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# Deep Junk and the Anarchic Post-Gendered Mindset of the Digital Age

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Cal Newport recently proclaimed our minds' decline in the digital age, attributing it to excessive consumption and addiction to digital junk food: "Much of digital content that ensnares our attention in the current moment is also ultra-processed, in that it's the result of vast databases of user-generated content that are sifted, broken down, and recombined by algorithms into personalized streams designed to be irresistible. What is a TikTok video if not a digital Dorito?"[1] Newport references a study showing that people in the workplace are distracted, on average, every two minutes.[2] Apart from the addiction factor raised here—which is problematic not only because of the compulsive behavior it drives, but also because it generates a constant state of anxiety,[3] the most alarming implication of Newport's comparison between junk food for the mind and for the body is that the digital age diminishes our brainpower and our human capacity for "deep work." Wasn't Marshall McLuhan's idea that media are extensions of our limbs and ideas, rather than their killers?

[1] Cal Newport, "Stop Filling Your Mind with Digital Dorritos," *New York Times*, Sunday Opinion, March 29, 2026, 6.
[2] Microsoft, *2025 Work Trend Index* (Redmond, WA: Microsoft, 2025).
[3] Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024).

This issue of *MAST* represents a variety of resistant stances toward the "digital Dorito." The forms of body modification and gender anarchy discussed in these pages—which incorporate AI, VR, and other forms of extended mediality—demonstrate "digital deep work" at its best. They show how it is possible to spend extended time with new media and new forms of digital expression while achieving depth rather than junk. What this requires is an acknowledgment of media practices that recognize challenges to attention span, as well as issues of bias and digital exploitation, alongside the limits of the digital sphere in the face of neurodivergence and physical pain. All eight contributions, and their respective authors, engage the digital for its transformative, immersive, and phantasmagorical power, as well as its turn toward anarchy and the dissolution of boundaries. Yet, junk is also part of this landscape, if we define it as something excessive—something we do not know what to do with. As Zachary Fine suggests in his review of the New Museum's exhibition *New Humans: Memory of the Future*, our digital culture and the history of posthumanism can be understood as a "kind of encyclopedic junk pile, with hundreds of discarded visions of how technology might save—or estrange us from ourselves."[4] In light of this inescapable immersion in digital excess, the contributions that follow—introduced here in the order of their appearance—function as a kind of prophylactic or inoculation against the media onslaught that threatens mental degradation.

In Darren Tynan and Brenton Rossow's AI film *The Spire*™, for instance, we encounter "plastic debris as a violent ecological force that is both generative and destructive." The film's queer ecology resembles fragments of a newly imagined species—somewhere between a fossilized cockroach and an ancient underwater cactus. In *The Spire*™ the interdisciplinary media artists Tynan and Rossow confront the viewer with "toxic encounters" (O'Laughlin), not

[4] Zachary Fine, "Back to the Future: The Return of the New Museum," *New Yorker*, April 13, 2026, 82.

simply to emphasize the "junk" factor, but to foreground indeterminacy. It becomes impossible to taxonomize these newly imagined morphological assemblages, which resist the binary logic of biology versus artifact, or human versus nonhuman. In this way, *The Spire*™, along with its authors' philosophical reflections, opens up a compelling, if not mystical, space of queer inquiry. The question remains: what are we seeing? Are these "creatures" reflections of ourselves, of our environment, or of toxic underwater waste such as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch? We do not know. The feeling that remains recalls the final scene of *La dolce vita* (1960), where a weary group of revelers gathers around a mysterious dead sea creature washed ashore. Marcello and his companions linger, asking, "What is it?"—yet ultimately walk away without seeking an answer.

