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Why We Want to Be Cyborgs: The Role of Prostheses in the Subject's Desire

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Abstract: The relationship between prostheses used by cyborgs and the desires of the subject is multifaceted and complex. From a Lacanian perspective, prostheses act as substitutes for the *objet a*, offering a form of partial satisfaction, yet never fully fulfilling the subject's desire. Prostheses not only serve as tools for medical reshaping but also play a pivotal role in restoring lost aspects of subjectivity. This dual function complicates the boundary between rehabilitation and enhancement, as prostheses not only correct impairments but also augment human capabilities, transforming people with disabilities into potential "superhumans." The continual advancement of prosthetic technology leads to an evolution of the body itself, pushing beyond traditional conceptions of subjectivity and fueling the pursuit of the cyborg body's aesthetic ideal. Prostheses also facilitate the reproduction of desire, which may catalyze a heterogeneous transformation of the subject, re-establishing their identity in profound ways.

Keywords: Cyborg; Prostheses; Disability; Subjectivity; Desire; Enhancement; Lacan

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标题：我们为何想成为赛博格：义体在主体欲望中的作用

摘要：赛博格所用义体与主体欲望之间存在多样且复杂的关联。从拉康的视角来看，义体是“客体 a”的替代物，它虽能为主体带来部分满足，却始终无法彻底满足主体的欲望。义体是用于医疗重塑的工具，也是失落的主体性得以恢复的关键。这种双重功能模糊了恢复与增强的边界，因为义体不仅能够治疗身体的残疾，更可以强化人类的能力，使残疾人成为潜在的“超人”。义体技术的持续发展使身体本身得以进化，超越了传统的主体性概念，也催生了人们对赛博格身体美学理想的追求。同时，义体还带来了主体欲望的再生产，这或将引发主体的异质性转变，使其以深刻的方式重建其身份。

关键词：赛博格；义体；残疾；主体性；欲望；增强；拉康

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1. Introduction

In a broad sense, a cyborg can be understood as a hybrid of human beings and technological artifacts. For the cyborg, prostheses serve not only as physical aids or substitutes but as a crucial role factor in shaping subjective experiences. The relationship between prostheses and the subject's desire is intricate, reflecting a complex interplay between the body, technology, and identity. For individuals with disabilities, prostheses hold profound personal and existential significance, representing ideals of selfhood and agency, and thus assuming a pivotal role in the formation of identity. Furthermore, advanced prostheses, driven by cutting-edge technology, do not merely compensate for the loss of physical function; they also introduce new sensory capabilities, thereby expanding the complexity of subjectivity. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the relationship between prostheses and desire, offering an in-depth analysis of prosthetic subjectivity.

2. Desire for Prostheses

Human desire has consistently been inextricably linked to the yearning for a stronger body, whether that body is imagined as possessing superhuman attributes or an idealized, yet unattainable, form. Within the imagination of the body, two archetypal conceptualizations emerge: one posits that the transient, corporeal nature of the body forms a sharp contrast with the purity and eternity of the soul, thereby advocating for a spiritual life that seeks to liberate the spirit from the confines of the body to prevent the body from corrupting the soul; the other asserts that, given the body's inherent mortality and finitude, it should evolve towards immortality and eternity, utilizing various technological means to emancipate the body from its role as a limitation upon the subject. The latter vision directly gave rise to contemporary cyborgs, but, in fact, when cyborg

technology reaches its apex, the former vision can also be realized through virtual cyborgs, as the embodiment of the former vision or way.

However, as an object of desire, the essence of the prosthesis lies in its inherent inability to grant the subject with complete and eternal satisfaction. This is precisely the driving force behind the continuous innovation of prostheses and the relentless upgrading of cyborgs. From a Lacanian perspective, the prosthesis assumes the role of a substitute for the *objet a*. Lacan describes *objet a* as follows: “It is here that I propose that the interest the subject takes in his own split is bound up with that which determines it—namely, a privileged object, which has emerged from some primal separation, from some self-mutilation induced by the very approach of the real, whose name, in our algebra, is the *objet a*.” (Lacan, 1979, p.83). In other words, *objet a* is the cause of desire, linked to the lack experienced during the subject’s initial separation from the maternal body. As Lacan said: “What is object a, whose fundamental forms you saw me trace out as far as I could take them? Object a is what fell away from the subject when anxious. It is the same object that I depicted as ‘the cause of desire’” (Lacan, 2013, p.58). This lack gives rise to the subject’s desire and compels the search for a substitute for *objet a*.

