The normalization of the cyborg: from futuristic artistic expression of mutilation to daily aesthetic beauty

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Old futuristic dreams and utopias

Over the course of one hundred years, humanity has moved from the visionary and fantastic description of a new futuristic human to the contemporary actualized realities of cyborgology. The aesthetic of the human body has changed from the futurist's ideal - a world based on a merging between the human and the machine for the creation of a new being able to supersede the limitations imposed upon the body by nature and society - to the contemporary realities of bioengineered prosthetics that are used to overcome physical limitations and mutilations (Poggi 1997: 19-20).

Humanity is no longer relegating the possibility of a cyborg to the realms of illusion and wondrous utopia. The existence of beings that are in part machines has become a fact of life with the increased possibilities of exchanging and replacing organs and limbs for prosthetics and mechanical devices. The ethical question to be asked is no longer whether a human being with an artificial heart or with artificial limbs is still human, but how much of a human body can be artificially reconstructed before the human element is overtaken by the nature of the mechanic.

Old philosophical and theological questions of what is the nature of humanity and where it resides – in which specific organ if in any – resurface when it becomes increasingly possible to transplant and exchange multiple and more numerous organs in an individual or multiple patients.
If the relationship between the organic and the mechanic is no longer lived in contemporary society as a dichotomy but as an empowering dialectic – a new

symbiotic framework - humanity is then looking at the rebirth of the 'human' under a new framework based on a relationship with the technological that is functional to the strengthening of the individual's organic body. This process of strengthening and empowerment for the creation of better-humans and/or super-humans[1] that defy the limitations of nature does not only affect the individual but, if contextualized in wider national and international frameworks, the relationships between social groups within a nation as well as the social, political and economic equilibria between nations.

The digital divide may be replaced by a new division between societies and cultural groups where bioengineered and augmented bodies are pitted against natural organic bodies. The augmentation of the body may become directly proportional to the level of personal income as well as future national policies and investments in public health.

From mutilation to empowering technologies

The concept of mutilation as a permanent scarring of the integrity of the body has been overcome in the public imaginary by the representation in visual culture of the cyborg, the bionic human and the genetically and bionically engineered mutant. Mutants with bionic prosthetics in the *X-Men* film trilogy, the bionic man in *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1974) and his companion *The Bionic Woman* (1976) as well as *The Terminator* (1984) with its sequels have all contributed to creating a new aesthetic perception of the artificial.

From *A Cyborg Manifesto* to theories of Posthumanism and Transhumanism, the arts have embraced the opportunity of realizing the conjunction between human and machine envisaged by Tommaso Marinetti in the *Futurist Manifesto*. Stelarc has contributed with his performances and body implants to explore new aesthetic forms that conceive the prosthesis as an evolutionary empowering design. The body is no longer a perfect given structure to be preserved but an evolutionary organism that can be improved upon here and now. The prosthetic, particularly in Stelarc's aesthetic approach, is not a repairing of a mutilated body, but an augmentation on a healthy body, that is altered, reconstructed and enhanced according to the artist's aesthetic and technological personal considerations.

[1] The concepts of better-human and super-human have great ethical, moral, political and sociological implications. In this paper the meaning of super-human and/or better-human is only used to identify the possibility of a technological empowerment to 'repair and improve' upon the body. This was a scholarly choice in order to avoid, in this text, the classification of old humans vs. new humans.

The visionary 'madness' of Mina Loy and her manifesto of 1919 titled *Auto-Facial-Construction*[2] (Caws 2000: 334) no longer speaks of impossible realities when the transplant of a face becomes a medical possibility and no longer a fictional story to be represented in the movie *Face Off* (1997). Nor is freezing the face in a permanent fixed expression of eternal beauty an impossible reality: Botox and aesthetic surgery paralyse and stretch the face in a fixed expression of joy and youth, with striking similarities to Loy's manifesto.

