Conclusion

Software in a Body

Critical Posthumanism and
Serial Experiments Lain

Man is something that should be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?
—Friedrich Nietzsche

During the course of this study, numerous insights have been gleaned about the status and limits of posthumanism in the context of Japanese visual culture. First and foremost, it should be apparent that the discourse of posthumanism is neither homogeneous nor unified, but rather an arena of contesting perspectives grappling with both “humanism” and its “post.” Concerning the meaning of the “post” prefix, it is no exaggeration to say that over the last thirty years, cultural critics have been obsessed with post-isms. In addition to the spate of studies dealing with postmodernist, poststructuralist, postcolonialist, and postnational approaches to culture, one is not hard-pressed to find numerous examples of post-Marxist, posthegemonic, postfeminist, and postracial readings of cultural texts. In the absence of a prefix with greater purchase, some scholars have even resorted to repeating the “post” prefix to the point of utter vacuity, such as in the designation “post-poststructuralist.” Such examples notwithstanding, it would be shortsighted to assume that the “post” prefix is utterly meaningless. At the risk of oversimplification, such post-isms frequently serve as pronouncements of death: the death of essentializing foundational concepts such as Subject, Man, Nation, and Meaning.

In terms of their historicity, what such “post” discourses have in common is that they not only look back to a certain “past” and its discursive formations, which have been or are soon to be overcome, but also look ahead to a certain “future” beyond the peculiar fixations and hypostatizations of
the “past” or soon-to-be-past “present.” Although discourses of the “post” performatively promise (or even demand) the advent of some “future” alterity, some anticipated rupture with the “past,” it seems to be almost an irrevocable trait of post-isms that they always promise to arrive but have always already not yet arrived. They thereby risk enacting what Jean-François Lyotard has warned may be a “forgetting or repressing [of] the past” that, rather than surpassing the “past,” actually remains nostalgically attached to the “past,” even as it attempts to displace it. Or worse: such post-isms, in their global formalization of the outdated “past” and the much-heralded “future,” repeat what Jacques Derrida has described as “the oldest of historicisms.”

The discourse of “posthumanism” belongs to this tradition of post discourses without simply being conflated with it. Where critical posthumanism parts company with other post discourses is precisely in the way in which it situates the status of the “post.” More precisely, it would be a mistake to assume that the “post” of “posthumanism” simply implies a going beyond of “humanism” per se or a clean eschatological break with the human, as if it were possible to discard the discourse of humanism (and the human) once and for all so that we can move forward into a new era free from anthropocentric presuppositions and metaphysical fictions. Without presuming to escape the orbit of humanism or eclipse its philosophical underpinnings altogether, critical posthumanism nevertheless problematizes the fundamental principles of humanism, particularly its appeal “to the notion of a core humanity or common essential feature in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood.”

Historically, Western humanism has defined this “core humanity” in terms of a privileging of reason and the human subject derived from René Descartes’ (1596–1650) philosophical reflections on the status of the cogito (and implied mind-body split) in his influential seventeenth-century treatises Discourse on the Method (1637) and Principles of Philosophy (1644). The ramifications of Descartes’ fundamental philosophical principles were far reaching for the development of humanism as a discourse. As Neil Badmington succinctly puts it, “Humanism is a discourse which claims that the figure of ‘Man’ (sic) naturally stands at the centre of things; is entirely distinct from animals, machines, and other nonhuman entities; is absolutely known and knowable to ‘himself’; is the origin of meaning and history; and shares with all other human beings a universal essence. Its absolutist assumptions, moreover, mean that anthropocentric discourse relies upon a set of binary oppositions, such as human/inhuman, self/other, natural/cultural, inside/outside, subject/object, us/them, here/there,