

The Hidden History of the Cyborg  
A Historio-Philosophical Essay  
on the Magic of Technology

The Enlightenment Cyborg

Legend has it that René Descartes (1596–1650) made an automaton, a beautiful female android, which he named “Francine” after his deceased daughter. Descartes and the automaton were inseparable, and he took “her” with him on all his journeys. During a storm at sea, Descartes was nowhere to be found, and the seamen discovered a large wooden box in his cabin. They were struck by horror when they opened it, seeing a young woman inside, seemingly dead, but alive as well. Convinced of witchcraft and of having found the ill omen that hampered the voyage, the captain threw “Francine” overboard. According to tradition, Descartes represents the watershed between a magical world in which automata were frightening and fascinating, and a mechanised world in which humans became machines.<sup>1</sup>

For centuries, humankind has been fascinated by comparisons between humans and machines, and by purported transgressions of the boundaries between them. Androids, robots, and cyborgs all capture the imagination. The image of the cyborg was famously explored by the feminist theoretician Donna Haraway, for example, in her “Cyborg Manifesto”. In this text, she claims that the cyborg is a recent twentieth-century development. Similarly, others have argued that there has been a recent watershed, or discontinuity, which inaugurates the post- or trans-human.<sup>2</sup> According to Alison Muri, however, the coordi-

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1 On Descartes’ daughter, see Adrien Baillet, *La Vie de Monsieur Descartes* (Paris, 1691; facsimile reprint, Geneva, 1970), vol. 2, pp. 89–92. The story of the automaton appears in the eighteenth century and had a wide currency in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See, for example, Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 1–2; and Leonora Rosenfield, *From Beast-Machine to Man-Machine: Animal Soul in French Letters from Descartes to La Mettrie* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968), p. 203.

2 Cf. C.H. Gray, ed., *The Cyborg Handbook* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 5; Bruce Mazlish, *The Fourth Discontinuity. The Co-Evolution of Humans and Machines* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).