



POST-HUMAN BODY AND BEAUTY

CUERPO POSTHUMANO Y BELLEZA

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ABSTRACT:

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The article calls into question the very possibility of a post-human aesthetics, starting from the following premise: rather than post-human, it is more correct to speak of *post-natural*, indicating by this expression a reality produced through a new type of evolution, which does not simply change human nature, but denatures it, radically transforming it into an artefact. This post-nature which aspires to be perfect, immortal, invulnerable, is entirely devoid of beauty. In fact, while there may be an aesthetic of the artificial and of the artefact if it is in relation to objects, there is, however, no aesthetic of the post-human body. This is because is configured as a non-body and does not have the characteristics for what is commonly intended as beauty (harmony between matter and form, a reflection of inner life, uniqueness). Also in this case, it is more correct to speak of post-beauty, which in its properties appears to be the mirror image of beauty and ultimately, represents its complete dissolution.

RESUMEN:

Palabras clave:

Cuerpo-posthumano,
belleza, estética.

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El artículo pone en duda la posibilidad misma de una estética post-humana, a partir de la siguiente premisa: en lugar de post-humano, es más correcto hablar de *post-natural*, indicando con esta expresión una realidad producida a través de un nuevo tipo de evolución, que no cambia simplemente la naturaleza humana, sino que la des-naturaliza, transformándola radicalmente en artefacto. Esta post-naturaleza, que aspira a ser perfecta, inmortal, invulnerable, es totalmente carente de belleza. De hecho, si bien puede haber una estética de lo artificial y también del artefacto, en relación con los objetos, en cambio no puede darse una estética del cuerpo post-humano, debido a que éste se configura como un no-cuerpo y no tiene las características de lo que comúnmente se entiende por belleza (armonía entre materia y forma, reflejo de interioridad, unicidad). También en este caso, es más correcto hablar de post-belleza, que en sus propiedades parece una imagen especular de la belleza y, en última instancia, constituye su completa disolución.

1. Nature and post-nature: the body as an artefact and the dissolution of the original

"The sky above the port was the colour of television, tuned to a dead channel". The opening words of the well-known science fiction novel by William Gibson's

Neuromancer efficiently express the transformation with which the notions of beauty and nature are likely to suffer in the technological age. We are no longer capable of looking at the world and grasp the harmony and it is considered a duplicate or a reference to the artificial,

which represents the imperfect copy. It is the reversal of the myth of Plato's cave: no longer do we escape the image to go back to what is true, but abandon truth by surround ourselves with images, depictions deprived of consistency. Gibson's novel, like many others of science fiction, is also interesting as a metaphor for the changes that the body undergoes within the technological universe. The protagonist, Case, a hacker who is found guilty of concealing data, is deprived of the ability to connect to cyberspace and is isolated to the "prison of flesh" of his material body. Next to him, Molly, a samurai of the street, has a body that is artificially enhanced through the implanting of retractable blades placed under the nails and multifunctional lenses that cover the eyes. In general, the bodies of the different characters that populate the novel have a chilling panorama of ugliness: not facially, but regarding the kit, multifunctional systems, built to efficiently carry out set tasks.

Rather than artificial bodies, we are dealing with artefacts, that is, reality that does not reproduce – by imitation and re-creation – something that exists in nature, but is invented and developed thanks to technique, just like a radio or a motorcar. The artefact, understood as a cultural dimension, is inseparable from the human body, which is not simply a fact of nature. Man is by nature an artificial being, because of his eccentricity, as noted by Plessner: «Devoid of place and time, based on nothing, the form of eccentric life obtains its base. Only to the extent of what it creates, it owns and is brought forward. The artificiality of acting, thinking and dreaming is the means by which the inner man, as a living natural being, is in accord with himself. With the forced interruption through the production of intermediate elements made, the life cycle of man to which he is bound as an autonomous body, its needs and impulses of life and death, and rises to a sphere superimposed on nature and is collocates in freedom»¹.

The artefact, however, is a de-naturalization, as it pursues a life form designed according to the correction of all that is considered as a defect of nature. It is the

mirage of perfection, that man desires non-stop, the dream of immortality that demands of man a kind of self-denial: «Expel himself from himself into an artificial orbit in which he will circle forever»².

