

Posthuman Bodies in the Making: Woman and Technology in *The Girl Who Was Plugged In*

OURNID Soumia^{1*} 

¹University of Chlef Hassiba Benbouali, Algeria
Laboratory: TICELET
s.ournid@univ-chlef.dz

CHAAL Houaria² 

²University of Chlef Hassiba Benbouali, Algeria
Laboratory: TICELET
h.chaal@univ-chlef.dz

Received: 09/05/2023,

Accepted: 04/04/2024,

Published: 30/06/2024

ABSTRACT: *It has long been thought of 'a world governed by technology' as part of an unreached future. Nevertheless, the current reality is, in many aspects, a manifestation of what the works of science fiction once foresaw. The rapprochement between the content of this genre and its reification begs the question of survival, or rather, the shape of survival in a technological world. Hence, this article is an endeavor to reflect the influence of technology demonstrated in James Tiptree Jr.'s *The Girl Who Was Plugged In* (1973) on reality. To reach this end, the novella is regarded from a posthumanist prism with the aim of speculating the meaning and the making of the female mind and body in the Age of Machine. The paper also evokes aspects from the feminist and Marxist schools in relating facts with fiction to reflect upon the speculative dimension of the science fiction genre insofar as the schools provide a profound insight into the realistic social features that can be found in literary texts. The textual analysis reveals that technology feeds humans' superficiality towards the female consciousness and physique, which is manifested in areas related to beauty standards, consumption, and love, and interferes with redefining the human by detaching the mind from the body.*

KEYWORDS: Artificial feelings, consciousness, female body, posthumanism, technology.

* Corresponding author: **OURNID Soumia**, s.ournid@univ-chlef.dz

ALTRALAG Journal / © 2024 The Authors. Published by the University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria.

This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Introduction

Being the only creature with a mind capable of generating abstract thoughts, the human race has often wondered about its place in the universe. Not only that, but this also often extends to the endeavor of ameliorating that place in the universal hierarchy. From highly significant acts of wars, exploration, colonialism, inventions, constructing empires, changing politics, or influencing economies, down to the daily pursuit of achieving personal tasks, humans seek one thing: improvement. Much of this ongoing improvement is owed to the intellectual movements that fuel the thirst for knowledge and progress. Among these movements is humanism, which saw light during the Renaissance era and was emphasized during the Age of Enlightenment. Humanism can be summarized in the words of Protagoras who says, “Man is the measure of all things” (qtd. in Pepperell, 1995, p. 154). Put differently, humanism dictates that the human is the center of the universe. However, the aforementioned pursuit to ‘improve’ necessitates the presence of a hierarchy in which one may arise. Such a hierarchy has long been established among (1) nature, which is mostly represented in plants, living, breathing creatures without the ability to move, think or communicate; (2) animals, with the ability to move and sometimes communicate, but not think beyond their physical needs; (3) humans, with all the above qualities in addition to thinking abstractly; and (4) God, or a divine entity, with unfathomable abilities. Notwithstanding that the hierarchy is often regarded in the same order that is hitherto stated, humans always seek to ascend higher. This recalls the Biblical story of the ancient people who sought to reach the heavens through the tower of Babel, to which God’s punishment was to diversify human languages. This story shows that human ambition is limitless. Their ambition was, later, the engine directing humans’ attention toward technology.

Before the birth of unrivaled technological advancements such as Robotics, techno-communication, prosthetics, intelligent machines, artificial intelligence (AI), nanotechnology, genetic manipulation and more, some writers like George Orwell, H.G. Wells, Arthur C. Clark, Isaac Asimov, and others anticipated radical changes in human life due to technology. Their works combined the factual and the fictional, creating the genre of science fiction. The latter, which might be traced back to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), was perceived as lowbrow literature until time proved the realization of many theorized inventions that science fiction writers anticipated. Antidepressant pills, surveillance cameras, earbuds, and tablets were foreseen in *Brave New World* (1932), *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* (1948), *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), and *2001 A Space Odyssey* (1968) respectively. Works of science fiction continue to create futuristic scenarios where technology is the master.

Among the range of literary works that reflect some aspects, albeit extreme, relating to the contemporary era is James Tiptree Jr.’s *The Girl Who Was Plugged In*. The latter is a novella set in a near-future capitalist dystopia. It follows the story of a woman named P. Burk, as she ‘plugs’ her consciousness into a manufactured body that meets the feminine epitome. The plot opens with a description of an “ugly” (Tiptree & Sheldon, 1989, p. 2) seventeen-year-old girl named Philadelphia Burk and referred to as P. Burk, who attempts suicide but gets saved at the last moment. She is soon offered to be a part of an experiment with the end of serving a corporation called GTX. An engineer named Joe designs a machine that implants the consciousness of the protagonist in a fabricated body, which is given the name Delphi. P. Burk soon disappears under the flesh of Delphi and the shining social life that this feminine, “fifteen and flawless” (1989, p. 7) body grants her. The job of the protagonist is explained to be a way of advertising in a world where ads and publicity are rendered illegal. In other words, she impersonates a celebrity, who represents a role model for people to buy and use the products she uses. P. Burk is not the only one in this line of work, but she is the only one whose mind is plugged into another body. This continues until she falls in love with a man named Paul and starts to immerse in the lie of her existence, forgetting what she really is and believing that she can have a normal life. Her love eventually results in her demise, or at least the demise of P. Burk, while Delphi continues to live through someone else’s consciousness.

