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Assignment Three: Part III

To read Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia* is to experience N. Katherine Hayles' vision of posthumanism as outlined in *How We Became Posthuman* and in *Electronic Literature.* Memmott, like Hayles, takes on the notion of the liberal humanist subject in relation to new media technologies. Ultimately, Memmott's work explores what precisely is at stake when Hayles' conception of the posthuman is realized.

In *How We Became Posthuman* and *Electronic Literature,* Hayles considers the liberal humanist subject in relation to new media specificities of the modern age. Feedback loops and coevolution are central themes to her conception of how the body and machine interact in the age of technology. In *Electronic Literature*, Hayles proposes a model that "entangles body and machine in open-ended recursivity with one another. This framework mobilizes the effect recursivity always has of unsettling foundations while simultaneously catalyzing transformations as each partner in the loop initiates and reacts to changes in the other" (130). Similarly, Hayles' earlier conception of the posthuman also foregrounded the importance of exchange between man and machine, with no essential differences or demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals (3).

Central to the concept of the posthuman is the notion that consciousness no longer resides within the boundaries of human flesh. And once the body expands to include technological apparatuses, it becomes difficult to locate personal identity within a consciousness that has no clear bounds. The idea of a downloadable consciousness inevitably arises in discussions of the posthuman, and is exemplified in Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia* where the machine speaks to the reader/player, as if another consciousness calls out from behind the screen.

In reading *Lexia to Perplexia*, I chose a linear approach clicking first on "The Process of Attachment." Immediately, Memmott conjures up the mental image of that which lies beyond the screen, suggesting the I-terminal's "focus is at the screen rather than the origin of the image." Through this move, readers become aware that the screen is simply an interface, and that *something* lies behind it, something that originates and generates the information displayed on the screen. Calling a reader's attention to the screen *as* a screen is unusual in any computer interaction; users have come to accept what is on-screen as natural, self-apparent, and entirely neutral. Memmott shatters this illusion by drawing the reader's attention to the idea that there is a something, an origin, that cannot be seen.

This something beyond the screen can be explored as we begin "taking fingersteps into the apparatus." Memmott writes, "the two machines—the originating and the simulative—collapse and collate to form the terminal-I, a cell.f, or, cell…(f)." What Memmott calls the terminal-I, that merging of the originating and simulative forces, could easily be renamed the posthuman in Hayles' language. Like the terminal-I, the posthuman represents an "amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (3). Both figures emerge from the meshing together of man and machine.

Memmott goes on to describe "the bi.narrative exe.change between remote and local bodies" as "compressed into the space between the physical screen and the oculus of terminal-I." Memmott's focus on ocularity corresponds with Hayles' observation that "tensions between the body's transformative potential and the threat that the machine will appropriate embodied functions… are most acute around issues of vision" (Hayles 104). So when Memmott conjures vision and ocularity as major themes for his terminal-I (represented both through that word itself and through eyes pictured on-screen), he touches on one of the most frightening aspects of posthumanism, in which human faculties are threatened. Despite our modern posthuman reality, however, Hayles explains that "human vision, whether enhanced by

machines or not, remains for most people an essential faculty whereby we place ourselves in the world and interact creatively with it" (Hayles 104).

While vision and other human factors are discussed in Hayles' vision of the posthuman, one particular aspect her creation shares with Memmott's terminal-I is its focus on feedback loops, coevolution, and recursivity. Hayles focuses on "entwining body and machine together" where they "interact in fluid and dynamic ways that are codetermining" (Hayles 88, 128). These interactions form a "feedback cycle" wherein "the self and other, body and machine, serve as a metaphor for the coconstruction of embodiment and media technologies" (Hayles 122). Memmott too envisions this feedback-driven, coevolutionary cycle between body and machine, yet in different terms. Memmott writes, "The completion of this circuit is an applied communification." These communifications, these feedback loops, are essential to the construction of the terminal-I and the posthuman.

These feedback loops, however, make communication active and labor-intensive. Memmott writes, "when everything is crystal clear, and susynchronized the passage of meaning through the bi.narrative conduit is smooth, without catches or serration and the doubled trans|missive agent(s) never meet, combat, or challenge." Throughout *Lexia to Perplexia*, Memmott demonstrates his own preference for communication that does catch, serrate, and challenge, for its "creole of human language and code," its "functioning and malfunctioning interface," and its "fragmentary reading experience" highlight the complexity involved in enjoining these human-machine communifications or feedback cycles. Reading these works means actively entering into the cycles of communification despite their difficultly as compared to "crystal clear" message transmissions.

In establishing the important place difficulty holds in electronic literature, Memmott proceeds in *Lexia to Perplexia* to deliver on the work's promise to perplex reader/users. Memmott warns that readers must "submit to terminal hopscotch" before shifting into a flickering, nearly-unreadable mess of words and images. Hayles explains that in "the mangle of practice, the resistances of technical objects play crucial roles in modifying and directing a researcher's efforts" (Hayles 109). As reader/users struggle to understand the complex interface with its "multiple data streams, constantly changing stimuli, and evocation of an intuitive grasp of algorithmic operation, these works appeal simultaneously to deep attention and hyper attention as part of the process transforming what it means to read" (Hayles 118).

In a "continuing wave of action, response, counter-response, and so forth," readers of *Lexia to Perplexia* deal with communications that are simply undecipherable (Hayles 98). In Minifesto One, Memmott acknowledges this fact, writing "binarrative communification is rendered in the wreck, the mess in the middle, the collision of incompatible transmissions, arising from the eroded ruins of miscommunication. The numbers are off." This phenomenon of incomplete and imperfect communication is precisely what Hayles describes when feedback loops are broken; in those cases, communication's "flow back into the object has been short-circuited" (Hayles 109). In any case, reading Memmott's work "requires deep attention skills to grasp the complex interactions between verbal play, layered screen design, twitchy navigation, and JavaScript coding" (Hayles 124). With a makeshift vocabulary including words like "infostatic" and "pictocept," Memmott's "moody currency" of language demands more interactivity between text and reader/user than print literature could.

In Minifesto Three, Memmott exhibits perhaps the most fascinating aspect of his work. In this section, the computer itself calls out to the reader and takes on a narrative quality. With Hayles' posthuman in mind, it is as if the downloaded consciousness of the digital substrate calls out from beyond the screen. Memmott writes, "I am not enough—I am antiquated so pull the plug why don't you." Similarly, the computer's voice haunts, "the tangible machine, the one you are seated before, is dead already… I can't think fast enough; or, if today you think I think fast enough for you, tomorrow you will reject me—this is my destiny I know." In a posthuman conception where boundaries between body and machine no longer exist, this voice is *our* voice. The desolation of life confined to binary code is our own sad fate. We are the machines, and we worry that this is our destiny too.

In Minifestos Four and Five, what was once the liberal humanist subject, self-contained and easily delineated, becomes "fragments of I." The voice in the machine laments, "Though attached to myself,

meCell.f is less me than me." This fragmentation relates to electronic literature's expansion "to include those who fashion the hardware and build the software, those who use the software to create works of electronic literature, and those who interact with electronic literature as users/players" (Hayles 129). With this network of influence, it is no wonder that the self becomes unidentifiable within the endless feedback loops and terminal-I configurations between body and machine. In this investigation of the Self in electronic literature, "the stakes are nothing less than whether the embodied human becomes the center for humanistic inquiry within which digital media can be understood, or whether media provide the context and ground for configuring and disciplining the body" (Hayles 87).

Works Cited

Hayles, N. Katherine. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame, 2008.

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