

Henderson, Heike

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# Nothing but a Vessel? Investigating the Role of the Body in Tom Hillenbrand's Techno Thrillers

Heike Henderson, Boise State University

## Abstract

This chapter examines the role of the body, and its possible uses, in two recent techno thrillers by German author Tom Hillenbrand: *Hologrammatica* (2018) and *Qube* (2020). It explores the boundaries between humans and machines in a futurist/dystopian scenario that allows people to replace their organic brain with a digital “cogit” (a small quantum computer) and switch bodies at will. Theories of posthumanism and transhumanism serve as a backdrop to analyze relevant aspects of the novels and to consider ramifications of technologies that might be possible in the not so far future. It questions the role of artificial enhancements to bodies, of the connection between bodies and brains, and of fundamental concepts like identity, body, and humanity.

A particular emphasis of the chapter will be placed on the role of gender. The interchangeability of bodies (i.e. vessels) in Hillenbrand's techno thrillers invalidates clear gender distinctions, along with other physical characteristics. While moving beyond human limitations allows for a certain playfulness in transgressing boundaries, Hillenbrand's novels fail to live up to the full spectrum of their possibilities. They do, however, allow readers to envision future constellations of non-binary ways of being, and of forming relationships that transcend traditional ideas.

Lastly, the chapter examines the novels' setting in a world that has been altered by severe environmental threats, and it investigates how the mind-body split impacts issues regarding crime, detection, and identity. The cautionary function of Hillenbrand's texts thus urges us to consider future ramifications of current developments in regard to technology, culture, and environment.

## Keywords

Body, gender, artificial intelligence, transhumanism, techno thrillers, Hillenbrand

As Nicoletta Vallorani asserted in her contribution to the 2020 *Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, “Crime Fiction and the Future,” the body “has become a keyword for the future in both crime and science fiction. The increasing instability of a physical frame that we used to consider as something we were born with and bound to keep from birth until death has become one of the favourite topics in science fiction and also affects crime fiction” (411).

In this chapter, I intend to question the role of the body, and its possible uses, in two recent techno thrillers by German author Tom Hillenbrand. Specifically, I will examine the boundaries between humans and machines, at a time when robots become more and more like humans, and humans are able to incorporate more and more artificial enhancements, from widely accepted prosthetics, pacemakers and cochlea implants to more controversial modifications like implanted microchips and genetic modifications. This leads to the following research questions that I would like to address in more detail: What constitutes a human body, how does it differ from an artificial body, and how can it be used?

By exploring the interplay of biology and technology, body and mind, virtuality and physicality, this article tackles issues that have been brought into the cultural mainstream by the cyberpunk movement. The question of how to establish identity beyond physicality – also in the specific context of gender roles, crime detection, and punishment – has been a central topic of cyberpunk works from William Gibson's genre-defining novel *Neuromancer* (1984) to Annalee Newitz' more recent *Automons* (2017).<sup>1</sup>

Since the stated purpose of this volume is to examine the ways in which crime fiction as a genre incorporates and (re-)negotiates gender and sex, and how it represents and/or questions normativity and deviance in gender and sexual identities, I will extend these questions to consider the role of gender and sex in Hillenbrand's thrillers. Will gender still be an appropriate category to identify and classify human beings when the borders between genders, and between humans and machines, become more and more permeable? How do definitions of gender and sex change when bodies become less fixed and more adjustable? How do ideas about gender and sex relate to the body?

## Tom Hillenbrand's Techno Thrillers

To approach these questions, I will look at Tom Hillenbrand's techno thrillers *Hologrammatica* (2018) and *Qube* (2020). Tom Hillenbrand is a German writer who first garnered popularity for a culinary mystery series (six mysteries to date) that features a chef from Luxemburg. In my opinion, his more interesting novels are located at the intersection of crime fiction and science fiction. The first of these novels, *Drohnenland* (from 2014, published in English translation as *Drone State*, 2018), won both the Glauser Award for Best German Crime Novel and the Lasswitz Award for

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank reviewer 2 for the suggestion to situate Hillenbrand's novels more clearly in the broader sci-fi tradition.

