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**EDINBURGH BIOMEDICAL ETHICS FILM FESTIVAL 2013 ON
CYBORG-ETHICS**

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How many new synthetic body parts are required before a human being becomes a cyborg (human-machine organism)? With the development of an increasing interface between machines and humans these questions are becoming ever more relevant. Already many people wear hearing aids, pace-makers and a number of other devices making them the first individuals on the road to 'cyborgisation'. Maybe it would also be possible, in the not too distant future, for people to wear memory chips on the sides of their heads. But would this modify their identity? Would persons who have always been considered by others or by themselves as average suddenly be seen as very intelligent? These are questions that society will soon have to face.

A direct interface between a computer and a human brain is also something that is on the horizon. Many individuals in society seem already captivated for many hours, every day, by their smart phones, laptops and tablets. Sometimes, one even wonders whether these individuals would not prefer cyberspace and video-games to the real world.

In the future, it may even be possible for individuals to download their minds into their computer hard-disks in order to exist in cyberspace. This is actually something to look forward to according to futurologist Ray Kurzweil. Such "*software based humans*" he predicts, "*will be vastly extended beyond the severe limitations of humans as we know them today. They will live out on the Web, projecting bodies whenever they need or want them, including virtual bodies in diverse realms of virtual reality*".¹ But is this something to which one should look forward to? May it not also be a kind of cyber-prison?

Living online in cyberspace may enable persons to live forever. But what kind of life would this be? Individuals would have direct access to all the information on the web but would they be able to fall in love or even taste their favourite wines? Will humanity eventually become obsolete? Is humanity such a bad thing? What about the risk that cyber-persons may eventually get tired of their virtual existence and want to return to the real, natural world?

From even this brief survey, it should be evident that the topic of cyborg-ethics raises a mountain of important ethical dilemmas. This is one of the reasons why the 9th Edinburgh Biomedical Ethics Film Festival made Cyborg-Ethics its topic for 2013. The event took place between Friday 22 and Sunday 24 November at the Edinburgh Filmhouse and was organised in partnership with (1) the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics (2) the Edinburgh Filmhouse and (3) the Mason Institute at the School of Law of the University of Edinburgh.

¹ R Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2005) at 235.

The Festival (which was the first Cyborg-Ethics Film Festival in the World) featured a range of stimulating cyborg-ethically themed films and documentaries including:

- **Tron (1982)** whereby a hacker is digitally broken down into a data stream by a malicious software pirate and reconstituted into the internal, 3-D graphical world of computers.
- **Repo Men (2010)** in which humans have extended and improved their lives through highly sophisticated and expensive mechanical organs created by a bio-robotic company. However, if they do not pay their bills, the company sends its repo men to take back its property.
- The film entitled **Fixed: The Science/Fiction of Human Enhancement (2013)** had its UK premiere at the event. This new documentary questioned commonly held beliefs about disability and normalcy by exploring technologies that promise to change human bodies and minds forever.
- Also forming part of the Festival programme was a “double bill” of **Doctor Who: Rise of the Cybermen + The Age of Steel (2006)** in which a plan was attempted to upgrade humanity by using homeless people and turning them into cyborgs (named the Cybermen).
- Finally, **Videodrome (1983)** was presented in which a sleazy cable-TV programmer begins to see his life and the future of media spin out of control when he acquires a new kind of programming for his station. He gets literally drawn into his TV-set that uses the show as its front for a global conspiracy.

At the end of each screening, a discussion took place between the audience and a panel of experts in bioethics, law, philosophy and politics. These included: Prof. Gerard Magill, Professor of Healthcare Ethics, Duquesne University, USA; Professor Graeme Laurie, Professor of Medical Jurisprudence at the University of Edinburgh and Dr. Patricia Vargas, Lecturer in Computer Science and Robotics at Heriot-Watt University.

The event was a success in many different ways including the quality of the post-film discussions which covered many diverse aspects of cyborg-ethics. It also enabled participants, for the first time, to meet people for whom the topic is either personally or academically relevant.

Speaking about the Festival, Dr. Gill Haddow, deputy director of the Mason Institute at the University of Edinburgh indicated: *“Every day, we rely on technologies that are implanted into the human body for health purposes such as cochlear implants, cardiac devices and glucose monitors. However, ... will increasing use of implants*

begin to affect what we are as well as who we are? What are the political, social and economic consequences of relying on this technology? ... [E]veryone is invited to speculate on the ethics of a cyborg future”.

One of the great successes of the film festival was that it engaged all members of society and not just experts. At the presentation of the films relating to *Dr. Who and the Cybermen*, a number of primary-school children attended (accompanied by their parents) a few of whom were wearing their Cybermen masks. And at the post-film discussion, the panellists, who included a number of professors, made a very real effort to make the discussion relevant to these children. Perhaps they knew that they were the ones who most needed to think about the ethical consequences of cyborg-ethics. Perhaps these were some of the children who will eventually become cyborgs in the future.