

The Techno-Cultural *Übermensch*: Hybridity and Disembodied Subjectivity in the Posthuman Age

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Abstract: The image of the Posthuman has commanded considerable critical attention and academic speculation in recent times. The prospects of radically transforming the human species with the interpolation of biotechnological and informatics technologies converge on the vision of the techno-modified, cognitively augmented human, shattering the multicultural perception of humanity as a civilisation structured in terms of race, class and gender. The prevalent techno-cultural discourse of the 21st century finds a vibrant manifestation in the phenomena of Transhumanism and Posthumanism. With the integration of technology into our lives, the self-concept of the humans has undergone a transformation giving rise to the concept of the posthuman – a techno-cultural *Übermensch*. This transformation becomes evident in space explorations, cybernetics, artificial intelligence and the creation of bionic organisms that have become the defining aspects of the techno-scientific age. It presages the erasure of the natural self and materializes at the point where human intelligence is theorized as being co-produced with machine intelligence. The transition of humans as a species is towards a more cognitively enhanced autonomous variant of its current state of being. It envisions a techno-modified cultural space where the traditional parameters of race, class and gender are thoroughly refurbished. Placing the concepts of transhumanism and posthumanism within the larger context of cultural and interdisciplinary studies, this paper investigates the notion of cultural identity, human hybridity and the erasure of embodiment that the new techno-modified cultural scape of the twenty-first century ushers in.

Keywords: *Übermensch*, techno-culture, transhumanism, posthumanism, disembodied subjectivity, hybridity

Technology is a fundamental cultural force redefining human experiences and social interactions in unimaginable ways. The techno-

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scientific advances of the latter half of the twentieth century have drastically transformed the socio-cultural scape. The new technological paradigm of Artificial Intelligence and Augmented Reality has made serious intrusions into our knowledge and experience of reality urging us to rethink our position as a species in terms of the technology at our fingertips. Human beings as a species has always been characterised by biological intelligence. During the course of its evolution as *homo sapiens*, man has successfully created an alternative to biological intelligence namely machine intelligence or artificial intelligence. The twenty first century is witnessing a remarkable integration of these two forms of intelligences so much so that it has forced humanity to reimagine the very concept of being human. Digital technologies have drastically revamped our notions of time, space, body and mind propelling humanity towards the posthuman condition. The image of the Posthuman has commanded considerable critical attention and academic speculation in recent times. The prospects of radically transforming the human species with the interpolation of biotechnological and informatics technologies converge on the vision of the techno-modified, cognitively augmented human shattering the multicultural perception of humanity as a civilisation structured in terms of race, class and gender.

Enhancement or augmentation is an impulse profoundly entrenched in the human psyche and is as ancient as human evolution. Man had always sought ways and means to cure his deficiencies and enhance his physical attributes and mental capabilities. Enlightenment humanism was a celebration of the defining characteristics of the species such as belief in reason, scientific evolution and individualism. The advances in genetics, nanoscience and artificial intelligence have challenged the predominant doctrines pertaining to the human condition, altering our experiences as a human and also our understanding of the very concept of the 'human'. The transition of humans as a species is towards a more cognitively enhanced autonomous variant of its current state of being. Futurologists believe that humans in the near future would simultaneously inhabit the worlds of both the biological and the virtual signalling the end of our traditional concept of the human. The prevalent techno-cultural discourse of the 21st century finds a vibrant manifestation in the phenomena of Transhumanism and Posthumanism. As the dominant philosophies of the techno-cultural age, they share conceptual similarities and indulge in critical engagements with common motifs, ideas and challenges and address

the human condition in the technological age. While Transhumanism vigorously promotes human enhancement or augmentation with the help of technological intervention, Posthumanism deliberates on what it means to be human in the techno-scientific age. Both approaches consider the notion of human co-evolution with technology and in the process initiates a reevaluation of the cultural constructs that had been the defining characteristic of humanity for a major part of its existence in this planet.