Best German SF Novel (in 2015). It is set in 2049 and invites readers to imagine a future marked by constant surveillance and predictive technology.<sup>2</sup>

Hillenbrand's next thriller *Hologrammatica* (2018), also a bestseller, and its sequel *Qube* (2020) will be the basis for this article. Both texts shine a fascinating light on future ramifications of technological progress and efforts to optimize human life and society. *Hologrammatica* takes place in 2088 and technological inventions like the holonet, a permanent holographic augmentation of reality, have become ubiquitous, while society also deals with a backlash against constant surveillance, including new privacy laws. New technologies such as mind uploading allow people to effortlessly switch identities by uploading digital copies of their brains into a body of their choice; this blurs the boundaries between humans and artificial intelligence. It also raises questions about what makes humans human. People who have replaced their organic brain with a digital "cogit," a small quantum computer that runs the brain emulation, are called "quants," or hollow heads in the vernacular. For those people, (gendered) bodies have become mere vessels that are exchangeable at will. Consequently, gender as well as descriptive attributes have ceased to play a role in identifying people, both for official purposes such as passports, and in crime and detection.

*Hologrammatica*'s protagonist is Galahad Singh, a private detective who specializes in finding missing persons – not an easy job, when people can just upload their minds into bodies of their choice. Due to the ease of changing one's looks, most of the current arsenal of personal traits that we employ to describe and find people, such as physical characteristics, photos, gender identities or names, is no longer useful. Consequently, most people in *Hologrammatica* and *Qube*'s world pick their own name(s), and passports do not include photos anymore. This challenges our current reliance on physical characteristics in identifying humans, with its over-reliance on visual aspects. It also urges us to consider fundamental questions, including the following: what is real, what is just imaginary, and does it even matter?<sup>3</sup> What makes humans human?<sup>4</sup> What is the relationship between bodies and minds? And, last but not least, what role will gender play in artificially augmented bodies of the future?

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of *Drohnenland*, see Henderson, "Crime and Detection in a Virtually Mobile World" and Henderson, "Mapping the Future? Contemporary German-Language Techno Thrillers."

<sup>3</sup> Most of the visual world in *Hologrammatica* and *Qube* is just a projection; one needs special glasses to strip away levels of holographic augmentation.

<sup>4</sup> Possible answers to the question of what makes humans human are individuality, relationships, social interactions, empathy, free will, and awareness – although all of those are presently challenged by current developments in artificial intelligence.

*Qube*, set in 2091, includes some of the same characters as *Hologrammatica* and provides a continuation of the main storyline. By now, a significant part of the population, about 10%, has become quants. *Qube*'s protagonist Fran Bittner, a UNANPAI agent,<sup>5</sup> was Galahad Singh's love interest in *Hologrammatica* and first taught him about quant customs and etiquette. Although some quants have professional reasons for the conversion from sponge skulls<sup>6</sup> to hollow heads, many quants, according to Fran, enjoy body swapping as a way of life. They appreciate the changeability and fun that is associated with choosing and changing one's body, and they quite often prefer to stay unrecognizable. The only question that is therefore considered taboo when interacting with a quant is the following: what do you look like in real life?

### The Role of Gender and Artificial Intelligence

*Qube*'s protagonist Fran is a quant who uses both male and female bodies. He/she (the pronoun changes according to the body being used) is referred to as Francesco or Francesca, or, in a version that works for both genders, just Fran. He/she chooses whichever body appears most advantageous – for example, Fran uses a female body, perceived as less threatening than a male body, to approach and talk to another woman more easily. Occasionally, Fran also uses an everyman suit – a holographic outfit, loosely based on Philip K. Dick's 1977 novel *Scanner Darkly*, that continuously alters a person's appearance: their face, height, silhouette, and clothes. This comes in particularly handy when following or shadowing people, as it makes it very hard to be detected.

Interestingly enough, in the world of *Hologrammatica* and *Qube*, where gender is interchangeable at will, it is used in a rather stereotypical way to play with people's expectations and to gain advantages. I am not sure whether Hillenbrand intends to highlight the possibility of playfully exploiting people's weaknesses, or if he is rather caught up in his own gendered prejudices, similar to how AI bots and voice assistants like Siri and Alexa tend to reinforce gender biases – despite claiming they do not have a gender, they more often than not use female names and female sounding voices along with 'female' traits like helpfulness and giving the impression of being there for you whenever you need them, just like a (female) friend. As Sabine Heuser observed, "[t]heoretically speaking, artificial intelligence need have no gender characteristics at all; nonetheless, they often do display gendered features or gender-specific behaviour" (129). Heuser goes on to speculate that perhaps "AIs are also an expression of the human race's dream to perpetuate and recreate itself without the limitations of the human body as reproductive organ" (129).

