

Posthumanism, Technology, and Monstrous Life Forms

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Abstract

This article aims to discuss and argue about the tangled and intricate relations between posthumanism and technology in the attempt of elaborating upon the creation of new monstrous forms of life within the framework of bioart. By dwelling on works by Oron Catts and Ioana Zurr, the article seeks to re-think posthumanism's species inclusiveness as a scientifically and technologically determined trait and to emphasize the role of technology in decentering the human-normative understanding of life. Nevertheless, using examples pertaining to the artistic field, the paper implicitly re-phrases the artistic enterprise from the point of view of a theoretical, lab-researched based endeavor dictated by accelerated biotechnological changes.

Keywords

posthumanism, mutant life forms, biotechnology, hybridization, bios, zoe, human animal, non-human animal, monstrous creatures, bioart.

Introduction

In 2014, Pierre Huyghe released his most recent film entitled *Human Mask*, in which the surrounding exteriors, depicting a deserted and shattered town, were shot in a post-Fukushima exclusion zone, with a camera attached to a drone. The main character, a bizarre creature, wearing a Noh mask, is shown wandering in an abandoned shelter, replicating uncanny human gestures and repeatedly touching its long dark hair with its thin, claw fingers. It is in the light of this disturbingly hybrid, monstrous creature – half animal, half cyborg, half ape, half machine – that I intend to unfold the breach between species within the posthumanist framework and to bring forward the role of technology in forging this misty un-bordered territory. Because, while cultural representations of the future usually envision, in terms of automation, the exchangeable chemical bond between humans and cybernetics, the animal is still described as the outermost edge of the human, and, from this point of view, afflicted with exclusion and subordination, and sentenced to social and language deprivation even in postulating narratives about possible, preferable futures. However, since Darwin, as Christoph Cox legibly avers, “we are less inclined to stress out the links to the divine and more likely to acknowledge animals as our kin.” (Christoph Cox, 2016: 115) In *On the origin of species*, Darwin advocates for the elimination of boundaries and

hierarchies as a prime principle in theorizing evolution. If species may (statistically) combine in countless shapes and manifestations, that is due to the fact that the evolutionary process is conceived as a series of variations and mutations through which the other is re-produced and brought into appearance. Evolution is “a descent with modification,” it follows “the play of repetition and difference” (Elisabeth Grosz, 2005: 19), designating a mechanism grounded on mutant recursive replication. The greater the proliferation, the more the variation is able to enact new monstrous forms of life, especially when “monstrosities cannot be separated by any clear line of distinction from slither variations.” (Charles Darwin, chap. I). Every embryo or larva is an instance of species mutability, every cell, trunk or molecular chain's bifurcation represents an open-ended becoming.

Monstrous Life Forms

The non-human animal is not only the absolute alterity, “the wholly other they call animal” (Jacques Derrida, 2008: 11) or – as Agamben, following Linnaeus' footsteps, reasons – an anthropomorphous machine unable to recognize itself as human yet through which, like in an optical device, the human animal should be able to foresee itself (Giorgio Agamben, 2004: 26), but foremost, as its human kin, a transitional form of life, already transmuted and always transmuting. For, rather than denominating an essentialist, teleological and finite unit within nature, each living organism designates an ongoing actualization of a virtual field of possibilities. The nineteenth-century French biologists Etienne and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, along with Camille Dareste, who founded the science of teratology (the study of monsters) annulated the opposition between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ creatures by refusing to standardize one unique variation of the unlimited string of variability an organism can undertake. “It is impossible”, Dareste wrote, “to establish in any definitive way the limits of the possible.” (Camille Dareste, 2016: 120) Instead of following the path of identical replications, the algorithms of natural selection operate on infinite data, culling from and crossing incentive, stimulative and mutable species. The monstrous, mutant creature is therefore a morphological actualization, no different than, the same and on par with any other, of the vast virtual continuum which is matter.

Nevertheless, the impossibility to schedule, predict and restrain the dynamics of the evolutionary lines of flight

proves to be even clearer when technology slithery enters into the question. Not only does technology determines an explosive of computer-based devices capable of parsing and manipulating the DNA structures of living organisms, but it also gives rise to the number of lab experiments, generating cellular and genomes' intersections, hybrid life forms and genetically modified organisms. Even though all these ascending advances in both bio- and nanotechnology and in genetic engineering may undoubtedly lead the way towards a potential discharge of the material body, resolving it to a set of flickering signifiers running on a computer screen (Katherine Hayle, 1999: xiv) or to a sort of archives of data (Catherine Waldby, 2000: 6), facing the emergence of digital ontology, they equally give birth to a zone of indeterminacy, characterized by interspecies inclusiveness, beyond the taxonomic limitations of genus, class, breed and even flesh embodiment. Changes registered in the politics of descent are also converting the politics of selection. In the era of postindustrial, techno-capitalism, nature, in the way Darwin pictured it, fled its dominant role in dictating species selection. Modification and mutation are not anymore the outcome of a structural interplay within nature, but rather intertwined products of a naturalcultural selection, following the logics of symbiogenesis, to use Dona Harraway's terms. Schooled in the westernized techno-cultural discourse, posthumanist living organisms are being shaped and saturated by information sciences and technological protocols. They state the encounter between historical evolution, philosophy and techno-biological sciences, making permeable the discourse of and on difference(s). As Rosi Braidotti considers, taking into consideration the etymological heritage, monsters represent "the in between, the mixed, the ambivalent as implied in the ancient Greek root of the word *monsters*, *teras*, which means both horrible and wonderful, object of aberration and adoration." (Rosi Braidotti, 1994: 77) They negotiate the space of confluences and convergences, displacing the rational thought to nomadic frames on its approach towards the (mal)formation of the body.