The Girl Who Was Plugged In is a story of a person behind a façade, which relates closely with all that is created by the internet and social media, allowing people false identities that range from slightly modified to completely fabricated. Ironically, the author of the novella is yet another example of a false identity, for James Tiptree Jr. is a pseudonym that Alice Bradley Sheldon used to sell her fictional works until her death. It is easy to notice that literature is a field that has long been dominated by male authors, and the genre of science fiction was even more masculinized, as men constituted the majority of both authors and readers. This makes the plot of this Hugo Award-winning novella more significant, as it tackles the story of a woman unable to face the world with her true self. Hollinger observes almost poetically that “Tiptree's story is a sadly ironic fairy tale that examines the pressures on women to replicate the ideal of femininity, to play it ‘straight’ even as they are doomed always to fail at such a task” (Hollinger, 1999, p. 29).

The themes of this work bring to the fore the philosophy of posthumanism, for some of the defining aspects of the human, mainly the female mind and body, are showcased. In conducting this literary analytical study, aspects of the feminist, as well as Marxist literary theories, are deployed. The former is applied to investigate the stereotypes associated with the representation of the female body whilst the latter is used to depict the promotion of consumerism to enrich corporations respectively. This aims at analyzing the use and abuse of beauty standards in favor of corporate capitalism in the novella and reflecting it onto the present reality. That is, it shows how much of the fictional events of the work can be seen today, tackling, hence, the posthuman world from within.

Posthumanism and the Theories of Science Fiction

The post-World War II Era was a fertile ground for breeding theories about humans' purpose, their place in the universe, and simply what it means to be a human. That era was rooted in modernity but blossomed in postmodernity with remarkably extreme edges. If it is regarded from the right angle, postmodernity can be charged with providing the perfect environment for the growth of posthumanist theories. Posthumanism is a term proposed by Ihab Hasan in 1977, but over half a century after its coinage, the term did not acquire a unified definition, nor, in many ways, a specific field of study. It rather refers to a pluralized range of theories about humans, humanity, and humanness that often penetrate scientific discussions and, sometimes, are referred to in reading futuristic literary works. In this regard, Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter define posthumanism as “the cultural condition occasioned by twenty-first century biopolitics, technoculture, life scapes and all the desires and anxieties arising therein, as well as the discourse that studies all that” (qtd. in Drewitz, 2022, p. 62). To formulate a cohesive comprehension of the posthumanist theory in the literary sphere, it is important to contextualize it within the postmodernist movement insofar as the latter provides the fertile ground for the former to be applied to fictional texts. This contextualization is relevant to the current study, as it provides a rationale behind the adaptation of posthumanism to read the representation of the female mind and body in a realm governed by technology.

In literature, the causality effect between postmodernism and posthumanism is seen in three focal points. First, the ontological pursuit of postmodernism allows writers to cross the barrier of the known truth and enter a realm of the fantastical through their works; this manifests in stories about aliens and futuristic dystopias governed by technology. Second, postmodernism introduces a sense of playfulness demonstrated in the carnivalesque mode of writing, which inspires posthumanist writers to tackle essential subjects about human survival in a less serious tone. Third, postmodernism is known for blurring the line between the factual and fictional, which appears in posthumanist futuristic scenarios that are based on an extreme version of writers' contemporary reality. Those extremes are often demonstrated in dystopias. Finally, postmodernism, as an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984, p. XXIV), allows the emergence of what Lyotard terms “petit récit” (1984, p. 60) or little narratives; this paves the way for unconventional

plots and non-human or transhuman characters to be immersed into literature. As a result of this, scholars and critics started to formulate theories about this new dominating literary genre.

Among the urging discussions in the posthumanist discourse is the notion of the cyborg. The latter is best understood in Donna Haraway's definition of it as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway, 2013, p. 1). In her essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto," she concludes that humans are becoming cyborgs due to transcending the humans/animals, organisms/machines, and physical/non-physical boundaries. Haraway relies on this theory to criticize the idea of binary oppositions by emphasizing that many things in the universe intersect and overlap often. Along the same vein, she describes two perspectives regarding the cyborg world theory. The first is a military-driven, dystopic realm where technology overpowers humans, leading to the vanquishing of the latter. She argues that "[t]he main trouble with cyborgs [...] is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism" (2013, p. 4). The second perspective is that of a harmonious world where animals, humans, and technology coexist, bridging the gender, class, and species gaps. She confirms, however, that neither of these perspectives reflects the truth. The latter, for her, is rather a combination of both views. Further, Haraway questions what being human is by asking, "Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?" (2013, p. 33). This brings to the fore questions about prostheses and transmitted consciousness, which are essential to *The Girl Who Was Plugged In*. Her essay, then, is an attempt to break away from binaries, categories, as well as narrow definitions toward a more fluid and dynamic reality.

