

# Fashioning the Body of the Future. Trans- & Post-humans (Excerpt from Dissertation in Fashion Studies)

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*“As Glaucus, when he tasted of the herb,  
That made him peer among the ocean gods:  
Words may not tell of that transhuman change.”*

– Dante Alighieri

For a couple of years now, contemporary fashion has been using the words “posthuman” or “transhuman” to refer to some of the most avant-garde collections. The likes of Rick Owens, Gareth Pugh, Iris Van Herpen, Alessandro Michele, Hussein Chalayan, Rei Kawakubo and other designers are often coined with either of these terms. (Fedorova, 2018; Evans, 2018) Indeed, when watching their shows, one might easily ask himself — Who are these clothes designed for? Are they for humans or for some future mutations of humans, machines and animals? In order to develop a contextual understanding of the terms transhumanism and posthumanism, we shall analyse their socio-historical evolution.

The *Divine Comedy* was written at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and it is the first historical record of the term “transhuman” that we know of. Dante Alighieri, the great Italian humanist used this term to illustrate the transcendence of the human condition beyond its limitations. It is a rare evidence that Alighieri had already in the early 1300s thought of a certain “transhuman” change which would make humans “peer among the ocean gods.” (Alighieri, 1320)

Indeed, the context in which the word is being used has changed since the times of Alighieri, yet its meaning remains. A few centuries later, the famous essay of Julian Huxley and titled *Transhumanism* speaks of an entire system of thoughts which enables humans to fully realise their capabilities. In the next step, according to Huxley, humans will attempt to overcome the limitations of their nature by the means of scientific and technological explorations. (Huxley, 1957) In this regard, transhumanism has become an entire philosophical movement and arising from the modernist technological revolution, it

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proposes the belief that “if proper measures are taken, no one need be starved of true satisfaction, or condemned to sub-standard fulfilment.” (Huxley, 1957, p. 14)

In the light of the contemporary scientific and technological developments, transhumanism can be, and should be understood as a practice of human enhancement. Here, Mann sees “... a link to artistic, designed-based practices that take us close to the issue of human enhancement as a means for developing transformative bodies.” (Mann, 1997) It is clear then, that the relation of transhumanism and the body is explicitly conditional, as the process of transformation of human towards transhuman is enacted precisely through the human body. At the end of this process however, the biology and the structure of the body might be challenged so much that it becomes but a “... substrate for the mind, dispensable once better replacements are engineered.” (Lilley, 2013) This argument is perfectly reflected by Sandra Blakeslee’s statement:

*“The body does not have a monopoly for enacting the desires of the brain.”*

*Sandra Blakeslee, 2008*

So the imperfect body needs to be enhanced and augmented via a thoughtful design process in order to become the vessel for this transhuman change. Haraway implies that it is the question of “... how can our ‘natural’ bodies be re-imagined and re-lived in new ways...” (Haraway, 1991, p. 3) Here, fashion offers an interesting testimony of the re-imagination of the human body towards the transhuman. When Rick Owens says “That’s my story, and that’s the story of humanity: trying to fix ourselves, always trying to fix ourselves” (Owens, 2018, online) he is referencing precisely this quality of his fashion — to re-think and transgress the human body. However, as Fedorova argues, this is not a new practice and fashion in this regard is but a visual representation of a dystopian future rather than a real fulfilment of the transhumanist ideal of enhancing the body. (Fedorova, 2018)

This issue can however be more effectively solved from the stance of neuroscience, cybernetics, robotics, computing and other scientific disciplines. (Lilley, 2013) The people who have embarked on this scientifically and technologically-fuelled transition of re-designing their biological bodies are generally well-known as biohackers or cyborgs.

Donna Haraway, the author of the *Cyborg Manifesto* defines cyborg as “a hybrid creature, composed of organism and machine.” (Haraway, 1991, p. 149) As long as this human-machine union serves the purposes of an evolution and a continuous enhancement of the human potential, it shall be identified within the scope of transhumanism. (Vita-More, 2012) Nowadays, the transformative bodies of cyborgs may consist of an array of different technological solutions — prosthetics, implants, artificial senses, bioengineered gadgets, etc.

To mention a few most iconic examples, I would begin with Neil Harbisson, the first legally recognized cyborg in the world and the co-founder of the Cyborg Foundation. He was born colour-blind, so in 2004, he teamed up with neuroscientists, doctors and designers and he designed an antenna with a chip, which were later implanted into his skull. The antenna senses colour frequencies and translates them into audible vibrations, which are then transmitted to his brain through the implanted chip. Thanks to this technology, he has become the first human being capable of hearing colours, even those beyond the human visual spectrum. (Modesta, Harbisson, Graafstra, 2020)

Another cyborg, Moon Ribas, has implanted seismic sensors in her feet which enable her to detect not only all the earthquakes, but also the moonquakes happening on the Moon. This additional sense has become an inspiration for her work as a dancer and choreographer. Manel Muñoz is also an artist who has designed himself biometric ears that can perceive changes in weather. (Modesta, Harbisson, Graafstra, 2020, online)

All these cyborgs and biohackers share a similar approach to the human enhancement — their transformative bodies are designed to broaden their sensorial capabilities and thus reveal a new portion of reality. This phenomenon was named ‘Revealed Reality’ by American neuroscientist David Eagleman in order to distinguish it from “Augmented Reality” or “Virtual Reality”. The latter two are virtually-designed and unlike Revealed Reality do not “unveil” that part of the cosmos which had been hidden for the

limited human perception. (Eagleman, 2015) The process of revealing a new portion of the cosmos is a perfect example of a 'transhuman change', where the human being is transcended beyond his narrow cognitive spaces and thus transgress the human potential.

While Ranisch and Sorgner talk about transhuman as a transitional human, they argue that at the end of this technologically induced evolution, the result is a completely new being — a posthuman. *Post-humanism* represents a divorce from humanism, because it challenges "... the persistent concepts and dualities deeply rooted in Western culture, such as nature/culture, man/woman, subject/object, human/animal, or body/mind." (Ranisch, Sorgner, 2014, p. 8) Unlike in the case of transhumanism, posthumanism has not formed a clear philosophical stance, so it rather encompasses a plethora of meanings and implications. However, for the purposes of this essay, I shall regard posthumanism as something which may arise from the ashes of "those five hundred years of humanism which may be coming to an end." (Hassan, 1977, p. 843) But most importantly, as Ihab Hassan wrote in his essay *Prometheus as Performer: Towards a Posthumanist Culture* "posthumanism does not mean the literal end of man but the end of a particular image of us." (Hassan, 1977, p. 845) According to Vänskä, this means that humans shall no longer have the image of being the "crown of creation", as the humanist tradition puts forward, but that they shall be returned in the midst of other species and the natural world. This allows "... to transgress and to erase the hierarchical boundaries between humans, animals and machines, and between the organic and the inorganic." (Vänskä, 2018, p. 27)

Both posthumanism and transhumanism, according to Ranisch and Sorgner, attempt to free human beings – the first one by rejecting the outdated humanist paradigm and the latter by overcoming the human biological limitations. (Ranisch, Sorgner, 2014) In this regard, it is posthumanism which may better represent some of the qualities of the contemporary fashion. According to Evans, 'queering' the human body by renegotiating its form and gender is a practice of rejecting its human-ness. (Evans, 2018) Fashion as such however does not create the transitional human, but rather fashions the final product of this transition — the posthuman body. Indeed, fashion plays an important role in the representation of this newly developed body, but it is science and technology which is the creator here.

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