

Posthumanism: An Introduction

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Lecture 13

Lec 13 : Posthuman Bodies: Cyborgs 2 - Gender and Cyborgs

So let's continue with cyborg bodies. You might recall that in the previous module episode, if you want to call it that we looked at the origin of cyborg bodies in various kinds of myths around human-animal hybrids, human-machine hybrids, automatons, and we noted that there are human-machine hybrids and human-animal hybrids now. We also have a transplanted human person whose boundaries of the self have been disturbed because he or she is carrying or has given himself or herself somebody else's organ. And then there are, of course, the creatures shall we say of cloned varieties created out of human original chemical material, who have now been endowed with life in some fashion and are now, quote-unquote, 'creatures.'

Now, whether those are also to be classified as post-human remains to be seen. Today, we move to a more defined subcategory of the post-human body and post-humanism's interest in gender and cyborgs. A lot of this stems from pioneering work by Donna Haraway early in the '80s and '90s and, of course, continuing through the 2000s where Donna Haraway argued that cybernetics might challenge gender inequality by creating a new world and, of course, a new being.

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The cybernetic organism – the cyborg – is a mix of nature and culture, being part human and part machine.

Thus, it is seen as transcending patriarchal conceptualization of essentialized gender differences, gender roles and gender identities.

Since the cyborg blurs/breaks borders, it blurs identities as well, and therefore traditional categories such as mind/matter, body/spirit, male/female are also blurred

'the advent of cybernetics might help in the construction of a world capable of challenging gender disparities'
Donna Haraway

Posthuman Bodies: Cyborgs 2 - Gender and Cyborgs

She proposed that since the cybernetic organism the cyborg is a mixture of nature (which is the flesh-and-blood body we all possess, are born with, and die with or die from), the cybernetic organism is a mixture of nature and culture. It's partially human and partially machine. So that's why it's a mixture of nature and culture. So for Haraway at least in the early days when she was arguing this case it was possible that a cyborg could be seen as transcending patriarchal conceptualizations of nature.

Essentializing, universalizing gender differences, gender roles, and gender identities. The point she makes is, since the cyborg blurs sometimes even breaks down boundaries, it can be taken to mean it blurs identities as well. Which means traditional categories and rules, such as mind, matter, body, spirit, male, female, can also be blurred. Remember, we said this in our discussion of cyborg bodies: that you do not know where to say the human ends and the machine begins. You cannot say that this particular person

The flesh and blood thing is human. If the person, if that human form, if the corporeal body has, say, an interface with a machine, has an artificial implant, or has a cloned version of himself or herself. We don't yet have human clones; it's a stock cipher, but hypothetically speaking, there could be. So, since the cyborg blurs boundaries, it also blurs identities. And traditional categories that have always determined what we understand as the human mind dominant over matter, body dominant over spirit, male dominant over female all these categories have also been blurred.

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The traditional stereotype of

Man=Mind
Woman=Matter

Becomes redundant in the cyborg

Traditional dualisms

self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/ made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man

'High-tech culture challenges these dualisms in intriguing ways. It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what body in machines that resolve into coding practices'

Donna Haraway

Posthuman Bodies: Cyborgs 2 - Gender and Cyborgs

For people like Donna Haraway, this is a very important thing. In the traditional dualisms, There is a self-other binary, and this is followed by a series of binaries. Mind, body. Culture, nature.

Male, female. Maker, made. Truth, illusion. God, man. The traditional stereotype of man being only mind and woman being only matter and remember, this is a very traditional stereotype.

Now, this stereotype of man equals mind and woman equals matter is no longer tenable in a cyborg. Because it's no longer possible to see where the mind ends and matter begins, or whether mind is exclusively mind or mind is itself layered with something else. As in the case of a cybernetic organism, a cyborg, it's difficult to define the limits of either the man or the machine. Either the human flesh and blood or the machine. So, since you don't know where nature ends and culture begins.

Since you don't know where the flesh-and-blood corporeal structure of the body is distinct from and differs from the mechanic or computer that helps the person live. So, we don't know those boundaries. How do we define where the human is or is really located? So, people like Donna Haraway and subsequent critics including but not restricted to Catherine Haynes, Rosie Braidotti, Francesca Ferrando, and others this stereotype of man equals mind and woman equals matter is a redundant one now.

In the day of the cyborg, this division, this distinction no longer applies. High-tech culture defies these dualisms, these very easy dual structures. Because, as Donna Haraway famously said, and I'm quoting here, it is not clear what is mind and what is body in machines that resolve into coding practices. You cannot be sure.

So all the old dualisms have more or less been eroded, in some cases destroyed. Donna Haraway would say, and this is her pioneering essay, cyborgs might consider more seriously the partial, fluid, sometimes ambiguous aspect of sex and sexual embodiment. I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess. Provocative statement, controversial statement, as you can imagine, that I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess. Because a goddess is exclusively feminine.

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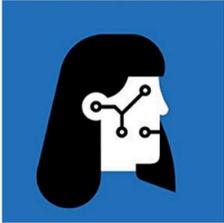


'Cyborgs might consider more seriously the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment...'

