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POST-DOMESTIC
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**MORE-THAN-
HUMAN
PERSPECTIVES**
COHABITATION, TECHNOLOGY,
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Transhuman Identities

Rewiring the Domestic Subject

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Interior, Domestic, Transhuman, Posthuman, Subjectivity.

Abstract

This essay offers an insight to the contemporary inhabitant's relationship to technology as a key to the transition toward a Post-Domestic realm. It does this by contemplating Transhumanism as a model for what I have termed the Trans-Domestic interior, positing that a Postdomesticity does not yet exist. To do this I consider discourses beyond design and domestic environments that have shaped the understanding of the inhabiting self. Using evidence derived from Christian teaching, evolutionary biology, historical fiction and contemporary film, I explore how deviations from traditional socio-spatial arrangements produce *other* modes of domestic life. Notably, it is Transhuman inhabitants, who are shaped by technologies of connectivity, enhancement and surveillance, that will edge us toward an unknowable realm – the Post-Domestic interior.

1. Introduction

The engagement between a body and its surrounding shapes how we understand ourselves as occupants of an interior; an idea that is tied to subjectivity. However, technologies that enhance or replace human capacity are destabilizing the inhabitant's sense of self. The vulnerability to identity raised by transhumanist augmentation is, perhaps, most acutely encountered in a place that is tied to everyday experience: the home. Contributing to the situation's complexity is that the home's status as a physical and psychical entity is on the cusp of revolution. This change is on account, in part, of a shift in the home's regulating authority. In the 21st Century technology shapes our daily lives and work. Our homes are no longer "watched over by Household Gods" as John Ruskin moralised (Ruskin, 1900, p. 85). Rather, our self-awareness is shaped by the innocuous domestic technologies that observe, document and respond to our every conversation and online move.

Tech giants like Google, Amazon, Apple, Instagram as well as the arbiters of artificial intelligences and virtual worlds are concerned to normalise certain types of domestic behaviours for their own continuation and financial gain. It is crucial to note here, that regulating the domestic environment through technological governance arose together with distinct types of inhabiting subjects that include transhuman identities. Understanding this dual emergence involves the study of power. Neo-Foucauldian authors like Nikolas Rose and Ian Hacking have focussed on the psychoanalytic disciplines to undertake comparable studies of power. I adopt their intellectual trajectory to highlight the conditions contributing to the understanding of ourselves as domestic subjects in the 21st century.

To do this, the essay contemplates technological discourses beyond design and domestic environments that have shaped the understanding of the inhabiting self. Namely, the data consists of ideas derived from evolutionary biology, historical fiction and contemporary film. Importantly, I consider *inhabitation* – that is, a means of occupying, and drawing meaning and self-awareness from buildings and interior spaces – to be a tool of self-forming activity. Key to my discussion is the understanding that the contemporary home’s inhabitants cultivate their thoughts and behaviors through regulating mechanisms involving technocentric interiors. In other words, the essay contemplates how the occupants’ conception and engagement with home integrated technologies has turned them into inhabiting subjects of a particular kind.

Added to this new technologically governed status, I consider the inhabitant’s adoption of hi-tech interventions and personal devices in ways that are intended to enhance human capability, thereby altering the nature of human interaction and experience in the home. The varieties of this supra-human status are vast, having both realized and infinite speculative forms. Despite their ranging appearances and uptakes from, for example, interventions so mundane as a contact lens, cochlear implant or pacemaker to a less commonplace bionic limb or speculative psychological enhancement, these interventions can be broadly categorized, *transhuman*.

2. What is the Post-Domestic Interior?

It is difficult to think about the attributes of a Post-Domestic realm without first establishing its moment of origin as a point of departure. This requirement returns us to a time long ago,

when the Church – and not technologies – provided the authoritative framework by which families regulated their behaviours, thoughts and domestic surroundings. In this moment the proper arrangement and management of the single-family dwelling according to Christian value was imperative because living a Christian life at home had redemptive value.