Haraway's posthuman and post-gendered theories are more utopian in nature. Scott Bukatman described it in his book *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* as a "utopian impulse [which] is far from Baudrillard's cyborg nightmare" (Bukatman, 1993, p. 323). In this book, Bukatman emphasizes that "it has become increasingly difficult to separate the human from the technological" (1993, p. 2). He further argues that any emergence of new technology creates both a cultural threat and a hope for improvement to humanity. This skepticism remains unknown until the works of science fiction frame it either under a utopian or a dystopian picture. From the Machine Age, the Nuclear Age, and the Space Age, to the current Information and Electronic Age, science fiction writers convey hopes and fears about the possible outcomes of technology. In the end, Bukatman refers to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a body without organs, which is slightly reversed in Tiptree's novella. The latter tackles a mind without a body, or put differently, a juxtaposition of a disembodied human and a dehumanized body.

In addition to Haraway and Bukatman, other critics such as Baudrillard, Virilio, Deleuze and Guattari, believe that the genre of science fiction—which includes "film, video, comics, computer graphics, computer games, virtual reality, the theme park" (Gordon, 1993, p. 445) along with literature—explain the Information Age. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. coined the term 'The SF of Theory' to refer to forenamed thinkers' theories about science fiction. He argues that "SF embeds scientific-technological concepts in the sphere of human interests and actions, explaining them and explicitly attributing social value to them" (Csicsery-Ronay Jr, 1991, p. 387). These theories are, in their essence, an endeavor to explain the existence of humans in an era increasingly dominated by technology. Hence, works and theories of science fiction establish a tradition centered on the philosophy of posthumanism along with its various, yet interconnected,

facets, including technological acceleration¹, transhumanism², antihumanism³, biopolitics⁴, singularitarianism⁵, and anthropocentrism⁶. Both Haraway's feminist cyborg theory as well as Bukatman's 'terminal identity' in the techno-Age, along with other themes centered around the female body, human consciousness, and artificial feelings, manifest in Tiptree's *The Girl Who Was Plugged In*.

To fulfill the main aim of this paper, the following sections reflect the above-mentioned theories regarding humans and technology onto the novella. While doing so, the focus is more targeted toward the female body and the ways in which it has been moderated an altered to resemble a machine but with purposes that differ from the forward-looking endeavors of elevating mankind. Rather, the transhumanist female body that underwent a process of technological acceleration in this dystopian reality is shown to serve textbook purposes, which is that of pleasing the male sight and desire and promoting goods. Each of these ideas is detailed in what follows with a reliance on posthumanist perspectives.

Brain Determinism and Physical Disembodiment

Among the essential existential questions that scientists and thinkers attempt to pursue is the definition of the human itself. Humans share several features with many other species, yet they are, in more ways than one, distinct. In an attempt to locate the source of this distinction, the concept of brain determinism comes to the fore. The latter is the belief that the brain is the sole organ responsible for every mental phenomenon, i.e. consciousness, which renders it the container of the self. This belief may carry the indication that anything beyond consciousness, like the body and the outer world, is relatively insignificant (Pepperell, 1995, p. 13). In *The Girl Who Was Plugged In*, the definition of the human that often resides in consciousness is stripped away, as technology separates *the* mind and *the* body by combining a certain mind and a certain body to create a human.

The mind/body dichotomy manifests in several incidents throughout the novella, as the entire plot is constructed upon a manufactured female body and a transmitted human consciousness. After she was retrieved by GTX following a failed suicide attempt, P. Burk's consciousness is implanted beyond her body into that of what came to be called Delphi. The latter is

in no sense a robot. Call her a waldo if you must. The fact is she's just a girl, a real live girl with her brain in an unusual place. A simple real-time on-line system with plenty of bit-rate [...] eighty-nine pounds of tender girl flesh and blood with a few metallic components, stepping out into the sunlight to be taken to her new life. (Tiptree & Sheldon, 1989, p. 10)

¹ The rapid development of technology and its inclusion in every aspect of human life. It includes areas such as communication, computing, and artificial intelligence (AI).

² A philosophical trajectory that stands in parallel with posthumanism. It tackles the possibility of technology to bridge the gap between homo sapiens and the robot by transcending the limitations of the human mind and body.

³ A philosophical lens that offers criticism to the humanist ideas about the centrality and exceptionality of the human. It rejects the presence of a universal hierarchy and adopts a more holistic view of the world.

⁴ A concept associated with modern governments that utilize scientific and technological breakthroughs, especially those related to altering human biology, to serve political agendas.

⁵ An ideology speculating that technological advancement will, at a certain point in the future, lead to an utter divergence referred to as 'singularity.' This is an irreversible coalition between humans and technology, where the effect of later intertwines with and within human civilization, resulting in an unprecedented era governed by AI and transhumans.