Early references to transhumanism can be found in the writings of Julian Huxley where he maintains that human species can transcend itself in its entirety where man would remain man, but transcending himself realising new possibilities of enhancing his basic human nature. In *New Bottles for New Wine*, Huxley (1957, 17) emphatically states:

I believe in 'transhumanism': once there are enough people who can truly say that, the human species will be on the threshold of a new kind of existence, as different from ours as ours is from that of Peking man. It will at last be consciously fulfilling its real destiny.

Huxley nonetheless believed that even after this transition to an exalted state of being, humanity will retain its individualistic character as a species and associated transhumanism with creating a more conducive environment favourable to social and spiritual development. However 'transhumanism' assumed a new dimension after Huxley, especially in the wake of the monumental advances in Nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, and cognitive science (NBIC) technologies in the latter half of the twentieth century when it became the keyword for transgressing the confines of biology by means of technology. A concept initiated in contemporary science fiction and future studies, transhumanism advocates a transformation of the human condition with the help of advanced scientific and technological means for enhancing human physiology and cognition. The most ubiquitous transhumanist thesis is that human beings would transcend the biological constraints of their current frame and transform themselves into beings with abilities so drastically and fundamentally different and so prominently expanded from their current condition that they would eventually merit the label of posthuman beings. Fereidoun M. Esfandiary, popularly known as FM-2030, is credited with introducing the term 'transhuman' in its current sense. In *Are You a Transhuman?*, he addresses the transhumanist schema in greater length and claims:

Even more profound evolutionary changes are now evident. We are striving to deanimalize our species - debiologize intelligence - deplanetize. ... The most urgent problem facing us is not social – economic – political. The most pressing problem facing us *all* everywhere is death. (Esfandiary 1989, 116)

According to Esfandiary, mankind would soon overcome this imperfection with the help of monumental breakthroughs and transform himself into a new species. He uses the term ‘transhuman’ as an abbreviation for ‘transitional human’, the link between the human and the posthuman – the earliest manifestations of a race of new evolutionary beings, on their way to becoming posthumans. In his 1990 essay *Transhumanism: Toward a Futuristic Philosophy*, the British philosopher and futurist Max More terms it as an ideology and a movement that seeks to develop and make available technologies that eliminate ageing and greatly enhance human intellectual, physical and psychological capacities in order to achieve a posthuman future. The World Transhumanist Association founded by Nick Bostrom and David Pearce in 1998 defines transhumanism as an intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the desirability and possibility of fundamentally enhancing the human condition through applied reason and is often considered as a contemporary renewal of the secular aspects of Enlightenment humanism. Transhumanism is marked by a categorical assertion of technological augmentation converging on visions of enhanced post humanity.

Transhumanism considers technology as an integral aid to human progression. Bodily transformations with the help of technology is categorised as the next big stage in the evolution of mankind where humans would transcend the limitations of biological evolution. The increasing prominence of science fiction in popular culture has awakened an extensive interest in the future impact of advanced technologies on the human body and mind. Marvin Minsky’s *The Society of Mind* (1986), Eric Drexler’s *Engines of Creation* (1986), Hans Moravec’s *Mind Children* (1988) and Ray Kurzweil’s *The Age of Intelligent Machines* (1990) are some of the seminal works of the period that engaged in serious reflections on the technological future of humanity, which proved to be a solid source of inspiration for the current generation of futurists and transhumanist philosophers. The neo-Darwinian worldview as promulgated by Richard Dawkins and Stephen Jay Gould upheld that humans should make serious

interventions and participate creatively in the process of biological evolution.

