal Stepford exemplar walks out of the Female Improvement System like a model, small-waisted, large-breasted, with her hair now blonde in an up-do, wearing earrings and high heels, posing provocatively. Her hips sway from side to side as she, smiling, carries a tray with a martini in one hand and men’s slippers in the other. In the next scene, this caricature is on her knees, placing slippers on her husband, who is now smiling too with a martini in his hand. Mike states, “Welcome to the future”. The video ends with the title “Stepford – She’s gonna love it!”

The cartoonish presentation of the technological annihilation of a woman is significant. Science and technology are never communicated in a vacuum. “This promotional thing,” presented in what Mike identifies as “layman” terms, is technoscience translated and reframed as childhood entertainment – simplistic, clichéd, and image-based. Science is portrayed as happening in labs filled with test tubes and beakers, and performed by white men in white lab

coats, reframing the bewildering cultural and technological complexities into easy to understand, safe processes and systems that produce desirable end-products for men. Whilst promoting technoscience, the video also engages a very particular view of women. Women here are the unwilling objects of scientific experiments. Never does the video articulate the woman's position or her interpretation of the transformations. Rather, it attempts to translate her position, ending the spiel by speaking for her with the unconvincing assertion that "She's gonna love it!"

The portrayal of a seemingly simplistic and autonomous technology is in reality the glorification of a product generated by a self-serving technoscientific culture that is both profoundly aggressive and deeply misogynistic. In this sense, *The Stepford Wives* expresses the masculinist tendencies of technoscience generally, aligning well with such recent publications as *Wired's Mind Grenades: Manifestos from the Future* (Plunkett and Rossetto, 1996) and Bill Gates' *The Road Ahead* (1995) which similarly conceptualize technology from the standpoint of a few "select" masculine subjects. To be in the technological vanguard is to perceive oneself as standing in a privileged relation to technology, to be closer to its "pulse," and to be God-like, as Mike explains to Joanna:

Joanna you're a brilliant woman. Surely you can appreciate, at the very least, the genius of the concept. Picture it. If you could streamline your spouse, if you could overhaul every annoying habit, every physical flaw, every moment of them whining and nagging and farting in bed. Imagine if you could enjoy the person you love, but only at their very best. The only reason for your anger, your resentment, your rage is really very simple. You're furious because we thought of it first. While you were trying to become men, we decided to become gods.

Here the men of AOL, Microsoft and NASA assume a privileged position, one that supposedly allows them to see further, and to know more than a mortal woman preoccupied and distracted with feminism. By having unique access to these "heights," the high-tech avant-gardists see themselves as the prophets of the future. They become gods. They are the brilliant minds who think of things first, and who move fast enough to keep themselves on the "cutting edge" of technological innovation. In these terms, being ahead of women becomes a way of reconfirming their mastery of techno-culture, and their elite and dominant position in the world.

What also becomes apparent from Mike's statement is that the Female Improvement System is not simply an anatomical technological transformation device for sale on the global market, but it is also a spectacular, ideological re-imagining of the social relations surrounding gender and embodiment. Mike's vision draws upon the concept of the body as infinitely

malleable through technological reinvention. Indeed, his explanation suggests a “streamlining” and “overhauling” of the body, drawing on metaphors of upgrading other machines, the perfect body/mind here adapted and controlled through technoscience and nano-chips. Mike’s Female Improvement System is a systematic and misogynistic application of science and technology that reduces the enhanced and overhauled women to technoscientific merchandise for the global market.

