

ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module

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Question: De/constructing the Human: *In what ways do contemporary artists and designers challenge and reconfigure dominant constructions of the human subject through lenses such as feminist theory, posthumanism, queer critique, or psychoanalysis? How do such practices trouble the boundaries between self, other, and machine?*

Title: An exploration into the effect of posthumanism in design on the disability community

Abstract

This essay explores the effect that posthumanism has in the disability community. By looking at both posthuman philosophical approaches to disability, and posthuman design, the argument is that design for disability has both a positive and a negative impact on the disability community. The increase in respect and value using posthuman philosophy, along with greater choice in design in disability aids, provides an overall positive experience. However, the need that society has to 'fix' disabled people and 'normalise' different bodies, has an overall negative impact on disability identity.

The theoretical framework begins with philosophical thought about what makes human and mind/body duality, focusing on contemporary theories from Julian Baggini and Cary Wolfe. This provides the groundwork for evaluating how posthuman elements of the body can positively or negatively affects disability identity. A core theory in understanding perceptions of disability is the clinical gaze which views disabled people as broken and fixable with a hybrid of technology, science and art.

The artistic focus is on two designers that work within prosthetics industry. The first designer is non-disabled Kaylee Dougherty creating prosthetic eyes. The second designer, Van Phillips designs limbs based on his personal experience of having a disability. This creates a dichotomy of how nondisabled and disabled designers view disability.

Introduction

Posthumanism can refer to a set of philosophical thoughts that move beyond humanist philosophy. It can also refer to moving beyond the natural limits of being human by making changes to the body. This essay will refer to both definitions of posthumanism. Medical science creates posthuman bodies through 'fixing' bodily differences, impairment, injuries or imperfections, creating a new part or parts for the body. Examples can be seen in prosthetic limbs, medical equipment like pacemakers, and orthopaedic pins.

While this technology can be seen as good thing when it comes to 'correcting' disability, it plays into an ableist narrative that disability is bad and needs to be fixed. The reality is that some disabled people do not require changes to their bodies and are more disabled by the society they live in than their impairment. However, non-disabled people have often tried to design new body parts to help people to walk for example, rather than create a better environment for being in a wheelchair.

The idea that technology and science will remove disability is not new. For example, the syphilis epidemic in Europe during the end of the fifteenth century created many bodily defects. The most noticeable was the loss of nose. This resulted in a rise of body repair and created cosmetic prosthetics as a profitable business and profession (Hughes, 2019). Later, in the 1850s novel *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, Charles Bovary attempted an operation to correct a club foot to keep up with the trend of trying to fix the human body to certain standards; "hasn't the time come to cry out that the blind shall see, the deaf shall hear, the lame walk?" (Flaubert cited in Davis, 2013, p. 8).

Art and literature often depict disability as negative. Film and television often design villains as characters with scars, limb differences, or 'cyborgs', who are either part machine or people who get additional body parts blurring the boundaries of human and technology (Oxford Reference, 2025). These cyborgs show posthumanism design in disabled characters, often furthering the negative stereotype of disability.

This essay will focus on how posthuman bodies can both help and harm the perception of disability, giving examples from prosthetic design and the artistry behind them. This bridges art and medical science, along with product design,

aesthetics design, and material design. The two main artists/designers are Kaylee Dougherty and Van Phillips. One designer has a disability, and the other is nondisabled. It will also examine how designing for disabled people falls in line with a posthuman philosophy that disabled people are and should be valued.

Chapter one will provide a theoretical context into what makes us human, with a focus on classic theorists like Rene Descartes and contemporary practitioners such as Julain Baggini and Cary Wolfe. This will set the groundwork for evaluating how posthuman elements of the body affects the sense of self or humanness. It will then move onto two case studies into posthuman design, addressing the works of contemporary thinkers such as philosopher of technology Ashley Shew, and social historian Bill Hughes. The first will focus on the artistry of the prosthetic eye and the second case study looks at the design of prosthetic limbs. Both case studies examine what having a posthuman addition means for people who use them, people who choose not to use them, and people around them.