The exponential rate of technological change and the social reception of technology in contemporary culture have led to increased and improved instances of attempts to incorporate technology into our lives. Transhumanism primarily focuses on the emerging and converging technologies like nanotechnology, biotechnology, informatics, cognitive sciences and artificial intelligence. This inadvertently initiates dialogues on hybridity and human augmentation. The late 20th century western academic discourse celebrates the figure of the cyborg – a hybrid of the natural and the artificial, the organic and the inorganic, as the contemporary techno-cultural manifestation of a legacy of boundary or frontier creatures. Popular culture proliferates in frenzied visions of the murky consequences of human-machine hybridity. The identity of the human race has transcended the physical attributes of race, gender, culture and to a certain extent, the species itself. The posthuman age is witnessing the wilful amalgamation of the qualities of humans and other animate and inanimate things, persistently challenging and redefining our understanding of reality. The cultural scape has become progressively technologically textured.

Friedrich Nietzsche, in the Prologue to his 1883 book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* alludes to the *Übermensch* as a free spirit transcending the limitations of human existence, liberated from the constraints of tradition and ideology, and marked by a unique and passionate approach to life guided by reason and intellect. Alexander Tille in his 1896 English translation of the book rendered the *Übermensch* as 'Beyond-Man'. Man's engagement and interaction with technology has led to a reimagining of the concept of the 'human'. Humanity has always sought to extend and enhance its physical and mental competencies beyond its current confines. Biomedical interventions to cure the deficiencies of vision, hearing and mobility have drastically transformed and enhanced the quality of living. Human augmentation is a common term in interdisciplinary research and focuses on interactive digital extensions of human senses and cognitive capabilities. This is primarily achieved by means of non-invasive wearable interactive technologies and surgical interventions or chemical stimulants. The focus is on temporarily or permanently transgressing the limitations of the human frame through natural or artificial means. Wearable Interactive technologies have widened the

scope and nature of human perception and covers innovative advances in disciplines as diverse as electrical, mechanical and genetic engineering to AI. These enhancement procedures might culminate in an alteration of the basic human characteristics and capabilities, bringing about significant changes to the general attributes of the species which lie beyond the current human range. With a technologically enhanced humanity on the move, the traditional cultural constructs would become less and less prominent and societies would be defined along the lines of augmented and non-augmented humans. Human augmentation would enhance human productivity and capabilities and in the process add to the human mind and body, ushering in a new class of beings called the posthumans.

Technological singularity or ‘singularity’ as proposed by John von Neumann in 1950 envisages a near future when technological progress becomes uncontrollable and irrevocable resulting in profound alterations to the human civilization. He claims that AI capable of self-improvement cycles would surpass the limits of human intelligence. The famous science fiction writer Vernor Vinge in his 1993 book *The Coming Technological Singularity* states that within thirty years humans would develop the technological means to create superhuman intelligence shortly after which the human era will be ended. The dawning of this new era where human intelligence would become increasingly non-biological and trillions of times powerful than its present state is emphatically proclaimed by Ray Kurzweil in his book, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. Kurzweil (2006, 7) maintains that the impending singularity would transform “every institution and every aspect of human life, from sexuality to spirituality” and “alter our perspective on the significance of our past and the ramifications for our future”. He also claims that in due course human parts will be replaced by mechanical parts and mankind would successfully upload their entire minds to computers and become digitally immortal. Posthumans will inhabit a cultural space where there would be a seamless assimilation of the corporeal and the virtual world:

The Singularity will represent the culmination of the merger of our biological thinking and existence with our technology, resulting in a world that is still human but that transcends our biological roots. There will be no distinction, post-Singularity, between human and machine or between physical and virtual reality. (Kurzweil 2006, 9)

Posthumanism is a distinct take on the telos of the culturally morphed and enhanced human. The term 'posthuman' is variously used to denote a class of advanced humanity – cognitively, neurologically and psychologically. The posthuman lives simultaneously in the world of the virtual and the biological as the existing virtual reality technologies explore the nature of the boundary between the real world and simulated space. Posthumanism is characterised by an unambiguous emphasis on emerging technologies. NBIC technologies coupled with advances in genetics, robotics and artificial life are presaged as the grounds for the advent of a new form of techno-cultural *Übermensch* who would ultimately transcend the 'human', merging biological intelligence with machine or nonbiological intelligence in ways that would redefine the conventional notions regarding human consciousness and existence. These posthumans would acquire such mastery over nature that they would be able to amend the most fundamental conditions of existence like birth and death and also transcend the confines of space and time. As a philosophy embedded in and fashioned by the techno-cultural scape of the new millennium, posthumanism envisages an enhancement of the human body through genetic manipulation, cloning, implants and organ transplants. It explores the boundaries of being human and projects a state of humanity where man and machine would become increasingly entwined in a cognitively enhanced evolution, heralding the next stage in the evolution of the human species.