However, the true *objet a* remains perpetually absent, suppressed in the unconscious, with the temporarily manifested *objet a* being merely an illusion projected by the subject. Thus, any object of desire can only ever be a total substitute for *objet a*. Therefore, desire can never attain final fulfillment, as there is no final signifier or goal that can be permanently attained. We can understand why Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, placed death as the ultimate goal of desire. If we accept that the ultimate end of desire is the logical consequence of satisfaction—that is, when we are satisfied, no further desire remains—it becomes clear that Freud viewed death as a form of Nirvana or the restoration of lost unity, the final cure for the fragmented subject (Freud, 1961, pp.49-50).

Therefore, the prosthesis is perpetually a stand-in for a part of maternal body, a mere illusion rotating in the metonymic chain. This constitutes the desire-fueled enclosure of the cyborg: the acquisition of a prosthetic body, paradoxically, represents a failure, forever marking the loss of the original body.

Anyway, prostheses, in their continuous upgrading and replacement, attempt to fulfill the insatiable desires of the subject. In this ongoing cycle of prosthetic replacement, the desire for the body is repeatedly transferred onto each new prosthesis. However, each transfer results in only transient satisfaction and an even deeper sense of emptiness, as Qiong Wu aptly observes: “Desire maintains a tenacious, indomitable attachment to its objects. Due to the failure of acquisition, the subject is compelled to search anew, yet this search inevitably culminates in failure. Ultimately, what the subject finds is merely one substitute after another, with each new object briefly occupying the position of the desired object in an attempt to satisfy the subject’s need for

ever-increasing investment of libidinal energy” (Wu, 2011, p.385). This describes the driving force behind the continuous advancement of prostheses: the desire that propels the subject to seek momentary satisfaction through the possession of prostheses, even though such satisfaction is elusive, offering little hope for lasting or ultimate fulfillment.

3. The Role of Prostheses in Restoring the Body and Reclaiming Subjectivity

The subjectivity function of prostheses in fulfilling desires is vividly embodied in individuals with disabilities, whose subjectivity is often in a state of disintegration or loss. In *Anthropology of the Body and Modernity*, David Le Breton said: “People with disabilities are no longer regarded as subjects, but rather as individuals who possess something” (Breton, 2010, p.196). In contemporary society, individuals with disabilities are frequently subjected to various forms of discrimination, gazed upon with pity and curiosity. Their subjectivity is seen as either abnormal or diminished. The issue of subjectivity in disabled individuals illuminates the fundamental significance of the body for subjectivity. Indeed, the term “subject” in English inherently carries the connotation of a distinct body, which separates it from others, with the notable exception of pregnant women (Gagnier, 1991, p.8). The loss of bodily integrity thus entails the loss of subjectivity, a condition clearly evident in individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, this loss appears to be definitive and irreparable, given that the body can no longer regenerate.

Disability not only triggers anxiety about the objective world within the subject itself, but also evokes a similar anxiety from others regarding the objective world. When a disabled person gazes at a non-disabled individual, they often perceive the latter as a mirror image of themselves, thus turning the non-disabled body into an object of unattainable desire. Conversely, when a non-disabled person gazes at a disabled individual, they, too, see the disabled person as a shattered mirror of themselves. However, disability exposes the darker side of this mirror: the human body’s frailty is both terrifying and easily attainable, making everyone a potential candidate for disability. At times, this mirror image is rejected and avoided by the subject, driven by anxiety. As David Le Breton notes, “The body is the foundation of one’s identity; its abnormalities naturally estrange the individual from their own sense of self, or at least from the perception of others, because an abnormal body can no longer serve as a mirror to others” (Breton, 2010, p.197). The disabled body exposes the vulnerability of subjectivity, revealing the fragility of identity to the world. In this sense, the horror of disability is akin to that of death, for it announces the demise of the subject.

For individuals with disabilities, the prostheses serve as crucial means of reshaping subjectivity, as the reconstruction of the body through prosthetics can restore its appearance and function to resemble that of a non-disabled individual, thereby reasserting one’s social identity and mitigating societal discrimination and exclusion. Patients who are bedridden due to organ failure, paralysis, or other debilitating conditions, and who await death, can also experience a form of

rebirth through the use of artificial organs or complex biological materials, thus extending their lives. This represents the cyborg future of humanity, one that challenges the tragic fate of the subject—a fate that, in the past, seemed like an inevitable oppressive force, with individuals passively subjected to severe illness and aging, unable to resist or overcome it.

