

The Fate of Flesh: Post-Humanist Views of the Body and Gender

Alberto José Viralhadas Ferreira

Abstract

Gender has been held up a defining trait of mankind and has been the target of deep and conflicting scientific analysis in the past century, with contrasting approaches ranging from the biological to the social realms. However, as emerging technologies such as plastic surgery and genetic engineering become common place, new social and cultural paradigms can change the very way we interact and feel, as determining biological and physiological factors lose relevance. The reformulation of traditional sex roles that pervades the cultural mainstream encourages a rethinking of the sensible experience of physicality and traditional definitions of gender roles, especially in light of post-biological theories. This shift can give way to a new and more radical redefinition of "human" and render traditional categorizations such as "man" and "woman" obsolete. Although such radical changes are still in the distant future, these questions encompass a wide range of philosophical and sociological issues that are integral part of any relevant discussion about the present "human" condition and the effect that knowledge can bring to a self-determined evolutionary path. Can technology help us achieve "perfection" as an achievable human quality? And, in this context, can "perfection" be equated with an undifferentiated harmonization between individual human beings? In an attempt to approach some of the more relevant points of this subject, this talk would incise on the redefinition of the body and sexuality in the light of post-humanist theories and explore the possibilities these possess for the near-future evolution of humankind.

Key Words: Posthumanism, gender, androgyny, sociology, postmodernism, transhumanism, sex, culture.

Sex-change surgeries are on the rise. Since the 1960's, hundreds of thousands have applied for a sex reassignment surgery with varying degrees of thoroughness. Officially recorded statistics on this type of medical intervention are scarce, although certain studies (Olyslager and Conway 2007) point to a prevalence of 1:4,500 males and 1:8,000 females worldwide, while a review numbering the postoperative success rate of male to female as 87% and 97% female to male (Green, R. & Fleming, D. T. 1990). According to the 2011 update on the Prevalence, Incidence, Growth and Demographic Report¹ assembled by the Gender Identity Research and Education Society, the growth rate for the transsexual

population was an estimated 11% with a lowering mean age of 42. Over 70% of all sex changes are male to female.

The surge of sex change surgeries in the past 20 years is directly correlated to medical technological advancement, but gender dysphoria is not a modern phenomena by any means, nor is the attempt to change one's identity based on physical biology. While gender dysphoria is a medically diagnosed condition with its own subset of motivations and implications, to feel oneself in the wrong skin, to have the motivation to change, even if only by external enhancements: what human being can claim to have not felt these urges at one point or another of its existence? However, this psychological instability has since departed from the personal realm and instilled itself in the cultural mindset: that while sex might be fixed at birth (for the moment), gender and sexuality are not determined by any such factors and are increasingly becoming a matter of personal choice.

Our culture is only now catching up with the instability of identity, sexually or otherwise. Gender itself being a categorization prone to various linguistic and cultural pressures (Butler 2004), the phenomena of gender reassignment and the possibilities of gene and hormonal therapy, as well as growing subcultural and mainstream trend towards androgynous fashions, bring us closer to two questions: is "gender" still a valid relational categorization and, if so, are there room for additional genders within a postmodernist sociological approach?

Legislations are being redefined all over the world to support gay marriage, transgenderism is a choice that cannot be legally discriminated against: through theories of difference and tolerance, the mainstream mindset is adapting to a new gender typology, as it loses its ties to sexual secondary characteristics and enters a phase of indetermination in light of the technological possibilities we now possess.

