Technology, Science Fiction and Psychopathology in the New Millennium

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Summary

This paper argues two imbricated points. Firstly, it is concerned to take issue with overly enthusiastic predictions many commentators are making that we are entering a "posthuman" era in history, brought about by the relationship we have to contemporary information technologies which threaten to make human intersubjective exchange at the physical level obsolete. Theorizing about the superseding of the human, I will argue, has both a science fictional and a millennial character, a problematic status for any epistemological claims such thinking would wish to make. The second and related point of the argument is to suggest an alternative reading of the cultural consequences of information technology. Such a reading focuses on the renegotiation of natural versus cultural forces in the human psyche due to the imbrication of the human with its technology, and suggests that what is most human about us, is what is perhaps most "pathological" about our psyches - that is, what exceeds or escapes assimilation both to consciousness and to technological elements in our culture.

Opsomming

Die argument in hierdie referaat behels twee verwante sake. In die eerste plek sê dit die oorentoesiastiese voorspellings van verskeie kommentators dat ons 'n postmenslike era in die geskiedenis binnegaan, die stryd aan. Dié era sou die gevolg wees van die verhouding waarin ons staan tot kontemporêre informasietegnologieë wat dreig om menslike, intersubjektiewe interaksie op 'n fisiese vlak onmoontlik te maak. Ek sal argumenteer dat die teoretisering van die oorskryding van die menslike beide 'n wetenskapfiksionele en 'n millenniale karakter het, wat 'n problematiese status veroorsaak vir enige epistemologiese beweringe wat sodanige denke sou wou maak. Die tweede en verwante deel van die argument behels 'n alternatiewe lesing van die kulturele gevolge van informasietegnologie. Dié lesing fokus op die herverstaan van die verhouding tussen natuurlike en kulturele kragte in die menslike psige as gevolg van die ineenvlegting van die menslike met sy tegnologie, en stel voor dat dit wat die mees menslike omtrent ons is moontlik ook die mees "patologiese" omtrent ons psiges is - naamlik dit wat die assimilering van beide die bewuste en van tegnologiese elemente in ons kultuur oorskry, of daarvan ontsnap.

What do heretics and cyborgs have in common? They are harbingers of the apocalypse, bringers of the message that the world as we know it ends with the millennium. A thousand years ago religious dissenters saw God's judgement on sinful humanity approaching with the portentous onset of the first millennium, and predicted the end in biblical terms - terms, we now see, of *natural* apocalypse; fire, flood, plague. A thousand years later the parameters and *deus ex machina* of the apocalypse have altered somewhat, but the outcome remains the same: the extinction of humanity. If the new millennialists are to be believed, twenty-first century humanity faces a kind of planned obsolescence, almost an evolution beyond itself which comes about as a result of its own control over nature through technology, the final laying to rest of the spectre of natural apocalypse. Initially this technological breakthrough, which, we should remember, is still in its infancy, meant that we could destroy ourselves with our very own technological apocalypse, the nuclear holocaust, but latterly this has become less of an immediate concern. What preoccupies the millennial mind now is a gentler apocalypse, a New World Order of technoculture in which the human merges with its technology in a kind of utopian Frankenstein scenario with a Hollywood ending. That is, many influential commentators on the impact of technology on cultural beliefs and practices (such as Baudrillard, Haraway, Jameson and dating back at least to Benjamin via McLuhan) see the current and ongoing proliferation and refining of what we might call the prosthetics of technology as epochal. They see, in what technology does as much as in what it might be, the mechanism of a rupture or a shift in the nature of human history and humanity's thinking about itself. Such a shift might be viewed as postmodernist or simply millennial in the sense of an ending that word contains, but the technology which drives it takes many concrete forms. It might manifest itself as the human genome project or the information superhighway and internetworking, as, in its subcultural parlance, the "new flesh" or the "new edge", but these technologies have similar outcomes for how we understand our culture. That is, they putatively alter intersubjective human relations and ultimately disturb the negotiation between our natural or instinctual elements and our cultural ones. It is that fragile negotiation which, it is argued by contemporary commentators, is under threat from late twentieth century technology, and it is this consideration which makes heretics, cyborgs and technocritics objects of or participants in probably the ultimate and most characteristic ontological enquiry - that into the nature of human being.

Despite the portentousness of these opening remarks, I wish to make no large claims, however, and ask no imponderable and thus rhetorical questions in this paper. Instead I want to attempt to answer, or at least further

problematize, two questions: 1) does the millennium and its technology imply, as is often asserted, an apocalyptic obsolescence for humanity and thus the heralding of the New World Order of the human/machine hybrid of the cyborg, and 2) what does the preoccupation with obsolescence imply for our thinking about ourselves as psychological subjects?

