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Science/Fiction: Gendering the Posthuman

To hybride 'science' and 'fiction' as 'science/fiction' means not only to blur the boundaries between scientific discourse and literary discourse, but also to scandalously connect scientific truth-claims or ‘facts’ to the devalued popular genre of science fiction and its imagined futures. More specifically, the concept signals my understanding that technoscientific and literary narratives are both material-semiotic technologies of (re)production, insofar as these seemingly discrete discourses and practices co-produce new human bodies and subjectivities as well as interactively constitute objects of knowledge.

Science/fictions are currently offering humanity two different visions of the future that correspond to two different styles of posthumanist production in literature, film, the arts, philosophy, cultural theory and technoscientific writings in the fields of Artificial Intelligence and Artificial Life. One is a popular-posthumanist vision that simply re-dresses the liberal-humanist mind/body split in modern chic, and welcomes the turning of human beings into information patterns without bodies – no-body is perfect. The other is a critical-posthumanist vision that tries to avoid a dualistic approach to human ontology, and emphasises the material instantiations and incorporations of information.

The critical model of posthumanism does not defend discrete individualism, but stresses living bodies’ corporeal interconnectedness to the world and to other actors – whether these other actors are humans, animals or machines. In popular-humanist science/fictions of the future, by contrast, homo sapiens is still a distinct and superior species, and human beings have perfected themselves to the extent that they are finally in perfect rational control over their deficient and decaying bodies.

Feminist scholarship has pointed out that throughout history such ‘body horror’ has corresponded to abjection of the feminine. It has to be said, however, that the horror and concomitant desire to reach control and mastery over bodily processes is not exclusively expressed by male voices. Transhumanist Natasha Vita-More, for example, is the designer of Primo Posthuman, offered by the American artist as a kind of manual – reminiscent of car advertisements – for making humans live forever (or at least very very long), while still looking like super-models. Along with other followers of the neo-philosophy of ‘Extropy’, Vita-More sees the merging of bio-, nano-, and information technologies as part of the progressive advance towards immortality and enhanced creativity.

This prototype future body, the artist explains in an essay, is “founded on scientific probability and inspired by technological prowess”. It is “ageless, has replaceable genes, and gender variegation.” Is this Donna Haraway’s dream of a “post-gender world” in her Cyborg Manifesto come true? Dream on. Instead of inventing a novel human form that transcends traditional inscriptions or prescriptions of classical Greek and Roman renderings of physical perfection, Vita-More draws on “the ideal of ‘man’ and incorporates it in its transhumanist values of improving the human condition.” Combining design and biotechnology, “Primo is engineered like a finely tuned machine and displayed visually like a biological body to mirror the human shape for cognitive association, visual recognition, and aesthetic appeal.” Beneath the figure of Primo on the artist’s website, we learn that the first posthuman is constructed as “a cross between Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier and Valentine.”

Gender variegation? Hardly. The posthuman is all too huMAN. In other words, what I miss here – and with regard to Vita-More’s fashioning and stylising of her own body (through diet, exercise and cosmetic surgery) – is the kind of critical reflection and political art of someone like French multimedia performer Orlan. Orlans ongoing art project The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan – her metamorphosis into a composite of Venus, Diana, Europa, Psyche and Mona Lisa by means of plastic surgery on her face – is a feminist critique of Western, sexist and racist standards of aesthetics and the beauty industry.

The work of both artists shows that ‘body-building’ is the location were technology and the imagination, or fact and fiction, meet. This synthesis, however, can either reproduce old figurations in postmodern disguise or generate new models of the (post)human beyond the disembodied abstractions of popular posthumanism and hegemonial representations of gender, sexuality, race, and other categories of difference.

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