

Flickering Bodies:

Posthuman Embodiment, Visibility & Power In Cassils' Becoming an Image

by Zhuuyue Gao

This essay examines how Posthumanist theories of subjectivity are challenged and reconfigured through Cassils' *Becoming an Image* (2012–ongoing). It begins with the observation that contemporary digital cultures increasingly frame the human subject as an informational pattern rather than an embodied agent, where visibility is assumed to be continuous, transparent, and reproducible. Against this assumption, the essay argues that Cassils' performance introduces a condition of intermittent visibility that disrupts the link between seeing and knowing.

Through close analysis of the work's structure — performed in darkness and revealed only through photographic flashes — the essay demonstrates that visibility is neither stable nor guaranteed but produced through sustained physical effort. Each image emerges from labour, exhaustion, and material resistance, making embodiment inseparable from the conditions of its appearance. In this way, the performance reveals the energetic and temporal cost of becoming visible, challenging the notion of frictionless digital representation.

The theoretical framework draws on the works of N. Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway to articulate two distinct yet complementary approaches within posthumanist thought. Hayles exposes the risks of reducing subjectivity to disembodied information, emphasising that such abstraction obscures the uneven distribution of vulnerability across bodies. Haraway, in turn, proposes the cyborg as a model for understanding embodiment as relational, hybrid, and politically situated within technological systems. Read together, these perspectives shift the focus from whether bodies persist to how they are mediated, regulated, and made legible.

The essay further situates Cassils' work within the politics of archival visibility, showing how systems of documentation produce the conditions under which bodies become knowable. By separating reproducible photographic images from fleeting embodied perception, *Becoming an Image* exposes the limits of visual evidence and resists demands for stable legibility.

Ultimately, the essay argues that posthumanist frameworks reveal embodiment not as a stable given but as a contested process shaped by power, mediation, and material vulnerability. Cassils' practice demonstrates that visibility is always grounded in labour and risk, insisting on the continued political significance of embodied life.

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In contemporary digital cultures structured by datafication, algorithmic governance, and cybernetic infrastructures, the human subject is increasingly understood as an informational pattern rather than an embodied agent. This abstraction of embodied life into systems of information does not emerge exclusively from digital technology, but extends earlier models of knowledge that prioritised classification, legibility, and empirical observation over lived social experience. As Karl Korsch (2016) suggested, materialist critique risks losing its political force when material social relations are reduced to the neutral accumulation of historical “facts”, detached from the living conditions of labour and production. Within such systems, visibility refers to the subject’s exposure to technological observation and institutional legibility and is assumed to be continuous, transparent, and infinitely reproducible – while bodies appear secondary to the data they generate. Posthumanism emerges as a critical response to this reconfiguration of subjectivity, yet it is internally heterogeneous.

This essay begins from a specific aesthetic condition – the condition of intermittent visibility produced through photographic flash – and argues that Cassils’ *Becoming an Image* (2012 – ongoing) [Figure 1], exposes the limits of Posthumanist theories that privilege information over embodiment, as Hayles argues (1999). Through an analysis of the work’s sustained performance, material resistance, and disruption of visual mastery, I demonstrate how Posthuman embodiment emerges not as disembodied code but as lived, laboring, and vulnerable materiality – manifested through exertion, exhaustion, and relational negotiation within systems of power.

Becoming an Image is performed in near-total darkness. Cassils repeatedly strikes a 900-kilogram clay mass, illuminated only by the flash of a photographer’s camera [Fig.1]. Each burst of light produces a fleeting image – muscle contraction, sweat, recoil– before collapsing back into obscurity. Vision here is discontinuous and violent: the flash blinds as much as it reveals, leaving viewers with retinal afterimages rather than stable forms. This visual condition challenges the assumption that visibility automatically produces knowledge. Rather than providing continuous access to the body, only

isolated moments separated by darkness are offered. This poses a challenge to strands of posthumanist thought that assume the increasing transparency, continuity, and legibility of the subject under conditions of technological mediation. If posthumanism often imagines enhanced access to the body through data and imaging systems, Cassils’ work instead foregrounds opacity, interruption, and the failure of visual capture. The subject that appears here is neither fully knowable nor continuously present but emerges only through fragmented and contingent acts of exposure.