But the result is not reassuring. «The inhumanity of this enterprise is readable in the abolition of all that is human, all too human in us: our desires, our faults, our neuroses, our dreams, our disabilities, our delusions, our unconscious and even our sexuality – these prescriptions of all the traits that make us specific living beings [...] The limits of the human and the inhuman are deleting themselves, not towards the superhuman level and the transmutation of values, but towards the sub-human and the pre human level, towards a disappearance of the symbolic features of the same species, something that would rightly give reason to Nietzsche, according to which the human species, left to itself, would not know anything else but to double or destroy itself»³.

This is what we read on several websites dedicated to post-humanism, where the "hedonistic imperative" is configured as a biological strategy to eradicate suffering from human life, and more generally from the world of the living, thanks to nanotechnology and genetic engineering and where it is hoped to defeat of death: «In my opinion, death is a tragedy. It is a tremendous loss of personality, skills, knowledge, and relationships. We have rationalized death as something acceptable because we have had no choice. But diseases, aging and death are problems that we are now able to overcome» and again: «Humanity is transforming, going from flesh to silicon. That's why the arrival of our cybernetic future is good news»⁴. Although the real world is fortunately still far from narrative inventions or science fiction predictions, the idea that the body is becoming "old-fashioned", to paraphrase the words of Anders, is suggested each day not only by progress from biomedicine and technique,

1 H. Plessner, *I gradi dell'organico e l'uomo: un'introduzione all'antropologia filosofica*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2006, 339. Our translation. [*Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie*, 1928].

2 Baudrillard, J. *The perfect crime*, Verso, London – New York, 1996, 39.

3 Baudrillard, J. *Lo scambio impossibile*, Asterios, Trieste, 2000, 42. Our translation. [*L'échange impossible*, Galilée, Paris, 1999].

4 *La singolarita' e' vicina: quando gli esseri umani trascendono la biologia. Domande e risposte con Ray Kurzweil*, [On line document] <<http://www.estropico.com/id259.htm>> [Consulted: 17/10/2013].

which insist to believe that the “old” way to be born and die is anachronistic, but also by the different theories that consider sexual difference a kind of fossil remnant. In this perspective, it dissolves the boundary between the possible and the real, between what is given and what is the result of self-determination, between what is a technical product and what is properly human.

In his analysis of depictions, Baudrillard notes that an abyss separates the 17th century automaton from the android or the post-human body. The first does nothing but reaffirm the excellence of both the human body, so complex as to be imitated and that of his mind that is able to realize that imitation. The automaton, in the end, still awakens a question about man and the dilemma of appearances, because it is constantly confronted with the living man and does not abolish the difference, but rather highlights it. Its charm lies in the similarity. In contrast, the android or cyborg represents the disappearance of the similarity, the deletion of the term of comparison⁵. By analogy, where technique is subject to man, we pass to equivalence, where it is exactly the opposite: «The being and appearance are merged into a single substance»⁶. It is the liquidation of the real, of any difference between the real and the copy, as if someone has unplugged the projected image in a mirror and made it their own, indistinguishable from the original, which thus loses its character as a primary reference and matrix. It is the death of the original and the end of transcendence: «A process of absorption of signs and absorption by signs»⁷. Man becomes «immanent in the signs he arranges»⁸. There is no more possibility to verify the reality, since it too is a product of invention.

The range of duplication, splitting and multiplication becomes infinite at this point. Walter Benjamin, dealing with the work of art, has outlined a progressive

evolution that we can apply also to changes in the conception of the body⁹. As a ritual object, the work of art has firstly taken a cultural and aesthetic form, and then becomes technically reproducible in a multiplication of copies without an original. Similarly, the body is gradually losing its symbolic and sacral character and has become an object of consumption, technical manipulation and finally replication.

2. The two utopias of post humanism and the subversion of beauty

“Farewell to the body” writes Le Breton¹⁰: if anatomy is no longer a destiny, but the result of a decision that is constantly revocable, the body turns into prosthesis of the Self that is forever in search of an identity. The body is now seen as a sketch, a draft to be corrected. Baudrillard defines it as “body metastasis”, to indicate the constant changeability and the total subjection to the biomedical eye, which deprives it of any symbolic value, as it is defined exclusively in terms of the genetic code (DNA) and brain structure (the information code and the billions of neurons). «We are in a system where there is no more soul, no more metaphor of the body – the same story of the unconsciousness has lost much of its resonance. No story, no instance comes to present a metaphor of our presence, transcendence no longer plays in our definition, our being is consumed in its molecular chains and its neural convolutions. All this no longer defines individuals, but potential mutants. From the point of view of biology, genetics and cybernetics, we are all mutants»¹¹.

