

# Smartphones and the New Flesh

by [Nicholas Mahoney](#)

Static reaches from a television set, warping the screen as it morphs into a veiny membrane, stretching a pistol-bearing hand toward the TV's viewer. A gory slit opens in the viewer's abdomen, creating a receptacle for mind-altering video cartridges, which slowly undulate. Another television grows a pair of lips, softly speaking as they push the screen out to engulf the viewer's head. Broadcasting executive Max Renn, body twisted into a grotesque weapon, cries out "Long live the new flesh!"

These are images from David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*. The 1983 film explores a burgeoning, horrifying unity between man and machine in which the latter takes control of the former. The mind-and body-altering TV program *Videodrome* contorts its victims into mindless pawns, their bodies as twisted as their broken minds. Cronenberg explored the abjection of the posthuman through the media technology of the time: CRT televisions, Betamax tapes, and ultra high frequency broadcasting. In the twenty-first century, nearly all such technologies have been superseded by the smartphone, a device which, in our inseparability from it, draws humanity even closer to Cronenberg's 'new flesh.' As it assumes more and more functionality by the year, the iPhone grafts itself onto our arms like the fleshy pistol that replaces Renn's hand at the close of *Videodrome* (01:09:35). It is both the source of that mind-bending signal and the resultant bodily distortion. The visceral disgust brought on by the new flesh, as portrayed by Cronenberg, calls into question the trustworthiness of comparable real-world phenomena. If the melding of man and machine fits so readily into the genre of horror, we should certainly examine the means by which such transformations are actually happening.

For some, the smartphone's trend toward hegemony over everyday tasks represents a cause for concern. Adam Greenfield, in the first chapter of his 2017 book *Radical Technologies*, observes that this device has begun "to stand in for a very large number of the material objects we previously used to mediate everyday urban life" (11). Greenfield names keys, watches, radios, calendars, and physical currency as objects that have been "dematerialized" by the all-consuming smartphone. If the phone can be understood as an extension of the body, these items have not only been dematerialized but also

absorbed into the body itself. As such, they alter the nature of the body's interaction with its surroundings. Greenfield describes the resulting state of being as the "networked" self. He cites onboard navigational technology as an innovation that is fundamentally changing our perception of the world and its geography, writing that "in using [smartphones] to navigate, *we become reliant on access to the network in order to accomplish ordinary goals*" (22). Not only do these maps display the layout of our surroundings, they show us our place within them, personified by a directional icon in the center of the screen. Thus, the body itself enters into the cartographical network. Though it provides a welcome sense of convenience and ease of exploration, this innovation does not enhance the connection between the subject and their surroundings; rather, it fuses them to their smartphone, creating a navigational dependency that leaves the subject helpless to find their own way.

Further, smartphones can be said to change the environment according to the profiles of their users. As navigation apps tailor their "depiction[s] of the environment" to each user's profile and behavior, "the smartphone presents each individual user with a different map" (Greenfield 24). These individualized landmarks, determined through algorithms, often highlight places for the user to spend money. When two different users who depend on their phones for knowledge of their surroundings receive subtly different maps, they lose the experience of existing as cohabitant bodies in the same world. Users need not rely on each other, or on any human body, to establish a knowledge of the world built on physical experience. Rather, they share knowledge of their environment with the smartphone, which further embeds itself in flesh that becomes ever less human.

The anthropological implications of the smartphone and related technologies are profound. These double-edged tools operate freely on the triangular relationship of mind, body, and world to an extent that worries scholars such as Greenfield. For other thinkers, the advent of the new flesh is a welcome change. The transhuman body will, without a doubt, be stronger, faster, and more resilient, and the concept of a transhuman mind has implications that shatter any existing conception of consciousness. Google's Ray Kurzweil, in a talk at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), declares that "my view is not that AI is going to displace us. It's going to enhance us. It does already." Kurzweil affirms the idea of the smartphone as an extension of the body, predicting that "we're going to literally merge with this technology, with AI, to make us smarter." The gradual metamorphosis of the human body appears to be an inevitable result of any continued progress in the field of artificial intelligence – humanity has no remaining target for optimization more lucrative than itself. Kurzweil welcomes this inevitability; in a burst of techno-capitalist optimism, he cites as advantages of the transhuman not only enhanced mental acuity and the eradication of cancer, but also a series of fundamental shifts to human consciousness. He claims that, by melding with artificial intelligence, "we'll be smarter and we'll create new forms of communication that are as profound as music is." The magnitude of