Figure 1: Cassils, *Becoming an Image*, 2012-ongoing, Los Angeles, ONE Archives.

Because the image appears only in these brief flashes, attention shifts to the conditions that produce it. Crucially, the images in *Becoming an Image* depend on physical effort. Each flash captures a moment generated through the repeated impact of Cassils’ body against the clay. The image, therefore, emerges from exertion that precedes the flash and from fatigue that accumulates over the course of the performance. What becomes visible is not simply the body itself but the process of labour through which the image is produced. Against digital cultures that understand visibility as immediate and effortless, the work demonstrates that appearing can require time, energy, and physical strain.

N. Katherine Hayles’ critique of cybernetics and information theory (1999) offers a useful framework for understanding this refusal. In *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles traces how the liberal humanist subject came to be increasingly organised through informational paradigms that privilege pattern, signal, and feedback over

material embodiment (Hayles, 1999). She argues that cybernetic discourse foregrounds pattern and information at the expense of material instantiation, hereby risking the erasure of embodiment as a site of lived experience and vulnerability.

This shift reflects a broader transformation in how subjectivity is conceptualised. It reflects a deeper transformation in how subjectivity is conceptualised. As MacPherson (1962) argues, the liberal humanist subject was historically understood through what he terms “possessive individualism”: a figure imagined as the owner of their body and capacities, treating the body as a form of property even when shaped by social institutions.

Extending Hayles’ concern with abstraction, this framework helps clarify what is at stake in the displacement of embodiment. If both liberal humanism and cybernetic posthumanism risk conceptualising the body as either property or substrate, they share a tendency to instrumentalise embodiment rather than account for its material conditions.

Such models of the human subject are not neutral but shape the forms of knowledge they produce. Mary Midgley (2001) argues that scientific theories are often guided by broader “mythologies” or background pictures of the world that determine what counts as intelligible explanation. These assumptions influence which aspects of human experience are considered relevant and which are excluded from scientific attention.

In the context of Cassils’ *Becoming an Image*, the performance makes these epistemological assumptions materially visible by exposing how dominant visual and technological frameworks privilege what can be captured, stabilised, and reproduced, while marginalising forms of embodiment that are ephemeral, effortful, or resistant to clear representation. The intermittent flashes that structure the work do not simply limit visibility; they actively reveal the conditions under which visibility becomes legible as knowledge. What remains unseen—fatigue, duration, and the accumulation of bodily strain—falls outside the parameters of what such frameworks recognise as meaningful data.

By foregrounding these exclusions, Cassils’ practice demonstrates that the problem is not only what is made visible, but how regimes of visibility are structured in advance by theoretical and technological assumptions. In this sense, the work extends Midgley’s argument by demonstrating that what escapes scientific or visual attention is systematically produced rather than accidentally overlooked. Visibility, therefore, cannot be understood as a neutral or purely technical process, but must be analysed as a site where epistemology, power, and embodiment intersect.

Within informational paradise, the body no longer appears as the grounding condition of agency but as a medium through which information is processed and transmitted. When humans are understood primarily as patterns of information, the body no longer appears as the grounding condition of agency but as a medium through which information is processed and transmitted. Hayles (1999) emphasises that this abstraction does not eliminate power but reorganises it. By separating informational patterns from the material conditions of embodiment, such models tend to overlook how vulnerability and difference remain unevenly distributed across bodies. In practice, the consequences of technological systems – such as surveillance, data classification, or bureaucratic regulation – are experienced differently depending on gender, race, and class. What becomes less visible in informational accounts is therefore not the body itself, but the political significance of embodied limits such as fatigue, dependency, and exposure to risk.