What appears clear is the nature of instrumentality that the body takes, in an even more radical way: a tool that often troublesome in the service of the mind. «Our bodies will only be vehicles to transport our brains. If we could get rid of it, it would be better», said soundly by a scientist in Silicon Valley. In this perspective, anything that falls outside the mental – often understood as neurobiological – becomes residual, becomes part of what

5 See Baudrillard, J. *Lo scambio simbolico e la morte*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2007, 64-65. [*L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Galimard, Paris 1976].

6 Ibid. Our translation.

7 Baudrillard, J. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, Sage, London, 1998, 191.

8 Ibid, 192. Baudrillard names here a classic movie, *Der Student von Prag* by Wegener (1913), in which the main character, once he sold the image of himself, started to be persecuted every where and every moment by his *alter ego* and is forced to kill it, killing himself.

9 Benjamin, W. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Harvard University Press, 2008.

10 See Le Breton, D. *L'Adieu au corps*, Métailié, Paris, 1999.

11 Baudrillard, J. *L'autre par lui-meme, L'altro visto da sé*, Genova, Costa & Nolan, 1987, 39. Our translation.

Baudrillard calls “unnecessary features”¹². Among these we can include even sexual difference, which is closely linked to the symbolic value of corporeality. The same *Gender Theory*, sorted within a current of feminism, can be read as a demonstration of this trend. After affirming the separation of the sexed body, considered pure biology that is symbolically irrelevant of gender, being the cultural result of social and political dynamics proceeds to confirm that the same body element would be forged in language and in dominant codes, as a simple product of a linguistic construction.

The old duality gives way to transformation, to the metonymy of the sexes, to in-difference, which make the human world similar to the garden of Alice, the wonderland of incessant transmutations¹³. On the other hand, the end of sexual difference is but a result of the alleged sexual “liberation” carried out thanks to technique: in the first place, contraception has disassociated sexual activity from procreation, then the techniques of assisted reproduction have dissociated the reproduction from gender. After sex was “liberated” from reproduction, we enter the stage where reproduction wants to “get rid” of sex. Sexuality itself becomes “useless” or turns into something functional: «Once its total, symbolic exchange function has been deconstructed and lost, sexuality collapses into the dual use-value/exchange-value scheme (which two aspects together are characteristic of the notion of *object*)»¹⁴. Value in use for the individual, as satisfaction of his needs or exchange value, which is no longer symbolic, but economic, contractual, and is similar to prostitution. The more perfections that are added to the real, the more perfected is the artefact, with the effect of hiding or annulling the truth: in this way, the symbolic power is diverted to a sort of meta-physical culture where sex is reified¹⁵. But if the femininity and masculinity become functional then beauty is no longer a natural value but “exponential”, i.e. an independent variable based on a functional relationship.

The post-human project seems to stand on two utopias: the utopia of being brought into the world – and not coming to the world – and the other is to conquer death. Both radically subvert the meaning of beauty.

Being brought into the world means getting rid of everything that is *given by nature*, to rebel against what is *already made* to build a second nature appropriate to ones desires. In this key, we can read two phenomena: *Body Art* and *Transgenderism*.

Body Art proposes itself to turn the body into a critical tool to undermine values and conventions and to reveal hidden dimensions. It no longer pursues an ideal of beauty. It does not propose aesthetics but a moralistic use of the body, which ends up becoming ideological. The medium is the metamorphosis, the intake of a variety of body shapes, even repulsive, with the intent to surprise, provoke, induce to react¹⁶. Orlan’s *Carnal Art* is one of the most striking examples of this auto-reconfiguration of the body, as it appears in *Manifesto*: «Carnal Art is self-portraiture in the classical sense, but realised through the possibility of technology. It swings between disfiguration and re-figuration. Its inscription in the flesh is a function of our age. The body has become “modified ready-made”, no longer seen as the ideal it once represented, the body is not anymore this ideal ready-made it was satisfying to sign»¹⁷.