change suggested here, which Kurzweil sees as beautiful and thrilling in equal measure, is so vast that it may not be comprehensible to humans who exist on a purely biological plane of consciousness. Artificially mutating the human, he predicts, will be analogous to seeing a new color. Words fail. For Kurzweil, smart technology is no invading body snatcher but a miraculous human innovation, making us into superhumans of steel and muscle, free of disease, more equal than ever before, thriving as “spiritual machines,” as the title of Kurzweil’s 1999 book would have it.

For better or for worse, smart technology, as exemplified by the smartphone, has already wrought profound ontological changes on the human form, both physically and mentally (though those categories, in a case such as this, cannot strictly be separated). The ramifications of further changes are at once tempting and frightening. The discourse to which both Greenfield and Kurzweil contribute weighs the sacrifice humans must make in order to partake of the possibilities of the transhuman. A synthesis or resolution to such a discourse requires a further understanding of this sacrifice.

If an understanding is to be found for these ongoing changes to the human, two complementary terms from Giorgio Agamben’s essay “What Is an Apparatus?” may be applicable: “subjectification” and “desubjectification.” These terms are essential to understanding Agamben’s concept of “apparatus” and provide a lens through which to view the smartphone’s new flesh. An apparatus, simply put, is anything inhuman that affects human thought and/or behavior, with its binary opposite category being living beings themselves. After explicitly citing “cellular telephones” as examples of apparatus, Agamben describes a third, resultant category: the subject. The subject is “that which results from the relation and, so to speak, the relentless fight between living beings and apparatuses” (14). These subjects may arise from “multiple processes of subjectification: the user of cellular phones, the web surfer, the writer of stories, the tango aficionado, the anti-globalization activist, and so on and so forth” (14-15). The subject, as such, is the altered self which emerges when an apparatus acts upon a living being – or when a living being acts through an apparatus, if such a distinction can be made. Subjectification is not, by definition, always insidious. It may act in myriad directions, with the only constant being the dialogue between living being and apparatus to produce a subject. Greenfield’s ‘networked’ self is an Agambenian subject, as is Kurzweil’s ‘enhanced’ self. The apparatus of technology produces a practically infinite series of varying subjects, based on an equally large number of distinct subjectifying processes.

Agamben argues that the process of subjectification increasingly affords influence to the apparatus, drawing power and identity from the living being. Under late capitalism, “there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus”; and as capitalism accelerates, so does

subjectification (Agamben 15). Digital technology, as an increasingly powerful wing of capital, has rapidly become a widespread and powerful proliferator of apparatuses. As such, its subjectifying power has begun to morph. Under late capitalism, apparatuses “no longer act as much through the production of a subject, as through the processes of what can be called *desubjectification*” (20, italics mine). These processes “do not give rise to the recomposition of a new subject, except in larval or, as it were, spectral form” (21). Subjectification may be understood as a fair exchange, wherein the involved being trades some self-determination to the apparatus in exchange for a previously inaccessible level of sophistication, efficiency, convenience, or other enhancement, thus producing or becoming a subject. Desubjectification, however, tilts the scale in favor of the apparatus: the being receives no real benefit, instead falling under the apparatus’s sway. This parasitic “exchange” produces no enhanced subject. Rather, from the belly of the helpless being, the new flesh bursts forth unopposed.

Greenfield, Kurzweil, and Agamben all share at least one conjecture: the expansion of the smart-tech apparatus is already leading us to a new evolutionary stage, be it the networked self, spiritual machine, or desubjectified being. While Greenfield mistrusts this process and Kurzweil welcomes it, Agamben works to theorize what is to be done. He puts forward the Roman idea of “profanation” as an interventionary measure to be carried out by beings under the sway of the apparatus. The profane, according to the ancient Roman jurist Trebatius, is “that which was sacred or religious, but was then restored to the use and property of human beings” (18). For Trebatius the dominant apparatus was the Roman state religion, but his logic can also be applied to the modern apparatus of the smartphone. The smartphone, like a religion, acts as something sacred: it exists on a plane beyond that of living beings, even though the beings have constructed it. Through profanation of the apparatus, Agamben suggests, living beings may regain a certain level of power, winning back some leverage in the exchange of subjectification.

