

Posthumanism: Narcissism, Schizophrenia or the Twilight Zone

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In Professor Asma's article, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Work in Progress*, he gives us an introduction to Posthumanism by naming a few of the fields practices, such as cloning, genetic engineering and neuropharmacology. He quotes the professor of cybernetics at England's University of Reading, Kevin Warwick, who said, "I was born human. But this was an accident of fate—a condition merely of time and place (Asma, 2001)," phrased by another as "...a dimension not only of sight and sound but of the mind," which of course we all recognize as Rod Serling's introduction to the Twilight Zone. Asma infers, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, to the posthumanistic dream of cyborg Utopia when he links our current "wet sacks" of bodies with contemporary artists who are exercising their humanistic right to deconstruct, reconstruct, manipulate and exhibit their own "wet sacks."

Both Orlan, with her surgeries that suggest she is "taking off a mask," and Stelarc, who sculpts internally and performs remote muscle-stimulation, are executors of genetic art, which involves DNA, either directly or indirectly. There is also transgenic art that involves genetic engineering. Whether an artist works with DNA or engineers genes, it is logical that Prof. Asma would be reminded of Freud's idea that: "technology is our way of becoming prosthetic gods (Asma, 2001)." John McDermott, professor emeritus in labor studies at the State University of New York at Old Westbury, has referred to technology instead as "the opiate of the intellectuals (Hook, 2003)."

Artists have forever struggled with demons of one type or another and several have participated in posthumanist artistic techniques whether consciously or

unconsciously. Van Gogh's self portrait displays bandages in place of his severed ear. Da Vinci dissected bodies and human brains to understand the function and to attempt to locate the soul. Literature gave us such nihilistic artists as Plath, Hemingway and Woolf. All tortured souls who engaged their demons and in so doing, engaged the audience to inform and/or comfort us, if only by demonstrating that we are not alone in our own struggles. Asma suggests that the posthuman artist is somewhat narcissistic, possibly drawing on the definition of having an "excessive love or admiration of oneself (Webster, 2001)." However, narcissism is also a psychological condition "characterized by self-preoccupation, lack of empathy and unconscious deficits in self esteem (Webster, 2001)." Asma has positioned us perfectly with artists and narcissism as the entry into Posthumanism theory. Paul Virilio, in his book *Art and Fear*, asserts, "Contemporary art participates in war against humankind (Gessert, 2003)," when in actuality, some may argue the identity formulating processes of post humanism are the true culprits.

In researching Posthumanism I had the increasingly uncomfortable feeling of not wanting to know these things, of being content in my blessed obliviousness. Alas, I am no longer an innocent. To understand Posthumanism, we must first understand humanism, or at least I needed to. The American Humanist Association lists eight types of humanism: Literary Humanism, Renaissance Humanism, Cultural Humanism, Philosophical Humanism, Christian Humanism, Modern Humanism, Secular Humanism and Religious Humanism. As nonacademic as it is, I must say WOW! The Humanist Manifesto III, successor to the Humanist Manifesto of 1933, says "Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of

humanity (American Humanist Association, 2003).” The Manifesto ends with: “The responsibility for our lives and the kind of world in which we live is ours and ours alone (American Humanist Association, 2003).” So how do we make the leap from such altruistic ideals to the “cybernetic organism, a futuristic vision of posthuman hybridity (Woods, 2003)?” We must first travel through transhumanism, “a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity,” no wait, that’s Rod Serling again.

Transhumanism or “transitional human (hook, 2003),” is “the intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by using technology to eliminate aging and greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities (Hook, 2003).” This movement has subtypes also: Extropians, Transtopians, and Singularitarians.