The intent is not to pursue aesthetic criteria, but rather to build ourselves, according to an arbitrary and indisputable will that is opposed to the fact of nature, as is evident from Orlan’s statement: «Mon travail est en lutte contre l’inné, l’inexorable, la nature, l’ADN (qui est notre rival direct en tant qu’artiste de la représentation) et Dieu»¹⁸.

In a similar way, Stelarc transforms the body into a kind of anachronistic and obsolete casing to get rid of. The artist becomes a “genetic sculptor” an “architect of the interior spaces of the body”, a “surgeon who implants dreams and transplants desires”, an “alchemist of evolution”¹⁹.

12 See Baudrillard, J. *Lo scambio impossibile*, op. cit. 47. Our translation.

13 See Baudrillard, J. *Lo scambio impossibile*, op. cit. 100.

14 Baudrillard, J. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, op. cit. 151.

15 See Ibid, 152.

16 See Le Breton, D. *Body Art*, in Marzano M. (ed.), *Dictionnaire du corps*, PUF, Paris, 2007, 140-144.

17 Orlan, [On line publication] *Carnal Art Manifesto* <<http://orlan.eu/adriensina/manifeste/carnal.html>> [Consulted: 17/10/2013].

18 Orlan, *De l’art charnel au baiser de l’artiste*, Paris, Jean-Michel Place, 1997, 41.

19 See D. Le Breton, *Body Art*, 144.

Also *transgenderism* can be interpreted as a manifestation of the post-human utopia of being brought into world. It could be defined as the anxiety of the limits of the sexed body; a desire for metamorphosis, nostalgia is be otherwise in respect to the body already given. It is the same project that we find in the “polymorphic body” of the American based *Queer Theory* or in the “body without organs” theorized by Deleuze and Guattari²⁰, who intends to go beyond sexualisation to arrive to a mobile and floating sexuality. Or even in the transformation envisaged by Butler, who proposes the exchange of genders and therefore also of clothes, as subversive gesture of liberation (parody)²¹. A common note to these theories is the absence of beauty. If beauty is always associated with a call for unity, to an external order which is a reflection of inner harmony, all of these manifestations occur instead as intentionally dissonant, producing a sort of existential cacophony.

The second utopia is the victory over death. In the cult movie directed by Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner*, the “replicants” of Nexus 6 who are androids built specifically to perform heavy-duty work without questioning about the purposes of their business, possess superhuman strength, but are devoid of feelings and have a predetermined duration. Some of them rebel and go in search of who designed them to know the reason of such an existence so limited: Why is it so that among all endowments received, have they not been created immortal? The epilogue of the meeting with their “creator” is, of course, dramatic: it is a clear demonstration that in the end, every technical effort to force the human condition, “replicating it” or simply enhancing, beyond a certain limit, the capacity that is always an attempt to cancel the death. A pathetic attempt, but nevertheless inevitable. It had already been announced by Aeschylus, who in *Prometheus* has one of his character say while he suffers the penalty of violating the divine limit, that only after having given man the oblivion of death, he could off fire, being the technical capacity: “I turned man to

the sight of death ... then I made him a sharer of fire”. The technique is inseparable from this removal of death, the illusion of being able to forget it or defeat it.

The traditional narrative science fiction has presented us with a naive version of immortality, à la Frankenstein, made possible by the assembly of organs, by the multiplication of transplantations and by infusion of new life energy into a body. But this version is always accompanied by some sort of *ybris*, the violation of a sacred boundary that makes the result, in some way, terrible. In the chapter *The Immortals*, contained in the *Chronicles of Bustos Domecq*, Borges tells of the protagonist’s experience of a medical examination by a geriatrician, Raúl Narbondo, to solve his problems of aging. In the waiting room, he meets the “immortals” who are characters or furniture, which are wooden cubes with slits from where strange voices come out. The doctor presents them as those who have attained immortality by replacing various parts of their organism. But when Narbondo offers the same transformation to Bustos, he flees in terror.

