

Cyborgs, Tryborgs and Crip Tech – Amble Skuse

"The Cyborg, the Tryborg and the Crip Tech - Navigating the use of technology interfacing the body as a disabled person".

As we look further towards the use of technology as assistive and additive to the body, we forget to ask the question, what's wrong with being human? Amongst discourse of the Posthuman we find modes of thinking which replicate enlightenment racism, sexism and ableism. Hurling towards a future whilst maintaining parochial mindsets of hierarchy and power dynamics are we just doomed to repeat ourselves in an ever more dystopian comedy of errors?

Disabled Studies currently holds some of the most exciting and radical philosophy on this subject. Disabledness places people in the position of "outsider" which gives a unique position from which to be able to critique postmodern hyper-capitalist technological development. Disabled people's perspective however is viewed as existing in a silo, only relevant to other disabled people. What might happen if we considered this outsider viewpoint as a revealing perspective, dealing with the key question of "what does it mean to be a human being whilst dependent on technology and humanity?".

This presentation explores how disabled people use technology to interface with the world, and how this sites us in a discussion around the cyborg, the tryborg and the posthuman.

It will draw on Foucault's discussions of a system of Biopower, which includes the concept of a 'Society of Normalisation' (Foucault 1980: 107), in order to examine the stereotypes of Disability and the categories of Other which Disability brings about in readings. I also use Tremain's feminist interpretations of Foucault to look at how Biopower impacts upon the Other. This work will then be extended into Donna Haraway's reading of Foucault

, where she explores the identity of the cyborg in an increasingly digitised and data driven society.

I also draw upon Petra Kupper's work exploring the concept of performing a disability in an everyday context, and the performance shifting depending on the contextual requirements. She argues that in this sense the disabled person is always presenting themselves through a lens of preconceived ideas about disability.

"The act of taking on disability as a social phenomenon can be an act(ivity), a role, a story, that needs rehearsing, a story that isn't available transparently, but that needs mediation" (Kuppers, 2003. p9)

3. The power of the normal and the performance of disability.

The piece Normalised Interfacing consists of two different performance and composition aspects. Firstly, the performance of a wheelchair user making a soundwalk, exploring the streets of a new city, encountering problems, I perform my disability to the people in the street. Secondly, I then use

my experiences of exploring this new environment to create a bespoke soundwalk, a series of tracks which are location specific and available via an app to a walking (or wheeling) audience.

I wanted to explore how and why these performances become a part of lived experience for disabled people. By using a wheelchair in a public space I become a spectacle, a performance, something to be curious of. Indeed, being a wheelchair user in a space and being the artist is a spectacle in itself, one which disrupts notions of what the artist looks like, and why a wheelchair user might be in a gallery space.

I would argue that this interest in the disabled figure is a reflex to a society's concept of the normal. In deciding what fits into society (i.e. people for whom the way things are designed) we also create a group of people for whom society does not fit, the Other people.

Foucault explores the ideas of the normal in his work on Power and Discipline. Foucault observes that the development of the industrialised society created a streamlining of society. Through standardized education, medical record keeping, hospital systems, and the standardization of industrial processes and products, we were able to test and record how people become a part of a social process, in which 'normal' allows fluid passage, full contribution and productivity.

In shaping the population to the "normal" the systems and processes work more efficiently. Those who are outwith those 'normal' spaces present obstacles to this efficient system.

"A certain historically and culturally subjective regime of power has produced certain acts, practices, subjectivities, bodies, relations, and so on as a problem for the present"

But what of those for whom this shaping proves impossible? For reasons for race, gender, disability? For those outside of 'normal' (meaning that the systems which have been produced do not work for them) a system of fixes and interventions exist.

Those who do not fit the mainstream may be considered to produce less, to consume more and to be difficult to manage, or to create excess cost within an efficient system. Even beyond our assumptions of government and power, we have internalized this sense of normalization and police it culturally. The obvious ways that a society polices itself are through the state power systems such as prohibitions and punishments, which are imbued with racial, gender and abled assumptions. However, as Shelly Tremain explains, our society has complex and subtle ways of policing the normal and imposing it including,

"techniques of self improvement and self-transformation (technologies of the self) such as weight-loss programmes, and fitness regimes, assertiveness training, botox injections, breast implants, psychotherapy, and rehabilitation"

The pressure from society to intervene in disabled people's lives, to fix them, to pity them, or to use them as a way of showing one's caring credentials, all uphold this model of oppression via normalization and Othering.

This system of "othering" disabled people, and requiring them to fit within a social norm creates a paradigm along the lines of kill or cure. We must be seeking some form of cure for our disabledness, we must want to fit in, we must want to be normal, for the consequences of living outside the normal are too profound and unbearable to accept.

