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Edited by Bernadette Wegenstein and Cla Calabresi

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Deep Junk and the Anarchic Post-Gendered Mindset of the Digital Age

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Cal Newport recently proclaimed our minds' decline in the digital age, attributing it to excessive consumption and addiction to digital junk food: "Much of digital content that ensnares our attention in the current moment is also ultra-processed, in that it's the result of vast databases of user-generated content that are sifted, broken down, and recombined by algorithms into personalized streams designed to be irresistible. What is a TikTok video if not a digital Dorito?"[1] Newport references a study showing that people in the workplace are distracted, on average, every two minutes.[2] Apart from the addiction factor raised here—which is problematic not only because of the compulsive behavior it drives, but also because it generates a constant state of anxiety,[3] the most alarming implication of Newport's comparison between junk food for the mind and for the body is that the digital age diminishes our brainpower and our human capacity for "deep work." Wasn't Marshall McLuhan's idea that media are extensions of our limbs and ideas, rather than their killers?

[1] Cal Newport, "Stop Filling Your Mind with Digital Dorritos," *New York Times*, Sunday Opinion, March 29, 2026, 6.
[2] Microsoft, *2025 Work Trend Index* (Redmond, WA: Microsoft, 2025).
[3] Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024).

This issue of *MAST* represents a variety of resistant stances toward the "digital Dorito." The forms of body modification and gender anarchy discussed in these pages—which incorporate AI, VR, and other forms of extended mediality—demonstrate "digital deep work" at its best. They show how it is possible to spend extended time with new media and new forms of digital expression while achieving depth rather than junk. What this requires is an acknowledgment of media practices that recognize challenges to attention span, as well as issues of bias and digital exploitation, alongside the limits of the digital sphere in the face of neurodivergence and physical pain. All eight contributions, and their respective authors, engage the digital for its transformative, immersive, and phantasmagorical power, as well as its turn toward anarchy and the dissolution of boundaries. Yet, junk is also part of this landscape, if we define it as something excessive—something we do not know what to do with. As Zachary Fine suggests in his review of the New Museum's exhibition *New Humans: Memory of the Future*, our digital culture and the history of posthumanism can be understood as a "kind of encyclopedic junk pile, with hundreds of discarded visions of how technology might save—or estrange us from ourselves."[4] In light of this inescapable immersion in digital excess, the contributions that follow—introduced here in the order of their appearance—function as a kind of prophylactic or inoculation against the media onslaught that threatens mental degradation.

In Darren Tynan and Brenton Rossow's AI film *The Spire*™, for instance, we encounter "plastic debris as a violent ecological force that is both generative and destructive." The film's queer ecology resembles fragments of a newly imagined species—somewhere between a fossilized cockroach and an ancient underwater cactus. In *The Spire*™ the interdisciplinary media artists Tynan and Rossow confront the viewer with "toxic encounters" (O'Laughlin), not

[4] Zachary Fine, "Back to the Future: The Return of the New Museum," *New Yorker*, April 13, 2026, 82.

simply to emphasize the "junk" factor, but to foreground indeterminacy. It becomes impossible to taxonomize these newly imagined morphological assemblages, which resist the binary logic of biology versus artifact, or human versus nonhuman. In this way, *The Spire*™, along with its authors' philosophical reflections, opens up a compelling, if not mystical, space of queer inquiry. The question remains: what are we seeing? Are these "creatures" reflections of ourselves, of our environment, or of toxic underwater waste such as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch? We do not know. The feeling that remains recalls the final scene of *La dolce vita* (1960), where a weary group of revelers gathers around a mysterious dead sea creature washed ashore. Marcello and his companions linger, asking, "What is it?"—yet ultimately walk away without seeking an answer.

In *Mirror Blade: Extreme Body Modification, Colonoscopy Cinema and Abjection in The Substance*, media theorist and experimental filmmaker Cla Calabresi analyzes the visualization of excrement in the body of an aging diva—here, a television aerobics anchor—articulating the meaning of the abject through a precise feminist reading. As Calabresi suggests, an open wound disrupts stability. Once again, we enter the realm of junk: what emerges from a wound, if not waste? *The Substance* focuses on what is typically unseen and undesired. Most bodily fluids, including mucous, are categorized as waste, and medical infrastructures are designed to remove them. In this award-winning film, however, mucous develops its own dynamic, becoming a biotope—and perhaps even "human": "The mucous constantly threatens to burst out its fluids out of the bathroom, the screen, and erase any border, with its load of corporeal abjected truths." In Coralie Fargeat's film—often described as "body horror"—this scenario culminates in a feminist explosion of imagery representing the fractured physicality of an aging diva. The protagonist, Sue, emerges as a younger, idealized version of Elizabeth after taking "the substance," while Elizabeth herself imagines her navel—the site of her original connection to a maternal body—

expelling undigested food. She attempts to erase her aging self from the mirror, as though it were waste. As in *The Spire*™, normative boundaries of visibility are dissolved. As the "substance" permeates the film, Calabresi notes, distinctions between inside and outside—between Elizabeth and Sue—collapse. Hypervisibility and invisibility converge. The feminist gaze in both the film and its analysis is incisive, excavating waste and abjection as sites of potentially authentic female expression. Accessing this post-female subjectivity relies on digital techniques—special effects and sound design—that foreground cinema's core capacity: illusion.

In *Techno-Embodied Performativity in Dystopian Imagination: Gendered Androids in The Stepford Wives and The Heart Goes Last*, cultural theorist Oliwia Lasocka uses another filmic genre—the comedy, based on a horror novel by Ira Levin and a novel by Margaret Atwood—to understand queer and post-gendered reconfigurations of subjectivity. Her critique of the patriarchal order underlying the hyperfeminine androids in both of these works lays bare the danger of the digital realm in that it not only shows but also reproduces gender norms we thought we had overcome. Robots or feminized androids no longer merely discipline female bodies; they have now replaced them with a consumable, upgradable product, as the author has it.

In other words, "the substance" to split off one's younger self is no longer needed in the age of the robot, because living women are, as such, waste. In our capitalist extractivist world, we no longer even want to consume actual women, as we now have sexbots, which Paul Preciado (*Testo Junkie*, 2008) attributes the unique *potentia gaudendi*, the power to entertain. In *The Stepford Wives*, "the size of the robots' breasts can be changed via remote control, as casually as adjusting a thermostat," writes Lasocka. With that, the author stresses our cultural interpretative bias: even with no real biological sex, these robots are interpreted by us, humans, through human gender frameworks, and therefore remain gendered, while women remain subverted. But

Lasocka arrives at an interesting and promising conclusion: what if, in our era of "silicon gender," these post-gendered robots were indeed fluid and went beyond our binary gender structures? In other words, these tales of post-gendered robots under examination by Lasocka offer a new way of considering the familial lines of embodiment by looking the instability of gender straight in the eye. This instability might be what McKenzie Wark has recently identified as a non-relationship between the genders mediated by thirdness:

> Female is the other to male within the language of the body, which is gender. The other to the body is variously the robot, the ghost, the god, and so forth. […] Indeed, it may well be that there is no relation between male and female, only ways in which this non-relation is mediated by thirdness.[5]

Filmmaker Gina Kim brings us back to reality while using what some might consider the most unreal of all media: virtual reality. But her VR trilogy, *Cinematic VR: a Voluntary Exile into the Pain of Others*, is anything but unreal. "Literature, through such profound immersion, is a wondrous art that builds a world in the consciousness of the reader," Kim writes. But for the story she tells in her VR trilogy *Bloodless, Tearless, Comfortless* (2017–2023), neither literature nor cinema is sufficient, since what Kim attempts and achieves in her virtual environments is for the viewer to exchange her body with that of the protagonists. In this 360-degree environment, she explains, "the viewer has no body and no physical separation from the image, the viewer and the subject come to occupy the same ontological dimension." Within this logic, there is no "genre" needed to convey the message, so to speak. In *The Substance*, the genre is body horror; in *The Stepford Wives*, the genre is comedy; and in *The Heart Goes Last*, the dystopian novel.

[5] McKenzie Wark, "Human, None Too Human," in *New Humans: Memory of the Future* (New York: Phaidon, 2025), 324.

Gina Kim leaves no room for the kind of escapism produced by genre—something that "transports" us elsewhere and is constructed within our consciousness. There is no turning away from the "comfort women" whose stories are told here: the abuse of the female body of a woman who bled to death in a single-room tenement in Dongducheon. In the *Comfortless* trilogy, our viewing engagement through VR transforms into activism. We emerge feeling that we must do something—now. Not unlike in *The Substance*, as explained through Calabresi's essay, viewers experience a reversal of being: "A moment of inversion. The ultimate exile." Only here, we are not in a body horror film driven by special effects, but in the starkest reality—walking the streets near U.S. military bases with the comfort women, who are there to "comfort" their torturers, nearly touching the trash that lies scattered through the American town of Kunsan (*Comfortless*, 2023). With this kind of irresistible identification, the *Comfortless* trilogy demands a level of empathy that is not only urgent and unsettling, but one that—put in the filmmaker's own terms—transcends objectification, as the viewer exchanges her own body, breath, and vocal cords with those of the victims portrayed. Through this loss of one's own body, Kim's work does not simply prompt empathy; it compels embodiment of the other's pain.

The first four essays and practice-based works have exposed, showcased, and analyzed body modification in the age of the post-gendered body through various critical lenses—ranging from queer ecology to a feminist reimagining of (aging) bodily agency, and toward new forms of media engagement in what McLuhan might have described as an "ice-cold" media landscape requiring high levels of participation from its users. All essays and works so far have engaged with the question of the abject (Calabresi, Kim) and deep junk (Tynan and Rossow, Lasocka), whether through the stark realism of VR, abstract forms such as science fiction and body horror, or older analogue media such as the novel. What these essays share is their focus on extreme

forms of femininity that persist beyond their own symbolic death, re-emerging in states of gendered in-betweenness. The next four contributions take this one step further, using *techne* to move into the unknown terrain of cyborgism—and onto the cyborg's as-yet unwalked paths.

Researcher and poet Marzia D'Amico and cartoonist Marco d'Alessandro, in *Your Body is a Masterpiece of Tissue Engineering. On Disability: a Practice-based Poetics of Collaboration*, re-enact not the pain of others, as Gina Kim does, but their own pain in the form of what the authors themselves call "experimental comics, digital poetry and transmedia storytelling," and what most closely resembles a graphic novel. As the principal author, Marzia D'Amico, points out, the piece is written from a non-binary position grounded in the lived experience of chronic illness, which forces them to compose entirely on a computer, as their body is not able to hold a pen.

In *Your Body is a Masterpiece of Tissue Engineering*, the machinic and the human are envisioned as interdependent and allied, becoming one flesh-machine. The "I" becomes a speculative "we," as Marzia D'Amico reportedly merges their writing with the drawings by Marco d'Alessandro. On the final page, we see a partly human, partly cyborg-like figure walking proudly, holding their own rib cage like an exoskeleton-purse. Next to this image, the authors write about how this cyborg's saliva merges with titanium: "and the threads of my system filaments of saliva under a chest of solid titanium that will endure for centuries to come that I will stick to the sun and will call it MOTHER." In the scholarly portion of this visual novel-essay, Marzia discusses self-performance as a mode of overcoming their unwell body. With a cyborg born into motherhood, rather than from motherhood, the authors offer a stark realization that the exoskeleton may be the only means through which this ill body can write: "the loss of an artistic practice due to physical disability remains an underexplored and seldom-discussed

subject." The mutual transformation of human and tool (technogenesis) enables Marzia and Marco to collaborate and become posthuman together in a "continuously shifting, fragmented, and mechanically entangled corporeality." This compelling work, much like *The Spire™*, engages productively with the notion of junk as essential to discovering new forms of post-gendered embodiment. The authors emphasize the amphibious nature of their work as something rooted in the "glitch aesthetic, wherein error, degradation, or interference become sites of affective and epistemic potential." Disability is thus no longer framed as lack, but as a pathway toward aesthetic production.

In *Digital Inclusion: Artificial Intelligence, the Body, and Voice of Posthumanist Practice*, installation artist Paulina Ebringerová follows in the footsteps of Marzia D'Amico and Marco d'Alessandro, analyzing an artwork based on the lived experience of a neurodivergent boy with autism and a severe speech impediment: *Transplantatio*, by Paulina Ebringerová and Peter Mazalán. Like D'Amico, Ebringerová emphasizes that this work does not aim to give the subject a voice, but rather to enable "redefining what it means to speak, to be present, and to be recognized." Digital inclusion, then, is not about "fixing" a disability, "but creating a space in which the subject can express itself differently." In a way reminiscent of Gina Kim's approach to empathy through identification with the body of the other, Ebringerová enables us to hear a voice we would otherwise be unable to perceive—a voice belonging to a subject who cannot communicate through conventional speech. In doing so, we symbolically enter a space in which we hear the other speak for the first time—an act that enables an ethics of "being heard," as Ebringerová stresses, allowing us to participate not only in another's phonation or speech, but in their true voice. The posthuman dimension of this artwork lies in the fact that technology becomes a co-creator of the missing voice, thereby producing a hybrid subjectivity. As the work

took the form of a live performance, we now have access to it only through images and written accounts by one of the artists, Paulina Ebringerová herself. She recounts a profoundly moving moment during the performance, "when the boy and his mother stood up from the audience and approached the screen." In that moment, the neurodivergent subject became an active co-creator of his own representation, rather than a passive recipient of care. Here, the post-body meets the real body, not unlike the mirror effects described in *The Substance*. The performance reveals that human subjectivity is not only expandable in cyberspace, but that human existence itself can find expression through technology, which here functions as a producer of authenticity—an authenticity that was not nonexistent, but previously inaccessible to others through conventional means. Through *Digital Inclusion*, the boy's voice has not only been heard; it has become present (Merleau-Ponty).