These informational frameworks re-organise subjectivity around circulation, pattern, and productivity rather than embodied presence. Earlier models of the subject often relied on binaries of presence and absence, defining identity through what the subject possessed or lacked. Informational paradigms deconstruct this structure. Instead of grounding subjectivity in bodily presence, they emphasise the formation and circulation of patterns within technological systems. As Hayles’ (1999) analysis of cybernetics demonstrates, informational models tend to treat human beings as configurations of signals, feedback, and pattern recognition rather than as embodied agents.

However, once information is treated as separate from material embodiment, new forms of political and institutional vulnerability emerge. When information is imagined as independent of its material instantiation, embodiment can appear secondary or even unnecessary. Hayles' (1999) work highlights the limits of this abstraction by positing that information is always materially instantiated and historically situated. From this perspective, the apparent neutrality of informational systems begins to unravel. In practice, bodies remain unevenly exposed to institutional power. Those who are seen as "gender queer", for example, often encounter structural barriers in accessing healthcare, legal recognition, and bodily autonomy within bureaucratic and medical systems (Spade, 2015). Informational models that privilege coherence and reproducibility – understood as the standardisation of patterns or gestalts (Koffka, 1935) across contexts – risk obscuring these forms of embodied vulnerability.



The unequal exposure to technological and institutional power constitutes a political condition of subjectivity. This uneven exposure to institutional power is central to the argument of technological embodiment by Donna Haraway (1991). In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway rejects both liberal humanist autonomy and nostalgic appeals to an organic wholeness, arguing instead that "In modern biologies, the translation of the world into a problem in coding can be illustrated by molecular genetics, ecology, sociobiological evolutionary theory, and immunobiology" (p.34). The cyborg, therefore, functions not as a reconciliation of human and machine, but as a critical figure that reveals these boundaries as historically constructed and unevenly distributed.

If bodies become legible only through technological systems, embodiment cannot be separated from infrastructure that classify and govern them. Haraway's (1991) emphasis on hybridity, therefore, carries an ethical implication. If subjects are already constituted through technoscientific systems, agency cannot lie in escaping these structures but in taking responsibility for how they organise power, visibility, and vulnerability. Rather than imagining a return to an autonomous human subject, the cyborg foregrounds the need for situated political engagement within the systems that produce embodiment.

Haraway (1991) situates subjectivity within global information systems shaped by military, scientific, and capitalist logics. Within these systems, power operates through the organisation and circulation of information. Bodies become legible to institutions insofar as they can be coded, transmitted, and managed within technological infrastructures. Haraway's critique is not that bodies literally become information, but that informational systems increasingly treat embodiment as if it could be fully translated into code (1991). Informational systems do not operate neutrally. They reflect and reproduce existing relations of power, determining which bodies become visible, legible, or governable within technological regimes.

If power operates through informational circulation, agency cannot reside in autonomy or withdrawal, but only in situated engagement.¹ The cyborg is accountable precisely because it is entangled. Embodiment is not opposed to technology; rather, technological systems are always encountered, experienced, and negotiated through embodied existence. Read alongside Hayles, Haraway helps clarify the stakes of Posthuman embodiment for this analysis: the question is not whether bodies are mediated, but how mediation distributes vulnerability, visibility, and control.

If posthuman embodiment is shaped by systems that determine which bodies become legible, these dynamics become especially visible in the archival politics surrounding *Becoming an Image*. The work was commissioned in response to the relative absence of trans-identified bodies within institutional archives, drawing attention to the ways in which systems of documentation shape what

becomes historically visible (Gill-Peterson, 2018). Archives do not simply preserve bodies or events; they also dictate legibility by determining what counts as evidence and what may enter the historical record. As Jacques Derrida (1995) argues, the archive is not a neutral repository but a structure that produces the conditions under which knowledge can appear. This insight is extended by Saidiya Hartman (2008), who demonstrates how archival systems not only exclude marginalised represented, often leaving only fragmentary or violent traces of their existence.