Whereas modern Western society places no more emphasis on appearance than past societies, gender ambiguity assumes a different outlook, being not merely physical nor cosmetic. There were many historical cultures where gender was linguistically determined, regardless of the biological sex of the individual. Certain cultures, such as specific Native American populations, define gender roles not only based on biological sex, but also on age or social strata (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997: 160). Gender roles could even be interchanged depending on the social environment and context, as certain individuals would engage in behaviours that could range from forms of transvestism to overt sexuality in a fashion that was neither condemned nor subversive. For instance, anthropologists Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe have reported that lesbian erotic relationships were commonplace in Lesotho, under a social ritual called "motsaalle". E.E. Evans-Pritchard observed that male Azande warriors commonly bought young boys to act as wives, performing household tasks and often engaging in sexual activities with them. None of these practices were socially condemned by these cultures until the European colonization transformed the cultural paradigms of these peoples, as they

were embedded in a social organization that also encouraged sharing and teaching in the context of the needs of the group, like hunting or fabric weaving.

In Europe and America, however, gender roles are very much tied to individual emancipation. Support groups and associations tend to grow in geographical clusters, having sprouted with the aim to provide legal and psychological aid to gay and lesbians who want to assume a different social role by redefining their presumed sexuality in the public eye. These micro-communities accept these interchangeable roles and strive to promote wider awareness of their own particular organization and therefore seek a validation of their own meta-social stance. While personal emancipation might be important, acceptance by society at large still plays a major role in the organized initiatives put in action by these groups, as personal desire to change one's biological sex is linked inextricably to the social context and the mainstream discourse.

The growth of the transgender community and lobby in the mainstream media has popularized the use of the term "transgendered" as an amorphous abstraction of both male and female. The difference that is prevalent in these individuals has dragged the issue into the public consciousness: that it is possible to acknowledge a third sex through the delta state of sexual ambiguity. Science tells us that this condition is a valid psychological disorder, where one assumes emotional responses of the opposite sex and assumes a dichotomous role, both in attire and behaviour, to his or her own biological sex.

The instability of gender roles in modern society is not an absolute phenomena, even if its visibility is intimately linked with the technological availability that has made it possible to conform one's physicality to one's psychological profile and sexuality. That gender roles seem to be imposed on both sexes in most cultures is a widely studied possibility (Chodorow 1999; Eagly et al. 2004) as is their now relentless scrutiny and demystification, and, for the most part, blurring to the point of mingling. It is a stretch to assume that gender roles as stable entities are going to disappear, for they provide valid social reference markers that still hold true in most societies, no matter how progressive, or that any sexual barriers have been lifted from the modern psyché, despite the increasing media devotion to these matters. What has changed, indeed, is the social tissue and organization and the need for specific roles. The cultivation of specific gender roles in societies has served the purposes of implementing specific morals and reinforcing a specific social structure. This has been propagated primarily by political, economic and religious institutions. The latter in particular has been instrumental in implementing gender roles as a basis for a patriarchal social structure and fixed social strata. Father, mother, son, daughter. Basic concepts that translated themselves into a fixed nuclear family structure.

In a sense, cosmetic surgeries are an attempt to thwart time and the expectancy limit of our own bodies, although their purpose has several implications. A beautiful skin is a surefire way to get to the top in any given professional context,

especially the ones that emphasize interaction and presentation, such as corporate and legal jobs, constitute the bulk of the white collar professional strata. Hamermesh and Biddle have reported on studies that being in the top third best-looking people in a company is usually accompanied with a 5 per cent salary bonus (1994, p. 1186), a trend that is also applicable to attorneys (1998). This phenomena was labelled “lookism”, and several theorists (Granleese and Sayer 2006, Duncan and Lorretto 2004) have claimed it is a visible and real factor of discrimination in the workplace and in society at large. However, while cultural standards of beauty tend to be instable and historically inept markers of stable gender roles, it is important to consider the existence of universal traits and whether attractiveness can render itself into gender motifs and aesthetics in a consistent fashion.

While evolutionary and biologically-determined perceptions of beauty and fitness, built on genetic compatibility and desirability, might be approaches that help to systematize many of our mating habits, the cognitive interpretation of facial expressions and play another very different role. They tap into our very subconscious, a combination of aesthetic appeal and interpretative physical language: faces are deep wells of emotion where we are confronted by the impression of the Other as much as we are haunted by primal memories. Images of children tend to impress us more than that of adults and neotized traits hold our attention and signify youth. At a primal perception level, these traits are not eroticized, but they carry the weight of triggering an emotional response that is later subdued into physical attractiveness after our social imprinting filters them out. At this level, there are no gender distinctions or secondary sexual traits: beauty traits are valid across genders and sexualities.

