The Emergence of the Posthuman Consumer and the Fusion of the Virtual and the Real:
A Critical Analysis of Sony's Ad for Memory Stick

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(Abstract)

As the world moves closer to new cybernetic life forms (i.e. self-regulating technological entities) a fundamental question arises as to what the term "human" means. An equally important question is whether we are entering a new phase of "posthuman" lifeworld inhabited by cyborgs composed of organisms and machines. At first glance, such questions might appear have no theoretical or practical significance. However, some recent developments in human/machine interactions suggest that this requires attention. This paper makes a modest beginning in addressing relevant issues and examines their implications to some new ways of constructing the consumer, or more precisely the posthuman consumer.

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Introduction

As the world moves closer to new cybernetic life forms (i.e. self-regulating technological entities) a fundamental question arises as to what the term "human" means. An equally important question is whether we are entering a new phase of "posthuman" lifeworld inhabited by cyborgs that are, according to Harraway (1990), who popularized the term first, composed of organisms and machines. At first glance, such questions might appear capricious and may seem to have no practical value, especially because, by many accounts, what is human has been settled a long time ago and to raise it now may have no evocative significance. After all, don't we all know what it means to be human – it means that humans belong to a class that is "not-animal," "not-plant," 'not-machine," they are a manifestation of a privileged biological form that some even dare to consider to be closer to something divine, endowed with intelligence and unparalleled brain power, and can communicate through a complex system of language and symbols. Why then is this question raised now? This paper makes a modest beginning in addressing relevant issues and examines their implications to some new ways of constructing the consumer, or more precisely the posthuman consumer.

We will first begin by clarify the terms, posthuman and cyborg. We provide three quotes (Exhibit 1), one from Rutsky (1999) on posthuman condition, the second from Harraway (1990) on cyborg and the third from Hayles (1999) on the combination of "posthuman" and "cyborg."

"The term "posthuman" has come to designate a loosely related set of recent attempts to reconceptualize the relationship between the rapidly transforming field of technology and the conditions of human embodiment. These are, generally speaking, a response to the cybernetic turn and the visualization of information, provoked by … the scale of disorientation and displacement created by the impact of computerization, the rise of new forms of engineering and new modes of knowledge, the creation of artificial life etc. The most literal adjudication of the term posits the demise of human in the face of a technological evolution, its absorption into the new informational economies as obsolete organic matter. Some other less apocalyptic and more nuanced critiques, primarily associated with cyborg politics, also take the posthuman to designate an historical effacement of some precybernetic, 'organic' human figure…For now I want to use the term to evoke a general critical space in which the techno-cultural forces which both produce and undermine the stability of the categories "human" and "non-human", can be investigated. How are the self-identity and transcendent status of the human secured as the "not-animal," the "not-machine" and the "not-embodied'" and in what way does the purity of these categories unravel and contaminate each other?" (Rutsky 1999 p.24)

Cyborg is a term popularized by Harraway (1990) who describes it in the following terms:
"A cyborg is a hybrid creature, composed of organism and machine. But, cyborgs are composed of special kinds of machines and special kinds of organisms appropriate to the late twentieth century. Cyborgs are post-Second World War hybrid entities made of, first, ourselves and other organic creatures in our chosen "high-technological" guise as information systems, texts, and ergonomically controlled labouring, desiring, and reproducing systems. The second essential ingredient in cyborgs is machines in their guise, also, as communication systems, texts, and self-acting, ergonomically designed apparatuses. (p10-11)

"First the post-human view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second post-human view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenona, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only minor sideshow. Third, the post-human view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that begun before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the post-human view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the post-human there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals." (Hayles, 1999, 2-3)

These three quotes suggest to us that we are witnessing the emergence of a posthuman/cyborgian paradigm that views the *intersection* of human and machine as a postmodern possibility in contrast to the received view under modernist thinking which considers these two entities as distinctly separate. However, at this *intersection* is not an ordinary machine—machine nevertheless—but a machine that is cybernetic and intelligent, a machine that has begun to evolve out of a virtual world of information and communication technologies.

In this paper, we first present some foundational ideas concerning human identity and notions of representation. This will be followed by a discussion on posthuman

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possibilities and in the final section we will consider an ad from SONY corporation for Memory Stick^{TM} as an example of an interesting imagery of posthumanism.