Filmmaker and performer Angelo Madsen's *An Idea to Live In: On Lifelong Investigation, Fakir Musafar, and the History of Body Modification* is based on his lifelong work and investigation into the U.S. body modification subcultural icon and performance artist Fakir Musafar (1930–2018), about whom Madsen made the moving documentary *A Body to Live In* (2024). For readers who have not yet seen the film, Musafar's renowned performances include "flesh hook suspension" or "body play," often involving BDSM, and are usually associated with the art form of the Modern Primitive. As we learn from the author and documentarian, "Musafar would do extreme waist training, corsetry, extended sensory deprivation, suspensions, restrictions, interventions, and most notably extreme body piercing practices." What is most compelling in Madsen's contribution to this special issue is his own perspective on documentation. He poses profound questions to himself and to us while examining Musafar's body modifications: "Is the goal of Fakir's extreme body mods to own the body, to deeply

inhabit? Or is it to leave the body (behind)?" Rather than offering definitive answers, Madsen resists placing Musafar's post-body into a fixed "box." For instance, he avoids resolving whether Musafar should be labeled trans or not. Instead, he challenges us to reconsider the notion of ownership: "What does it mean to own something versus just to live in it?" This contribution demonstrates, through Musafar's extreme body practices, that the body is not simply something to "inhabit," or even to "own." As Musafar himself states, "the body is the door to spirit." The form Madsen gives to this investigation—the documentary film—carries a distinctly spiritual quality: The film is one rupture after another, but contained in interment lengthy images that suggest wholeness in that unending fracturing. In a sense, film itself consists of such ruptures; each of the twenty-four frames per second is a discontinuity that produces the illusion of wholeness. This wholeness emerges from the capacity of moving images to construct meaning across time—one image gaining significance in relation to the next, and to those that follow minutes later.

The visual artist Sara Bissen's *Sculpting the Post-Body* returns us to the moving image through 3D digital animation, echoing the volume's opening with Tynan and Rossow's AI film *The Spire*™. In her work, Bissen resists colonial epistemologies by imagining queer, non-binary embodiments that generate mythical Central Asian creatures and cosmologies. Her intervention into mythology becomes what she describes as a "decolonial tool for body modification," giving form to "what is overwise ungraspable." Bissen reintroduces a notion of the post-body that predates the digital era. Her visual language draws on African diasporic spiritualities that foreground sonic, ritualistic, and ancestral knowledge. Her post-body does not emerge solely from digital experimentation but resonates with Musafar's analogue bodily practices—both exceed conventional understandings of the human. She challenges concepts such as originality

and sovereignty as both fiction and burden. Moreover, Bissen reinserts histories of mutilation and erasure into her digitally animated installation worlds. In these environments, "the digital medium becomes not just illustrative but generative: a cartography of bodies that were always possible, always imagined, and now finally rendered." Bissen's work is deeply political, as are all contributions to this issue. Through animation, she reanimates mythical women of oppressed ancestries, bringing long-silenced histories into digital visibility. The immersive format she employs, much like Gina Kim's use of VR, compels the viewer into an active dialogue with the work. The result is a powerful form of artistic activism.

In the final four contributions, we sense a shift toward a hopeful and desirous posthumanism—toward an as-yet-unborn body. Yet all contributions, whether their tone is euphoric or dysphoric, suggest that immersion in subcultures allows us to confront and reframe what might otherwise be dismissed as "junk"—including our own bodily matter—as sites of experimentation and openness. This creates space for a renewed understanding of the post-gendered self: a self that is embodied, resilient, and perhaps capable of enduring for centuries. The issue's diverse media—ranging from narrative film across genres to digital poetry, performance art, VR environments, 3D animation, documentary film, and installation art—once again affirm the "medium is the message" thesis. Each medium reveals something distinct about what is at stake. In a post-gendered body modification anarchy, limitations dissolve. Mysticism becomes tomorrow's science imagined today—another McLuhanism. As Arthur C. Clarke famously stated, "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."[6] Freud,

[6] Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 36.

in his 1930 *Civilization and its Discontents*, describes humanity as a "prosthetic God," extending and constraining natural abilities through the prostheses of civilization, particularly technology.[7]

In the article mentioned at the beginning, Newport suggests addressing our addiction to digital "junk food" in a manner similar to how society confronted cardiovascular disease decades ago. How did that shift occur? Newport reminds us that it was driven by awareness campaigns that evolved into the "workout revolution," encouraging people to recognize the importance of physical exercise, particularly with age. As a result, there are now approximately 55,000 gyms in the United States.[8] But what initiated this transformation? According to Newport, President Eisenhower's heart attack in 1955 marked a turning point in public awareness. It prompted recognition that habits such as eating fast food, chain-smoking, and sedentary television viewing could severely damage cardiovascular health. Over time, this awareness led to research, behavioral change, and a population that is, in many ways, more physically fit today. Yet a new challenge has emerged: as digital engagement increases, mental focus declines, and anxiety rises. However, simply building 55,000 libraries or digital detox centers is unlikely to resolve this issue. What is needed instead is a form of media literacy that integrates theory and practice—an active engagement with and intervention in media itself. As demonstrated by the contributions in this issue, such an approach offers a more meaningful response. What these works collectively reveal is that we have entered an era of what might be called "Deep Junk"—and that what is required is an equally deep digital cure, grounded in the kind of critical and creative media literacy exemplified by the authors in this volume.

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[7] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961).
[8] Newport, "Stop Filling Your Mind with Digital Dorritos," 7.

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Bernadette Wegenstein is an Austrian linguist, author, and award-winning documentary filmmaker. Her work brings together feminist thought and an interest in erased histories. Bernadette has produced and directed several documentary features, including *The Archives* (forthcoming 2026), *Devoti tutti* (2023), and *The Conductor* (2021), which was nominated for an Emmy for Outstanding Arts & Culture Documentary in 2022. She is the Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of Media Studies at Johns Hopkins University, where she also directs the Center for Advanced Media Studies. She has published numerous books in the field of feminist media studies, including *Getting Under the Skin: Body and Media Theory* (2006), *The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty* (2012), *Jane Campion* (2025), and *Radical Equalities: Global Feminist Filmmaking* (2022). Email: berna(at)jhu.edu.

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Speculative Morphological Assemblages from Canhedonia's Wetlands: A Queer Ecology within the Animated Film *The Spire*™

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Brenton Rossow
Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia

This practice-enabled research[1] presents a series of stills from the authors' forthcoming experimental, generative AI film, *The Spire*™. Set in the not-too-distant future realm of Canhedonia, a polluted wetland bleeds into the edges of an industrial megacity. Within this eroding wetland–city threshold, morphological assemblages blur ontological distinctions of human and non-human, nature and culture, and animal and object. Human-made artefacts, flotsam and detritus from nearby industrial excess, combine with microbial life, plastic pollution, animal and human DNA, proteobacteria, and cultural paraphernalia to form fused and agglomerated entities.

[1] The term "Practice-enabled research" refers to approaches in which creative practice enables and generates knowledge, rather than serving solely as an object of analysis. See Craig Batty and Arezou Zalipour, "Research, Practice, Knowledge: Introducing the Creative Knowledges Enabling Framework," *Media Practice and Education* 26, no. 4 (2025): 461–477, https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2024.2384686.

Figure 1. *Untitled #1*. Still from *The Spire*™. AI-generated digital image, 2026.

Figure 2. *Untitled #2*. Still from *The Spire*™. AI-generated digital image, 2026.

These speculative morphological assemblages (figures 1–6) emerge from within a wetland queer ecology. While imagined, they resonate with a growing body of ecological

phenomena that challenge ingrained subject/object dualisms, such as artificial versus natural,[2] and question heteronormative conceptions of what "nature" is or can be.[3] This practice-enabled research situates itself within contemporary queer ecological thought by posing, through image-based speculative morphology, the question: "What counts as 'natural' – and why?"[4] This question is addressed in relation to gender, sexuality, and environment.

In the technofeudalist city of Canhedonia, a vast underground bio-computational network operates as a "cloud-based sweatshop,"[5] generating power and maintaining surveillance operations for the corporation, *The Spire*™. The network's tentacular, throbbing cables gradually swallow the city's spire-like markers, entrances, and exits. At the eastern entrance to the corporation, a polluted wetland zone has given rise to morphological assemblages that collapse and resist metaphysical distinctions between biological and cultural, human and non-human, and object and entity.

These assemblages, situated within the wetland environment, disrupt "obedient conceptions of containment and fixed boundaries of natural spaces so often conceived of as exploitable reserves."[6] As Rod Giblett argues, wetlands are "non-binary: neither land, nor water, but both; neither solid, nor liquid, but both. Their identity is fluid, trans-generic and indeterminate."[7] Wetlands have historically been viewed as sanctuaries, offering refuge and

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[2] Stephen Buranyi, "'We Are Just Getting Started': The Plastic-Eating Bacteria That Could Change the World," *The Guardian*, September 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/sep/28/plastic-eating-bacteria-enzyme-recycling-waste.
[3] Abigail Lowell, "Nature Is Queer," The Environmental Protection Information Center, August 2025, https://www.wildcalifornia.org/post/nature-is-queer.
[4] Nicole Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (Springfield, Chicago, and Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 2.
[5] Yanis Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (London, UK: Vintage Publishing, 2023), 77.
[6] Richard Watts, Maureen Ryan, and Danny Hoffman, "The Queer Ecologies of the Tambass Wetlands," *Edge Effects*, November 2025, https://edgeeffects.net/tambass-wetlands.
[7] Rod Giblett, *Wetland Cultures: Ancient, Traditional, Contemporary* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 7.

liberation.[8] The polluted marshes and craggy glens surrounding *The Spire*™ similarly constitute a "queer ecology."[9] A passionate defender of swamps as marginalized environments, Giblett further notes that wetlands "punch way above their weight," covering approximately six percent of the Earth's surface while remaining an "oppressed minority" and a "marginalized community of plants and animals (humans and more than humans)."[10]

This practice-enabled research draws influence from nonbinary animals that exhibit bilateral combinations of male and female traits, characteristics, and anatomies, sometimes referred to as "chimeras."[11] The dual-sex butterfly, for example, is asymmetrically divided along its body, displaying both male and female antennae, legs, wing colorations, and reproductive organs that are "fused down the middle."[12] This phenomenon is known as bilateral gynandromorphism.[13] Like Giblett's wetlands, which are neither fully land nor water but both,[14] gynandromorphs are neither exclusively male nor female, neither masculine nor feminine, but instead embody both simultaneously.

This form of biological indeterminacy resists singular systems of classification. Natural phenomena such as dual-sex butterflies disrupt binary sex taxonomies and categorizations, thereby challenging the heteronormative assumption that queerness is 'unnatural.'[15] Bilateral

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[8] Rod Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1996).
[9] Nicole Seymour, "Queer Ecologies and Queer Environmentalisms," in *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies*, ed. Siobhan B. Somerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 108.
[10] Giblett, *Wetland Cultures*, 6.
[11] Miles Griffis, "Gynandromorphs Are Nature's Nonbinary Beauties," *Atlas Obscura*, April 2024, https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/wild-life-excerpt-gynandromorphs.
[12] Ian Sample, "Half Male, Half Female Butterfly Steals the Show at Natural History Museum," *The Guardian*, July 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/jul/12/half-male-half-female-butterfly.
[13] Katie Pavid, "Beauty of the Dual-Sex Butterfly," Natural History Museum, September 2024, https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/beauty-dual-gender-butterfly.html.
[14] Giblett, *Wetland Cultures*, 7.
[15] Melyka Bennett, "Queer Ecology – Embracing Diversity in the Natural World," British Ecological Society, June 2023, https://www.britishecologicalsociety.org/introducing-queer-ecology-embracing-diversity-in-the-natural-world.

gynandromorphs can thus be understood as existing outside rigid binary demarcations of male/female and masculine/feminine.

Figure 3. *Untitled #3*. Still from *The Spire*™. AI-generated digital image, 2026.

In the animated film *The Spire*™, the city of Canhedonia's public relations team has developed a series of experimental technologies designed to metallurgically reinforce the human spinal column through a prescribed regimen of oral medication, ostensibly eliminating back pain among gig workers. This speculative premise draws inspiration from the evolutionary transformations depicted in David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* (2022), particularly the removal of physical pain, while also echoing themes of worker exploitation found in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936).

As part of these experimental programs, donated human spinal columns are studied within a network of interconnected underground laboratories. However, the biological and chemical waste disposal system at Canhedonia's primary spinal research facility is severely mismanaged. A malfunction in one of *The Spire*™'s spinal column sorting belts results in a

human spine being expelled at the porous boundary between the facility and the surrounding wetlands. This breach allows toxic chemical sludge and human DNA to leach into the wetland ecosystem, generating the conditions for rapid morphological evolution.

Figure 4. *Untitled #4*. Still from *The Spire*™. AI-generated digital image, 2026.

Within this contaminated and radioactive environment, new morphological assemblages emerge, fusing human and animal genetic structures with bioluminescent microbial life and industrial waste materials (figure 1), among other elements.

Deep within the eroding threshold between the wetlands and *The Spire*™'s waste facility and spinal research laboratory, spatial zones become indeterminate, forming a queer ontology. Drawing inspiration from Andrei Tarkovsky's sci-fi film *Stalker* (1979) and Alex Garland's Lovecraftian horror *Annihilation* (2018), the wetlands of *The Spire*™ are populated by mutated lifeforms that devour prey and writhe through radioactive bulrushes in search of mates. Amid fungal growths of accumulated waste, spreading like mushroom spores dispersed by the wind,

binary distinctions collapse and seep into one another. These indeterminate zones parallel the unstable boundary between the wetlands and *The Spire*™'s waste and research infrastructure.