Agamben explains profanation as a “counter-apparatus that restores to common use what sacrifice had separated and divided” (19). This conception of the profane lacks certain negative connotations one might associate with the word. For example, Jesus’ expulsion of money-changers from the Temple can be understood as an act of profanation that countered the apparatus of currency, though it could also be understood as the replacement of one apparatus with another, the second being the nascent apparatus of Christianity. In that case, neither was more sacred, in the Agambenian sense, than the other. The money-changers in the Temple could also represent the techno-apparatus’s current status: what has been made sacred at the behest of capital ought to be made mundane again. Christ’s act of profanation, at the very least, restores the toppled coins to their proper everyday place. How might we similarly profane our modern apparatuses?

Greenfield's example of the navigational importance of the smartphone illustrates the sacralization of the apparatus and the resulting difficulty of profanation. Locational information is now more accessible, yet more arcane, than ever before. Both of these factors open the door to desubjectification. Even Kurzweil's hopeful analysis implies this problem. When, in his CFR talk, Kurzweil promises that "[m]edical nanorobots will go inside our brain, connect our neocortex to the cloud," he entrusts the internal processes of the human brain to artificial intelligence. That which, by any sense of right, belongs to the being is given over to the apparatus; the machine assumes the role once occupied by the human. The new flesh is not an extension or even a mutation of the being, but an extension of the apparatus through the vessel of the being. Following desubjectification, the being for all intents and purposes ceases to exist.

Desubjectification both complicates profanation and lends it a greater urgency. As Agamben writes, "if a certain process of subjectification (or, in this case, desubjectification) corresponds to every apparatus, then it is impossible for the subject of an apparatus to use it 'in the right way'" (21). This argument rejects both Kurzweil's optimism and Greenfield's caution, instead suggesting that any engagement with the apparatus on its own terms is a futile endeavor. The apparatus, as it currently stands, cannot be profaned simply or by force: since the public space is currently moderated by apparatuses, no beings acting within it can retain their subjectivity as beings. The profanatory process cannot directly combat desubjectification. Agamben concludes that "this problem cannot be properly raised as long as those who are concerned with it are unable to intervene in their own processes of subjectification, in order to then bring to light the Ungovernable" (24). The danger of desubjectification lies in the fact that it leaves beings dependent upon their apparatuses — on the smartphone for navigation and socialization, and eventually on nanobots for communication and medical care. Thus, they are helpless to combat the new flesh as it swallows them alive.

The only preventative measure is to return to the initial terms of subjectification itself and to reassess what must from the *apparatus* we can sacrifice for the sake of our own subjectivity. Agamben's 'ungovernable' is that which is fundamentally human within the subject, that which always eludes the managerial sway of the apparatus. In terms of the techno-apparatus, a reclamation of the ungovernable does not consist of rejecting technology and all of its developments, nor of accepting these developments as they are, nor even of using them according to the terms of discretion or ethics. Rather, it indicates that beings must negotiate their relationship to the apparatus down to its very beginnings, taking nothing for granted and leaving nothing unexamined. They must intervene in the subjectifying processes of not only the smartphone, but the airplane, the automobile, the bicycle, and the walking stick, all of which act upon beings through varying levels of the same process. The ungovernable individual considers each action with the weight afforded it by the corresponding apparatus, forming its subjecthood in a manner that protects it from desubjectification. Maintenance of the ungovernable does not rule out further evolution of the human form, which after all has been subtly

evolving with its attendant technologies since its inception. The new flesh is not so new: to assault it is to assault ourselves. Instead, it must be treated as a disease born in the old flesh, planted by one apparatus or another and left to mutate and proliferate as the being subjectifies in functionally infinite directions. To attend to and preserve the ungovernable simply ensures that, whatever further metamorphoses the subject *Homo sapiens* undergoes, it will remain fundamentally human.

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## Works Cited

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