If we can accept that the idea of “normal” being constructed in order to enable the streamlining of society’s structures, then we can also see that Other, (in this case disabled) is also a socially constructed idea.

Kuppers (2003) argues that this dehumanising of the Other masks the danger of disabled people disrupting a system which tells people they must conform. If this disabled person cannot conform, and yet is experiencing a valid life, then the notion that one must be within the “norm” in order to receive society’s benefit begins to crumble:

As the word ‘normal’ expects us to conform, and thus also creates a space outside of it for those for whom conforming is not an option, Ableism then steps in to reinforce the ‘wrongness’ of not conforming. Ableism casts the role of evil, scrounger, lazy, ugly, demon, and witch upon disabled people as a threat to non disabled people. Ableism says “do not be different for we will attack”. Those who are not normal are not welcome here for they upturn the system which maintains control.

When we see a disabled person doing something outwith the expected narrative we are faced with a disconnect around our assumptions of people’s role in society, and the compromises we ourselves have made in the search to become a ‘normal’ member of society. Disabled visibility threatens this conforming, and shows a glimpse of potential for everyone to be individual, for everyone to reject ‘normality’.

“...every encounter with the Other, every performance and citation of the order , makes Foucault’s ‘biopower’ system momentarily visible and inserts the sliver of difference into the safe spaces of ‘normality’.”

In our current culture, we see that “celebrations” of disabled people’s achievements are still framed as special, different, beyond. There is space for the super-disabled to be celebrated “despite” their Otherness, overcoming their Otherness, but little space for non super-hero Others to merely exist and be seen as equal. Disabled people of achievement are framed as super heroes, existing to motivate Normal people. Those Disabled people not able to achieve super-hero status are then seen as objects to be pitied or quietly resented. This extension of ableism maintains the discriminatory system whilst applauding those who battle through it. It acknowledges the ‘otherness’ which has been cast upon those individuals and then, rather than remove that otherness to create a situation of equality and respect, tells those ‘others’ that they have conquered the system which is stacked against them, hailing them as heroes. The flip side of this then is that it is implied those who are not able to negotiate the system which is stacked against them are simply not trying hard enough. ‘Normal’ gives us the choice to either applaud the successful disabled person or weep for and vilify for the unsuccessful one. In fact, the option is there to remove the barriers that they are either overcoming or failing to overcome.

PERFORMANCE OF THE EVERY DAY IN THE CITY

As a disabled artist recording, filming and travelling through a new city in a wheelchair. My movements become performance, inserting this sliver of difference into the city. My being in the gallery space becomes a performance of my disability, using the electric doors, negotiating lift space (entering staff only zones to share the goods lift, or deciding amongst a group of women with pushchairs who should take priority in the public lifts), crossing roads with no drop curbs, traversing tram lines in my wheelchair. All these actions provide an opportunity for me to be seen doing

something differently to Normal, and for me to provide an experience for the “audience” (in this case, the passers by who unwittingly become an audience).

“The disabled performances ... insist on their moment; their fleshliness in a specific space and time, their having been there. Here, performance is a marker of existence in a fleeting world”.

Kuppers goes beyond this idea of performing the disability as a conscious performance. She asserts that just the act of being disabled requires constant mediation and performance. For each environment we present ourselves in different ways, through different lenses and tell slightly different stories, depending on our audience and depending on what needs to be said, or done in that context.

“the act of taking on disability as a social phenomenon can be an act(ivity), a role, a story, that needs rehearsing, a story that isn’t available transparently, but that needs mediation”.

In this way, disabled living requires constant layering of truths, negotiation and representation of our bodies and lives dependent on the circumstances. For example a disabled person may wish to minimize their difficulties for their employer, whilst being required to relate their “worst day” at a disability needs assessment. We may choose not to disclose our pain or fear to our closest friends or relatives, but are required to ‘look disabled’ when using a blue badge in public. As we reinvent ourselves in multitudes every day in order to meet society’s expectations of us “as a disabled person” we also delve into deep seated archetypes around disabled people deception, lying, and faking which we find so often in fairytales and the media. Am I telling the truth? What is the truth?

So I was interested to take the idea of the performance of being disabled into the street, to see how the city responded to me and how I responded to the city. What would people see and what would I present?

4) Interfacing and Cyborgs: The disabled body as cyborg – using sensors to make the body a performance partner.

In creating Normalized Interfacing I paired my body with a series of machines which would allow me to interface with the city, and to create a record of that experience. The performance and the composition would not have been possible without the use of these machines, this technology, which , paired with my body allowed my a cyborgian approach to interfacing with the built environment.