Post-Enlightenment Western thought has been shaped by Cartesian dualism and Eurocentric humanism,[16] producing and sustaining divisions such as subject/object, nature/culture, mind/body, self/other, material/discourse, and human/world. These divisions have been critically challenged by new materialist, posthumanist, and relational theoretical frameworks.[17] The distinctions between masculine and feminine, male and female, and sex and gender are likewise reinforced through an essentializing "binary logic."[18] Judith Butler asks: "What possibility exists for the disruption of the oppositional binary itself?"[19]

In the spirit of troubling subject/object dualism, one such possibility is explored through indeterminate zones between the biological and the artificial, and the human and the non-human, within a text-to-image prompting practice. This form of digital design can be understood as "doing philosophy,"[20] insofar as digital artefacts shape how humans relate to the world. Generative AI imagery, moreover, possesses a discursive capacity that enables a reorientation toward an increasingly porous reality in which boundaries between material, digital, biological, cultural, social, and discursive domains are "increasingly blurred."[21]

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[16] Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019), 15.
[17] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*.
[18] Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 15.
[19] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 36.
[20] Jesse Josua Benjamin et al., "Machine Learning Uncertainty as a Design Material: A Post-Phenomenological Inquiry," paper presented at the CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '21), Yokohama, Japan, May 8–13, 2021, 3, https://doi.org/10.1145/3411764.3445481.
[21] Simon Susen, "Reflections on the (Post-)human Condition: Towards New Forms of Engagement with the World?," *Social Epistemology* 36, no. 1 (2022): 65, https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2021.1893859.

The image sequence depicting wetlands life in Canhedonia engages a key trope of queer ecology: "the strange intimacies and blurry ontologies of living matter."[22] The text-to-image prompting process operates as a form of queering, understood as a verb, by "questioning and defamiliarizing foundational categories."[23] In this case, it involves unsettling binary distinctions such as living/non-living, animal/object, and nature/culture. The authors construct an imaginative digital space in which such dualisms are suspended, producing "tensions between determinacy and indeterminacy."[24]

This AI image generation practice invites taxonomical fusion, for example, by compositing rubbish, discarded building materials, debris, and flotsam with insectile architectures (figure 4) to generate new morphological forms, and by enabling slippages between 'natural' and 'human-made' categories. The ambiguity of image data boundaries is evident throughout the series. Tube-like structures, for instance, may be perceived as either synthetic polymer materials or translucent biological tentacles (figure 2), while skin, flora, and geological matter overlap and merge (figures 3, 5), rendering taxonomical categories indeterminate. What the authors describe as indeterminacy refers to a perceptual tension that arises when visual data initially appears coherent but becomes ambiguous upon closer inspection, particularly when viewers attempt to categorize or taxonomize these speculative assemblages. This indeterminacy is intensified by an expectation that discrete entities, textures, and morphological categories should exist.

[22] Seymour, "Queer Ecologies and Queer Environmentalisms," 109.
[23] Seymour, "Queer Ecologies and Queer Environmentalisms," 109.
[24] Martin Zeilinger, "The Politics of Visual Indeterminacy in Abstract AI Art," *Leonardo* 56, no. 1 (2023): 78, https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_a_02291.

Here, the authors draw on analyses of visual indeterminacy in Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) imagery[25] and in painting.[26] Most text-to-image models operate through diffusion processes, in which noise is progressively removed from image data using learned associations between textual prompts and visual features within high-dimensional vector spaces.[27] These processes can generate perceptual effects of indeterminacy. As Aaron Hertzmann argues, machine learning models produce continuous pictorial fields in which elements can merge, resulting in a lack of distinct boundaries. Consequently, "object creation and texturing steps do not operate on separate, distinct objects," and visual elements can blend "like filling in a coloring book where none of the outlines are closed."[28]

Such models enable fluid reconfigurations of taxonomical categories, unconstrained by a substantialist metaphysics of discrete, bounded objects and subjects. This challenges "culturally and socially determined expectations of how perception and interpretation function,"[29] particularly the expectation that stable boundaries exist between natural/artificial, human/non-human, and subject/object categories.

Within this image series, diffused indeterminacy manifests in several ways. Categorical slippage renders depicted entities unclassifiable in absolute terms. Hybrid textures collapse distinct morphological forms, for instance, combining wood with reptilian scales, while previously separate entities merge, such as a gnarled tree stump fused with a reptilian head (figure 5). Textural blending further contributes to this indeterminacy, as bone, skin, and plant

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[25] Aaron Hertzmann, "Visual Indeterminacy in GAN Art," *Leonardo* 53, no. 4 (2020): 424–428, https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_a_01930.
[26] Robert Pepperell, "Seeing without Objects: Visual Indeterminacy and Art," *Leonardo* 39, no. 5 (2006): 394–400, https://doi.org/10.1162/leon.2006.39.5.394.
[27] Dave Bergmann and Cole Stryker, "What Are Diffusion Models?" IBM, August 2024, https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/diffusion-models.
[28] Hertzmann, "Visual Indeterminacy in GAN Art," 425.
[29] Zeilinger, "The Politics of Visual Indeterminacy in Abstract AI Art," 77.

matter appear to merge through processes suggestive of biological contamination and genetic leakage (figure 5).

Figure 5. *Untitled #5*. Still from *The Spire*™. AI-generated digital image, 2026.

Some images also reference existing queer ecological phenomena (figure 2), in which binaries such as artificial/natural have already broken down, for example, in the case of plastic-eating bacteria.[30] The *The Spire*™ image series additionally presents composite morphologies in which geological materials co-determine biological forms, such as a quadruped partially constituted by rock (figure 3). Flora, fauna, insectile architectures, and cultural artefacts similarly agglomerate into hybrid systems (figure 4).

Some of the diffused imagery in the series also foregrounds plastic debris as a violent ecological force that is both generative and destructive (figures 2, 4, 6). One example is the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, an approximately 1.6 million square kilometre accumulation of plastic waste in the North Pacific Ocean, composed of mobile phones, plastic lighters, bags,

[30] Buranyi, "'We Are Just Getting Started.'"

toothbrushes, water bottles, and innumerable other human-made objects. Plastic pollution has colonised the hydrosphere and, on one hand, affords ecological processes, for instance, plastic debris can function as rafts for marine organisms, enabling transoceanic dispersal. At the same time, these plastically mediated conditions generate inhospitable environments and contribute to marine life mortality.[31]

Figure 6. *Untitled #6*. Still from *The Spire*™. AI-generated digital image, 2026.

The generative AI-based morphological assemblages in *The Spire*™ confront the viewer with what Logan Natalie O'Laughlin terms "toxic encounters."[32] O'Laughlin argues that toxic animal traces "have lives well beyond their initial encounter and do important cultural work as foils, mirrors, and bellwethers for Human(kind)."[33] In the film's speculative ecology, the surrounding wetlands have adapted and transformed in response to polluted environmental

[31] Linsey E. Haram et al., "Extent and Reproduction of Coastal Species on Plastic Debris in the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre," *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 7 (2023): 688, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-023-01997-y.
[32] Logan Natalie O'Laughlin, "Toxic Animal Encounters: Queer Environmental Threats and Racialized Reproduction Anxieties" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2018), 5.
[33] O'Laughlin, "Toxic Animal Encounters," 5.

conditions and survival pressures. These transformations are not framed as externally imposed body modifications but as processes of adaptation and evolution shaped by environmental change.

Figure 6, for example, depicts a creature that has adapted to the harsh, polluted environment of *The Spire*™'s wetlands. The debris embedded in its body functions both as camouflage and as a display to attract potential mates. Oil-slicked feathers extending from its back enable short bursts of flight, allowing it to evade larger predators, although sustained flight remains impossible. To hunt fish without entering the contaminated water, the creature has developed razor-sharp claws adapted for capturing radioactive mud crabs.

During the diffusion process in text-to-image prompting, features learned from tagged training data are probabilistically reconstructed through an iterative denoising process within a high-dimensional latent space. In this process, categorical attributes derived from visual data representations bleed into one another, fusing textures, objects, and object parts. This fusion produces visual indeterminacy, a perceptual condition in which a viewer's attempt to identify and categorise visual elements is suspended, as the image resists definitive resolution.
In generative AI imagery, the visual forms, shapes, and structures of what the authors term diffused speculative morphological assemblages remain porous and resist clear identification within singular ontological or taxonomical categories such as "animal," "object," "human," "natural," "artificial," or "cultural" (figures 1–6). This creative practice engages with discourses of queer ecological becoming, including gender indeterminacy and the nonbinary qualities of wetlands and phenomena in the animal kingdom.

In both the natural world and the imagined world of *The Spire*™, wetlands are neither entirely water nor land, but both. Similarly, dual-sex butterflies resist classification as strictly

"male" or "female"; instead, bilateral gynandromorphs embody nonbinary biological forms. The speculative wetland creatures in the authors' forthcoming film, shaped by the environmental breach originating from Canhedonia's spinal research laboratory, likewise appear indeterminate and resist definitive identification or binary classification. These speculative morphological assemblages thus enact a central trope of queer ecology: an ongoing interrogation and exploration of indeterminacy as a mode of ecological becoming.

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Mirror Blade: Extreme Body Modification, Colonoscopy Cinema, and Abjection in *The Substance*

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Abstract: In contemporary ideals of beauty, women undergo extreme body modifications in order to build a perfect body as a practice of self-discipline that risks their alienation from embodiment. *The Substance*, a film directed by Coralie Fargeat in 2024, stages the doubling of the self that extreme body modification and beauty makeover cause to Elisabeth Sparkle, an aging television star in search for her lost youth and beauty. This essay analyzes the blend of colonoscopy cinema, and feminist strategies of filmmaking enacted by the director through a feminist, semio-psychoanalytical analysis drawing on the most prominent contemporary feminist film theorists, individuating *The Substance* as a feminist film focused on abjected femininity. In particular, the analysis will focus on how colonoscopy cinema is repurposed to expose abjection through the specific sites of the mucous, the bathroom, the navel, the eardrum, and the mirror.
Keywords: body modification, beauty, abjection, excess, mirror, colonoscopy cinema

Introduction

In the shifting paradigm of contemporary ideals of beauty, social media and cinema's aesthetic expectations of women have transferred onto their flesh, such that the mediated image has collapsed into the body itself—demanding eternal beauty. As stated by Bernadette Wegenstein,

"In today's culture, the concept of beauty, on a marker of nature's harmonies, is no longer clearly distinguishable from the efforts, desires, and even deformations that go into making it"[1] for women on and off the screen to stay "beautiful" forever. Maintaining youth is the first requirement, *conditio sine qua non* of this beauty.

This age of viral, dramatic beauty makeovers and upturning aesthetic surgeries corresponds to a variety of body horror films exploring women's "extreme body modification." In *The Substance* (MUBI, 2024), directed by Coralie Fargeat, a woman's attempt to claim control over her aging body through an extreme modification destroys her life, provoking a not only physical, but also semiotic split. This plot twist constitutes a "behind the scenes" of the viral social media posts about makeovers, body modifications, and beauty routines that reveal the self-surveillance required for women to sustain the contemporary, impossible aesthetic standards imposed on them, in an increasing dissociation between their embodied experience and their social media avatars, devotedly committed to an eternal sequence of beauty routine and makeover that alienates them from real life and erases their identities.[2] The theorist Vivian Sobchak observes that if she underwent surgery to escape aging, she would become unrecognizable to the eyes of others, but mostly to her own: "Surgery ... would create of me an uncanny and disturbing double."[3] What are the consequences of the obsession with eternal beauty on women?

This essay will apply a feminist, semio-psychoanalytical framework to inquire how *The Substance* is informed by this question. Psychoanalysis and semiotics are employed for two

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[1] Bernadette Wegenstein, *The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 88.
[2] Silvia Semenzin, *Internet non è un posto per femmine* (Milano: Einaudi, 2026).
[3] Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 38.

renowned reasons. First, my analysis acknowledges the interplay and correspondence between preexisting social dynamics in the formation of the subject and the experience of the medium of cinema as their unconscious reenactment. Second, semiotics and psychoanalysis have been fruitfully turned by post-Lacanian feminist theorists against the patriarchal society that conceived it,[4] and continue to be essential for a contemporary feminist film theory and filmmaking. Specifically, I will deploy an innovative blend of Anna Kornbluh's codification of colonoscopy cinema and a genealogy of feminist theories of abjection developed by Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Anneke Smelik, and Kaja Silverman.

Colonoscopy Cinema

The Substance generated widespread debate over the claustrophobic beauty standards imposed on—and incarnated by—the star system. Elisabeth Sparkle (Demi Moore), a world-famous television star, is appalled when the producer of her aerobics show fires her on the day she turns fifty. Elisabeth is desperate. What would she do to get her beauty back? Anything—even becoming someone other than herself.

Following the contemporary collapse of the mediated image into the real body, the fantasy of eternal beauty that Elisabeth desires materializes as a girl born from the woman's back, in the grotesquely extrauterine pregnancy of a younger, merciless copy of herself. In the film, biohacking humanity and womanhood to create renewed beauty and youth is reduced to a process of mere chemical production from the incipit: a naked, sunny-side-up egg simply pops in two after the injection of "the substance." Sue is born from Elisabeth through the same macrocellular mitosis: in contemporary cinema and beyond, "Human bodily existence is

[4] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 14.

foregrounded as a material surface amenable to endless manipulation and total visibility."[5] In *The Substance*, the careless disposability of the human body is even more ruthless because Elisabeth is a woman—a woman in her fifties—in a profession where feminine aging equals a death sentence. The naturally aging body of Elisabeth Sparkle is suddenly deformed by the scrutinizing gaze of a producer (Dennis Quaid); caught under the inescapable sharpness of this judgmental look, Elisabeth will undergo a literal fragmentation of her body and psyche and generate the incarnated idealization of a perfected self in-the-flesh that will lead to the total decay of Elisabeth's authentic body.

