Cyborg Consciousness- a Visual Culture Approach to the Technologised Body

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13799/eacr/vol7/E-07

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Cyborg Consciousness: A Visual Culture Approach to the Technologised Body

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ABSTRACT

THE CYBORG—an imaginative body that unites elements of the organic and the technical—offers a powerful prism for understanding humanness in a postmodern, technological world. By exploring how expressions of the future body are imagined and coded in marketing communications, this research uncovers the social codes that are produced therein. Using a visual culture approach, twenty-one tropes are identified through which the technological body is coded. Three of these—liminality, embodiment, and the technological gaze—are examined in greater depth in the research, drawing on primary and intertextual visual advertising material. This paper shows how technology produces liminal zones around the body.

INTRODUCTION

It might be the height of technological folly to consider the body obsolete in form and function: yet it might be the highest of human realisations. For it is only when the body becomes aware of its present position that it can map its post-evolutionary strategies... THE BODY IS OBSOLETE. We are at the end of philosophy and human physiology. [...] Evolution ends when technology invades the body. (Stelarc 1998:560)

Technology is often perceived as an abstract ‘nothing’- it has a tendency to dissolve into the cultural background (Rutsky 1999). Consumer behaviour and marketing research often regard technology as an invisible, neutral ether that is unproblematically absorbed into the social conscious. Because of this perception, the aesthetic value of technology and its concomitant ideologies receive little inquiry. Technology, like any other epistemology, brokers its own relations of power, meaning and representation, which in turn determine and influence broader social and cultural forces. Research into the politics of technology and its signifying practices in marketing is therefore merited.

One way of approaching such an inquiry is to examine the symbiosis of the human body and the machine-the cyborg body-in contemporary marketing communications. The playing out of the dynamic relationship between body and technology has only been examined cursorily in marketing literature (Giesler et al. 2004, Venkatesh et al 2002, Toffoletti 2003, Dobers and Schroeder 2001). The technologised body is a strange ontological state. It is a ‘semiotic ghost’ (Sterling 1986), a body that does not exist in a physical sense, but one that has been conceived at the cutting edge of a cybernetic vision. From a visual culture perspective, one can argue that there is no difference between a body that exists as a physical reality and a fantastic, fictional body. This is because the vision of the human-machine crucially has an existence in the popular social imagination and has a decisive power in forming and unforming conceptions of the future body, excluding and including possibilities. It therefore has a social and political dimension.

The cyborg has become a symbol for the breakdown between what is nature and what is culture. This figure is evoked in imaginative fantasy, phobia and political aspiration. Cyborgs abound in film, theoretical discourse and popular fiction (Squires 1996). The meaning and implications of cyborg bodies in literature and film have become the objects of intense scrutiny.

... OF BODIES

The body is a complex blend of biological materiality and social discourse (Featherstone 1991, Grosz 1993). No articulation of the body, no gesture, no thought, does not betray the body’s ‘belongings’ in a social world (Crossley 2001:5). In consumer society the body acts as an ‘infrasystem’ (Dobers and Schroeder 2001) which conveys ideas about identity in the world. In this way, the body is one of the most significant loci of symbolic power (Rodaway 1995).

Redesigning the body in different, imaginative visual forms can change the way we think and philosophise (Poster 2000). As such, a change in the material body will inevitably effect a change in the code of representation (Abbas 1999). The most recent and profound change in the constitution of the human form has been the impact of technology. An impact this dramatic and pervasive will have implications on how the body is presented in consumer culture (Kaufmann 1998, Lash 2001).

... AND MACHINES

The tendency to draw a line between the human and the technical in Western civilisation is overwhelming. According to Latour, there are huge social forces that allocate certain things to the side of nature and things to the side of culture (Latour 1991:10). Nature is not some pristine state removed from culture. Nature is, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries part of culture (Stone 1992, Baudrillard 1987, Haraway 1991). As O’Mahoney attests, when technologies become more integrated, the ‘human’ approaches a stage where differentiation between the natural and the synthesised will no longer be possible. Technology is in this way giving birth to an “almost/not quite ontology” (Thrift 1998 121-173).

