

**FROM 1970s FEMINISM TO THE CULT OF CELEBRITY OF  
THE 1990s: THE TELEVISION ADAPTATION OF JAMES  
TIPTREE'S 'THE GIRL WHO WAS PLUGGED IN' (1973)**

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In this paper I discuss the short story 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In' (1973) by James Tiptree Jr. adapted for the science fiction television anthology *Welcome To Paradox* (1998). 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In' was originally published in Robert Silverberg's science fiction anthology series *New Dimensions 3* and is a narrative about a young physically-impaired woman called Philadelphia Burke who is merged with technology in order to control remotely the artificial body of a beautiful female celebrity named Delphi. Through the perfect body of Delphi, Philadelphia Burke is offered the chance of a new and better life. The television adaptation of 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In' was aired on the American Sci Fi Channel on 14 September 1998 as part of the Canadian production *Welcome To Paradox*. Consisting of thirteen episodes, *Welcome To Paradox* is set in a futuristic city called Betaville where technology has perfected humans and human existence. Paradoxically, this perfection is undercut by the way technology is used to exploit human desires and distort human relationships.

Drawing from classic works by well-known science fiction writers, *Welcome To Paradox* provides a series of adaptations that pay homage to 'the success of the mixed-genre drama anthologies of the 1950s' (Yaszek 65).<sup>1</sup> In her 2008 article 'Shadows on the Cathode Ray Tube: Adapting Print Science Fiction for Television', Lisa Yaszek explains:

Much like early stand-alone programs...science fiction anthologies [such as *Welcome To Paradox*] do not dwell long on the technoscientific conditions enabling the worlds they present. Instead, they focus on the social and moral dramas engendered by these conditions. As such, they both preserve the golden age dictate to put a human face on science and technology and modify it in ways that have historically guaranteed the largest broadest television viewing audience possible. (65-66)

Yaszek implies that faithful translations of science fiction print into stand-alone television episodes are often subjugated to topical subjects that reflect current concerns about humanity's relationship with technology. In general, it is accepted that adaptations will differ from their original source due to shifts in historical context and audience expectations.

The parameters that define television adaptations of science fiction outlined by Yaszek inform my analysis of Tiptree's short story. James Tiptree Jr. was the pen name for American woman science fiction writer Alice B. Sheldon (1915–87). Much of the work that Sheldon produced under the male pseudonym of Tiptree reflected her concerns about gender relations in North American society and her active engagement with newly emerging feminist issues. Primarily, I read 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In' within the socio-historical context of 1970s Second Wave Feminism. I consider that it is a cyborg narrative responding to specific feminist issues of that decade, particularly those concerning women and technology. In a review of *Welcome To Paradox* by television critic Patrick Lee in 1998, he describes 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In' as an episode that uses Tiptree's 'unusual premise to look at the cult of celebrity' (1). From Lee's assessment it is evident that a shift has occurred between the print and television adaptation of Tiptree's text, whereby issues pertinent to women in the 1970s have been replaced by new concerns about celebrity culture prevalent in the 1990s. Therefore, from the original context of 1970s Second Wave Feminism to the cult of celebrity of the 1990s I explore the following two questions: Is it possible to mediate historical ideologies and representations into the present? What, if anything, is lost in the television adaptation of 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In'?

To answer these two questions, I will first introduce and offer my reading of Tiptree's text as a revision of the science fiction mechanical woman narrative and discuss its intertextual relationship with the influential feminist text of the 1970s *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) by Shulameth Firestone. Secondly, I will discuss Patrick Lee's assertion that the television adaptation of Tiptree's narrative is primarily about the cult of celebrity by reading 'The Girl Who...' in relation to Chris Rojek's theoretical exploration of celebrity in his book *Celebrity* (2001). It is from these two readings I will argue that although I think it is possible to mediate historical ideologies into the present, in the case of the adaptation of 'The Girl Who...' for *Welcome To Paradox* this has not happened. Nonetheless, the differences that separate the print original from the television adaptation do not necessarily mean that all or anything is lost. Instead, I consider that the modification of 'The Girl

Who...’ for television adds new meanings and introduces Tiptree’s text to a new audience. In this context, I argue that ‘The Girl Who...’ is enriched by its adaptation for the science fiction television anthology *Welcome To Paradox* and should be viewed as a mediated form that compliments the print original.