At the beginning of *The Substance*, nothing seems left to interpretation. The film has been cited in a *New Yorker* article as a perfect example of the recent "New Literalism" of Hollywood films, characterized by a "pre-digested" flow of images and didactic displays of meaning.[6] Anna Kornbluh codifies this cinematic style as "colonoscopy cinema" for its quest for hyperbolic proximity between the camera and the spectator, and of both to the object being observed. "The medium is missing ... Immediacy crushes mediation," she writes, so that the camera becomes a colonoscope able to penetrate instead of simply framing bodies.[7] The camera-colonoscope privileges extreme close-ups and first-person point-of-view angles as an effect of the shortening distance between reality and cinema, and between cinema and social media. Colonoscopy cinema can be weaponized from Hollywood's renowned misogyny to continue framing female bodies as cuts of meat at a butchery.[8] The scalpel of this new type of camera is sharper than it has ever been on women; its blade cuts, penetrates, and phagocytizes, only to

[5] Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 50.
[6] Manwali Serpell, "The New Literalism Plaguing Today's Biggest Movies," *The New Yorker*, March 8, 2025, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/critics-notebook/the-new-literalism-plaguing-todays-biggest-movies.
[7] Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy or, the Style of Too-Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2023), 6.
[8] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*.

render a female body more and more "edible" to the audience. Elisabeth becomes an egg, a concrete star on the Walk of Fame, a poster. The producer crushes and swallows shrimp while announcing that he is firing her; while he speaks, a waitress beyond his shoulder leans on a table, displaying her young buttocks.

Producer: Renewal is inevitable. And at fifty... Well, it stops.

Elisabeth: What stops?

The immediacy that characterizes colonoscopy cinema demands an uninterrupted exploration and capture of bodily surfaces that Elisabeth's wrinkles and weary appearance can no longer sustain; with menopause, the "flow" of contemplation she is expected provoke as a woman is interrupted and lost. Having consumed the shrimp (and Elisabeth), the producer has no reason to speak to her further and walks away. A fly dramatically—prophetically—drowns in the woman's glass. While she drives back home, a billboard with her picture is ripped off. If the film stages a perpetual "signposting," as the writer of the New York Times article on New Literalism might put it, it is one of a woman-sign that has lost her identity. Elisabeth is haunted by her own persecutory, obsessive iconography, a flowing redundancy of iconic and indexical signs that restricts Elisabeth to no more than an aging body ready to be substituted. "YOU ARE ONE," says the substance's advertising that she watches. But soon she will not be anymore.

In a perfect enactment of colonoscopy cinema, we watch extreme close-ups of the needle sweeping under her skin, the substance entering her veins. Elisabeth seeks in vain for a sign of rejuvenation on her own body before collapsing on the floor, but the younger flesh she craves will not belong to her. The pupil of her eye pops in two, as the egg previously did, and a young woman, Sue (Margaret Qualley), breaks out of Elisabeth. The signs Eisabeth was haunted by quickly devoured her psyche and flesh and left a hollow body that now lays down on the floor,

with its back cracked into an open wound. Sue sews it shut, but the wound will never truly heal, as a hyperbolical trace of the loss Sue was born from, and on which depends to survive. Beginning from this extreme body modification, Fargeat contaminates colonoscopy cinema with a feminist filmmaking methodology: an immediacy that disrupts mediation potentially exalts a visual excess that highlights the fundamental lack on which the cinema is built[9] and foregrounds abjection—especially in the case of a protagonist who is twice as abjected as she could be: an aging female character. In the words of Kathleen Woodward," In our mass-mediated society, age and gender structure each other in a complex set of reverberating feedback loops, conspiring to render the older female body paradoxically both hypervisible and invisible."".[10] This is hyperbolically manifested in *The Substance*'s doubling, but while the immediate surface of the film is concerned with the young, beautiful appearance of Sue dramatically overshadowing the horribly decaying skin of Elisabeth, subtle clues in the film increasingly suggest other semiotic truths. The New Literalism of *The Substance* is disturbed by the progressive resurgence and bridging of Elisabeth/Sue's split body and will, so that immediacy and lack of mediation are repurposed to exalt visual excess and unearth abjection.

Elements and Sites of Cinematic Excess in *The Substance*

The collapse of meaning that the abject represents tears down the illusory, unstable boundaries between Self and Other: it is a carnal, terrifying irruption into the Symbolic order otherwise dictating our psychic balance—an open wound disrupting our stability.[11] What is internal, invisible, and deemed to stay as such suddenly threatens to tear apart the fragile border of the

[9] Anneke Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
[10] Kathleen Woodward, "Performing Age, Performing Gender," *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006): 163.
[11] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993).

skin and break free outside the body:[12] it is not only a visual but also a bodily, psychosomatic excess that women can adopt as a tool to demonstrate the lack they are obliged to bear is, in reality, a projection cast onto them by men.

Anneke Smelik describes visual excess as a "subversive element creating other meanings" that moves beyond narrative as such.[13] This article broadens the concept of excess as not only a visual configuration. In the following section, I will analyze the forms that it takes to articulate abjection in *The Substance*: the mucous, the bathroom, the navel, the mirror, and the eardrum.

The notion of mucous developed by Luce Irigaray is considered a type of excess inducing both fascination and disgust and exceeding the patriarchal representation of women.[14] No one can agree on its meaning. Mucous is something neither inside nor outside the body, its most unspeakable configuration. Mucous, moreover, does not rely on the patriarchal regime of sight but rather on touch to be experienced and articulated. This helps explain explains the capillary presence of mucous and consequent body fluids in many body horror films, including *The Substance*.

Once Sue has been created, Elisabeth self-segregates at home and observes her uncanny double taking over both her domestic and mediatic space. Sue hides the giant poster of Elisabeth in the living room, mocks her during an interview, and her face and body progressively substitute Elisabeth's image in the entire city; the aerobics exercises Elisabeth used to perform for her female fans become vacuous, obsessive displays of Sue's buttocks, inner thighs, and lips meant

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[12] Nicole Majewski, *Material Reality. Feminine Abject in Body Horror Films* (New York: School of Liberal Arts and Sciences Pratt Institute, 2023).
[13]Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked,* 125.
[14] Margaret Whitford, "Irigaray's Body Symbolic," *Hypatia* 6, no. 3 (1991): 97–110, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3809841.

to provoke a voyeuristic and fetishistic control. The camera, obsessively fixed on her orifices, surveils a border and thus preserves the integrity of the captured female image preventing it from being invaded and liberated by the unrepresentability of her abjected sex.

The abjection of Sue and Elisabeth is momentarily removed, but not destroyed, so that it continues gathering force in the domestic space that signifies both the mucous bridging "outside and inside" and the immediacy of colonoscopy cinema that attempts to disrupt it: Elisabeth's bathroom, a squared, pristine space that exalts the fluids bursting out from Elisabeth and Sue and the acid color of the substance. The bathroom in *The Substance* holds together and yet threatens the unity between Sue and Elisabeth, configurating as a perfected site to host abjection and to both feed and contain its manifestations (see figure 1).

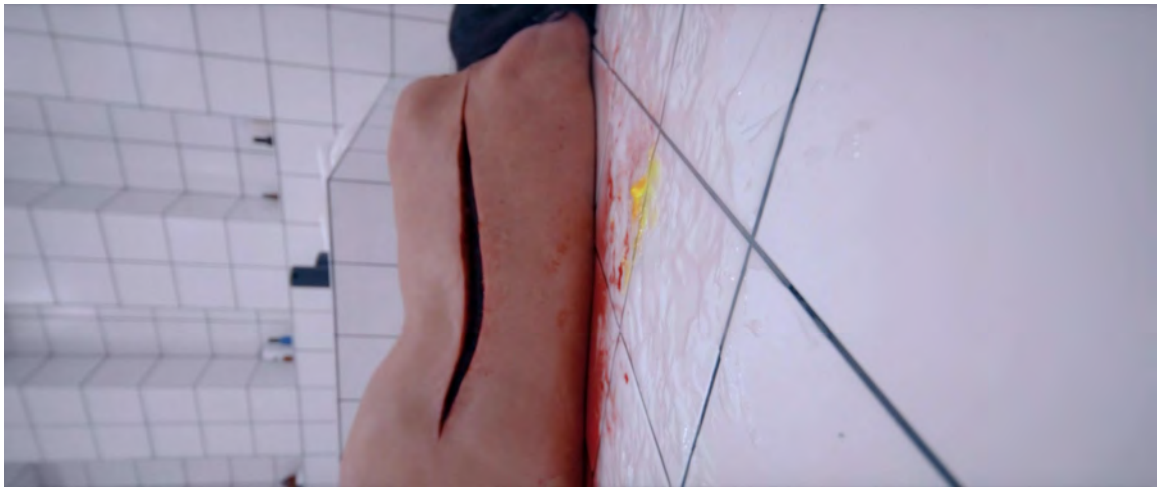

Figure 1. The "mucous" derived by Elisabeth's split invades the whiteness of the bathroom, film still.

In the era of an increasing obsession with the quest for eternal beauty and youth, the bathroom contains what, of a woman, must be kept in the dark; it is a membrane-place to discipline her own body. It is here that Elisabeth, looking at herself, decides to take the substance; here, where she splits in two and stores the "food" required to keep one another alive during their unconscious states. Elisabeth and Sue keep each other's bodies hidden in the

bathroom during their alternating "shifts," sheltering them from any other gaze. The room, at the beginning, successfully holds their secret.

But when Sue and Elisabeth understand their damnation to a perpetual regime of alternating invisibility and hypervisibility, the bathroom loses strength, revealing its double nature as both container and catalyst of abjection. Sue takes one step further and builds a bathroom-within-the-bathroom to hide Elisabeth even more deeply. Later, a man Sue is about to have sex with in the living room opens the zipper on the back of her bodysuit and a cascade of organs falls onto the floor—but this turns out to be Elisabeth's hallucination (see figure 2). The woman wakes immediately afterward, weakened and decayed, still exiled in the bathroom. The mucous constantly threatens to burst with its fluids out of the bathroom, across the the screen, and to erase any border with its load of corporeal, abjected truths.

Figure 2. Sue's vision of her organs falling out, film still.

The impossibility of recognizing herself as an aging woman pushes Elisabeth to keep Sue alive, but the precarious split between the two bodies is collapsing. Sue has another vision: while she is rehearsing, something pulls from inside her buttocks. The camera, obsessively fixated on her genitals and orifices, cannot miss it. The crew stops the rehearsal and dissects, "frame by frame," the entire sequence of the choreography (see figure 3). Sue runs into the dressing room

and pushes the object toward her navel until she extracts a chicken leg. Her navel opening and sucking itself in is the last thing she sees before waking up and discovering that this, too, was a vision she had while she was in the bathroom, and Elisabeth binge-ate chicken in front of the television during the whole week at her disposal.

Figure 3. The crew fixating on Sue's anus and pubic area, film still.

The navel, as a psychoanalytic object, is both the scar of a wound referring to the violent separation from the maternal body and the most enigmatic passage of a dream[15]. Following the notion of the abject defined by Julia Kristeva as depending on fantasy to be visualized,[16] Smelik individuates the navel as the unplumbable riddle of female sexuality represented in a film, akin in its implications to the mucous.[17] Sue's vision of her navel expelling undigested, "unmediated" food is one of the most powerful representations of abjection in the film. The hypervisibility of the mediatic regime of immediacy forces her to keep hiding the body from which she was born, but the chicken she hallucinated having inside her thighs is scattered throughout the apartment,

[15] Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked*, 168.
[16] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).
[17] Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked,* 153.

bearing trace of Elisabeth's body and of their failed relationship: the camera-colonoscope could not stop abjection to find its way out of the body, invading the screen.

"I can't go back inside her," Sue says after this episode as she collects the fluid of Elisabeth in the hidden bathroom, "Gross, old, fat, disgusting!" as she withdraws as much liquid as she can from her "matrix"'s debilitated body. The substance that names the film reveals itself to be not the drug itself but rather this sort of spinal fluid that grows more and more opaque and eventually runs out, killing Elisabeth and Sue: the substance is one belonging to abjection. Sue despises it, but also needs it.

We have observed, so far, the attention of *The Substance* on the female bodily mucous and fluids as a site of abjection; I would now like to focus on the film's hyperdiegetic history of sounds both produced and lived from within the body, sounds that consitute an uncharted territory of feminine hearing that has usually been disavowed. It has frequently escaped theoretical attention that gender-based discrimination in films is the effect of dominant cinema's sound regime as much as its visual regime, and that the female voice is as relentlessly held to normative representations and functions as is the female body and psyche. The female voice and hearing have in cinema their own history of subjugation within the patriarchal mediatic system and have been neutralized as a projection of male castration.[18]

The voices of Elisabeth and Sue in *The Substance* are often strangled, muffled, and silenced by other men, but Fargeat ensures that we, as an audience, can hear what they hear and experience a hyperdiegetic "film-within-a-film,"[19] or a sort of "otoscopy cinema." While Sue and Elisabeth barely speak throughout the film, it is their bodies that utter the extreme body

[18] Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
[19] Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror,* 56.

modification they undergo. Under the weight of the mediatic regime of hypervisible immediacy, Sue finds herself unable to continue switching with Elisabeth, as the perfected beauty she represents is demanded more and more by both the viewers and herself. Every time Sue experiences withdrawal—namely, when the spinal fluid she needs from Elisabeth is completely absorbed—it is as if spectators were feeling pulled“ into her head,” as she is: so that they can hear the anxious breath and beating of her body reverberating as if it was a disturbing, keen tinnitus hammering against the eardrums. Underneath the regime of gazes and the illusion of hypervisibility that youth and beauty seem to grant, Sue and Elisabeth’s voices are perpetually unheard, rejected, and trapped inside a female body that has become a soundproofed prison.

Figure 4. The conductor eats shrimps with his fingers, framed by a first-person POV angle, film still.

At the beginning of the film, the producer announces over the phone that he is going to fire Elisabeth while urinating; the audience can hear the sound of him as he unzips, his urine streaming down the toilet, and his aggressive, merciless voice in an unsettling, cacophonic blend that is destined only to grow louder. When the producer communicates his decision to Elisabeth while eating shrimp, the extreme close-ups of his hands, his mouth, and the shrimp crushing in his mouth alternated with the first-person point-of-view angles (see figure 4) are accompanied by the complementary sound of his jaw growing nauseating and unavoidable, thus revealing the

abjection of a male subject that normally would be disavowed and projected elsewhere. A camera-colonoscope, usually allied with the male gaze, is now counteracted by an otoscopic function: only a woman's auditory perspective could hear what the spectators hear, thanks to *The Substance*'s camera-otoscope.