Theoretical context

Before understanding posthumanism, it is important to understand what makes us human. For centuries, philosophers have questioned the body's role in humanness. Aristotelian thought sees the mind and body as distinct from each other (Robinson, 1978). In contrast, St. Iraneus (c. AD 202) suggests that the body and mind combined makes us human (Weinandy, 2003). Rene Descartes had a similar theory, claiming that the body is simply a machine that the mind drives, with the mind being an incorporeal entity (Rozemond, 1998). This suggests that what makes us who we are is our mind and not our bodies. It also suggests that the mind can exist without the body, whereas the body is a mechanistic entity that cannot exist without the mind. Biologically speaking, it is true that the body needs a brain to be able to perform basic functions such as breathing and pumping blood, although with today's medical technology, these functions can be performed by machine. Stephen Hawking is a good example of a human who can communicate and perform bodily functions with limited use of his body. He relies on carers and mechanical equipment for day to day functions, and uses his mind for his work in theoretical physics. This could imply that he is 'pure mind', detached from material conditions. Mialet (2012)

suggests that it means “all the human and nonhuman ‘prostheses’ that serve the indispensable task of maintaining his body and building his identity are absent or unnecessary” (p.356). A criticism of Descartes’ mind-body dualism is that he cannot explain how the mind enters the body as separate to the body (Harfouch, 2018).

However, the mind or brain is not the only aspect of humanhood. Despite Descartes’ argument that the mind does not need a body, our experiences we have in our bodies shape who we are (Baggini, 2012). Our gender, race, social interactions, prejudices and privileges all contribute to this. There is no ‘self’ beneath all these experiences. The self is not mind, body, or a combination, but a collection of a unique set of circumstances (Baggini, 2015). This mirrors Deleuze’s theory that “bodies, through their actions, create problem-events demanding new concepts. Neither bodies nor ideas determine the other” (Swarbrick, 2017). Deleuze considers mind-body dualism to be a posthuman problem, by trying to separate mind and from the human body.

A further consideration about what makes us who we are can be found in the theory of The Ship of Theseus. If all parts are replaced bit by bit, is it still the same ship. Applying this to the human context, if we replace a leg or hip, is it the same person? Most would argue yes. What if more of the body was replaced and changed, including the most recognisable, which is the face? Botox and injections can radically change the face to make the person unrecognisable, but does this make them a different person? It could also be argued medical procedures such as treatment for facial burns also make a person look different, but this rarely receives the same criticism as elective surgery. In this case, although a layer of skin is removed and scarring may be left, does it make the person different? To most people, it is the person inside that counts. This returns us to Descartes’ theory that we are just our mind. This leads to the question of posthuman bodies, and how much of who we are is left after being replaced or added to by medical technology or cosmetic procedures.

The branch of posthumanism that means to move beyond what it means to be human, including making additions to the body to go beyond the natural body, is sometimes known as ‘transhumanism’ (Wolfe, 2010). Many disabled people have

posthuman or 'transhuman' replacement body parts, which can help them to navigate their environments, but it can also prevent more impactful changes by focusing on the person as the 'problem' to be fixed, rather than designing the world to be more accommodating to different types of bodies. There is a clear difference between non-disabled designers who usually focus on ableist technology to fix the person, and disabled designers who usually focus on adapting the world around them rather than changing their body (Costanza-Chock, 2020) . It could be argued that this is due to clinical gaze in which medical professionals have the need to fix and make someone 'whole' again and eliminate disability (Daffron & McLaughlin, 2021). Another reason is that fixing a disability will give the non-disabled individual a 'hero complex' (Hughes, 2019). However, in posthuman philosophy, "people with disabilities deserve to be treated with respect and equality" (Wolfe, 2010, p. xvii). Humanism broadly speaking, uses a set of ethical philosophies to ascertain what a person is worth, based on their morality and other deciding factors, often based on religious thought. Although there are many definitions of humanism, the idea of humanism as a way of thinking is as old as humanity itself. According to humanist thought, disability has been perceived in various ways, but usually negatively. "The idea of disability in the early modern period was often contained within the classification of deformity and monstrosity" (Wilkie, 2024). This view paved the way for the mistreatment of disabled people, viewing them as sinful and non-productive to society (Hughes, 2019). This is because disability was usually seen as divine punishment, or punishment for criminal offenses. A notable example is loss of limbs as punishment of theft, which still exists today in countries like Sudan (Salih, 2023). This makes people born with limb difference or acquired through accident look as though they have committed a crime. *The Bible* has examples of blinding sinners. Women were accused of witchcraft just for having a disability. Royals and high-status people used to hide disabled children and adults due to perception of disability being 'less than'. President Roosevelt used to strategically position himself at podiums to hide the fact that he used a wheelchair as in his time it was a sign of weakness (Harrison, 2024).