In an attempt to overcome the sovereignty of anthropogenetic and anthropomorphic perspectives, the posthuman monstrosity, indebted to its computer simulated siblings, appears as a contaminated body (Judith Halberstam, Ira Livingstone, 1995: 3), articulated with both artificial intelligent systems and genetic recombination of codes and materials. It's, therefore, a question of twining software and wetware, of mediating between the two not with the aim of re-affirming the kith and kin of machines, animals, plants and minerals, but first and foremost with the purpose of stating the interspecies condition of present and future life forms, pleading for a transition from *bios* to *zoe*, and elaborating upon the role of contamination. For Anna Tsing, the key to surviving the industrial ruined landscape of the future stands in collaboration and contamination, which are mutually dependent. "Collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination" (Anna Tsing, 2015: 29); without it, extinction, not germination, lies ahead in somber, dusky colors. Relational con-

tamination creates new life forms, transforming them into the process. Each encounter generates genetic and genealogical re-locations and paves the way for monstrous contagions to occur. Collaboration, contamination, contagion – all, in a synonymic organic relation, allow us to imagine the future, by encouraging the re-production and re-enactment of life from and in hybrid associations, pointing towards the never neutral intervention of technological assistance and underlining the need to expand the compass of life itself, renegotiating the relation between *bios* and *zoe*.

From *bios* to *zoe* to *techne*

The dualism between *bios* and *zoe*, which the posthumanist attempt of species inclusiveness doesn't hesitate to conjure, has a long turbulent history that can be easily tracked down to the Greek etymology of the term life. Hence, even though they both share a common root, their meaning as well as their degree of socio-political and ge(ne)ological inclusion differ: while *zoe* names the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, plants, humans or gods), *bios* rather indicates the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group (Giorgio Agamben, 1998: 4). Thus, the gulf between the two grows from the kind of life the two engage, since *zoe* generally regards the existence of a living being, without drawing a line of hierarchical demarcation or natural circumscription, and *bios* indicates a qualified, particular type of life, adjusted to the political norms and tied to *logos*. Moreover, besides delineating the deprivation of participating in the politics of the state, *zoe*, implicitly, names the deprivation of any form of agency over their own life inside the citadel. It is, thus, a question of exclusion through non-identifying and non-ratifying their function as socio-political actants in the dynamics of working out the power and in building the etatist structure. Devoid of juridical consent, *zoe* qualifies *la vida nuda*, transgressing any form of conceptualization and incarceration attempted to be designed by the laws of social contingencies, being, from this point of view, opened to mere potentialities. If *bios* is attributed to the civic, politically and (falo)logocentrically organized life, which inevitably dwells into the *polis* and which accommodates the only living being who possesses institutionalized language, that is the human animal, then *zoe* corresponds to the language deprived living beings, to the vibrant "vital materiality that flows through and around us" (Jane Bennet, 2010: x), naming the "mindless vitality of Life carrying on independently of and regardless of rational control" (Rosi Braidotti, 2006: 37), the bare life to which the human animal responds by exhibiting an exclusive inclusion. *Zoe*, finding itself in an inclusive opposition with *bios*, validates nonhuman agencies and ratifies a shared space of inbetweenness where formally different life forms ally and collide. However, transitioning from *bios* to *zoe*, a correlated third term, *techne*, occupied by technology, enters the fastidious task of questioning our definition of (natural) life. In this triad landscape, technology emerges neither as an unbiased

force, nor as a prosthetic resort, but as an immersive, constitutive, always present, simultaneously old and premature agent, which is increasingly transforming the domain of life, revealing it as a genetic engineered interface between human and non-human animals and machines. Life opens itself as a biological matter transmogrified and transmuted on the process, entering in contact with different, stratified fields of the high-technological capitalist culture, resembling more and more to a semi-automated assemblage.