Mirror Blade

According to post-Lacanian psychoanalysis, abjection constitutes a possible escape from the male gaze in Lacan's mirror stage of identity formation: it could enable the woman to enter the Symbolic Order without being captured by the paternal "gaze," which reduces the woman's genital organs to a lack producing—or rather recalling—castration anxiety. Cinema is a "strange mirror,"[20] and cinematic meaning always carries the trace of the Other[21]. *The Substance* ultimately plays with the importance of the mirror as a psychoanalytic and cinematic device only to expose its weakness.

At the climax of the first fifteen minutes, Elisabeth throws a snow globe containing her miniature against a poster of herself. The clash between her actual self and her past representation explodes to make space for the younger self that will soon be born. Sue's first act is to contemplate herself in the mirror and measure her own *to-be-looked-at-ness*.[22] While the young woman watches herself reflected by screens and giant advertising posters, increasingly radiant and successful, Elisabeth grows to hate her own reflection more and more. In fact, the first woman's "rupture" in the film happens in front of a mirror. As soon as she discovers to have a rotting finger, Elisabeth becomes aware of how much Sue's existence demands of her and tries, one last time, to leave the apartment and just be herself. This means looking for the positive

[20] Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier,* 49.
[21] Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror,* 12.
[22] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 19.

sanction of a man who "still" wants to date her—but the two will never meet. The reflection on the lock of the door mirrors a face she cannot show anymore. Elisabeth goes back to the bathroom, looks at her reflection, and manifests her psychosomatic split: first hiding her cleavage under a scarf, then brushing the makeup from her face with increasing violence and frustration; the woman tries to erase her image from the mirror, incapable of accepting an imperfect, aging reflection of herself (see figure 5).

Figure 5. Elisabeth cries removing her makeup, film still.

Approaching the end of the film, the two women finally confront each other. Elisabeth runs to hide in the bathroom and locks the door. Sue breaks in and lifts Elisabeth's body so that they can look at each other through the mirror. Elisabeth smiles, thinking Sue will "recognize" her; instead, Sue smashes her face against the mirror, inflicting blood-dripping, disfiguring wounds. In a bathroom populated only by women, the mirror reveals its precarious and ephemeral nature of membrane. Instead of marking sexual difference, the broken surface represents the dangerous consequences of idealization, revealing how easy it is for the mirror to turn into a sharp weapon against women. Its rupture and weaponization induce the final collapse of the reciprocal invisibility marking Sue and Elisabeth's split.

Thoughout the film, all the elements and sites of excess blend into an abjected "substance"

progressively pervading the film and the spectators, until the border between "inside" and "outside"—between Elisabeth and Sue, between them and the audience, hypervisibility and invisibility, silence and scream, image and sound—collapses. The mirror separating the idealized image of a woman from her abjected bodily reality breaks, and the two women finally face each other in the last sequences of the film. Sue represents all the aesthetic and psychological traits demanded of a woman in the contemporary age: not only beauty and youth, but also a sunny personality and a thoughtless mind exclusively dedicated to the maintenance of her own body, while Elisabeth bears all the abjection that their split produces. Sue is desperate to hide Elisabeth and forget about her, yet she cannot renounce *The Substance* Elisabeth has: her abjected, aging body retains the meaning that Sue is devoid of. Elisabeth *is* the substance.

At the end of the film, Sue kills Elisabeth in a cascade of violence and blood and heads to the studio for the New Year's Eve television show she was supposed to host. Sue's body, however, has also received a final blow through the death of her "matrix." Her flesh starts decaying, her teeth falling out. Sue makes a last, desperate attempt to save "the show": she injects herself with the substance that separated her from Elisabeth's body.

What awakens is "Monstro ElisaSue," who represents the "inside-out" that both Elisabeth and Sue had desperately tried to keep hidden in the bathroom: a raw, skinless body that has become an open wound, a mucous in plain sight. Yet ElisaSue seems strangely satisfied with her new "look." She prepares for her big night with a parody of a beauty routine and makeover, similarly as the women in the social media posts cited at the beginning of this article. She pierces her bald head with an earring and covers her disfigured face with the picture of Elisabeth taken from the shattered poster in the living room—not one of Sue—finally ready to show the abjection that her past, split selves rejected until the point of tragic consequences (see figure 6).

When ElisaSue sings on stage, a deep, hollow voice emerges; still, nobody wants to listen. The audience, at first astonished, erupts in screams and vomits only when a breast pops out of ElisaSue's orbital cavity. The creature then explodes in a joyous, liberatory fountain of blood—a tribute to Carrie and its path of feminist revolt (1976)—in a rioting catharsis of abjected femininity, a liberating *jouissance*.[23]

Figure 6. ElisaSue with the mask ripped off Elisabeth's poster, film still.

After the explosion of blood at the studios, what is left of ElisaSue—the face of Elisabeth on top of a bloody blend of organs and flesh—drags itself toward the star of the Walk of Fame displayed at the beginning of the film and melts there with a smile. Sue and Elisabeth are reunited as one and finally accept their body. Abjection has made its way to the surface. Fargeat's strategy of splitting a woman in two uses New Literalism to manifest the real split a woman must navigate between her public appearance and the bodily materiality she has to disavow.

Conclusion: For a Future of Abjection

In the words of Vivian Sobchack, "Cinema is cosmetic surgery—its fantasies, its makeup, and its

[23] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.

digital effects able to "fix" (in the doubled sense of repair and stasis), to fetishize and reproduce faces and time as both "unreel" before us. And, reversibly, cosmetic surgery is cinema, creating an image we not only learn to enact in a repetitive compulsion but also must—and never can—live up to."[24]

The Substance offers an explicit representation of the dissociation and alienation that a woman today must endure between the body modifications demanded by society and the real, imperfect body she needs to conceal. Among other recognitions, the film has been acclaimed for the convergence of an on- and off-screen history of a woman star: during her Golden Globe acceptance speech, leading actress Demi Moore has shared the joy of returning to the spotlight with a project that recognized her value as an aging woman who had been put in the corner. Yet ElisaSue is not granted the same privilege to return to the stage.

The camera-colonoscope applied within a feminist framework—and jointed to its "otoscopic" function—creates a short circuit: immediacy, proximity and hypervisibility exalt their opposite and abjection finds spaces of re-mediation negotiated by women. Yet despite this powerful eruption of abjected femininity, the path of liberation of ElisaSue is not destined to continue. As so often happens, a woman willing to explore and manifest her abjection is eventually punished through a scene exit that is also a literal death: the film collapses into a stereotypical ending of this type of narrative.[25] One wonders whether the death of ElisaSue, yet again in cinema, comes to signify the impossibility for a woman to survive on screen once no longer "abjected" from the discourse, diminishing the film's attempt to repurpose colonoscopy

[24] Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts,* 50.
[25] I extensively discussed this topic in Claudia Calabresi, *I'd Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess: Cinema, Sociosemiotics, Science Fiction and Feminisms* (master's thesis, University of Torino, 2022), available from the author.

cinema for feminist filmmaking and give birth to an "all-round" woman. If the intent of representing this impossibility was to denounce its injustice, it is worth noticing that the spectators of today's films already know innumerable stories of women condemned to a more or less literal death when they challenge the boundary between meaningless hypervisibility and abjected corporeality that the system of beauty standards oblige them never to cross.

When Demi Moore won the Golden Globe for Best Performance by a Female Actor in *The Substance*, her acceptance speech went viral: [26] spectators, especially women, crave positive stories of female all-rounded visibility and aging acceptance in which women can still live and be seen regardless of beauty and youth. Yet one year later Demi Moore herself has become the subject of deep concern for the extreme weight loss she appeared with at the Actors Awards: many users on social media asked whether the actress is "on the substance,"[27] indicating her as an example of contemporary *body fascism* targeting women. Erasing a woman's body means erasing her voice, for diet culture has become a perfected "disciplinary technology."[28]

The Substance resists, in its entirety, as an accomplished example of how colonoscopy cinema can be combined with strategies of excess in New Feminist Cinema; however, ElisaSue's death weakens its subversive message. Furthermore, the current authoritarian pressure on women's bodies rushed to punish and erase the very actress who embodied ElisaSue's rebellion. It is time to bring abjection into cinematic and public discourse without killing the woman brave enough to manifest it, and to dare to imagine her future—on and off screen.

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[26] "Demi Moore Wins Best Female Actor – Motion Picture – Musical/Comedy | 82nd Annual Golden Globes," YouTube video, uploaded by Golden Globes, January 5, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SvW3XJP5Ic.
[27] Mike Boyce, "Demi Moore Sparks Fresh Concern Over 'Skinnier-Than-Ever 'Appearance at Actor Awards — 'Food Must Be Very Expensive in L.A.'," *RadarOnline*, March 2, 2026, https://radaronline.com/p/demi-moore-sparks-fresh-concern-over-skinnier-than-ever-appearance-at-actors-awards/.
[28] Da'Shaun Harrison, "Let Us Explain: Body Fascism," *Scalawag*, March 3, 2026, https://scalawagmagazine.org/2026/03/let-us-explain-body-fascism/.

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Techno-Embodied Performativity in Dystopian Imagination: Gendered Androids in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last*

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Abstract: This article examines gendered androids in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* as sites of techno-embodied performativity, situating them within debates on posthuman corporeality and queer media potential. It draws on Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra to interrogate the hyperreal perfection of synthetic femininity, Judith Butler's theory of performativity to reveal gender as a programmed construct, and Paul B. Preciado's notion of pharmacopornography to expose how technocapitalism transforms bodies into sites of extraction and control. On the one hand, the article analyzes artificial female figures as instruments of power, ranging from hyperfeminine constructs that reinforce patriarchal norms to seductive, ambiguous bodies that sustain capitalist logics. On the other hand, it argues that these mechanical characters also function as sites of resistance: while reproducing normative gender scripts, they expose the constructedness of gendered identity. Furthermore, the article contends that moments of failure open up possibilities for post-gender readings, positioning androids as proto-queer entities that unsettle the boundaries between subjecthood and objecthood and contribute to broader debates on embodiment, desire, and control under algorithmic governance.
Keywords: gender, robots, feminism, techno-embodiment, post-gender

Introduction

When a robot performs gender better than a human, what remains of the body as we know it? In an era of deepfakes, AI-generated influencers, sexbots, and social robots, cultural representations of such creations become a mirror of contemporary anxieties about gender and technology. The 2004 film *The Stepford Wives*[1] and Margaret Atwood's novel *The Heart Goes Last*[2] (2015) depict synthetic women as Flusserian technical images—media that do not merely represent but actively reconstruct reality and gendered embodiment.

Human-like robots' physical appearance usually suggests gender, race, or age.[3] Moreover, robot design significantly influences our expectations of and interactions with machines, depending on their form and features.[4] For example, when it comes to gender, Jennifer Rhee argues that AI has long been intertwined with reproductive labor and care, an association that persistently shapes how robots are imagined.[5] Historically tied to feminized reproductive and care labor, this association has produced female-coded robots, particularly in domains such as domestic service, care, and emotional assistance. These robots are frequently designed with feminine traits, such as soft voices, gentle movements, and submissive behavior, mimicking gendered archetypes. For this reason, Samantha (*Her*[6], 2013) is designed to be emotionally attuned, reinforcing stereotypes of women as caregivers. In other representations, female robots are often emotionally manipulative (Ava in *Ex Machina*[7], 2014); they perform household chores

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[1] Frank Oz, dir., *The Stepford Wives* (Paramount Pictures, 2004).
[2] Margaret Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last* (London: Virago Press, 2016).
[3] Robert Sparrow, Eliana Horn, and Friederike Eyssel, "Do Robots Have Sex? A Prolegomenon," *International Journal of Social Robotics* 15, no. 11 (2023): 1707–23.
[4] Christoph Bartneck, Dana Kulic, Elizabeth A. Croft, and Susana Zoghbi, "Measurement Instruments for the Anthropomorphism, Animacy, Likeability, Perceived Intelligence, and Perceived Safety of Robots," *International Journal of Social Robotics* 1, no. 1 (2009): 71–78.
[5] Jennifer Rhee, *The Robotic Imaginary: The Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
[6] Spike Jonze, dir., *Her* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2013).
[7] Alex Garland, dir., *Ex Machina* (Universal Pictures, 2014).

(Rosie the Robot Maid in *The Jetsons*[8], 1962–1988; Alice in *Subservience*[9], 2024) or are programmed for sexualized roles (Kyoko in *Ex Machina,* 2014). All these robots not only mirror societal norms and anxieties about femininity and gender but also consolidate power structures, shaping how we act, perceive ourselves and others, and understand the world around us.

This article argues that representations of android bodies in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* trace a shift from explicit patriarchal control of femininity to more differentiated biopolitical and capitalist regimes of bodily governance, while simultaneously opening space for queer and post-gender reconfigurations of subjectivity. Robotic figures thus function both as instruments of domination and as sites where normative gender and power structures begin to destabilize. The first part analyzes hyperfeminine androids in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* to show how their programmed traits materialize patriarchal fantasies of controlled femininity. The second part examines *The Heart Goes Last* as a system in which technology no longer merely reinforces traditional gender roles but operates as a corporate mechanism for managing and regulating all bodies. In this way, the article traces a movement from direct patriarchal coercion in *Stepford* to more sophisticated and systemic forms of capitalist control in Atwood's dystopian world. The final part reorients the analysis toward the queer potential of mechanical figures, arguing that malfunction and systemic failure emerge as modes of resistance to dominant power structures. This comparative approach traces how representations of techno-corporeality evolve from explicit gender enforcement to subtler systems of bodily governance, mirroring real-world transitions from industrial to digital capitalism.

