

## ***Bodies of Work: Corporeality, Postmodernism, Posthumanism***

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En partant de certaines opinions – des plus pessimistes et, en règle générale, les moins bien informées sur le rôle de la technologie dans la vie de nos corps et de nos esprits, cet essai explique, arguments à l'appui, d'abord que, moins „naturelle” que l'on ne le croit, la corporalité humaine possède une forte dimension techno-culturelle, ensuite que le postmodernisme change considérablement la présence de „l'artificiel” dans nos corps. Je suggère, par la suite, que nous devrions considérer le postmodernisme comme un stade politico-culturel à la faveur duquel l'humanité met complètement à nu sa posthumanité. À ce point, ce qui devient d'une évidence criante c'est une compréhension post-rationnelle de la dynamique esprit-corps. Suivant cette dynamique, le corps, nouveau producteur de discours, n'est plus la Cendrillon de la raison. Il en résulte que la posthumanité est représentée par le corps humain dans son âge post-organique, post-instrumental et post-rationnel.

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### ***I: After “Prosthesis”***

My title, if not my argument itself, is indebted to Kathy Acker's 1997 essay collection *Bodies of Work* and more generally to the postmodern corporeal philosophy and discursive practice Acker championed throughout her career. To some, Acker is no more than a gratuitous pornographer, a silly *bricoleuse* at most. Others seize her as an outspoken renegade, a rebel with a timely cause experimenting provocatively both with form and hot-button content and making writing and politics again synonymous. In Acker and countless other writers, artists, activists, and critics in the wake of postmodernism, what warrants this synonymy is discourse's grounding in the body yet not in the traditional sense that the body is simply an instrument, a tool of reason or of the imagination and otherwise the mind's docile prosthesis. The body is no longer to mind what, in Derrida's account, writing is to speech or voice. The body becomes now the very site of reflection, *embodied* thought. It bears witness, cries out, is eloquent; it thinks, dreams, invents, produces discourse, hence it challenges the dominion of rationality. Thus, the past two decades or so have witnessed a spectacular and characteristic “return of the body” in the humanities. This return can be determined as a postmodern turn insofar as it calls into question one of the basic premises of modernity, namely, the Cartesian definition of subjectivity and, embedded in it, rationality as undisputed mark of humanity. Relentlessly queried throughout modernity, this premise nevertheless solidifies, takes center stage after Hegel, and is virtually institutionalized by the rationalism and positivism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is not until the 1960s that, by and large, the critique of this assumption becomes

radical and systematic enough, hence symptomatic of a new representation of “body,” “mind,” and “human.” If the last in this series had been posited as a testimony to the rule of the second (mind–mind or spirit, as reason) over the first, new bodily claims, models, and practices put forth a new meaning of corporality and by the same token call for a *posthuman* retooling—and revaluing—of the body. This means that the “post” in postmodernism and posthumanism is the same.

This also means that the body comes – not just “comes back” – after the human, complicating our historical and conceptual narratives, as all “posts” do when they mess with their “pasts.” It is precisely what cultural and material studies practitioners try to wrap their minds around when they point to the return of the repressed in the arts, popular culture, technology, the media, and across all sorts of disciplines. They realize, in other words, that this return forces us to rethink our humanity and how we have imagined it historically. In so doing, they fuel the expanding discourse of posthumanism – the new, interrogative, fundamentally dubitative discourse with the human as its problematic object. The advent of the body, the new awareness, resurgence, and celebration of the body in material and political contexts shaped by identity parameters such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity, dis/ability, and so forth get the human in trouble, or trouble it deliberately rather, with respect to the post-Cartesian method. Which is why human identity traditionally conceived *is* in trouble these days. And so are the humanities themselves, cultural studies argue, because the humanities do not put out reliable knowledge anymore, do not manage to describe mankind credibly. Whatever they may still be discoursing on, we are told, hardly recovers or “name” a “truth,” “origin,” or “presence.” According to Derrida again, the very “name of the human” [*l’homme*] – the human’s representations, worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*), the human sciences altogether—is the “name of that being which . . . has nursed the illusion [*rêve*] of full presence, of a reassuring foundation, origin, and finite play” (1979, 427). Tirelessly puncturing this “onto-theological” pipedream, Derrida struggles to figure out how we might move beyond the human; indeed, how to account for a move that has already taken place; how to conceptualize the posthuman, in other words—and quite literally in *other* words, that is, in new terms, which might help us deal with, if not swerve around, older traps. For what plays out in the “return of the body” – in theory no less than in the culture this theory draws from—is a posthuman becoming of the human.

