

# Posthumanism: The Absent Present

**Extract from**

**'The Medicalization of Cyberspace' by Andy Miah & Emma Rich  
(2008, Routledge, pp.111-114).**

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[The online pro-ana movement] is one example of how the virtualization of identity has led to a prostheticization of the body, which is revealed as a removal process towards an artificial prosthetic – a prosthetic that is designed to not fit, to be burdensome. This notion of a *prosthetic burden* returns us to the main theoretical premises of the book, where the medicalization of cyberspace encompasses the consideration of health outside of the traditional medical environment and within the multi-faceted, non-regulated (rather than unregulated) space of the Internet.

The medicalization of cyberspace embodies the way that medical practice is developing in the contested conditions of postmodernity, where ethical discourse takes place within a space of ambiguous realness. As Braidotti (2002: 2) observes, 'we live in permanent processes of transition, hybridization and nomadization, and these in-between states and stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation'. In keeping with these observations, we have not attempted to assert a single, comprehensive view of the body in cyberspace. Instead, we have explored how questions of materiality and humanness emerge via the context of medicalized cyberspaces. Through our examples, various

modes of enacting what Sandberg (2001) describes as ‘morphological freedom’ have been articulated. The auctioning of a human kidney on eBay, the proanorexia movement and the rhetoric of the first human clone each clarify the broadening base of ethical concern and its challenge to social science. This confrontation takes two forms, the first of which is most clearly espoused by Fuller’s (2006) critique of ‘bioliberalism,’ as fundamentally antithetical to sociology’s socialism. Fuller’s concern is that the legitimization of such practices leads to a diminishing respect for human subjectivity, and his views are not unlike Fukuyama’s (2002) attack on technoprogressive or transhumanist claims. Fuller’s encounters with bioethics are part of a series of inquiries by social scientists who have become critical of the politics of bioethics. Over the past few years, a number of other sociologists have offered similar critiques of how bioethics should engage more fully with sociological issues (Haimes 2002; Hedgecoe 2004; de Vries et al. 2006; López 2004).

The second confrontation involves the operable mode of sociology, as the study of societies. This is explained usefully through another example. In 2002, designers from the Royal College of Art in London developed a prototype of a telephone tooth implant that would sit permanently lodged in the tooth, rather like a cavity filling. These designers had no intention of developing the product, and so in one sense the episode was a hoax (Metz 2006). Yet the media treated the concept as a genuine product that might arrive soon on the market. The imaginary artefact took on a life of its own and came to constitute the conditions within which such prospects came to matter to previously unengaged communities. Indeed, with the increasing miniaturization of technology to the nano scale, the concept is difficult to dismiss outright, although such applications are nowhere near realization. Again, this reminds us of the examples discussed earlier in the context of David Cronenberg’s film *The Fly* (1986). This provocation appeals to the kinds of blurred space that are now characteristic of discussions about the future, where technological possibility is treated as technological probability or inevitability. Perhaps the height of the success for these designers was making the front cover of Time magazine, which confirmed the extent of their provocation.

Such future-casting advances the sociological criticisms of futurology in quite interesting ways, and these provocations are inextricable from an analysis of medicalized cyberspace. Indeed, imagining the (ethical) future has become a more legitimate practice for sociologists via the recent trend towards upstream public engagement on science and technology issues, which has, in turn, provoked discussions about the value of empirical ethics. While one might discuss the politics and sociology of these possible futures – bioliberalism versus bioconservatism – what seems uncontested is the rebiologization of sociology that the debate presumes. Indeed, Delanty (2002) takes stock of the challenge this provokes by considering how the science of genetics is inevitably socially constructed by individual agency, and so we must look to the social sciences to make sense of this. He goes on to locate these discussions in the context of a public discourse that resembles the upstream engagement debates about science.

Accompanying these conversations is the emerging conceptual lens of mobility, which Urry (2000) offers to explain how sociologists must work in a period that is characterized by the absence of societies. We will return to this concept in the conclusion, though it is useful to mention that an integral aspect of this work attends to the digital dimensions of mobile cultures. It offers further support for considering online health discourses as mechanisms through which to make sense of technological identity and its relationship to the officialdom of medicine. However, it is also important to link these ideas with other contemporary health care debates, such as the notion of medical tourism, where clients travel the world in search of medical laws that accommodate their particular need or desire. One can include our earlier discussions about body and organ trafficking within such debates.