My technology included

- EZLite DX8 electric wheelchair
- Zoom H6N sound recorder
- 2 x Røde M5 condenser microphones
- 1 x Beyer dynamic SM58 Microphone
- 1 x GoPro video recorder
- 1 x Sony Digital SLR camera
- 1 x MacBook Pro 2010
- Max/MSP software
- Logic Software

MUSE1 EEG headband
Multiple unbranded pulse sensors
1 x Arduino

Susan Broadhurst talks about extending the body through external devices and instruments, to bring the body into the world in a new way.

“The body adapts and extends itself through external instruments. To have experience, to get used to an instrument is to incorporate that instrument into the body. The experience of the corporal scheme is not fixed or delimited but extendable to the various tools and technologies which may be embodied. Our bodies are always open to and intertwined with the world. Instruments appropriated by embodied experience become part of that altered body experience in the world. In the way, ‘the body is our general medium for having a world’”

“This intertwining of the body, technology and world is important since instead of abandoning the physical body, instrumentation and technology extends it by altering and recreating its embodied experience.”

5) The disabled body as cyborg

In combining my body with the technology, Haraway’s concept of the Cyborg helpfully describes the development and disarming of the binary opposition of Normal and the Other.

“A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world changing fiction.”

Haraway talks about how our social reality is actually a fiction. As referenced earlier in the chapter, disabled people are living this fiction on many levels, we are presented as a fictitious beast to society, either hero or villain, or at the very least object of pity. We are rarely afforded a three dimensional personality and often the roles we are expected to play overlap and contradict each other. We are complicit in the fictionalization of ourselves, in that in each environment, with each connection we will present an adapted reality, one which is appropriate for context, and which affords us and the other people involved, the fewest problems.

Haraway links to Foucault’s theory of BioPower as a way of shaping our society’s systems to Normality. In her writing she describes the development of BioPower as the beginnings of cyborg politics.

“Micheal Foucault’s biopolitics is a ... premonition of cyborg politics.”

In Foucault’s observations we are streamlined to become a part of a system, categorising Normality using education, medicalization and how well we fit into an industrialised society. Those who cannot fit within this bell curve of ‘normal’ being sidelined to be ‘other’. This creation of the other then gives space to the fracturing of identities based in binary oppositions. These binary oppositions have an impact upon how we view ourselves, and our environment.

Haraway identifies the shift between industrial society and digital society, and reflects upon how this then develops Foucault’s BioPower.

“We are living through a movement from ... industrial society to a polymorphous, information system ... transitions from the comfortable old hierarchical dominations to the scary new networks I have called the informatics of domination.”

Haraway's notion of the cyborg explores a means of resistance, which accords with Networked structures.

“No objects, spaces or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language.

One important route for reconstructing socialist-feminist politics is through theory and practice addressed to the social relations of science and technology... The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self.”¹

Her description of the cyborg chimes with the approach of the disabled community to subvert the capitalisation of technology and use it as a means for community, opportunity, voice and personal freedom. By marrying the use of technology with a networked structural approach we can see ways to imagine realities which fit us. In addition to this, some of the most cyborgian humans alive are disabled people. Disabled people have for a long time, used “aids” and technologies to adapt their bodies to an uncompromising space. However, Haraway only once refers to the possibility of Disabled people being cyborgs.

“Perhaps paraplegics and other severely handicapped [sic]² people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization with other ... devices.”³

In Donna Reeve's discussion of Haraway, she identifies the importance of disabled people in the cyborg identity. “Potential cyborg figures can be seen in the wheelchair user, the person with a cochlear implant, artificial leg or pacemaker, someone who uses an assistance dog”⁴ and also draws attention to the lack of discussion around disabled people in cyborg literature.

“discussion of prosthetics and impaired bodies is often limited to consideration of how technology either restores functionality or normalises the person”⁵. This references the desire to cure disabled people discussed earlier, that technology should exist in order to help the disabled person become more “normal” to society.

Linking back to Tremain and the technologies which are enabled to Normalise us and allow us to “fit in” to society Reeve draws on Goodley (2010) and explains

¹ Haraway, D.J. 1991, P163

² In UK disabled language, ‘Handicapped’ is a term which has been rejected for negative connotations of being beggars. However it remains the norm in other cultures such as the U.S. and France.

³ Haraway, D.J. 1991, p.178.

⁴ Reeve, D. (2012) 'Cyborgs, cripples and i Crip: Reflections on the contribution of Haraway to disability studies', in D. Goodley, B. Hughes and L. J. Davis (eds) Disability and Social Theory: New Developments and Directions , London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 91-111.

⁵ discussion of prosthetics and impaired bodies is often limited to consideration of how technology either restores functionality or normalizes the person

“One of the reasons why there has been little utilization of the transgressive cyborg figure within disability studios to date is because of a well-documented history of how technology was problematically associated with normalisation, rehabilitation and cure.”⁶

Within popular cyborg culture there seems to be an air of supremacy in becoming a cyborg. With acknowledgement and praise heaped upon those who choose to do it to be “futuristic” or “artistic” as opposed to those who do it as a result of their disabled situation.

