

Testi/3

*Parahuman**

Technology, Semi-sovereignty, and Bodies in the Future Perfect

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The article starts with an outline of the current debate on the technical extension and modification of the body. Subsequently, I will argue in favour of adopting a sceptical stance towards any form of versioning and optimization logic related to the body. I will, by contrast, propose other terms: semi-sovereignty and a conception of the body in the future perfect, framed within an understanding of the relation between bodies and technology that I have tentatively called 'parahuman'. Futuristic scenarios all too often already know where the body will end up, which is why they mostly have the character of a curse or a rather banal self-fulfilling prophecy. Therefore, I am asking to consider first of all how it is possible to rethink in a more interesting way the already existing hybridisation between bodies and technology, and how it is possible to challenge futuristic scenarios according to which the 'post' of post-humans is an overcoming of something flawed (the 'natural' body).

1. Superhumans

Neil Harbisson considers himself a cyborg. In 2010, together with Moon Ribas, he established the Cyborg Foundation, which supports people who want to become cyborgs. In autumn 2013, in Berlin, the Verein Cyborg e.V. was founded, which pursues similar objectives. Tim Cannon, one of the most popular representatives of the Body-Hacking and Body-Modification community, puts it straightforwardly: the human body is «fundamentally defective»¹. Indeed, it should and could be improved by technical means. How could we understand this new/old emphasis on the necessary fusion of bodies and technology? Do the cyborgs of the 2010s differ from older techno-avantgardist visions? Has the

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¹ T. Cannon's talk about Cyborgs e.V. in the C-Base Berlin, *Our Cyborg Future*, 14 October 2013, <<http://vimeo.com/76897222>> (accessed on June 1st, 2014).

human body become 'more feasible' or are the new cyborgs merely a further rehash of the totalitarian dreams of a 'new man' from the first half of the 20th century?

First of all, there is a striking similarity between the intellectual milieu of the new cyborgs and the milieu of the avant-garde of the 1920s, which longed for the 'new man'. We might say that Neil Harbisson has made an old dream of the Dadaists come true. In the 1920s, Raoul Hausmann wrote inspiring texts on the 'Optophonetic', i.e. the technical conversion of an optical signal into acoustic perception. He was also involved in the technical development of such a device². Human perception should synaesthetically be expanded, and this revolution in perception would be the prelude to a political revolution, in accordance with the spirit of Russian and Italian Futurists. For some time now, Neil Harbisson has been integrating the 'Optophon' into his everyday life. Since 2004 he has been wearing an *eyeborg*. Harbisson is colour-blind and this device receives the colour spectrum from the environment and turns it into sounds, so that he perceives faces, supermarket shelves and landscapes as melodies or harmonies.

What should one put forward against this playful form of heightened perception, especially since it offsets a bodily 'defect' and leads to more or less interesting artistic results? How and why should the right to technical *enhancement* be denied? The contemporary cyborgs like to talk about 'morphological self-determination', following an older political tradition: the demand for gender reassignment surgery on the part of intersex people. However, cases such as those of Oscar Pistorius or Markus Rehm make evident how delicate the surface has become on which the discussion about *enhancement* takes place. In 2008 Pistorius asked to participate in the Olympic Games in Beijing. However, the Anti-Doping Committee denied him this right, since his prosthesis was regarded as a performance increaser. Pistorius lodged an appeal, a counter-report was prepared and he won the case: his participation at the Games was allowed, however only on the condition that his participation would remain an exception. In the debate fears were expressed that allowing the prosthesis would open the door to more body modifications by ambitious athletes. For instance, how could the sports authorities prevent sportswomen or sportsmen from voluntary mutilating themselves in order to adopt technical supports? In a system in which the imperatives of individual success and performance have long triumphed over 'natural' corporeality, it would only be logical to replace those body parts that are an obstacle to victory.