In *Mirror Blade: Extreme Body Modification, Colonoscopy Cinema and Abjection in The Substance*, media theorist and experimental filmmaker Cla Calabresi analyzes the visualization of excrement in the body of an aging diva—here, a television aerobics anchor—articulating the meaning of the abject through a precise feminist reading. As Calabresi suggests, an open wound disrupts stability. Once again, we enter the realm of junk: what emerges from a wound, if not waste? *The Substance* focuses on what is typically unseen and undesired. Most bodily fluids, including mucous, are categorized as waste, and medical infrastructures are designed to remove them. In this award-winning film, however, mucous develops its own dynamic, becoming a biotope—and perhaps even "human": "The mucous constantly threatens to burst out its fluids out of the bathroom, the screen, and erase any border, with its load of corporeal abjected truths." In Coralie Fargeat's film—often described as "body horror"—this scenario culminates in a feminist explosion of imagery representing the fractured physicality of an aging diva. The protagonist, Sue, emerges as a younger, idealized version of Elizabeth after taking "the substance," while Elizabeth herself imagines her navel—the site of her original connection to a maternal body—

expelling undigested food. She attempts to erase her aging self from the mirror, as though it were waste. As in *The Spire*™, normative boundaries of visibility are dissolved. As the "substance" permeates the film, Calabresi notes, distinctions between inside and outside—between Elizabeth and Sue—collapse. Hypervisibility and invisibility converge. The feminist gaze in both the film and its analysis is incisive, excavating waste and abjection as sites of potentially authentic female expression. Accessing this post-female subjectivity relies on digital techniques—special effects and sound design—that foreground cinema's core capacity: illusion.

In *Techno-Embodied Performativity in Dystopian Imagination: Gendered Androids in The Stepford Wives and The Heart Goes Last*, cultural theorist Oliwia Lasocka uses another filmic genre—the comedy, based on a horror novel by Ira Levin and a novel by Margaret Atwood—to understand queer and post-gendered reconfigurations of subjectivity. Her critique of the patriarchal order underlying the hyperfeminine androids in both of these works lays bare the danger of the digital realm in that it not only shows but also reproduces gender norms we thought we had overcome. Robots or feminized androids no longer merely discipline female bodies; they have now replaced them with a consumable, upgradable product, as the author has it.

In other words, "the substance" to split off one's younger self is no longer needed in the age of the robot, because living women are, as such, waste. In our capitalist extractivist world, we no longer even want to consume actual women, as we now have sexbots, which Paul Preciado (*Testo Junkie*, 2008) attributes the unique *potentia gaudendi*, the power to entertain. In *The Stepford Wives*, "the size of the robots' breasts can be changed via remote control, as casually as adjusting a thermostat," writes Lasocka. With that, the author stresses our cultural interpretative bias: even with no real biological sex, these robots are interpreted by us, humans, through human gender frameworks, and therefore remain gendered, while women remain subverted. But

Lasocka arrives at an interesting and promising conclusion: what if, in our era of "silicon gender," these post-gendered robots were indeed fluid and went beyond our binary gender structures? In other words, these tales of post-gendered robots under examination by Lasocka offer a new way of considering the familial lines of embodiment by looking the instability of gender straight in the eye. This instability might be what McKenzie Wark has recently identified as a non-relationship between the genders mediated by thirdness:

> Female is the other to male within the language of the body, which is gender. The other to the body is variously the robot, the ghost, the god, and so forth. […] Indeed, it may well be that there is no relation between male and female, only ways in which this non-relation is mediated by thirdness.[5]

Filmmaker Gina Kim brings us back to reality while using what some might consider the most unreal of all media: virtual reality. But her VR trilogy, *Cinematic VR: a Voluntary Exile into the Pain of Others*, is anything but unreal. "Literature, through such profound immersion, is a wondrous art that builds a world in the consciousness of the reader," Kim writes. But for the story she tells in her VR trilogy *Bloodless, Tearless, Comfortless* (2017–2023), neither literature nor cinema is sufficient, since what Kim attempts and achieves in her virtual environments is for the viewer to exchange her body with that of the protagonists. In this 360-degree environment, she explains, "the viewer has no body and no physical separation from the image, the viewer and the subject come to occupy the same ontological dimension." Within this logic, there is no "genre" needed to convey the message, so to speak. In *The Substance*, the genre is body horror; in *The Stepford Wives*, the genre is comedy; and in *The Heart Goes Last*, the dystopian novel.