Due to societal changes over time, perceptions of disability changed, creating the charity model of disability, whereby disabled people were treated with pity. Part of posthuman thought involves moving beyond this humanist way of thinking, and

instead of disdain or pity, disabled people are treated as valued members of society, with rights and agency (Wolfe, 2010).

Case Study 1: Eye of the Beholder

Many people believe that ‘the eyes are the windows to the soul’. The focus of this case study is on prosthetic eye designer Kaylee Dougherty. The emphasis on the eyes shows they can communicate emotions more than words or reveal that someone is lying (Kumar Panda, 2019). Eyes are also used for communication, such as using eye contact and conveying emotions (Riggio, 2023).

Various cultures throughout history have placed pennies on the eyes of the dead. Although it initially comes from the ancient Greek belief that coins were needed to pay the ferryman to cross the river Styx into the afterlife (Alföldy-Gazdac & Gazdac, 2013), the reason that the eyes were chosen as the location of the coins is reveals that eyes are perceived as important. By placing coins on the eyes, it helped keep them closed which protected the spirit in their journey into the afterlife. This links back the idea of the eyes being the windows to the soul as open eyes could allow evil forces to enter the body (Brown, 2013).

An eye for an eye is an ancient Babylonian legal code that was later repeated in the *Bible*, meaning equal retribution (Rybachuk, 2023). It could be argued that the choice of eye as a code for punishment proportional of the crime could be because the eyes are a sensitive part of the body, and vulnerable in an attack. Losing an eye is a life changing event. Further to historical ideas about the eyes, there are contemporary theories that eye colour can reveal personality traits such as wisdom, reliability or creativity (Larsson, et al., 2007). This case study will call into question if putting such heavy emphasis on eyes is ableist towards people with ‘posthuman’ eyes. For example, people with prosthetics eyes or other modifications.

Losing an eye has serious consequences to vision, including depth perception (RNIB, 2025). Prosthetic eyes have replaced natural eyes since ancient Egyptian and Roman times. They would use clay as material and hand painted the details of the eye. However, during the 1500s, Europeans experimented with materials such as enamel gold and created the glass eye which was the most popular for hundreds of years (Discovery UK, 2019). Whilst it could be argued that they do not have a

functional purpose as they do not restore vision, prosthetic eyes can help to protect the structure of the eye socket and eyelid (Comoweb, 2024). However, research has shown that there is a greater risk of infection and bacteria in people who wear prosthetic eyes than eye-patch wearers (Rokohl, et al., 2019).

For a lot of people, a prosthetic eye is used for aesthetic purposes. Morris & Vogel (2024) argue that historically prosthetic eyes did not add to quality of life and their use was purely cosmetic. They go on to say that when the person chooses to wear a prosthetic, it is an “important expression of bodily agency” (p.15), which helps their sense of self. However, in many historical cases they were used because of other people’s reactions to bodily differences rather than their own needs. The design of prosthetic eyes is an art form in itself and some ocular prosthetists see themselves as artists. For example, Kaylee Dougherty describes her process as an art and science combined (Steinbrenner, 2017). The value of fabricating prosthetics from hand is an art form because of how unique each eye is (Boston University, 2018). The main material used now is acrylic due to the durability and clear coats it creates. To add detail, irises are hand painted referring to the unaffected eye. Each hand painted and moulded prosthetic eye is a work of art, due to the unique shape and details including the small fibres for textures such as veins (fig1). Other prosthetic eyes are creative, going against historical ideal of hiding or disguising objects of disability (Pullin, 2011).