⁶ A belief that stems from humanism to indicate that the world is centered upon human values, desires, and existence. It is an argument that both the natural and the technological elements exist to serve homo sapiens.

Ironically, Delphi's body adapts perfectly to P. Burk's mind; "Joe says he never saw a Remote take over so fast. No disorientations, no rejections [...] She's going into Delphi like a salmon to the sea" (1989, p. 13). In this regard, P. Burk may be seen as a bodiless being begging to be immersed in some sort of shape. Delphi's fabricated body, hence, represents the perfect shell to contain P. Burk's mind. In time, the protagonist gets as comfortable in Delphi's body as she refrains from "eating or sleeping, they can't keep her out of the body-cabinet to get her blood moving" (1989, p. 13). For P. Burk to attain her needs, "Delphi gets a long 'sleep'" (1989, p. 13), which resembles the natural circle of sleep, when the "brain reorganizes and recharges itself, and removes toxic waste byproducts which have accumulated throughout the day" (Eugene & Masiak, 2015, p. 1) whilst the body rests. Only in this context, P. Burk is the brain and Delphi is the body. In a way, P. Burk and Delphi become a new representation of a human being whose mind and body are separated by technology but simultaneously linked by it. This may be read as an indication of the realization of singularitarianism, where the line between the organic and the mechanic becomes as blurred as they create a new seemingly holistic entity. It can be said here that the text speculates a near future where the theoretical vision of singularitarianism becomes factual.

Furthermore, this duality of the mind and the body begs the question of the importance level between the mind and the body. The protagonist is a combination of a soulless carcass and a bodiless consciousness. Right from the beginning of the novella, P. Burk's physique is attached to the most negative descriptions. She is referred to, for instance, as a "rotten girl" (Tiptree & Sheldon, 1989, p. 1), a "horrible Body" (1989, p. 5), a "forgotten hulk" (1989, p. 7), and a "grim carcass" (1989, p. 11). Conversely, Delphi's body is described as a "darlingest girl child" (1989, p. 5), "flawless" (1989, p. 7), "beautiful baby" (1989, p. 7), and "seductive child" (1989, p. 8). Scientifically speaking, the mental life of humans, including the conscious or unconscious senses, thoughts, and behaviors, is subjected entirely to the activity of the brain (Searle, 1980, p. 425). A more simplified explanation of this phenomenon is described by the narrator:

P. Burke does not feel her brain is in the sauna room, she feels she's in that sweet little body. When you wash your hands, do you feel the water is running on your brain? Of course not. You feel the water on your hand, although the "feeling" is actually a potential-pattern flickering over the electrochemical jelly between your ears. And it's delivered there via the long circuits from your hands. Just so, P. Burke's brain in the cabinet feels the water on her hands in the bathroom. The fact that the signals have jumped across space on the way in makes no difference at all. If you want the jargon, it's known as eccentric projection or sensory reference and you've done it all your life. (Tiptree & Sheldon, 1989, p. 6)

This labels the brain the defining organ of the human being, which, by this definition, should situate P. Burk in an indispensable position and Delphi in an expendable one. Nonetheless, the exaggerated condemnation of P. Burk's body as opposed to the almost sanctified descriptions of Delphi's, in addition to every character's, including P. Burk's, celebration of this new project and pretending that Delphi is a real person, indicates that the form is perceived to be superior to the mind. This idea redefines what it is to be human, or at least what it is to be a socially accepted human, providing a novice insight on the posthuman. That is, the more the world falls under the mercy of technological acceleration, the more it becomes easy to neglect the function of the mind. The latter has often been regarded as the factor that distinguishes leaders, philosophers, scientists, and intellectuals from the commoners in the era where humanism and its theories were the dominant philosophical trend. However, posthumanism, according to the novella, introduces a new criterion for social hierarchy, which is that of the possession of, and/or immersion in, technology.

Being a part of this technological experiment, P. Burk's consciousness is limited to certain social restrictions that are dictated to the new Delphi:

The training takes place in her suite, and is exactly what you'd call a charm course. How to walk, sit, eat, speak, blow her nose, how to stumble, to urinate, to hiccup—DELICIOUSLY. How to make each nose-blow or shrug delightfully, subtly different from any ever spooled before. (1989, p. 5; emphasis in the original)

This set of instructions is closer to programming a machine. After all, it is not Delphi that is undertaking this restricted practice. As the narrator continues to explain:

But P. Burke proves apt. Somewhere in that horrible body is a gazelle, a houri who would have been buried forever without this crazy chance. See the ugly duckling go! Only it isn't precisely P. Burke who's stepping, laughing, shaking out her shining hair. How could it be? P. Burke is doing it all right, but she's doing it through something. The something is to all appearances a live girl. (1989, p. 5)

Simultaneously, Delphi represents an escape route for P. Burk. Before being part of GTX, P. Burk unsuccessfully attempts suicide. When saved, "her eyes leak a little from the understandable disappointment of finding herself still alive" (1989, p. 3). P. Burk had no purpose or endeavor in life until her mind was plugged into the body of Delphi. Accordingly, it can be said that as much as technology strips the protagonist of her true self, it also grants her a new identity that liberates her and allows her a place where she was previously alienated.