[5] McKenzie Wark, "Human, None Too Human," in *New Humans: Memory of the Future* (New York: Phaidon, 2025), 324.

Gina Kim leaves no room for the kind of escapism produced by genre—something that "transports" us elsewhere and is constructed within our consciousness. There is no turning away from the "comfort women" whose stories are told here: the abuse of the female body of a woman who bled to death in a single-room tenement in Dongducheon. In the *Comfortless* trilogy, our viewing engagement through VR transforms into activism. We emerge feeling that we must do something—now. Not unlike in *The Substance*, as explained through Calabresi's essay, viewers experience a reversal of being: "A moment of inversion. The ultimate exile." Only here, we are not in a body horror film driven by special effects, but in the starkest reality—walking the streets near U.S. military bases with the comfort women, who are there to "comfort" their torturers, nearly touching the trash that lies scattered through the American town of Kunsan (*Comfortless*, 2023). With this kind of irresistible identification, the *Comfortless* trilogy demands a level of empathy that is not only urgent and unsettling, but one that—put in the filmmaker's own terms—transcends objectification, as the viewer exchanges her own body, breath, and vocal cords with those of the victims portrayed. Through this loss of one's own body, Kim's work does not simply prompt empathy; it compels embodiment of the other's pain.

The first four essays and practice-based works have exposed, showcased, and analyzed body modification in the age of the post-gendered body through various critical lenses—ranging from queer ecology to a feminist reimagining of (aging) bodily agency, and toward new forms of media engagement in what McLuhan might have described as an "ice-cold" media landscape requiring high levels of participation from its users. All essays and works so far have engaged with the question of the abject (Calabresi, Kim) and deep junk (Tynan and Rossow, Lasocka), whether through the stark realism of VR, abstract forms such as science fiction and body horror, or older analogue media such as the novel. What these essays share is their focus on extreme

forms of femininity that persist beyond their own symbolic death, re-emerging in states of gendered in-betweenness. The next four contributions take this one step further, using *techne* to move into the unknown terrain of cyborgism—and onto the cyborg's as-yet unwalked paths.

Researcher and poet Marzia D'Amico and cartoonist Marco d'Alessandro, in *Your Body is a Masterpiece of Tissue Engineering. On Disability: a Practice-based Poetics of Collaboration*, re-enact not the pain of others, as Gina Kim does, but their own pain in the form of what the authors themselves call "experimental comics, digital poetry and transmedia storytelling," and what most closely resembles a graphic novel. As the principal author, Marzia D'Amico, points out, the piece is written from a non-binary position grounded in the lived experience of chronic illness, which forces them to compose entirely on a computer, as their body is not able to hold a pen.

In *Your Body is a Masterpiece of Tissue Engineering*, the machinic and the human are envisioned as interdependent and allied, becoming one flesh-machine. The "I" becomes a speculative "we," as Marzia D'Amico reportedly merges their writing with the drawings by Marco d'Alessandro. On the final page, we see a partly human, partly cyborg-like figure walking proudly, holding their own rib cage like an exoskeleton-purse. Next to this image, the authors write about how this cyborg's saliva merges with titanium: "and the threads of my system filaments of saliva under a chest of solid titanium that will endure for centuries to come that I will stick to the sun and will call it MOTHER." In the scholarly portion of this visual novel-essay, Marzia discusses self-performance as a mode of overcoming their unwell body. With a cyborg born into motherhood, rather than from motherhood, the authors offer a stark realization that the exoskeleton may be the only means through which this ill body can write: "the loss of an artistic practice due to physical disability remains an underexplored and seldom-discussed

subject." The mutual transformation of human and tool (technogenesis) enables Marzia and Marco to collaborate and become posthuman together in a "continuously shifting, fragmented, and mechanically entangled corporeality." This compelling work, much like *The Spire™*, engages productively with the notion of junk as essential to discovering new forms of post-gendered embodiment. The authors emphasize the amphibious nature of their work as something rooted in the "glitch aesthetic, wherein error, degradation, or interference become sites of affective and epistemic potential." Disability is thus no longer framed as lack, but as a pathway toward aesthetic production.