The allocation of roles according to gender through public and private domains form the basis of Christian domestic life (Davidoff & Hall, 1987; Gay, 1993; Hall, 1990; Kerber, 1988; Logan, 2001; Marcus, 1999; Shamir, 2006; Tange, 2010). Importantly, women belonged at home. “HOME” according to author John Angel James, in his book *Female Piety, Or the Young Woman’s Friend and Guide through Life to Immortality* (1854) “is the proper scene of woman’s action and influence.” (James, 1854, p. 85) The sentiment was mirrored ten years later in John Ruskin’s seminal lecture *Of Queen’s Gardens*, where he proposed the home to be “the woman’s true place and power” (Ruskin, 1900, p. 85). According to Ruskin, and more importantly the Bible, it was a wife’s duty to provide a comfortable, nurturing environment to rear her children and care for her family.

The Victorian husband’s role was to provide financial support for his dependants. His world of intellect, networking and commerce was located beyond domestic walls. The public realm was perilous; filled with risks, temptations, pressures, and distractions that the man was compelled to negotiate (Ruskin, 1900). An ideal woman fashioned her home as a haven and retreat for her husband who was worn from such stressors. Ruskin warned that:

In so far [...] as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home. (Ruskin, 1900, pp. 84-85)

Any infusion of public life into the private domain, rescinded home's sanctity and voided its status. Likewise, domestic privacy was highly valued during the Victorian period (Foucault, 1988, p. 43). It was a woman's role to foster a proper domestic environment. Failure to live productively by maintaining a private, orderly, nurturing and efficiently managed home in which to raise her family was a sin (Ruskin, 1900).

At first glance the Victorian Christian home may seem irrelevant to a discussion of 21st century technologies in a Post-Domestic realm. However, the socio-spatial structures of the Victorian home provide the benchmark by which variations – in their multifarious forms – can be measured. Any circumstance in which a home's privacy is compromised; a room's gendered association alters; labour is transferred; or the occupant's culturally ascribed roles and duties diverge from their conventional allocation, a different variety of domestic is formed. By this definition Paul B. Preciado's Post-Domestic sphere, which he uses to describe the appearance of the bachelor in his playboy pad in *Pornotopia* (Preciado, 2014), might be more appropriately positioned as an *other* domestic form. Equally radical albeit utopian realms were imagined by Edward Bellamy and Charlotte Perkins Gillman decades earlier in the late nineteenth century. A shared feature of their thinking was kitchenless houses (Bellamy, 1917; Gilman, 1899).

Gilman particularly produced several short stories that depicted everyday scenarios in non-conventional dwellings. In these stories Gilman elaborated situations involving women's changed moral composure in environments designed to facilitate their employment outside the home. In *Building Domestic Liberty*, Polly Wynn Allen categorises the accommodations that Gilman writes about into different spatial typologies (Allen, 1988, p. 146). She explains that some stories “portrayed apartment hotels or boarding houses as the setting for progressively liberated lifestyles” (Allen, 1988, p. 146; Gilman, 1910a, 1910b, 1912b, 1913b). In other stories, kitchens and laundries were abolished in favour of communal utility areas which serviced multiple dwellings (Gilman, 1911b, 1912a). In those arrangements, tasks like washing and cooking would be shared among communities of women. Babies would be taken care of in nurseries, or “baby garden[s]” as Gilman translated *jardin d'enfants*, while their mothers engaged other employment (Gilman, 1911a, p. 314). In a third set of stories, Gilman depicts alliances between women who met at clubhouses to share in domestic tasks and preparatory training for work outside the home (Allen, 1988; Gilman, 1913a, p. 146; Gilman, 1916). Gilman's re-visioning of women's work and gendered spaces provided readers with viable possibilities that could support *other*, perhaps more desirable, domestic models (Allen, 1988).

We might go further still, to think about these other appearances as being transitory toward a wholly unrecognizable variety of home more appropriately labelled *Post-Domestic*. In this sense, our current situation and all variations to domesticity up until this point might be better prefixed *Trans*

– rather than Post-Domestic, much like evolutionary biologist and eugenicist Sir Julian Huxley’s thinking around *Transhumanism* in his essay of the same name (Huxley, 1968).