The extent to which such an understanding has already become mainstream was impressively demonstrated in the campaign *Meet the Superhumans*, which was produced by Channel 4 on the occasion of the 2012 Paralympics. Anyone

² See C. Borck: *Sinnesmontagen. Die Sehprothese zwischen Ersatzapparat und Technovision*, in *Ultravision. Zum Wissenschaftsverständnis der Avantgarden*, eds. S. Flach and M. Vöhringer, München 2010, pp. 149-164; P. Bexte, *Mit den Augen hören/mit den Ohren sehen. Raoul Hausmanns optophonetische Schnittmengen*, in H. Schramm et al., *Spuren der Avantgarde: Theatrum anatomicum. Frühe Neuzeit und Moderne im Vergleich*, Berlin-New York 2011, pp. 426-441.

who followed the 2012 Paralympics, even superficially, was able to sense that something is changing in the public perception of disabled sports, perhaps even in the perception of disability as a whole. Spectacular images were circulated already in the run-up, for example by means of the campaign. It was the biggest media campaign ever launched by the British Channel 4. With a hard-hitting *Public Enemy* song, the training of eight Paralympics British athletes is shown in the video. In a hard and dynamic montage the classical narrative of misfortune and its overcoming by self-discipline and harshness is illustrated through the athletes biographies. The visual language, which blends video clip and action film, connected accidents or war-related events with competition.

This way of staging disability is relatively new, and its implications for disabled sports and the efforts for inclusion are hard to predict. This visual language denotes a new quality of the demand for participation: as in the case of Oscar Pistorius' demand for participation in the Olympic Games for the non-disabled, the faces of the protagonists of the film reflect a defiant pride, as if to say first of all: we too!

The designation 'superhumans' is related to two concepts of transgression. The first idea is what Peter Sloterdijk in his book *You Must Change Your Life* calls «cripple existentialism»³. He deals with disability in an (in my view) over-affirmative way as he attributes an especially strong will to other-than-normal-bodied human beings. This narrative of the *overcoming* [*Überwindung*] of limits is still strong today – as can be seen in the commercial. It is currently aligned with the neoliberal imperative of constant self-improvement. Perhaps the best-known representative of this program is Aimee Mullins: a Paralympics athlete, model, actress and popular motivational speaker at TED conferences. The narrative of overcoming is furthermore aligned with certain evolutionary theories; to put it in another way, we might say that 'disability' has now 'migrated' to the theory of evolution. The so-called *handicap theory* developed by Israeli biologists Amotz and Avishag Zahavi explains excess and surplus, e.g. in the plumage of birds, as the exhibiting of a handicap on the part of male animals (e.g., extra-long tail feathers which are a hindrance to flight). These male animals are particularly attractive to females because they show that they are able to survive despite their handicap. Superfluity is thus reinterpreted as a handicap and a visible identification for a particularly high degree of 'fitness'. These pop evolutionary theories fit well with the idea that it is precisely their 'deficiency' that makes other-than-normal-bodied people particularly compatible – and that is the second idea emphasized by the video – with the latest technologies, and thus renders them particularly future-oriented beings – human beings 2.0. This idea was worked out at a conference entitled *H2.0 – Human 2.0* which was held at MIT in 2007 by Hugh Herr, an engineer in prosthetics who firmly championed this thesis⁴.

³ P. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, trans. W. Hoban, Cambridge 2013, pp. 43-47.

⁴ See the website of the conference: <<http://h20.media.mit.edu/>>, accessed October 10, 2015.

The staging of the Paralympics athletes as a league of superheroes suggests a comparison with another group of ‘handicapped’ superheroes: the X-Men⁵. They were invented by the graphic artists Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1963. Since 2000 six major films, plus three more about the character Wolverine, have made the mutant league prominent. The films deal with the issue of otherness at the crossroads between biopolitics, normalism, technoscience and fantasies of superiority in a multi-layered way. The protagonists are mutants who, through the X-gene, develop certain features that turn them into social outsiders: they have wings, claws, and leonine manes. They can whip up a storm, they are telepathically gifted or have magnetic abilities. The fact that we should understand these film versions of the comics as a contribution to the history of the extermination of minorities is already made clear by the fact that the mutations of one of the protagonists occur for the first time when he is sent to a concentration camp. The films demonstrate two exemplary ways of in which the mutants, as a *minority group*, deal with their otherness. One group of mutants around Magneto consider themselves an evolutionary superior ‘species’ and engage in identity politics: physical superiority based on physical otherness, and moral superiority based on the experience of oppression. A second group around Charles Xavier – who is a Holocaust survivor as well – acts within the scope of an assimilation strategy: young mutants are educated in a college so that they may learn to employ their qualities productively for the benefit of society. They are simultaneously trained to defend the group (against Magneto’s people, against the mob) as a battle team with a strict ethos of channelling violence. When the figures were developed by Jack Kirby in the 1960s, they stood for two forms of politics: the liberal civil rights movement *à la* Martin Luther King and militant identity politics, embodied by Malcolm X. Politics and society, on their part, behave towards the mutants in an ambivalent way, fluctuating between open physical violence and political inclusion, between fear of the Other, fascination for the unusual, and attempts to make the ‘powers’ of the X-Men economically profitable.