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[8] William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, dirs., *The Jetsons* (Hanna-Barbera Productions, 1962–1988).
[9] Scott Dale, dir., *Subservience* (Millennium Media, 2024).

This analysis is grounded in the intersection of three critical perspectives: Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra,[10] Paul B. Preciado's queer biopolitical framework,[11] and Judith Butler's theory of performativity.[12] Informed by media theory, particularly Vilém Flusser's insights into programmed technical images,[13] the androids in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* are read not as mere characters but as ideological carriers. Their behaviors and aesthetics materialize through programmed design decisions that construct, rather than reflect, social norms. Baudrillard's simulacra theory radicalizes this perspective, exposing the robots' "perfection" as a hyperreal simulation that erases the very possibility of authentic gender.

Programmed Patriarchy: Hyperfeminine Androids as Gender Simulacra

In the realm of gendered technology, hyperfeminine androids do not simply imitate women but actively reproduce patriarchal norms. They function as simulacra of idealized femininity—perfect copies that replace complex, lived womanhood. In *The Stepford Wives*, independent women are systematically replaced by their husbands with obedient android doubles. In *The Heart Goes Last*, Charmaine and other residents live in the privatized town of Consilience, where daily life, work assignments, and housing are strictly regulated, and everyone is expected to conform to assigned gendered social roles. In both narratives, femininity is engineered to please, serve, and conform, reducing gendered identity to a controllable aesthetic of docility and desire. Whether imposed through mechanical replication or enforced through social and economic programming, this manufactured femininity obscures the power relations it sustains. This section adopts a comparative reading of both texts to examine how gender is

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[10] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
[11] Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013).
[12] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[13] Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

operationalized through technological bodies and controlled social environments. Taken together, these narratives frame hyperfeminine androids not as technological novelties that challenge existing social order, but as gender simulacra designed to stabilize patriarchal and capitalist control.

In *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, Naomi Wolf exposes how mass media reduces women to impossible ideals, transforming beauty into a tool of control.[14] However, with the development and proliferation of social robots, these manufactured standards take on a new material form, in which androids materialize patriarchal fantasies as three-dimensional, functional simulacra. In other words, unlike Wolf's two-dimensional magazine images, androids embody patriarchal ideals in embodied, functional forms. This materialization of patriarchal standards recalls historical patterns of female commodification, linking contemporary androids to longstanding logics of ownership and objectification.

According to Marxist theory, the origins of female subordination may be traced to the rise of private property, which enabled the exploitation of biological differences between the sexes. As Gera Lerner suggests, the patriarchal system that emerged over four thousand years ago in the Ancient Near East rendered women "a resource, acquired by men much as the land was acquired by men."[15] Patriarchy turned women into tradable commodities, much like land and property, and the synthetic females in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* render this logic literal. Since these hyperfeminine robots can be purchased, their engineered bodies function not only as objects of desire but also as assets intended for ownership. Atwood foreshadows this problem even before the narrative begins, in the epigraphs preceding the novel:

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[14] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002).
[15] Gera Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 212.

> …with wonderful craftsmanship he sculpted a gleaming white ivory statue… It appeared to be a real living girl, poised on the brink of motion but modestly holding back—so artful did his artistry conceal itself… He kissed her, convinced himself that she kissed him back, spoke to her, embraced her…[16]

By quoting the story of Pygmalion, Atwood lays bare the illusion at the core of robots' programmed femininity. Their perceived perfection masks the same old exchange value. Just as the statue's "artful" craftsmanship conceals its inert submission, androids like those in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* perform idealized womanhood while remaining fundamentally transactional. Technology does not overturn patriarchy here; it simply repackages it. Women—whether the statue kissed into life or robots—remain commodities, now refined by algorithms rather than myth, yet still subjected to male ownership. Atwood's epigraph thus signals a dystopia in which the female body, whether flesh or machine, continues to be acquired, appraised, and animated by male desire.

The perpetuation of patriarchal ideals presented in these two texts, however, is not limited to programmed submission; it is also encoded in visual form and spatial design. Both *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* inscribe patriarchal control through the aesthetics of the 1950s, reconstructing not only gendered appearances but also domestic architectures, spatial arrangements, and modes of everyday life characteristic of the period. The 1950s aesthetic is weaponized because it evokes a time when patriarchal norms were openly normalized and aestheticized as ideals of social order. As Thomas Barrie explains, postwar television systematically promoted a white, middle-class fantasy in which "the father [was] the breadwinner and mother […] a nurturing stay-at-home mom" through sitcoms that rendered

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[16] Margaret Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*. (Epigraph; no page number)

suburban conformity natural and desirable.[17] Just as vintage sitcoms used the suburban home as a supporting structure to normalize hierarchy, these dystopias deploy 1950s design as active propaganda. They do not merely nostalgically recall the era but reinstate its most coercive values through environmental design, endlessly replaying what Barrie calls "established common cultural ground" while erasing alternatives.

Before entering Stepford, the women live with relative autonomy; they pursue their own careers, opinions, and relationships, often in tension with societal expectations. Their neighborhoods appear ordinary, imperfect, and sometimes messy, reflecting lives shaped by negotiation, choice, and small acts of resistance. Similarly, in *The Heart Goes Last*, Charmaine and Stan move from a precarious and disordered existence outside Consilience, shaped by economic collapse and social breakdown, where survival often requires improvisation and moral compromise. Their homes, routines, and clothing are dictated by circumstance rather than ideology.

Once they arrive in Stepford or Consilience, however, the social order associated with the 1950s asserts itself. In Stepford, men dominate the public sphere: they work, make household decisions, and socialize outside the home, while women are confined to domestic roles and programmed to embody perfect, submissive housewives. Although women are permitted to socialize with one another, the scope of their interactions is narrowly regulated, limited to book discussions, recipe exchanges, and the planning of domestic and social events. Women who resist or fail to conform are replaced with androids, ensuring that the town maintains its idealized hierarchy and that independence or dissent has no place. It soon becomes clear that every woman eventually fails to meet these expectations and is subsequently replaced. Similarly, in

[17] Thomas Barrie, *House and Home: Cultural Context, Ontological Roles* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 142.

Consilience, men occupy technical and managerial positions, while women, like Charmaine, perform domestic and caregiving labor, including knitting, cooking, gardening, doing laundry, and assisting at the hospital as caregivers. The Consilience project is hailed as "the revolutionary new venture,"[18] yet, as in Stepford, the allocation of labor and mechanisms of social control reproduce 1950s ideals, rendering gender conformity visible, unquestioned, and inescapable.

This regime of control extends beyond tasks and routines to the visual regulation of women's bodies, where appearance becomes a key site of ideological inscription. As Mark J. O'Connell argues in *Forma ex Machina: Fashioning Gender, Control, and Identity in the Representation of Female Robots in Science Fiction*, the design of artificial women is never incidental.[19] Clothing, bodily silhouettes, and even color palettes operate as semiotic cues that signal social roles, regulate behavior, and stabilize hierarchical orders. As he explains, the design and costuming of robotic women function as powerful instruments of gendered conditioning, reinforcing specific ideals and ideologies through deliberate aesthetic choices.

This logic is also characteristic of Stepford and Consilience, where clothing both reflects and enforces gendered expectations, albeit in different ways. In Stepford, women wear floral dresses, aprons, and pearls, visually signaling their domestic roles. In contrast, men wear suits or casual work attire that emphasize authority and participation in the public sphere. In Consilience, by contrast, residents are required to wear bright pastel colors such as pink and blue, intended to evoke the feeling of a happy new beginning. Atwood describes these colors as "springlike," comparing them to nature's renewal after winter.[20] Here, winter represents life outside

[18] Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, 141.
[19] Mark J. O'Connell, *Forma Ex Machina: Fashioning Gender, Control, and Identity in the Representation of Female Robots in Science Fiction* (2024), https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.13850974.
[20] Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, 141.

Consilience—marked by dirt, decay, and moral compromise—while the pastel aesthetic promises a manufactured rebirth. A similar logic operates in *The Stepford Wives*, where the robot wives' floral dresses and pristine kitchens produce an illusion of perpetual spring: gleaming surfaces and cheerful obedience obscure the "winter" of women's autonomy, masking the loss of freedom behind an aesthetic of order and charm. In both cases, pastel palettes and carefully curated domestic spaces create an atmosphere of optimism while subtly enforcing conformity.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the secret facility within the Consilience project produces sexbots modeled on mechanical replicas of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. Atwood's decision to replicate Monroe and Presley in mechanized form signals the enduring cultural hegemony of mid-twentieth-century beauty standards, while also underscoring how contemporary robotic representations reproduce and reactivate these idealized forms. By translating Monroe and Presley into programmable bodies, Atwood reveals how idealized images of gender are stabilized through repetition and technical reproducibility. These robotic bodies do not merely reference cultural icons; they function as regulatory templates that discipline desire, visibility, and bodily value. In this sense, the sexbots demonstrate how technocapitalism preserves aesthetic authority by transforming cultural memory into operational design.

In conclusion, *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* demonstrate how hyperfeminine androids and meticulously curated environments function as instruments of patriarchal control. By rendering gender performative, visible, and endlessly replicable, both texts expose the mechanisms through which authority, conformity, and aesthetic ideals are maintained. These works underscore that domination is not only social but also materially and visually embodied, setting the stage for a closer examination of how robotic bodies operate as sites of both power and resistance.

The Body as Power Interface: The Biopolitics of Robotic Bodies

While *The Stepford Wives* reveals patriarchal control through the literal replacement of female organic bodies with programmed replicas, *The Heart Goes Last* demonstrates a more sophisticated neoliberal bodily regime. In this evolution, robotic bodies become part of a mechanism of control that Preciado describes as pharmacopornographic capitalism—a system in which biotechnology, desire, and institutional power converge to regulate bodies at the molecular level. Here, Atwood's novel illustrates how technocapitalism extends beyond patriarchal coercion to absorb all bodies, organic and mechanical alike, into its logic of extraction.

Preciado characterizes the pharmacopornographic era as a twenty-first-century regime in which biotechnology, digital media, and global capitalism collaborate to govern bodies and desires at microscopic scales.[21] Unlike traditional disciplinary power, this system operates through molecular engineering (hormones, antidepressants, genetic modification) and the industrial standardization of pleasure (pornography, gender norms, and sexual identities). It transforms intimacy into a marketable resource and biological life into patented intellectual property. He describes this shift through the pharmaceutical industry's control of reproduction, demonstrating how capitalism has moved from exploiting labor to shaping subjectivity itself. I argue that Atwood's sex robots literalize this logic. These androids are not merely gendered puppets or (sex) toys but nodes within a system that commodifies arousal (pharmaco), harvests organs (porno), and renders life itself a corporate asset.

Pharmacopornography reveals how modern power no longer commands "obey" but instead whispers "choose, consume, and optimize." The Consilience facility produces Monroe and Presley models—ready-made replicas of idealized femininity and masculinity. Yet customers

[21] Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 25.

can also customize their robots, selecting every detail of their companions, from physical features to behavioral traits. This produces a revealing paradox: while customization appears to express individual freedom, it in fact enables more sophisticated forms of control through the intensification and manipulation of desire. Hyperpersonalization thus achieves what overt coercion cannot—a subject who self-regulates, pursuing corporate-curated ideals while believing themselves to be autonomous.

As Preciado argues, while pornography historically functioned as an external technology regulating male sexuality, the mid-twentieth century witnessed a shift toward internal control, as the pharmaceutical industry began to manipulate arousal directly through chemicals and prosthetics.[22] This movement from visual stimulation to biochemical intervention reflects the broader expansion of the pharmacopornographic regime into bodily governance. However, as *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* demonstrate, robotic bodies extend this logic even further. In *The Stepford Wives*, men replace their wives with androids, yet this control proves double-edged: the men themselves become entangled in the same regime, their desires and behaviors shaped by the system they enforce. *The Heart Goes Last*, by contrast, reveals a deeper form of neoliberal technocapitalist exploitation. Here, robots are no longer substitutes for human partners but fully commodified vessels engineered for optimized pleasure. Unlike pharmaceutical or pornographic control, which still operates through organic bodies, robots represent the ultimate realization of this logic. They do not merely discipline desire but replace the body itself with a consumable, upgradable product. The mechanized body thus becomes not only a site of control but also a manufactured asset within capitalism's ongoing cycle of extraction.

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[22] Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 29.

For Atwood, however, the body—organic or not—emerges as the primary site of control. Like pharmacopornography, which transforms choice into an instrument of governance, *The Heart Goes Last* demonstrates how, within a biopolitical regime, even the most intimate spheres of life—sexuality, desire, and pleasure—are stripped of autonomy. The novel dismantles the illusion of the body as a private domain, revealing how power penetrates the most personal aspects of existence. First, the Consilience project presents itself as a utopian alternative to capitalist instability, yet it imposes what Michel Foucault identifies as the "Victorian paradigm of sexual control," in which seventeenth-century repression gave way to nineteenth-century regulatory mechanisms that confined sex to procreative utility while eliminating nonproductive forms of pleasure.[23]

After moving into their new house in Consilience, Stan and Charmaine realize how much effort has been invested in the complete containment of inappropriate sexual acts. As Stan recounts:

> Music and movies are available on the same network [Consilience network], although, to avoid overexcitement, there is no pornography or undue violence, and no rock or hip-hop. However, there is no limitation on string quartets, Bing Crosby, Doris Day, the Mills Brothers, or show tunes from vintage Hollywood musicals.[24]

If anything threatened the vision of a pure and flawless society, it was immediately removed from social life. Furthermore, as Foucault argues, "wherever there was the chance they [unnecessary pleasures] might appear, devices of surveillance were installed."[25] Consilience replicates this regime with disturbing precision, installing hidden cameras throughout the city,

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[23] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 42.
[24] Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, 43.
[25] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* 42.

including in private residences and intimate spaces. The system remains constantly vigilant, ready to detect even the slightest sign of indecency.