In their 2003 article, Hönekopp, Bartholomé and Jansen argued that standards of female facial attractiveness, while historically variable (Grammer 1995), share common patterns that can transcend culture (Cunningham 1995, Jones 1996). While facial symmetry plays a role in male attractiveness, and a good fitness level arguably translates into an attractive body and facial frame, none of these elements played as important a role as ubiquitous clear eyes, smooth skin, small chin and nose and shiny hair. Who else shares these traits? Children.

Infancy as an aesthetic standard is culturally embedded in notions of values and protectiveness, but the appeal that stems from not yet developed (or underdeveloped) secondary sexual characteristics is also a motif that has pervaded art and society since the dawn of time.

Historically, androgyny itself has been ever-present in virtually all civilizations. There are numerous records of eunuchs being commonplace in China (Shih-shan Henry 1996) and they were an essential part of the nobler strata of the Byzantine Empire and also participated in a number of sexual rituals both on and off duty. However, the later Classical aesthetics of the human body, which emphasized images of valiant warriors and charismatic leaders is not at odds with libidinous orgies and hedonistic pleasures of the Roman Empire. However, the emphasis on

balanced, muscular figures constituted a standard motif of the art produced at the time.

This aesthetic changed dramatically with the advent of Christianity. Once one of many Mediterranean cult sects, Christianity was transformed for mainly political reasons into the social and moral basis of the Holy Roman Empire and became arguably the strongest of all discourses in Western societies. Depictions of the humanized divine have followed artistic trends as contemporary artists worked reoccurring themes of persistence and sacrifice, into a changing iconography and transient aesthetic motifs. The representation of the Christ as a suffering figure drew comparisons to certain female traits by scholar such as Caroline Bynum (1987), who argued convincingly that the body of Christ, as often portrayed in the Passion, was highly feminine, its suffering akin to that of a rape victim, its crucified body “passive, rent, and exposed” (Lomperis and Stanbury 1993: 108).

Despite this connotation, the feminine nature was seemingly vilified by many Christian scholars throughout history, including the influential Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine, who considered the feminine nature as “deficient and unsuccessful” (Kung 2005: 39). However, despite its apparent subduing of female character, the Christian artistic motifs came to emphasize androgynous traits in their depictions of male portraits, including its most important icon. After the Renaissance, and in particular Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* painting, portraits of Christ never again portrayed an ascetic, unruly figure with its face covered with curly facial hair, instead depicting a figure with a perfectly trimmed beard, wide glowing eyes, long eyelashes, lengthy thin fingers, and long hair. These traits came to represent the personification of "sinless", "immaculate", "eternal": all traits of the undying self, as much a figuration to which aspiration should be drawn as a paragon of immutability. In this type of representation, perfection presents itself as blunt and unvarying. It conjures up its own materialization as an idealistic abstraction of the potentially maximum traits of any given concept. Kant has equated perfection as the “concept of the totality of something composite”, as per the Wolffian rationalist thought (Zuckert 2007: 213), but there its virtuality is emphasized by its very nature of abstractness and relativity to a given model. While the concept of perfection might be variable due to this relativity, the way we think about it (that is, its meaning) negates variety or variability by equating desirable traits with their best possible manifestation, sealed and enclosed in the den of the ideal.

"Perfect in all ways" is the end of kineticism and the beginning of staticness. It is an ideal type that serves not as aspiration, but as a conditioning element in several facets of our lives. Perfection as a concept is the great harmonizer that has been manipulated and moulded in the light of the superficial aspirations of our age, but whereas religion applied the concept primarily as a moral standard, perfection is now the common denominator of mass consumerism, partially construed as a need, inheriting the promotional power of traditional and conservative ideology

while still, on a social level, decomposing reality into material objects of desire and, on a physiological level, the human body into components to be maintained, enhanced and, whenever possible, renewed. This atomist view of the human body favours a plug and play approach that coagulates into a functional mindset.