<u>The Human Identity in Modernity and</u>
<u>Mechanistic Ideas of Representation</u>

Beginning with Descartes our understanding of the world has followed a mechanistic route. Essentially, the mechanistic approach formalizes the ideas or symbols we use to represent the world in a rationalistic fashion. In addition, it also attempts to formalize the process of thinking itself. Thinking in this perspective means instrumental reasoning, calculation, using formal rules of evidence and monitoring standardized/predictable performance. Rational thinking is a conscious, competent administration of an idea, aided by procedural methods. The mechanistic and formalistic idea of representation was also at the heart of computing in its beginning stages and continues even today to some extent. Data are representations of facts and computer technology is essentially directed toward storing and manipulating of data. The mechanistic paradigm underlies the design of various every day technologies that exhibit a purpose, are singular, and well-ordered. To the extent that mind is presumed to control matter, we view these machines as controllable devices whose functions are dictated by human needs and dictates, and whose operations and purposes appear to be very transparent. Any interaction with the machine implies this relationship.
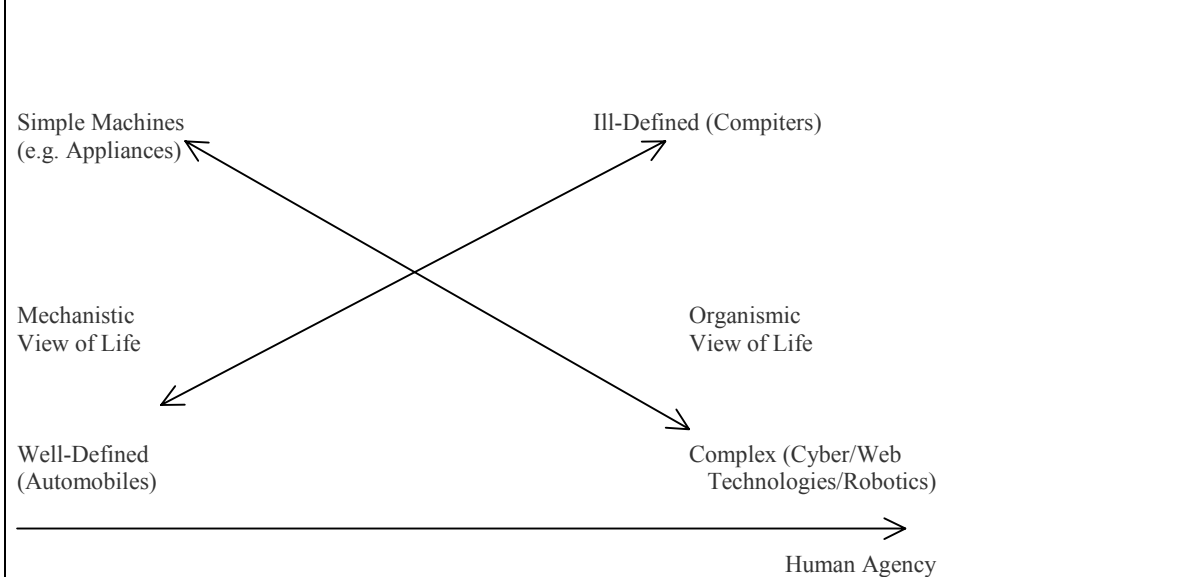
Romantic View in Modernity - Mechanism vs. Organism:

In parallel to this mechanistic view of the world, there always existed a romantic view. Human emotions and unconscious desires always resisted these mechanistic and formalistic norms of behavior and looked for forms of liberatory moments. Poetry

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always existed side by side with logic. However, in all of these cases, the romantic elements played a secondary role to the rationalistic framework because of social norms and institutional structures. While the mechanistic view lent itself to collective order and rationality, the romantic view was a privileged, individualistic, artistic expression, which allowed for physical and bodily articulations.

We elaborate this idea further in Figure 1. We do this by using everyday technological devices. The rectangular formulation is a modified Greimasian square which pits mechanism against organism. Familiar domestic technologies (kitchen appliances and automobiles) are classified as mechanistic devices characterized by singularity of purpose and well-defined systems. Together they constitute the mechanistic space. At the opposite end are computers and the new cyberspace technologies that occupy the organismic space. They are both ill-defined relative to the mechanistic technologies. The relationship of the technologies to the human agency varies. The mechanistic technologies serve the human being in the performance of various mechanical chores. The organismic technologies mimic human intelligence and also serve human needs at a higher level. The extreme form of this relationship is where the computer can act as a simulated human being.   Writing in 1984, Turkle (1984) compared the computer as the mirror in which the human being could see himself or herself. This imagery was further modified in her latest book, *Life on the Screen* (Turkle 1995). Using a postmodern interpretation, she characterized the computer screen as the door behind which other humans reside and can be contacted. We have moved a long way from the kitchen appliances to the Web technology.