Seltzer conceives of this increasingly intimate interaction between bodies and machines, the many ways in which human space is being technologised, as the ‘psychotopography of machine culture’ (Seltzer 1992:72). Baudrillard (1994) asserts that technology has evolved beyond its functionality and now responds to a more complex emotional place in the social psyche. The technologised inscribing of the body has been instrumental in transforming and confusing the taxonomies of human existence beyond anything ever possible in natural evolution. There is no purely ‘human’ identity anymore (Butler 1990). Balsamo (1999) is perhaps correct in viewing the human and machine as a relationship of extent, rather than dichotomy, and theorises that there are ‘degrees of cyborgism’. Such a view of the body is evidenced in lived social practices such as transsexuality (Stryker 1995), cosmetic surgery (Balsamo 1999), reproductive biotechnologies (Steinberg 2000, Haraway 1997, Sobchack 2000), the development of intelligent machines (Pepperell 2003), cryogenics (Scurluck 1992) and even the use of virtual reality to evade the aging of the body (Featherstone 1995, Gromola 1996). Other cyborg bodies constitute theoretical postulations of how the future body will be conceived as technology advances. Pursuits in Artificial Intelligence (Feynman 1959, Moravec 2003) and the deep future prophetic visions of Stelarc and Arthur and Marilouise Kroker all
influence social notions of human body image and identity. The concept of the cyborg is one means of visually representing identity that is both ontologically new and unresearched as a visual signifying practice.

**POSTHUMANISM**

Posthumanism views human evolution as inextricably bound with technology from the time of the industrial and agricultural revolutions. The Darwinian thesis of artificial selection (1859) is refuted by a more radical perspective which advocates that a quantum leap in evolution will come from sophisticated mechanical or electronic modification instead of a slow biological change (See Peppereell 2003).

In the technological age, humanity is sometimes viewed as a ‘failed project’ (Kroker and Kroker 1996). Extending this thought, Stone (1992) questions what in fact happens as human physical evolution falls further and further out of synchronisation with human cultural evolution. While traditional accounts of human physical and social evolution posit an incremental course of human evolution—that events must build upon events and developments upon developments, (Crossley 2001)—the notion of posthumanism implies a radical breaking off from, and reconceptualisation of, the state of being human.

The concerns raised by posthumanism have found their way into research in marketing. Venkatesh, Kabarbara and Ger (2002) ask what it means to be human in technological times. The authors assert that although this field of research has been awarded only superficial attention in consumer behaviour studies, there is evidence to suggest that a model of posthuman consumption may explicate aspects of consumer behaviour today (cf. Giesler and Venkatesh 2005). Looking at the idea of an emerging technological perception, Venkatesh et al. (2002:446) argue that society is now witnessing “the emergence of a posthuman/cyborgian paradigm that views the intersection of human and machine as a postmodern possibility in contrast to the received view under modernist thinking which considers these two entities as distinctly separate.” This perspective implies that technology, which was once seen as something “out there”, is gradually being internalised and is forming an integral part of the human perception (cf. Latour 1993, Haraway 1991).

**TECHNOLOGICAL SYMBOLISM IN ADVERTISING**

Advertising imagery borrows from existing artifacts in art, literature, science and other cultural discourses to establish meaning (Schroeder 2002). While many studies have looked at the semiosis of issues such as art, literature or colonialism in advertising, little attention has been paid to the referent system of science. Technology apparently just ‘is’. It has no ideological or aesthetic value that can be deconstructed (cf. Wacjmann 1996). However, there are at least two ways that technology creates meaning in advertising. Firstly, technology is itself a semiotic system with its own appertaining values and beliefs. How human bodies are reconstructed through technology in advertising, and how the concept of the ‘posthuman’ has been represented is a salient aspect of visual culture. This means that technology can function as a discourse, out of which “subjects” or bodies can be produced (Foucault 1982:115).

Secondly, as well as transmitting meaning, technology as a medium also creates it (Virilio 1990, Cubitt 1998). This is an area of inquiry that is neglected. As Martin Listner et al. point out, “the physical sciences, even of the applied variety, do not address such technologies as ‘media’ but only ever as an arrangement of electrical circuits, functions, transmitters, pattern and noise. It is as if what is foregrounded in the physical or natural sciences becomes back-ground in the cultural or human sciences, and vice versa, thus maintaining a blind spot between nature and culture” (Listner et al. 2003:297).

In every historical period, certain aesthetic forms have become central to the episteme or historical vision of a given society (de Laurentis 1980). Discourses of science, technology and digital media are beginning to constitute the new aesthetics of the twenty-first century, and they are fundamental in forming intellectual thought (Stafford 1991). This process has led to a critical juncture in how the body is presented and represented in consumer culture.

