

Sándor Hornyik

Natura Mortifera: A Post-Humanist Perspective

Anything that causes death is deadly. A shot, a prick, an overdose of medicine. Nature itself can also prove to be deadly, although one should specify first whether it is Nature or human nature in question. Concrete facts, however, kill ambiguities, explain things that are unexplained or inexplicable, dispel the enigma of darkness and resolve tensions. In contrast, the exhibition entitled “Deathly Nature” aims to preserve something of the culture of horror, so this introductory essay also intends to treat the problem of ambiguity in a similar manner: it poses but does not answer questions. What kind of Nature is deathly? Who understands and shows Nature as something that causes death, when and why? – These questions are deliberately left unanswered. The culture of horror, perhaps the most obvious explanatory framework, does not provide a consistent perspective either. For instance, the phrase “deathly nature” means something entirely different within the visual framework of a psycho thriller or a bio horror movie. One need merely consider the differences between the cinematography of Roman Polanski (*Repulsion*, 1965) and David Cronenberg (*Crash*, 1996) or between scripts written by Alfred Hitchcock (*Psycho*, 1960) and Vincenzo Natali (*Splice*, 2009).

In the fine arts, possible connotations of “deathly nature” or “*natura mortifera*” are even more laden with connotations, as the phrase *natura morta* conjures up concepts that have their roots in Classical culture: still life, moralization, academism and realism. Moreover, Classical culture and reality also share a somewhat contentious and ambiguous relationship, since outside the world of fine arts, images of perfection (flawless bodies, brawny discus throwers and bloomy peaches) exist solely in the realms of illusions or fancy. Therefore, the art of the Classical period – which in this sense lasted until the emergence of Dadaism and Surrealism – was dominated by images of the body that had drifted down from the realm of ideas (with the rare exceptions of works by Caravaggio or Francisco de Goya). The art of idealized body images prevailed until the century of the motion picture. Yet in truth real bodies always suffer wounds and are far from ideal, and their fragility and imperfect physicality are among the main principles of today’s post-humanist humanism.¹

Film and photography, however, become parts of this post-humanist perspective in manifold ways. They not only reflect on reality, but the ambivalence of photographic and filmic realism and reality is a feature that is also inherently present in post-humanism. Since representation and reproduction are not simply straight, unidirectional processes, moving from the body towards the image, one should consider the possibility of reaction, reflection and repercussion as well. Seen in this way, works of art should convey more than a mirror image of reality and should go beyond naturalism, as art is indeed capable of shaping and constructing reality, from couple’s therapy to plastic surgery. In other words the relationship between the “inner” and the “outer” and the thematicization of this relationship should become more emphatic, even more crucial. And yet, as for what kinds of “truths” and truth values are ascribed to paintings, moving pictures, and *objects d’art*, this is emphatically dependent on discourse (it is not irrelevant whether we are speaking of art, the sciences, or law). Furthermore, even within the various branches of the visual arts there are distinctive “languages” with which to express spatiality, as for instance one relates spatially to sculptures and paintings in radically different ways.

Gábor Fülöp’s *Katica* (“Ladybird”, 2010), for instance, evokes the idea of *Wunderkammern*, the Cabinets of Wonders. This sculpture radically rewrites the traditionally human-centred perspective of Classical sculpture, since it centres on the body of a *Coccinella Septempunctata*, the seven-spot ladybird. Moreover, it also questions the traditional notions of

¹ Judith Butler. *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso, 2006.

the subject and subjectivity, as the body-statue is fully covered by the insects familiar from Hungarian folk art and the toy industry. The question of whether the sculptor intends to represent a miracle or portrays the first specimen of a new humanoid with an exoskeleton made of chitin remains open. Possible interpretations become even more complex if one understands the sculpture within the oeuvre of Fülöp, in which the reticulated, airy body of the sponge-like *Animus* (2009) and the Minotaur-like, savage *Nagy Szürke* (“Big Grey”, 2012), both depicting male figures, make the feminine features of *Katica* even more pronounced. Fülöp’s plastic art provides a particularly relevant starting point, since it contains almost every possible post-humanist code of interpretation. The wooden *Animus* conjures up both computer graphics and the immense archaic knowledge of professional woodworking, the figure of *Katica* evokes the cyborg and thus the dissolution of the borders between nature and culture, while *Nagy Szürke* can have biological, biopolitical as well as mythological connotations, depending on whether one shows more interest in the biological possibility of a Hungarian grey cattle-human hybrid or in the current revivification of Hungarian cultural myths.

