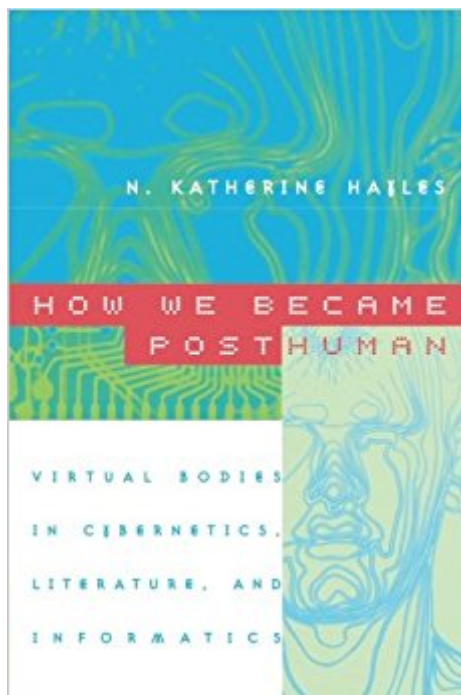




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How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies In Cybernetics, Literature, And Informatics



Synopsis

In this age of DNA computers and artificial intelligence, information is becoming disembodied even as the "bodies" that once carried it vanish into virtuality. While some marvel at these changes, envisioning consciousness downloaded into a computer or humans "beamed" Star Trek-style, others view them with horror, seeing monsters brooding in the machines. In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles separates hype from fact, investigating the fate of embodiment in an information age. Hayles relates three interwoven stories: how information lost its body, that is, how it came to be conceptualized as an entity separate from the material forms that carry it; the cultural and technological construction of the cyborg; and the dismantling of the liberal humanist "subject" in cybernetic discourse, along with the emergence of the "posthuman." Ranging widely across the history of technology, cultural studies, and literary criticism, Hayles shows what had to be erased, forgotten, and elided to conceive of information as a disembodied entity. Thus she moves from the post-World War II Macy Conferences on cybernetics to the 1952 novel *Limbo* by cybernetics aficionado Bernard Wolfe; from the concept of self-making to Philip K. Dick's literary explorations of hallucination and reality; and from artificial life to postmodern novels exploring the implications of seeing humans as cybernetic systems. Although becoming posthuman can be nightmarish, Hayles shows how it can also be liberating. From the birth of cybernetics to artificial life, *How We Became Posthuman* provides an indispensable account of how we arrived in our virtual age, and of where we might go from here.

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Customer Reviews

In this book of panoramic scope Hayles considers no less than the fate of the human race. In a rich and detailed discussion ranging from the science fiction of Greg Bear and Philip K. Dick to the science of Norbert Wiener's cybernetics and Claude Shannon's information theory, Hayles traces the changing conception of human consciousness and claims that a great many of us are already posthuman. A posthuman is someone who has been reconstructed in some sense, either physically or mentally, such that he or she exceeds, or believes they can exceed, the boundaries of a human. About ten percent of Americans can be considered cyborgs in the technical sense by virtue of having some kind of artificial implant - these people would qualify as posthuman since they have compensated for some limitation of their bodies through technological augmentation. However, Hayles claims that to be posthuman no prosthesis is necessary, simply the way in which we think about ourselves as conscious agents needs to change. The advent of Shannon's information theory has led to the modern convention of treating information as if it were entirely non-physical. If this idea is applied to the information in our heads - that is, the collection of memories that make each of us unique - then we quickly arrive at the conclusion that our consciousness can be uploaded into a computer, decanted into a robot-body, or even backed-up onto computer disk, giving us eternal life. This is the story of how information lost its body and it is an idea which is now well established in Western culture and technology. Yet, Hayles believes it to be misguided. Any informational pattern, be it pebbles on the beach or electrons whizzing across the internet, must have a physical embodiment to exist.

This is an important, impressive, and infuriating book that should be read by all those interested in the posthuman movement, the possibility of a cyborg future, and the nature of cyberspace. I agree with other reviewers that it is a penetrating analysis of the cultural revolution taking place in information and what it means for human (and posthuman) society. It is important as a powerful statement of the post-modern concern with embodiment and what that might portend for the future of humanity. It is impressive as a wide-ranging analysis of the inter-linkages of technology, culture, and the human body. It is infuriating because of the jargon-filled text and convoluted nature of the writing. That last criticism is one that is generic for post-modern works such as this, and certainly not a specific criticism of this book. UCLA professor of English N. Katherine Hayles makes the case that the body (or lack thereof) is central to this posthuman future. She notes that the body is lost in the information age, as disembodied voices/knowledge/data came to dominate thinking about a posthuman evolutionary stage. She also explores the development of the concept of the cyborg,

and what the merger of humans and machines might eventually come to mean. She undertakes the analysis through a series of case studies. One of the best of them is her chapter on the science fiction of Philip K. Dick, whose novel "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" was made into the classic feature film "Blade Runner." His obsession with artificial life, and by extension "real" life, consumed much of Dick's writing and has much to say about the essence of the posthuman.

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