

Tech Flesh 1: Resequencing the Human Genome Project

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Widely hyped as a "bible of life" and a "map" to the future of human evolution, the Human Genome Project throws into sharp ethical relief critical social issues raised by this newest phase in eugenic experimentation. Simultaneously speaking in terms of the language of facilitation (post-genetics as about the eradication of disease and the extension of the human life span) and the language of control (genetic sequencing as the latest pharmaceutical version of the social hygiene movement), the Human Genome Project with its vision of pure genes and designer biology raises again the specter of scientific hubris and the silent political interests of a potential genetic superclass.

With the collaboration of Eugene Thacker (Rutgers University/Georgia Tech), this issue of CTHEORY is devoted to a diversity of critical perspectives on the promise and perils of the Human Genome Project. Here, artists, writers and theorists provide an alternative, critical vision of the genome and its infotech ideology.

We are grateful for the active and generous support of Boston College, particularly the Department of Sociology and its Chair, Professor Stephen Pfohl, in developing this issue, and we very much appreciate the technical assistance of Jeffrey Wells and Carl Steadman.

The multimedia version of Tech Flesh is available at <http://ctheorymultimedia.cornell.edu/>. Ctheory multimedia is a collaborative project between Ctheory and Cornell University's Electronic Publishing Program.

Gene Probes

The triumph of biotechnology as the key emergent tendency of the 21st century indicates that we may be entering a final phase of technology — harvesting human flesh. Breeding virtual bodies better suited to the vectors and virtualities of post-biological life.

The body has always been the site of the most radical political, indeed eschatological, struggle — the decisive site for the inscription in flesh of power as it speaks the body future.

The data body is the recombinant body: cloned by the biotech industry, spliced by artificial skin, digital nerves and networked intelligence, resequenced by the liquid signs of brand advertising. Simultaneously the targeted axis of the interfacing of digital reality and biotechnology and the site of future political struggle where flesh rubs against the will to virtuality, the data body is, for better or for worse, the spearhead of techno-culture.

The Biotech Eye

The eye of the future is the biotech eye. The matrix machine. The mirror moon becoming trash. A slow eye in a fast zone a data catcher. The eye of forgetting the sun shattered eye slips through the code and captures light.

The eugenic eye opens up into a universe of artificial flesh, chip nerves, laser lips, cloned organs, mutant DNA, vector images, and virtual dreams.

The wired universe grows an eye, and we become travelers of the digital iris.

An Eye that Hears

What if biotech does something fundamentally different than previous technologies, not simply disturbing the ratio of the senses, but reconfiguring the senses, creating mutations and hybridities of the previously separated ratio of the senses. Not just the human ear acoustically augmented to the enhanced hearing of a cat or the nose with the smelling power of a sniffing dog, but the human eye as a digital eye scanning the sky like a migrating bird, washing out the sun and the moon in favor of suddenly visible lines of magnetic polarities across the horizon or the human nervous system jacked up to such a point of receptivity that, like cattle before it, the body's nerve net sets off early warning systems for approaching earthquakes.

An eye that hears. Skin that speaks. An ear that sees with upgraded 20/20 vision. A recombinant body with tactile smell, touch that arcs across the color spectrum, chromatic sounds, muffled sweat, talking retinas and noise that bleeds, Lasix eyes, eyes that see but have no vision.

Of Mermaids and Werewolves

To speak of a future of hybrid organs of perception is, of course, to return to a deeper anxiety in the human spirit, an "anxious object" expressed most eloquently and hauntingly in tales from classical antiquity of other hybridities, other mutants, of

mermaids and werewolves and minotaurs and centaurs, of mutant beings half-man/half-bull, half-flesh/half-machine.

But why the anxiety over mutant flesh? Perhaps because of a more primitive fear of the inevitable mythic punishment that follows this challenge to the gods for such a radical transgression of the language of species difference. Icarus may have been doomed not for his hubris in seeking to escape the gravity of the earth's downward pressure on human skin and bone and blood, but for his revolt of the restless heart on behalf of a new species being: part-bird/part-human. Transgressing species difference is the limit experience of classical mythology — the in-between, the third interval, the eye that turns upward into the white glutinous mass and hovering dark orbit of the skull's cavity. It is to be feared with a frenzy of anxiety, and desired, secretly desired, but desired nonetheless with the passion of finally transgressing the forbidden limit.

But what is, the mythic fear of mutating boundaries is also to be understood psychoanalytically for what is has also always been? A strange movement of desire to be the forbidden limit and beyond: being wolf, being cat, being strange, being hybrid, being cloner, being splice, being fish swarm and animal pack and cougars in the soaring mountains of the electronic fields, being sun skin and photosynthetic eyes and PowerBook G4 memory and flash talk and streaming vision. An iMac personality with a VRML smile and a tasteless tongue cut with lynx ears and a feline software profile turned to the speed of light.

Perhaps the mythic imagination with its fables heroic and tragic and ambivalent of the meeting of gods and man and history is our recombinant future. A Digital Achilles. A Flash Art Ulysses. A Homer for all the technological fundamentalists. After the long sleep of a radically divided and radically rationalist modernism which repressed the eternal validity of myth with cynicism and self-hate, we can hear again the first intimations of other travelers at future's gate. Minotaurs and werewolves and centaurs and mermaids and ravens and eagles begin to stir again from the sleep of repression, stories forbidden of the Taquesta Indians at mouth of the Miami River begin to circulate again with their haunting insight that the soul is to be found in the shadow, the reflection and the eye, the Haida story from the Queen Charlotte Islands of the clam shell as the beginning of the life of the people, Hopi prophecies of an age that is doomed without the sheltering sky of mythology, the modern ratio of the senses that refuses its divisions and equilibriums, and goes directly for the language of transgression — transgressing the ratio of the senses with strange hybridities-- disturbing the eye, cloning the ear, shockwaving the real.