### **‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’ (1973)**

‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’ is a proto-cyberpunk narrative set in a near-future dystopian urban landscape, where the aggressive advertising of commodities has become outlawed. As the male narrator explains: ‘All the media and most of the landscape was taken up with extravagant competing displays. The thing [advertising] became uneconomic. The public rebelled’ (13). In place of advertising, companies have created a generation of celebrities. Unknown to the public, these celebrities are artificially grown in ‘Placental Decanters’ and controlled by people called ‘Remotes’ (14). The purpose of the celebrity is to persuade consumers to buy products. However, without the ‘Remotes’ to control them, the celebrity is ‘just a vegetable’ (11). P. Burke is the story’s unlikely female protagonist who becomes a ‘Remote’. Described as the ‘ugly of the world’ (3), P. Burke is physically deformed and her features unredeemable. As Tiptree writes, she is ‘A tall monument to pituitary dystrophy. ... When she smiles, her jaw — it’s half purple — almost bites her left eye out’ (3). P. Burke’s marginal position in society leads her to commit suicide. Her life as a ‘Remote’ begins when her suicide attempt fails and she is taken from the street, and offered the opportunity to live another life, the life of a celebrity (2). P. Burke agrees and is merged with technology and transformed into a cyborg. As a cyborg, P. Burke’s mind is adapted and conditioned to control the body of the artificial construct Delphi. Trained in her new job, P. Burke lives a double life as a celebrity as she learns to perform perfect femininity and convince the male protagonist of the story, Paul Isham III, that Delphi is a ‘real’ woman (20).

### **‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’: A Revision of the Science Fiction Mechanical Woman Narrative**

In my analysis, I consider that Tiptree’s 1973 novella revises the science fiction mechanical woman narrative. In science fiction literature, the image of the mechanical woman is a popular trope expressing male fears

and desires about technology. She is represented as beautiful, obedient and controllable. Often the mechanical woman falls in love with the man who has made her, affirming his mastery over the feminine and nature. An early example is Lester Del Ray's 'Helen O'Loy' (1938), which tells the story about two scientists who create the perfect woman: she falls in love with her maker and stays loyal to him until his death (Del Ray 64–65). However, by juxtaposing the physically impaired body of P. Burke with the physically perfect body of Delphi, Tiptree subversively borrows a standard science fiction trope in order to critique the lives of women divided and subordinated by patriarchal society through myths of beauty and romance. In this context, I consider that 'The Girl Who...' reflects Shulamith Firestone's view on 'the culture of romance' described in her 1970 feminist text *The Dialectic of Sex* (165).

In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone lambasts patriarchal institutions for perpetuating the myth of the gallant hero who, she argues, only serves to elevate women 'to states of mock worship' (166). Firestone explains that such myths maintain women in a position of inferiority because they generate and sustain female stereotypes, which she argues, encourages men to see women as 'dolls' and, in turn, women respond by expressing their individuality through aspiring towards a feminine standard defined by men (170). Consequently, as Firestone writes, 'The competition becomes frantic, because everyone is now plugged into the same circuit. The current beauty ideal becomes all-pervasive' (174). Woman as a formulaic standard that men desire to possess underpins the male fantasy of male domination over women. Women who conform to an ideal defined by patriarchy boosts the male ego, because her proximity to the feminine ideal also assists in defining his masculinity and hence his success as a man.

Firestone's analysis of romance and feminine beauty in patriarchal culture is exemplified and critiqued in Tiptree's science fiction text. P. Burke is a woman who desires to escape the limitations of her own existence through the perfect 'girl-body' of Delphi (Tiptree 11). Delphi is the doll-like automaton that P. Burke remotely controls, but also who she desires to be. In this context, P. Burke is the woman who is 'plugged in' to the media circuit that standardises and promotes idealised images of woman. However, in this tale, there is no happy ending. Paul falls in love with Delphi the construct not P. Burke the real woman and mistakenly kills P. Burke, leaving him with the lifeless body of Delphi (52–53). Overall, 'The Girl Who...' is a refusal to follow formulaic romantic narratives that represent women achieving the feminine ideal, gaining social status and economic security through the acquisition of an ideal male lover. Equally, Paul's heroic deeds are

undone when femininity is exposed as mere artifice upon which the hero's maleness depends. In Tiptree's satire on romance, femininity and masculinity are deconstructed through a revision of the science fiction mechanical woman narrative.