Enhancements and augmentations are not new concepts or practices. Most however are corrective procedures, such as laser vision operations and prosthesis to replace lost limbs, telescoping and microscopy used in surgeries and research, as Asma uses his computer, for specific purposes with specific ends, a tool. In transhumanism, humans transition into the tool, with the end purpose of “improving human performance (Hook, 2003).” Minister Kenneth Phifer says, “Humanism teaches us that it is immoral to wait for God to act for us. We must act to stop the wars and the crimes and the brutality of this and future ages (Edwards, 1989).” In case you come away from that with the impression that this too is altruistic, understand “a posthuman would no longer be a human being, having been so significantly altered as to no longer represent the human species (Hook, 2003).” Richard Jastrow wrote a book entitled *The Enchanted Loom* in

1981, in which he fantasizes that: “At last, the human brain, ensconced in a computer, has been liberated from the weakness of the mortal flesh...It is in control of its own destiny...Housed in indestructible lattices of silicon, and no longer constrained in its span of years...such a life could live forever (Hook, 2003).” This raises cultural and ethical questions, but most assuredly a more personal one of: what type of life will this be?

For supporters of the transhumanist and posthumanistic movements, the answer is, any type of life you wish. Anything that your brain can imagine, it can code and thereby live, or simulate living. This is where the research is so consuming, the data so massive, and dare I resort to minimalist vocabulary, scary, that I was almost overwhelmed. When I read that there is “nothing special about the current form of humanity (Ust, 1996),” I think of the minute intricacies and the elaborate functions of this amazing machine called the “human form,” and I am aghast that we have progressed so far to think it “nothing special.” I have long thought that many of societal ills, divorce, crime, etc., is because we have become an increasingly disposable society, yet I never dreamed that even we, in our entirety, would also be disposable.

“Posthumanism is an attitude on how to deal with the limitation of the human form. It is a vision of how to move beyond those limits by the radical use of technological and other means.” So stated by Daniel Ust in his 1996 article entitled *What is Posthumanism?* Another attitude Daniel mentions is “techno-transcendence,” which he says, “simply means using technology to overcome our limits, to transcend.” So much for transcendental meditation. ‘Cognitive science (Ust, 1996)’ and re-engineered minds, implanting new brain tissue, rewiring the brain, brain inter-faces, “migration through silicone (Ust, 1996)” or “uploading (Ust, 1996).” The terms are endless. The possibilities

are endless. The questions are endless. What are the social consequences? Who will have the ability to upload and “migrate through silicone?” What if a person chooses to stay in the current human form? Discrimination is a definite factor, against both the enhanced and the unenhanced. However, historically, it would be prominent against the unenhanced. The highly enhanced, predictably the wealthier population, will easily retain hegemonic rule. If some can only afford a lesser degree of enhancement, while others can afford, or choose, no enhancement at all, it reinforces class delineation. Most disturbing is that there seems to be no alternative. British physicist, Freeman Dyson says, “the artificial improvement of human beings will come, one way or another, whether we like it or not, as soon as the progress of biological understanding makes it possible. It will be seen by millions of citizens as liberation from past constraints and injustices. Their freedom to choose cannot be permanently denied (Hook, 2003).” What type of injustices will the unenhanced incur? What of the theists and basic theology? “Can their God be so easily dethroned (Hook, 2003)?” What of the mental stability and make-up of these uploaded and computer generated brains that need no bodies or food or shelter?

Angela Woods poses just such questions in her critical analysis *Schizophrenics, Cyborgs and the Pitfalls of Posthumanism*. Here she challenges the idea of binary opposition between Fredric Jameson’s postmodern schizophrenic and Donna Haraway’s Utopian cyborg. Jameson describes postmodern subjectivity as schizophrenia because “the subject is no longer bounded, centered or possessed of psychic depth (Woods, 2003).” Woods wonders how this will be different for the disconnected and fragmented cyborg of posthumanism. With the concept of gender dismissal, or the ability to determine or change gender at any given time, Woods argues, “is the schizophrenic

transcendence or erasure of the body and its social inscriptions (Woods, 2003).” It is not a unifying process, rather splintering, an “imageless, organless body, which is perpetually reinserted into the process of production (Woods, 2003).” If we think we have identity issues now, how is it a positive to “relocate the decentered subject in an unmapped territory, an area beyond the boundaries of gender, race, sexuality, class and even psychic structure...(Woods, 2003)?” There is no possibility as we see it now, to account for lived experiences since the cyborg, the posthumanistic creation, is an abstract, and coded as desired for as Woods points out, “successful cartography is surely a prerogative of political, geographical and ideological location (Woods, 2003).” Who will program whom, and who will ultimately be at the controls, if there will be any controls? Who will maintain the computer base? Who will determine who the creation is, and when back-ups are made in case of computer crash, who or which will be the “real” one? In my current class position, will I become the equivalent of a black and white television set vs. a plasma screen?

