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The Physical and the Informational: New Perspectives on the Body in Science Fiction

The body has long been considered an essential component of—if not equivalent to—the self. However, in the wake of the information revolution, this changes. Late 20th century science fiction reflects a world in which the growth of mass media and the emergence of information technology have rendered the body nearly obsolete. For Ballard, Burroughs, Gibson, and Butler, the control of information has become the primary means by which individuals express their agency, and "being human" is nothing more than a state of mind.

Perhaps the most straightforward example of "the power of information" is the influence of media. In his novel *Nova Express*, William S. Burroughs describes "eddies and tornados of sound and camera array" (159), as well as a "Word broken pounded twisted exploded in smoke" (157). Through the use of violent imagery, Burroughs illustrates how the control of discourse is effectively a violent act. In fact, informational acts have *more* power to effect change than the use of physical force, due to their capacity to reach more people. There is no shortage of contemporary examples—during the Arab Spring, social media allowed protesters to mobilize in new ways (Brown et al.). For Burroughs, the emergence of instant one-to-many communication has fundamentally altered the individual's capacity to act.

Similarly, in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Ballard presents "post-physical" views of sex, death, and war. The protagonist is obsessed with starting World War III, but for him, World War

III is "not the political and military possibility, but the inner identity of such a notion" (Ballard 6). The war does not take place on a physical battlefield, but an informational one, where the targets are representations of celebrities ("celebrities" being platonic ideals of fame, rather than actual people). Similarly, the protagonist expresses a need "to invent a series of imaginary sexual perversions, just to keep the activity alive" (95). In this new, informational world, genitals have been replaced with mathematical surfaces and architectural blueprints, and the most intimate function of the body is reduced to a transfer of information.

We now turn our attention to Gibson's *Neuromancer*. In Gibson's world, AIs are more feared than even the most powerful humans, and "the nanosecond that one starts figuring out ways to make itself smarter, Turing'll wipe it" (Gibson 132). Despite lacking bodies, AIs have the capacity to dominate the world purely because of their ability to manipulate information. Meanwhile, humans view their bodies as nothing more than tools (or perhaps fashion accessories). Street samurai like Molly augment their bodies without a second thought, and due to neural interfaces and cut-out chips, prostitution is nothing more than "renting out the goods" (147). Much like Ballard, Gibson presents sex as an informational act: Molly has no qualms about her body being used for various perverse activities, but is horrified when her mind is on the receiving end. The body is an merely a vessel. In fact, the presence of the matrix means that a body is not even necessary for "life," as evidenced by Dixie Flatline.

Gibson presents informational existence as not only an alternative to the physical body, but as a more fundamental mode of being. A particularly striking example comes from the novel's denouement, in which Case finds out that the toxin sacs have been removed from his bloodstream. Molly explains that Neuromancer "got so deep inside [Case's] head, it made [his]

brain manufacture the enzyme" (268). A similar process happens in *Dawn*, when Lilith's body is induced to reabsorb cancer via "a kind of chemical command" (O. Butler 21). While perhaps a bit implausible, these scenarios force the reader to confront the fact that every aspect of the body is inherently informational—encryption, feedback, compression and error correction, ATGGCTACCACGTGA, all combining in different permutations to form aspects of the "self." Traditionally, the physical has come first, as the slate on which information is written. Gibson and Butler invert this hierarchy, demonstrating that information is a necessary prerequisite for any sort of meaningful physical being.

It should be noted that the primacy of the informational over the physical does not mean that the physical ceases to exist entirely. For information to actually interact with anything, it must have some physical representation. In fact, it can be shown that any amount information must occupy space (Bekenstein, Aaronson)[1]. The issue, however, is that the difference (or perhaps *différance*) between physical and informational existentance is not as clear-cut is commonly assumed, and that the hierarchical position of the physical over the informational is simply obsolete. Life has always been informational, but only in the wake of the technological revolution does it reveal itself as such.

This line of inquiry naturally leads to an old (and perhaps cliched) question: what does it mean to be human? If we ask the question in a biological context, the answer is simply "a member of the species *H. sapiens*" (the precise meaning of "species" is outside the scope of this

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[1]Although it is the more authoritative source, the Bekenstein paper will likely be impenetrable to readers without a physics background. Aaronson's explanation is very well-written and should be accessible to a popular audience.

essay). However, if we ask the question in a social sense—which is perhaps the only choice in an informational world, as biology ultimately privileges a physical perspective—the answer is very different. In this new world, "human" becomes more of a cultural concept than a biological one.

Let us turn our attention back to *Dawn*, in which humans are confronted with the possibility of integrating with another species. We now see a new human identity constructed—one which did not exist before, and which defines itself in opposition to the Oankali. In order to analyze this process, we look to Judith Butler, who identified similar processes when examining the social construction of gender (as far as we know, Judith and Octavia Butler are not related).

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler claims that "gender can be understood as a signification that an (already) sexually differentiated body assumes, but even then that signification exists only in relation to another, opposing signification" (J. Butler 13). We can see a similar mindset develop for many of the characters in *Dawn*. When Lilith and several Oankali try to enter Curt's camp, he stops them, shouting that "'This is a human place!'" (O. Butler 227). Before the arrival of an Other, this would be an fundamentally null statement: if every member of society is a human, then every place is a human place. However, the introduction of the Oankali necessitates the drawing of new ontological boundaries. "Being human" has suddenly become performative.

Curt's statement also suggests that Lilith, due to her association with the Oankali, does not qualify as "human," despite having a human body. We see further evidence for this when Lilith laments that her daughter "'won't be a daughter'" (246). Lilith's angst in this passage is not only an expression of fear when confronted with the possibility of playing Eve to a new race,

but a rejection of her own identity as a human. Though she remains biologically human, she is socially—and therefore informationally—an alien.

As society becomes more informational, it becomes necessary to reconsider what it means to be human. For Ballard, Burroughs, Gibson, and Butler, this means the obsolescence of the body, the supremacy of the mind, and the dominance of language over brute strength. This implies the existence of a new kind of humanity, one which is performed rather than received. In this strange new world, one is not born, but rather becomes, a human.

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