A vivid illustration of this can be found in the film *Forrest Gump* (1994). Lieutenant Dan Taylor, whose legs were shattered in an ambush, initially wished to die honorably on the battlefield. However, he was unexpectedly saved by Forrest. After returning to the U.S., he fell into a state of despair, leading a hedonistic and self-destructive life. Yet, with Forrest's encouragement, he gradually overcame his struggles and regained his confidence. In the final scenes of the film, he miraculously stands again before others, thanks to his titanium alloy prosthetic legs, and even finds a beautiful fiancée. Forrest, astonished, refers to them as his "magic legs". Lieutenant Dan's experience is emblematic of the rapid advancements in postwar limb restoration surgery in the 20th century. The Vietnam War left countless soldiers disabled, and prosthetic technology, alongside cyborg innovations, offered them a new hope for revival and reintegration into society. This narrative underscores the transformative potential of prostheses in reshaping not only the physical body but also the social and existential conditions of individuals who once faced the irreversible loss of bodily function and identity.

Today, high-tech prostheses have the potential to eradicate discrimination, leading to a fundamental transformation in the existential conditions of individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, these advancements have, to some extent, redefined the very concept of "disability." When prosthetics can not only replace damaged body parts but also enhance certain physiological functions, the natural body becomes comparatively vulnerable, thereby shifting the notion of disability onto the original body itself.

Liao Zhi (廖智), a dance teacher who lost her legs in the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, is a living embodiment of how the concept of disability can be redefined. After undergoing the amputation of both legs, Liao Zhi began a new life accompanied by prostheses. After enduring a painful adjustment period, she was finally able to move with her prosthetic legs as naturally as with real legs, even dancing with them, thereby continuing her dream of dance.¹ (Liao, 2020) She explains, "Prostheses can never replace my hands or legs; they are always external aids. However, after ten years of living with them, I have become accustomed to their presence and no longer consciously perceive them. Putting on my prosthetic legs in the morning is like putting on shoes when you wake up, just as some people need to wear glasses when they get up" (Liao, 2013, pp.78-96). The prosthetic legs she wears most often consist of two metal support rods, and in her dances, she frequently places them at the center of visual focus, bringing out a unique cyberpunk

¹ 廖智 (2020) : 廖智, 丹可磨也, 而不可夺赤,

<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1654621846021714126&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

aesthetic. In her TikTok videos, she even promotes the superiority of prosthetic legs over natural legs — they allow her to “grow taller” at will. Thanks to her prosthetic legs, Liao Zhi has achieved a perfect and successful life, with her metallic legs possessing a cyberpunk beauty that rivals natural ones. She has also become a renowned disabled dancer and published several books about her experiences, establishing herself as a writer. The prostheses have opened a new door in her destiny.

4. The Role of Prostheses in Enhancing the Body and Expanding Subjectivity

High-tech prostheses possess the potential for virtually limitless enhancement, enabling individuals with disabilities to transcend their biological limitations and become capable of achieving superhuman abilities. This transhumanist possibility stems from cybernetics’ fundamental approach to the cyborg subject. As Hayles observes, “When system boundaries are defined by information flows and feedback loops rather than epidermal surfaces, the subject becomes a system to be assembled and disassembled rather than an entity whose organic wholeness can be assumed” (Hayles, 1999, pp.211-212). In this framework, the cyborg reconfigures the subject as a mechanical construct, thereby dissolving the subject’s closed, organic structure and enabling the subject, through external technological augmentation, to achieve remarkable levels of expansion.

In the case of Neil Harbisson, a notable example of a cyborg artist, he demonstrates how a prosthesis could expand subjectivity. Harbisson, born with congenital color blindness and able only to perceive shades of gray, lacked the ability to differentiate color saturation and tone. To address this, in 2004 he implanted a unique prosthetic eye, a device resembling an antenna attached to his skull. This device, a wireless sensor, contains a color-detecting probe at its tip and a chip embedded within his skull at its base. The sensor translates colors into sound and vibrations, offering Harbisson an alternative means of perceiving external stimuli. As Harbisson himself clarifies, this technology provides an additional sensory experience, distinct from synaesthesia, where individuals might “hear” colors or “see” sounds. Rather than this, Harbisson detects images through the vibrations transmitted to his skull. Consequently, Harbisson’s prosthetic eye extends his sensory capabilities beyond the human norm, enabling him to perceive infrared and ultraviolet spectrums and even convert musical compositions by Beethoven and Bach, or speeches by figures such as Hitler, into vivid visual imagery. In this way, Harbisson’s subjectivity is extended by a sensory differentiation that sets him apart from non-cyborg subjects.