Fülöp’s two *Ufos* (*Ufo Girl*, 2012 and *Ufo Boy III*, 2011) focus on yet another aspect of today’s society. The male and female UFO-humans represent the hopelessly irresolvable dichotomy of human perceptions regarding gender, which acquires an ironic undertone if one considers that all the sculptures and plastic works of art in the “Deathly Nature” exhibition are by male artists. The female gaze seems to have another focus; it seeks to reconstruct reality in other ways.² Márta Czene’s series of paintings were inspired by iconic films: the basis for *Mi van veled?* (“What’s Wrong with You?”, 2010) was Roman Polanski’s 1965 *Repulsion*, while *Álmomban máshol* (“Somewhere Else in My Dreams”, 2008) is an adaptation of Dario Argento’s 1985 *Phenomena*. The protagonists of both films have connections with worlds to which others do not have access. The heroine of *Repulsion* is subjected to patriarchal prejudices, and also to her own repressed sexual fantasies, and this eventually leads her to madness and murder. Conversely, in *Phenomena* the heroine transgresses normality by using her supernatural abilities. She can communicate with insects and see what they see, know what they know, and she uses her abilities to find and kill a serial killer. Czene’s works acquire yet another twist if one considers that the post-humanist perspective has been subjected to the most thorough interrogation by female scholars working at the crossroads of the natural sciences, philosophy and feminist criticism, such as Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles.

Post-Humanism

The expression “post-humanism” is thought to be Ihab Hassan’s term,³ who, in turn, used Michel Foucault’s well-known metaphor of “man [being] erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea”.⁴ Foucault’s idea that human notions and theories are historically determined became the point of departure for Friedrich Kittler, who went one step further and found the principles of the human perspective not in discourse, but in the technology that preforms it.⁵ Hassan’s post-humanist fantasies received a major impetus when biology and

² Cf. Laura Mulvey. “British Feminist Film Theory’s Female Spectators: Presence and Absence.” *Camera Obscura*, 3, 1989, 68-81. See also Jackey Stacey. *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*. London: Routledge, 1994.

³ Ihab Hassan. “Prometheus as Performer: Towards a Posthumanist Culture.” *Performance in Postmodern Culture*. Ed. M. Benamou. and C. Caramello. Milwaukee, WI: Coda Press, 1977, 201-220. Hassan’s text was rediscovered in the 1990s, cf. Neil Badmington, ed. *Posthumanism*. New York: Palgrave, 2000.

⁴ Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* [*Les Mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines*]. New York: Vintage, 1970, 387.

⁵ Friedrich Kittler. *Optical Media* [*Optische Medien*]. Berlin: Merve Verlag, 2002.

optics became subtle enough to reveal human microstructures with the aid of genetics and computer animation. Post-humanism has also turned science-fiction into reality: the sheer existence of Dolly (1996-2003), the first mammal to be cloned from an adult somatic cell, has reinforced the cross-breeding experiments of H. G. Well's sinister Doctor Moreau (*The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 1896).

Parallel to this tendency, in part through the ideas of psychoanalyst-philosophers like Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, the subject has come to be seen from a post-humanist perspective that has redrawn the borders and historical relevance of the notion of "man."⁶ Working from anthropological and psychoanalytical premises, Kristeva has persuasively argued that humankind always defines itself in comparison with something else that it then endeavors to exclude from its concept of itself, whether this is the other, language, or deadly nature, which threatens human existence. And on the level of collective identity, this exclusion can lead to such horrific consequences as Auschwitz, Abu-Ghraib, or the nameless death camps and genocides in Africa,⁷ in other words conflicts that have played a distinguished role in the rewriting by André Breton, Georges Bataille and the Surrealists – before Lacan and Foucault – of the borders of the human body and spirit.⁸

