

The Posthuman Body: Changing Dynamics of Pleasure

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to analyse the posthuman body as a 'techno-biological' and 'techno-cultural' trope. The paper discusses the various discourses on posthuman body and its potential for pleasure. There are some reflections on the changing notions of sexuality and sexual pleasure in the virtual world as well as on body modifications and sex toys that create hybrid 'posthuman' bodies. Technology is used by modern humans to augment the bodily performances and even as an alternative to bodily functions. The basic assumption involved in the philosophy of body-modification is that the 'natural' body is incapable of facilitating the most perfect and intense physical experience to humans. So, technology is integrated with the 'natural' body thus converting the latter into a techno-cultural entity which is capable of better performances and experiences. The newly evolved techno-biological body transforms itself into a techno-cultural body. Posthuman, in that sense is post nature. The attempt is to overcome the limitations of nature by technology, projecting the capabilities of future humans. Thus, the emergence of posthuman techno-cultural body is a human attempt to triumph and even transcend nature.

Key Words: posthuman, techno-cultural, sexuality,

The definition of body is not always necessarily determined by its material and biological coordinates only. Rather, body is a complex amalgamation of materiality and discourse- or, to put it in other words, body is made of both cultural and natural constituents. There is a 'natural' body as well as a 'cultural' body. Intervening with the 'natural' body is not a modern phenomenon. Body piercing, tattooing and body art date back to early civilizations. They were important social signs associated with initiation ceremonies, rites of passage and punishments. Body is often considered as a malleable matter that can be molded according to one's wishes. Unlike the ancient period, science and technology has enabled modern humans to make more daring interventions with their bodies.

Technology often identifies certain lacks in the body and suggests enhancements, thus creating a hybrid body. Apart from aesthetic and medical reasons, human body is also modified for more intense experiences of pleasure. Posthumanism thus envisions a future of blended bodies, modified and technologically enhanced, which are not one, yet very much fused in acts producing sublime forms of pleasure. Posthuman bodies thus embody an epistemological crisis. In Pepperell's attempt to describe the word posthuman he says:

The word 'posthuman' is employed to describe a number of things at once. First, it's used to mark the end of that period of social development known as humanism, and so in this sense it means 'after humanism'. Second, it refers to the fact that our traditional view of what constitutes a human being is now undergoing a profound transformation. It is argued that we can no longer think about being human in the same way we used to. Third, the term refers to the general convergence of biology and technology to the point where they are increasingly becoming indistinguishable. In this sense the term posthuman is preferable to 'post-biological' (the two terms are sometimes interchanged) insofar as the decaying category of human can be seen merely a subset of an increasingly virulent 'techno-biology' of which we might be but a transient phase. The term 'transhuman' is also widely used and carries some interesting implications not fully explored here, such as extended life and extra-terrestrial intelligence.(iv)

Pepperrell here refers to the posthuman body as a product of technology. This paper is an attempt to analyse the posthuman body as a 'techno-biological' and 'techno-cultural' trope. Various discourses on posthuman body and its potential for pleasure are elaborated in the paper. There are some reflections on the changing notions of sexuality and sexual pleasure in the virtual world as well as on body modifications and sex toys that create hybrid posthuman bodies.

Cultural and literary studies are now blended with scientific and technological knowledge to understand the emerging discursive patterns that define human body. Various theoretical disciplines have been analyzing body as a biological, social and cultural trope: as an assemblage of performatives that constantly redefine the body. Technology and body create curious conjunctions and the use of contemporary technology has transformed our ways of perceiving our body.

Man's close association with machine has a long history. It is the outcome of creativity as well as the desire for better experiences. Humans have constantly tried to invent machines that can improve their quality of life and often enhance their pleasure of being. Man invented machines for ease and comfort and also to enrich their experiences. Thus, a binary was formed as 'we'(humans) and the 'other' (machines that humans invented). The extent of immersion offered by technology in the form of virtual world has enabled humans to have richer, complex and more intense experiences and bodily pleasures. The simulation of the real in the virtual space opens up a whole new world of experiences. Hence this idea of man's status as the creator and user is eventually being problematized with this emergence of machines that are now part of man's perpetual search for pleasures. The fixed distinctions between man and machines is also getting blurred lately especially after the advent of AI enabled robots. There is also a shift in the distinction between subjecthood and objecthood. Machines are no longer static or inert. The AI enabled pleasure machines are designed as 'sensible partners of pleasure' which reciprocate to the human needs and demands and engage in pleasurable acts.