Today, design of such items is down the individual preference of the user. While some people prefer to be subtle, others like to own their disability and let their personality and identity show through their disability aids. An example of this is Sunshine Jones, known on social media as ‘hey miss teacher’. Jones is a schoolteacher with a huge collection of prosthetic eyes in various designs, colours and patterns, many of which are glittery (fig 2). She says that her one prosthetic that matches her natural eye felt as though she was hiding a part of her identity as a disabled person (Jones cited in Court, 2023). In her case and many like her, the use of a posthuman extension to her body acts as a positive expression of herself. She describes her false eye as a fashion statement and encourages others to be more confident with their disability. She uses her statement eye to spread awareness about her disability. This is a posthumanism approach as she celebrates her difference instead of hiding it, showing that she has just as much worth as others.

In summary, the design and craft of prosthetic eyes allow people to go beyond the natural limits of humanity and gives them agency of choice. This is posthuman in two ways as it reimagines and challenges 'normal' body ideals and shows progressive philosophical thought where disabled people are valued. Kaylee Dougherty claimed that she likes taking something that is broken and fixing it. While many people are appreciative of her designs, it could also be argued that her perception of people without an eye as 'broken' is an ableist way of thinking. That said, she is giving a valuable service for people who use her designs. The argument is not with her designs but her choice of words describing her profession. Although she sits within the posthuman approach of going beyond the natural body, it could be argued that she has a humanist way of thinking about the people who use them.

Figure 1: Paintbrush placing fibres onto prosthetic eye by Kaylee Dougherty





Figure 2: Sunshine Jones displaying her collection of prosthetic eyes

Case Study 2: The Metal Man

Metal has been used since the bronze age to make weapons and shields with significant advantages in the iron age. "The history of metals is the history of civilization" (Wilson, 1994, inside cover). This shows that metal is an important part

of tracing human advancement. This case study moves on to the work of designer Van Phillips and his unique design for prosthetic legs for running.

Despite the fact that metal is not new, it gives the impression of being futuristic, or robotic especially metals with a high shine. It could be argued that plastic is more posthuman than metal because it is a modern substance that only started being used in human bodies since the 1970s (UPMC Health Beat, 2015). Yet, because it does not look artificial, it looks less posthuman than a metal piece on the body.

Clean metal that is polished and sleek, usually silver coloured like stainless steel, or a polished white or black tend to give a robotic look. Modern technology, for example smart phones, electric cars and laptops use silver for durability and electrical benefits. In contrast, darker metals like copper can give an industrial look, leaning into a modern subculture aesthetic like steampunk (The Silver Institute, 2025). Metal being used medically is not new with the copper coil created in 1960 (Corbett & Bautista, 2024) and dental fillings in the early 1800s using tin to fill the tooth because of how cheap the material was. Although the metal has changed over the years, we still use metal for filling teeth because of durability (Elmsleigh House Dental Clinic, 2022). It could be argued that because these are hidden and not visible to the public it is treated differently to visible differences. The oldest recorded prosthetic leg is estimated to be created as early as 300BC. It was created with a wooden core while using metal materials including bronze and iron to coat the wood (Morris, 2024).

Movement in prosthetic limbs add to the robotic look. Contemporary prosthetics are advanced enough to connect to the nerves, allowing people to regain the ability to grip. Furthermore, there are some advancements that allow artificial hands or limbs to be controlled by the brain in the same way the brain would control the body (fig 3). In some cases, the wearer can even feel with the artificial body part (Wired, 2023). Using new technology, artificial intelligence (AI) is used to create coding for movements of the prosthetic. Another way new technology is used is computerised virtual reality of the missing limb. This helps the future wearer to visualise how the prosthetists would work and transitions the wearer into the process of a prosthetic limb. Unfortunately, some see a prosthetist limb as a way of fitting in, and caving to social pressures of looking normal to make others more comfortable (Shew, 2024). Hughes (2019) describes it as 'correctional logic' which seeks to "pass off wrong as

right with a prosthetic trick” (p.103). Prosthetics can cover up what society sees as a ‘problem’ by normalizing it. There are also practical issues with prosthetics; for people with certain arm amputations and high leg amputations, prosthetics are not worth the hassle compared to the reward. Some people have spent significant time adjusting to the prosthetics because the design is heavy, creates discomfort, and can be painful to the user (Shew, 2024).