The post-humanism proposes two “reassuring” solutions to the ancient dream of immortality of man. On the one hand it numbs, offering an infinite range of possibilities instead of the desire for the infinite: to do, to achieve, and to produce. Even the manipulation of time and the de-structuring of temporality contribute to the removal of death. If, in fact, you can repeat the experience of the beginning and the end many times, you get the negation of the very notion of starting and finishing, with the result that you feel immortal or at least, exorcise death. Immortality can be conquered or become capable of not dying (and this seems to be the promise of technologized medicine) or dying all the time, making daily life a *rehearsal of death*²². The triumph of the ephemeral, of the *disposable*, the absolute repeatability of experiences and relationships, the radical reproducibility of the images may end up convincing that just as there is a fixed point at the beginning, an *original version*, there isn’t even an end. The experience of the creation of a text on the computer, where there

20 See Deleuze, G. – Guattari, F. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Penguin Classics, London, 2009.

21 Butler, J. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York-London, 1990.

22 See Bauman, Z. *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Polity Press, Oxford, 1992.

is no trace of the corrections, of the original drafts and successive afterthoughts or the path followed to reach the conclusion but where everything is deconstructed in a sort of dialogue with the screen, offers a striking example of the dissolution of the distinction between provisional and definitive.

Secondly, post-modern culture searches for another solution: if death represents a fatal event, predictable but not programmable and beyond control, to conquer it we can just make it rational, transform it into a gesture of freedom, that each may choose to make at a given time. In this perspective, you do not die anymore, in the passive sense of the event, but you decide to put an end to life: this is the new version of immortality, proposed with almost scientific coldness and in some cases reduced to the inevitable exit from a scene where the roles are intended to be interpreted only in healthy and capable subjects. Once it was a passing-through, when belief in the afterlife was widespread and vocal, and then de-cess, since biomedical science has intervened, and now death becomes the pro-cess, understood as a kind of activity. Dying, is no longer fatal, but decided at determined times and places.

These perspectives make beauty superfluous or at least radically change its meaning. Beauty has always been seen as an antidote to death, a remedy to the anguish of the ephemeral, but if death is overcome in other ways, beauty no longer makes sense²³. It turns into refinement or aesthetics, but loses that metaphysical character capable of elevating the spirit and put it in touch with reality outside of time.

3. Beauty and post-beauty: two models in comparison

The meaning of beauty has been so profoundly changed, to the point that you need to ask whether it is still legitimate to talk of 'beauty' in the classic sense: let us try to understand in what respects, therefore, it is possible to make a comparison between what is meant traditionally as 'beauty' and the beauty of the post-human body .

A body, in order to be beautiful, must have certain properties. This, appearing to our eye as a truism, is no longer the case in posthumanism: the changes inflicted on body dimensions in its broadest sense are such as to render questionable the applicability of the concept of beauty.

In the process leading to the post-humanism, the body is charged with artificial additions. Implementation through prosthesis profoundly alters the nature of the self. We are not dealing with a body with prosthesis: the body itself has become an entire prosthesis, in which the artificial can not be distinguished from natural, following as whole which removes the difference between nature and artifice. «Human bodies have no boundaries»²⁴ is what we read in the Posthuman manifesto. The self becomes artificial, a prosthesis of the body, because *the artificial body is natural*.

The post-human body, abstractly considered, is outside and before any biological-natural determination: without boundaries, it is un-defined in and in-definable to start with. Intended as a modifiable support at will, it becomes beautiful through processes of de-construction and re-construction, in such a dialectic in which the parties precede and exceed the whole. The *subjectivity* becomes, in this context, the rhetorical artifice of a culture to be abandoned, the theoretical construct of a science that is definitely outdated and branded as "mythical".

Changing the anthropological anatomy of the body, there is a necessary change in the sense of its beauty: the "post-beauty" is characterized as a point of arrival both calculable and measurable, becoming an idol to reproduce and replicate without distinction. It is designed in light of performance as a mere identical correspondence to an external model, deprived of essential metaphysical tension. Beauty, to paraphrase Benjamin, becomes "technically reproducible"²⁵. The beautiful body is (re) produced technically, leaving nothing to imagination and thought. If for Kant, the aesthetic idea is «that representation of the imagination which evokes much thought»²⁶,

24 Pepperell, R. «The Posthuman Manifesto». *Kritikos*, 2, (2005), II.7.

25 Benjamin, W. *op. cit.*

26 Kant, I. *Critique of Judgement*, Oxford University Press, 2007, 142.

23 See Severino, E. *Del Bello*, Milano, Mimesis, 2011.

then in the post-humanity, the imaginative and symbolic propulsion of beauty is turned off by technique. Technical reproducibility means at the same time also losing the *original*: it makes no sense to speak of *individual* beauty, because in the entity as such, nothing is beautiful that can not be reproduced. The *aura* of a work of art, the *charm* of a person, is supplanted by technology.