The integration of machines into human body is an attempt to

overcome nature because what is natural in body is identified as defective and an external prosthetic is integrated in order to rectify that defect. In that sense, technology is an attempt to transcend the human condition through cultural techniques as Hannah Arendt puts it. Technology, she says, “is a cultural technique, an expression of our creativity, our longing, our desire and a way to shape our environment which shapes us in return. Machine is man’s desire to create an artificial counterpart” (353). In that sense the emergence of a newly integrated man-machine is a new form of techno-cultural body which transcends the limitations of nature. Technology recreates realities of the body and these bodies question the status quo. The insights on posthuman body reveal that there is an explosion of change and multiplicity. The disenchantment with the aesthetic and the natural body has given a greater impetus to the blending of technology and biology, thereby creating hybrid bodies. This complexity of corporeality has led to the emergence of various new fields of inquiry on body. Post humanism implies that there is a fundamental change in the relation between the human species and the world. Manifestations of this change is discernible even in man’s relationship to his own self.

Humans often ‘disidentified’ with the machines they created. This was based on the subject- object binary. In this binary, subject usually occupies a position of power. The waning of man’s power over the machine as a user has gradually given way to more symbiotic forms of existence. A great deal of recent theoretical probing have accentuated the rejection of several other familiar dichotomies. Man- Machine binary too has undergone significant changes. The posthuman body is one that blends into the machines to form a hybrid that defies the set boundaries and margins of bodily experience and pleasures.

Machines that participate in acts of sex transgress their mere position as objects. They negotiate sex and sexual pleasure and thus problematize dichotomous categories such as body (subject) and machine (object). This fusion of body and machine into a hybrid and homogenized entity throws open immense possibilities of pleasure that border on the sublime. These machines offer limitless pleasures that can be accessed

at one's will. The freedom that marks these acts adds to the promise of sublime pleasures.

Machines claim to participate in human experience of pleasure. One may claim that the machine 'serves' humans. This performance of service mimics human labour. But the position is even more complex in the case of sex toys (also referred to as sexual wellness toys) in the way it redefines the idea of the body in sex as a combination of the biological and the synthetic. Wide variety of vibrators, dildos, G- spot toys, masturbators and other sex toys for couples not only replace a human body that engages in the pleasurable act but also act as an additional prop in love making of partners and even help to accentuate pleasure.

Electronic machines question the subject- object dichotomy and hence reorganize pleasure. Distinguishing human body from the non-human becomes more complex. Bruce Mazlish says that man and the machine he creates are continuous (3). Machines work. Work is the very premise on which machines exist. The work done by machines in sex transgresses the idea of mere service in the way these machines blend in with the human bodies to provide pleasure in all its sublimity.

Modifying the body through plastic surgeries and various other methods, for some people, is a means to live a "normal" life. Victims of accidents and acid attack survivors resort to such surgeries. Bodies are modified for aesthetic reasons also. Facial plastic surgery, silicone implants, breast enhancements, buttocks enhancements, pectoral and abdominal implants etc. are some of them. This idea of modifying the body for beauty enhancement is closely related to aspects of sensual/sexual pleasure. Body transformation and modifications that ranges from vaginaplasty and labiaplasty to genital cosmetic surgery hold the promise of such enhanced forms of pleasure. Penis lengthening and widening surgeries are also becoming popular these days. Intimate body piercing or genital piercing is often practiced in order to enhance sexual pleasure. Such body enhancements and modifications are fulfillments of human desires for perfection. These bodies are atonce aestheticized/beautified, individualized and eroticized. Such bodies are neither completely biological nor synthetic, but a combination of both and cannot be

separated. The post human bodies are thus biological, cultural and technological. In a sense, such enhancements in order to improve the sexual performance can be seen as a proxy attempt to converge the qualities of machine into human body in order to overcome the inherent shortcomings of the latter.

Altering the body has two aspects: aesthetic and functional. Tattooing, putting scars or marks on skin, facial piercing, breast implants or even hair/nail coloring are examples of the aesthetic side of body alteration. Altering the body for bettering the performance of body again has two objectives: medical and non-medical. Putting body-implants like pacemaker or even wearing an eyeglass has a medical intent. Whereas, altering the sexual organs or attaching external objects to genitalia for the purpose of enhancing sexual pleasure can be described as a non-medical purpose of body alteration. Though penis implants used for erectile dysfunctions come under the medical category, one can argue that its function is both aesthetic and functional.