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<sup>5</sup> The acronym stands for United Nations Agency for the Non-Proliferation of Artificial Intelligence.

<sup>6</sup> Sponge skulls is the vernacular for 'normal' people with biological brains.

Fran's main antagonist is an artificial intelligence called Nemo. Of course, despite all safeguards, having a digitized brain, as Fran does, makes one susceptible to an artificial intelligence accessing and manipulating one's brain – one of the not too surprising plot twists. In *Qube*, Nemo specifically chose Fran as an unwitting accomplice because Fran is changeable and gender fluid – which both parallels the AI's own *modus operandi*<sup>7</sup> and is beneficial for the AI to accomplish its goals. Since the AI does not have a body, it needs human proxies like Fran.

Although the AI possesses an extremely superior intelligence, there are nevertheless aspects of human behaviour that are difficult for the AI to grasp. Both as a male or female, Fran appreciates having a beautiful body. When the artificial intelligence Nemo uses brainbeam to download Fran into a breathtakingly gorgeous woman, Nemo expects Fran to be pleased. Fran instead complains that this body is too perfect – i.e., not human. For the AI, this is hard to understand – since it obviously knew of Fran's preference for having a beautiful body, it wanted to give her the best, and from an AI's perspective 'too perfect' is just not possible.

### **The Permeability of Borders Between Bodies and Machines**

Hillenbrand's novels thus explore the permeability of borders between bodies and machines. While the mind uploading as it is portrayed in *Hologrammatica* and *Qube* is clearly a futuristic technology, the basis for it is less far-fetched than it would appear at first glance. In his 2016 nonfiction text *The Age of Em: Work, Love, and Life When Robots Rule the Earth*, Robin Hanson discusses the social implications of minds uploaded into computers (brain emulations or 'ems' for short). Futurologist Ray Kurzweil, in *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (1999) and *The Singularity is Near* (2005), also examines the union of humans and machines. Kurzweil predicts that our descendants will live a virtual or purely cybernetic existence without people's identities being closely tied to their bodies. Through mind uploading, it would be possible to live an almost unlimited life as software on a computer.<sup>8</sup> Alternately, people might even be uploaded into physical bodies produced by nanotechnology, composed of nanobot swarms that could take new forms in fractions of a second (*Spiritual Machines* 145). Kurzweil predicts this will come true by the end of the twenty-first century – just after the fictional setting of *Hologrammatica* and *Qube*.<sup>9</sup>

Hillenbrand's fictional texts explore the human ramifications of these futurist and dystopian scenarios. As N. Katherine Hayles already stated in her 1999 classic *How*

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<sup>7</sup> The AI appears in a variety of different shapes.

<sup>8</sup> Although I would question if this would indeed fulfil the definition of 'life.'

<sup>9</sup> In order to judge the validity of Kurzweil's predictions, it might be helpful to look at some of his predictions for 2019 and 2029: For 2019 he predicted that computers would be embedded everywhere, and for 2029 that there would no longer be a sharp division between the human world and the machine world.

*We Became Posthuman*, if “there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation,” there are no more experiences or emotions that truly reside outside of the digital world (3). The *Black Mirror* episode “Be Right Back” raises similar questions about data and identity: Is a person more than the accumulation of their vast digital footprint over time? And, if we contend that the essence of a person is more than their digital footprint, what exactly is most essential in being human, at a time when artificial intelligence gets better and better at mastering such human skills as imagination, abstraction, and induction – in addition to those skills in which computers have long outperformed humans, like precision, recall and memory?<sup>10</sup>

Transhuman arguments derive from ideals of human perfectibility, rationality and agency inherited from humanism and the enlightenment. In many ways, transhumanism also challenges Western humanist tenets, including the sanctity of the soul, the unity of body and mind, and the uniqueness of every individual. Transhumanism can thus be perceived as a radical refiguring of what it is possible to do as a human.<sup>11</sup> While not as extreme as mind uploading or body modifications, participants of the quantified self movement treat their bodies as data sets and attempt to optimize this data – which, according to Andrew Pilsch, “responds to the transhuman perspective that the human is nothing more than an information pattern that happens to be currently instantiated in fleshy form” (4). For many transhumanists, the availability of life-enhancing technologies suggests an imperative to use them to remake ourselves into something more than merely human.<sup>12</sup>

## Sex with Interchangeable Bodies

The interchangeability of bodies, as it is explored in Hillenbrand’s world, has thought-provoking consequences in regard to sex and pleasure. Quants can change their bodies into whoever they think would be most appealing to the person they want to be intimate with – and Fran does exactly that, both in regard to his/her own pleasure, and in the fulfilment of official duties. When Fran and Galahad Singh first have sex in *Hologrammatica*, Fran asks Singh to choose from ten possible vessels, five male and five female, that are at Fran’s disposal. Professional escort services like “vessel vixens” go even further in that they allow customers to choose a body

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<sup>10</sup> For another interesting exploration of the ramifications of the integration of humans and robots, see Theresa Hannig, *Die Optimierer* (2017) and its sequel *Die Unvollkommenen* (2019).

