



Disintegrated Bodies – From Cyborg Microcelebrities to Capital Flow: A *Post- Phenomenological Investigation of Disembodiment*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a postphenomenological investigation of cyber bodies and their politics. A case study is made through cyborg microcelebrity Lil Miquela and her role in the attention economy. The relevance of embodiment, re-embodiment and disembodiment is critically considered through Kirk M. Besmer (2015), Donna J. Haraway (1991) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1974) theoretical exploration.

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Many conversations about embodiment and re-embodiment fit within postphenomenological narratives. The materiality and movement of the body within the physical realm expanded towards its disintegration as virtual and robotic re-embodiments are repurposed and reshaped towards what Kirk M. Besmer (2015) mentions as **extension thesis**. This term is defined as an extension of embodiment as technologies develop ‘human perception, agency and cognition’. Yet, Besmer’s (2015) understanding of extension thesis is quite limiting as he concludes at the end of his essay how one’s canal body cannot be shifted from one’s embodied situation. (Besmer 2015: 55–69). But what about natures of complete disembodiment? The question that is presented revolves around the nature of disembodiment within the internet space and its socio-economic implication.

Besmer (2015) fails to acknowledge cases of actual distancing from one’s physiological body while many efforts of creation of disembodiment are extremely vital in this shift of the internet presentation of the self and the space that is used within it. Technology has allowed to form a social remixing of avatars and different agencies. This allows to re-imagine the self that is presented online which still fits within the domain of re-embodiment. And some avatars have no relation to any physical body. Their presence is becoming more popular within microcelebrities and the fetishizing of ‘influencers’ for the purpose of an attention and experience economy.¹ As an example, Lil Miquela (@lilmiquela) was born in 2016 on Instagram, an avatar fabricated by Trevor McFedries and Sara DeCou. Her success and popularity give insights towards technocultural obsessions of manipulation of body images and it refigures notions of material ownerships through immateriality for capital motives.

In order to comprehend those implications, a case study is made through Lil Miquela’s success and her purpose of existence will be related to Donna J. Haraway’s (1991) famous essay ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’. In addition, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1974) investigation of the body in ‘Phenomenology of perception’ needs to be identified, to allow a juxtaposition of different shapes and forms of embodiment. This theoretical exploration will result in grasping how human beings exist within an internet framework outside of the embodied self. In addition, it will give a small glimpse towards the future of marginalised performance acts that relate to cyborg avatars whose space is solemnly online and how they relate to capitalism.

EMBODIMENT, RE-EMBODIMENT AND DISEMBODIMENT

To understand the online space and cyborg bodies, it is important to distinguish and interpret the difference between embodiment, re-embodiment and disembodiment. All cases revolve around the sense of presence and the interlink of the body within the ‘here’ and ‘there’ depending on its environment — either be it a physical or virtual environment — as well as its connection with technology (Besmer 2015: 55–71).

EMBODIMENT: BODY IMAGE AND BODY SCHEMA

Traditional phenomenological definition of embodiment is purely physiological. The sense of presence is connected to the material body and its organism. It is often referred to kinaesthesia, which defines one’s own perception of the self and awareness is in contact with one’s own body in space and its movement. It can be translated into two terms, the body image and the body schema. The body image refers to one’s awareness and self-perception as an embodied creature. It consists of ‘a complex set of intentional states of dispositions — perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes — in which the intentional object is one’s own body’ (Gallagher 2005: 25). This perception is shaped through the lifespan of the body’s ‘user’.

While body schema relates more towards the motor and cognitive skills of the body. Merleau-Ponty (1974) did not simply define ‘body schema’ as the automation of our bodies through its movement and its kinesthetic impressions that was learnt and developed from early age into adulthood. He describes body schema as a ‘spatiality of position and spatiality of situation’

¹ In this paper, attention and experience economy refers to economies that are built on the online consumption of information and their experience. Profit made is through a user’s time (attention) and clicks (experience), it is often used as an economic model for social media platforms.