The beauty becomes something simply positive, i.e., *positum*, orphaned of its origin and metaphysical destination and mutilated of its symbolic dimension, as a sign that stands for something else. It dissolves the relationship that is seen as key to every artistic production, between the sensory and intellectual premise of Hegelian aesthetics: «In this way the sensuous aspect of art is *spiritualized*, since the spirit appears in art as made sensuous»²⁷. The sensitive and the spiritual collapse into matter, in the most idolatrous and abstract sense possible.

This vision of the body and corporeality is associated with a subjectivity that has first been reduced to subject: as an open dynamic and relational entity, the *subjectivity* is crushed in the narrow perimeters of the *subject* that is a mute and passive instrument. Every genuine opening to transcendence, or the transcendent, is closed to the “beautiful body”, which now lives as a sarcophagus. Any attempt to get out of the armour turns back to signify oneself: the body as a sign to another, and for others, such as a structure of original returning to which we are assigned, no longer has any meaning. The end and the ends no longer exist as such, to pursue a circularity of time, giving us forever a technique, we subtract individual identity: «All origins are ends and all ends are origins»²⁸.

In the apparent triumph of exteriority, it ceases to be truly so since it is something *external*, to be really something else: «Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the “outside” is the real source of fear»²⁹. And then, neither an inside, a soul. Since there is no longer any hidden interior guarded from the outside, the size of the surface becomes the only thing conceivable and possible, deleting any metaphysical or

moral connotation which lies in the beautiful object, with the reference to a higher dimension: «But this aspect – external existence – is not what makes a work into a product of fine art; a work of art is such only because, originating from the spirit, it now belongs to the territory of the spirit; it has received the baptism of the spiritual and sets forth only what has been formed in harmony with the spirit»³⁰. The post-human beauty closes the post-human subject like a protective shell, which makes interiority inaccessible, taking away the breath of life and annihilating it.

The beauty in this process also loses any pedagogical quality, no longer representing a value which educates the soul through the body. Dissolving the complex unit of the soul-body relationship, the achievement of beauty becomes a simple *adaequatio*, an equivalence of shapes and sizes, a simple *matter of fact*. We are faced with a radical *exteriorism*, in which the surface represents at a time, also the whole depth that is accessible.

The post-human objective, democratizing beauty and making it accessible to all, is to *standardize the flesh*. But in a more radical sense, to *eliminate* the flesh, which is the last bulwark of the individuality of the body and of the material, in favour of a collective super-body, in which everything is artificial and natural at the same time, and that soon tends to identify with a super-organism without person or individuality. The final outcome of this process is: «The moment of merging the web of non-human forces that frame him/her, the cosmos as a whole. We may call it death, but in a monistic ontology of vitalist materialism, it has rather to do with radical immanence»³¹. The beauty achieved through a “technical route towards the beautiful” also certifies the death and it’s turning off, the “beautiful subject” no longer exists because the post-human world is an orphan of beauty. But on the other hand it is also the orphan of the subject which, sacrificing itself to the identity of everything with everything else, finally loses its identity: «The identity of everything with everything is bought at the cost that nothing can at the same time be identical to itself»³².

27 Hegel, G.W.F. *Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, 1988, 39.

28 Pepperell, R. *op. cit.* III.7.

29 Horkheimer, M., Adorno, T.W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, 2002, 11.

30 Hegel, G.W.F. *op. cit.* 29.

31 Braidotti, R. *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013.

32 Horkheimer, M., Adorno, T.W. *op. cit.* 8.

4. Scientia est potentia: the totalitarianism of the technique

In a similar context, apparently characterized in a materialistic key, matter is the least “material” that can be thought of: the post-human world and the radical scientism that characterizes it, are strongly *idealist*. With the vanishing of the dialectical opposition between given material and a knowing subject, the condition of the existence of both vanishes: «Both subject and object are nullified. The abstract self [...] is confronted by nothing but abstract material»³³.