To begin examining these questions, something of a methodological digression is necessary, one that is central, however, to any consideration of technology and ontology. It is always significant to me that the commentators fascinated (and I mean that term in its proper psychological sense) with ontological questions of technology and humanity so often choose science fiction as an evidential field for claims which cannot yet be made empirically, such as the existence of a non-metaphorical cyborg body. Though not an unusual phenomenon in the human sciences, the use of literature as evidence in "harder" sciences like cybernetics and artificial intelligence begs a lot of questions regarding the relationship of art, especially in this case popular art, to scientific thinking and production. In other words, when discussing ontological issues of humanity's relationship to new forms of technology, is it possible and valid to use literature as evidence for the possibility of scientific knowledge? Such a potential difficulty is not only a consequence of disciplinary or knowledge boundaries, but foregrounds the thorny question of the sometimes radically underspecified status of an analogy between what happens in a fictional narrative and what happens in a laboratory.

In the case of science fiction the problem is exacerbated by the traditional provenance of the genre. That is, science fiction has purported not only to imagine the social future and impact of technology, but to *predict* its forms and consequences. Science fiction has thus always had a strangely skewed commitment to realism, a realism paradoxically in advance of representation. A famous recent example of the process, and the increasing imbrication of the realms of science and art, was the decision by computer technologists to adopt the term "cyberspace" to describe the virtual "realm" of electronic information exchange enabled by the intercommunication of different computer systems throughout the world. The term was first coined to describe just this virtual realm, but one set in the future, by cyberpunk author William Gibson. And science fiction's concern with what might be called futurist realism extends also, and perhaps more significantly in the light of contemporary millennial technological developments, to the psychological consequences of humanity's relationship to technology, not just to predicting the hardware itself. Since the so-called "new wave" of science fiction, begun largely in Britain in the 1960s through the *New Worlds* magazine edited by Michael Moorcock, the genre has attempted to envision

the human psyche adapting to and contesting the impact of technology on contemporary culture and its own being. Since the advent of this science fiction of "inner space", the boundaries between scientific disciplines and the arts, and different forms of knowledge in general, seem to have become increasingly blurred, spurred on by the impact in critical circles of post-structuralist and postmodernist theories which, in some versions, espouse a kind of pantextuality and the permeability of many different cultural objects and knowledge disciplines to self-reflexive interpretation. The seeming convergence of the trajectories of science fiction and postmodernist theory has been accelerated by developments in technology itself, specifically advances in digital information and computer technology. It has thus become almost banal, and certainly journalistic, to say that the world is becoming science fictional, but the direction in which contemporary infotech has moved has caused, I would say, a renewal of popular interest in science fiction, and perhaps the inauguration of a more widespread theoretico-critical interest in the genre, for what it can tell contemporary culture about the consequences of an ever more rapidly advancing technology.

In this context it is no accident that a focus of contemporary critical interest in science fiction is in the figure of the cyborg. The machine/human amalgam has always been a staple narrative theme of the genre, but it has more recently become the most representative shorthand metaphor for the multivalent complex of technological processes which mark a shift in our culture from an industrial society to an information one. Partly this is because, I think, the cyborg represents the dramatised culmination of what is perhaps technology's essential feature - its role as prosthesis, as extension of human agency. However, if our technology may now become part of our bodies, it may also supersede our bodies altogether, nature eclipsed by culture. Such curmudgeonly psychological luddism takes on an even more shrill tenor when bodies might be replaced, not even with hybrids of organism and technology, but with symbolic electronic exchange itself, in the computer network.

For this reason the cyborg body, even though as metaphor it is coextensive with the history of twentieth century technology, still acts as a powerful cultural marker of the increasing prevalence of what one might call the advent of a properly technosexual culture, one which increasingly privileges the intimate relationship between bodies and technology, and threatens the epistemological or psychical status of the bodies' prior negotiation between nature and culture. Perhaps this is reflected in the nature of contemporary millennialism itself - not a preoccupation with the disappearance of thought, or cultural practices and objects, but with the disappearance of the *body*.

It is the possibility of that obsolescence, seen as nothing less than an

epistemic shift, which encourages one to think of cyborg millennialism as perhaps the quintessential postmodern field of enquiry, particularly since it concerns mundane aspects of being a normative and productive being in society, such as performing tasks, or even communicating, on computer networks, as much as more arcane questions of ontology and sexuality.