After watching the “promotional thing,” Joanna challenges Walter from her position as the object of technoscience by questioning the reality elided within the cartoon. She directly confronts the Men’s Association’s desire to create domestic slaves that exist only to wait on them, instead of enjoying a life with an equal partner who willingly negotiates gender roles, domestic responsibilities and expectations of embodiment. When she asks if the Stepford wives can say “I love you,” Walter turns to Mike who steps into the foreground saying, “Of course, in fifty-eight languages.” Mike here quantifies the statement “I love you” into the number of languages in which it can be espoused, privileging numerical quantity over emotion, and eliding questions of slavery, fetishization, and feminism. The scene ends with Mike pressing a button on the remote control in his hand. The floor opens and Joanna’s fembot emerges from below, lying on a slab, framed by blinding white light. Together, Walter, a tearful Joanna, and the vacant-eyed replica descend and are enveloped by the white light, ready for the God-like transformation process identified by Mike. The next time Joanna appears on screen, she is no longer the dark-haired unsatisfied questioning woman dressed in black, but is blonde, pushing a shopping cart, her pastel clothing and hair disturbingly blending in with the products on the shelves.

The depiction of the transformation of women into fembots highlights the homogenizing and normalizing forces disciplining women. The makeover of Bobbie Markowitz from a stereotypical, loud, Jewish, New York feminist into a Stepford wife exemplifies these forces. We first meet Bobbie at the Stepford community’s Fourth of July party. In a large crowd of beautiful women and short stumpy men, a loud grating female voice is heard, “Excuse me, excuse me. Excuse Me!!” A stout middle-aged woman with curly shoulder-length mousy hair and glasses, wearing a t-shirt with “Deep Purple” emblazoned on the front, pushes her way up to a group of men from the Men’s Association. She demands:

Am I the only one that finds all of this more than a little bit disturbing? We’re celebrating our nation’s birthday. But there are no African-Americans, no Native Americans, no Asian Americans.

This is Bobbie Markowitz, a renowned author and feminist committed to multiculturalism. She critiques the seeming invisibility of white hegemony, besieging men from the Stepford Men's Association to account for its reproduction of a fantasized, homogenized, monolithic American culture. Questioning Stepford's participation in the whitewashing of the American population, she negates the entire foundation of Stepford's celebration. She is articulate, assertive, confrontational, and politically informed.

While Bobbie is represented as feminist, multiculturally grounded, and ethnically other, she is also portrayed as unhappy and frustrated with her life and her relationship to her husband. In a scene at Bobbie's unkempt home, she commiserates with Joanna and Roger, all three discussing their past forays into therapy and their psychiatrists' prescribed mood-altering medications. Bobbie's chaotic house is filled with debris, half-eaten food, banana peels, plastic containers with their lids off, clothes, and books everywhere. Bobbie defiantly explains that she does not hire a cleaner because her husband insists she clean the house herself. The disheveled, filthy environment and emotional frustration and unease depicted in this scene combine to provide the spectacular "before" images grounding Bobbie's "overhaul" into a fembot. Gone are the slovenly pants and t-shirts, glasses, and gestures and mannerisms of an active speaker. Overnight, Bobbie transforms into a blonde, anglicized, contented housewife, now wearing a lacy apron adorned with bows, pearl earrings and a knee-length blue floral dress corseted at the waist to reveal a classic hour-glass figure. Fembot Bobbie welcomes Joanna with arms outstretched and voice soft and sweet: "Good morning Joanna. Isn't it a lovely morning?" As she walks around the house fluffing pillows, preoccupied with cleaning, and continually offering Joanna coffee, we see fembot Bobbie's spotless kitchen and dining area, uncluttered and gleaming. Fresh baked goods and fresh flowers replace the former chaos. There is no debris and no dirt, just an immaculate American-colonial-styled show home containing a demur housewife.

The scene juxtaposes the oppositional characteristics between the slovenly, dissatisfied Bobbie and her "happy and healthy" reproduction. The comedic transformation of Bobbie into a version of anglicized femininity is structured so strikingly, and amusingly, as to highlight just how domesticated and dominated Bobbie has become, as a living Barbie-doll who fetishizes housework. Like all fembots, Bobbie is a technological artifact, absorbed with cleaning, baking and making the "perfect" home for her husband and family. As such, fembots reveal their political and cultural foundations. Indeed, the adage that artifacts have politics is the haunting

point of the movie (Winner 1980: 121). Feminist challenges, ethnic identity, and negotiations surrounding equitable distribution of gendered labor are all eliminated through the fembot's technological transformation into docility, subservience and familial consumption. Using technoscience to elevate the triviality of housework into an all-consuming fetish is an intensely political act that amounts to a technoscientific re-institution of separate spheres. The Men's Association's technoscientific expertise redirects women's lives, localizing and containing them within domesticity. The fembots expose how technoscientific solutions abet and reproduce hegemonic gendered relations of domination, and are resolutions that serve white, male-dominated elites.