This mind/body division is taken to its extreme in Tiptree's novella; however, it is, to a visible extent, a part of contemporary reality. The internet and social media platforms resulted in the phenomenon of separating one's vital reality from the virtual one. People started to create fake personas much like the façade that P. Burk hides behind. This virtual persona is often bound by a set of unspoken rules that may seem chaotic and random but are, in their essence, tied to a new set of conventions. Moreover, virtual reality is increasingly eliminating diversity in the beauty and fashion industries and moving toward uniting beauty standards much like Tiptree's futuristic setting indicates. These new conventions are further illustrated in the novella's treatment of the themes of advertisement and materialized beauty.

Advertising the Female Body

Technology is admittedly responsible for creating a rapidly transmitted circle in a number of fields such as news, scientific discoveries, and advertisements. Before the Industrial Revolution, leisure goods were a luxury afforded only by the upper class, but the emergence of the middle class allowed most people to afford and desire products that were unnecessary for survival. This led to the birth of a new concept: consumerism. In explaining Marxism's negative stand regarding the latter, McNall writes, "The more you consume, the less human you are" (1990, p. 45). This creates a link between the Marxist perspective and the antihumanist ideologies that reject the constant attendance to every human desire regardless of the consequences that may ensue. In more ways than one, Marxism's antihumanist attitude supports the posthumanist stand of equality among beings. Although one of the core objectives of Marx's revolution was to allow the proletariat a standard of living beyond the basic survival needs, it is still skeptical about excessive consumption. *The Girl Who Was Plugged In* treats one of the essential engines of consumerism, which is advertisement, in parallel with treating the perception of the female body from a posthumanist prism.

Despite being the central character, P. Burk is repeatedly marginalized in various respects. The plot is narrated from a third-person perspective by an unnamed narrator coming from the future. The opening line of the novella sets a one-way conversation between the narrator and a muted unnamed listener. The latter is referred to as "dead daddy" (Tiptree & Sheldon, 1989, p. 1), which denotes his masculinity.

Likewise, the narrator's tone of voice and his unhidden sexual predilection for Delphi's body, and disgust from P. Burk's "ugly[ness]" (1989, p. 5), suggest that he is a man. Furthermore, the author of the novella, as mentioned earlier, is a woman penning under a masculine name with an endeavor to sell her writing to the predominantly male audience of science fiction in the twentieth century. Therefore, the reader is regarding the story of a female protagonist behind three layers of male views: a male-named author writing about a male narrator who is talking to a male listener about a girl. These layers strip the protagonist from the possibility of voicing her perspective. Throughout the novella, P. Burk is silent in the sense that her thoughts are unheard by the reader except for what an obviously prejudiced narrator deduces. This presents P. Burk as a mere object around which an interesting story is knit, which dehumanizes her as much as plugging her mind in another body does.

At the beginning of the novella, the listener appears, through the narrator's remarks, more "curious about the city [...] in the FUTURE" (1989, p. 2; emphasis in the original) than about hearing the story of P. Burk. A defining aspect of this "not all that far in the future" (1989, p. 2) reality is that there are "[n]o commercials," "[n]o adds [...]. Not a billboard, sign, slogan, jingle, skywriter, blurb, sublimflash, in this whole fun world." The narrator explains that "Brand names" exist only "in those ticky little peep-screens on the stores and [it] could hardly [be called] advertising" (1989, p. 2). For a moment, the absence of advertisements may seem liberating inasmuch as it emancipates people from the restrictions of consumerism; nonetheless, grand corporations such as GTX use a different kind of advertisement. Their agenda is best described in the words of Mr. Cante, a "fatherly man" (1989, p. 7) who oversees GTX:

Advertising as it used to be is against the law. A display other than the legitimate use of the product, intended to promote its sale. In former times every manufacturer was free to tout his wares any way, place or time he could afford. All the media and most of the landscape was taken up with extravagant competing displays. The thing became uneconomic. The public rebelled. Since the so-called Huckster Act, sellers have been restrained to, I quote, displays in or on the product itself, visible during its legitimate use or in on-premise sales. (1989, p. 7)

This business, however, is kept secretive. When P. Burk, in the flesh of Delphi, gets suspicious about the illegality of the work, Mr. Cante reassures her that it is done for the greater good:

All those products people use, foods and healthaids and cookers and cleaners and clothes and car—they're all made by people. Somebody put in years of hard work designing and making them. [...] What happens if people have no way of hearing about his product? Word-of-mouth is far too slow and unreliable. Nobody might ever stumble onto his new product or find out how good it was, right? And then he and all the people who worked for him—they'd go bankrupt, right? So, Delphi, there has to be some way that large numbers of people can get a look at a good new product, right? How? By letting people see you using it. You're giving that man a chance. (1989, p. 8)

His rationalization provokes the protagonist to question the law that forbids advertisement. He nourishes her doubts by judging the prohibition as part of "bad, inhuman laws [...] despite their good intent" (1989, p. 8) and emphasizing that without the efforts of "people who understand" (1989, p. 8) like the members of GTX, of which Delphi is now a part, "[the] economy, [the] society would be cruelly destroyed. [They]'d be back in caves!" (1989, p. 8). Cante's efforts successfully convince her to be an advertisement agent, which dislocates her further from reality. In addition to the manufactured body and a remote consciousness, her consumer habits and lifestyle are now dictated by the highest bidder.