Contemporary popular culture as much as recondite academic criticism seems to relish in analysing the impending or ongoing obsolescence of the human, particularly the corporeality and psychological stability of the body. Does this mean that it is obsolescent? I think we should begin to try to answer this question not with an internal analysis of the body itself, an ontogenetic enquiry, but with a phylogenetic one. As Mark Seltzer succinctly points out:

> It is possible to trace ... a series of uneven shifts, from the mid-nineteenth century on, from market society and possessive individualism to machine society and disciplinary individualism to the control society and cybernetic "dividualism". But ... it is not possible to understand these transitions in terms of a progressive "obsolescence of the body" and replacement of bodies and matter by writing and communication - as if writing and communications were simply immaterial and as if people were merely bodies and bodies merely matter.
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> (Seltzer 1992: 181)

Though Seltzer's focus here is slightly different, since he is concerned with discursive shifts and writing technologies rather than strictly cyborgian questions, this passage is useful for its rigour in bringing a historical critique to millennial critical thinking. By insisting on the *materiality* of writing and its technology, computers and writing as work, and by distinguishing between "bodies" and bodies-with-psyches, he is able to critique fruitfully the notion of a "progressive 'obsolescence of the body'" as a typically "modern" (in Foucault's sense of that word) exegesis of representations. It is an exegesis, therefore, which is marked by a typically double register of the empirical and the transcendental. That is, without the rigorously maintained idea of a disarticulation between the various anthropologies of the self and the idea of technological "progress" since the nineteenth century, we maintain a version of the "repressive hypothesis" which is technologized rather than sexualized:

> The "return of the body" [in contrast to its "obsolescence"] in the control society could scarcely be more conspicuous. It is tempting to read the centering on the natural body in the rituals of conspicuous consumption as ... an antidote to what looks like the ... "obsolescence of the body". This version of the repressive hypothesis conserves, however, an essential incompatibility between bodies and technologies and hence fails to register the *assemblies* of natural bodies and

technologies that make up the body-machine complex.

(Seltzer 1992: 181)

The crucial point here is that, in Foucault's genealogy of sexuality, the more a repressive mechanism apparently operates on sexuality in modernity, the more discourses and texts proliferate about sexuality. Thus, in an apparently technosexual *post*modernity, could the proliferation of discourse about the superseding of the sexualized body, the oedipal body, mark its obstinate survival as an entity negotiated between nature and culture? Particularly since such discourse flourishes about the body as consumer in late capitalism, an "evolutionary" step on from the industrial age's focus on the body as producer. Such a proliferation, as Seltzer points out, marks a discursive nexus. It is not that the body either absolutely disappears or conspicuously returns, but that technology occupies an increasingly central place in understanding its ambivalent status in human culture.

Here further questions arise. If we simply invert the supposedly hierarchical dominance of technology over the body, thus preserving the more traditional view of technology as prosthetic extension and servant of the body/subject, we are no nearer to understanding what it is that technology threatens in human ontology, or if there is anything about human being which exceeds or escapes the ignominious millennial fate marked out for it by those convinced of the impending cultural triumph of digital technology.

In order to approach these issues it seems necessary first to place "the human" in a historical dimension, since in one sense the end of the body means the end of history as we know it - and it certainly means the end of the linear history of human control and production of technological "progress" or invention.

Seltzer's comments point to a movement from societies with a disciplinary subjectivity to those he terms "control" - that is, a new form of relation between bodies and machines which has its own epistemic characteristics. In this he extends Foucault's work and gives us an important avenue into what might be called the excess of the human, or what Lyotard has called, apparently paradoxically, the Inhuman. In the introduction to his book of that name, he defines the human as the realm of culture, and opposes to it the child, who does not know how to be enculturated and is thus "inhuman", in a valorized inversion of the usual meaning of that term. And, as he concludes this essentially Freudian insight, "this debt to childhood is one which we never pay off ....[I]t is the task of writing, thinking, literature, arts, to venture to bear witness to it" (Lyotard 1988: 7).

Both Lyotard and Foucault thus oppose to the progressivist narratives of technological teleology which imply the superseding of the body, an under-

standing of it which takes into account its natural or instinctual elements as excessive, or beyond capture in what Lacan would call the symbolic realm. And, alongside Lyotard's inhuman child, Foucault would of course put the mad and the perverted - all at some level valorized objects of psychological, philosophical and aesthetic enquiry.