Stepford's fembots thus embody a radical masculinist politics, deeply at odds with feminist scholarship in Science and Technology Studies. The political framework and the provocative aspect of Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" elucidate the emancipatory and imaginative potential of the cyborg, its ability to de-center the concept of either/or, and to uproot a unified autonomous selfhood.<sup>1</sup> Haraway's cyborg is a hybrid, defined by its professed capacity to be the savvy and skilled boundary-dweller. However, Haraway's cyborg is emancipatory only in so far as it remains partial, contradictory and de-territorialized, and not confined by specific configurations or locations.

And therein is the problem for the Stepford fembots and the reason much feminist theoretical analysis overlooks this film. For Haraway, the cyborg is an occasion for the celebration of transgressions. The Stepford fembots, however, do not violate, transgress, or re-situate social boundaries. Instead, they are confined and secured within the Men's Association's predetermined conceptualizations of femininity, instantiating men's definitions and needs. The singularity of the male ideal is signified visually with all fembots always clothed in pastels. Indeed, all of the fembots dress alike, walk alike, talk alike, and think alike. The loss of distinctiveness is conveyed through the Stepford wives uniformity, eliminating all markers of social and cultural difference. Bobbie's natural, Rubinesque body is set in opposition to her technologically recrafted Barbie-esque body. The frustrations and dissatisfactions that arise from her social displacements are erased through her transformation. Her ethnicity, her political

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<sup>1</sup> In the "Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway (1991) challenges the notion of the cyborg as an icon of Cold War power and instead asserts that the cyborg can be a symbol of feminist liberation. For Haraway, the cyborg is a fusion of animal and machine, a fusion that does not aspire to organic wholeness but relishes its incompleteness and its ability to transform, network, and to be used as an imaginative resource.

orientations, and her feminist-based gender politics are sanitized through the Men's Association's application of technoscience that re-imagines and (re)creates the Stepford wife.

The uniformity of the Stepford wives is seemingly epitomized in Claire. The film leads us to believe, until the final scenes, that Claire Wellington, wife of Mike, is also a fembot. We come to learn however, that her blonde hair, pastel-flowered dresses, hour-glass figure, inane conversations about gardening, cleaning and politeness, and her adoring worship and deference to Mike are all performative illusions. Claire, fully human, is the scientist/mastermind of the Stepford gated-community. Mike, it turns out, is a robot. We come to this realization as Joanna, protecting Walter from Mike's assault after Walter refuses to change her into a fembot, bashes Mike's skull. Surprising everyone, his head rolls across the floor, sparking.

Joanna: He's a Stepford husband?!

Claire: An angel. Now he's just spare parts, thanks to you.

Walter: What are you? Are you a person or a machine?

Claire: I'm a lady.

Joanna: A real lady?

Claire: Every inch.

Walter: Wait, wait. A real, real lady? Are you a human being?

Claire: Yes. And I may very well be the only decent human being left.

Joanna: In Stepford?

Claire: In the world!

This confusion between the boundaries of human/machine, real/fake constitutes the one moment when the film hints at a radical postmodern technoscience perspective of the sort articulated by Haraway. Neither Claire nor Mike can be interpreted through mere binary concepts of human or machine. This confusion allows the questioning of what is "real." Indeed, Walter and Joanna's uncertainty highlights the instability and the porous nature of our oppositional definitions of human and machine, and the performative framework that is relied on to support them. If Claire, as a human, performs perfectly as a machine, and Mike, the machine, performs perfectly as a human, clear distinctions between the binary oppositions of human/machine collapse. Both Mike and Claire de-center and unground assumed definitions. They both incorporate the "machine" and the "human" and thus embody the tensions between the two terms.