The futuristic setting of the novella resembles the present not in the literal manifestation of its aspects, but in the effect that these aspects result in. To illustrate, the narrator mentions a “worldwide carrier field bouncing down from satellites, controlling communication and transport systems all over the globe” (1989, p. 2) which admittedly resembles the internet. Moreover, he (if pursuing the above-mentioned conclusion that the narrator is a man) refers to “the holovision technology that’s put TV and radio in museums” (1989, p. 2). The Holovision technology is a 3D projector that requires no lens to project a full-size image of a person. This technology is not fully developed yet and is certainly far from circulation, but the impact that the narrator mentions, which is “put[ting] TV and radio in museums,” is noticeably nearing. People nowadays rely on their smartphones and the internet in almost every aspect of life: news, weather, entertainment, self-care, communication, education, programs, etc. A considerable portion of technological development is targeted toward technology that lives on a phone, in the form of applications. It can, therefore, be argued that smartphones are now pushing the TV and radio to the edge of retirement. More importantly, the advertising and marketing business, as well, is following the trends that the novella predicts. Although ads are not illegal at present, corporations are indeed relying on the popularity of social media influencers to promote their goods. Besides, plastic surgeries, and, at a more accessible and less expensive level, the use of filters and avatars is quite literally providing one fabricated face to countless users, ‘plugging’ them, hence, in a different face, which is the central thematic concern of Tiptree’s work. The idea of posthuman bodies in the making, then, is not abstract anymore. It is a part of reality.

On top of this, such dehumanization and technologizing of humans, both in fiction and reality, may be regarded from a more profound posthumanist perspective. One of the reasons that contributed to the emergence of the latter as a philosophical trajectory is the noticeable failure of humanism and the hierarchy that it establishes with the aim of preserving human civilization. Therefore, posthumanism traces and rejects the biopolitical discourse that seizes the opportunities provided by science for biological alteration to meet political ends. The above analysis shows that Tiptree’s novella reflects an illustration of such an idea when P. Burk’s biological enhancement is shown to be in the service of the marketing industry. It can, therefore, be claimed that this novella is a cry against the misuse of biopolitics, which, instead of being harnessed to enhance the human body for benevolent ends such as improving health conditions and more, it is targeted toward feeding the capitalist hierarchy despite the visible damage that it causes to the public. This damage appears more clearly in interpreting the representation of the emotional side of the protagonist.

Love in the Age of Technology

Progress may situate humanity at an enhanced level, but there are some fundamental flaws, such as the objectification of the female body, that instead of being eliminated, are alas rooted in every era, and the era of Artificial Intelligence is no exception. “Such imaginative appropriations of technology do not necessarily permit us to transcend the dominant (patriarchal) ideologies of our everyday existence; rather they can serve to reinforce and perpetuate such ideologies” (Mitchell, 2006, p. 114), writes Kayne Mitchell in an attempt to conclude women’s place in the Age of technology. Similarly, Margret Atwood talked about the female body being an advertisement tool and a commodity (Atwood, 1990, p. 492), and Simone De Beauvoir explained that a woman is seen as “Truth, Beauty, Poetry [...] All except herself” (De Beauvoir, 2010, p. 223). In Tiptree’s work, the protagonist is a juxtaposition of objectification and disembodiment, reflecting both anthropocentric and transhumanist stands. On the one hand, the first manifests insofar as the definition of the human, according to humanism, falls into a highly narrow category of the white and the male, in addition to other limitations. Therefore; objectifying the female self to please the male sight may be considered to be an anthropocentric endeavor to please the desires of the human. The second one, on the other, is seen in the forementioned detachment between the mind and the body, which naturally results in stripping the female feeling –thus identity– while to nourishing a machine.

The Girl Who Was Plugged In is, after all, a love story. A character named Paul Isham is introduced as “bright and articulate and tender-souled and incessantly active and he and his friends are choking with appalment at the world their fathers made” (Tiptree & Sheldon, 1989, p. 19). Paul soon falls in love with Delphi, and P. Burk, starting to be convinced that she *is* Delphi, loves him back. The narrator sarcastically describes the beginning of their love as an effortless course of events:

Really you can skip all this, when the loving little girl on the yellow-brick road meets a Man. A real human male burning with angry compassion and grandly concerned with human justice, who reaches for her with real male arms and—boom! She loves him back with all her heart. (1989, p. 20)

This description presents the protagonist as a flat character with predictable, almost stereotypical, behavior. It stripes the female character from depth and presents her as the one-dimensional female character that the male-dominated readership of science fiction may expect. However, the narrator's comments cover this representation with a layer of irony that provides meaning to her passiveness.