**ADVERTISING AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE FUTURE**

A futurised body image has supplanted and expressed itself in visual culture, most markedly in advertising and marketing communications. Advertising often acts as a psychological barometer, measuring prevailing preoccupations and anxieties in a given society (Schroeder 2002). The appearance of cyborg imagery in contemporary visual texts can reveal ways in which society conceptualises and works out its relationship and feelings towards technology. Oehlert (1995), for example, has suggested that cyborg images can uncover psychological reactions to conceptions of humanity, death, and the nature of evil in a technological era. The proliferation of theory about the cyborg has introduced fresh perspectives on how to reconceptualise the human body and subjectivity (see, for example, Balsamo 1996 and Peppereell 2003).

Many representations of the technical body are projects for the future, yet these images have a powerful affect on how society perceives the validity of these projects.

Increasingly, the psychological projection of the mind and attitude towards the future in advertising has been accompanied by visual texts which clearly reside there. Many forms of advertising have become highly stylised, looking towards conspicuously future-oriented images of ‘high-technicity’ for their inspiration. The temporal discrepancy between the present world and what is represented as the future has grown, reaching a point where this visual extrapolation often bears no resemblance to the present state of things. Digital media technology is the tool used to graft this future, and the unlimited potential of technology acts as a muse that fuels the imagination of the creative designer. As Cubitt attests, in technology, “we find not only [...] what is, but what might be” (Cubitt 1996: iv).

In this way, the ‘future’ is increasingly constructed in and informs the present; the future is presented. The future is shaped and influenced by the present more than ever before. The future is fetishised as an object of imaginative resources, and at the same time taken for granted as a tool through which all life is observed. More often than not, images of humans in advertising are not really human in the traditional senses of ‘natural’ or ‘organic’. They are subject, for example, to rigorous aesthetic technologisation, such as cropping and airbrushing (Schroeder and McDonagh 2004, forthcoming). Advertisements are becoming even more highly finished, excessively produced and artificialised aesthetic artefacts. In all instances the consumer effaces the distinction between reality and artificiality. Images of the ‘human’ in advertising often oscillate between these two points.

The physical and psychological proximity of the human body to the machine is increasingly depicted in the visual economy—a common device in advertising is the anthropomorphisation of technological devices, with technologisation at strategic sites of humanness in the body, such as the heart and eyes.

The ubiquitous anthropomorphisation of the technical and mechanocomorphism of the human conditions the viewer’s concept of humanism. Many images that appear to be ‘natural’ humans are
in fact digital composites of many different bodies. The American artist Chris Scarborough’s exhibition “Composite Monster” (2004, Sarrat Gallery, Vanderbilt University) articulates this gap between the real and the technologically simulated. This exhibition displays photographs of ‘convicted criminals’. The photographs are in fact amalgamations of many different human features. The final image is no longer what could be termed ‘human’. The art is described as photorealism—revealing the irony that there is no reality in the image except a simulated one.

Visual representations evolve in complexity until the human–machine symbiotic is highly ambiguous and it is impossible to distinguish which part is human, and which part is machine. The image of the iconic news presenter Max Headroom (1987) exemplifies such a practice (Image 1). His body is a complex blend of digitalism, body and social discourse.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Knowledge is increasingly constructed visually. Martin Jay (1993) calls the growing centrality of the visual to contemporary Western life ‘ocularcentrism’. Visuality impinges on our ideas of how we construct reality. Jencks notes the increasing inseparability of vision and forms of knowledge; ‘We daily experience and perpetuate the conflation of the ‘seen’ with the ‘known’ in conversation through the commonplace linguistic appendage of ‘do you see?’ or ‘see what I mean?’” (1995:3)

This research adopts a critical visual culture approach to the image, informed by Barthean, Foucauldian and psychoanalytic theory. This research aimed to connect abstract theory with lived aesthetic experience’ (Stafford 1997:45, see also Rose 2001). In this spirit, concepts of cyborgism and posthumanism that appeared in the theoretical literature reviewed were then explored through the image. Twenty-one tropes emerged that could potentially be used to theorise the future body. These were again grouped into clusters of similar overarching themes. Since the objective of the research is to examine the technologised body and its environment in marketing communications, a purposive sample is the most beneficial to the enquiry because it allows the selection of examples that best answer the research objectives (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2003:175). Advertising databases where searched to look for advertisements that were set in the future. Three motion advertisements were analysed. Visual evidence of three of the tropes–liminality, embodiment and the technological gaze—were investigated in detail, and intertextual visual material was used to support the evidence in the primary examples. This paper discusses how technology can create liminal zones in and around the visual body.