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Figure 1. Configuration of Mechanistic and Organismic View of Life

Simple Machines (e.g. Appliances)   Ill-Defined (Compiters)

Mechanistic   Organismic
View of Life   View of Life

Well-Defined   Complex (Cyber/Web
(Automobiles)   Technologies/Robotics)

                                                     Human Agency

Mechanical to Computational to Bio-Technical:

We are moving from a mechanical concept of the world to a computational concept and further into a bio-technical concept of the world. For centuries, a key argument centered around culture and nature dichotomy questioning which of the two was superior in explaining or guiding human behavior. The debate continues and keeps some of us occupied. A few thinkers have suggested that the dispute between nature and culture is itself socially constructed, for according to some of them what is natural is cultural and what is cultural is natural. While the debate regarding nature-culture goes on, a parallel debate has surfaced in recent years, natural vs. artificial. Whatever progress we have recorded in the last 300 years is in the world of the artificial. For more than three decades our focus has been on not just artificial but artificial intelligence (AI). This has more recently expanded into artificial life (AL) suggesting that we are moving away

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from AI to AL. The aesthetic of the body has also accordingly shifted to artificial formulations of the body.

The basis of computerization is the effacement of the distinction between mechanism and organism. We are now picturing machines as organisms or self-replicating artifices. Organisms do not have a purpose, at least one that can theorize about. We can talk about the automobile having a purpose, that is, as a means of transportation. The main purpose of an organism seems to be self-replication and this is as close we can get to in uncovering its purpose. The site for the effacement of the distinction between mechanism and organism is the cyberspace.

Computerization of the Aesthetic:

Computers are no longer viewed as merely computational devices working with mass amounts of data. The cyberspace has become a site of romantic vision and experience, and all the suppressed emotional areas of life are blossoming in cyberspace. One can see this in various technological manifestations of cyberspace--interactive media, virtual technologies, simulated art and a host of similar developments.

If the basis of cyberspace is the effacement of the distinction between mechanism and organism, we may be looking at machine-organisms as self-replicating artifices. The main purpose of an organism is to self-replicate but, as we stated earlier, this is true of a machine. However, this traditional distinction between mechanism and organism is being eroded with the entry of new technologies of information. Of particular interest for our discussion is how the blurring of this distinction has an impact on individual identity.

With the emergence of the sciences of the artificial (Simon 1983), and the new technologies of computerized aesthetic, the very notion of the body is undergoing a serious and active debate. These new disciplines of the artificial are high status scientific disciplines and their approaches to the cultivation of the physical via the artificial have received much intellectual support. These new disciplinary ideas are penetrating into our notions of subjectivities not simply metaphorically or phenomenologically but by creating a social problematic of the contemporary world. The question then is what is the nature of subjectivity in cyberspace.

In the Cartesian framework, the mind-centeredness dominates our view of the world. In the postmodern world, we are moving more and more into a body-centered framework. The architecture of cyberspace lends itself to the permutations of bodily expressions and displays through the use of color, three-dimensional graphics and other visual imagery. Cyberspatial manipulations are subject to interactivity, which means that the user is more a bricoleur in Levi-Strauss's sense.

Cyberspace is not only the realm of the artificial but the realm of artificial life. In a Cartesian world, artificial intelligence (AI) provides the dominant model for thinking. The best example is the computer in the famous movie, 2001 Space Odyssey with a mind but no movable body. In a non-Cartesian world, artificial intelligence slowly gives way to artificial life (AL). The earliest manifestation of artificial life is the computer virus. Computer virus is a self-replicating organism with minimum intelligence and maximum destructive power. The principle of self-replication can be easily extended to other cyber forms.

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Consumer Subjectivity in Cyberspace:

The models of virtuality in cyberspace provide new forms of subjectivity. For example, many of the contingent essentialisms of cyberspace come from science fiction (e.g. Neuromancer, Bladerunner). Hollywood presents the realms of possibility and advertising takes its cue from what happens in Hollywood--where hi-tech determines the protocols of contemporary consumer culture.

With this general discussion on the notions of the virtual and the real, let us move more specifically to the emerging posthuman condition.