A whole range of political options are presented in which the promise of individual happiness plays a certain role, along with struggles for an identity of the mutants as a group, the historical experience of violence and scientific expertise as the basis for decision-making processes. The films raise a number of striking questions with regard to the Paralympics: What is the status of physical otherness within the struggle for participation in political and social processes? Is ‘identity’ an adequate basis for political agency? How should we understand otherness and difference in the context of normative or normalising regimes? What models of *agency* are conceivable and feasible beyond the classical, bourgeois understanding of the subject as individual? And also: What is the relation between otherness

⁵On the issue of otherness and disability with regard to X-Men, see my essay written with Tina Lutter: K. Harrasser and C. Lutter, *Spielräume. Zwei Szenen zur Differenz*, in *Dritte Räume. Homi K. Bhabhas Kulturtheorie. Kritik. Anwendung. Reflexion*, eds. A. Babka, J. Malle and M. Schmidt, Wien 2012, pp. 237-248.

towards the growing possibilities of a medical-technical intervention in the body? In several episodes, pharmacological or technical modification plays a crucial role, for example, in developing a drug that promises to neutralize the mutations and thus to obtain a normalization.

The narrative of physical (self-)improvement as a quasi-evolutionary teleology of performance – in this case as well as in the case of Pistorius – is thought through until it shows its social and political consequences, since it collides with an important democratic principle, the one of equality, but no alternative narrative is proposed. The alleged inevitability of improvement through an ever-increasing interweaving of the organic and the technological remains a veritable TINA hypothesis – There Is No Alternative – to self-improvement. Whether the scenario is nanotechnical, bionic, pharmaceutical or robotic, the core story remains the same: man is invited, allowed to or condemned to fulfil evolution by means of technologies. But in what political, economic and cultural situation is the discourse on the inevitability of the technical reworking of the body plausible at all? The concept of ‘fitness’ plays a crucial role here, with its ambiguous meanings, at the crossroads between species survival, social adaptation and phantasms of superiority. In my opinion, technical manipulations of the body must be analysed as part of a modern re-evaluation of what life is. Around 1800, a form of vitalocentrism emerged that became associated with two powerful explanatory patterns: (the theory of) economics and history. Together with historical discourse the theory of evolution coined the imperative of the ‘survival of the fittest’. And together with (the theory of) economics, vitalocentrism lead to the establishment of biopolitical measures for the preservation of health and labour, but also to a new type of subject: a subject who, like an entrepreneur, takes care of his own health and productivity. One must therefore understand biotechnologies as techniques under the aegis of self-care. Nowadays, we are called to take care of and to intensify our lives on both a large and small scale. The appeal, in a broad and appalling form, resonates in the concern for the ‘extinction’ of the Germans, which Thilo Sarrazin in 2010 expressed loudly and in a populist way.⁶ On a small scale, as an individualized appeal, it is expressed in the micro-procedures of self-management (from the alarm clock to the to-do list), but also in the effort to stay fit and beautiful, and in all kinds of precautionary measures. What might constitute an argument for emancipation in the disabled movement – that all bodies are deficient, that there is no supra-historical norm of the healthy body – becomes a fulcrum and pivotal point of the imperative for self-improvement and self-care.

2. The Parahuman

⁶Cf. T. Sarrazin, *Deutschland schafft sich ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen*, Munich 2010.