The skilful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts'.

I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.

Donna Haraway



13. Posthuman Bodies: Cyborgs 2 - Gender and Cyborgs

The cyborg as a 'dangerous possibility' (Haraway) is a congeries of connected humans, machines, non-human animals and matter, and therefore is an alternative model of the subject as interconnected, dependent, fluid and partial.

Posthuman Bodies: Cyborgs 2 - Gender and Cyborgs



Which means to say that the goddess is rendered a woman, superwoman, divine, but still a woman. But a cyborg is difficult to determine. A cyborg's sexual identity, gender role, human identity are all called into question. It is difficult to draw those boundaries.

The machines as a dangerous possibility that's her phrase are a congeries of connected humans, machines, non-human animals, and matter. Therefore, it's an alternative model of the subject itself. Remember, we have said this: the human is no longer to be deemed independent, autonomous, and bounded. The human is interconnected, mutually dependent, fluid, and partial. Networked?

Yes. Consciousness as an emerging condition? Yes. Mathematized into data? Yes.

Dependent upon technology and technologized? Yes. So, look at all these things and ask yourself: where does the human boundary lie? And if the human boundary is itself uncertain, how do you draw gender boundaries? Do you want to think in terms of cyborgs also as gendered?

And there's a huge debate on this. As to why artificial intelligence is always female, at least in name. Whether it's AI or UC. Critics have pointed out that AI is usually cast as or within a feminine gender. Why and how?

It's a matter of some debate. And that's a different debate altogether. But it's enough for now to keep in mind the fact that the cyborg is a certain possibility. It's a mixture of connected humans, machine-human hybrids, human-non-human mergers, different kinds of matter, and is therefore a completely alternative model of the subject itself. For posthumanism and feminist responses to this cyborg, the cyborg or human body is characterized by openness, ambiguity, and connections.

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In posthumanism and feminist responses to the cyborg, the human body is marked by

- Openness
- Ambiguity
- Connections

To and with other bodies (including nonhuman), technologies and the world.

Bodies are seen as 'trans-corporeal', being linked to other bodies (Alaimo)

Posthuman Bodies: Cyborgs 2 - Gender and Cyborgs

What do you mean by this? It means very simply that humans are open to the world. It's not restricted to or isolated from the world. It's linked. Remember the phrase we have used before: the networked human body.

So the human is networked, open to the world. It's not restricted to the world. It's characterized by ambiguity. Which is man? Which machine?

How much of it is human? How much of it is not? How much of it is machine, and what's left of the human? How much of the human remains? When I say 'what's left of the human,' that's precisely what it means.

To use the example again, if you have a transplanted organ from another organism, are you just you, or are you you plus that organism? Is that organism part of you, and are you part of that organism? For feminists, This kind of side-bearable condition is more pluralistic. More plural.

More multi-layered. Gives more options. We do know that in some sci-fi, the gender roles are called into question. Think of, say, Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Gender switching is a common practice.

It's a different species of being. Which means to say the cyborg has potential. It can be this or it can be that. Then of course there is the fact that the human being is connected with the world via technology. Which means the human being is a networked being.

It's embedded. It's connected. It's not, emphatically not an isolate. This leads critics like Stacey Alaimo to make the point that bodies are transcorporeal. Transcorporeality is an

influential concept enunciated by Stacey Alimo, who notes that we share our bodies with other bodies, which means, and this is her environmental humanist trajectory of thought,

If we are transcorporeal, if we share our corporeality with other creatures, then it follows that if there are toxins in the air, all our bodies will absorb them. Transcorporeality is not just the fact that we share the same animal. Remember the argument made very early on that humans, like other creatures, are animated by a vital force. Right? Now, in that case, we ask: if all life forms have the same vital force, then how do we create a hierarchy of human beings?

How do we create a superior race of life forms that can then dominate others? Now, if you were to extend this argument, as has been done by people working on environmentalist narratives and toxic body memoirs, transcorporeality means that you share your toxic identity. And I don't mean 'toxic' in the cultural sense that we use to label toxic masculinity and toxic work cultures. No. I am speaking very literally of toxins.

So, suppose you have toxins in your body. Where did those come from? The risk involved in contemporary times is that you, because you are part of a larger network of bodies, those bodies which have toxins in them also share the same space with you. Which means to say, there is a transcorporeality that is toxic in nature.

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The significance attached to the cyborg as a hybrid in posthuman thought, however, has come in for criticism for ignoring questions of race and ethnicity.