But the emancipatory potential inherent in these now destabilized definitions is revoked by Claire in the next scene where she justifies her goal of creating, through technoscience, a "perfect world" with Mike transformed into the "perfect man" and with the Stepford wives

transformed into “perfect women.” Claire articulates to Joanna her critique of contemporary social relations as they are entwined with the technoscientific imaginary.

Claire: I was just like you, over-stressed, over-booked, under-loved. I was the world’s foremost brain surgeon and genetic engineer. I had top secret contracts with the Pentagon, Apple, and Mattel. I was driven, exhausted. Until late one night I came home to find Mike with Patricia, my brilliant, blond, twenty-one year old research assistant. It was all so ... ugly. Then early the next morning, as I gazed across the breakfast table at their lifeless bodies, I thought, “What have I done?” But more importantly, “What could I do to make the world more beautiful?” I had the skills. But I needed help in realizing my larger vision. And so I made Mike. Because he was someone other men would listen to... So I decided to turn back the clock, to a time before overtime, before quality time, before women were turning themselves into robots.

Joanna: But why didn’t you change the men too? Claire: That’s next.

Joanna: You’re insane!

Claire accuses 21<sup>st</sup> century women of “turning themselves into robots.” Her use of a robotic metaphor is significant, summoning images associated with regimentation and mechanisation. Claire’s use of “robots” expresses her concern about the dehumanizing and controlling effects of contemporary work environments and their accompanying expectations and stresses, and significantly, women’s uncritical acceptance of dominant social practices. She sees women as enslaved by social and cultural expectations, as mere human automatons succumbing to authoritative dictates of the work place.

This critical vision of women and their social location results from Claire’s own social location at the top of the scientific and medical profession hierarchy. As a former top brain surgeon and genetic engineer, Claire is also part of the elite of medical scientists and cutting-edge technologists, esteemed within the world of the military-industrial complex. Indeed, working within the Pentagon, Apple and Mattel, Claire was at the top of a technoscience career track. Yet like many women scientists, Claire’s actual technoscientific accomplishments were veiled behind the male hero. The narrative of the male scientific hero has been analyzed by feminist theorists of Science and Technology Studies. Maureen McNeil (McNeil 2007) specifically highlights the contrasting portrayals of men and women scientists’ biographies. For example, she compares James Watson’s *The Double Helix*, with the biographies of Rosalind Franklin, the biophysicist renowned for her work on imaging DNA. Watson’s biography enacts and celebrates its modern heterosexist character. Like Stepford’s Mike, Watson is the sexy, racy, manly hero in a man’s world. In contrast, women scientists, such as Franklin and Claire, are portrayed as difficult and less desirable. Claire is similarly framed by the complications of being a woman and a scientist. Claire rises to the top of her industry, yet is represented as failing as a

woman. Her devotion to her scientific vocations is depicted as negating her role as wife, while simultaneously her homelife comes to negate her career as a scientist. In this sense, Claire's personal history de-legitimizes her exceptional medical background and scientific accomplishments. Her exhaustion and dedication to her job frames her husband's affair with her young assistant. Blaming herself for his indiscretion, Claire leaves her career track, choosing to remove herself to the suburbs. The splitting of women's identities into woman *versus* scientist is in stark contrast with the portrayal of the enactment of male heroism *through* science. Indeed, the insanity Joanna ascribes to Claire fails to even address the Stepford men's willingness to use remote controls and nano-chips to control their wives, to prefer the technologically-produced replica of their original wives. Ultimately, Claire is the problem, her biographic monologue squarely situating her personal history within the gendered discursive narratives of contemporary technoscience biographies.