From a certain perspective, the Surrealists' playful and uncanny Humanism permeates the paintings of Ágnes Verebics and Zsuzsa Moizer as well. But while the first is closer to the more basilar world of Bataille, the latter follows in Breton's more ethereal but psychologically no less disturbing wake. While Moizer aims to rewrite the female identity exposed to the male gaze, Verebics's animal portraits accentuate the relativity of the human identity itself, the most striking examples of which are her 2009 enormous, gloomy great white owl (*Hóbagolyság*, "Being a Great White Owl") and the portraits of deformed cats, whose similarly abject effect is largely the result of their anthropomorphous and neurotic characters. The world depicted in Moizer's works, however, is not an everyday Gothic fairy tale either, particularly when her works centre on the theme of violence and, latently, on castration, as for instance in *Kivégzés* ("Execution", 2009). Gergő Kovách's plastic art similarly proposes the integration of post-humanistic and humanistic ideas, which he intertwines with references to classical literature, from Aesop through Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Although thematically these works provide an ironic criticism of 21st-century technophilia, the high-tech materials of the works (such as polyurethane foam) indeed represent technology at the cutting edge. The technical perspective is crucial to an understanding of the works: although Kovách constructs his figures with bearings on art history always in mind (his works deconstruct Dadaism, Futurism and Pop Art), the sculptures, for instance *Jani* (2011), exist well beyond the realm of Dadaistic puns; they provide a glimpse into a post-human world.

As opposed to the gentle psycho-terror represented in works by Moizer, Verebics and Kovách (which, in the latter's case, has parodic overtones), István Nyári prefers to show the naturalism of the bio horror genre. His 2009 *Van Gogh Syndrome*, for instance, evokes the fictitious world of classical post-humanist writer William Ford Gibson, whose 1984 *Neuromancer* introduces the reader to a cyberspace with Japanese traits. Gibson's novel proved a huge success in a territory previously dominated by the Anime and the Manga styles, and Nyári operates with a similar Gibsonian cyber-experience of flesh-prostheses when

⁶ Jacques Lacan. *Quatre concept fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*. Paris: Minuit, 1964. See also Julia Kristeva. *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. Paris: Seuil, 1980.

⁷ Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford U P, 1998. See also Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge [Histoire de la sexualité: la volonté de savoir]*. London: Allen Lane, 1978.

⁸ Georges Bataille. "L'Abjection et les formes misérables." *Essais de sociologie*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970. On George Bataille's rediscovery and art historical relevance see Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois. *Formless: A User's Guide*. New York: Zone, 1997.

preparing a grotesque, pornographic version of the Japanese schoolgirl trope, except that he imbues it with the ghastly cinematography of horror films. Individual plastic works by Fülöp seem to depict the same world of bio horrors: both the carnivorous plant (*Urushi II*, 2008) and the cloned velociraptor (*Raptor*, 2013) bring the world of science-fiction as well as of genetic engineering uncannily close. Perhaps the most disturbing feature of these sculptures is their realistic depiction, which makes one wonder whether they are more suitable for a museum of fine arts or a museum of natural sciences – a problem that indicates the hybridity of today’s artistic productions.

At first sight dioramas by István Máriás (a.k.a. Pista Horror) and László Karácsonyi have a similar effect: unlike their Classical antecedents, these works are more sculptural maquettes than artworks of optical illusions, for which museums of ethnography, military history and film history could all provide a suitable home. Máriás’ 2012 diorama *Roni Loves You* provides a hilarious critique of capitalism. It is a slasher movie at its best, although perhaps still slightly too much under the influence of the visceral visuality and perverted humour of such films. In comparison with the McDonald’s clown running amok, the quest for a capitalist humanism is transferred into mythical dimensions in the *Adam and Eve (Expelled from Paradise)* series (2013).⁹ Similarly, pop-cultural and mythical dimensions merge in Karácsonyi’s equestrian metal Transformer figures, which – each disguised as 21st-century Saint Georges – are about to slay their dragons. One could describe the skull-shaped *A bolygó neve: Craniata* (“Name of the Planet: Craniata”, 2010) as the result of interbreeding Vanitas pictures with a military sand table – a fig both for the history of art and film production.¹⁰ The critique of populism and nationalism in the imperial stroller of *Bús magyar sors II* (“Gloomy Hungarian Fate II”, 2010), however, is close in its effect to Csaba Kis Róka’s home-coming vampire outlaw of *Hazatérőben* (“Home-Coming”, 2011), which leads one from post-humanist fantasies on to the much more severe world of shattered bodies.