<sup>11</sup> For a thorough analysis of transhumanism, see Pilsch. See also Braidotti, who raises the question of what the post-human might be in a post-anthropocentric perspective, and who argues the case for a posthuman theory that considers feminist subjectivity (101).

<sup>12</sup> Rodney A. Brooks, the director of the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at MIT, also predicts that the distinction between us and robots is going to disappear (236), and that what starts out as bizarre will become the norm (230). He envisions that we will not download ourselves into machines; rather, over the course of our lifetimes, we will morph ourselves into machines through the merger of biotech and robotic technology (212).

from a catalogue. A quant then uploads his/her cogit into the requested vessel. It is even possible to pre-order a complete memory erasure, in which case the escort makes a backup of his/her brain prior to the body swap and thus retains no memories of the encounter.

Sophie Wengerscheid, in “Not in the Image of Humans: Robots as Humans’ Other,” analyses the depiction of interactions between humans and posthumans in contemporary science fiction films and literature. She asserts that although sex robot manufacturers try to create robots in the image of humans and market them as perfect partners for human beings, generally men, it is, on the contrary, the otherness of posthuman figures that makes it possible to transgress human’s self-centeredness and arouse strong feelings. According to Wengerscheid, “as long as robots are designed in the image of humans, they will not be able to do anything else other than to mirror existing needs, experiences or imaginations” (569). If we hope for “challenging new experiences, transgressive new affects, new forms of encounters and hierarchies undermined . . . , we need robots that challenge our restricted self-understanding as humans superior to all other nonhuman beings” (569).

Hillenbrand’s quants only fulfill this desire to a certain extent. While some of the encounters between Fran and the novels’ other characters are certainly transgressive and invite us to expand our imagination of what is possible, many interactions also reproduce and reinforce existing heterosexist patterns. The most popular vessels, for example, are small Asian females and strong Black males – it is difficult to get more stereotypical than that. Or, in another parallel to contemporary behaviors, people clamor for designer bodies as many people clamor for designer clothes today. The technologically enhanced humans as they are depicted by Hillenbrand try to move beyond human limitations, but in many ways, they still seem to be caught in an early twenty-first century mode of imagining life and human relationships. It might be up to future literary manifestations to imagine something that is more than a mere copy of existing bodies, that is truly original and transcends the split between the virtual and the natural world.

### **Struggling with Gendered Expressions of the Body**

One of the issues that Hillenbrand seems to particularly struggle with is gender: how to imagine gender in a non-binary and yet relatable way. The reason for this might be that Hillenbrand’s thrillers are produced for a mass market and therefore rely on easy marketability for robust sales. Gender is deeply connected to embodiment, with all its trappings and cultural connotations. While Hillenbrand portrays gay relationships (Galahad Singh identifies as gay and prefers Fran in a male body), and the joys of body swapping, he does not move beyond contemporary images of male and female bodies. There is no in-between, no both, and no as-of-yet unimagined bodies – which I guess would be hard to describe.



In *Trans\**, Jack Halberstam charts the undoing of certain logics of embodiment, and asks how gender might be imagined in the future.<sup>13</sup> Halberstam describes transgenerism as “a desire for forms of embodiment that are necessarily impossible and yet deeply desired” (20). It therefore “has long been situated as a site of futurity and utopian/dystopian potential” (21). Reflecting on the tendency to associate body with home, Halberstam suggests thinking of embodiment as a series of “stopovers” instead (24). This, I believe, is useful in reflecting on Hillenbrand’s novels – although, as mentioned above, these texts fail to live up to the full spectrum of their possibilities.