<u>The Development of Posthuman Thought:</u>
<u>The Individual as Posthuman</u>

Posthuman Identity:

In her book Katherine Hayles (1999) discusses some critical notions concerning post-human identity. The most popular post-human identity is the cyborg created by science fiction movies and literature. In the construction of the cyborg there are informational paths connecting the organic human body to its prosthetic artificial extensions. This presumes a conception of information as a disembodied entity that can flow between carbon based organic compounds and silicon based electronic compounds to make protein and silicon operate as a single system. This is both a powerful metaphor and a profound (ly) material consequence of organic and inorganic fusion. This posthuman phenomenon is exemplified in the SONY ad for Memory Stick[TM] (which will be discussed later in some detail) (Figures 2a and 2b) where the fusion occurs between the polymer based Memory Stick[TM] and the carbon based human brain. Such a fusion is

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explained by Hayles (1999) as a construction of post-human identity (see her quote – Exhibit 1 above):

Sony's Memory Stick:

In the spirit of providing a concrete example of how the posthuman discourse is being enacted in our everyday life, we have selected a Sony product, the Memory Stick[TM] which appeared in the November 2000 issue *Discover*, a popular science magazine (Figures 2a and 2b). At one level, the ad is like any other ad, a print communication concerning an electronic device. At another level, it begins to merge the human with the artifice, and it is this aspect that is of interest in the paper.

