

Me (and) the Machine

Posthumanist theory attempts to escape the anthropocentric way of viewing the world that we as humans have practiced for the majority of our existence. It seeks to “undermine” the traditional delineations between humans, animals and technology (Bolter, 2016). New technologies have forced us to rethink these boundaries entirely (Forlano, 2017), and offer us a lens with which to examine our posthumanism more closely than ever. These technologies are, however, never passive observers. They bring with them their own modifications to us as a result of their involvement, and we are more involved with them than ever before (Castree et. al, 2004).

In fact, our very nature – human subjectivity – is constructed and maintained by these mediating technologies (Thrift, 2011). And their power and politics is as much an emergent property of them simply existing (Gane, 2005) as it is the programmers on top of the script. But rather than despair at the control these technologies have over us, we need to recognise them as part of our lives – our ontologies (Castree et. al, 2004). It is ultimately a symbiotic relationship, with influence running in both directions.

As designers, we need to understand the positioning of who we are designing for. We need to understand that the technologies we will be working with are much more pervasive than the surface level functionally that we intend for them. In understanding this, we can develop more insightful designs that consider the human (posthuman) in the entirety of their context.

We exist on what Harroway terms the “machine–human–animal continuum” (Harroway, 1991) and the notion that we are apart from animal due to our cognitive superiority and

somehow separate from technology because of our biology is false. Using posthumanism as our frame, we can see that “we have never been human” (Latour, 1993) which I would amend to read as “we have never been *entirely* human.” Instead, we exist as a hybrid, with fluid and distributed subjectivity.

While it is true that new technologies have amplified our posthuman condition, where biotechnology and information networks are part and parcel with daily life (Castree et. al, 2004), posthumanism is not an emergent property of the 21st century. These technologies merely “blur” the traditional boundaries (Forlano, 2017), and allow us to see the true nature of our existence along Harroway’s continuum. Here, Castree et. al explain posthumanism succinctly, as a tool to “deliver critical insights into contemporary social conditions” (Castree et. al, 2004, p.1357).

We are, as humans, inextricably linked to technological and informational networks at an unprecedented level (Castree et. al, 2004). Mediating technologies compel us to operate our lives through them (Gane, 2005). Technology is no longer discrete artefacts or functional instruments made for fulfilling a particular goal, but are “active mediators” necessary for us to access our lifeworlds (Fass, 2016).

They shape an ever increasing number of aspects of the lived environment, from the large-scale geographical information systems that govern our ability to move in the world, down to social and entertainment technologies that continuously tailor what we see to our preferences. “The power of technologies to determine human life is becoming ever clearer” (Gane, 2005, p.40). This is inescapable, as these technologies are necessary to navigate our everyday lives, not to mention are for the most part enjoyable.

As subjects of analysis, we cannot place ourselves at the centre, and instead exist in connection to these networks which increasingly have their own power (Gane, 2005). In fact, Kittler goes as far to say that “the dominant information technologies of the day control all understanding and its illusions” (Kittler, 1999, p.40).

Perhaps a more palatable phrasing offered by Kittler (1999) is that technology “determines our situation”. Fass (2016) tells us that the opportunities that new technologies offer us should not be taken at face value. Take for example FitBits: the opportunity posed is the ability to track your fitness more closely, but underneath that is technology that obliges you to run to justify its existence. He gives another example of a sleep tracker that he would wake up in the middle of the night to check. Ironically, obsessing over it led to a poorer sleeping schedule. This goes for all technologies and platforms, what they offer is also what they impose.

We need to be aware that the constraints of the technologies we are using dictate our interaction with them, and the technology has its own agenda, sometimes altogether quite different from its supposed purpose. Taking social media as an example: instead of what appears to be technological infrastructure supporting an extension of human socialisation, the platforms are warping and creating entirely new norms and modes of communication to be compatible with their capabilities and agenda (Couldry & Van Dijck, 2015), which without overgeneralising is largely to support avaricious capitalism. The very identities of people are defined by the “performances” they they deliver through their interactions with social media and other entertainment applications that employ preference sharing. And the users perform these identities through the constraints of these applications (Bolter, 2016).

Elwell (2013) terms this complex the “transmediated self”, where the era of connectivity has led to self-identity being formed in accordance with the aesthetics of transmedia production. This new identity exists in the space between the digital and the physical as a “browsable story-world”. Rather than a core analog self being modified by Instagram identity or information from a data mining service, the transmediated self emerges from the feedback loop between digital and analogue world. Here, we can see the symbiosis of the posthuman existence – patterns of behaviour in the physical world are repeated in the digital world, while norms are adapted from the digital and replicated in the physical, constituting a single transmediated self.

Thrift (2011) attempts to better contextualise this continuing evolution of the posthuman, arguing that human subjectivity is no longer built from within, but relies on an external mediating network – “the security-entertainment complex.” Here, agency of state security and the big names in digital capitalism are the main players, creating and sustaining identities in their image.

The notion of power here might be thought to lie with these companies and organisations, and to a certain extent it does, but it needs to be understood that these technologies have their own dictate that controls the content they produce, structured by the very hardware that permits them to exist (Gane, 2005).

As we continually dematerialise our physical objects into binary code, enabling the information to be processed by machines, we lose their original meaning, concealed within the code. And the operation codes themselves are largely obfuscated, some burnt into the physical circuitry of the computer, completely inaccessible. The layers of abstraction go so deep through levels of symbolic programming language that we simply cannot understand

exactly how our top level computer code is processed, let alone the information that lies on top of it (Kittler, 1997). It is here perhaps that we can recognise modern technology as a powerful entity with its own processes and politics that need to be considered and respected. A fixture on the machine–human–animal continuum no less important than the human.

But despite its power and influence, I disagree with Gane (2005) who argues that we are at the mercy of the system; we are merely part of it, and it of us. We exist in a symbiosis with the network simultaneously “under and over the script” (Latour, 2013), switching between modes in what Donna Haraway (2004) terms an “ontological choreography”.

Ingold (2013) offers sound advice when considering this symbiosis from the perspective of a designer. He posits that the task of “the maker” is to bring all of the elements into a “sympathetic arrangement” with each other, thus enabling them to “correspond.” Only by understanding fully the positioning of the user can we successfully execute such a sympathetic arrangement of elements, and design posthumanly.

Thinking posthumanly – an adverbial form that would make Latour (2013) proud – allows us to escape the trap that so often ensnares designers when employing ‘human-centred’ design. Human-centred design assumes a discrete relationship between design and user, at odds with, and at the expense of, the much wider ecosystem in which both design and user reside (Forlano, 2017).

Posthumanism, I think, needs to be considered carefully in the context of design. It can be easily misconstrued as “past” human, where really it is a call for designers to better contextualise the human in their interconnected reality (Forlano, 2017). This can only ever

enrich a design, and lead to a better understanding of both person and the world at large. And as technology is so profoundly intertwined with our lives and psyche, designing posthumanly is necessary to produce something that respects the user for whom you are designing.

I write this essay as mediated by a chain of technologies that will allow me to learn, be graded, and ultimately land a role where I will most likely be designing for digital outcomes through technology. Here lies in equal measure bias on my part for, and self-evident proof of, my argument.

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