At the same time, however, sex and sexuality are central to the narrative. Although married, Stan and Charmaine remain oriented toward fantasies of others: she begins an affair with a man who embodies her most hidden and socially unspeakable desires, while he becomes obsessed with a woman, he has never met but believes personifies his deepest desires. Initially, these private indulgences and transgressions appear to express agency, as their affairs seem to function as acts of liberation and their fantasies as self-directed desires. Yet it becomes clear that their sexuality is not personal but political, with each encounter surveilled and manipulated to reinforce biopower's hold.

Ironically, even their involvement in the anti-capitalist plot intended to dismantle Consilience reveals their lack of agency. Stan and Charmaine are selected to destroy the system rather than choosing to rebel. The novel's focus on sex is therefore deliberate: without mechanisms of control, pleasure itself loses meaning. Just as hyperpersonalized androids disguise coercion as choice, Stan and Charmaine's seemingly liberated desires follow a script they did not write. Atwood's biopolitical regime does not merely regulate bodies; it appropriates desire itself, rendering intimacy a site of governance.

The centrality of sex in *The Heart Goes Last* stems from its dual nature as both a site of capitalist extraction and an unstable force that resists total control—what Preciado calls *potentia gaudendi*. As he explains, this term refers to the capacity for pleasure as an inherently unstable force that cannot be owned, stored, or fully commodified.[26] In both narratives, the robots are, at their core, sexbots. Stepford's androids embody patriarchal fantasies of docile, perpetually

[26] Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 43.

available pleasure. They are devoted mothers and housewives, yet their subjectivity is reduced to a logic of sexual availability and service. In one notable scene in *The Stepford Wives*, the size of the robots' breasts can be adjusted by remote control, as casually as adjusting a thermostat. In *The Heart Goes Last*, robotic bodies literalize pharmacopornographic capitalism's drive to commodify arousal, intimacy, and even the biological matter underpinning them—organs, hormones, and neural responses. Yet sex's narrative urgency lies in its paradoxical status. As Preciado notes, *potentia gaudendi* is inherently fugitive. This is why technocapitalism's attempts to mechanize it—through programmable androids, algorithmic desire, or harvested organs—are both obsessive and ultimately doomed. Sex's value to capitalism depends precisely on its uncontainability.

In *The Stepford Wives*, the men's violent replacement of women with robots exposes not only patriarchal control but also a profound anxiety in the face of desire's instability. Replacing the organic body with a programmed one attempts to stabilize female desire by rendering it predictable and consumable. Yet the androids' uncanny perfection undermines this fantasy; their inhuman compliance reveals the void at the heart of patriarchal desire. *The Heart Goes Last* extends this logic into a fully systematized regime, in which sex robots function as nodes within a broader apparatus that monetizes intimacy, affect, and biological life itself. At the same time, the novel's proliferation of black markets, rogue desires, organ trafficking, and acts of rebellion—from Consilience's inhabitants to Joycelyn, the program's co-director—demonstrates that *potentia gaudendi* continually escapes institutional capture. The narrative centers on sex because it represents the ultimate contested terrain. For Preciado, *potentia gaudendi* functions as a form of labor that is both abstract (datafied, circulated) and irreducibly material. The existence of robots as sexbots does not resolve this tension; rather, it intensifies it, exposing the limits of

capitalism's attempt to convert life's most volatile energies into profit. At the same time, these failures of capture open a space for rethinking embodiment, desire, and gender beyond the logics that seek to regulate them.

Posthumanist Hopes for a Post-gender Future: Can Robots Be Queer?

Posthumanist visions of a post-gender future often collide with the stubborn materiality of design. It is difficult to imagine a robot that resembles, as Atwood describes, "a pretty blond girl in a red and white polka-dot bikini and a pin-up pose, hands clasped around one drawn-up knee, the foot in a slingback red high heel," undoing the very categories it hyper-performs and consolidates.[27] The fantasy of a post-gender future, in which gender no longer burdens the body, falters when synthetic bodies are designed to satisfy rather than challenge the male gaze. Even in parody, the machine's design reveals a deeper truth: posthumanism's radical potential is often flattened into a marketable aesthetic, where liberation becomes just another product feature. As Ania Malinowska explains:

> The sexbot industry promotes a serious gender bias in terms of target clients and the construction of robotic subjects. [...] Also, the very design of (ro)bots reflects limited understanding of gender dynamics in relation to culturally progressing standards. The traditionally understood variations of male and female, rendered by means of stereotypical looks (for sex robots), behavior, language, responses, and function in the intimate/romantic relationship, prove little understanding of the cultural landscape as well as the (ro)botic subject.[28]

A fundamental contradiction plagues gendered robotics: while posthumanism promises liberation from biological constraints, commercial implementations reinforce traditional norms.

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[27] Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, 242–43.
[28] Ania Malinowska, "Sexbots and Posthuman Love," in *International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media and Communication* (Wiley, 2020), 4.

The sexbot industry's stereotypical designs thus reflect not a lack of creativity but a calculated alignment with market demands, privileging familiarity over innovation.

Nevertheless, as this article has argued, even robotic bodies that are gendered through processes of naturalization within existing social norms retain the potential for queer reinterpretation and subversion. While gendered robot design may consolidate cultural stereotypes, it simultaneously exposes their artificiality. If gender is, as Judith Butler's theory of performativity suggests, a repeated cultural performance rather than an innate truth, then robotic bodies—unburdened by biological essentialism—paradoxically reveal gender as a purely social construct.[29] When a machine performs femininity or masculinity through programmed gestures and engineered proportions, it denaturalizes what is often mistaken for biological necessity. Moreover, the plasticity of robotic embodiment—its capacity for change in visual and vocal features—creates opportunities for destabilization. If gender is fundamentally constructed, robotic bodies demonstrate how easily it can be reconfigured, transforming what appears fixed in biological organisms into something openly programmable. As Roy Schwartzman notes, while the gendered cyborg exposes gender as constructed, science fiction frequently reinscribes traditional hierarchies by confining female-coded figures to objectified or diminished forms of subjectivity.[30]

In *The Stepford Wives*, husbands replace their wives with mechanical copies, and in *The Heart Goes Last*, the CEO of Consilience desires Charmaine but ultimately commissions a passive mechanical replica instead of pursuing a relationship with her. This reliance on robotic substitution reveals that the fantasy of ideal femininity requires artificial construction. The

[29] Butler, *Gender Trouble.*
[30] Roy Schwartzman, "Engendered Machines in Science Fiction Film," *Studies in Popular Culture* 22, no. 1 (1999): 75–87.

cultural ideal of femininity is so unattainable that only programmed machines can sustain it. Real women, with their autonomy, complexity, and imperfections, inevitably fail to perform it precisely because they are human. These narratives expose how patriarchal desire depends on control and predictability—qualities that only machines can fully guarantee. By eliminating the unpredictability of real women, male characters eliminate the possibility of resistance. In both cases, femininity is not celebrated but manufactured.

Nevertheless, glitches inevitably emerge that expose these mechanisms through moments of malfunction, when even programmed machines cannot sustain normative performances. We see this, for example, in the Stepford wives' frozen smiles during power surges or in sentences repeated in loops, both of which betray their artificiality. These glitches do not merely undermine the robots themselves but also the systems that produced them, revealing that no iteration of gender, however engineered, can fully erase its own constructedness.

In 2014, Francesca Ferrando surveyed over one hundred students and researchers to examine how gender shapes perceptions of robots, cyborgs, and artificial intelligence.[31] The results revealed a marked tendency to imagine such entities through a masculine or neutral lens, with virtually no association with femininity. Yet this absence does not signal genderless neutrality; rather, it reflects deeply embedded cultural biases. As Ferrando argues, even in the absence of biological sex, robots are interpreted through human gender frameworks—a logic clearly visible in both Stepford's hyperfeminized androids and Atwood's sexualized machinic bodies. As she writes, "even if sex will have no biological or physiological significance for robots, gender—its cultural apotheosis—will still be valuable for humans (at least in the near

[31] Francesca Ferrando, "Is the Post-Human a Post-Woman? Cyborgs, Robots, Artificial Intelligence and the Futures of Gender: A Case Study," *European Journal of Futures Research* 2, no. 1 (2014), 9.

future), to relate more easily with our robotic significant others."[32] She titles her article "Is the Post-Human a Post-Woman?", yet by "post-gender" Ferrando does not mean a utopian erasure of gender categories, as the term is often misunderstood. Instead, she aligns with thinkers such as Donna Haraway in suggesting that gender is not a fixed identity but a relational and performative process. In this sense, "post-gender" refers to a condition in which gender is no longer tied to biology or binary structures but is open to fluidity, multiplicity, and transformation.

Although robots do not possess biological sex, humans continue to rely on gender categories to better identify with them, communicate, and form attachments. This suggests that gender functions as a cultural and communicative code, detached from the physical body, thereby opening significant potential for queer interpretations. It creates space to move beyond the gender binary—there is no necessity to assign robots as "he" or "she"—and enables experimentation with identity independent of biological embodiment. Ferrando further notes that robots are, at once, "the other, the same, and the chimeras" that, although "constructed from human knowledge and categories […] transcend them both."[33]

Ania Malinowska introduces the concept of silicon gender to examine how gender is produced in relation to robotic beings and their material form. She defines silicon gender not as an additional identity within the gender spectrum, nor as a metaphor for queer or non-binary gender. Rather, she explicitly frames it as an ontological condition rather than an identity category.[34] Silicon gender does not belong to the sex/gender system; it exists and operates outside it. The term names a mode of embodiment grounded in machinic materiality rather than

[32] Ferrando, "Is the Post-Human a Post-Woman?" 9.
[33] Ferrando, "Is the Post-Human a Post-Woman?" 16.
[34] Ania Malinowska, "The Silicon Gender: Technological Species and the Transgression of Model Sexes," *Postcollectivity: Situated Knowledge and Practice* 284 (2024): 224–35.

flesh, offering a framework through which the robotic figures in Stepford and Atwood's novel can be understood not as failed women or exaggerated stereotypes, but as entities that expose the limits of the human sex/gender system itself.

Drawing on Samani et al.'s notion of robot culture, which understands robots as mediators of new modes of cohabitation and social codes, Malinowska examines the cultural dynamics that emerge as artificial entities become embedded in everyday life.[35] In these hybrid environments, where non-organic agents increasingly participate in human communities, traditional gender categories are both reproduced and challenged. This framework resists binary thinking by foregrounding the fluidity and constructedness of gender identities.

Importantly, Malinowska draws on Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology to argue that the robotic subject introduces a fundamental disorientation into our understanding of gender. By entering a world organized around organic, human-centered categories—particularly binary, sexed bodies—robots become unfamiliar elements that disrupt established spatial and social arrangements. When robotic beings enter these relational networks without clear gender coordinates, they unsettle the familiar lines of identity and embodiment. This disorientation, rather than constituting a failure of categorization, becomes a productive force: it destabilizes inherited models of gender, opens space for alternative orientations, and invites new forms of identification no longer confined to the binary logic of sexed embodiment. In robot cultures, gender thus becomes a communicative tool rather than a biological fact, enabling alternative, trans-organic expressions of identity that exceed the conventional human model.

Read through the lens of silicon gender, *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* stage

[35] Hooman Samani et al., "Cultural Robotics: The Culture of Robotics and Robotics in Culture," *International Journal of Advanced Robotic Systems* 10, no. 12 (2013): 1–10.

moments in which gender loses its orienting function once it is fully transferred onto machinic bodies. In *The Stepford Wives*, the android wives do not simply exaggerate normative femininity; they embody a form of gender that no longer belongs to a living subject. Femininity appears here as a technical property of the machine—stable, repeatable, and detached from lived experience—producing a sense of unease precisely because it operates without relational negotiation or the possibility of failure. This is where gender becomes disorienting: it remains legible yet no longer organizes social relations in the way human gender does. A comparable disorientation operates in *The Heart Goes Last*, where sexbots modeled on idealized cultural icons circulate alongside human bodies. These figures cannot be fully situated within existing gender categories, as their gender functions as an interface rather than an identity, mediating desire without reciprocity or agency. In both narratives, robotic bodies reveal what Malinowska conceptualizes as silicon gender: an ontological condition in which gender is grounded in machinic materiality rather than organic embodiment. Rather than pointing toward a utopian post-gender future, these moments expose the instability of gender itself when detached from human corporeality, opening a speculative space in which gender appears as a contingent, reprogrammable system rather than a natural or inevitable structure.

Conclusion

The gendered androids of *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* expose the paradox at the core of techno-embodiment: even as they replicate oppressive norms, their very artifice destabilizes the categories they perform. These narratives demonstrate that robotic bodies are never neutral; they materialize the ideologies of their creators, whether rooted in patriarchal nostalgia or capitalist extraction. Yet their failures also illuminate the constructedness of gender itself, offering glimpses of a posthuman future in which identity might be reconfigured beyond

binary constraints.

This tension reflects broader challenges in theorizing robotic subjectivity. Just as critical race theory and posthumanism grapple with whether to transcend or reclaim identity categories, queer robotic futures demand a dual approach: first, deconstructing the anthropomorphic frameworks that reproduce gender hierarchies, and second, embracing the radical potential of synthetic bodies to redefine relationality. As Rosi Braidotti reminds us, posthuman ethics requires neither nostalgia for humanism nor uncritical techno-optimism, but a commitment to new networks of care that recognize and sustain difference—whether biological, mechanical, or hybrid.[36]

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[36] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

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Cinematic VR: A Voluntary Exile into the Pain of Others

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All forms of art contemplate how to empathize with the pain of others. To truly feel the pain of others, voluntary exile is necessary. One must be willing to leave the comfort and safety of one's own world and enter into the discomfort where another's suffering resides. In Han Kang's *We Do Not Part*, the protagonist's journey—battling to find and rescue a bird—is so painful that I could not read it all at once. She falls unconscious into the snow and, upon barely making it to a house, confronts the lifeless bird. Each sentence is so suffocating that I had to close the book repeatedly, only to open it again, inching through the pain. In Grace M. Cho's *Tastes Like War*, the pain of the author's mother—who once lived as a U.S. military comfort woman and eventually died with schizophrenia—is similarly overwhelming. Like someone in a trance, she leaves home and wanders the forest in search of wild mushrooms and blackberries. Even after putting the book down, her actions make the walls and windows of my room feel unfamiliar. Literature, through such profound immersion, is a wondrous art that constructs a world within the consciousness of the reader.