'When the human body is fractured into organs, fluids and genetic codes, what happens to gender identity? When the body is fractured into functional parts and molecular codes, where is gender located?'
Anne Balsamo

Posthuman Bodies: Cyborgs 2 - Gender and Cyborgs

Combined, brought on the same plane, placed on the continuum because you share not just bodily, corporeal conditions of weakness, but because you are porous, your bodies are porous, you ingest toxins. You ingest various organisms. Which means to say that

other bodies are linked to other bodies. Go back to the earlier point we have made about consciousness as emergent, both embodied

and bodies are in the dead if your body is linked to other bodies if your body is linked to other life forms and those life forms are part of the same ecosystem as you are and have ingested some toxins. Would you not like to think that the same kind of poisoning has happened to you too? Transcorporeality is actually expandable to think in terms of transcorporeal vulnerability itself, that we share vulnerability with other life forms because we can all be destroyed by the same set of toxins. To return to the cyborg, the significance attached, the value given to the cyborg as a hybrid in first human thought has become in the recent past a little bit of a controversy. What is the race of the cyborg?

Do you see, can you find so many cyborgs that are black or brown? Or is the cyborg hegemonically, influentially white? Do cyborgs have a race? Can they be given a racial identity? When you think of those terms, whether race and ethnicity are concepts and ideas to be attached to the sidewalk, then you have a different set of problems.

Then, of course, if you break down the human body into organs, fluids, and genetic codes, remember we spoke about the fact that the human body arises from a code that is also dematerialized into code, right? It comes into code form. It converts the code form into flesh and blood. So it works in both dematerializing and rematerializing modes, right? We already looked at that.

Now, the question that people like Anne Balsamo asked very early is: when the body is fractured into functional parts and molecular curves, where is gender? What happens to gender identity? Right? So, we give... some importance to the cyborg, but we shouldn't also forget that the cyborg is also meant to trigger questions about race, questions about ethnicity, questions about identity because what race is a cyborg?

What community is a race of cyborgs? Take horror films, apocalyptic thrillers, look at techno-science in films; you will discover this problem that people are talking about: what race is a cyborg? Then, moving on, reproductive technologies are also seen as enabling a very different idea of gender and motherhood. The IVF mode

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Reproductive technologies are interpreted by feminists as enabling a different conceptualization of gender roles such as motherhood.

They also redefine what we mean by kinship and family when processes of reproduction are assigned to and shared with machines.

'in its promise of delivering children who are 'just like' other offspring, but through a process of mimicry that is not quite the same as the original process on which it is based. This ambivalence of mimicry lies at the heart of the paradox IVF presents ... as both a confirmation of the norms it relies upon and a disruption to their authority and authenticity

Sarah Franklin

However, feminists are aware of the linkage between such technologies and racialized capitalism that creates conditions of exploitation of women of colour in the form of surrogacy factories, infertility tourism and others.

Posthuman Bodies: Cyborgs 2 - Gender and Cyborgs

alters the idea of not only sexuality and modes of sexual reproduction, but it redefines gender roles such as motherhood. What do we understand by kinship? Kinship has a certain bloodline argument, right? Down the family tree and things like that. But if everything is created in a laboratory, how come genetic materials

through processes of cloning, then where do you pitch the question of identity? Filling from that, where do we pitch the question of family or kinship? If the process of reproduction was shared by or even assigned entirely to machines, where did the human come from? Test tubes. Think of a response to that.

Think of a response to that. When we ask, who or what constitutes your family, you say, well, the lab was where I was born, and my family will be in the lab, and the material is in the lab. You may or may not know the original material from which a clone has been created, from which a particular organ has been created, which is then placed inside you. All of this goes to show that reproductive technologies are crucial because they redefine gender roles. Feminists are aware of the fact that these are potentially dangerous technologies because

You have heard of surrogacy and surrogate rooms. You also know then that in many cases, there is a link between expensive reproductive technologies and capitalism, which often ends up exploiting women of color and women from the global south. In the form of what has been called surrogacy factories. And out of those factories come children, which the Western family will then take on. But are these so-called surrogate women a part of the family?

No. As you know, when you look at a cult text now, perhaps not the novel as much as the TV series or the film, *The Handmaid's Tale*. What is the question of the family that arises

in a text like that? So, all in all, one of the things you see about feminist approaches to post-feminism is that they are interested in the gender of the side dog. But they are also interested in reproductive and other technologies that change, at least nominally, gender roles that challenge gender roles, particularly when it comes to sexuality, mothering, and nature.

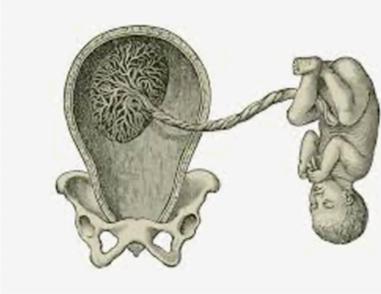
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"While reproductive technologies have the potential to change understandings as well as realities of reproduction and of family and gender constructions, this potential is not inherent in the reproductive procedures themselves. It can only be developed, supported, and continually renegotiated through reconceptualizations of cultural technologies of family and gender that work to challenge both material realities and discursive practices of dominance to allow for new realities of relatedness.

Jenny Bonnevier



Posthuman Bodies: Cyborgs 2 - Gender and Cyborgs



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Posthuman Bodies: Cyborgs 2 - Gender and Cyborgs

So, cyborg bodies, whether gendered or not, become the subject of considerable feminist debate. Thank you.