(Merleau-Ponty 1974: 100). He positioned the body and the flesh within Gestalt psychology's sense of the world. The body is situational and not merely spatial and there is a dynamic nature that comes with it (Merleau-Ponty 1974: 102). Liam Jarvis (2019) emphasises on this position by his discussion on body-ownership and its 'localization', he gives out many examples from medical contexts as well as VR experiences where spatiality becomes concerned with an 'attribution of self-identity to a body'. The 'localization' or 'mislocalization' of the body in relation to its spatial dimension provides immersive embodiment that are outside its biological borders and more towards a 'virtual proxy'. The immersiveness of the virtual environment, enables 'affective experiences of a self that hyper-extends beyond the protective layer of the skin to incorporate experiences of otherness' (Jarvis 2019: 7).

Within this situational spatiality, we conceive that the body does not have a definitive centre but its organism functions through its perception of the space that it inhabits as well as the circumstances that the body is involved in. (Besmer 2015: 64). This recognition allows the space of the 'here' and 'there' to be more diversified leading to the embodiment to reach a double spacing and situational representation that could be beneficial for cases of re-embodiment.

RE-EMBODIMENT: ROBOTIC AND VIRTUAL RE-EMBODIMENT

The multiform of the body and its spatiality is not only phenomenologically driven. Vittorio Gallese (2009), who has studied cognitive neuroscience and phenomenology also urges to look into psychoanalysis. He incites a dialogue between many disciplines. His embodied simulation theory addresses the 'capacity to share the meaning of actions, intentions, feelings, and emotions with others' (Gallese 2009: 520). He explains this shared simulation through 'mirror neurons' — 'premotor neurons that fire both when an action is executed and when it is observed being performed by someone else' (Gallese 2009: 520). — Subjects can experience through action observation, a trigger of action execution that occurs within the motor system resulting in a 'direct mapping between the visual description of a motor act and its execution' (Gallese 2009: 520–521). Gallese's (2009) points out this relationship in the works of Merleau-Ponty (1974) who has also suggested that understanding of gestures does not simply occur through visual spectatorship but through action and intention of the self and of others. The body becomes inhabited through other's intention and not simply by its own biological mechanism. (Gallese 2009: 526). With Merleau-Ponty (1974) and Vittorio Gallese's (2009) framing, it can be suggested; the body is inherently re-embodied through action and observation of others. Going back to Kirk M. Besmer's (2015) 'Extension Thesis', the dialogue of re-embodiment that is technology mediated is also considered, as he mentions two forms of technological Re-embodiment. A robotic and virtual one:

- Virtual Re-embodiment blurs the line between the 'here' and 'there'. Games and immersive virtual environments are a perfect example for that. The environment within the virtual world puts the embodied self within two principles. The body is still present within the real world, while it is also existent within the immaterial one. Besmer (2015) justifies how in games, the users move their real bodies in sync with the avatars that they chose. This experience is very natural and adaptable, the players often do not think too much or are aware of their actions and bodily movement, it is merely natural.
- Robotic re-embodiment transpires within tele-robotic systems, tele-surgery and remotely-operated vehicles. In such cases, there needs to be a learning and coping process that leads for the machinery to be part of the embodiment. Similar to Merleau-Ponty's (1974) example of the blind man's cane. The situational spatiality leads to an extension of the motor skills as the object becomes a part of the body that enhances and links the blind man's perception of his surroundings. Thus, the cane loses its role as an independent object and is transformed into a sensitive zone for perception (Merleau-ponty 1974: 144). This extension of the cane or any robotic system is developed with exercise. A body needs time and practice for it to become fully re-embodied within the tools and technologies that serve this re-embodiment.

While both virtual and robotic approaches towards re-embodiment are extremely major in understanding corporal experiences, there are efforts into the integration of complete disembodiment, in which avatars, robots or any systemic organism is away from the bodily function of the users.