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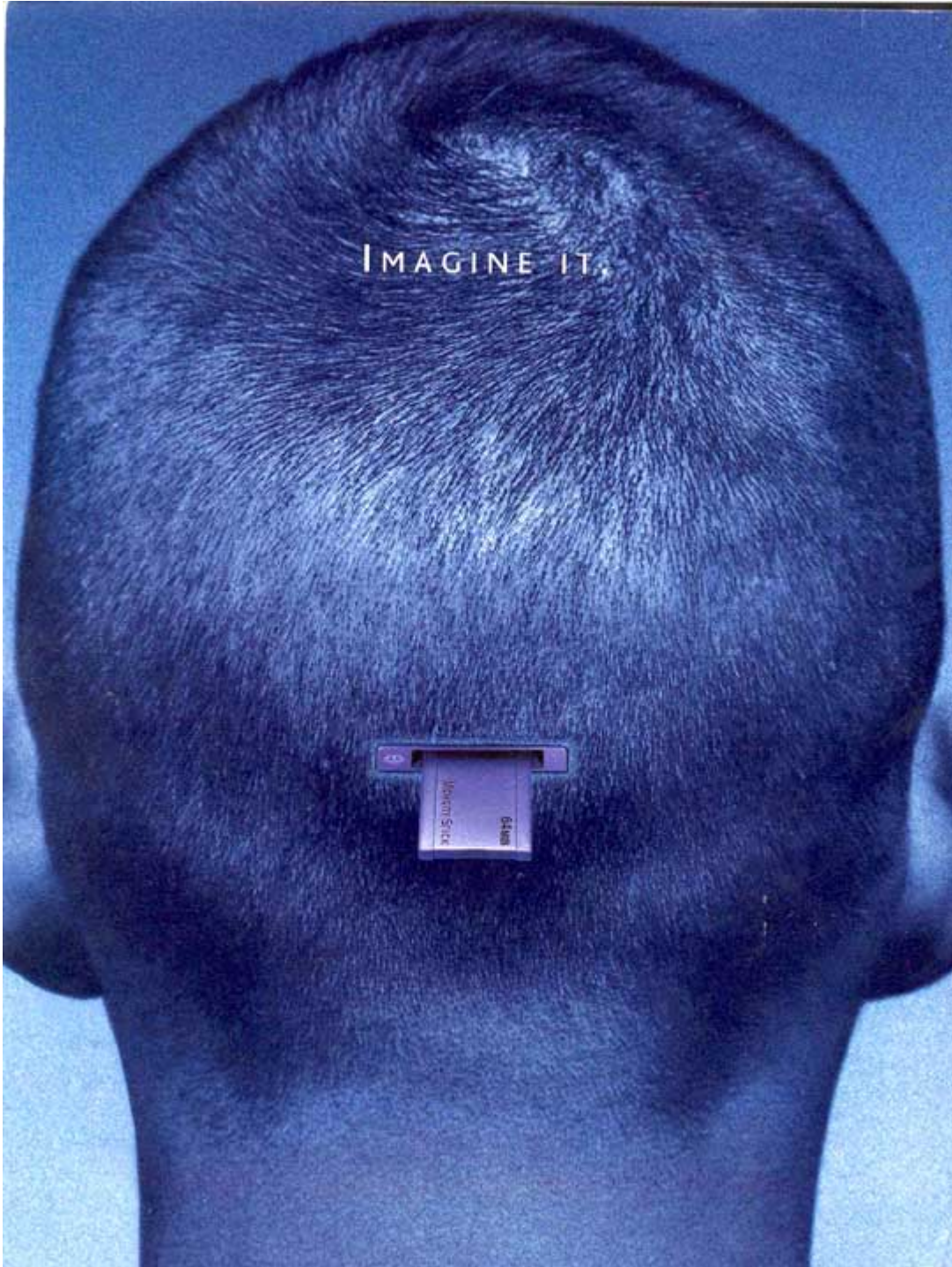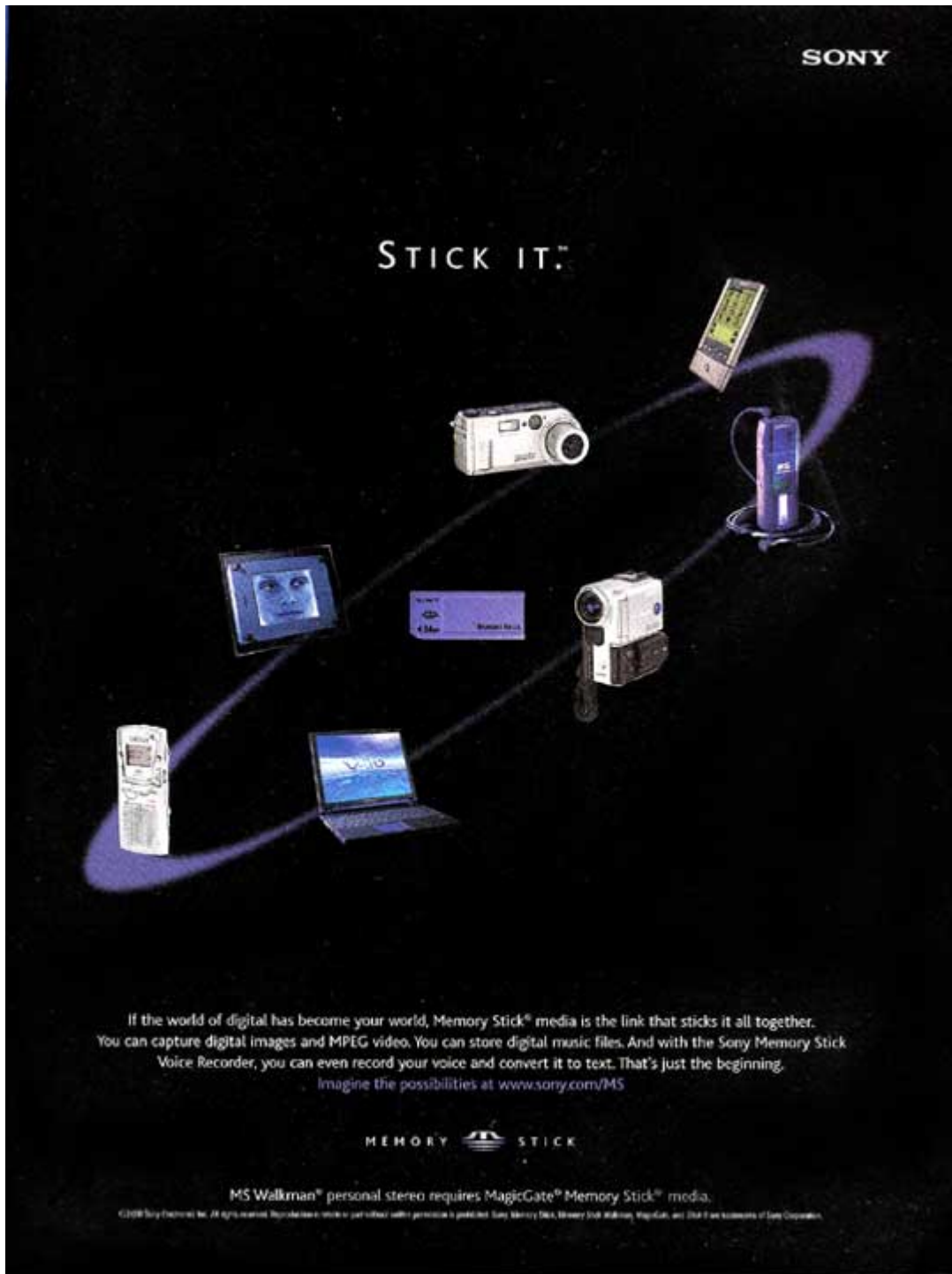
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Figure 2a. Sony Ad

Figure 2b. Sony Ad (cont.)