As the uber-technoscientist however, Claire merely applies a myopic technoscientific solution to the complex and multifaceted structural issues she critiques, without addressing the larger political, causative and structural frameworks. Claire represents the epitome of the short-sighted scientist whose application of a technoscientific solution eradicates her intended objectives. Ironically, she wants to prevent women turning themselves into robots by transforming them into fembots with nano-chips. She promotes the veneration of women through the creation of fembots which are instead manipulated by remote control and used like appliances. Paradoxically, for Claire, women's liberation is achieved through the excision of all agency and distinctiveness from Stepford women.

Claire also approaches the governmentality of Stepford as another technoscientific problem. Virtually everything in Stepford falls within her purview: Mike, as the alpha-male robot under her command, controls the geeky men; nano-chips, implanted into all the wives, gives her complete control over the women. Claire thus achieves surveillance and control over the Stepford body politic. And after Roger is transformed into a gay male version of the fembot, he runs for political office, and in doing so, morphs into the ultimate Stepford Manchurian Candidate. Pre-programmed by the nano-chips, Roger no longer wears pastels or "flamboyant" colours, but is the embodiment of the controlled elected official in a Brooks Brothers suit. He is designed and automated to represent and protect Claire's vision of the "Stepford Way," undermining any semblance of democratic practice.

Claire's technoscientific dominion over Stepford is thus secured on all significant levels. Bioethical questions surrounding the transformation of humans are elided within the narrative of the film. She circumvents participatory processes, shielding technoscientific discourses and her value commitments from any challenge that could arise from inside or outside Stepford. Her technoscience, in this sense, is a means of production and authority. She is the ultimate puppet master, constructing an entire world that seemingly loses all trace of her partisanship.

So while the fembots cannot be aligned with Haraway's cyborg, Claire's desire for the "perfect" world meshes with what Haraway critiques as "normal science" (Haraway 1997:24). Constructing Mike as the legitimate and authorized "gentleman scientist," Claire is indeed the "ventriloquist for the object world." She speaks with the presumptions of a powerful elite, answering to none but her own vision and resources, seeing herself as "the only decent human being left." She reproduces the power relations from which she also benefits, while denying her central role in creating that power dynamic. She is omnipotent, playing the God-trick of objectivity, portraying herself and her goals as beneficent, her ideals enacted supposedly for the good of the collective, espousing a rhetoric of progress that so often accompanies technoscientific discourses. So while her goal is an idealized nostalgic community of committed citizens and genteel relationships, what she creates instead is a simulation based on robotic subservience, gratuitous pleasure, and a mall world of superficial and self-indulgent misogyny created and enforced through technoscience. While Claire espouses an ostensibly value-neutral technoscientific imaginary, that imaginary is grounded in and becomes expressed through a deep utilitarianism and a reification of women's life in servitude. Through the application of science and technology, and an elitist and undemocratic *modus operandi*, Claire as uber-technoscientist reinforces men's social domination.

That domination is achieved through the implantation of nano-chips. Unlike the original film in which Stepfordization required the murder of the original subject and her replacement with a robotic doppelgänger, the comedic 2004 Hollywood version changed the conclusion to allow for a happy ending. In 2004, the wives' brains are merely controlled with the insertion of five nano-chips, a process that is effectively reversed, by disabling the chips, to achieve that feel-good happy ending. Indeed, milquetoast Walter is the hero of the movie. He sneaks down into a kind of mainframe supercomputer machine room, but instead of rows and rows of computers, hanging outlines of translucent one-dimensional full-body female outlines fill the room. He

accidentally backs into the platform in front of one of the outlines. A replica of Charmaine's face suddenly lights up, with the body outlined and silhouetted in blue with blue lights running, like veins, up and down the translucent torso, culminating in several spots, the effect similar to chips and wiring inside a computer. Not being a computer specialist himself, Walter ignorantly/hopefully begins simultaneously pressing all the buttons on the displays. The scene abruptly cuts back and forth between close ups of Walter pushing buttons in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century space of cool-blue-hued supercomputers, to upstairs where a wide-angle shot reveals couples waltzing in sync at the Victorian-esque Mid-Summer Night Ball. As Walter presses buttons downstairs, sudden individualized flashes punctuate the entire ballroom, as fembot after fembot experiences the sudden nano-reversal process, returning to their previous identities.