In *Digital Inclusion: Artificial Intelligence, the Body, and Voice of Posthumanist Practice*, installation artist Paulina Ebringerová follows in the footsteps of Marzia D'Amico and Marco d'Alessandro, analyzing an artwork based on the lived experience of a neurodivergent boy with autism and a severe speech impediment: *Transplantatio*, by Paulina Ebringerová and Peter Mazalán. Like D'Amico, Ebringerová emphasizes that this work does not aim to give the subject a voice, but rather to enable "redefining what it means to speak, to be present, and to be recognized." Digital inclusion, then, is not about "fixing" a disability, "but creating a space in which the subject can express itself differently." In a way reminiscent of Gina Kim's approach to empathy through identification with the body of the other, Ebringerová enables us to hear a voice we would otherwise be unable to perceive—a voice belonging to a subject who cannot communicate through conventional speech. In doing so, we symbolically enter a space in which we hear the other speak for the first time—an act that enables an ethics of "being heard," as Ebringerová stresses, allowing us to participate not only in another's phonation or speech, but in their true voice. The posthuman dimension of this artwork lies in the fact that technology becomes a co-creator of the missing voice, thereby producing a hybrid subjectivity. As the work

took the form of a live performance, we now have access to it only through images and written accounts by one of the artists, Paulina Ebringerová herself. She recounts a profoundly moving moment during the performance, "when the boy and his mother stood up from the audience and approached the screen." In that moment, the neurodivergent subject became an active co-creator of his own representation, rather than a passive recipient of care. Here, the post-body meets the real body, not unlike the mirror effects described in *The Substance*. The performance reveals that human subjectivity is not only expandable in cyberspace, but that human existence itself can find expression through technology, which here functions as a producer of authenticity—an authenticity that was not nonexistent, but previously inaccessible to others through conventional means. Through *Digital Inclusion*, the boy's voice has not only been heard; it has become present (Merleau-Ponty).

Filmmaker and performer Angelo Madsen's *An Idea to Live In: On Lifelong Investigation, Fakir Musafar, and the History of Body Modification* is based on his lifelong work and investigation into the U.S. body modification subcultural icon and performance artist Fakir Musafar (1930–2018), about whom Madsen made the moving documentary *A Body to Live In* (2024). For readers who have not yet seen the film, Musafar's renowned performances include "flesh hook suspension" or "body play," often involving BDSM, and are usually associated with the art form of the Modern Primitive. As we learn from the author and documentarian, "Musafar would do extreme waist training, corsetry, extended sensory deprivation, suspensions, restrictions, interventions, and most notably extreme body piercing practices." What is most compelling in Madsen's contribution to this special issue is his own perspective on documentation. He poses profound questions to himself and to us while examining Musafar's body modifications: "Is the goal of Fakir's extreme body mods to own the body, to deeply

inhabit? Or is it to leave the body (behind)?" Rather than offering definitive answers, Madsen resists placing Musafar's post-body into a fixed "box." For instance, he avoids resolving whether Musafar should be labeled trans or not. Instead, he challenges us to reconsider the notion of ownership: "What does it mean to own something versus just to live in it?" This contribution demonstrates, through Musafar's extreme body practices, that the body is not simply something to "inhabit," or even to "own." As Musafar himself states, "the body is the door to spirit." The form Madsen gives to this investigation—the documentary film—carries a distinctly spiritual quality: The film is one rupture after another, but contained in interment lengthy images that suggest wholeness in that unending fracturing. In a sense, film itself consists of such ruptures; each of the twenty-four frames per second is a discontinuity that produces the illusion of wholeness. This wholeness emerges from the capacity of moving images to construct meaning across time—one image gaining significance in relation to the next, and to those that follow minutes later.