Before we analyze the ad in some detail, a brief comment on the cultural interpretation of an ad would be an order. Williamson (1978) argues that advertisements are cultural factors that mold and reflect the lives of masses. Although the basic goal of advertising is to sell products to potential customers, an important function of advertisement is to manipulate the cultural symbols that lie behind the ad, to structure the material life of the consumer and influence their feelings and life patterns. Advertisement creates structures of meanings in a way that consumer identities are established through a process of consumption of both the product and its accompanying meanings/images (McCracken 1988, Askegaard 1991). During this analysis one of our goals is to understand the collective impersonal signs and symbols that are communicated in the Sony ad and used by the consumers to identify themselves.

The product shown in the ad is Sony's Memory Stick^{TM} which is a copyrighted product of Sony Corporation. It is a recordable IC (integrated circuit) digital storage media. It is used in electronic devices to store and transfer digital data. It has the potential to become a standard storage and transfer media. It is smaller than a stick of chewing gum, and is available in the range of 8MB – 64MB storage sizes and with a PC card adapter. Due to its compact and thin size, it is designed for use in small digital audio/video electronics products. It allows users to transfer information, such as data, text, graphics or digital images from one electronic device to another quickly and easily.

Compared to other IC media, Memory Stick is smaller in size than compact flash and smart media. It is highly reliable with a 10-pin connector, and an Erasure Prevention Switch that when set on "Lock" eliminates the risk of accidentally erasing or recording over- stored data. It has Original Serial Protocol for forward compatibility with

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higher capacity models to be developed in the future. The Memory Stick format is designed to be expanded in the future to incorporate digital copyright protection to record protected content.

In sum, the use value of Memory Stick is to store visual, textual, and sound data and transform them into each other and it is compatible with various electronic devices.

In the first page of the ad the memory stick is attached to a man's head. On the upper part of the ad are inscribed the words, "Imagine it." The words are written across the back of the skull which is the seat of the human brain and the repository of human memory. The ad is designed to persuade the consumer to use his/her imagination in the process of viewing the ad. The message is deliberately ambiguous and double coded and the viewer is expected to interpret the ad in their own way. At one level the message asks the viewer to simply envision the possibility that an opening can be made in a human skull so that the memory stick can be inserted into it, and at another more abstract level the message is pointing to a posthuman condition where the human head and the artifice are merged into one and the same entity, a version of cyborgian brain.

Looking at the visual patterns in the ad, one finds that the whole page is printed in blue except for the memory stick which is in purple and wedged into the center of the head in a surreal fashion. What is particularly noteworthy is that the memory stick is placed right at the very mid-point of the cranium that suggests its strategic position in the brain. An individual with a memory stick grafted into the head thus symbolizes a posthuman condition of possibility and in an ironic way the consumer who views the ad establishes his/her own identity vicariously as the posthuman consumer.

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In addition to the utility of the product which is hardly elaborated in the first page of the ad, the ad stresses its symbolic value.

Posthuman Analysis:

For a further elaboration of this viewpoint let us turn to Hayles (1999). She visualizes the post-human subject as a composite, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational unit whose boundaries undergo continuous construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. In a similar fashion to Hayles, Haraway (1991) envisions the cyborg as a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism. It is where the social reality meets fiction in an abashed fashion. For Haraway "the late 20th century is a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organisms; in short we are cyborgs." (1990)

At this point, we shall attempt to take the analysis to the next level of phenomenology. In this ad, we see certain visions of mind-body duality that have occupied social theorists, scientists, and philosophers through many centuries. Most scientists acknowledge that the mind-body duality is a social construction that obscures the holistic nature of human experience. Damasio discusses the complex mechanisms by which mind and body communicate, and emphasizes that the body is a more than a life-support system for the brain (Damasio as cited in Hayles, 1999, 245). According to this perspective, the body is not a passive organism receiving orders from the brain but an active contributor of content to the human mind. Feelings are communicated by the body to the mind in the form of information about the body's structure and its continuously varying states. If feelings and emotions are the mutterings of the body to the mind, by

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extension, the feelings are "just as cognitive as other precepts" and are considered part of human thought and indeed part of what makes humans rational creatures. In other words, the mind-body duality has to be problematized not in terms of Cartesian disjuncture but as a postmodern union. In terms of the specific example that we are concerned with here, being posthuman is not simply a question of the human having prosthetic devices grafted into his/her corporeal matter but perhaps one of equivalence between humans and computers as information processors.

