Title: Recalibrating the ‘Human’

David-Jack Fletcher
Media Music Communication and Cultural Studies, Macquarie University
david-jack.fletcher@mq.edu.au

Abstract

As technology continues to progress beyond the limits of what was once thought impossible, questions concerning the state of the human dominate Western thought. However, while the lines between 'human' and 'nonhuman' are perpetually disintegrating, the human seems reluctant to move beyond humanist paradigms that deploy notions of ‘essence’ as both a unique human quality, and the justification of immobilising the value of nonhuman species in a dichotomous hierarchical structure. How can the human reconcile their position at the top of any hierarchy when the species-boundaries are blurred in the wake of posthuman technologies that seek to enhance and alter the mythos of the pure human form? This article argues that a recalibration of contemporary conceptions of the human is required in order to account for posthuman technologies. Deploying the notion of the contemporary human as cyborgic in nature, this article examines the role played by technologies of body modification in the disruption to hegemonic narratives of the human, specifically regarding disability, gender, sexuality and subjectivity.

Article

The term ‘human’ has been constantly defined and questioned, examined and re-examined by philosophers and scholars since Socrates and Plato established early critical thinking. Despite this, there has nonetheless never been an accurate definition – or explanation – of what it is, exactly, to be human. Of course, there have been significant attempts - notably Martin Heidegger, who examined the human in relation to what it was/is not, and relentlessly pursued the notion that the human exists atop a hierarchy of life as a result of the human’s possession of ‘essence’. Heidegger examines the concept of essence mostly in relation the human, and also technology. This in itself problematises the uniqueness of the human based on essence. Heidegger’s preoccupation regarding essence is tracing the roots of the word. According to the translation of Martin Heidegger’s The Question Concerning Technology by William Lovitt, “[e]ssence’ is the traditional translation of the German noun Wesen” (1977:3, emphasis in original). In the same essay, Heidegger seeks to reveal Wesen as a verb, “with its meaning ‘to dwell’, provides one integral component in the meaning of the verb sein (to be)” (1977: 4, emphasis in original). Ultimately, his definition of essence equates to the German word Dasein; as just established, sein means ‘to be’ and Da in German translates into ‘there’. “The title Dasein taken literally, therefore, means to be there, there being” (Fuller 1990: 51,
emphasis in original). Dasein, then is the required site in which a being can disclose itself.

In this article, I will use the word 'essence', and it is in the sense that Heidegger defines it that it is to be understood. Heidegger’s account of essence posits this as a unique aspect of the human that separates Homo sapiens from nonhuman species. Others have since described essence as rationality, and others again as consciousness. These descriptions are highly problematic, holding the implication that nonhuman species are in fact purely driven by instinct whereby the human is not. It is Heidegger’s notion of essence that positions the human at the top of his hierarchy of life. Perhaps the purest account of this hierarchy can be seen in Heidegger’s three theses of world, which state that “[1.] the stone (material object) is worldless; [2.] the animal is poor in world; [3.] man is world-forming” (Calarco and Atterton 2004: 17, emphasis in original). While Heidegger here references animals, his hierarchy can be appropriated to nonhuman species in general, which will be the focus of this article. Hence, this hierarchy of world is illustrative of a larger discourse that seeks to elevate the human above nonhuman species. However, in a society which is perpetually being shaped by – and in turn, shaping – what I will refer to as 'cyborg technologies', wherein boundaries between human and nonhuman species become ever-increasingly blurred, the question should be asked - how does the human reconcile their position at the top of a hierarchy that may or may not exist anymore, if it ever truly did?