As the above example demonstrates, in modern society, disabled cyborgs may surpass the abilities of ordinary individuals, becoming fortunate beneficiaries of the technological age. No longer seen as the “scapegoats” symbolizing tragic destinies in myths and legends, they are now the “favored ones,” endowed with extraordinary abilities. This reminds us of Baudrillard’s

insightful discussion. In his exploration of the potential of disabled individuals, he pointed out that, with the aid of material forces, disabled people can transform into experts in power and strength—individuals endowed with extraordinary abilities in movement and sensation. If society increasingly aligns itself with disabled people, this is no accident. The blind and those with limited physical abilities become experimental grounds, bodies deserving of attention. They must undergo intellectual optimization while also being socialized in form. Their very immobility makes them ideal candidates for automation and remote control, allowing them to become the best tools. Normal individuals will never become such advanced cyborgs as disabled or cognitively impaired people. Just as the castrati brought the most beautiful voices to Renaissance choirs, the potential of these individuals in modern society is realized in their transformation into prosthetic extensions of the human body. (Baudrillard, 2012, p.176)

Perhaps, with the support of cyborg technology, disabled individuals are becoming the first to achieve participatory evolution as advanced humans, while those of us who are able-bodied find ourselves becoming the disabled in the age of cyborgs. This dynamic leads both disabled and able-bodied individuals to be increasingly tempted by more sophisticated and aesthetically refined prosthetic bodies, thereby driving us toward an endless pursuit of cyborgization.

5. The Signification of Prostheses and the Reproduction of Desire

Desire is, at its core, determined by the faculties of the body. For instance, the auditory organs generate a desire for music, the eyes evoke a desire for landscapes, and the skin fosters a desire for touch. Therefore, the absence of certain sensory faculties necessarily precludes the corresponding desires. This reflects the limits of the body, or the limits of signification. Prostheses, however, can transcend these bodily boundaries, stimulating the brain through new sensory inputs, thereby creating new perceptual abilities and, consequently, new desires.

From the perspective of cybernetics, the prosthesis introduces a new form of signal input, which challenges the brain's signal processing capabilities. Scientific research has shown that the cerebral cortex exhibits remarkable plasticity, enabling it to forge new connection patterns between metal electrodes and biological cells. This process can be likened to learning a new language: the brain gradually discerns the meaning of the incoming signals and learns to process them through cross-referencing with other sensory inputs. This distinction underscores the difference between the brain and hardware: the brain is a highly plastic living system, with astonishing adaptive capabilities, thus making possible the integration of technology and biology. Therefore, sensory systems function like “plug-and-play” sensors, eliminating the need for constant re-engineering of the brain itself. Instead, by designing appropriate peripheral devices, the brain naturally finds ways to utilize them (Eagleman, 2019, pp.208-209).

For example, in the ears of a bat, ultrasonic waves may be perceived as pleasant music,

though humans cannot hear them; in the eyes of a snake, the world unfolds in a colorful infrared spectrum; the tongue of a lizard enhances the richness and allure of airborne scents; and in the body of the electric eel, the surrounding environment is perceived as an electric field filled with currents. These examples demonstrate that various data from the external world must be specially processed by the brain, which requires a sensor capable of receiving external signals. Modern prostheses function as these new sensors. Although they appear to be substitutes for the body, their underlying technology simulates the sensory signals of the original body, as restoring the sensory signals of the body often proves too complex. Consequently, prostheses may enable the brain to create new data processing models.

Cochlear implants and retinal implants represent examples of functional replacement prostheses. The auditory experience facilitated by cochlear implants does not replicate the natural auditory perception of normal hearing individuals. Instead, cochlear implants employ small electrodes to convert sound signals captured by a microphone into electrical stimulation. These stimulations directly activate the auditory nerve fibers that run along the cochlea, thereby transmitting signals to the brain. Consequently, the auditory signals processed are artificially encoded, functioning as a form of “foreign language” that bypasses the cochlear processing pathway. Although at first, many people heard sounds that resembled the static of a poorly tuned radio, they soon adapted and were able to understand the meaning of the sounds. (Goldstein & Cacciamani, 2021, p.352). Users of cochlear implants first perceive a buzzing or crackling sound, which they must learn to adapt to and interpret in order to correctly identify auditory signals. Therefore, cochlear implants do not merely restore or enhance hearing but instead represent a form of auditory reconstruction.