### **'The Girl Who Was Plugged In': A Comment On The Cult of Celebrity**

In contrast, the adaptation of 'The Girl Who...' for the science fiction television series *Welcome To Paradox* is presented as a tragedy reflecting contemporary concerns about the media and celebrity culture. Set in the 'domed city Betaville', 'The Girl Who...' focuses on human desires and how they are mediated and controlled by technology through the special status of the celebrity, whose prime function is to maximise profit margins for multi-national conglomerates. As the enigmatic host of the series 'Paradox' explains: 'In the city of Betaville, where laws have outlawed advertising, only the stars showcase products and they are treated like Gods' ('The Girl Who...', *Welcome To Paradox*). In this opening statement, a relationship is made between the God-like celebrity, the media and the commodity. It is a statement which reflects Hamish Pringle's argument about celebrity culture in contemporary society where the power of 'sheer fame' not only sells products, but where the celebrity is also a product created for public consumption (Pringle 101). In particular, *Welcome To Paradox* considers the cost of celebrity to the individual by following the rise and fall of Delphi, as P. Burke's dream of fame rapidly turns into a nightmare. Useful for discussing the divided life of P. Burke as the celebrity Delphi is Chris Rojek's definition of celebrity. Rojek argues that there are three key elements that define the celebrity: the first is the pseudo-religious status of the celebrity as god or goddess; the second is the celebrity as fabrication; and the third is the problem of 'celebrity status' itself, which Rojek argues, 'always implies a split between a private self and a public self' that can potentially cause 'a clinical or sub-clinical loss of identity' in the celebrity (11).

The television adaptation of 'The Girl Who...' exemplifies Rojek's definition of the celebrity. For example, in the opening sequence, the viewer is introduced to the 'Gods' of Betaville, as they encounter the 'poor discarded mortal' P. Burke. The scene depicts what appears to be a chaotic and frenzied encounter between a group of celebrities, the media and a worshipping public, but which is in fact a carefully planned expo on the latest perfume, ominously titled, 'Grief 49'. The main celebrity is

‘Breathe’, who along with his entourage are presented as God-like: they are distant and untouchable as they effortlessly walk amongst ordinary people, who desire to be just like them, near them, or indeed be a part of their lives, if not in reality, then through the products they endorse. At the same time, the viewer is drawn to the shadowy distorted figure of P. Burke, who has attracted the interest of two PR men working for the company GTX. As they single her out, discussing her unique and marketable human quality and her feelings, P. Burke is gripped with pain and stumbles. Helped to her feet by a compassionate yet enigmatic ‘Breathe’, he hands her a white lily, a symbol of goddess worship, as well as tragedy and death, foretelling both her rise and fall (‘The Girl Who...’, *Welcome To Paradox*).

Rojek explains that ‘the modern meaning of the term *celebrity* actually derives from the fall of the gods, and the rise of democratic governments and secular societies’ (9). This statement implies that at best the celebrity functions to fulfil the needs and desires of individuals in a godless and faithless society and, at worst, exploits them as feelings and emotions are numbed and dehumanised in a technologically-mediated age. In this context, the ‘plugging in’ of P. Burke’s emotions into the artificial body of Delphi creates the perfect cybernetic system for the purpose of capitalist accumulation. As a cyborg that is real and artificial, ordinary and elite, she is a celebrity that promises to fulfil the desires of the masses, while remaining elusive and special. At the same time, her cyborg identity accentuates the fact that she is a celebrity, who has literally been fabricated. A scene that emphasises this point is the moment when Delphi is lifted out of the ‘Placental Decanter’ and P. Burke comes face-to-face with her newly constructed alter ego. P. Burke is connected to electrodes that transfer her thought patterns to control the body of Delphi and is delighted with her new guise. Together they constitute a ready-made female media machine that is to be used and controlled for public consumption. However, P. Burke and Delphi are two separate entities with P. Burke living a divided life as the person existing behind the public persona of the celebrity Delphi. At first, this experience excites her, then, it begins to trouble her, and finally overwhelms her, as she starts to believe that she can die and be reborn as Delphi. In effect, P. Burke experiences what Rojek describes as a ‘loss of identity’ (Rojek 11), as she is no longer able to distinguish between her real self and her celebrity self. Inevitably, her life ends in tragedy (The Girl Who...’, *Welcome To Paradox*).