Claudia Springer suggests, “[w]hen the boundaries between human and artificial collapse, all of the other dualities also dissolve, and their two parts become indistinguishable, displacing humans from the unique and privileged position” (1996:34) that Heidegger and others placed them on so eagerly. With this in mind, this article then seeks to consider the survival of the human in a posthuman context, and the reluctance to move beyond historical notions of the human due to a technophobic fear that progression infers the loss of our 'essence', and the eventual acknowledgement that “[w]e are not special” (Brooks 2002: 174). Furthermore this article will examine these notions in specific relation to the cyborg and its potential to disrupt hegemonic narratives of the human regarding disability, gender and sexuality via cyborgic technologies of body modification. I acknowledge that the implications stretch further than what is outlined here, however issues such as race and class, which are easily attributable to the same effects of cyborg technologies, will not be explored in this article. These issues are too large to be examined in this article, which focuses specifically on notions of gender, sexuality, and disability. Ultimately, this article aims to deteriorate notions of hierarchies of life between human/nonhuman and human/human binaries by suggesting that the definitions of both ‘human’ and ‘essence’ need a slight recalibration in a posthuman age, because “[a]s the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end” (Foucault 1970: 3887).
The term 'cyborg' results from the conjoined terms ‘cybernetic organism’. The word 'cyber' stems “from the Greek kubernetes: the steersman of a ship” (Young 2006: 21, emphasis in original), or to steer. Joining organisms to the notion of cyber can lead us directly to cyborg, which then implies a certain level of control of the cyborg steering. It is this notion of the cyborg that has been explored throughout various (science) fictional discourses since the early 1960s, most notably when Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline coined the term in their 1960 article Cyborgs and Space. Despite the exploration of cyborgs throughout popular culture, these creatures also exist outside the realms of fiction, inhabiting a liminal, ‘in-between’ space – “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 1985: 149). In the traditional sense of science-fictional discourse, cyborgs are part human, part machine, and hence are generally excluded as ‘not human’ on the basis that they lack qualities of essence such as rationality and consciousness. However, this article examines the cyborg in the sense that Haraway describes; a creature of social reality that perhaps is not composed of wires, per se, yet exists as a human-machine hybrid nonetheless. In this sense, the cyborg, “melt[s] binaries, crosses genders, slips into other species and genres, [and] samples multiple sexualities” (Loza 2001: 350-51). Therefore the notion of the cyborg is rife with the potential to deteriorate social notions of the human through the disruption they present to qualities such as gender and sexuality, and the corporeality of the cyborg's inhabited body.

It may be the cyborg's potential for control that has led to technophobic views of posthumanism, for if the cyborg has the capacity to control itself, then it isn’t much of a stretch of the imagination to recognise its potential to control the human. Technophobic views of posthumanism posit notions of control as a pre-cursor to destruction – not only of the human, but also of essence. However, few seem to realise that the cyborg is already among us, already is ‘us’. The reluctance to acknowledge the presence of the cyborg can be traced back to the fear of a loss of essence; by positioning essence as uniquely human, this automatically rejects the possibility of cyborgs existing with a sense of agency, and positions the cyborg as clearly Other - and ultimately, inferior to the human. Not only does Heidegger’s theory of essence prevent the cyborg ever being considered more than spare parts, it also enforces a hierarchy of life, at the top of which remains the human, as outlined by his theses of world.

As stated above, the cyborg has emerged in a Western context as a result of cyborg technologies that progress the human towards a posthuman mode of existence. Posthumanism is a notion that has been examined as a potential form of the future human if we are to continue to traverse the technological path. It may seem logical, then, to introduce the cyborg as a posthuman species. N. Katherine Hayles, however, suggests that the cyborg is already within the human, stating that posthumanism “configures [the] human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines” (1999:2). For Hayles, the differences between human and nonhuman are increasingly blurred, and notions of posthumanism seem to force Homo sapiens to
reconsider what a traditional/historical/pure human being actually is; from this perspective, though, it becomes clear as to why some people are reluctant to receive this upgrade. Once again, it is the fear of losing our essence, this essential aspect that positions the human as a species at the top of a hierarchy of life that poses the greatest threat in posthuman discourse. Many fail to see, though, that “[t]he posthuman does not mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human” (Hayles, 1999: 286), at the other end of which lies the figure of the cyborg. If the cyborg is positioned as simply a new form of human, it is possible to view the human as simultaneously being upgraded and maintaining its essence – if we agree that such a thing exists to begin with. The mythical essence, while acquiring an updated account of itself, should remain unharmed.