The re-conceptualization of *zoe* through technology in bioartistic practice

This (re)opening to *zoe* – an alternative, irrational, non-discursive face of bios – by embracing both technology and science as essential agents in the process, represents a move forward to a more radical, post-anthropocentric approach, that artists like Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, working in the field of bioart, share. Co-founders of Tissue Culture & Art Project (TC&A) and academics of SymbioticA artistic research laboratory, Catts and Zurr are interested in using tissue technologies as a medium for artistic expression and production, as they are investigating the interaction between different human and especially non-human organisms with the purpose of enunciating a new class of semi-living beings. The semi-living is a term coined by the two artists, in 1996, and since then it has been used for designating no medical usage living tissue constructs that are grown out of tissue(s) pertaining to more complex organisms, and that are developed and maintained alive with the aid of technological intervention and artificial support. By dwelling on the understanding of biology not as a merely analytical discipline, but rather as engineering, in the tradition of the German biologist, Jacques Leob, known for his famous experiment on artificial parthenogenesis, the two artists envision life as a raw material to contestably design. Catts and Zurr are working with regenerative medical technologies that are currently being used in medicine for the creation of neo-organs or body spareparts, such as the infamous human ear attached to a laboratory mouse. However, instead of being grown into a pre-established form, with a fixed medical purpose, and im-

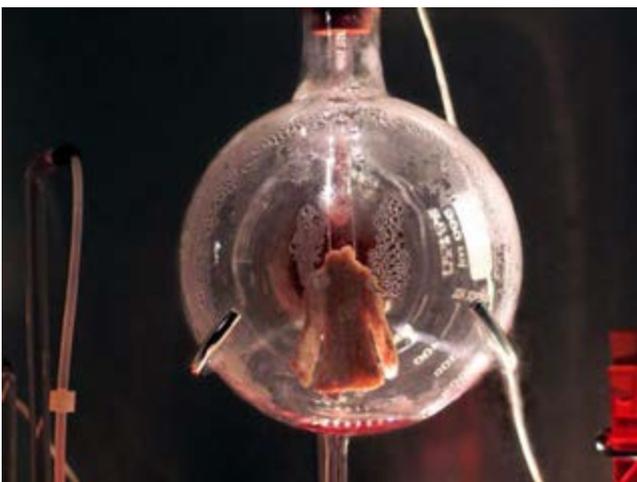


Figure 2. *Victimless leather*, photo from TC&A webpage



Figure 1. *Pig Wings*, photo taken TC&A webpage

planted into a host body, their three-dimensional tissue constructs are aimed to be integrated into artificial, techno-scientific bodies, creating monstrous semi-living beings, which are “biologically and psychologically non-functional,” (Eugene Thacker, 2005: 309) and which occupy that “ambiguous, intermediary zone between subject and object, a sort of tissue actants” (Idem), mediating between fully biological and excessively artificial life forms. Art is not anymore produced in the studio, but in the secured, aseptic environment provided by the fully equipped laboratory, where science trained artists are working with applied technologies for manipulating stem cells, genotypes and in vitro tissues, participating in a collaborative bio-tech revolution. Moreover, using fragments of biomass that grow like art objects outside of the organism from which they originated, Catts and Zurr are questioning the ethics and economics of life reproduction within the framework techno-science acceleration. *Victimless leather* (Figure 1) – a prototype of a stitch-less jacket, grown from cell cultures into a layer of tissue supported by a coat shaped polymer layer – or *Pig Wings* (Figure 2) – a three Pterosaurs-shaped set of wings made out of pig mesenchymal cells (bone marrow stem cells) and grown over/into biodegradable/bioabsorbable polymers for approximately nine months inside a rotary cell culture bioreactor - are both critically acknowledging and responding to a constantly ascending culture of life fetishization and commodification, from stem cell and tissue banking to disembodied cuisine and entertainment business. The lack of rhetorics and politics employed to elaborate on these semi-living beings – neither inert objects, nor autonomous, self-sustaining organisms – meets a yet too human-centered approach towards the posthumanist present, which is still leashedly captive to an anthropocentric system of signs.

Our tendency, as humans, to reduce these and other monstrous creatures – be they anatomically and genetically modified organism, requiring technological assistance or cyborgs, combining (synthetic) flesh, software and bit to bit articulation – to agential origins, depriving them of social and political agency, confirms the persistence of an exclusivist utilitarian ethical perspective and the prevalence of political and ideological agendas in considering

the teratological creatures, which nevertheless embody our akin other. Instead of manifesting an extraneous tendency of dismissiveness, based on inherited anthropocentric beliefs, we should recognize them as our biotic, abiotic, automated, semi-living collaborators and co-laborers for a future community to come. We are all mutants and in teratology we confide - don't be afraid to transmute!

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Anca Bucur is a Bucharest-based poet and performance artist, co-founder at frACTalia press, and editor at InterRe:ACT magazine. Being interested in techno-culture and bio-technological framings of future communities, she often works with text, images, sound and computer software. In her poetry she makes use of post-conceptual techniques, experimenting with different types of language(s) and discourses. She studied literary theory at the University of Bucharest from where she holds a MA, and currently she is a research assistant at Human Language Technology Center and a Ph.D. candidate with a thesis researching Wittgenstein's *traces* in literature and art.