BACKGROUND TO THE PRIMARY MATERIAL

In 2003 Nike commissioned fifteen filmmakers to create The Art of Speed campaign for the 2004 Summer Olympics. The brief asked the respective creative teams to interpret the idea of speed. *Les Jumelles* and *Eye D* are the contributions of KDLAB, a New York-based graphic design agency. *Les Jumelles* is a two-minute advertisement, launched in cinemas in June 2004 in the US, to mark the release of Nike’s Swift training suit and trainers. *Eye D* is an experimental companion piece to *Les Jumelles*, and speculatively promotes Nike’s prototype of the same name, a personal communications device that will not be available commercially until 2014.

In November 2003, ATTIK—a global branding and communications group in San Francisco—unrolled their marketing communications campaign for the launch of Scion—a new car model from Toyota. Ambience Entertainment, a Sydney-based visual effects and design company created *Transformer*.

FINDINGS: TECHNOLOGY AND LIMINALITY IN ADVERTISING

Liminality is a philosophy and set of practices that describe a state of transition between two or more boundaries. These boundaries exist on different ontological levels (social, physical, psychological), and liminality emerges as a critical theme in areas as diverse as philosophy (Deleuze and Guattari 1980), feminism (Kristeva 1982), social anthropology (Douglas 1996), consumer behaviour (Sherry 1990, Schroeder and Borgeson 2002), and architecture (Vattimo 1997).

This research reports that technology creates at least five liminal zones in visual representation; (a zone between) the virtual and the real, nature and culture, the social coding of the objectified female and the empowered female, the male and the female, and the mechanical and the visceral.
Technology creates spaces where it is difficult to distinguish where concrete physicality ends and a virtual environment begins. The information screen in *Les Jumelles* visualises the invisible experience of a cyberspace. The screen is virtual information that meets the physical body in a *threedspace* between virtuality and reality, allowing a tactile interfacing between these two states of being. (Image 2) The screen also opens up another point of liminality. Throughout the advertisement the information on the screen corresponds to the runner’s activity. Is the screen controlling the runner’s performance, or is the runner’s performance affecting what is happening on the screen? In such an instance it is impossible to tell the controller from the controlled. This same liminal agency is depicted in *Eye D*. Interestingly, this screen is appositely set at another liminal site— the inside of building (traditionally seen as culture) and the outside of the building (nature).\(^1\) Representations such as this urge the visual consumer to renegotiate the demarcation between a virtual world and a physical one.

**Nature and Culture**

Posthuman visual representations cut across the divide between what is considered an object of nature and what is a human-made construction. The fractal ceiling in *Les Jumelles* concretises such an experience. (Image 3) This object synergises elements of nature with technological materials. During the advertisement, this ceiling structure responds and adapts to its environment; it causes a corresponding sphere on the floor to ‘grow’. This fractal pattern of growth strongly resembles organic configurations present in nature and the fractal arrangements created by Mandelbrot patterns in chaos mathematics. On the other hand, it is clearly a constructed material and it also emits an electronic light.

Further, a transcoding of biological evolution with technical evolution is evident in these texts. The visual trope of evolution is employed regularly in technological culture, problematising one of the most socially accepted essences of nature. *Transformer* heavily relies on the episteme of Darwinian evolution to generate its message. Darwinian evolution is simultaneously celebrated and undermined in many visual representations of the future.

In ‘Making Cyborgs: Making Humans’, Pyle notes that the presumed superiority of the ‘organic’ is upset at a moment in the text which reveals that the ‘organic’ needs the ‘mechanical’, or proves them to be inextricable (1993:125). This manifests itself visually in the increasing representation of liminal ‘quasi-objects’ (Serres 1987, cited by Latour 1993:55) in advertising: objects that do not emanate fully from technology nor from the organic world. The point is that we are encountering images where it is difficult to tell which of its parts connote the nature of the human (organic) and the culture of the technological.

**The Sexually Empowered Female and the Sexually Objectified Female**

The technologisation of the body also obscures traditional social codings of certain bodies in visual culture, especially of the female body. It is difficult to attribute a normalising social category to the technological woman based on how she is represented visually. The sleeping female in *Les Jumelles* is a mysterious and powerful figure (she is after all, the protagonist in control of the screen in *EyeD*), but the outline of her breasts is focussed on and fetishised. (Image 4) The tight-fitting ‘skin’ worn by the female runner emphasises her sexualised form, but this sexualisation is made ambiguous because the clothing in the ad connotes a post-organic, ‘post-body’ suit that is highly functional. In this way, the male gaze is ambiguous because the female sexual form is hygienised and no longer strictly ‘of the body’.