Fran does not ever appear to be at home in his/her body. The chosen vessel merely provides a necessary embodiment to move around in the world. The series of stopovers in male or female bodies fulfils desires of the moment, but as soon as the requirements of the time, place and/or environment change, the body gets discarded. Although Fran acknowledges that multiple body swaps in a short period of time make her/him tired (psychologists recommend people do not change bodies so often), Fran just uses the body as a means to an end. While pleasure can be obtained through the use of the body, it does not appear integral to Fran’s definition of self. This coincides with a larger de-valuation of the body in society. When everything is possible, as far as embodiment is concerned, nothing truly matters.

Transgressing the limitations of the human body is a prevalent aim of the characters in Hillenbrand’s novels. By foregrounding the notion of role play and examining the possibility of gender and body switching, Hillenbrand opens some interesting lines of investigation into character and gender in fiction. Identity is no longer tied to an identifying body, proper name, or pronoun. Bodies, names, and genders are merely indicators of the many roles that people can play, or the personas they can assume. The real, original body is just one of many vessels to which the cogit in Hillenbrand’s universe occasionally returns – although at one point in the novel, too many body swaps within a short period of time leave Fran disoriented and suffering from vessel vertigo. Like business travelers who wake up in the morning in yet another hotel room in another city and wonder where they are, Fran wonders: who am I and where am I?

## Body and Mind

Although transgressing the limitations of the human body through body swapping sounds very playful, futuristic and advanced, it does not really overcome the old dualistic separation of body and mind. Thus, the question arises: can the human body be entirely separated from the mind, or does one always leave traces on the other?

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<sup>13</sup> The asterisk, according to Halberstam, modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination (4).

In the context of Hillenbrand's novels, this issue is referred to as the Descartes problem: the impossibility of permanently separating body and mind. If they do not want to risk the possibility of a brain crash, cogits need to return to their original body within 21 days.<sup>14</sup> While this mind-body problem features prominently in both novels and, to a certain extent, even forms the basis for the plot, Hillenbrand does not examine the deeper connection between the two. Even though there are obviously no clearcut answers, one must consider the marks that the mind leaves on the body, and the body's impact on the mind. I therefore question whether erasing the fallible human body and substituting it with a vessel is truly desirable, or is it not rather the uniqueness and fundamental irreplaceability of the body that bestows it its value? Shouldn't we thus value our bodies more?

As Jennifer L. Creech and Thomas O. Haakenson assert in their introduction to *How to Make the Body: Difference, Identity, and Embodiment*, the body "is the physical manifestation of our presence in the world" – "one of the most fundamental aspects of being human" (4). Not surprisingly, the materiality of the body has been and continues to be the focus of much cultural and political concern. If we agree with Creech and Haakenson that "bodies walk through the world and accumulate different experiences according to their legibility and assigned cultural meanings" (4), then I cannot help but wonder what the implications are for cogits and/or, to tone it down a bit, changeable bodies. What kind of experiences would a permanently changeable human being accumulate, and how would that impact further manifestations of the body? Maybe ultimately, Hillenbrand's texts remind us that bodies are never just natural and biological, they are always changing, transforming, and constructed within a cultural context.

## Environmental Threats and Cyborg Metaphors

In Hillenbrand's novels, the role of the body is examined in connection with existential threats like climate change that have made large parts of the earth uninhabitable, and the possibility of space exploration and colonization.<sup>15</sup> As one of the characters in *Qube* mentions, it is indeed possible to live anywhere and everywhere if we just change our ideas of what it means to be human (65). Of course, changing our ideas of what it means to be human might necessitate very real material changes. Yes, we can change our bodies, with the help of technology, genetic modifications, and artificial intelligence. This does, however, go to the very heart of the question of

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<sup>14</sup> One of the plot lines in both novels consists of people working to extend this time frame, to allow people to stay longer or maybe even indefinitely in a different body – which would ultimately result in a form of immortality.

<sup>15</sup> In *Hologrammatica*, climate change forms the backdrop of the novel (setting) and functions as the instigator for the development of the artificial intelligence tasked with curbing it (basis for the plot). The text could thus also be classified as an ecothriller. *Qube* further deals with the aftermath of climate change and explores issues of space exploration and colonization.

what constitutes a body. Does the human body have any inherent value and meaning, or is it just, as it is described in Hillenbrand's futuristic world, seen as nothing more than an antiquated machine of tendons and bones (122) that begs to be optimized?