Despite mass reluctance to upgrade the human to posthuman, the invention of cyborg technologies have already seen a paradigm shift in the way the human views itself as a species. Perhaps this shift has been so subtle as to be primarily unrecognised, however these technologies have had a significant impact upon several aspects of the human – notions of gender and sexuality, the 'acceptable' human body, the human relationship with nonhuman species, and the decay of long-standing hierarchies of life between human/nonhuman and human/human binaries. Perhaps then, the term ‘human’ is in need of a recalibration in order to take into account the presence of the cyborg within not only society, but also within us as a species. Homo sapiens are always changing, so can we accurately define the human, or can it only ever be defined in specific cultural, social, and historical contexts? If we answer in the affirmative to this question, then it becomes possible to more easily accept the need to recalibrate how we are defining ourselves. If we also consider that the human is constantly being re-shaped and altered paradigmatically, then we can assume that human essence, too, is constantly undergoing similar changes. Hence, acknowledging the human as an existing cyborgic figure within a posthuman context should not automatically mean the erasure of essence, but simply a recalibration of what this essence is, and what it means for the human and for the construction of its subjectivity. Notions of cyborg subjectivity have been consistently questioned and ultimately deemed as mythic and/or fictional beings by mainstream Western society, however if credence is paid to notions as equally challenging as that of essence, then perhaps cyborg subjectivity deserves equal examination.

Subjectivity has been presented as something uniquely human, and implies a level of agency that nonhuman species are generally denied. To consider cyborgs as possessing subjectivity, then, could potentially be seen as just as dangerous as offering them the right to share our unique essence. Once again, this perception is consistent with the view that cyborgs are ‘not us’. If the human has indeed become a form of cyborg, a question then emerges - what of our human subjectivity? How is the updated human constructed in the wake of cyborg technologies, in relation to gender and sexuality, and how do human bodies become de/naturalised with the addition of these technologies? These questions alone depict the challenges that cyborgs hold for
hegemonic notions not only of the human, but also of human subjectivity. Cyborg subjectivity can be discussed in terms of body modifications, such as tattooing, piercings, and the recent extreme body art movement known as scarification. These technologies, while seemingly simple in design – for an obvious lack of wires, integrated circuits, and an operating system – can produce in the subject a sense of empowerment through the making of their body as art. Body modifications like these are perhaps the most obvious form of posthumanism, and perhaps also the most invisibilised because of their ‘digital lack’, which simply refers to the absence of a digital interface.

Tattoos and piercings have long been seen as a form of rebellion, often met with repulsion and distaste. Deployments of such body modification technologies, however, often “engage symbols embedded in historic systems of representation” (Pitts 2000: 444), particularly for those considered Other, or part of a social minority group such as homosexual or transgender. For body modifiers, the body is seen as a “plastic space onto which a sense of self is projected” (Sweetman 1999: 15), which holds obvious implications for the construction of subjectivity through modification of the body. Certain types of body modification can be quite extreme, as in the case of the performance artist Stelarc, who makes use of medical equipment, prosthetics, and robotics to amplify his body both visually and acoustically. Stelarc’s primary goal within his art is to experiment with augmentation of the body in a posthuman paradigm that suggests the body is “the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate” (Hayles 1999: 2).