The purpose of this paper was to summarize the original text, explore the given theory and then apply the theory to current events. I seem to have raised more questions than found answers, however, application of posthumanism is not in the least difficult to find. W.J.T. Mitchell in *Secular Divination: Edward Said’s Humanism*, informs us that just the word humanism caused Said feelings of “reverence and revulsion: an admiration for the great monument of civilization that constitute the archive of humanism and a disgust at humanism’s underside of suffering and oppression that make them monuments to barbarism as well (Mitchell, 2005).” Today, at the cost of \$200,000 per unit and a “\$127 billion project called Future Combat Systems Weiner, 2005),” we, America, with

the life saving, life-prolonging technology at hand have “robot warriors” that are “fast, accurate and will track and attack the enemy with relatively little risk to the lives of US soldiers (BBC News2005).” Just as the desired life of Utopian cyborgs, “the armed robot does not require food, clothing, training, motivation or a pension (BBC News, 2005).” It is a certainty that the rich and powerful will occupy and rule the poor and weak. As technology grows, so too will the intelligence and autonomy of the robot warrior thereby allowing destruction by “robot soldiers who will think, see and react increasingly like humans (Weiner, 2005).” Their shapes will be in any form the builder desires. They “may look and move like humans or hummingbirds, tractors or tanks, cockroaches or crickets. With nanotechnology...they may become swarms of ‘smart dust’ (Weiner, 2005).”

Technology and potentiality is moving so quickly that debates on use, ethics and human rights has barely begun. “The lawyers tell me there are no prohibitions against robots making life-or-death decisions (Weiner, 2005),” says Mr. Johnson, who leads robotics at the Joint Forces Command in Suffolk, VA. Bill Joy, a co-founder of Sun Microsystems, a leading technological agency say, “As machines become more intelligent, people will let machines make more of their decisions...Eventually a stage may be reached at which the decision necessary to keep the system running will be so complex that human beings will be incapable of making them intelligently. At that stage, the machines will be in effective control (Weiner, 2005).” So answers my question as to who will ultimately control and maintain the computer base that is a posthuman being. In Transhumanist’s FAQ’s written by Nick Bostrom of Oxford University, there is a whole section about society and politics, and the question of “Will new technologies only benefit the rich and powerful (WTA, 2003)?” is answered in short, that probably, but this

has been the way of the world since time began and technological progress will not solve this problem. He does remind us that technology becomes cheaper as time goes on.

Therein lies my comparison of being a black and white television set vs. a plasma screen.

In more relative terms, people are still dying horrific deaths from AIDS in Africa and India because they cannot afford the newly developed treatments used here.

Undoubtedly, a provision to under-developed countries of the highly expensive technology to enhance themselves or their environment is unlikely. We genetically engineer food yet hunger persists worldwide. Posthumanism, to me, is a frightening concept. That robot warriors "...don't care if the guy next to them has been shot (Weiner, 2005)," they won't care if who they shoot is an old woman or a baby. As Mr. Finkelstein of Robotic Technology asks, "if you could invade other countries bloodlessly, would this lead to a greater temptation to invade (Weiner, 2005)?" I contend the answer is yes. Are we not currently liberating Iraq by military force? If there were no US bloodshed, would there be concern whether to withdraw or "stay the course," or would there even be a dialogue?

Normally, this would be the conclusion, however, I am not sure that there can be a conclusion. As Asma aptly points out in his article, it's "all rather unsettling if one happens to feel a certain nostalgia for that ol' wet sack, with all its flaws (Asma, 2001)." I'm not sure if this paper has enlightened or confused. I know that personally, I like my brain where it is and I am now, even more content with the fact of aging and dying compared to the alternative of virtual reinvention. There are many avenues to pursue, analyze and question within the posthumanistic theory. I have attempted to touch on a few, without overload of self or others. I may research further; I may not. Currently, the

“dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind” is wavering and now powering down.

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