Cases of disembodiment can occur in fragments of cyberspaces that are still correlated to real spaces. Donna J. Haraway (1991) explains in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, 'a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction' (Haraway 1991: 149). As a model to this mixed cyborg between reality and fiction, we see big investments in hyper realistic sex robots and avatars, the whole industry is worth an estimated \$15 billion worldwide (Reid 2019). These robots serve a fictional approach to pleasure. It is major to note that this fiction is used within the context of fetishising technocultures to create hybrids of science fictions that are a gateway to real life needs. The small line between the two creates the politics of networking and territories, we see the construction of cyborgs to have Western, white dominant features and when it is presented differently, most cases are for the 'exotic' appeal of fetishised nationalities.² Haraway (1991) describes it as:

In the traditions of "Western" science and politics — the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other — the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination. (Haraway 1991: 150)

Haraway's (1991) discourse is often in reference to dominance, she mentions that Science is not only about knowledge but about power as well, especially when it is intertwined with technology. She clearly investigated this relationship when she looked into the construction of theories about bodies in the field of modern biology. In her study of the biologies of Robert Mearns Yerkes and E.O. Wilson, she was able to showcase the historical transformation of the body into an engineering vessel for capital and patriarchal structures for both machine and market reproduction (Haraway 1991: 43–68). Biology moved from a 'science of sexual organisms to one of reproducing genetic assemblages.' She mentions that the 'fundamental change in life science did not occur in a historical vacuum; it accompanied changes in the nature and technology of power, within a continuing dynamic of capitalist reproduction' (Haraway, 1991: 45). Shoshana Zuboff (2019) and Paul Mason (2015) highlighted these points of power structures in context to surveillance capitalism and post-capitalism where labour became immaterial. Mason (2015) believes that technology can produce an information economy and knowledge society that would reshape familiar notions of production and labour that would destroy markets of private ownership (Mason 2015: 10). While Zuboff (2019) argues against this viewpoint, she points out that the economic model of information knowledge is in relation to the monopolization of private tech companies, such as the example of Silicon Valley's³ economic system. (Zuboff 2019: 132). However, both of their arguments call attention to the switch of the current economic production. The industry of robotic sex work amplifies this ongoing power of capital and patriarchal social structures. The domination of sex robots made cyborgs and virtual avatars production inheritably concerned and associated to economies and social obligations. While accounts of sex work as the oldest profession has a strong historical context with material labour of the body and patriarchal structures (Salmon 2008: 121–135), we see the same form of labour with its immaterial implication with the industry of robotic sex work. The self and the body within the cyberspace became an erotic body or a body that cannot be defined without its political indication of ownership and market value.

CYBORG MICROCELEBRITIES AND INTERNET MARKET VALUES

To foresee the politics of cyborgs and the disembodied avatar. We look into the case study of cyborg microcelebrities whose presence is purely online. The body of the cyborg is in no relation to any physical body. Its purpose is using digital characters and storytelling to fit the needs of the entertainment industry.

² Fetishised nationalities refers to sexual desires towards a person or culture belonging to a specific race or ethnic group. (via https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Racial_fetishism) It differs from nationalities and different cultural backgrounds. However, in this research it refers to a western point of view of the fetish of the 'other'.

³ Lil Miquela's biggest investors come from Silicon Valley.