In the 21st century, the concept of perfection is still flimsily linked to moral righteousness, but, rather, to embody appearance and functionality that determine identity in a given social group or context. Traditional typologies such as age and gender are thus decentralized and redefined, the latter no longer the object of social stigmatization, the latter no longer the object of social emancipation. In its stead, youth has emerged as a commodity relevant across generations, progressively growing in importance, while ageing becomes not an ascent into social relevance and respectability through experience or wisdom, but rather a descent into degradability, frailty and dependency (Bytheway 1995; Gilleard and Higgs 2000).

The myth of youth is the dream of mortality, the aspiration to deceive perishability, with the twist of being a temporary condition that only looks better in hindsight. The demographic concept of youth was the direct result of the capitalist industrialization after the World War I (Hareven 1995: 123) and has come to represent a lifestyle, one that entails a given social context or expected social side benefits, after a redefinition of advertisement strategies, who targeted teenagers as a vulnerable and permeable group, and conditioned the representation of age, arguably leading directly to general attitudes of discrimination towards the elderly and social invisibility for ageing women (Biggs 2002: 175). Youth has become a quality that can be transposed and acquired through the application of cosmetic products and surgeries as physical appearance has become age-independent. Traces of the unblemished look of youth can be identified in the iconography of beauty plastered on the media. Every website and newsstand sports adulterated images of models, both male and female, sporting the unblemished look of a skin undamaged by the ravages of wrinkles or scars. The weight of representation has fallen on highly feminine faces imbued with neotized traits, as the boundaries of age become more and more flexible and our productivity extends into later years (Covino 2004: 101). However, in modern society, technology has provided the necessary tools to equate functionality and productivity with physical appearance and the increasing emphasis on fitness and expanding the age limits for given lifestyles squarely redefines the nature of our social roles and, even more tellingly, our sexual roles.

Posthuman sexuality is still an extreme view, as it is hanging on the physical reconditioning inhibited by the biological determinism of our current physical states. While gothic fantasies such as those presented on Stone Constantine's novels, where characters conjure up sexual organs freely on their mutable selves, belong in the realm of fantasy, sexuality has become an empowering tool of self-assertion and exploration for gender redefinition. As Patricia McCormack defined it, the "hybrid desire" (Giffney, Noreen, O'Rourke 2009: 111) of the Other and the redefined Self has given way to modes of existence in the cultural mainstream

where sexuality is no longer a meeting of complementary and dialectical parties, but rather a vibrant realm of seducible signs (Baudrillard 1990: 135). The notion of the Other has even transcended the human species, such as Badmington's fetishization embodied by the alien (2004) or the multiplicity of the monstrous, both micro and macro-cellular, that is found as a psycho-erotic threat in many a thriller-of-the-day.

As the discursive and social nature of gender fragment, so emerge a multiplicity of identities that cannot be characterized easily nor dismissively as "homosexuality" or "heterosexuality". The multiple transgendered communities that have sprouted in the past decades, oscillating between transvestism and transsexuality, cast a relativistic outlook on current power and social structures, negating traditional bipolar notions of sex and challenging the perception of the biological as a primordial mark of social status and role.

These changes were brought about not just because of emergent dissenting discourses in the cultural mainstream. Economy and technology have relegated the role of the individual to that of a functional node in a network of information and interchange, where corporatism and economic unruliness cast the individual into a state of anxiety and confusion, effectively compromising its identity and role. In an adversarial capitalist world, where normalization and blurring constitute the basis of difference, individual lives are pressured by social trends and economic pressures that blur the fabric of easy categorizations such as gender role and, in turn, dilute the sense of "standard" sexuality. The decentralization of sexual discourse towards gender politics is still deeply connected with social and economic evolution and highlights the independent nature of role traits and biological sex, a difference which Posthumanism expands on by allowing decomposing both into their subliminal characters, decentralizing and, in turn, acknowledging the spectrum of what the human body and the variability of our own identity.