For Foucault, that to which modern human subjects are instructed to be constantly vigilant, is not an outside principle or authority but one (necessarily potentially flawed) apparently safely housed within. Surprisingly, given the centrality of its "psychological perception" the modern subject needs to value no particular psychological content except the possession of a unique self and the belief that this self is, and must be, his or her own to cultivate and maintain. Thus the lamentable rise of what Foucault derided as the "psy-industries", which foster and promote the illusory notion in modernity that the task at hand for the "psychological subject" is the constant revelation of a merely temporarily suppressed personality. Therefore, the central and radical Freudian insight that repression is a necessary constituent of culture itself is, perhaps also necessarily, overlooked.

In terms of the body, the enculturated and thus oedipalized body, the illusory quest for full self-knowledge is endlessly fascinating because the body is a privileged site of that discovery and search. This is of course because it is *disarticulated* from that which it contains. It is not that the body is inarticulate of course, but that it speaks a different language, one which Foucault and Lyotard both refer to as "the Unthought", and which is discursively isolated in psychoanalysis as the unconscious mapped onto the body. The "self", understood as consciousness, is, for good reasons, hardly ever able to hear or understand this language.

But what are the implications for this unthought and inhuman knowledge, for knowledge it certainly is, emanating from our unruly bodies when our technology might be able to dissociate subjectivity and corporeality in a "virtual" or purely informational social system?

Allecquere Roseanne Stone "imagines" such a possibility as a "progression" in the form of the body-subject relation under the impact of cybernetics systems:

> If we consider the physical map of the body and our experience of inhabiting it as socially mediated, then it should not be difficult to imagine the next step in a progression towards the social, to imagine the location of the self inhabiting the body as similarly socially mediated - not in the usual terms of position within a social field or a capacity to experience, but in terms of the physical location of a subject independent of the body, within a system of symbolic exchange - that is, information technology.
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> (Stone 1992: 614)

The validity of Stone's point here - of the subject coming to terms with its uncoupling from the site of its subjectivity, its body - depends on two imbricated arguments: an acceptance of the contention, Cartesian in essence, that the mind is the seat of subjectivity and the body its vehicle; and the consequent contention that symbolic exchange is possible without a body. Both the realization of a psychical subjectivity and symbolic exchange thus become possible through purely technological means (at least ostensibly) in a new socius of "virtual" interaction in computer networks.

Stone's thinking here is intriguingly and productively typical of those technocritics who make more or less transcendental claims for the postmillennial, "posthuman" technological subject. A virtual social system, a socius without the body, would be a kind of "metaphysical anthropology", with all the anomaly and paradox that phrase holds.

By contrast, Lyotard, in his fine essay "Can Thought Go On Without a Body" (1988) has in common with Foucault (and Freud of course) an insistence that symbolic exchange is impossible without the addition of the essentially non-symbolic and residual character given to it by the body. And, again like Foucault, he identifies the human condition of possibility of thought (as opposed to its technological or machinic analogon) as requiring consciously avoided experiences emerging from and rooted uniquely in the body - those of lack and suffering.

> An example [of the work of human thought] is found ... in Freudian *Durcharbeitung*. In which ... the pain and the cost of the work of thought can be seen .... The pain of thinking isn't a symptom coming from outside to inscribe itself on the mind instead of in its true place ....[S]o: the unthought would have to make your machines uncomfortable, the uninscribed that remains to be inscribed would have to make their memory suffer.
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> (Lyotard 1991: 19-20)

This final point about the suffering of memory required to make machines human (or rather, to allow thought to survive without a body) reminds me of one of the most poignant aesthetic representations of the issue. In Ridley Scott's 1982 film, *Blade Runner*, the central concern is the ontological one of the psychical consequences for technologically replicated subjects who cannot reconcile their consciousness to their status as made, not found. To combat the inbuilt knowledge of their imminent and prescribed deaths they try to counter with the "cushion" of memory, but these memories themselves are of technological origin - they are implanted. Finally the androids - the "replicants" of the film - are denied "truly" human status by their relation to their own deaths. That is, there can be no productive conflict for the replicants between eros and thanatos if they are always already aware

of the hour of their deaths.