In her New York Times article⁷, The Dawn of the ‘Tryborg’ Jillian Weise argues that only disabled people are true cyborgs. She uses the term Tryborg to describe someone who claims to be cyborg, but whose core existence is not dependent on the actual cyborgification of their body.

“Tryborgs can only imagine what life is like for us. The tryborg is always distanced by metaphor, guesswork and desire.”

The Tryborg may be an early adopter of body technology, or even of chip implants, but it is not their core identity to be fused with technology, it is a choice. This choice echos through much of diversity theory and can be seen in concepts such as cultural appropriation. If a white person puts on a Native American headdress as a costume, it is a choice, they may temporarily experience negative social consequences for their choice, but the removal of the ‘costume’ restores their whiteness. The change in level of privilege is something they choose to explore, not something which is a core part of their identity. So it is, Weise argues, with tryborgs.

She critiques Haraway’s work as that of the tryborg.

“The manifesto reads: “In short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics.” But Haraway is a tryborg: she’s not disabled; she has no interface; she uses the term as a metaphor. The strategic move where one group says, “I shall speak for them because they do not exist / do not live here / do not have thoughts” is common of the tryborg. When they are not speaking for us.”⁸

Weise also echos the work of Mitchell and Snyder (1997) highlighting that disabled cyborgs are often footnotes to the academic discussion of the cyborg.

“Tryborgs rely on the nonexistence of actual cyborgs for their bread and butter. If cyborgs exist, how will the tryborg remain relevant? Wouldn’t we just ask the cyborg for her opinion? The opinions of cyborgs are conspicuously absent from the expert panels, the tech leadership conferences and the advisory boards. The erasure is not news to us. We have been deleted for centuries.”⁹

However, much of what Haraway suggests as a cyborgian approach to post humanism does reflect a lived reality for disabled people, be it described by a non disabled voice (Haraway’s father was disabled and used crutches to walk, so there is a possibility that her thinking was influenced by this

⁶ Reeve, D. (2012) 'Cyborgs, cripples and i Crip: Reflections on the contribution of Haraway to disability studies', in D. Goodley, B. Hughes and L. J. Davis (eds) Disability and Social Theory: New Developments and Directions , London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 91-111.

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/opinion/the-dawn-of-the-tryborg.html>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/opinion/the-dawn-of-the-tryborg.html>

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/opinion/the-dawn-of-the-tryborg.html>

fact, although it is hardly mentioned – another common feature of the deleting of disabled people in cultural theory).

Haraway talks of cyborgian fiction in which gender neutral or feminist cyborgs are fitted with technology to enable them to survive in non-human spaces. In Vonda McIntyre's *Superliminal* the character Orca is a genetically altered human who can dive to deep ocean conditions. Laenea is a pilot who receives implants to allow her to survive travel at the speed of light. These medical interventions allow access to spaces otherwise inaccessible, in the same way that my wheelchair allows me access to spaces which are otherwise impossible to navigate. There are spaces which an Able person can exist, which I simply cannot exist in. These places include multistory car parks, many office blocks, theatres and stadiums, large towns and cities, airports and public transport terminals. By adding my wheelchair to my body these spaces become accessible to me in the same way as an oxygen tank allows a diver to go under the sea, or an astronaut uses a suit to travel to and breathe on the moon. The wheelchair is an object which allows my body into spaces which were not designed for it to operate.

Despite our cultural aversion to disabled people, and the fear surround the use of mobility aids and wheelchairs, we can see that disabled people are key to the development of the cyborg, to the future of the adapted human. We have been experiencing cyborgian lives well before our culture was aware of the concept of virtual spaces and posthumanism¹⁰. The way in which disabled people have celebrated their adaptations, adopted them and used them to create new networks of support can also be seen in Haraway's identity of the cyborg.

"From another standpoint, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints."¹¹

The disabled person bridges that gap between being considered animal at one end of the scale to posthuman part technology cyborgs at the other end of the scale. We encompass those post binary identities of abled and disabled, animal and machine, human and posthuman, celebrated and distrusted. We embody the cyborg in our interfacing with the everyday.

Haraway states that

"Cyborg... is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other. Feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control."¹²

I would argue that this is precisely what disabled communities do through their uses of technology in their lived experience.

¹⁰ Posthumanism for me, is an incredibly problematic concept with regard to disabled people, but I have not explored it through my work in this thesis so will not unpick this further here.

¹¹ Haraway, D.J. 1991 P154

¹² Haraway, D.J. 1991 P.175