The cyborg metaphor is commonly employed to discuss bodily changes and optimizations that are necessitated by environmental threats and other cultural developments. As Rosi Braidotti explains in her chapter "The Posthuman as Becoming-Machine," the issue of technology is central to the post-anthropocentric predicament:

The relationship between the human and the technological other has shifted in the contemporary context, to reach unprecedented degrees of intimacy and intrusion. The posthuman predicament is such as to force a displacement of the lines of demarcation between structural differences, or ontological categories, for instance between the organic and the inorganic, the born and the manufactured, flesh and metal, electronic circuits and organic nervous systems. (89)

From its earliest manifestations, gender has been intimately connected to the concept of the cyborg (Haraway). As Katherine Hayles points out, the question of gender has also been used to distinguish between thinking humans and thinking machines. Since it is the part of the Turing test that most often has been forgotten, Hayles asks: "Why does gender appear in this primal scene of humans meeting their evolutionary successors, intelligent machines? What do gendered bodies have to do with the erasure of embodiment and the subsequent merging of machine and human intelligence in the figure of the cyborg?" (xii).

While Hillenbrand only touches on these issues, I contend that the role of environmental threats, specifically climate change, and its effect on (gendered) bodies, warrants further investigation. How do bodies adapt, and how do they need to adjust, in order to survive in an ever-more hostile environment? Gabriele Dürbeck, in "The Anthropocene in Contemporary German Ecothrillers," observes that "ecothrillers often oscillate in a tension between enlightenment and entertainment" (316). This fluctuation between fact and fiction certainly applies to Hillenbrand's futuristic thrillers as well. His novels undulate between real concerns and as of now still farfetched but fun-to-imagine and entertaining solutions. Like ecothrillers, techno thrillers have a function of popularizing knowledge and stimulating our collective imagination.

### **Techno Thrillers' Cautionary Function**

Hillenbrand's thrillers clearly also fulfil a cautionary function. Leila E. Villaverde and Roymieco A. Carter, in their discussion of SF films, focus on the ways in which these films have illuminated the possibilities of the future while providing "cautionary tales that ask us to reflect on the outcomes of our current behaviours and choices" (123). Particularly relevant in this regard is dystopian literature's potential

to portray possible futures not just as the consequence of individual choices, but systemically: “Dystopia’s foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic” (Moylan xii). Hillenbrand’s thrillers’ ability not only to depict troubling issues today, but also to envision future developments, along with their widespread popularity across socially and politically fragmented parts of the population, make them thus well suited to contribute to and even generate difficult discussions about the type of society that we want to live in.

An investigation of *Hologrammatica* and *Qube* also points to deeper issues regarding crime, detection, and identity. How will we treat crimes committed in virtual reality? Is it still murder, if I shoot one of many interchangeable bodies, or just a destruction of personal property? And, maybe most importantly: how can we hold people accountable, if they can just upload their minds into different bodies – or, in another iteration of the same predicament that is maybe even a little closer to becoming a reality, change their bodies through genetic modifications?<sup>16</sup> Personal identity has been the cornerstone of our legal justice system, but contemporary techno thrillers like *Hologrammatica* and *Qube* alert us to the fact that in the not-so-distant future, the question of what constitutes identity might become even more fraught and open to interpretation.<sup>17</sup>

As we can see in Hillenbrand’s novels, bodies that are modifiable at will, and ultimately detachable from the brain, provide both potential for new engagements and challenges for human life and life experiences. Crime and detection are at the forefront of establishing these modes of operation. These thrillers thus invite us to reflect on the ever-shifting boundaries between human and machine. Questioning the uses and the potential of human and artificial bodies necessitates deeper engagement with culturally relevant topics like gender, (sexual) identity, and the bodies’ relationships – with other bodies, with (biological or artificial) brains, and with the environment.

*Qube*’s last fight and big showdown takes place within a game. This further muddles the distinction between ‘real’ life and simulation. The AI can access every quant’s brain, and readers as well as protagonists are left wondering who is a ‘real’ person (in a vessel) and who is just an avatar. While this is clearly a ploy (some crimes that are committed within the game turn out to be just simulations), it does raise interesting questions about the similarities and differences between human bodies, technologically enhanced bodies, cyborgs, quants and avatars. It also points to pertinent issues regarding the definition of what constitutes a crime and what needs to be done to solve crimes of the future.

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<sup>16</sup> Daniel Suarez’s 2017 sci-fi thriller *Change Agent* explores this issue of genetic modifications.

<sup>17</sup> See also Kenley who contends that “digital technology stands out as a harbinger of the new types of crime, new criminal methodologies and new crime-solving techniques that mark contemporary crime fiction as somehow distinct from its more analogue forebears” (261).

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