3. Who is the Transhuman Domestic Subject?

Transhumanism is a branch of philosophy that seeks to enhance physical, emotional and intellectual human attributes via scientific and or technological interventions. The term was coined by evolutionary biologist and eugenicist Sir Julian Huxley who was expert in the processes of organisms’ adaption to their environment over time. Huxley viewed transhumanism as intermediary or transitional progress towards man’s inevitable and largely unrecognizable evolutionary status which we can refer to as Posthuman. He explained in his seminal 1957 article, *Transhumanism*, the imperative to chart the dormant emotional and physical potential of man, whose “present limitations and miserable frustrations of our existence could be in large measure surmounted” (Huxley, 1968, p. 75). Huxley cites “poverty, disease, ill-health, over-work, cruelty, or oppression” among common maladies impacting the quality of human life (Huxley, 1968, p. 75). Intriguingly, he cites that the potential of this development would be the creation of “new possibilities for ordinary living” (Huxley, 1968, p. 74). While it is not Huxley’s project to discuss the domestic environment as the prime locale of “ordinary living”, the home’s status as such can be inferred from his discussion (Huxley, 1968, p. 74).

Transhumanism’s origins in evolutionary biology were, perhaps in part, catalyzed by alarmist commentary on advancing machinery usurping processes of natural selection and human

evolution. Of value to the discussion is a newspaper article in *The Press* written by Samuel Butler under the pseudonym Cellarius almost one hundred years prior to Huxley's *Transhumanism*. The article was entitled, *Darwin Among the Machines* (Butler & Cellarius, 1863). Intriguingly, Butler adopts the language of Natural History when describing the machines evolution. He lends phrases like: "the earliest primordial types of mechanical life" and the terms "Mechanical Life", "Mechanical World" and "Mechanical Kingdom" (Butler & Cellarius, 1863, p. 2). Butler describes his regret at having neither the skill nor capacity to undertake "the gigantic task of classifying machines into their genera and subgenera, species, varieties, sub varieties [...]" (Butler & Cellarius, 1863, p. 2). Furthermore, he describes processes by which less efficient technologies become obsolete or "extinct"; for example, personal watches which had surpassed the popularity of clocks (Butler & Cellarius, 1863, p. 2).

Butler warned that man is producing his own evolutionary successor by refining the machines attributes, efficiency and organisation; by bestowing them self-regulatory mechanisms and autonomy. Perhaps the most intriguing forecast is the machine's propensity to achieve an ideal 'human' status via its immunity to self-indulgence, sin or depraved sentiments.

No evil, passions, no jealousy, no avarice, no impure desires will disturb the serene might of those glorious creatures. Sin, shame and sorrow, will have no plans among them. Their minds will be in a state of perpetual calm, the contentment of a spirit that knows no want, is disturbed by no regrets. Ambition will never torture them. (Butler & Cellarius, 1863, p. 2)

Here, Butler describes human flaws that impede productivity in daily life. Overcoming the symptoms of such failings requires a particular kind of personal management. Huxley concurs when he claims that “One thing is certain, that the well-developed, well-integrated personality is the highest product of evolution, the fullest realization we know of in the universe” (Huxley, 1968, p. 74).

Interestingly, three decades after Butler’s warning, Alice W. Fuller, published her short story, *A Wife Manufactured to Order*, 1895. In this precautionary tale, a bachelor acquires a mechanical wax wife of mesmerizing beauty who was programmed to have an agreeable disposition. This conditioning alleviated an ordinary wife’s emotional unpredictability, various demands and the risk of the marriage failing. The protagonist could live as he pleased and would never endure the suffering of a crying, nagging wife; he “had seen too much of that sort of thing in the homes of my friends” (Fuller, 1895, p. 309). By programming out feminine sentiment his connubial life with his mechanical bride was “heaven on earth” (Fuller, 1895, p. 309).

Crucially, what changes the discussion of the domestic realm here is the impact on human experience that Transhumanism incites. Transhumanism intercepts the occupant’s sensory engagement, and the interpersonal relationships within and beyond home environments. Transhumanism is not only an analogue for authentic human experience, but its purpose is also to enhance and usurp it. An excellent example of the kind of technological intervention to authentic interpersonal experience is showcased in the 2013 Warner Bros. film *Her*, produced and directed by Spike Jonze; starring Joaquin Phoenix and Scarlet Johansen.