Figure 3: Grabbing prosthetic hand

There have been many controversies over prosthetics in the sporting field. The discussion of posthuman abilities has been argued that technology such as the blade is an unfair advantaged, compared to other disabilities that do not have prosthetics. The prosthetic blades used in the Paralympics are designed for speed rather than replicas of the missing leg (figs 4 & 5). The blade was designed in 1983 by Van Phillips after his own experience of limb loss. Phillips studied prosthetic design and worked in the Biomedical Design field. The blades were designed with bounce and were based on the cheetah's back legs (V&A, 2025). It has also been argued that blades have an advantage over human legs. However, a study was performed and proved that it was not an advantage compared to a human leg due to the aerobic captivity (Ratliff, 2023). Furthermore, Grabowski (2016) noted that “a lot of

assumptions have been made about running prostheses and performance with no data to support them” (cited in BBC Sport, 2016). While blades may not be able to compare to human legs, it can be argued that blades do have an advantage in the Paralympics over those with one prosthetic leg rather than two, or with other disabilities.

To sum up, prosthetic limbs offer a posthuman option for people with limb loss or birth defects. Like prosthetic eyes, these limbs are posthuman in that they allow external body part to become part of their body, but the style of prosthetics designed by Van Phillips give another level of posthuman aesthetics. This is due to the sleek and futuristic design of the legs. Because the blades do not resemble human legs, they do not disguise the bodily difference, making them move beyond the humanist approach of disability being something to hide. This means they are designed for the wearer rather than others, to make them feel more comfortable. Unlike prosthetic eyes, prosthetic legs are functional legs that allow the wearer to move and run.



Figure 4: Cheetah Xtreme model prosthetic blade by Van Phillips



Figure 5: Cheetah Xtreme blade in action

Conclusion

In conclusion it could be argued that because of the humanist view of disability is usually negative, it affects how disabled people are perceived which in turn affects their sense of self and humanhood. Blindness and disability in the past and present have been seen in religion, literature and art as punishment for sin, or an outward display of bad character. Examples are *Bible* stories that blind sinners, women with disabilities being accused of witchcraft throughout history, and disabled people being hidden from society. This allowed an ableist attitude towards those with disabilities that still persists in an 'enlightened' age of posthumanism.

The approach of designers with disabilities in contrast with non-disabled designers highlights a difference in approach to designing for disability. Most non-disabled designers have the 'clinical gaze', which creates more of a humanist approach within their work. Their goal is to 'fix' disability. In contrast, disabled designers who have more of a posthumanism view, aim to enhance the disabled individual. This could be due to their own lived experience of disability, which leads to an argument that only disabled people should design for other disabled people. However, most academics and designers agree that as long as disabled people are included in the design process, and design considers real people rather than stereotyping, and with respect and knowledge about disability, nobody should be excluded from design.

A key issue highlighted in this essay is the pressure that disabled people feel to use prosthetics to fit in. Although seen by non-disabled people as an advantage, prosthetics often creates a disadvantage to the individual. Non-disabled people often see prosthetics as an easy fix, but unfortunately there are numerous challenges that come with using a prosthetic. Examples are the added weight on the amputated limb, which creates discomfort to the wearer, and pain from the prosthetics being unsuitable to the wearer.

This essay has highlighted some positives of prosthetics, such as the various designs and colours allowing for a sense of expression of style and personality. Posthuman design allows for prosthetics to look mechanical or unique rather than realistic, giving people a choice for how they want to look, whether this is a natural look to blend in, or a different look to make a statement. This gives disabled people a say in how their identity as a disabled individual is expressed. Having a visually noticeable prosthetic

can also start conversations about disability which spreads awareness of disability and prosthetics, removing harmful stereotypes and assumptions. Prosthetics can also give the individual added confidence.

How art and science have combined in making prosthetics, is not only impressive but also posthuman. The posthumanism approach of the hybrid between art, science and accessibility shows how, as a species, we have evolved from disability being a death sentence, or something to be hidden away and shamed, to being celebrated with machinery, technology and AI to achieve independence and confidence, as well as removing harmful misconceptions about disability.

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