Moreover, the narrator continues to emphasize that “it's really P. Burke five thousand miles away who loves Paul” (1989, p. 20). In a conventional narrative, the focus would be on the love story and the emotions of both lovers; however, the narrator here prolongs mocking this situation:

P. Burke [...] A caricature of a woman burning, melting, obsessed with true love. Trying over twenty-double-thousand miles of hard vacuum to reach her beloved through the girl-flesh numbed by an invisible film. Feeling his arms around the body he thinks is hers, fighting through shadows to give herself to him. Trying to taste and smell him through beautiful dead nostrils, to love him back with a body that goes dead in the heart of the fire. (1989, p. 20)

Paul's perspective is not clear to the reader. His ignorance of his beloved's truth, though, is repeatedly stated. Eventually, he suspects something is wrong and mistakenly believes that Delphi is a normal human controlled by a remote. He promises to help her and asks her to leave with him, to which she soon agrees. This damsel-in-distress situation is again mocked by the narrator who targets his comments again against P. Burk: “Brave little Delphi (insane P. Burke)” (1989, p. 21). Among the first and most essential goals of the feminist literary theory is to reject and correct the often-falsified and sexist damsel-in-distress narratives. When contextualizing this novella, it appears that it was first published in 1973, which was the peak of the second wave of feminism. Therefore, presenting this narrative in such a sarcastic way may be read as an indication that this type of narrative will always be stuck with a certain category of readership and even authorship. The futuristic setting of the work only adds to the hopelessness of escaping the patriarchal hierarchy that was emphasized by the humanist movement.

Furthermore, the love between Paul and Delphi lacks the intensity of fulfillment. Right from the beginning, the narrator remarks that this story is not that of “Cinderella transistorized” (1989, p. 4), which eliminates the choice of a happy ending when the love element is presented. On the one hand, Paul loves Delphi, who is merely a projector of P. Burk, and the latter “can no longer clearly recall that she exists apart from Delphi” (1989, p. 22). This means that Paul loves someone who does not exist beyond a mere body. His attraction is merely physical, and understandably so because Delphi is a sensation not only “for anybody with a Y-chromosome, but also for women and everything in between. It's the sweet supernatural jackpot, the million to-one” (1989, p. 16). According to this, objectification is intertwined with the transhuman body because the protagonist is not only regarded merely for her physique and having her thoughts and feelings ignored altogether, but this physique is not even her. What is admired here, hence, is, in the literal sense, a machine. On the other hand, P. Burk's love is highly romanticized. She “is seeing Heaven on the far side

of death, too. Heaven is spelled P-a-u-l” (1989, p. 25). She even starts to believe that she could die and be resurrected in the image of Delphi, to which the narrator comments, “Garbage, electronically speaking. No way” (1989, p. 25). This, again, asserts her lack of a realistic vision, which is a discriminatory quality that is sometimes attributed to female characters in literary texts.

It appears from the above-mentioned that the love between Paul and Delphi is damaged, to say the least. However, a third person presents a unique yet stronger facet of love; that person is Joe. When Paul reaches the GTX tower intending to rescue Delphi, he is still ignorant of what she is. Joe tries to prevent him from cutting the transmission, fearing that he would risk the Remote’s, i.e. P. Burk’s life. Regardless of Joe’s warning, Paul does open the cabinet, and “a monster rises up” (1989, p. 29). Terrified by the atrocity of her look, Paul pulls wires that control “so to speak her nervous system” (1989, p. 29) causing her collapse. With P. Burk dead, Delphi is “nothing but a warm little bundle of vegetative functions hitched to some expensive hardware” (1989, p. 30). After describing the scene of her death, the narrator remarks that “Joe is also crying a little; **he alone had truly loved P. Burke**” (1989, p. 31; emphasis added). Joe and Delphi’s love reflects a posthumanist relationship between humans and machines. It defies the traditional narrative of boy meets girl; boy and girl fall in love; boy and girl live happily ever after. Rather, the ending of the novella suggests a different narrative of man builds machine, man and machine serve each other; man and machine live in dependability ever after. Accordingly, both the female mind and the female body has been replaced with the machine, indicating the replaceability of the female presence in the posthumanist world.

It does not take much effort to see the resemblance between Paul and Delphi’s love story and the thousand online love stories via social media. In both cases, relationships are built on wires, true faces are hidden, and beautified façades are presented. As Stevenson almost poetically puts it, “In such a crucible of intermeshed social performances, identities are formed and reformed and we never simply are, but are always in the process of becoming human” (Stevenson, 2007, p. 101). This process might as well give rise to the posthuman instead. In the end, “Delphi lives again [...] But there’s a different chick in Chile” (Tiptree & Sheldon, 1989, p. 31). In the mind/body dichotomy, the latter ultimately survives while the former is easily replaced, making it expendable.