Abandoning the mythical-mimetic dimension of existence in favour of cold rational domain of the living, post-humanism is set up as yet another stage of the man’s mythical relationship with the world. Post-human instinct is, paradoxically, *radically human* and representative of what man lives in his profundity. At the same time, it is very far from the ideal of cold scientific rationality of which he would aspire to. Science and technique become fetishes, objects loaded with a transcendent meaning, almost mystical, through which man finally re-appropriates a new dimension.

Post-humanism thus takes on the traits of a mythical revolution, a return to the past, to the archetypal roots of existence, in which flows the desire to take over the world, to overwhelm it, in new forms, but following the instincts of old. The post-humanism we could paraphrase Horkheimer and Adorno, «is mythical fear radicalized»³⁴.

The aim is to overcome the nature through technique in which it is thought, rather naively, as radically opposed to nature. The *medium* chosen is the total conformation to an ideal of neutrality, impartiality and cold equality. Breaking down the nature where it limits us: in gender differentiation and in the processes of biological aging. The indistinct, removing the difference, at the same time removes the condition of deterioration of the perishable individual, of mortal flesh. The supposed neutrality and impartiality of the technical scientific description of the world, however, is as far removed from neutrality and

impartiality that one would like to attribute: «The impartiality of scientific language deprived what was powerless of the strength to make itself heard and merely provided the existing order with a neutral sign for itself. Such neutrality is more metaphysical than metaphysics»³⁵. The idolatrous devotion to the democracy of mathematical language – for the “neutral sign” – is in truth a distortion that does not consist merely in nature and reality, but in human desire, all too human, to dominate them.

The post-human myth is, in the sense of Adorno and Horkheimer, still deeply *enlightened*. What we read in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* also applies to the post-humanism: «Enlightenment’s mythic terror springs from a horror of myth. It detects myth not only in semantically unclarified concepts and words, as linguistic criticism imagines, but in any human utterance which has no place in the functional context of self-preservation»³⁶.

Science and technique become new authentic subjects, eliminating the human subject from the scene, being reduced to a “natural prosthesis” of technical artifice. «Substitutability is also the vehicle of both progress and regression»³⁷. The prosthesis, through which the real becomes unnatural (or artificial), is a regression which cancels the conditions for existence of difference itself between prosthesis and nature. In the *Post-human Manifesto*, it is consistently stated that «in the post-human era, machines will no longer be machines»³⁸.

The techno-scientism of post-humanism is symbolically represented and mocked in Goethe’s *Faust*, when, in the alchemical laboratory, Wagner is struggling with an attempt to create artificial life: «Nay, God forbid! This procreation is most rare: of the old, senseless mode we’re now well ridden [...] The beast therein may further find a zest, but man must learn, with his great gifts, to win henceforth a purer, loftier origin»³⁹. To the confident enthusiasm of Wagner, Mephistopheles opposes this ancient wisdom, worthy of the Devil: «Who lives,

33 Ibid, 20.

34 Ibid, 11.

35 Ibid, 17.

36 Ibid, 22.

37 Ibid, 27.

38 Pepperell, R. *op. cit.* I.7.

39 Goethe, J.W. *Faust*. <http://archive.org/stream/fausttragedy00goetuoft/fausttragedy00goetuoft_djvu.txt> [Consulted: 30/09/2013]

learns many secrets to unravel; for him, upon this earth, there's nothing new can be; I've seen already in my years of travel, much crystallized humanity»⁴⁰. The story is old and has already been seen, warns Mephistopheles. Man, throughout his history, starts again willingly from where he was born: from his myths which give new shape to the ever-present fears and hopes.

The mythical root of post-humanism is in how it present itself to an era, as an ultimate and new humanity, of a "post-humanity", in which finally man will be leave behind his mortal and perishable nature to become whole with an existing one that surpasses it and complements it. The fact is that the very act of opposing nature and its laws is, in the deepest sense, a *natural act*. The liberation from nature takes place under the aegis of nature, as yet another manifestation: «Any attempt to break the compulsion of nature by breaking nature only succumbs more deeply succumbs to that compulsion»⁴¹.