Stelarc is an interesting example to view when considering notions of the cyborg because of the impermanence of his art. His performances embody Hayles’ notion of the body as a prosthetic site of manipulation. One should give particular consideration to the prosthetic ear that he is arguably most famous for - this permanent body modification has re-shaped his body, and when the prosthetic ear is complete, it will be functional in that the ear will act as a transmitter, so anybody will be able to log on to Stelarc’s website and listen to whatever the transmitter is hearing. This sort of modification holds significant implications for the body, but also for Stelarc’s sense of self; even before his prosthetic ear is complete, he has become a literal cyborg as described by popular culture – a human/machine hybrid. His own acknowledgement of his modifications as an attempt to augment the body and push it to its corporeal limits can be viewed as illustrative of the effects these technologies have upon his subjectivity. By examining both Stelarc’s work the body piercing movement, “we can see how our very subjectivities can be constructed in large part by the choices we make about our own cyborgization” (Gray 2002: 190). If these technologies influence notions of the body, of gender, and of sexuality, the discourses surrounding tattoos and other systems of body modification may then demand a recalibration of what it means to be human.
Notions of the human body become quite important when we consider the cyborg, particularly concepts of the physically disabled. Prosthetic limbs are an obvious form of cyborgisation; however, like body modifications, this form may too become invisibilised as Other. When considering the human body, 'abled' vs. 'disabled' is an unfortunate binary that does not seem to disappear. The advent of technologies aiming to aid disabled individuals, while providing more ‘abledness’, does little else than to further cement notions of ‘acceptable’ bodies and reinforces hegemonic discourses surrounding corporeality. Prosthetic limbs have several purposes, but they serve a dual function in posthumanist theory – they at once deny disabled individuals a particular alternative mode of existence as well as providing another. These technologies provide the implication that disabled individuals are in need of a new body, or at the very least, a new body *part*. An unfortunate aspect of “being disabled is that it] usually means struggling for freedoms that people without disabilities take for granted: fighting for a modicum of respect in a society that teaches that illness and loss of bodily control and abhorrent” (Bitch Publications 2003: 48), which reinforces the notion that these individuals must conform to homogenised concepts of acceptable bodies in order to be considered human. However, once the body is manipulated in this manner, it becomes cyborgic in nature in the traditional human-machine hybrid sense.

In this way, the newly ‘acceptable’ body has merely shifted from one form of Other to another, as cyborgs are still generally perceived as in/non-human. As stated earlier, the human is often defined by what it excludes, and despite the immersion of these cyborgic figures into everyday life, a substantial amount of humans still try to exclude both disabled and cyborgic individuals from current definitions of human. According to Robert Pepperrell, “human mental faculties like consciousness and creativity rely to a huge extent for their development on the stimulation received from the environment” (2009:131). In his book *The Posthuman Condition: Consciousness Beyond the Brain* (2009), Pepperrell describes disabled individuals as being incapable of experiencing a full range of emotions, hence disenfranchising them, and labelling them as nonhuman. Labelling these figures as nonhuman seems to somehow reinforce our own position on top of that same hierarchy of life that Heidegger wrote about some years ago.

Nina Lykke configures a “characteristic of the great modern divide between human and nonhuman is that its construction is accompanied by a strong hostility to monsters and hybrids in their capacity as boundary figures which adhere to neither the human nor the nonhuman sphere” (1999:76). The fear of acknowledging the cyborgs liminal existence as both human *and* nonhuman can stem from the notion of essence as a unique aspect of the human. Sharing this mythic substance would indeed be highly problematic for the human - at least, that is the technophobic perspective. However, perhaps the real risk of accepting cyborgic figures as human is that we may then have to accept them as *better* than human; in which case, where does that leave us?
The 'acceptable body' is a concept that cyborgs disrupt quite easily simply because of their existence as a hybrid body, challenging hegemonic bodies and, consequently, ideological frameworks regarding both gender and sexuality. Some may consider gender as something exempt from the effects of technology based on the assumption that gender is “a way of analysing the social side of human activity and technology [is] a component of the physical world around us” (Lerman et al 2003: 2). However, Lerman posits technology as existing in a negotiable relationship with gender; “each shapes the other” (Lerman et al 2003: 2). Historically, gender has been negotiated as a natural assumption based upon an individual’s sex, but it is common thought now “that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed” (Butler 1990: 8). If this notion is accurate, then conceiving of gender as not natural, but rather as a form of technology inscribed upon the body, seems like much less of a leap. Upon examining the roots of the term 'technology' - which stems from the Greek word 'Technikon' - Heidegger notes that “Technikon […] belongs to technē. […] [which] is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. Technē belongs to bringing-forth” (1977:13, emphasis in original). If gender is viewed as a way of bringing forth ones identity, then in this sense, gender can be considered a technology; also in the sense that gender can account for the activities of the craftsman, or subject.

