

**Thinking Through Digital Media:
Transnational Environments and Locative Places**

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Excerpt pages 186, 187

An interest in exploring our relationship with media also features in Geoffrey Pugen's Utopics (Canada, 2004-2008; <http://geoffreypugen.com/utopics.html>), probing the notion of life in virtuality, whether in the form of avatars or at the prospect of human-machine interaction. The installation of digitally composited photographs and documentaries that promote a functional online community is dedicated to helping people "super modify" their bodies in order to "transform [their] nature." The promotional video Aerobia! (Canada, 2005; <http://vimeo.com/6922386>) satirizes early theories of cyberspace that heralded the Internet as a space free from the limitations of physical bodies by considering the current moment of ubiquitous avatars and visual personal. The portal introduces users to the fictional institute of Utopics's 16-step program for super-modification of the human body. It adopts the rhetorical and aesthetic devices of late-night infomercials. Virtual selves, composed in JPEGs and recognized usernames, may be viewed on a web-application mashup that links a NASA satellite photograph of the earth with avatar biomes from Utopics. The program helps people overcome "intimidation, doubt, negative energies, guilt, hunger [or] weakness," which are removed through the "intense modification program."



Utopics Video Guide

The Utopics Video Guide (Canada, 2004) invites viewers to overcome their personal body issues to realize their “inner animal” through body modification. Before and after images show clients whose faces transform from human to animal. Elephant-headed figures enjoy an energizing aerobics class. The female voiceover calmly instructs listeners as a tribal beat of techno music plays in the background, its four-beat structure mimicking the human heartbeat. The program is an online community with a cultist appeal of striving for perfection towards animals as a means to transcend the foibles of human imperfections, pandemics and ecological crisis. The program is an inverse to the transformation in H.G. Wells’s 1896 novel *The island of Dr. Moreau* and the inverse of most interpretations of the hierarchies in Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution. The video also evokes the mass appeal of television workout series hosted by celebrities Richard Simmons and Jake Steinfield during the 1980s. Intercut is a vintage interview footage of professional bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger discussing the feeling of “coming” (sexual orgasm and ejaculation) as he works out, pumps up, or even goes home. Men and women discuss falling in love with people whose bodies they have never seen. In the photographs, Pugen layers the texture of animal “skins” atop human skin. Utopics engages with scholarship in Critical Animal Studies and the Post-humanities that examine forms of knowledge from a non-anthropocentric point of view. The project satirizes the dysfunctional and asymmetrical relationship of humans to nonhumans, particularly the everyday ways that humans project anxieties and fears to nonhuman animals as objects. The project is a tactical means to open thinking through digital media to other bases of knowledge.