Within cultural studies, there have been some precedents for these discussions about the ethics of bioliberalism, which we have already mentioned in various ways. Thus, conversations about cyborgs – more Kevin Warwick's enhanced human than Donna Haraway's interest in the differently able – have infused imaginative practices of cultural forecasting by aligning it with the established politics of cultural studies. For example, Gray appeals to the concept of the cyborg to address the interests of marginal groups whose humanness is not given full moral or legal recognition. His 'cyborg bill of rights' establishes that, among other things, there must be freedom of 'consciousness' and of 'family, sexuality, and gender' (2002: 28–29). His ideas and, more recently, Zylinska's (2005) relocation of ethics within cultural studies, culminating in her own manifesto for feminist cyberbioethics, stop short of utopian claims in order to argue on behalf of Otherness – of allowing people the freedom of biological modification in so far as it addresses plausible identity claims.

However, one almost feels that these manifestos are characteristic of an optimistic phase within the social sciences – the aspiration to study as yet unknowable societies. In response to these discussions about the role of bioethics in social sciences (and vice versa), Zylinska's 'feminist cyberbioethics' retreats from what might be described as cyber-libertarianism or bioliberalism to a proposed study of the 'ethics of hybrids'. These ideas have clear connections with a range of literature, such as Butler's (1993) notion of 'bodies that matter' and Mary Douglas's (1965) thesis on 'matter out of place', whose work has been discussed recently in the context of biological modification (Coyle 2006). The Pro-Ana community also responds to this problematic, as it is constituted by the presence of medical knowledge out of its proper, regulated sphere and, arguably, beyond the reach of that sphere. Like Zylinska (2005), we also revert from the cyborg paradigm in order to apply a more precise, theoretical claim about the medicalization of cyberspace. This is because our claim is only partially connected to the cyborg metaphor (as cyborg ritual), which has become only one form of various ways of conceptualizing the implications of machinic interfaces with biology. We also consider that Haraway's cyborg has often entered contemporary academic parlance without taking into account how non-central were her aspirations to talk about the imminence

of the cyborg as a posthuman entity. Rather, Haraway's ideal sits comfortably with the idea that there are fewer and fewer reasons to accept clarity over ontological distinctions. Indeed, Haraway suggests as much when proclaiming that 'the cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics' (1991: 150), thus invoking our earlier claim about the presence of the anorexic body in Pro-Ana movements. In each of the cases we discuss, the cybernetic organism cannot be reduced to mere information; yet the body is both absent and present in cyberspace.

The concept of presence is a crucial, though contested, notion in studies of digital cultures. Stories of suicide chat rooms (Rajagopal 2004) suggest that communication about sensitive or private issues online can often be accompanied by a weak sense of responsibility in participants that works to counter the quality of the experience. This has implications for what we call the bioethics of cybermedicine. Discussions about physical presence are accompanied by criticisms of bioethics as an industry of sorts, which lacks a demonstrated ability to prioritize social needs – such as welfarist conceptions of health care (Purdy 2001; Turner 2003; Zylinska 2005). To this, we might also add the commercialization of ethical culture – shopping, eating, energy, tourism, etc. – as further evidence of how the ethical has become hyphenated in the sense offered by Zizek (2004), as a surrogate for genuine ethical concern. In this manner, the absent presence within bioethics is characterized by its overwhelming presence within the public sphere, but lacking any ability to argue on behalf of basic health care needs. We are both overwhelmed and unassisted by bioethics, to the point where key scholars in the midst of discussions about medicine's future are beginning to think 'beyond bioethics' (Fukuyama and Furger 2007). This situation also explains why our construction of the absent present is ethical: it is the presence of an ethical commitment within cultural studies, which is constituted by an absence of the capability to scrutinize judgements. This is not a criticism of pluralism as such, nor wholly a criticism of those who have pioneered bioethics. Indeed, it is more carefully an appeal to consider what literature should inform bioethical deliberations and to support Callahan (1993: S9) in his counsel that bioethics must continue to 'expand its own horizons'.

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