Concomitantly, the futurised female form is represented in this manner in many other objects of visual culture. The bodies of the robot in Chris Cunningham’s installation “All is Full of Love” (Image 5), Tombraider’s Lara Croft, and many visual representa-

\(^1\)In fact, this advertisement seems to take advantage of other more traditional tropes of liminality— it is twilight, between day and night; the room mixes Renaissance architecture with hi-tech fittings, and so forth.
tions of Japanese cyberpunk fiction reproduce this same liminal portrayal of power through the siliconisation and digitalisation of the flesh. This leads to an intense debate surrounding the political status of the (technologised) female body. The findings argue that technology in fact reinscribes the female body’s social and cultural identity through the constitution of a liminal sexual form.

The Male and the Female

Technologies decorporealise the body to the extent that gender is opaque. The protagonist in *Transformer* is a typical example of this. (*Image 6*) It possesses ‘human’ qualities in the sense that it exhibits agency and an organic physical evolution, but the visible gender markers of the body are technologised and neutralised. Marketing communications has witnessed an increased proliferation of ‘neutral’ or liminal characters, which seem to connote ‘technicity’ rather than sexuality. The production of such bodies shifts visual attention away from a strict delineation of the male and female, because this border is relegated in importance to the technology that enables these particular bodies to exist in the first instance.

The Mechanical and the Visceral

Elements of each combine to produce what could be termed a mechanical viscerality. *Transformer* uses identifiable visual markers of bodily activity—the technological space surges with images reminiscent of bodily fluid—sweat and semen—in a world that is wholly technical. Mechanical processes take on the visceral fluidity that accompanies bodily processes in the creation of this liminal
zone. In “All Is Full of Love”, (Cunningham 2000), the camera alternates between the sterilised, bright environment of the laboratory, and the dark and damp pulsating activity of the cables underneath that seem to leak and even contaminate.

What is visually produced in these instances is a technology that seems to possess its own primitive instinct, and paradoxically, its own biology that is wholly technical.

**DISCUSSION**

Each of these zones of liminality which are brought into being by the various effects of technology could be described as ‘cyborgic’, as they represent places and (social) states with no fully closed meaning. In this way, the findings suggest that technology is implicated in poststructural acts of meaning-making. Liminality as a state involves the transgression of socially, naturally or morally
accepted boundaries of experience in the negotiation of another state of being. It is a dangerous and subversive activity because it disrupts careful social and metaphysical classifications. Mary Douglas argues that what really disturbs the cultural order is when things turn up in the wrong category; or when things fail to fit into any category (Douglas (1996[1970]: 121).

Such a practice is intrinsically linked to feminist notions of identity, as the creation of thirdspaces that emerge from binary narratives. Thus the proposition is that technology has an effect on the forms of representation in a way that offers a visuality to new liminal identities and physical states.

CONCLUSION

Looking at imaging practices in Enlightenment art and science, Barbara Stafford (1993) argues that in order to move beyond the metaphors that were created by a modernist sensibility there should be an intellectual attempt to forge new ones. She notes that, “such revolutionary embodiments or incarnated thoughts would demonstrate the independence and individuality of different types of expression.” This research finds that technology functions as a truly poststructural force, because it crucially both subverts and upholds the status quo of the body. This means that the image of the technologised body produces considerable slippages of meaning; what it connotes is liberated from the authorial hand of its creator and the (supposed) ideology of its representation transmutes from one political camp to the other with considerable ease. Technology is able to achieve this feat because it can plausibly disintegrate established truths that have underpinned Western thought for millennia. It acts as a disintegrator in a number of ways. This paper concentrates on its creation of liminality, both on and in the body. Technology exposes naturalised orders to be constructed codes, such as the lines that separate the masculine and the feminine, the mechanical and visceral, and even the divide between nature and culture. In this process, it establishes new thirdspaces of knowledge, that are neither one thing nor another, or perhaps what Serres (cited by Latour 1993:55) would call, ‘quasi-objects’. The point is that these quasi-objects and quasi-discourses are not the sentinels of hegemony or the harbingers of a new, liberatory regime for the body. The aesthetics of contemporary technology is still finding its ideological feet. This research concludes that the radical terrain of technological expression and representation is yet to be truly appropriated by a political philosophy. Posthuman images produce paradoxical social meaning. Marginal discourses such as feminism may be able to use these slippages of meaning to subvert traditional accounts of identity.

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