The term was coined by Theresa M. Senft (2013) in her book *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*. The book studied the phenomenon of young women who were broadcasting their lives over the Internet. 'They utilized still images, video, blogging, and crosslinking strategies to present themselves as a coherent, branded package to their online fans' (Senft 2013: 346). The self hence became a brand that has a market value. The engagement that comes within the presented self leads to more chances of economic growth. Labour switched within capitalism towards what Karl Marx called 'immaterial labour.' We see it nowadays with the success of Onlyfans, a UK based social media service where users can upload explicit content that can only be viewed by their subscribers who pay a monthly fee. For the success of their profiles, the users need to brand their page on their other social media accounts such as Instagram and Twitter so in order to grasp more subscribers resulting in more capital and success. Senft (2013) explains how there is a code-switching between 'fans and friends, audiences and communities'. She adds:

Today, immaterial labour is often disguised with words such as participation, discussion, flirting, goofing off. When theorized through the so-called 'attention economy,' it is almost always cast in narratives of empowerment. (Senft 2013: 350)

The narrative of empowerment is repurposing the notion of ownership from materialistic value and its connotation to possession. Zuboff (2019) and Mason's (2015) groundwork shows this movement and transformation of material labour towards an immaterial one. Ownership becomes a term for the liberation of the body, owning your own flesh, allowing its exposure and making the choice for it to be exposed and capitalised upon. Microcelebrities are still a form of re-embodiment but there is also the cyberspace of disembodiment that needs to be considered.

CYBORG INFLUENCER: LIL MIQUELA

In the context of the disembodied avatar, we see the case of the famous Lil Miquela, (@lilmiquela) a microcelebrity that is purely an AI avatar that promotes various products as well as social causes. In addition, the Brazilian-American Instagrammer is also a musician and an activist. (Blanton & Carbajal 2019: 88) She has been a vocal advocate for the Black lives matter movement and LGBTQ+ issues, identifying herself as a queer woman of colour.

We see her within the real world and she is presented as any other celebrity influencer, posing with artists and reaching entertainment news websites with headlines describing her breakup with her human boyfriend. (Dawson 2020). Other efforts into bringing her into the real world was animating in real life model Bella Hadid with the CGI model as part of a Calvin Klein campaign (Muller 2019). On June 11 and 12 of 2020, after a few days of the George Floyd protest⁴ she shared posts on her Instagram⁵ about defunding the police, urging donations to the cause. The model's activism shows her dedication to current real-life events, resulting her in occupying both real and virtual spaces.

The space between the real and the virtual become juxtaposed and the futuristic speculations between fiction and real are bridged together resulting in a new media ecological system.

A disembodiment that is in a world of embodiment and vice versa. There are certain dangers that come with it. Within the context of body image, cases of body dysmorphia become now even more flagrant. Regardless of Miquela's social activism, the body image is no longer even based on a manipulated beauty standard of a real body but a case of beauty that is fabricated and computerised. This transformation gives the body another dimension that N. Katherine Hayles (2005) portrays as a simulation that is essentially 'composed of numerical calculations that are closely associated with artificial intelligence and with postbiological subjectivities' (Hayles 2005: 6). Hayles (2005) theory emerges a new body — the posthuman body — that is morphed and mutated through the flow of code, a body of data that eventually represents a visual stimulation (such as the case of Lil Miquela). Arthur Kroker (2012) describes how Hayles (2005)

⁴ The George Floyd protests are an ongoing series of police brutality protests that began in Minneapolis in the United States on May 26, 2020.

⁵ https://www.instagram.com/p/CBWCeZEHbtw/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

theory has required an interrelation of the reality of computation with a theory of morphological changes. Through the circulation of the code, the body 'loses its (physical) referents only to gain a new (electronic) body, inscribing itself in the materiality of human flesh' (Kroker 2012: 65). The body schema hence transforms into a new categorisation that is presented not simply in Merleau-Ponty (1974) and Liam Jarvis (2019) spatiality and localisation but additionally it drifts into the instability of algorithmic presentation, resulting in the ownership of the body as data that is often purchased by private companies.