Science, whose legitimate daughter is technique, is intrinsically connected to the natural world: it wants to understand the mechanisms, to reproduce the operation and penetrate its mysteries. The technical-scientific relationship with the world responds to the metaphysics needs of man, who is not satisfied with the aesthetic contemplation of the stars, but who seeks to understand the movements and the role in the cosmos. In so called post-humanism, the vital link between the subject and nature is cut off, through the auto referential use of technique for self-service.

Science gives way to technique. If the subject of science is the man, then man is now subject to technique. Pure quantity triumphs in terms of duration, extension, of conservation of the matter. All is without a subject. The so called post-human myth presents a novelty compared to other myths: to remove the centrality of the subject that so far has been considered essential in mythological narrative. Deleting the subject means eliminating the conditions for the encounter with the mythical world. On the one hand, the traditional myth is processual-ity, movement, mimesis, desire; dialectic construction of

meaning and on the other, in post-humanism, there is stasis, mere identity, fixation, identical and egalitarian reproduction, negation, denial of sense and annihilation of the subject. The post-human project of anthropomorphism of the nature involves parallel naturalization of the *antropos*: «As computers develop to be more like humans, so humans develop to like computers more»⁴².

5. Conclusions

Post-humanism has been repeatedly brought closer to the Nietzschean supermanhood⁴³. The comparison, in particular, does not hold. In general terms, what brings post-humanism and supermanhood together is that you configure both as *myths*, that is, as narratives that are beyond the rational-scientific dimension of representation of reality. To look at the myth from a rational point of view is absurd and unproductive. It is too coarse of an error. The *myth* is a direct communication which tells us how things *really* are around us, seen by the penetrating intuition of the narrator, who gives us the filigree reality which is otherwise inaccessible in a conceptual way.

The mythical character, however, remains the single point of contact, external and formal, between the thought of Zarathustra and the Post-human. With regard to the theme of the body, in this specific case, the lure of Zarathustra in the opposite direction to post-humanism, is very strong and explicit: «The body is a great reason, a multiplicity with one sense, a war and a peace, one herd and one shepherd»⁴⁴. On the one hand, the technical idea of the abuse of science to overcome the natural limits of the body is branded by Nietzsche as the rejection of a corporeality that is assigned and that should be welcomed rather than resisted. On the other hand, the cancellation of individual identity in favour of a super-organism originates from the same inability to accept one's body and to identify with it, as

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Horkheimer M., Adorno T.W. *op. cit.* 9.

⁴² Pepperell, R. *op. cit.* 1.14.

⁴³ See for example: Sorgner, S.L. «Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism». *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 20, 1, (2009), 29-42. See also Ansell-Pearson, K. «The transfiguration of existence and sovereign life: Sloterdijk and Nietzsche on posthuman and superhuman futures». *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 27, (2009), 139-156.

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, F.W. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, 23.

principium individuationis: «He lives in your body, he is your body»⁴⁵, pronounces Zarathustra to the “despisers of the body”. The acceptance of the body and its limits, far from being passive in the face of constraints of nature, was to Nietzsche something genuinely *positive*, stirred by love and the desire for the finiteness of life.

From the content point of view, the Nietzschean Superman has very little to do with the post-human horizon: without being able to go into detail, the idea of circularity of time and the eternal return of the same, the overcoming of morality and dependency of God, are all themes that post-humanism resumes in part without following the conceptual depth and breadth.

It should however be noted that in both these perspective we lose sight of the totality of human living, dissociating it or in a mind that wants to manage a body or in a body that tries to self-assert itself excluding reason. In this unstructured horizon, we forget the lessons of Greek wisdom that combined beauty to the measure, intended not as a purely quantitative value determined by an instrument (*métron*), but as a formal balance (*métrion*), due to the harmony of the totality of the living being, only partially susceptible to measurement⁴⁶. This means that the search for the right measurement, that is beauty, is inseparable from the consideration of unity of the human being. We need to overcome any kind of reductionism to reaffirm the unity between body and spirit, even in the dialect between vulnerability of the flesh and the tendency towards immortality.

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⁴⁵ Ibid, 23.

⁴⁶ See Gadamer, H.G. *Filosofia e medicina pratica*, in *Dove si nasconde la salute*, Milano, Cortina, 1994, 109.