This becoming is an increasingly defining concern not just for Derrida. In fields as diverse as philosophy, political science, theology, information technology, robotics, medicine, critical theory, aesthetics, and literary studies, this endeavor has involved rethinking the human and humanity, and by the same token modernity’s—and modernism’s – legacy broadly speaking. Core categories of the “universalist” narrative of the Enlightenment and therefore, as Donna Haraway points out in her “Manifesto for Cyborgs,” prime “modernist figures” (86), the human, humanism, humanity, and the humanities are now undergoing deep-reaching reassessments and displacements as a result of the abovementioned return of the body. Unavoidable as they may be, such changes need to be addressed critically, for posthuman physicality, sexuality, and sociality, their politics, genealogies, historical formations, and present reformations are anything but predictable.

## **II. The Posthuman**

Revolving around various *posts*, contemporary theory has sought to come to grips with the posthuman before its advent proper. The Saussurean view of language as speaking through us, its presumed masters, a view essentially shared by Heidegger (1975, 197); also in Heidegger, the famous “Letter on Humanism” and, more recently, Peter Sloterdijk’s reply, which “sketches a brief history of humanitas as literacy network” (Apter 2001a, 78); the critique of the author as “origin,” “presence,” “center,” or language “owner,” argument put forth by Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva, Jean Ricardou, Marcelin Pleynet, Sollers, and other *Tel Quel* group members, and traceable to Saussure and Bakhtin; Deleuze and Guattari’s disassembly of the “desiring-machines” in *Anti-Oedipus*’s momentous unseating of the Freudian paradigm; Lacanian psychoanalysis, in particular the roles it assigns to lack and absence in the overall architecture of identity, and to language in the mapping of the unconscious and in the “positing” of the subject (2000, 80); Lyotard’s take on humanism in *The Inhuman*, but also, if less directly, his definition of discourse in *Just Gaming*; Foucault’s pronouncement on “man” as a “recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a wrinkle in our field of knowledge, [which] will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form” (1994, 23); the hyperreality epidemics in Baudrillard; Derrida’s deconstruction, which ultimately targets the human and its time-honored, “logocentric” self-representation also known as humanism; late feminist, gay, lesbian, ethnicity- and race-based critiques of traditionally white, male, masculinist, and heterosexist notions of identity, with Butler, Sedgwick, Fuss, Hayles, Bordo, Delany, hooks, and Haraway as the first names that come to mind: they all have attempted a full-fledged, posthumanist critique of the Cartesian, reason-driven, disembodied subject undergirding modern representations of humaneness in the West. Nonetheless, the discussion of textually and culturally specific displacements of the human and humanist discourse is just getting in high gear. In this view, it is important to stress, as Halberstam and Livingston have in their anthology *Posthuman Bodies*, that the posthuman does not complete teleologically the “human story,” does not simply finish up – nor does it finish off, break out of – modernity’s number one grand narrative. It would make more sense, the critics add à la Lyotard, to revisit the human and its history as the posthuman “in the works,” and, in so doing, to concede that the *post* in the posthuman both resists and triggers off the complex implications of the *inter*, *infra*, *sub*, *trans*, *pre*, and *anti*.

Also, it comes as no surprise that the newly emerged posthuman symptomatology has surfaced predominantly in cybernetics (Wolfe 1995), cyberculture (Gray 2001, Haraway 1990), cyberpunk (Bukatman 1993), cyberfantasies of fetishism (Fernbach 2002), monstrosity, and aliens (Graham 2002), as well as in related areas of postmodern literature, science fiction, popular culture, the “avant-pop,” and film. It is in these territories of the contemporary imaginary that the most shockingly posthuman possibilities have been tried out through various challenges to inherited representations of the human body and its multiple, culturally-historically set boundaries. The body unfolds a site where the human as a whole and part of a greater whole becomes something else, undergoes significant transformations, or reveals that such mutations have been under way for quite some time now. Accordingly, the human body, a major focus

of posthuman representations, cannot but renegotiate the interplay and hierarchies of reason and flesh, “spirit” and materiality, “naturalness” – the reason-governed body as given, made once for ever and going through “organic” growth – and “constructedness” – the body as material object shaped by competing discursive forces, the body as subjectivity, the human as *subject*.