If in the arts this approach has created aesthetic debates and polarizations between bioconservatism and technoprogressivism, how is the reality of mutilation and/or augmentation approached by people in their daily lives? Is the perception of the human body that of an evolutionary object that can be improved upon and that can benefit from enhancements and prosthetics?

The social evolution of the aesthetic perception of the human body has lead to a new aesthetic perception of prosthetics that is no longer solely seen as a permanent sign of mutilation but as that of a new technological empowerment. If the body loses a part, its replacement can be an enhancement, empowerment and new form of aesthetic beauty.

> In the last two to three years many men have asked to have prosthetics without coverage, leaving the metal part visible. They tell me that a leg like this is more futuristic! Maybe they feel more masculine because the metallic leg gives them the sensation of being bionic, half human and half machine. Men under fifty especially request it. At the opposite end of the spectrum, women ask for symmetric prosthetics very similar to the one they lost. (Interview with Dr. B, a prosthetist at the Limb Fitting Centre, London.)[3]

If the visual arts have created an experience and imagination of posthumanity as the futuristic merging of human and machine that the public perceives as increasingly achievable, what are the new frontiers of aesthetic exploration?

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[2] Mina Loy, "Auto-Facial-Construction," in *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. Mary Ann Caws. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000: 334.
[3] Interview with Dr B, at the Limb Fitting Centre, London. Interview by Valentina Sessa. 2 June 2008.

The daily aesthetic beauty of the prosthetics

The process of an aesthetic normalization of the cyborg, or its assimilation to a contemporary world that allows the enhancement of the body's abilities, is one that has to be considered as being shaped by cultural and contextual factors that borrow more from science fiction, a collective aesthetic imaginary and cultural traditions of beauty than from rational arguments.

The divisions along gender lines on the perception of empowerment are based on societal perceptions of masculinity and femininity that are rooted in psychological as well as biological imperatives. If for a male the increase in power, although through biomechanical prosthetics, may represent and be perceived as an enhancement of strength, sexual prowess and hierarchical social status, in a female the perception of mutilation is still dependant on the necessity of responding to a social context of beauty. This feminine beauty is disjointed by the idea of power and the artificial and strictly intertwined with that of youth, wholeness and defencelessness.

In a sequence of the film *Artificial Intelligence: AI* (2001) the deformity, monstrosity and/or disfunctionality of the female robot is made evident by contrasting the mechanical left side of her face against the perfectly replicated human features of the right side. The female wholeness is mutilated by the mechanic, while the male body is empowered by it.

In the different choices available to users/consumers in the aesthetic of the prosthetics between visibly mechanical prosthetics and invisible symmetric prosthetics, the role played by gender is shaping the exterior appearance of the artificial augmentation. If for young men, it may be said, that the mechanical element is part of a futurist vision of the body, no longer lived as a mutilation, but as an enhancement with its own attractive elements and aesthetic, women remain tied to a social perception of mutilation of the body. The female perception of the prosthetic is that of a mutilation that need not only to repair and empower, but replicate and mimic the reality of the human body.

More importantly, prosthetics need to respond to the representation of an ideal beauty that is canonized in the feminine representation of an aesthetically commercialized beauty. Using a filmic representation as an example, if the male empowerment through prosthetics of Wolverine in *X-Men* 2: *X-Men United* (2003) is

the positive empowerment of a hero, his female alter ego, Lady Deathstrike, is represented as monstrous by being both exceedingly beautiful and extremely powerful.

The aesthetic representation of the cyborg, in a visible aesthetic representation inclusive of both its organic and mechanical elements, should have been both man and woman or even beyond sex, avoiding the replica of gender based conflicts within the realm of the biomechanical. Very different are the realities of social perception, where a man can feel empowered in being both a cyborg and a bionic man, while a woman is relegated to an aesthetic vision of herself in response to societal canons. The 'positive' example is *The Bionic Woman* that replicates in her prosthesis the natural human beauty. The visibility of the mechanical in the female body is the equivalent of the representation and visibility of mutilation, monstrosity and dystopia, not that of an empowering augmentation.