By contrast, in the original 1975 film, the Stepford wives were murdered and permanently replaced by replica robots, spectacular simulacra without agency, programmed to merely fulfill men's desires. The horror was inherent in the murder and ultimate loss of these vital and vibrant women who were replaced with beautiful look-alike robots programmed merely to serve men. Coinciding with the 1970's feminist movement and the rise of micro-processors, video-games, and the beginning of the Microsoft empire, these replica/robots reflected anxieties of that technoscientific present (Johnston and Sears 2011).

The revisionist narrative of the 2004 *The Stepford Wives* connects the nano-chip to 21<sup>st</sup> century technological orientations, and thus 21<sup>st</sup> century hopes, ideals, anxieties and fears. These fembots represent a new type of technological programming and conditioning, a new type of invisibility and conspiracy. As a 21<sup>st</sup> century trope, the power of nanotechnology works with the concept of miniaturization and the manipulation of the basic building blocks of nature. Anything and everything, including the human body, can be rebuilt from the ground up, atom by atom and molecule by molecule (Frodeman 2006: 384). Whether or not nanotechnology actually will come to perform this way, as a trope it provides another new narrative about world-making.

Indeed, the 2004 version's addition of the nano-chips becomes another potential site in the movie to unsettle the notion of a binary between organic and mechanical and to collapse the opposition between organism and machine. As a concept, the fembot, as this idealized version of nanotechnology, has the potential to blur clear distinctions between technological and cultural programming, between machine and human. As used by Claire, nanotechnology allows her to construct hybrid women who are still composed of human flesh, but now enhanced by the

Female Improvement System to meet men's/Claire's specifications. Claire physically transforms women's bodies and re-programs their orientations and values. She also has the ability to gather exhaustive data about the status of their human bodies. The Stepford women are monitored continuously – their health, and even their caloric exchanges are measured in the smart house toilets, and all the data collected becomes part of Stepford's information network. The portrayal of the Stepford fembots thus raises questions about the collapsing boundaries between public and private, inside and outside, machine and human, as well as issues of privacy, autonomy, agency and consent.

The complexity of the issues surrounding these questions, though, are never addressed in the film. Instead, Walter's reversal of the nanotechnology programming allows the women to revert to their pre-Stepford personalities, and thus deprives the fembots of the symbolic power and challenge to the human/machine boundaries. Indeed, it is Walter who thwarts Claire's vision and is the active agent of the fembots' re-humanization. There is no rebellion or challenge, no "Stepfordator" arising from the fembots themselves. While Claire typifies modern technological rationality through her desire for order, control, and the need to dominate and master, while she transforms everything including dogs and humans into efficient machines and utilitarian resources, she is stopped by a man, by Walter's true love for Joanna (Vint 2007: 161). While human emotions defeat the overwhelming and destructive power of technoscience, it is a man who ultimately saves the world.

The nano-reversal depicts the re-securing of men's superiority over women, and the retention of human autonomy and control over the complexities of the technoscientific world. The happy ending erases any dystopian angst arising from nanotechnology, depicting an almost self-congratulatory attitude towards (hu)man empowerment over technoscience. Indeed, Walter's reversal of the nano-chips works to resolve the tensions raised throughout the film about women and power, while simultaneously erasing any suspicions about the promissory aspects of the technoscientific imaginary.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> We will not set up a dichotomy between science and technology, between pure and applied, or between academic and industrial. We will be treating these pairs as merely differing degrees of mediation within the practices that societies employ to prioritize and carry out their purposes in research and development. In the case of *The Stepford Wives*, they are very closely linked.

<sup>ii</sup> That new domestic technologies failed to deliver on their promise of increased leisure time for women is well documented. See, for example, Ruth Cowan, *More Work For Mother: The Ironies Of Household Technology From The Open Hearth To The Microwave* (1983).

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