OWNERSHIP OF BODIES WITHIN CYBERSPACES

Ownership of bodies within cyberspace is quite problematic. There are obvious efforts for revenue as Lil Miquela campaigns for big fashion brands as well as raising around \$6 million from Silicon Valley investors, resulting in a network of \$125 million for Brud, the company behind the virtual model (Shieber 2018). The political suggestions of the technocultures redefine portrayal of ownerships. There are obvious historical facts that show early models of ownerships of bodies, especially bodies of women and minorities, as seen in the example of robotic sex work and the transformation of the labour of prostitution into an immaterial one. There still seem to be efforts of reshaping the ownership of bodies to fit within the cyberspace rendering. Why is Lil Miquela a woman? Why is she a young adult? Why are her features biracial? Those questions are important to pose. Miquela's image is a body of the 'other', she is neither white nor black. She identifies herself with LGBTQ+ communities, she is somehow within the 'minorities'. Yet, her existence is dominated by a big private corporation who is profiting from owning her data. Her existence challenges the perception of the self within the body image and the body schema. The marginalised territory between Miquela and minority groups forms a reluctant positioning towards the avatar's social activism. And while this influencer is purely disembodied, other cases of microcelebrities that are re-embodied are also concerned and seen as data. Consequently, the ownership of the body might not be a direct one. The self becomes in that case always dominated by the market and its value for monetizing from the attention economy. This results in going back to Haraway (1991) and her explanation of domination, 'which gives in the lie to the autonomy of the self' (Haraway 1991: 177). The amount of autonomy became impossible to reach within the cyberspace, as she mentions - it is purely an illusion. Performance of the online presence leads to a form of a transgression; space used within marginalized groups for expression becomes the space for data harvesting and capitalistic goals. The fact that the CGI model is performing to be the fetish of validation, attention and marginalization becomes to a certain extent ironic. The image of the 'Other' becomes the dominator and the space that was used once for self-expression becomes reconfigured for economic prosperity.

CONCLUSION

Within the postphenomenological investigations of embodiment, we can clarify that the body cannot be expressed simply by the material world. The cyberspace has much importance to its nature and existence either be it a stage for re-embodiment or disembodiment. Kirk M. Besmer (2015) 'extension thesis' and Merleau-Ponty's (1974) argument allow a certain degree of knowledge in regards of the many characteristics of embodiment. It is no longer illustrated as a vessel of the mind/soul that is constrained within time and space. 'Here' and 'there' can be opposed or even mixed. The socio-economics of bodies still need to be considered especially within the realms of cyberspaces. Hence, Donna Haraway's (1991) Cyborg manifesto retraces the conversation towards the politics of race and gender. Throughout these politics, there is an urgency to investigate the norms of technocultures, as we saw throughout the example of Lil Miquela. Enrolment and experimentation with the technologies often results in a utopian reality of body ownership. Yet, they are being navigated and arranged as fictional developments and through an entertainment scenario, which allows for the capitalization of disembodied bodies. We see how the same space — the internet space — that is used for profit, is also being used for creating a community and a conversation for alienated and oppressed groups. Ownership as a term becomes doubly defined: the ownership of the body within a western feminist context; and an ownership that is acquired for liberation and control over the choice of exposing the flesh. This liberation becomes interpreted as a tool for breaking taboos and boundaries of the oppressed bodies of women. However, the second meaning also interprets the ownership of

the data of the body that is in the domain of the cyberspace. The images, the url, the avatars become the property of private companies. Existence within the cyberspace automatically means that the re-embodied self is a data that can be capitalized upon.

Taking into account those considerations, how do we create an internet that is free for all, away from any capitalistic endeavour? Is it even possible to create such a space? Now our understanding of the cyberspace is quite limited, making the target of manipulation for profit easier as it is carried out in the form of accessibility, liberty and illusions of a free for all internet.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Riad Salameh is a Lebanese researcher and art practitioner with a graphic design, art mediation and curatorial background. His work and research focus on the ownership of bodies in cyberspaces. He critically investigates internet capital economies and its interlink to technoculture. His interests relate to the abstraction of friends, acquaintances and the self in their physical and digital parallels. Subjects of irony, humour and intimacy are common in his work.

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