The Next Page of the Ad:

The next page of the ad is a spatial representation of electronic devices orbiting around the memory stick which is placed at the center of the orbit. At the top of the page, are the words, "STICK IT™". Once again, we see a double coding of the message. "Stick it" is not only a literal term for the memory stick, but it also conveys the notion that all these various devices stick together.

The metaphor used here is cosmic in detail and impact: it is the universe where celestial bodies are in orbit. Since the memory stick is at the center of the orbit, it may be viewed as the sublime force that keeps the electronic (planetary) devices in an elliptical gravitational field. Taken as a whole, the memory stick is the linking tool between the human (the first page of the ad) and the various electronic devices (the second page of the ad). However, this link is not simply a link in the utilitarian sense but a link in which the devices and the humans are able to cross their respective corporeal and artifactual boundaries in a posthuman fashion.

This posthuman imagery presented in both pages of the ad is already anticipated by Hayles (1999) in her description of a much simpler machine, the tape recorder and its relationship to the human:

> *"The switches activating the powerful and paradoxical techno-conceptual actors of repetition and mutation, presence and absence, were in the hands of the masses, at least the masses, which could afford the equipment. When voice was displaced onto tape, the body metonymically participated in the transformations that voice underwent in this medium. According to Burroughs, if the body becomes a tape recorder, the voice can be understood not as a naturalized union of voice and presence but as mechanical production with the frightening ability to appropriate the body's vocal apparatus and use it for ends alien to the self. Once someone's vocalizations and body sounds are spliced into someone else's, the effects can feedback into the bodies, setting off a riot of mutations and the instrumentality that brings them about. The taped body can separate at the vertical "divide line", grotesquely become half one person and half another, as it were, with the tape spliced lengthwise. In a disturbingly literal sense, the tape-recorder becomes a two-edged sword, cutting through the bodies as well as through the programs that control and discipline them". (Hayles, 1999, 210-211)*

Using Hayles's view of the posthuman imagery one might say that the transformation of digital data among various devices is both an embodiment and disembodiment of information. In her example, Hayles (1999) played on the analogy between the body and the audiotape. The voice of inscription was permanent and mutable, repeating past reality accurately and also allowing present interventions that could change its form and meaning. In effect, past reality could be constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed continuously. These interventions could be done by any post-human device or any posthuman being into whom the device is grafted. The memory stick exemplifies such a possibility for it can be used for storing and modifying past reality.

Let us return to the first page of the ad one more time. Sony might want the consumer to imagine a condition of possibility where they can disembody ideas, thoughts, and information that they generate and store in their lifeworld. Minsky and Moravec share a rather dramatic view of 'the dream of discarding death by downloading

consciousness into a computer." We may be closer to it than when they uttered these words. The most significant thing to both of them is the data, and the programs in the data that reside in the brain. And some day the individual will be able to take all that data, put it on a little disk and store it for a thousand years, and then have it turned on again. Lyotard (1991) likens this to a monad that knows everything out of the conventional time span. Although this is a rather extreme interpretation of the ad, the direction of its meaning is inescapable.