Are the cyborgs of today telling us just another story of biopolitical optimization? And does it make sense (again) to appeal to the 'natural' body as a resort? It seems to be more adequate to think of the body – since the biotechnological possibilities of reworking are increasing – as an entity that is made and colonized by technology without surrendering it to yet another kind of determinism that demands and promotes its improvement. But because of individualist humanism, we are largely incapable of adequately dealing with heteronomies, such as that of cooperation with technologies, in an intellectual and practical way. In what follows, I will try to develop an alternative concept of technical agency that can more interestingly and realistically describe what exactly we do whenever we interact with technology. We tend to underestimate or overestimate technologies. The constant mixing of bodies and machines is not a destiny in the sense of an evolutionary logic that leads to a complete eradication of the biological, but neither is it technology as such – neutral. As Bruno Latour puts it, we are continually delegating cognitive and physiological processes to whole networks of things; we have been doing this for a very long time and live in a technological and biological milieu in which history is embedded. The mixing of humans with non-human beings took place long ago⁷. But it is not just a matter of the kind of high-tech combinations which dominate science-fiction films and science journalism; rather, the sphere of mixing is extremely diverse: bacteria, space radiation, bicycles, streets, writing tools – all these entities decisively change what we can do and think. However this does not mean that the technologization of the body must signify vitalocentric efficiency; even if the current narratives present man-machine hybridization as the crowning of a trajectory leading from repair to improvement, from therapy to enhancement. The narratives are also imbued with economic motives: the ethos of entrepreneurial self-improvement as well as the utopias of perceptual renewal and networking connect with self-fulfilling prophecies of an ideology of global growth.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a feminist version of the cyborg was already available: Donna Haraway conceptualized a techno-body that does not know already what or who he/she/it might become, a techno body that is capable of establishing surprising new connections. Understood in this way, technologies, as Bruno Latour also suggests, are neither simply dominance and value-producing machines of cognitive capitalism, nor are they the material basis of an endlessly reconfigurable future promise. Rather, they embody past and present relations and they are world-generating milieus, which enable perception, communication, and modes of self-experience that would not be possible without them. Technologies are not simply functional: they are artefacts that stimulate the imagination and transform the body. I will consider two cases, one leading us back to Donna Haraway and the other to Oscar Pistorius and Charles Darwin.

⁷ See B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. C. Porter, Cambridge, MA, 1993.

Kenny Fries's book *The History of My Shoes and the Evolution of Darwin's Theory* is a commentary on Darwin's theory from the perspective of a disabled person⁸. Kenny Fries was born – much like Oscar Pistorius – with considerably deformed lower extremities. Oscar Pistorius' parents decided to have their child's legs amputated to allow him to have a 'normal' childhood – a child who is learning to walk with prostheses from a young age is 'more normal' than one bound to a wheelchair. So while Pistorius' parents chose a radical intervention and technological solution, Kenny Fries' parents opted for the long and painful procedure to make the legs capable of walking by means of orthopaedic surgery. Fries spent much of his childhood in hospital, with the result that he could move autonomously, but remained visibly 'with a different body'. In his book, he writes about this journey from one body into another and about many other journeys that he has taken up throughout his life. In particular, he reports on various hiking trips he has undertaken with his boyfriend. What is remarkable in his narrative is that he emphasizes an aspect of Darwin's thought, which social Darwinists generally like to forget, namely that 'adaptation' is always – according to Darwin – related to a milieu, so there is no such thing as 'general' adaptation or evolution. On the contrary, 'fitness' is conceived as something relational and contextual. Fries adopts this idea when he describes very carefully how he was surprisingly more capable than his partner on a certain hiking trip because his orthopaedic shoes could be used perfectly as an aid on a fixed rope route, while the ladders over the steep slope brought his 'normalbodied' friend on the brink of mental and physical breakdown. Something similar happens to him on canoeing expeditions: in this particular 'milieu' he has a physical advantage, e.g. because his legs fit very well in the canoe and his stiff hip gives him stability. The idea of fitness, of adaptation, and of capability, never falls into the depreciation of the less 'fit' or into a self-improvement imperative: because adaptation is always limited by a certain milieu: the 'better' limits himself, remains situational or, rather, situated. Agency is always about a specific practice within a specific milieu, but it brings self-pleasure and an experience of 'ableness', of ability as a partially sovereign relationship with a certain technical-biological environment. In Kenny Fries's narrative, one can also see how agency is distributed among rather diverse actors. Some are human, some are technical, some belong to the environment they have become. All these agents interact with one another, modify one another, and produce complicated choreographies.

My second example comes from Donna Haraway's book *When Species Meet*⁹. In this book Haraway thinks less about the technical-biological hybrid systems – the cyborgs that made her famous – than about the relationship between humans and animals. It is all the more surprising that in the middle of the book we find a small chapter about her father, who – to keep to our subject – was a sports reporter and moved on crutches and in wheelchairs for most of

⁸ K. Fries, *The History of My Shoes and the Evolution of Darwin's Theory*, Boston 2007.