It may be easier to conceive gender as being in constant negotiation with technologies in a more literal sense, than considering it a technology on its own. Furthermore, identifying gender as a technology able to be constructed again reduces the notion of gender as naturally occurring, based on sex, to little more than a fallacy. As with gender, cyborg technologies, too, have been constructed – discursively, culturally, contextually, socially, and historically – and placed upon, and within, the body, which blurs the lines between gender and technology, and solidifies Lerman’s position that gender and technology shape each other in a relationship based upon negotiation. This negotiation is described, in the context in which Lerman writes, as relevant only to human gender; despite gender being ascribed to both human and nonhuman species, this integration with technology is generally seen as unique to the human.

It is possible, however, to argue that the gender of nonhuman species, too, is influenced by the integration of technologies, particularly the gender/s of cyborgic figures. The human configures static associations between female/femininity and male/masculinity, which can be highly problematic. These strict categories inevitably erode the diversity that exists within gender, just as containing gender to the hegemonic binaries of male/female has initiated highly structured gender roles. As Johnson and Repta note, “[B]y virtue of living in a social world, individuals learn the appropriate or expected behavior for their gender. […] Individuals inevitably internalize conventional and stereotypic gender roles” (2011: 23). The performance of these gender roles inextricably leaves specific gender identities – such as hermaphrodites, pseudo-hermaphrodites, third gendered individuals, intersex, androgynous, and transsexual –unrecognised by society at large, or at the very least
invisibilised. These examples do not fit nicely within hegemonic discourses surrounding male/female dichotomies and so become sites of confusion, discomfort, and neglect. Some of these gender identities would not be possible in the context for which we identify them without the advent of certain cyborg technologies. For example, intersex individuals are those awaiting gender re-assignment surgeries and hence are no longer able to subscribe to the label of either male/female. Intersex is an interesting example to view, though, as despite its own liminality, the intention of intersex individuals is to be able to fit within that dichotomy, but on the opposite side to where they once may have been situated.

The notion of opposites is highly problematic when considering gender and gender identities - as outlined above, gender does not exist as a stable dichotomy of male/female, but as a broad spectrum of expression. Cyborgs stir the gender pot even further by solidifying the notion that these genders can, and do, exist. Ascribing gender to cyborgs can be problematic, though, despite both gender and cyborgs existing as cultural constructions. It is problematic in the sense that cyborgs do operate as liminal creatures and boundary figures, so nestling them within male/female dichotomies seems almost redundant. Haraway argues that “The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality” (1985:150), and so should not be expected to conform to dichotomous models of gender and/or sexuality. In exploring gender and gender identities in this way, the disruption shown by cyborgic figures becomes highly evident, problematising notions of stable genders and visibilising a broader range of gender expressions that have existed for some time.

These challenges to gender have altered the way in which the human perceives gender, and by virtue, gender identities. Where once, “irrespective of their particular chosen gender, [individuals would] develop their sense of gender in the face of strong messaging about the correct gender role for their perceived body” (Johnson and Repta 2011: 23), recent Western society has shown an increase in the deterioration of historical notions of masculinity, and with it, notions of femininity. It is in part because of these disruptions to perceptions of gender and the impact this has had upon the human that we as a species may need to recalibrate how we define ourselves. Some forms of gender may not have been possible without the invention of certain cyborg technologies – for example, intersex, as written above – therefore it becomes important to question certain aspects of the human and the nonhuman, particularly in relation to cyborgic figures who refuse to squeeze into limiting hegemonic frameworks regarding historical notions of gender, and also, of the human.

The challenge to gender as represented by the presence of cyborgic figures within Western society can also lead to interruptions in hegemonic discourse surrounding sexuality among humans. As is the case with gender and subjectivity, “sexuality, [too] is a complicated and remarkably intransigent subject of inquiry, one whose material consequences can be ignored only at the peril of both individuals and cultures”
Given the complexity of sexuality, it seems rather naïve to ascribe it only to humans. However, this privilege stems from the notion that while nonhuman species experience sexual relationships, there have been debates as to whether these species understand these relationships as sexual attraction and/or desire; hence sexuality is mostly defined in terms of human-human interaction, and placed into binaries of hetero- and homo- sexuality. These binaries once more become problematic when we consider such sexualities as bi-sexuality and a-sexuality within humans. Interpreting gender in multiple ways, rather than a strict binary, interrupts notions of sexuality as static and reproduces sexuality as something fluid and in perpetual change. In ascribing technology to sexuality – that is, contextualising it in a posthuman paradigm – we can infer that sexuality can be interrupted by cyborgs and cyborg technologies.