The visual artist Sara Bissen's *Sculpting the Post-Body* returns us to the moving image through 3D digital animation, echoing the volume's opening with Tynan and Rossow's AI film *The Spire*™. In her work, Bissen resists colonial epistemologies by imagining queer, non-binary embodiments that generate mythical Central Asian creatures and cosmologies. Her intervention into mythology becomes what she describes as a "decolonial tool for body modification," giving form to "what is overwise ungraspable." Bissen reintroduces a notion of the post-body that predates the digital era. Her visual language draws on African diasporic spiritualities that foreground sonic, ritualistic, and ancestral knowledge. Her post-body does not emerge solely from digital experimentation but resonates with Musafar's analogue bodily practices—both exceed conventional understandings of the human. She challenges concepts such as originality

and sovereignty as both fiction and burden. Moreover, Bissen reinserts histories of mutilation and erasure into her digitally animated installation worlds. In these environments, "the digital medium becomes not just illustrative but generative: a cartography of bodies that were always possible, always imagined, and now finally rendered." Bissen's work is deeply political, as are all contributions to this issue. Through animation, she reanimates mythical women of oppressed ancestries, bringing long-silenced histories into digital visibility. The immersive format she employs, much like Gina Kim's use of VR, compels the viewer into an active dialogue with the work. The result is a powerful form of artistic activism.

In the final four contributions, we sense a shift toward a hopeful and desirous posthumanism—toward an as-yet-unborn body. Yet all contributions, whether their tone is euphoric or dysphoric, suggest that immersion in subcultures allows us to confront and reframe what might otherwise be dismissed as "junk"—including our own bodily matter—as sites of experimentation and openness. This creates space for a renewed understanding of the post-gendered self: a self that is embodied, resilient, and perhaps capable of enduring for centuries. The issue's diverse media—ranging from narrative film across genres to digital poetry, performance art, VR environments, 3D animation, documentary film, and installation art—once again affirm the "medium is the message" thesis. Each medium reveals something distinct about what is at stake. In a post-gendered body modification anarchy, limitations dissolve. Mysticism becomes tomorrow's science imagined today—another McLuhanism. As Arthur C. Clarke famously stated, "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."[6] Freud,

[6] Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 36.

in his 1930 *Civilization and its Discontents*, describes humanity as a "prosthetic God," extending and constraining natural abilities through the prostheses of civilization, particularly technology.[7]

In the article mentioned at the beginning, Newport suggests addressing our addiction to digital "junk food" in a manner similar to how society confronted cardiovascular disease decades ago. How did that shift occur? Newport reminds us that it was driven by awareness campaigns that evolved into the "workout revolution," encouraging people to recognize the importance of physical exercise, particularly with age. As a result, there are now approximately 55,000 gyms in the United States.[8] But what initiated this transformation? According to Newport, President Eisenhower's heart attack in 1955 marked a turning point in public awareness. It prompted recognition that habits such as eating fast food, chain-smoking, and sedentary television viewing could severely damage cardiovascular health. Over time, this awareness led to research, behavioral change, and a population that is, in many ways, more physically fit today. Yet a new challenge has emerged: as digital engagement increases, mental focus declines, and anxiety rises. However, simply building 55,000 libraries or digital detox centers is unlikely to resolve this issue. What is needed instead is a form of media literacy that integrates theory and practice—an active engagement with and intervention in media itself. As demonstrated by the contributions in this issue, such an approach offers a more meaningful response. What these works collectively reveal is that we have entered an era of what might be called "Deep Junk"—and that what is required is an equally deep digital cure, grounded in the kind of critical and creative media literacy exemplified by the authors in this volume.

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[7] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961).
[8] Newport, "Stop Filling Your Mind with Digital Dorritos," 7.

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