

Flowing Forms: Changing Media, Changing Bodies

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My first thought in considering my position on “bodies” is: what is a body? When we speak of bodies, we often speak about conventions of normalcy, and creating distinctions between those who do and do not conform to these expectations. What is *normal* is often maintained by the same media that many use as a tool to counteract hegemonic representation. It should be clear to most of us, as media scholars, that media plays a key role in constructing/perpetuating these conventions. But what warrants increased attention is an examination of how media construct new expectations in the construction of *natural* bodies. As new bodily alternations become possible in an era of post- and transhumanism, it will become increasingly important to study the ways in which media, and speculative fiction in particular, imagines and perceives of a “natural” body, and how those depictions influence dominant understandings of those potential futures. The media we consume either normalizes or demonizes transhumanist configurations, and will be integral in influencing the social acceptance/disapproval of those technologies, and (re)definitions of a natural human body.

It is acknowledged that representation matters, and that “bodies remain undertheorized in media studies outside of representation,” but it should also be noted that emerging definitions of *bodies* are also issues of representation. How transhumanist, or posthumanist, bodies are represented in the media, and the discourse surrounding those representations and interpretations, also matters. The speculative embodiment and acceptance/disapproval of those representations has the potential to manifest outside of mediated fiction. The media we consume normalizes new techno-body relationships; the more we become familiar with these images, the more potential there is to evoke, embody, and create them. As such, we need to be aware of the potential affects of these representations, in the ongoing development of ethics within the digital, AI, and trans/posthumanist realms.

While transhumanist philosophy can be traced back to Julian Huxley and ideologies of eugenics, in recent years, especially with the mainstream popularity of dystopian speculative fiction narratives, there is a growing interest and popular media presence of transhumanism, and envisioning of new human-technology relationships and constructions. TV shows such as *Altered Carbon* negotiate the issues surrounding class-based access to technologies, and perpetuate fears about reducing the human body to a disposable “sleeve” for pure information. The series plays off similar fears in the *Black Mirror* series, where immortality is possible through the abandonment of the natural body, and the digitization of consciousness. These embodiments go further than the “virtual,” however, which is what I want to address more closely.

Transhumanist narratives are bound to technology, and the development of human-technology hybrids towards the end goal of immortality, broadly conceived. Both ideologically, and as imagined in futurist media, technology is used to overcome the limitations of the natural body. What is less explored is incorporating the role of nature, as interconnected to both technology and humanity, evoking nature-inspired design when altering the natural body. I question how technophilic futures may manifest a more symbiotic species – made possible through technology, but still fully engaged with, and responsible to, the natural environment.

Imaginators, such as Björk in her newest album *Utopia*, and Alex Garland's movie adaptation of *Annihilation* (just to name a few), demonstrate this speculative reality, whereby trans/posthumanism is interconnected with both technology and nature, challenging dualistic understandings of these terms. Although transhumanism takes many forms, one line of thinking reduces humanity to information and the ways in which that information exists, or does not exist, in a natural body. The natural body, however, is more realistically reduced to bacteria/nature than information, as it has long been acknowledged that within a human body, bacteria cells match human cells approximately 1:1. Where does the natural body begin and end? What role does nature play in transhumanist narratives as depicted in the media? When Björk performs as a flower-human hybrid, does she instill a desire for biophilic transhumanism in her audience? In *Annihilation*, when Josie Radek (as embodied by Tessa Thompson) becomes a flowering humanoid tree, does the audience perceive her to be dead, or might she inspire a cosmology of interconnectivity? More scholarly attention needs to be paid to how these depictions are influencing the development of mainstream understandings of the relationships between humanity, technology, and nature.

I use the term Embodied Futurisms to acknowledge the ways in which bodies are imagined in futurist texts. In this format, futurism is written onto the body and its existence in said reality. These bodies enact meaning, both as performance and social commentary, by looking to the past and the future in order to construct a different reality. To draw on the words of Donna Haraway, "it matters what stories tell stories," and it also matters how bodies embody bodies.