Transgression

The use of the word “transgression” as a philosophical term originates with George Bataille, but Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto”,¹¹ the chain of thought of which is both scientific and fantastic in its inspiration, bears far more affinities with the post-humanist milieu. Working from the perspectives of biology and the philosophy of science, Haraway was aware as early as the 1980s that the one-time hero of science fiction, the Cyborg, had appeared in body and spirit in various cultural productions, and first and foremost in the figure of the modern woman, who donned prostheses and nimbly formed their identities to meet expectations. Haraway’s figure of the Cyborg is deeply ironic, but she herself identifies with it when she asserts that she would rather be a Cyborg than a goddess. The reality of this grew roughly ten years later, when Hayles’ concept of the “posthuman” wove into this theoretical-scientific feminist discourse a macho informatics-cybernetics strand too, which stretches from Alan Turing (who is anything but macho) to the trans-humanists, who, like Hans Moravec, seek immortality and the key to god-like Cyborg existence in downloading consciousness.¹²

⁹ Find more on the post-humanist context of dioramas in Áron Fenyvesi. “Biodráma dioráma” [“Bio-Drama Diorama”]. *Új Művészet*, 3, 2013, 34-36.

¹⁰ See a more detailed study on Karácsonyi’s art in Márió Nemes Z. “Elszabadult eposzok” [“Escaped Epics”]. *Új Művészet*, 6, 2013, 30-31.

¹¹ Donna Haraway. “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s.” *Socialist Review*, 80, 1985, 65-108. Reprinted as “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 1980s.” <http://www.f.waseda.jp/sidoli/Haraway_Cyborg_Manifesto.pdf> , 9th October 2013.

¹² Katherine N. Hayles. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1999.

But to return, along with Bataille, to the main thread, we must also proclaim to the earth and to its substance (which remains more substantial than these concepts) that from the perspective of reason and the sciences post-humanism is an abject undertaking that by definition violates borders and is centred around death and the lifeless body, like the better part of the culture of horror. Although Kristeva's intention had once been to call attention, through the concepts of the abject and abjection, to the ever greater power of fear and the volatility that characterizes culture and the subject, these terms became widespread through their use in the American visual arts as synonyms for inferior and repulsive. However, this is not too distant from the intentions of the "father" of the term, Bataille, who first used it in descriptions of the excluded, the people outcast from society. Kristeva, however, making use of the perspectives of semiotics, contextualizes the concept in the psychoanalytic theory of language and subject and then returns to an understanding of the desire for the abject and abjection, which is at the heart of the culture of horror as well.

According to Kristeva, the abject is neither a subject nor an object, but rather oscillates between the two. It is at once human and inhuman, and for precisely this reason creates a sense of nausea. The 1993 Abject Art exhibition¹³ held in the Whitney Museum, New York, the first of its kind, builds on this. The exhibition, the subtitle of which was "Repulsion and Desire in American Art", included works by (among other artists) Andres Serrano, Robert Gober, Eva Hesse, Mary Kelly, Cindy Sherman and Louis Bourgeois. The works on display enabled visitors to construct an image of what is meant by abjection. Of course most of the works were more visceral than anthropological in their representations, and Kristeva herself sought to define the nature of the abject in opposition to culture: in other words everything is abject that is not culture and not – or no longer – subject, and is therefore a threat to the integrity of both (culture or the subject). Examples include any human excrement and waste, but particularly the waste products (as it were) of the female body, and of course the lifeless body, the corpse.

But Kristeva did not seek any answer to the problematics of the horror film: the scopic prompting, the death instinct and the craving for destruction. Taking these as her point of departure, Isabel Cristina Pinedo constructed the notion of carnography, modelled on pornography.¹⁴ The spectacle of death and the body can thus lead back from the abject to the various discourses of the gaze and the audience, which of course are not independent of the particularities of the visual cultures in which they abide, whether we are speaking of pathology, psychiatry, or painting. In some sense carnography also prompts the hands of László Györfly and Kis Róka, the differences between the two notwithstanding (the fine fabric of lines in the works of Györfly is reminiscent of Albrecht Dürer or Matthias Grünewald, whereas Kis Róka finds his painterly style in the luxuriant colourism of Goya and Delacroix and the eroticism of abjection).

While Györfly traces the narratives of decadent comics similar to *Sin City*, Kis Róka's caricatures of highwaymen and hussars figure in the context of the slasher horror film, but this

¹³ The title of the exhibition was "Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art." See a thorough study on Abject Art in László Györfly. *Abjekt Art: A rossz közérzet kultúrája a kortárs képzőművészetben* ["Abject Art: The Culture of Indisposition in Contemporary Fine Arts"]. 2009. <<http://www.lektoratus.hu/osztondijak/gyorffy09.htm>> , 9th October 2013. In the international context of the fine arts, the first to analyze the concept of the abject in depth was Hal Foster. See for instance Hal Foster. "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic." *October*, 3, 1996, 106-124. On the contemporary Hungarian context of the term see Mária Nemes Z. "Budapest Horror. Beszélgetés Györfly László, Kis Róka Csaba, Szöllösi Géza és Verebics Ágnes képzőművészekkel" ["Horror in Budapest: In Conversation with Artists László Györfly, Csaba Kis Róka, Géza Szöllösi and Ágnes Verebics"]. *Flash Art Hungary*, 11-12, 2012, 62-67.