Conclusion

A quick look at the course of history showcases that every era can be accused of discrimination against women. This discrimination is much apparent in objectifying and sexualizing the female body. Because of the word ‘history,’ one may think that these perceptions are part of the past, rendering them invalid to the contemporary era. However, Tiptree’s novella proves otherwise. In the Age of technology and social media, it has become easier to generalize and covertly enforce certain standards on women. These standards are more fabricated, less humane, and absurdly widespread. The disrupted causality between technology and the objectification of women is linked to the posthuman condition. On a larger scale, posthuman bodies appear in various shapes, among them is detaching the mind from the body, promoting materialism, and fabricating artificial emotions. All of these are essential to the context of Tiptree's work, but also to the reality in which this paper is written. Some believe that technology is liberating humanity; others are convinced that it is restricting it. *The Girl Who Was Plugged In* proves that technology can perform both rules simultaneously. This interferes with the whateness of humanity, as Bukatman puts it, “Mankind no longer exists” (Bukatman, 1993, p. 178), and the human condition evolved into posthumanism.

References

- Atwood, M. (1990). *The Female Body*. *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 29(4), 490–493.
- Bukatman, S. (1993). *Terminal identity: The virtual subject in postmodern science fiction*. Duke University Press.
[https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=63GtQqaHxBEC&oi=fnd&pg=PP19&dq=2.%09Bukatman,+S.+\(1993\).+Terminal+identity:+The+virtual+subject+in+postmodern+science+fiction.+Duke+University+Press.&ots=P79QC3jhhD&sig=r-aL5OpFNtmxO2a3s44qKGAgl-M](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=63GtQqaHxBEC&oi=fnd&pg=PP19&dq=2.%09Bukatman,+S.+(1993).+Terminal+identity:+The+virtual+subject+in+postmodern+science+fiction.+Duke+University+Press.&ots=P79QC3jhhD&sig=r-aL5OpFNtmxO2a3s44qKGAgl-M)
- Csicsery-Ronay Jr, I. (1991). The SF of Theory: Baudrillard and Haraway (La SF De La Théorie: Baudrillard Et Haraway). *Science Fiction Studies*, 387–404.
- De Beauvoir, S. (2010). *The Second Sex*. Knopf.
- Drewitz, T.-J. (2022). Redefining Humanity: Posthumanism in the American Science Fiction Narratives of Octavia Butler’s *Dawn* and Ann Leckie’s *Ancillary Justice*. *REDEN. Revista Española de Estudios Norteamericanos*, 4(1), 59–75.
- Eugene, A. R., & Masiak, J. (2015). The Neuroprotective Aspects of Sleep. *MEDtube Science*, 3(1), 35–40.
- Gordon, A. (1993). Posthuman Identity Crisis. *Science Fiction Studies*, 20(3), 444–448. JSTOR.
- Haraway, D. (2013). A manifesto for cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s. In *Feminism/postmodernism* (pp. 190–233). Routledge.
<https://api.taylorfrancis.com/content/chapters/edit/download?identifierName=doi&identifierValue=10.4324/9780203699386-12&type=chapterpdf>
- Hollinger, V. (1999). (Re) reading queerly: Science fiction, feminism, and the defamiliarization of gender. *Science Fiction Studies*, 23–40.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (Vol. 10). U of Minnesota Press.
- McNall, S. G. (1990). You Are What You Eat: Some Thoughts on Consumption and Marxist Class Theory. *Mid-American Review of Sociology*, 14(1/2), 45–52.
- Mitchell, K. (2006). Bodies that matter: Science fiction, technoculture, and the gendered body. *Science Fiction Studies*, 109–128.
- Pepperell, R. (1995). *The post-human condition*. Intellect books.
- Searle, J. R. (1980). Minds, brains, and programs. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 3(3), 417–424.
- Stevenson, M. C. (2007). Trying to plug in: Posthuman cyborgs and the search for connection. *Science Fiction Studies*, 87–105.
- Tiptree, J., & Sheldon, A. B. (1989). *The girl who was plugged in*. Tom Doherty Associates.
https://www.f.waseda.jp/sidoli/Tiptree_Girl_Plugged_In.pdf

Authors' Biographies

Soumia OURNID is a Ph.D. student of literature at Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef, Algeria. She obtained her master’s degree in literature and civilization from Blida 2 University, Algeria. Her Master’s dissertation revolves around minority literature and black feminism. She is currently specialized in contemporary American literature, and her area of research is science fiction and fictional dystopian texts.

Dr. Houaria CHAAL is a Lecturer (MCA) at the English Department of Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef, Algeria. She obtained her MA then PhD degrees in translation from Oran University, Algeria. She has been supervising master’s and PhD students of didactics, literature, and linguistics. Her area of research is translation studies and language teaching. She is currently exploring literary translation difficulties and is working on translation in the New Era (the Digital Era). Her research is published in three languages, namely English, French, and Arabic.