For the sake of terminological clarity, now, I offer at this point a distinction between “posthuman” and “posthumanist.” Where physical metamorphoses and generally speaking physicality are at issue; where these changes affect primarily, if not exclusively, the human body, deforming it, de-humanizing and stripping it of the expected human features, rendering it monstrous or inhuman, excessively organic (biological) or insufficiently, partly so (cyborg-like), I propose that we witness a *posthuman* becoming. But where critics try to get a handle on this process by theorizing posthuman developments and debating their implications *in* and *for* the human sciences; where, relatedly, they run up against the limits of classical humanism in defining the human and its posthuman mutations, and in response critique the cultural-philosophical, “humanist” roles the human has played as a rational entity in the West; where, lastly, this critique lays bare the unexamined, universalist albeit Eurocentric and masculinist assumptions underpinning the human subject, I deem *posthumanist* a better choice. Further, the posthuman is depicted chiefly in the arts, supplying regularly raw material to fictional discourse; the posthumanist is a matter of metadiscourse instead, a topic chiefly for critics, philosophers, and scientists working toward a revisionist rethinking of the human, via the body, outside the humanist box. Otherwise, the dichotomy is fairly undependable. Bodily changes bear upon the mind, too, upon the rational subject capable of “reflection.” Nor does thought—the thought of the posthuman included—occur solely in scientific or philosophical-speculative form. After all, postmodernism merges language and metalanguage, reflection and self-reflection.

One more time, the aforementioned posthuman shifts and renegotiations belong to a process already in place. Yet the process has accelerated of late, has become impossible to ignore. Arguably, the postmodern is the metadiscourse where this posthumanist reflection or realization obtains, as well as that which, within the contemporary, provides the instruments – the corporeal tropes, themes, vocabularies – for the discursive production, for a picture of the posthuman, so much so that, as I say above, for some critics the *post* in postmodernism and posthumanism is the same.

### ***III. “Thick” Bodies: Cultural and Technological Inscriptions***

What this picture foregrounds is the culturally thick, intertextual and material texture of the body. As I have maintained, the body has entered a post-instrumental stage, is no longer reason’s prosthesis, annex, or vehicle. What I want to highlight next is the body’s newly acknowledge materiality and “cultural construction.” That is to say, the posthuman representation underscores the cultural and material-technological intertextuality of the human body and the human in general, its infiltration by, inscription into, and continuous “referencing” of larger representations, texts, networks, assemblages. New critics and theorists tell us that our bodies bear witness to histories and stories, to dramas and traumas, are sexually, ethnically,

racially, and otherwise relentlessly inscribed and reinscribed into them, written and rewritten into being what they are. Further, culture at large is more and more turning into an “interfac[e] between bodies and technologies” (Hayles 1993b, 165). The technological is a posthumanizing agent in that it has been reworking the human in its various, eccentric embodiments, which often, if not always, lead up to an entire phenomenology of corporeal disruption and manipulative reincorporation. This not just a cyberpunk-style reincorporation fantasy but already reality, perhaps not the reality of Deleuze and Guattari’s bodies without organs – not yet – but already the reality of technology-saturated bodies, bodies that are no longer prostheses and tools yet full of prostheses, implants, inorganic fluids, devices, and mechanical parts, so much so that, as William Gibson proposes, the natural, original body, the human-in-the-body, is more and more something of a vague memory, a residue, an anachronism.

Thomas Pynchon, too, figures the human as a cultural space eroding the binaries of inert and alive, static and mobile, material and intellectual, physical and nonphysical, natural and artificial, biological and inorganic. *Gravity’s Rainbow*, for instance, shows off staggering combinatory capability, foregrounding what Donna Haraway has identified as “leaky distinctions.” While the modern age was obsessed with the “specter of the ghost in the machine,” in postmodern culture, Haraway maintains, machines encroach upon the realm of the “spirit” (1990, 193) only to render the latter a mechanism, scheme, artifact, material construction with a cultural history behind it. Even though Pynchon’s characters are not cyborgs like Philip K. Dick’s (“a poor-man Pynchon,” a critic calls him) or Gibson’s, they feature a similar structure. Mechanical components and instruments are built into people’s brains, undermining human “organicity,” the site of the “spiritual,” and along with it the notions of reason, mind, individual autonomy, and agency: “Inside their brains they shared an old, old electro-decor-variable capacitors of glass, kerosene for a dielectric, brass plates and ebonite covers, Zeiss galvanometers with thousands of fine-threaded adjusting screws, Siemens milliammeters set on slate surfaces, terminals designated by Roman numerals, Standard Ohms of magnese wire in oil, the old Gülcher Thermosäule that operated on heating gas, put out 4 volts, nickel and antimony, asbestos funnels on top, mica tubing” (Pynchon 1973, 518). Thus, the novel unearths a frail, heterogeneous structure of the subject, of a fragmented subject colonized and practically displaced by technology, by the fruits of its own “runaway” rationality, as Anthony Giddens would say. While the human body is relegated to the status of “hardware,” *techne*, in the modern, “perverted” sense Heidegger takes aim at, stands for the actual subject, enjoys a “vitality” of its own (Pynchon 1973, 401), unnoticed by the managers and plutocrats who still nourish the illusion of controlling “[le] *technologique*” (401). Ironically, it is an inanimate object like “Byron the bulb” that boasts of having a “soul,” and Pynchon plays here upon the complex meaning of the German *Seele*, the Hegelian counterpart of *Geist*. He underlines a process that postmodernism has been keen to underscore: technology “posthumanizes” the human, uncovers its cultural-intertextual makeup, which, as I note above, has been there since day one. For, to be sure, technology has always been embedded in the structure of the self, inlaid and reproduced in the structure of our bodies. As objects of technology, we take it in, so to speak, we become – already are – it. “We have never