¹⁴ Isabel Cristina Pinedo. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*. New York: SUNY P, 1997.

time flourishing on the ruins of socialism.¹⁵ The works of Győrffy and Kis Róka, however, are also profoundly ironic: they are “pathological” caricatures of glorious wars and manly virtues. In the case of Kis Róka, the laughably augmented penis, which has been placed in the role of the phallus and which seems entirely natural, creates an impression of baseness, disgust, and ridicule. Going one step further, Győrffy situates his own body, the body of the artist, in an obscene and pornographic context. In the series *7 x 7 főbűn II* (“7 x 7 Deadly Sins II”, 2008-2012) he not only conjures the obscene fantasies of man, but also offers satirical depictions of the art world, for instance in *Envy* he impales the decapitated heads of the Chapman Brothers on a stake.¹⁶

The “statues” of Géza Szöllösi awaken a similar impression, as his strange trophies call to mind images of the genetically manipulated wild boar, the snake, or the fox. The abject nature of Szöllösi’s works stems primarily from intermingling images of play and hunt, and also from the radical transgression of the borders between the living and the lifeless, the artistic and the non-artistic, the beautiful and the ugly. Barna Péli works in another register of the abject. He distorts human – not animal – bodies, tormenting them endlessly. In the ensemble of sculptures entitled *Szocmózis* (“Sociomosis”, 2011-2013), human, animal, and non-human bodies are interwoven in complex interactions in order to allude to the concept of social osmosis, or rather a grotesque version of it, in which it is not the human roles and functions that move from one sphere to another, but rather the subject who moves between various biological bodies. While male artists boldly form the body, female artists approach the abject in a manner that is more mediatized and subtle than the brutal social sculptures produced and the visceral mechanisms of influence employed by male artists, and they place the female registers of the abject in the foreground: the female body and the female voice, the body of the mother and the object of desire.

Czene, Eszter Szabó and Éva Magyarósi do this while reflecting on the language and spectacle of film. Magyarósi writes, designs, paints, and animates her stories. They are horrifying gothic narratives that have strong post-human overtones, at least in the ethical sense. The pieces in the series entitled *Játékok kegyetlen lányoknak* (“Games for Ruthless Girls”, 2009) narrate visual phantasms of a string of stories in which spectral female figures captivate the gaze with simultaneously charming yet also menacing rewritings of patriarchal stereotypes. Szabó also addresses the question of stereotypes, but in her work it is ugliness more than beauty that becomes threatening. In her paintings and animated watercolors aging and disintegrating subjects appear as caricatures of the capitalist consumer, such as in *Mennyibe kerül egy kiló párizsi?* (“How Much does a Kilo of Bologna Cost?”, 2008-2009). Subtle and self-contradictory in their portrayal, her figures conjure the dissolution of the body and mind. While one of Szabó’s determining references is documentary film and television reportage, Czene brings reality to the canvas through photography and photorealistic painting, but she does this by putting the elements of this reality into her own film, which she produces following a painterly path.

Female notions of insanity, illness, and disintegration point towards a kind of modernism that excludes anything and everything that might threaten the practical and goal-oriented identity of the human subject. However, post-humanist humanism endeavours to rewrite this life-threatening culture that rests on scientific and political foundations. This is increasingly relevant simply because the long 20th century, the century of concentration camps and psychiatry, has not yet ended. The big question now is simply whether alternative concepts of humankind and the subject will be able to reshape the world of modern bio-

¹⁵ Find an effective summary on Kis Róka’s art in Áron Fenyvesi. *Kis Róka Csaba*. Budapest: Acb Gallery, 2010.

¹⁶ See more on Győrffy and the abject in Márió Nemes Z. “Privát biológia” [“Private Biology”]. *Az ördög a DNS-ben* [“The Devil of the DNA”]. Székesfehérvár: Szent István Király Múzeum, 2012, 4-7.

politics, which is compulsively seeking to keep the institutional systems of law, medicine, and culture clean of the ever-more rapidly spreading hybrids.¹⁷

¹⁷ Cf. Bruno Latour. *We Have Never Been Modern* [*Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*]. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.