The cyborg of Donna Haraway, in the contemporary normalization process, appears to be a masculine figure. There are many challenges to the contemporary aesthetics of prosthetics, particularly when a powerful augmentation will generate a revolutionary physical equivalence between the sexes.

When Dr B was asked if the aesthetic challenges proposed by Stelarc with his prosthetic artworks and performances belonged more to the world of science fiction than reality, the answer focused on how much of the science fiction representation of the cyborg is reality already:

> I do not think his idea is science fiction. I believe that we are already moving towards that direction! Science is advancing the construction of electronic implants more powerful than human limbs, whereby they act upon data inputs to and from the brain. However, at that point people must learn how to use these prosthetics because sensitivity or human feeling in them is missing. For example, a prosthetic so powerful it could grab an egg and break it because it is not educated to control its power.[4]

Perhaps it is through the augmentation of power of the body through prosthetics, no matter if hidden or visible, that the equivalence between sexes will be achieved. As

[4] Interview with Dr B, at the Limb Fitting Centre, London. Interview by Valentina Sessa. 2 June 2008.

for the aesthetic appearance of the prosthetics, the answer to visibility versus invisibility of the mechanical may rest more in the realm of future cyborg fashions.

Conclusions: futuristic multiple aesthetics, bodies and consciousnesses

If the aesthetics of posthumanity are leading to a 'normalization' of cyborgology, through familiar forms of representation and daily engagements, the old visionary idea of the cyborg no longer applies. New approaches are surfacing that question and challenge the ethics and morals of the engagement between the body and technology.

The contemporary aesthetics of futuristic empowerment and augmentation look to artists and designers in order to deliver new modes of aesthetic consumption for a technology no longer perceived as limited to the reconstruction of a mutilated body but conceived as the necessary empowering framework to facilitate the transition from human to better-human and/or super-human.

The future visions are those of a representation of humanity that is disjointed by the body. A dis-incarnation of consciousness and/or of the 'soul' that enables the essence of humanity to be transferred, embodied and exchanged.

The re-incarnation of consciousness no longer has to await a divine re-awakening of the dead, but is a future possibility that - discussed as a material transfer of brain or only of memories - is presented as possible future reality in films, like *The 6th Day* (2000), which focus on cloning, memory transfer and human replicants (Battaglia 2001: 496). This process of separation of consciousness from the body could generate alternative scenarios - by destabilizing social realities - that will liberate the body from its institutional and political controls through the elimination of the original body itself as the only organic repository of consciousness and identity.

If consciousness is increasingly disjointed from the body in an ultimate process of deconstruction and disassembling of social and cultural hierarchies, the repository of consciousness needs no longer to be a unified body '…designing and building artificial prostheses that can be controlled directly by brain-derived signals,' (Lebedev and Nicolelis 2006: 536) could become the norm and allow for the possibility of single source emitting brain-derived signals to directly control multiple mechanical bodies.

The aesthetics of the cyborg are, therefore, continuing to shift, evolving with the evolution of technology and presenting the traditional concept of body and it's aesthetic with new challenges, both social and ethical. The concept of a human-like cyborg, a biomechanical simulacrum of humanity, is no longer the only envisaged possibility. It is a traditional anthropomorphic aesthetic perception of reality that does not keep into account the future technological opportunities offered by the evolutionary processes of an organic body being technologically empowered.

V.I.K.I. the 'rogue' computer in *I, Robot* (2004) is one possible example of an evolutionary scenario. Represented as being more similar to a queen bee than a human-like cyborg, V.I.K.I., a female dictatorial robotic entity, simultaneously controls thousands of robots, replicating the structure and social system of a beehive.

These new aesthetic representations alter the perception of the physical identity of the cyborg as well as the locus where human consciousness can be located. The aesthetic perception and representation of the cyborg, one hundred years on from the *Futurist Manifesto*, is bound to take new paths and develop new evolutionary branches that will render the image of the cybernetic organism portrayed in *The Terminator*, naïve, quaint and perhaps nostalgic.

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