The virtual space holds endless possibilities for the human body. ICT is used to engage in virtual sex which creates real sexual stimulation. Effects of technology increasingly permeate bodily boundaries. Bodies' interaction with technology results in queering as a result of the blurring of sexual identities. In the virtual space, body is networked. The process of connecting the human body to a technological device, the immersion into an electronic network, results in the transcendence of bodily boundaries. Sensory experience of the body is replaced by a simulation of the real that causes immense pleasure. The role-playing environment of the internet generates multiplicities rather than unities.

This blurring of boundaries evokes both terror and pleasure, says Hayles. He adds:

On the one hand, it evokes terror because by then humans can either go gently into that good night, joining the Dinosaurs as a species that once ruled the earth but is now obsolete, or hang on for a while longer by becoming machines themselves. On the other hand, regarding pleasure, the post human evokes the exhilarating prospect of getting out of some of the old boxes and opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means. (285)

Slavoj Zizek asserts that the transition towards posthumanism is a traumatic event. Informed by his psychoanalytic methods, Zizek states that

“the intertwining of the subject/ object, virtual/real dichotomy into an overlapping moment opening the Pandora’s Box of paradoxes connotes an encounter that disturbs the original and the neutral pacing of human stability” (No Sex Please).

He further states that the virtual can intersect disruptively with the real and what is real becomes disenchanting. For him

“Even advocates of cyberspace warn us that we should not totally forget our body, that we should maintain our anchoring in the “real life” by returning, regularly, from our immersion in cyberspace to the intense experience of our body, from sex to jogging” (No Sex Please).

He also holds that humans will never turn themselves into virtual entities “freely floating from one to another virtual universe” (No Sex Please).

Technology plays a significant role in forming and framing the human body.

“Technology also contributes to a transformation of the perception of the purpose of having sex: a transformation that increasingly separates the act of having sex from reproduction” (Squier 113)

and emphasizes the aspect of pleasure. The future of human body is a technological one with bodies and perceptions about bodies becoming more and more simulated. Post human world is not a post body era, but rather an era of fluidity between different analogue, material, digital and virtual bodies. Neither is it a post gender era but a transgender/ fluid gender era leaving the option for everyone to embody as many gendered selves as possible. Kavenay says that the organic human body becomes a tool

“of which we may ethically have as many(real or virtual) as we want” (163).

Technology blurs the difference between gender roles and sexes and who engages in sexual activity and how.

Anne Balsamo in her ‘Virtual Body in Cyberspace’ says that “technologies are transformed into technological commodities”(122).She reads the body as a sign and analyses the histories of these technologies.

Balsamo is skeptical about the claims that the cyberspace erases gender markers. She says that cyber space is not gender neutral and that it provides only “an illusion of control over reality, nature and especially over the unruly, gender and race-marked, essential mortal body”(127). She states that already existing gender patterns are replicated when cultural codes intersect with technology. Hence implications of gender in contemporary technologies of the body is not fully free from the tradition of binaries of gender.

Another important question which pops is concerning the connection between love and sexuality. What is the role of love when machine takes up the role of humans? The oft-quoted mechanical sex between humans becomes literally true in the event of machines becoming part of sexual experiences. The real question is does the intervention of machine in sexual acts deprive sex of love and associated emotional contents involved in the act of lovemaking? Does lovemaking give way to mere mechanical sex without love? This question can still be furthered into a larger question on soulless human machines. Are we entering into a new era of homme-machine (human-machine) which is devoid of humanness?

Yet another significant question about the ‘posthumanness’ of the techno- biological body in pleasure is perhaps the desire for the real body itself. We can and do feel pleasure when we engage in erotic activities online. Still, isn’t there a lingering desire for the real body, its smell and wetness? Nevertheless, the cyberspace is indeed liberatory in the way it reframes our conventional notions of morality and body. Howard Rheingold hints at a possible sexual revolution when he asks:

If technology enables you to experience erotic frissons or deep physical, social, emotional communion with another person with no possibility of pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease, what then of conventional morality, and what of the social rituals and cultural codes that exist solely to enforce that morality? Is disembodiment the ultimate sexual revolution and/or the first step toward abandoning our bodies?(48).

The question of body and technology is not a new one. Yet an attempt to understand posthuman body opens up a whole new set

of questions. What human life, pleasure, and sexuality can look like in the future? Is this posthuman transformation of body and sexual behavior liberatory or traumatic? To what extent will technology alter our notions of the purpose of sexual encounters.? The relationship between technology, sexuality and body is extremely complex and constantly evolving.

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