## Is it possible to mediate historical ideologies into the present?

So far, I have described and discussed the science fiction print and the television adaptation of ‘The Girl Who...’ and will now address the first question raised in this paper: Is it possible to mediate historical ideologies into the present? This question is complex for several reasons. One reason concerns the nature of the science fiction genre itself. Despite the fact that science fiction is a literature about the future, it is always about the present. A science fiction text is a product of its time and reflects issues and concerns of a moment in which it is written and published. ‘The Girl Who...’ is no exception. Tiptree’s text is firmly rooted in the 1970s and Second Wave Feminism. This is not only in accordance with my reading of the intertextual relationship of ‘The Girl Who...’ with Firestone’s influential feminist text, *The Dialectic of Sex*, but is verified in Tiptree’s epistolary exchange with leading feminist science fiction writers of that era, such as Joanna Russ. Tiptree established and maintained a lively dialogue with Russ about the division between a woman and the feminine ideal. Often Russ complained to Tiptree of the lack of female role models as she was growing up in the 1950s, stating, ‘women never did anything remotely interesting, so I identified with the men in all the books and films and in life, too, almost — which leaves you with an awful split sort of life’ (Phillips 303). Neither Tiptree nor Russ could relate to the notion of woman bound by patriarchal conventions. Consequently, their discussions often returned to the problem of how to be a woman (Phillips 303).

The problem of how to be a woman and overcome living ‘an awful split sort of life’ experienced in patriarchal culture is another important theme in Tiptree’s cyborg text. The juxtaposition of the physically impaired body of P. Burke with the perfect body of Delphi in ‘The Girl Who...’ is crucial for understanding Tiptree’s critique of the feminine ‘norms’ that define woman in patriarchal culture. Throughout Tiptree’s text, P. Burke is described as a ‘girl-brute’ (6), ‘monster’ (37), ‘freak’ (50). Her physical impairment is described in terms of body parts that are out of proportion to the rest of her body. The distortion of P. Burke’s physiognomy is extreme: ‘When she smiles, her jaw — it’s half purple — almost bites her left eye out’ (3). P. Burke has ‘big hands’ and her body is ‘a hulk’ (6, 12); she is physically whole, but misshapen. As the narrator cruelly points out, P. Burke is ‘the monster down in the dungeon...a caricature of a woman...obsessed with true love’ (37). The monster in the dungeon is a metaphor that alludes to the negative images of the abject feminine self that women internalise and bury deep in the

psyche. They are images that women wish to hide from the world, but from which there is no escape. The fact that P. Burke will be exposed for not being the woman that her lover thinks she is, is not lost on her. As the narrator explains, P. Burke's mind is divided over what to do about her dilemma: 'She has phases. The trying, first. And the shame. The SHAME. *I am not what thou lovest*' (37). Shame and guilt are what women are coerced into feeling. Women fear being exposed as less than perfect and therefore consider themselves frauds. Ultimately, P. Burke, who desires to be the perfect woman, is unable to maintain her masquerade and is destroyed and easily replaced. In contrast, Delphi's beauty is timeless and her body is resurrected again.

Tiptree utilises the trope of disability to illuminate how women are coerced by myths of beauty in order to compete with one another for the limited spoils that patriarchy affords them. In *The Beauty Myth* (1990), Naomi Wolf discusses the implications of woman divided between a perfect and imperfect self, arguing, 'Male culture seems happiest to imagine two women together when they are defined as being one winner and one loser in the beauty myth' (60). The divide between the imperfect, monstrous, ugly self and a desire to be perfect is an ancient trope that is evaluated through the female body. In Lennard J. Davis's discussion of the artistic representation of the female nude, which, Davis argues, is a tradition that centres upon the figure of Venus, he describes how the female body undergoes a process of 'splitting', whereby imperfection is excised and placed upon the body of 'her poignant double', Medusa (55). Consequently, Davis states that, 'Medusa is the disabled woman to Venus's perfect body' (55). However, in 'The Girl Who...', Delphi's perfect female body also connotes lack and impairment.