⁹ D. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis 2007.

his life due to a tubercular bone infection. Haraway emphasizes two moments: firstly, the relationship between the story, the narrated world, and the world-creating power of words; secondly, her father's ways of getting along with the various technical aids. In both cases, Haraway uses the expression «to stay in the game». «Staying in the game» means developing relationships that are materially semiotic in nature. A biography is produced by material-semiotic weaving: by linking *bios* to *graphie*, lived life to its signification. Haraway emphasizes that her father's particular biography could not have been written without taking into account his relationship with sport on the one hand and his crutches and prostheses on the other. The latter contributed to the movement patterns of the next generation. Both her brothers acquired the distinctive gait of their father, although they were perfectly healthy. «Staying in the game» also means the dedication of the author's father to his profession, which in turn attracted a whole network of technologies. Even after his professional activity had ended, he continued to pursue his keen interest in sport: by means of a complex satellite system, by commenting on the games on the telephone, etc. The words that Haraway finds for the role of technology in her father's life emphasize the empowerment potential of technology without expecting everything from technology. Furthermore the subjectivation of the father as a professional sports reporter does not follow the pattern of 'although': although he was handicapped, he became a sports reporter. On the contrary, she says that he always lived his «autonomy-in-relation». It was an autonomy, established within relationships and connections, an autonomy as transaction. Elsewhere she refers to the assemblage of man and machine embodied by her father through the expression «mess-mates», partners in disorder, partners in turmoil.

Despite Haraway's complete lack of hostility towards technology, a specific technical device in her narrative falls out of the game: her father's last wheelchair, which was by far the most technologically advanced, was no longer a mess-mate. Not because something was wrong with its technical details, but because it came 'into the game' at a time when the former pattern had ended. It came in at a time when the issue was how to die well and the wheelchair was possibly not a partner in this. Haraway consequently explores expressions that allow her to bypass or undermine the opposition between humanism and posthumanism. Because what matters is not only what technologies can do or what we can or cannot do with them, but also the way we are able to address them. Cyborgs, whether they are called X-Men or 'My father the sports reporter', are thus understood in the first place as figures who embody the awareness of a problem. If our techno-bodies are an inheritance of modern science and the capitalist production of surplus-value, it is necessary to dive into this abstraction and to work it from within. An acceptance of technologies does not necessarily amount to an acceptance of the hypothesis of inevitability or of *enhancement* and self-improvement. To understand the body in the future perfect mode is to conceive of it as an entity that will only in the future have knowledge about what it is capable of in the present. It is important not to carelessly project the body into the future of his perfection

and thus to deliver the actual, concrete bodies to the pressure of constant self-improvement. With an understanding of the body in the future perfect we come close to what Thomas Macho calls «inclusive humanism»¹⁰. It is an approach that, as a first step, determines humanism as a historically specific path. It starts from the fact that humanism is based on a specifically Western definition of man, which is problematic as such: the humanism of the Enlightenment as a 'regulative idea' (Immanuel Kant) implicitly proceeds from man as an individual capable of rational choices, having at his/her disposal him/herself and his/her body. And only over time, slaves, women, and others would also gain access to human rights by demonstrating their rationality, usefulness, and self-control. With Macho and Haraway, I am concerned with expanding the population of the agents and thereby humanism itself. This would be a humanism that does not derive from a definition of the 'human' nor from 'being human' as an unchanging quality, but from humanism as a horizon within which potentially many other subjects can be included, beings that are commonly not considered human beings. In the extension of the Spinozist dictum that we cannot know what a body can do, we cannot know who or what a human being is / can do.

Thus an arena of agency is envisaged that makes space for semi-sovereign actors (which is what all of us ultimately are). This is the idea of a political arena in which countless actors are considered capable of articulation, and not just those who express themselves in a rational way and act in a sovereign way. A central factor in relation to whether such an arena is possible is to make sure that the who (is able to speak up) is not narrowed down and that opposition is possible. Haraway uses the word *response-ability*. In every situation, it is the core-issue to give the possibility of a response, a counterargument. It is necessary to make arrangements for everything to be able to speak up. Rather than the concept of post-human, it seems to me that we should use here that of a co-humanity, which takes into account what coexists with people. Or perhaps – and this is my last suggestion – there is an even more fitting term: parahuman, a concept that suggests not so much a peaceful co-existence as a wild juxtaposition and succession of different forms of existence. For me, that would be a present and future filled with hope.

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¹⁰T. Macho, *Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen. Für einen inklusiven Humanismus*, in *Tiere. Der Mensch und seine Natur*, ed. K. P. Liessmann, Wien 2013, pp. 153-173.