been modern,” Bruno Latour proclaims in the title of one of his books. To paraphrase him, one could say, “We have never been human” – and Slavoj Žižek has said it in *On Belief*, where he urges us that “One should claim that ‘humanity’ as such ALWAYS – ALREADY WAS ‘posthuman’” (44). It appears that we have always been “impure,” material, “constructed,” in brief, bodies, bodies of works (texts, representations, scripts and inscriptions), and bodies at work, through which “we” have been “projecting a world,” to quote Pynchon again. On the other hand, the advent of the posthuman does not “eradicate” the human subject. Nor is the latter killed off by the poststructuralist logic warranting this advent: the *human* subject (and the subject of *humanism*) is instead de-centered, and its formerly “unexamined agency” is “questioned” (Spivak 1999, 323).

#### ***IV. “Body Matters”: Body Politics and the Body Politic***

Transformed by this process, bodies may seem “unnatural,” and the situations postmodern bodies are caught in – in fiction, in actuality, or in the in-between world of cyberspace – may struck some as offbeat. Yet we need to remember that these situations are the bitter fruit of “scientific progress.” Ironically, this progress has not resulted in the humanization of technology but in the technological posthumanization of the human, which has somehow “naturalized” technology, turning it into a bodily drama. The distinction between human bodies and body parts no longer operates once the mechanical, the artificial, the discursive, etc. have been embodied–corporealized–and work as such. They have decentered the self, and this postmodern/posthuman decentering has led to an ethical crisis. As Zygmunt Bauman explains in *Postmodern Ethics*, the technological erosion of the “moral self” (195) defines the age of “pervasive technology,” *our* age. Positing us and the world as “environment” (186) – as “storehouse,” Heidegger wrote–technology heralds the “sovereignty of means over ends” (Bauman 188), of tools over the subjects supposed to operate them. Whether the planet as a whole or the “human self” as an entity (195), former “totalities” break apart because the only totality technology systematically constructs, reproduces and renders invulnerable is the totality of technology itself – technology as a *closed system*, which tolerates no alien bodies inside and zealously devours and assimilates everything that comes within its grazing ground. Technology is the sole genuine in-dividual. Its sovereignty can be only indivisible and exceptionless. Humans, most certainly, are not excepted.

Like anything else, modern humans are technological objects. Like anything else, they have been analysed (split into fragments) and then synthesized in novel ways (as arrangements, or just collections, of fragments). (195)

Unable to cope with fragmentation, the moral subject of humanism is, Bauman maintains, “the most evident and the most prominent among technology’s victims” (198). As far as I am concerned, things are, fortunately, a bit more complicated. Granted, this particular subject and its metaphysics may have been written off. At the same time, new subjectivities–some of them quite posthuman along the lines drawn above–have been coming to the fore in the wake of postmodernism’s “incorporated” culture. The sexual revolution, post-1960 representations of racialized and “queer” bodies, the new interest in bodies as sites of understanding and pleasure,

pain and enjoyment, ability and disability, stigma and beauty, disease and health, then, especially with French feminism, the reinvention of the body as an authorizing place of resistance and anti-patriarchal self-empowerment have impacted politics most forcefully, in fact have given birth to *another* political body, to unforeseen sodalities and alliances. It all started with the issue of representation: with body as representation, with concerns about how certain bodies have been imagined historically, from what perspectives, to whose benefit, and so forth. Then all these “aesthetic” issues, concerns, and claims spilled over into “politics proper,” into how we *wanted* our bodies to be seen, spoken of, referred to, and otherwise treated, either in public or private. Thus, written all over by history and culture, the bodies of postmodernity have reinscribed themselves into the body politic with a vengeance and hold out the promise to rewrite history and culture.

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