P. Burke and Delphi are two women who are evaluated through their bodies. P. Burke, when conjoined with technology, possesses a highly skilled mind but is grotesque; Delphi is physically perfect, but is brainless. 'The Girl Who...' is a cyborg narrative that offers a critical evaluation of women and femininity within patriarchy as a representation of disability. For instance, Davis goes on to explain that despite the fact that 'Medusa is the disabled woman to Venus's perfect body', the statues of Venus that have survived from antiquity are, ironically, incomplete, many with missing arms and heads (55). Similarly, Delphi is considered physically perfect, her excessive feminine traits granting her cultural value within patriarchal society. However, analogous to the decapitated statues of Venus, Delphi is a woman without a mind, and is therefore an impaired, castrated figure. When P. Burke is not 'plugged in' living out

her dream life, Delphi, the ‘spectacular’ but brainless doll, just ‘sleeps’ (21, 23).

Davis’s analysis of how women are perceived and constructed in patriarchal society is relevant to Tiptree’s text when the narrator explains: ‘The fact is she’s just a girl, a real live girl with her brain in an unusual place’ (18). Delphi is real in that she is made of flesh and blood, but literally without a mind of her own, she is also controllable and malleable. Tiptree’s biographer Julie Phillips writes that at the time ‘The Girl Who...’ was published, ‘Russ had observed that for women, brains and body cancel each other out: women could be either smart or sexual but never both’ (335). It is a view reiterated by Naomi Wolf fifteen years later, when she writes: ‘Culture stereotypes women to fit the [beauty] myth by flattening the feminine into the beauty–without–intelligence or intelligence–without–beauty; women are allowed a mind or body but not both’ (59). Therefore, despite the fact that Delphi is a reconstructed woman who is deemed physically perfect, she is nonetheless a reconstruction that remains subordinate to men, because she signifies woman under the control of patriarchy.

‘The Girl Who...’ critiques women who collude in their own oppression. In order to be successful, women succumb to patriarchal technology, persuading them to consume products that make them more amenable to men. This is portrayed through P. Burke’s rejection of her own physically impaired body and her desire to live a new life through Delphi. In order to ‘close out the beast she is chained to’, P. Burke desperately wants to ‘fuse with Delphi’ (38). Ultimately, P. Burke not only wants to be like Delphi, but rather, she wants ‘*To become Delphi*’ (38). However, as Tiptree’s narrator explains, P. Burke’s desire to do so is ‘dumb’ (38), because Delphi is an unobtainable ideal which no woman can ever achieve. In Tiptree’s cyborg text, P. Burke and Delphi represent women who fail to reconcile the contradictions that their existence entails. ‘The Girl Who...’ demonstrates how women are entrapped by the double standards that bind women to the beauty myth, leaving no room for women to move beyond their prescribed roles within patriarchal culture.

This does not mean that historical ideologies such as those that emerged in relation to 1970s Second Wave Feminism and which are evident in Tiptree’s text cannot be mediated into the present. As my analysis of ‘The Girl Who...’ suggests, the juxtaposition of the ugly/disabled/perfect woman remains of interest to critics who wish to explore and overcome oppressive myths of perfection and beauty that are damaging to women. Tiptree’s print original presents P. Burke as ‘the ugly of the world’ (3), whose looks, as the narrator explains, when

merged with technology, are ‘if possible...disimproved’ (8). However, in the television adaptation of ‘The Girl Who...’, P. Burke is presented as a dishevelled homeless woman who, when merged with technology, becomes visually more appealing. In a fetching cyber–outfit with silver metallic trimmings, P. Burke is neither deformed, ugly, nor dumb, but a woman with potential star quality who is offered the chance of becoming a celebrity. In *Welcome To Paradox*, the dichotomy between the real and artificial is not about how women are divided and subjugated by patriarchal culture through myths of beauty, but about how cultural mechanisms, such as the media, exploit real human emotions for artificial material gains in the pursuit of profit.