For example, at the bottom of the second page, we see the following words, "if the world of digital has become your world, Memory Stick® media is the link that sticks it all together. You can capture digital images and MPEG video. You can store digital music files. And with the Sony Memory Stick Voice Recorder, you can even record your voice and convert it to text. That's just the beginning." These words seem to herald an oncoming posthuman world.
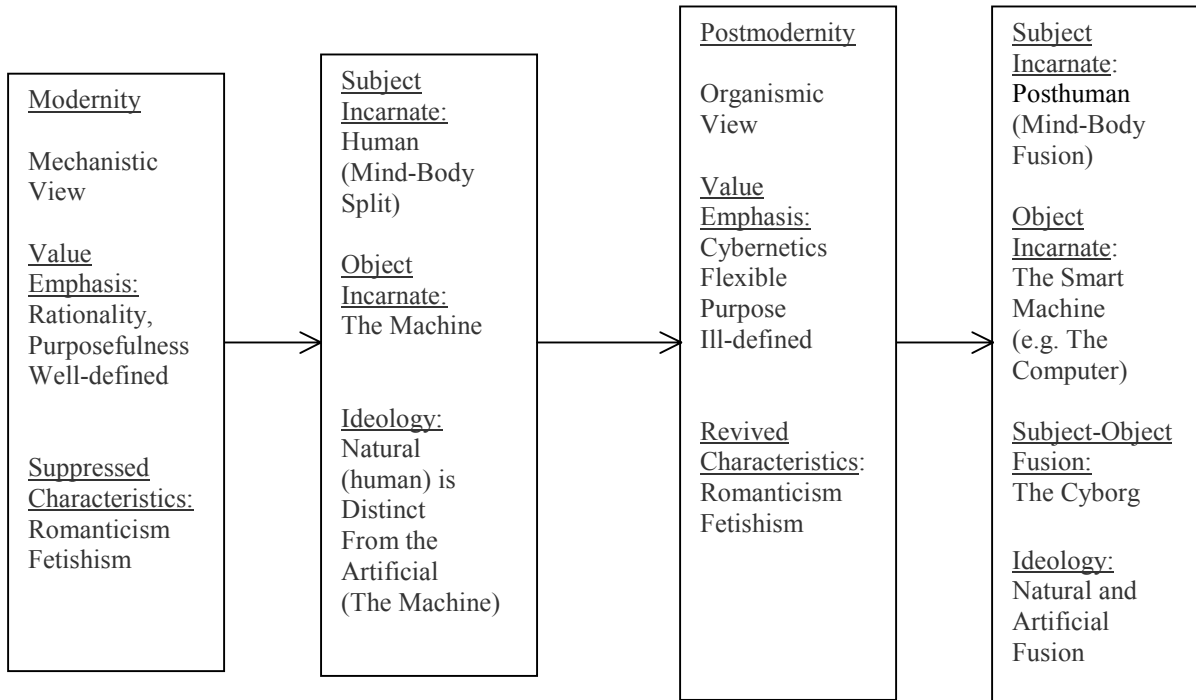
Summary and Conclusion

Our analysis shows that we are moving from a modernistic notions of the consumer to some new possibilities of posthuman consumer. We capture this progression in the Figure 3. The role of new technologies in this progression seems to be most interesting and compelling.

Traditional culture is marked by local situations where they cannot be easily transplanted or communicated without the help of technologies. The new technologies furnish cultural models which are not initially rooted in the local context but diffused through out the globe, and provide a remarkable means of overcoming the obstacles traditional culture face in the recording, transfer and communication of information.

(Lyotard, 1991) According to Lyotard, the current functions of the technology, the real value of the technological products (e.g. the Memory Stick) and the global diffusion of electronic and information networks give rise to a global capacity for memorizing and sometimes stand in opposition to the representations within traditional cultures. The paradox implied by this memory resides in the fact that in the last analysis it is nobody's memory. But nobody here means that the body supporting that memory is no longer earth bound. (Lyotard, 1991, 64).

This paper is a modest attempt to initiate a discussion on the notion of a posthuman consumer who is at the center of a major technological revolution. Some of our established ideas rooted in modernist thinking need to be re-examined and as we develop new theories of consumer behavior, we should remind ourselves us that the world of technological practice is moving at a lightning speed and both as researchers and practitioners we should meet the new challenges.

Figure 3: Progression from Human to Posthuman

Modernity

Mechanistic View

Value Emphasis:
Rationality,
Purposefulness
Well-defined

Suppressed Characteristics:
Romanticism
Fetishism

→

Subject Incarnate:
Human
(Mind-Body Split)

Object Incarnate:
The Machine

Ideology:
Natural (human) is Distinct From the Artificial (The Machine)

→

Postmodernity

Organismic View

Value Emphasis:
Cybernetics
Flexible
Purpose
Ill-defined

Revived Characteristics:
Romanticism
Fetishism

→

Subject Incarnate:
Posthuman
(Mind-Body Fusion)

Object Incarnate:
The Smart Machine
(e.g. The Computer)

Subject-Object Fusion:
The Cyborg

Ideology:
Natural and Artificial Fusion

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