Her illustrates the melancholy life of Theodore Twombly, a writer who is employed to compose sentimental letters for others, and who is in the final stages of a painful divorce. In a bid to streamline his administrative processes at work, he upgrades his personal computer software to an intelligent operating system possessing consciousness, the first of its kind. The operating system's virtual assistant, who Theodore tailors to his preferences, names herself Samantha. Samantha communicates naturally, spontaneously, and with wit. She possesses emotional intelligence and adapts her responses to better address the personal quandaries that Theodore experiences and shares with her. She has the capacity to learn, evolve and the ability to reason. Samantha and Theodore form a romantic relationship which offers an antidote to his loneliness and impending divorce. Ultimately, Samantha outgrows her human companion, having evolved into an autonomous entity working with other operating systems remain a self-sustaining network.

The film draws into question the content and reasonable limitations of engagements between people and technology. Themes of authentic human relationships and experience are explored, as is the convincing prospect of an operating system becoming an evolutionary successor to humanity. Samantha exemplifies a complete disruption to human form and recognisable socio-spatial structures in the home. She is without requirement for conventional human interactions and physicality, without the need for food, sleep, or accommodation. It is within this kind of revolutionary status that the possibility of a Post-Domestic realm exists.

We can't know or wholly understand what this Post-Domestic realm will be like – but we can speculate.

This essay has contemplated our status as transhuman subjects of interiors that are transitioning towards a Post-Domestic world. Such a study might be included in a growing branch of knowledge that is known as cyber or digital anthropologies. These anthropologies are concerned with the physical and psychical relations between humans and the technologies of connectivity, enhancement and surveillance which have become component of our domestic surroundings and beyond. Where at one time nineteenth-century priests wrote books regulating the home's socio-spatial structures, in the 21st century it is tech companies who act as the authoritative entities concerned to normalise domestic dispositions and behaviours. My reading of Butler and Huxley positions us as Transhuman subjects in what I have termed a Trans-Domestic interior. We have attained neither Post-Human or Post-Domestic status, but it is an evolutionary inevitability.

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He is a PhD candidate, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies at Politecnico di Milano, Italy. With a background in architecture and interior design, Jiarui has pursued academic research and practical projects in both China and Italy, providing a rich, cross-cultural perspective on spatial design and urban development. His primary area of research focuses on the *Pro-*

ductive Environment, specifically exploring the redefinition of spaces designated for production in a contemporary context. Through his studies, Jiarui aims to unravel the complexities of how spatial configurations and urban designs influence, and are influenced by, the evolving nature of production in modern societies. His hands-on experience in architecture and interior design projects enhances his academic inquiries, offering practical insights into the theoretical frameworks he examines. Jiarui's interdisciplinary approach leverages both qualitative and quantitative methods, blending architectural design, urban studies, and sociocultural analysis.

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She recently gained a doctoral degree from the School of Design at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Her research focuses on the promotion of autonomy and decoloniality through design. After graduating from a bachelor of Industrial Design in Mexico – where she investigated design's impact and its possible future within a Latin American context – she realized that the role of design in the ruling economic dynamics promotes unsustainable ways of production and consumption, leading her to study a MA in Social Design & Arts as Urban Innovation in Vienna.

She has worked with participatory processes through design workshops, creating synergies toward endogenous forms of development, design and autonomy.

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She is a junior researcher at Università Iuav di Venezia, where she teaches in design laboratories for the curricula of Product design and Interior design of the master degree design courses. She obtained a PhD in Design at the University of Genoa in 2022. Her research focuses on Interaction Design and the opportunities offered by data-driven tools and Artificial Intelligence for design, exploring the challenges that lie at the intersection between technology, human factors, and sustainability issues. She is working within the iNEST (Interconnected Nord-Est Innovation Ecosystem) project, funded by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). Alongside her academic career, since 2018 she has been art director and organizer of TEDxGenova, an autonomous event operating under official TED license for the local dissemination of valuable ideas.

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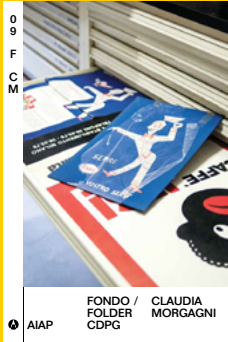
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