### **What, if anything, is lost in the television adaptation of Tiptree’s cyborg text?**

This leads me to consider the second question in this paper: What, if anything, is lost in the television adaptation of Tiptree’s cyborg text? To begin with, feminist concerns about romance and beauty are still of relevance today and the television adaptation alludes to these elements within Tiptree’s narrative. They are not altogether lost, but they are underplayed in relation to the original text. The feminist context that underpins Tiptree’s exploration of how women are coerced into desiring and achieving the ideal female body image through her cyborg protagonist is omitted. The cynicism and biting satirical tone that permeates Tiptree’s cyborg narrative are lost along with the cultural context of the 1970s that gives ‘The Girl Who...’ its specific historical value in terms of its criticism of the representation of women and gender relations in patriarchal capitalist culture. In particular, the extreme physical differences that separate P. Burke from Delphi are ignored. However, in their place, there is a fruitful and thoughtful exploration of how celebrity culture implicates both women and men in technologies that seduce society to endlessly consume products no matter the cost to human life. Therefore, I finally ask, do the differences that exist between the original print version and the television adaptation matter?

I discussed in the introduction that *Welcome to Paradox* is a series that ‘takes its cue from the success of the mixed–genre drama anthologies of the 1950s’, focusing ‘on the social and moral dramas that technoscience engenders in contemporary life’ (Yaszek 65–66). Additionally, *Welcome to Paradox* ‘preserves the golden age dictate to put a human face on science and technology and modify it in a way that has historically guaranteed the largest broadest television viewing

audience possible' (Yaszek 66). In this respect, television productions like *Welcome to Paradox* follow a well-established practice in American science fiction television — its writers adapt science fiction texts by well-known authors on topical subjects, which coincide with, or lend themselves to current social issues and human concerns about technology (Yaszek 65). This means that classic texts such as Tiptree's 'The Girl Who...' are drawn upon and adapted to illuminate issues that are pertinent to the moment of adaptation. In the case of the television adaptation of 'The Girl Who...' it is Tiptree's representation of P. Burke's double life as a celebrity and the power of the media to peddle dreams and desires that is afforded special attention, because it encompasses themes that resonate with society's preoccupation with media culture, and the cult of celebrity in the late 1990s. In this context, P. Burke's downfall is not so much due to her failure to transform into the ideal woman, but instead, it is her unwillingness to accept that her public 'persona' as a celebrity exists separately from her life as P. Burke. At the end of 'The Girl Who...' the host, Paradox, provides the moral to the tale, stating: 'When you combine advanced technology with human anatomy science can create the perfect body, but it can never replace the human heart. Welcome To Paradox' (The Girl Who...', *Welcome To Paradox*). This parting statement emphasises the dehumanising effects of technology on the individual when used to exploit human desires and distort human relations. Paradoxically, while technology may have afforded P. Burke new freedoms as Delphi the celebrity, technology has also entrapped her, as she is consumed by desires generated and driven by a technologically mediated society.

To conclude, I have outlined the differences that separate the original short story from the television adaptation of 'The Girl Who...'. I have discussed the meanings that are associated with these two texts in relation to their socio-historical context, the first emphasising the early 1970s and Second Wave Feminism and the second, the cult of celebrity of the 1990s. I have argued that despite these differences, and in particular, despite the fact that the television adaptation loses the original contextualisation and meanings of Tiptree's short story, it is an adaptation that draws attention to the issue of celebrity culture and the media that is pertinent and relevant to the time the series was released. Overall, I consider that the episode of 'The Girl Who...' should be regarded as a text that compliments Tiptree's short story. The two, when placed together, reinforce each other through important themes concerning humanity's relationship with technology.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For example, the production of stand-alone science fiction stories such as the adaptation of Judith Merril's novel *Shadow on the Hearth* (1950) into the episode 'Atomic Attack' for the mixed-genre anthology series *The Motorola Television Hour* in 1954 (Yaszek 57–58).

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