Of course, this is not a particularly rosy view of what constitutes the human essence; if I am to respond to my opening questions by saying that the body persists because machines cannot experience lack, or suffer and die in the way that we do. But of course, this view of humanness is commensurate with the *modus operandi* of psychoanalysis itself, where Freud would ask: what constitutes the normal if this is a pathological instance of it? Since psychoanalysis began as a way of curing mentally ill people, this is not perhaps surprising. What is much more intriguing for thinking about culture is the way in which this Freudian insight puts the anomalous, the pathological and the transgressive in a valorized and productive position in terms of what they can show us about humanness itself, its necessary intersubjectivity not only as a subject split between the thought and the unthought, but between itself and its others. Thus a profoundly non-technological way of knowing results, a knowledge emanating from the Other which might be termed "paranoid", as Lacan points out. In other words, it is a symptomatic knowledge, one which has effects not following necessarily from logical causes, but from the contingent vicissitudes of the Other - including that which is the subject's own unconscious. And this insight is still much contested and beleaguered, not only by the psy-industries, but by culture industries generally.

We might thus represent the continued conviction among millitech critics that technology is leading us to a posthuman, digital twenty-first century as a disavowal of an equally valid possibility - that it is the "inhuman", excessive or pathological elements in our psyches that are paradoxically maintaining our fragile humanity, and even, indeed, thriving on the ontological challenge to the human which the new technologies undoubtedly represent. Millitech critics, by, perhaps unconsciously, disavowing our inassimilable inhumanity in favour of a paradoxically evolutionary view of technology, sustain a teleological politics of the subject even as they posit a new (cyborg) subjectivity. This is precisely because they do not, like the earlier example of Roseanne Stone, escape a notion of subjectivity as potentially fully present to itself; a notion which is the constitutive illusion of subjectivity in modernity.

This "pathologization" in contemporary subjectivity manifests itself not only as violent pathology and perversion, but also as what one might call a range of pathologized representations of identity. These pathologizations are often in an intimate, and at times agonistic relation to technologies, especially media technologies and representations. Seltzer analyzes such a "relay" of technology and pathology in the course of a critique of serial killing and addiction in machine culture:

> I want to suggest ... that it is not quite a primary identification or imitation that becomes conspicuous in cases of serial violence, but, beyond that, an intimacy with technologies (and not least media technologies ... clearly there is a sort of CNN-effect by which serial killing and ramifying bureaucracies of information-processing solicit and ratify each other ...). I have in mind here something more than the mass media representations of such intimacies ... [s]omething more because if such accounts register the internal relations between the organic and the technological in such cases, ... they do so by pathologizing and thus disavowing the everyday intimacies with technology in machine culture; this everyday intimacy is thus routinely pathologized and exoticized in the alien and terminator versions of lurid tech-noir.
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> (Seltzer 1993: 98)

This passage was written before the release (and recent gripping but inevitable finale) of the O.J. Simpson trial, probably the chief contemporary indicator of the intimate imbrication of media technology and violent pathology, so we might grant its theoretical insight - and its central point. Viewed statistically, serial killing and violent sex crime have reached unprecedented levels as the century has worn on. There has certainly been a glamorization of such events and the figure of the serial killer, but Seltzer's argument highlights an essential banality in the operations of what appear the most transgressive acts of all. It is a banality which is usually overlooked or, rather, "disavowed" in favour of glamorized versions because of the relationship of the seriality of serial killing or even the multiple nature of mass murder to a primary identification which is present even in normal psychical life.

There are also examples of such cultural "regression" or pathologization occurring at a more organized social level, in contexts where the impact of technology plays a much less direct or discursive role. I refer of course to the global political tendency to nationalism, or more harrowingly, to ethnicization and even genocide. This presents not only a parallel tendency but something of a counter to the narratives of globalized informatics and postmodern subjectivity supposedly brought about by the technification and globalization of (Western) culture.

Clearly then, though technologies, and technologies of power, might be shifting the sense of human subjectivity, how it is understood through its spectacular representations, and how it may be changed by the millennial advance of technology into a possibly humanless twenty-first century, there is a parallel atavism operating in the human psyche which is doing as much to alter our sense of what subjectivity consists in - and as much to continue to problematize an easy progressivist or evolutionary view of what technology will do to culture and the human body in it.

I'd like to end then with a call for a shift of attention in millitech theory away from epistemological problems of the representations and discourses of technology in the production of postmodern and possibly non-natural subjects, to the ontological one of the conditions of subjectivity which provide the grounds for such putative shifts, and which are not properly dealt with even in some of the most dystopian and apocalyptic accounts of the latest death of the subject - this time at the hands (and it seems we still want them to *be* hands) of its technology. If this means acknowledging more than we have done as technocritics that our millennial culture is indeed apocalyptically pathologized rather than apocalyptically technological, then perhaps it will also renew our sense of the desirable differences between humans and machines.

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