Because archives depend upon visual documentation, photographic images frequently operate as forms of institutional evidence. Visibility in this context is therefore closely tied to processes of recognition and record-making, such that bodies not documented risk remaining absent from institutional memory. What is at stake, then, is not merely the deconstruction of representation, but the conditions under which bodies become interpretable within institutional systems of knowledge. Archival inclusion, therefore, depends upon the stabilisation within institutional frameworks of classification and authority. As Michel Foucault (2013) argues, modern institutions do not merely record subjects but actively produce the categories through which they become knowable.

Within medico-legal and cultural regimes, trans bodies have frequently been interpreted through classificatory frameworks that reduce them to typologies, spectacles, or medicalised pathologies. As Paul B. Preciado (2016) observes, modern regimes of knowledge often combine scientific observation with forms of spectacularisation, transforming gender-nonconforming bodies into objects of surveillance and display. Cassils' *Becoming an Image* intervenes in this visual economy by rendering visibility itself unreliable. The photographic flash—commonly associated with forensic evidence and documentary truth—here destabilises the authority of the image it produces.

The performance generates two distinct visual registers: the photograph captured by the camera and the fleeting retinal afterimage experienced by the audience. The photograph appears stable and reproducible and can, therefore, circulate within documentary and archival systems. The retinal

image, by contrast, exists only within the viewer's embodied perception and disappears almost immediately. By separating these two forms of visibility, the work exposes a tension between what can be archived and what can only be experienced, thereby revealing the limits of evidentiary regimes grounded in reproducibility.



By separating embodied perception from reproducible documentation, the work also reinforces N. Katherine Hayles' (1999) warning against treating information as a primary framework through which subjectivity is understood. When informational systems privilege pattern, classification, and reproducibility, institutions gain increasing authority in determining how subjects become legible. However, as Donna Haraway suggests, embodiment cannot be reduced to informational abstraction but must be understood as relational, situated, and materially embedded within networks of power and technology.

Through Cassils' performance, these perspectives reveal the limits of archival logic: while archives depend on stability, repetition, and legibility, the body enacted in *Becoming an Image* remains temporally extended, physically consuming, and vulnerable. Its most significant dimensions—fatigue, duration, and exertion—cannot be fully captured or preserved. In this way, the work resists incorporation into archival systems that privilege reproducible data, insisting instead on forms of embodiment that exceed the structures designed to record them.

Posthumanism does not entail the disappearance of the body; rather, it reveals the instability of the liberal humanist subject within contemporary technological cultures. Instead of asking whether embodiment survives technological mediation, I argue that the central issue lies in how bodies are reorganised, regulated, and made visible within informational systems. Taken together, Hayles and Haraway demonstrate that posthumanist thought does not offer a singular account of embodiment but a set of complementary critical perspectives. Hayles cautions against the abstraction of subjectivity into informational patterns, emphasising the political risks of disembodiment, while Haraway foregrounds hybridity and relational responsibility as strategies for inhabiting technological worlds without surrendering agency. Read together, their arguments frame embodiment as neither purely biological nor technologically transcendent, but as historically and materially situated.

Cassils' *Becoming an Image* materialises these theoretical concerns through sustained bodily exertion, exhaustion, and resistance. The intermittent flashes of the camera reveal a body that becomes visible only through sustained physical effort. Technologically mediated visibility is never immaterial: it is sustained through labour, risk, and the management of bodily limits. Cassils' practice resists both liberal humanist autonomy and technoutopian abstraction by positioning material resistance and endurance as central to the work. Posthuman embodiment therefore emerges not as an escape from the body but as a contested and relational process shaped through power, mediation, and vulnerability. Posthumanism remains most critical when it insists on the persistence – and the politics – of embodied life.

Footnotes

1. C.f. Arendt's thesis that action emerges within a shared and plural world rather than in sovereign isolation (Arendt, 2018).

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