The postmodern theorist and philosopher Ihab Hassan offers a comprehensive definition of the term 'posthumanism' in his essay *Prometheus as Performer: Towards a Posthumanist Culture?* based on a presentation delivered for a symposium on postmodern performance in 1976, where he talks about this dubious neologism:

We need first to understand that the human form – including human desire and all its external representations – may be changing radically, and thus must be revisioned. We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism. (Hassan 1977, 843)

The integration of technology into human lives has revamped man's concept of the Self. This amendment becomes apparent in some of the defining aspects of the techno-scientific age such as space explorations, cybernetics, artificial intelligence and bionic organisms.

As Hassan (1977, 845) points out, posthumanism does not mean “the literal end of man but the end of a particular image of us”.

Posthumanism disrupts some of the foundational conventions of western culture and seeks to re-examine the human subject in relation to his entities by undermining the traditional distinctions between the human, the animal and the technological. This new discourse not only focuses on man’s changed relation with his self but also warrants a reimagining of the society in the posthuman context. The human body in the posthuman age is a cultural construct created and fashioned by the major technologies of the age. The posthuman subject is a creature of social reality whose individual and collective identity is closely and inextricably linked to the techno-cultural manifestations characteristic of the current epoch. As Kurzweil (2006, 9) maintains, “our technology will match and then vastly exceed the refinement and suppleness of what we regard as the best of human traits”.

Human augmentation invariably raises questions of hybridity and the erasure of embodiment. Interpolation of technology into the human body has led to the evolution of a whole class of hybrid beings whose interactions with the physical world have fashioned the dominant discourses of the time. The distrust and fear associated with new technologies led to an undermining of technology as an alienating and isolating influence on humanity. In course of time, however, the technological artefacts mirrored our aspirations, moulded our experiences and defined our existence. Technology is understood and evaluated in terms of the relationship human beings share with the artefacts. In his paper “Technology as Cultural Instrument”, Don Ihde (1993, 32-42) argues that technology is an essential expression of socio-historically situated human nature. It is basically cultural articulation of man and not an external adjunct. According to Albert Borgmann (2012), the crucial trait of technology thought of as the form of our culture is the detachment of things and practices from contexts of engagements with a time, a place, and a community. By the culture of technology, Borgmann means the ensemble of technological structures and devices and the effects that this ensemble has had on the quality of human life. These techno-cultural artefacts embody the culture from which they are derived and subsequently transcend the cultural barriers.

The posthuman technological world offers cultural visions that have the potential to transform and enhance our knowledge and experience

of reality. This perception of our changed reality brings about a transformation of the conception of the self:

Materiality of technological culture does not negate its cultural or human underpinnings. Therefore, wherever some form of technology, agricultural or metallurgical, is transferred by way of import or export, it carries with it a whole set of human relationships. It does not move in isolation and through social vacuum. ...Technology moves inseparably with people who experience and use it. It is environed by a gestalt-type cultural milieu. So transfer of technology is to be understood as a sort of intercultural encounter and gradual accommodation, not confrontation. (Chattopadhyaya et al. 1992, 351–352)

The myriad ways in which technology affects human life and mediates man's interaction with his social environment has increased man's awareness about himself and his immediate environment. Verbeek (2011) points out that in our technological culture, scientific knowledge is not the sole property of scientists, but is increasingly forming the context against which humans understand themselves and the world around them. This encounter with technology ushers in a complex paradigm shift initiating novel cultural interfaces and engagements. "Artifacts mediate ways of existence (subjectivities) and experienced realities (objectivities) not because people told them to do so, but because of the relation between humans and the world that comes about through them" (Verbeek 2005, 140).