Artificial retinas operate on similar principles. They involve the implantation of tiny electrodes into the retinal layers. These electrodes generate electrical currents in response to light exposure, stimulating the inner retinal cells directly while bypassing the photoreceptors (light-sensitive cells) of the eye. This process allows light-sensing neural signals to be transmitted to the cerebral cortex. While the signals sent by artificial retinas are not identical to the natural signals used by the visual system, through downstream neural processing, the brain is capable of learning to extract the necessary visual information. However, the visual images perceived by users are typically vague and resemble “impressionist-style” representations. Patients must undergo a period of adaptation and learning to these new visual inputs in order to relearn the process of “seeing”.

Prostheses may eventually develop to a level that surpasses the capabilities of the original biological functions, leading to a heterogeneous transformation of human subjectivity. In science fiction *The Waste Tide*, Chen Qiufan (陈楸帆) imaginatively explores the changes in subjectivity brought about by high-tech prosthetic eyes. The protagonist, Chen Kaizong (陈开宗), receives a

prosthetic eye implant after an eye injury, yet this prosthetic eye is far more advanced than a typical human eye: its imaging system compensates for the defects of the human retina, allowing for a much clearer visual experience. Moreover, it enhances the eye's resistance to impact and includes additional functionalities such as video playback, information viewing, and distance calculation. As the Narrator said, "This is no longer just the replacement of an eye; the entire world will change as a result" (Chen, 2019, p.226). As a cyborg, Kaizong Chen willingly accepts the bodily enhancements brought about by his prosthetic eye.

There is also a science fiction novel related to this issue. Liu Yukun's short story *Happy Hunting* is a classic work centered around the theme of cyborgs. (Liu, 2022, pp.1-32) The author portrays a creature that transforms from a Hulijing to a human, and subsequently from a human to a cyborg fox. This creature, named Yan, experiences a tragic upbringing as her mother is murdered by professional demon hunters, forcing her to wander in a state of deprivation. However, thanks to the compassion of the demon hunter Liang, she occasionally receives assistance from him during special festivals. With the laying of railways and urban industrialization, the ancient magical powers begin to wane, rendering Yan incapable of reverting back to her original fox body. She is compelled to migrate to the city and survive by appealing to men with her charm. Meanwhile, Liang has relocated to the city and become an engineer, mastering cyborg technology. When he encounters Yan again, she is fleeing from a powerful man who cruelly transforms her into a cyborg, favoring a metallic body, and desires Liang to further modify her back into her original fox body. In response to Yan's wishes, Liang adapts her into a cyborg fox. The central theme of this narrative critiques ecological alienation and reflects on anthropocentrism. (Cheng & Hu, 2025) Additionally, it raises questions regarding the reproduction of desire—specifically, the acceptance of the beauty of her cyborg body, which leads to an aspiration for the cyborg fox body. Within this new cyborg body, Yan regains a semblance of magical power. Although this power is rooted in technology, she experiences a sense of freedom that allows her to reclaim her subjectivity.

Conclusion

From the perspective of psychoanalytic theory of desire, the prostheses as the objects of desire are essentially a substitute for Lacan's concept of the *objet a*. While prostheses appear to bring humans closer to the dream of an ideal body, they fail to provide a permanent satisfaction, resulting in a perpetual cycle of desire. This continuous evolution of the prosthesis is driven by the very nature of desire itself. The subjectivity of the prosthetic body lies not only in its role as a projection of bodily desires but also in its capacity to fulfill the desires of individuals with disabilities. By restoring and enhancing lost subjectivity, the prosthetics becomes a means of reestablishing a sense of agency. Additionally, prostheses serve as signifiers of desire, generating

new desires through sensory experiences mediated by sensors, which in turn foster further sensory-based cravings.

With the ongoing advancement of cyborg technology, we are faced with the challenge of rethinking concepts such as disability and normalcy, and considering the ethical, social, and existential implications these technologies bring. As these technologies evolve, we may witness the emergence of posthuman entities whose capabilities exceed those of traditional human bodies. This evolution will undoubtedly ignite profound debates about human nature, ethics, and societal structures. A key question is whether our desire to integrate with technology reflects a genuine need or an overblown desire. In the context of late-stage capitalism, will a cyborg society serve to bridge class divides, or will it exacerbate the digital divide, deepening economic inequalities and widening disparities in access to technology and opportunities? Regardless, cyborgs represent a compelling technological trend in contemporary society, and the physiological changes they introduce will inevitably lead to shifts in human psychology, as well as transformations in identity, social status, and ethical considerations. These developments demand further critical reflection.

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