The potential for disruption lies in the ambiguous nature of the cyborg, the liminality of the Beings as “boundary creatures, not only human/machine, but creatures of cultural interstice as well” (Stone 1996: 178). Historically, there has only been one form of ‘acceptable’ sexuality - that of heterosexuality - and while this has been contested in Western society for at least three decades, homosexuality and other forms of sexualities have long been considered amoral. Heterosexuality has often been presented as compulsory by “representing it as natural, as a fait accompli” (Sullivan 2003: 200, emphasis in original), and comes with specific roles for each participant; that is, “the equation of the female body with passivity, receptivity, penetrability, and the male body with activity, directness, determination, impenetrability, and so on” (Sullivan 2003: 128). Female cyborgs, then, present a threat to notions of sexuality, as they are a fusion between the masculine sphere of science and the feminine sphere of nature, which are generally seen as “two incompatible spheres that seem to exclude one another on account of their dissimilar natures” (Du Preez 2009: 35).

Of course, this is contextual and historical; Western society no longer accounts for science as a male-dominated field of inquiry, nor nature as a site of femininity. Du Preez notes that these spheres are incompatible in the sense that technology in general has been historically seen as opposing nature. Once again, the human has created and enforced a dangerous binary that separates male and female even further – that is, men are on the side of science, and women are on the side of nature, therefore the female has no place within technological frameworks. Constructing the cyborg as female, however, creates as a “terrifying cultural icon” (Halberstam 1991: 454) in the sense that “a female cyborg would be artificial in both mind and flesh, as much woman as machine, as close to science as to nature” (Halberstam 1991: 454). Existing as close to nature as to science, the female cyborg, therefore, exists as close to masculinity as to femininity, which produces certain fears about the stability of sexuality; that is, the female cyborg presents the opportunity to destabilise fixed notions of dichotomous categories of sexuality.
By placing these liminal creatures within a Western dichotomous logic of gender and sexuality, this model of representation reinforces the notion that the human is not yet ready to leave humanism behind for a posthumanist future. The human as a species still fears that an acknowledgement of their own cyborgization will result in the loss of the yet-to-be-discovered mythical essence, a fear which lies in the “deep-seated desire to be special. To be more than mere” (Brooks 2002: 174). Refusing to acknowledge that the cyborg is here already – and exists within us – reaffirms the fallacy that the cyborg will never be human and redeems the humans’ position at the top of a hierarchy of life.

Grouping those considered Other – based on perceived disability and/or queerness, among other things – alongside the cyborg into the category of ‘nonhuman’ creates clear problems, particularly regarding the perpetuation of hierarchical structures of life. The disruption to hegemony that the cyborg and other nonhuman species present, can lead to the eradication of these hierarchies, and potentially, to a utopic world as envisioned as both Hayles and Haraway. In order to achieve this potential utopic society, however, the definition of the human does indeed need to be recalibrated. Whether we are ready to acknowledge our own posthumanism or not, it cannot be denied that the human has been changed and altered by our relationship with technology, and vice versa. It is because of this relationship that we must consider ourselves posthuman, or at the very least, on the way to becoming post-.

Considering oneself posthuman should not automatically infer the eradication of essence or any other myth the human holds close to their biological beating hearts, but perhaps a recalibration of what this essence is, how it is interpreted – and indeed how this affects the definition of the human. Perhaps, one day, we will be holding those new meanings close to our mechanical hearts. However, one must wonder, if the only way the human can consider moving toward posthumanity is to recalibrate human essence and take it with us, will we ever be truly posthuman?

Reference List


Clynes, M., & Kline, N., September 1960, ‘Cyborgs and Space’, *Astronautics*. 26-27 and 74-76.