In his famous work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan depicts technologies as extensions of humanity - an augmentation or amplification of existing human faculties of action, perception and cognition. McLuhan classifies extensions into two broad categories - extensions of the body and extensions of the cognitive functions:

During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man - the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media. (McLuhan 1966, 19)

Technological posthumanism actively promotes human augmentation and this techno-augmentation is seen as the starting point for the evolution of a stronger, healthier and fitter humanity. Digitalization and virtual reality have transmuted and convoluted the contours of the psyche and the physique. Technology is no longer perceived as an extension of the enlightened rational mind, separate from the body. Technology has transformed itself into a powerful media that merges form and subjectivity. This paradigm shift in our perception of the techno-modified human entity, interacting enthusiastically with the virtual and material aspects of the reality, re-embodies our conception of the 'human'. Postmodern cybernetics envisages the human as a disembodied subject. As Katherine Hayles (1999) suggests, humans have become information patterns erased from flesh. The body itself will become obsolete and in the near future might become pure, disembodied subjectivity.

The posthuman condition addresses the enigma of human embodiment and attempts to comprehend the very essence of our existence in this new techno-scientific culture. Descartes famously deduced *Dubito ergo cogito, cogito ergo sum* (I doubt therefore I think, I think therefore I am); to doubt is to think and therefore the very process of thinking requires existence. Descartes assumed that personhood or subjectivity is entirely distinct from the body and that there are two specific components to our existence – the mind and the body (the Cartesian Mind/Body split). And the word 'embodiment' reflects this logic of duality – the mind/soul or personhood is something that is embodied or contained in the body or the natural part. This natural extension of the self, the body, embodies the site of intellectual intention, the mind. The erasure of embodiment is common to enlightenment humanism and posthumanism. The humanist notion presumes that man is more than the sum of his body parts and the unique essence that marks your individuality lies beyond the material realm. This transient quality, variously termed as the identity or the self is shared with all other human beings and becomes the defining characteristic of the species. Katherine Hayles (1999) understands 'human' and 'posthuman' as constructions that emerge from historically specific understandings of embodiment, technology and culture, and each of these views engenders inimitable prototypes of human subjectivity. The 'human' aligns itself more with the liberal humanist notions of the enlightenment era with its emphasis on individuality, reason, scientific progress, freedom and a celebration of

the natural self. Cybernetic posthumanism, on the other hand, perceives the body as merely a receptacle for information and code. It presages the erasure of the natural self and materializes at the point where human intelligence is theorized as being co-produced with machine intelligence. The Posthuman thus emerges as a deconstruction of the liberal humanist notion of the ‘human’.

Technological posthumanism presupposes the advent of a new cultural identity that explores novel modes of experiences and expressions for the human race. It envisions a techno-modified cultural space where the traditional parameters of race, class and gender are thoroughly refurbished. “Culture is identity, because it is culture that ultimately enables human beings to exist and carry the meanings that allow them to exist and carry the meanings that allow them to know who and what they are”, argues Satinder P. Gill (1999, 221–222). The collective cultural identity and history of the race will be challenged, determined and defined in terms of its technological capabilities. Human beings would accomplish such mastery over their environment that they would alter the parameters of their individual and collective existence. This new techno-cultural identity would transcend the barriers of race, caste, class and gender, altering man’s perception of the Self and the world around him. Firmly positioned in a techno-modified posthuman landscape and in conspicuous relation to all the non-human species and entities inhabiting the cultural space, the posthuman subject envisages a rethinking of human subjectivity and the traditional parameters of collective and individual cultural identity. The autonomous, intelligent disembodied modern subject, amalgamating the biological and the nonbiological, inhabiting the posthuman future is thus hailed as a new cultural entity - as the enhanced and perfected successor of the human being.

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