Our unfinished bodies, constantly redefined and under (re)appreciation, are, as architect Rem Koolhaas has stated, "construction sites", decomposable in our physical aspects, anatomized, along with the social and cultural roles that our physicality enables. As the world changes, and the forces pressed on by Mankind as part of its own growth also pulse along the storm created in the process, probing into questions of gender and sexuality allow us to trace the evolution of societies as a whole, bound economically and culturally, and the effect that such a path had on us as individuals. This will manifest the fragility of concepts that are so often taken for granted, such as beauty, sex, and identity, but will also aid us in reaching instead a deeper truth, that of the core Human and the richness of its boundless manifestations.

Notes

¹ "Information and Research into the Incidence, Prevalence and Growth of the Transsexual Population", n.d. <http://www.gires.org.uk/prevalence.php>.

Bibliography

- Aers, David, and Lynn Staley. *The powers of the Holy : religion, politics, and gender in late medieval English culture*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.
- Badmington, Neil. *Alien chic posthumanism and the other within*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Bockting, Walter O, and Eli Coleman. *Gender dysphoria : interdisciplinary approaches in clinical management*. New York: Hayworth Press, 1993.
- Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York; London: Routledge, 2004.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Holy feast and holy fast : the religious significance of food to medieval women*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering : Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Covino, Deborah Caslav. *Amending the abject body : aesthetic makeovers in medicine and culture*. Albany N.Y.: State Univ. of New York Press, 2004.
- Dickens, David R, and Andrea Fontana. *Postmodernism and social inquiry*. New York: Guilford Press, 1994.
- Eagly, Alice Hendrickson, Anne E Beall, and Robert J Sternberg. *The Psychology of Gender*. New York: Guilford Press, 2004.
- Giffney, Noreen, and Michael O'Rourke. *The Ashgate research companion to queer theory*. Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009.
- Green, R. & Fleming, D. T. "Transsexual Surgery Follow-Up: Status in the 1990s." *Annual Review of Sex Research* 1, (1990): 163-174.
- Hennessy, Rosemary. *Profit and pleasure sexual identities in late capitalism*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Hoad, Neville. *African intimacies : race, homosexuality, and globalization*. Minneapolis [u.a.]: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- Horsley, Richard A. *Religion and empire : people, power, and the life of the spirit*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.
- Jacobs, Sue-Ellen, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang. *Two-spirit people : Native American gender identity, sexuality, and spirituality*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997.
- Jones, D. (1996) *Physical Attractiveness and the Theory of Sexual Selection: Results From Five Populations*, Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan
- Jones, Meredith. *Skintight : an anatomy of cosmetic surgery*. Oxford; New York: Berg, 2008.
- Kuefler, Mathew. *The manly eunuch : masculinity, gender ambiguity, and Christian ideology in late antiquity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Küng, Hans, and John Stephen Bowden. *Women in Christianity*. London; New York: Continuum, 2005.
- Lomperis, Linda, and Sarah Stanbury. *Feminist approaches to the body in medieval literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.
- Simon, Rita J, and Alison Brooks. *Gay and lesbian communities the world over*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009.
- Tougher, Shaun. *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society*. Routledge, 2010.
- Tsai, Shih-shan Henry. *The eunuchs in the Ming dynasty*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Wiesner, Merry E. *Gender in history : global perspectives*. Malden, Mass; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Alberto Ferreira is an Ethnology PhD student at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Germany. His research interests are linked to Ethnology, Philosophy and Sociology, particularly post-humanism, ethics and economic sociology. When not otherwise busy with real life occupations of software localization and project management, he dabbles in the ancient arts of

music and painting, to the frustration of neighbours and onlookers alike.