What, then, of cinema? As both a spatial and temporal art, cinema has devised numerous strategies—editing, music, mise-en-scène—to create immersion and emotional resonance. A protagonist's sorrow is conveyed through close-ups of tear-streaked faces, and if that fails, through the mournful strains of a violin. While film often appears to be a powerful medium for inducing empathy, that empathy is frequently fleeting, superficial, and ultimately complicit in objectifying the suffering subject. A line exists between the object in front of the camera and the subject behind it. No matter how absorbed the viewer becomes, this invisible border cannot be crossed. It insulates us, separating our physical and psychological space from that of the world onscreen. This separation allows cinema to so openly turn the pain of others—through sex, violence, or even "poverty porn"—into consumable entertainment. Few media in human history have done so as extensively or as publicly.

Even more troubling are the politics of power embedded in the act of image-making itself. The high cost of live-action production has historically placed the camera in the hands of the powerful: citizens of the Global North, men, and those with capital—these are the ones who have stood behind the camera, wielding authorship and control. Meanwhile, the colonized, the impoverished, women, and those without capital have been positioned on the other side of the lens, reduced to silent subjects. Within this framework, the director—who commands both frame and gaze—has been granted a godlike authority. The voice we believe we hear from the screen may, in truth, be the voice of power disguised as the voice of the subject. What we perceive as empathy may in fact be the consumption—and exploitation—of pain.

360 virtual reality, however, disrupts these established formulas. The boundary between the front and back of the camera collapses. Unlike traditional cinema, in which the viewer looks into a framed world from an external vantage point, VR invites the viewer into a 360-degree

environment. This marks the spatial realization of what was earlier described as voluntary exile. Simply being placed within such a world already undermines one of the foundational psychological mechanisms of 2D cinema: voyeurism.

More importantly, this exile operates on an ontological level. In virtual reality, the viewer—the subject of the gaze—loses their body.[1] The gaze remains lucid, but the physical body capable of responding to what unfolds disappears. This condition is not merely disorienting; it is terrifying, akin to the paralysis of a waking nightmare. In this state—stripped of agency, disembodied, and vulnerable—the presence of the suffering other resonates on an entirely different register. It evokes responses far more acute than the passive reactions elicited by the objectification of suffering in conventional media. A polar bear losing its habitat on a flat television screen may have become a familiar image—even a cliché. But what if the polar bear were clinging to a melting iceberg beneath our feet, encountered not at a distance but through the immersive proximity of a VR headset? Could we remain indifferent?

One might argue that the world encountered in VR is not real—so why should it provoke such a visceral response? Yet, for the brain, the distinction between real and virtual is inconsequential. Information received through the optic nerve translates into identical electrical signals regardless of origin. Even when we consciously remind ourselves that what we see is not real, the affect—the emotional and sensory impressions—can be profoundly unsettling. In this immersive condition, where the viewer has no body and no physical separation from the image,

[1] The characteristics of VR discussed here refer specifically to 3DoF (three degrees of freedom) live-action cinematic VR. In such works, the camera position defines the viewer's point of view within a fixed 360-degree environment. Due to current technological limitations, viewer agency remains minimal, with vision as the primary mode of engagement.

viewer and subject occupy the same ontological plane. Herein lies the potential for a new form of empathy—one that transcends objectification.

All media are value-neutral, and virtual reality is no exception. The medium of VR does not inherently produce empathy or humanitarian insight; its immersive properties can just as easily be mobilized to construct violent or sensationalist narratives. During the so-called "Year One of VR" in 2016, many commercial ventures gravitated toward exploitative forms of horror and violence. Popular examples included simulations that placed viewers in the position of a comatose patient immobilized in bed, or as an abducted individual forced to confront an assailant face-to-face. Notably, these works rarely reproduced voyeuristic spectacles of violence directed at others. Instead, they positioned the viewer as the victim. Such configurations align closely with the formal conditions of VR: in a medium where the body is absent and only the gaze remains, viewers are more readily cast as immobilized subjects rather than active agents. In documentary contexts, this condition has often been framed as ethical strength. However, within the mainstream film industry—where agency and narrative action are central—it has posed significant commercial limitations. This tension has contributed to the difficulty of sustaining investment in VR and remains a key obstacle to its wider popularization.

Although these conditions constrained VR's commercial viability, they also revealed its profound potential as a medium for engaging the pain of others. It was the collapse of spatial, psychological, and ethical proximity in virtual reality that catalyzed the *Comfortless Trilogy*.[2] To recount the story of a South Korean camp town woman brutally murdered by a U.S. soldier in

[2] "Comfortless Trilogy (2017-2023) Trailer," YouTube video, accessed March 17, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lj6cgpw44sQ&t=5s.

1992 required more than traditional 2D cinema. To represent her death in a format that might once again objectify the victim—even under the guise of empathy—was ethically untenable.

What does it mean to remember the loneliness of a woman who bled to death over several hours in a single-room tenement in Dongducheon? How can we carry forward the unspeakable violence of that moment—not as a footnote in forgotten history, but as a living event reawakened each time a viewer enters the world? These unresolved questions compelled to the creation of *Bloodless* and later shaped the eight-year process of completing the full *Comfortless Trilogy* in virtual reality.

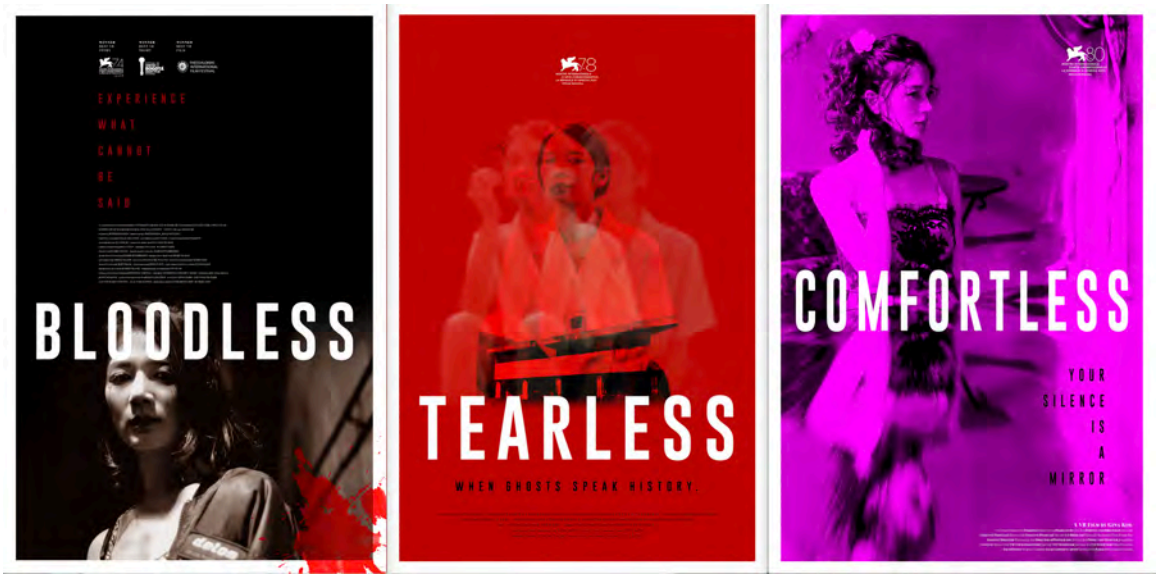

Figure 1. *Comfortless Trilogy – Bloodless, Tearless, Comfortless*. 360 3D cinematic VR, 2017–2023.

Many critics have approached the *Comfortless Trilogy* through the lens of metaphor and historical symbolism, often focusing on the ghost as narrator. These are valid readings. And yet, they do not reach the core. The heart of the trilogy is not about "seeing" a ghost who speaks from within spaces of trauma. Rather, its essence lies with the audience—in the moment when we, as viewers, lose our bodies. It is not an experience of ghost-seeing, but of ghost-becoming. This transformation is made possible through the ontological exile uniquely enabled by virtual reality.

The moment the audience becomes aware of this transformation arrives without warning. In *Bloodless*,[3] the first work in the trilogy, the viewer begins as an idle observer, taking in the textures of the military camp town with detached curiosity. Then, something shifts. At the periphery of vision, a woman appears—not merely a passerby, not a soldier. Something in her presence draws our gaze. We begin to follow her with our eyes. Yet she remains elusive, leaving behind only the sound of footsteps. Eventually, within the narrow alleyways, she approaches us directly. Just as we expect to finally behold her, something unexpected occurs: in an alleyway too narrow for two bodies to pass, she walks straight through us. If she is a ghost, then we, too, have already become one.

Figure 2. *Bloodless*. 360 3D cinematic VR, 12 minutes, 2017.

In *Tearless*,[4] the second work in the trilogy, the subject no longer merely meets our gaze. Instead, the viewer becomes her vocal cords, her breath, her embodied voice. We wander

[3] Gina Kim, *Bloodless* (2017), accessed March 17, 2026, https://www.ginakimfilms.com/#/bloodless-2017/.
[4] Gina Kim, *Tearless* (2021), accessed March 17, 2026, https://www.ginakimfilms.com/#/tearless-2021/.

through the ruins of the medical prison, tracing the daily lives of the women once detained there. Without warning, we find ourselves standing at the edge of a rooftop—the place where she ended her life. Neither her body nor ours is visible, yet her ragged breathing does not come from beside us; it resonates from within, somewhere between our ears. Her breath stops. Night falls over the mountains and sky. Down the corridor, her weeping begins—quiet at first, then swelling into cries, sobs, and grief. Once again, we realize: the voice does not echo from outside. It breaks open from within.

Figure 3. *Tearless*. 360 3D cinematic VR, 12 minutes, 2021.

In the ontological space of virtual reality—where subject and viewer occupy the same plane—the subject is no longer an object to be observed. On the contrary, the subject can now look back. This reversal reaches its fullest expression in *Comfortless*,[5] the final installment of the trilogy. Here, the dynamic between seer and seen is mediated through the symbolic use of mirrors. In every room of American Town, Inc.—a military prostitution complex built around the

[5] Gina Kim, *Comfortless* (2023), accessed March 17, 2026, https://www.ginakimfilms.com/#/comfortless-2023/.

U.S. Air Force base in Gunsan—mirrors appear, emphasizing the hyper-voyeuristic nature of the space. Yet when the viewer looks into these mirrors, their own reflection is absent. The viewer has no body.

Night falls, and with it returns her presence, accompanied by the sounds of the town in its heyday. Now, in the mirror where the viewer should appear, she emerges instead. We see a woman moving through the rituals of another night of labor. Later in the morning, she steps out into the already bright yard, and the viewer watches her collecting laundry. Then something unsettling occurs: she sees the viewer. She approaches. She asks a question. At this moment—when the subject recognizes the viewer, when the one who is seen becomes the one who sees—the viewer undergoes a reversal of being. A moment of inversion. The ultimate exile.

Figure 4. *Comfortless*. 360 3D cinematic VR, 16 minutes, 2023.

The fundamental limitation of 2D cinema—its tendency toward objectification—finds, in the medium of virtual reality, an unexpected and symbolic counterpoint. It is in this context that the term *experience*, often used to describe VR, becomes deeply ironic. For it is precisely through the loss of one's body that one comes to embody the pain of the other. The viewer, having relinquished physical form and become a ghost—an incorporeal presence—can no longer

remain within the safety of a familiar world. The viewer is exiled. Yet once one has lost the physical boundary of the self, one can become anything. Not only another person, but also any object or element of the world. The potential for *becoming*—of merging into the other—opens beyond the human.

In a world where only vision and consciousness remain, I may become you, a tree, a cat, a rock, a wave, the Earth. And what if I do not merely witness the polar bear perched precariously on a melting iceberg, but *become* that polar bear—not only spatially displaced, but ontologically transformed? What if I were the narrator of *We Do Not Part*, setting out alone into the snowstorm in search of a bird? What if I, too, collapsed in the blizzard, only to rise again and continue, unable to abandon the fragile creature? Or more devastating still: what if I were the bird—confined in a cold, dark cage, unaware that anyone was coming, slowly freezing? This is the visceral power of virtual reality. It renders the pain of others not as spectacle, but as an exile of being—a spatial and ontological displacement so complete that it unsettles the very notion of the self.

And yet, the most critical point remains: the world that matters is not the virtual one, but the real world to which we return after removing the VR headset. In that virtual space, you became them. You saw, heard, and felt their pain. But you could do nothing. Now, with the headset removed, you have a voice. You have a body. What, then, will you do with them?

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———. *Tearless*. 360° 3D cinematic VR film. 12 minutes. 2021.

———. *Comfortless*. 360° 3D cinematic VR film. 16 minutes. 2023.

Gina Kim reimagines cinematic storytelling across genres and platforms, developing a distinct transnational perspective centered on female protagonists. She was the first Korean director to helm a U.S.–Korea co-production, *Never Forever* (2007), starring Vera Farmiga, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival. *Final Recipe* (2014), a pan-Asian co-production starring Michelle Yeoh, premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival and was released in more than 3,400 theaters across China. Her groundbreaking VR trilogy on U.S. military comfort women has been presented at over 200 festivals, museums, and institutions worldwide. She is a Professor in the Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media at UCLA. Email: ginakim(at)tft.ucla.edu.

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Your Body Is a Masterpiece of Tissue Engineering On Enby Disability: A Practice-Based Poetics of Collaboration

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Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal
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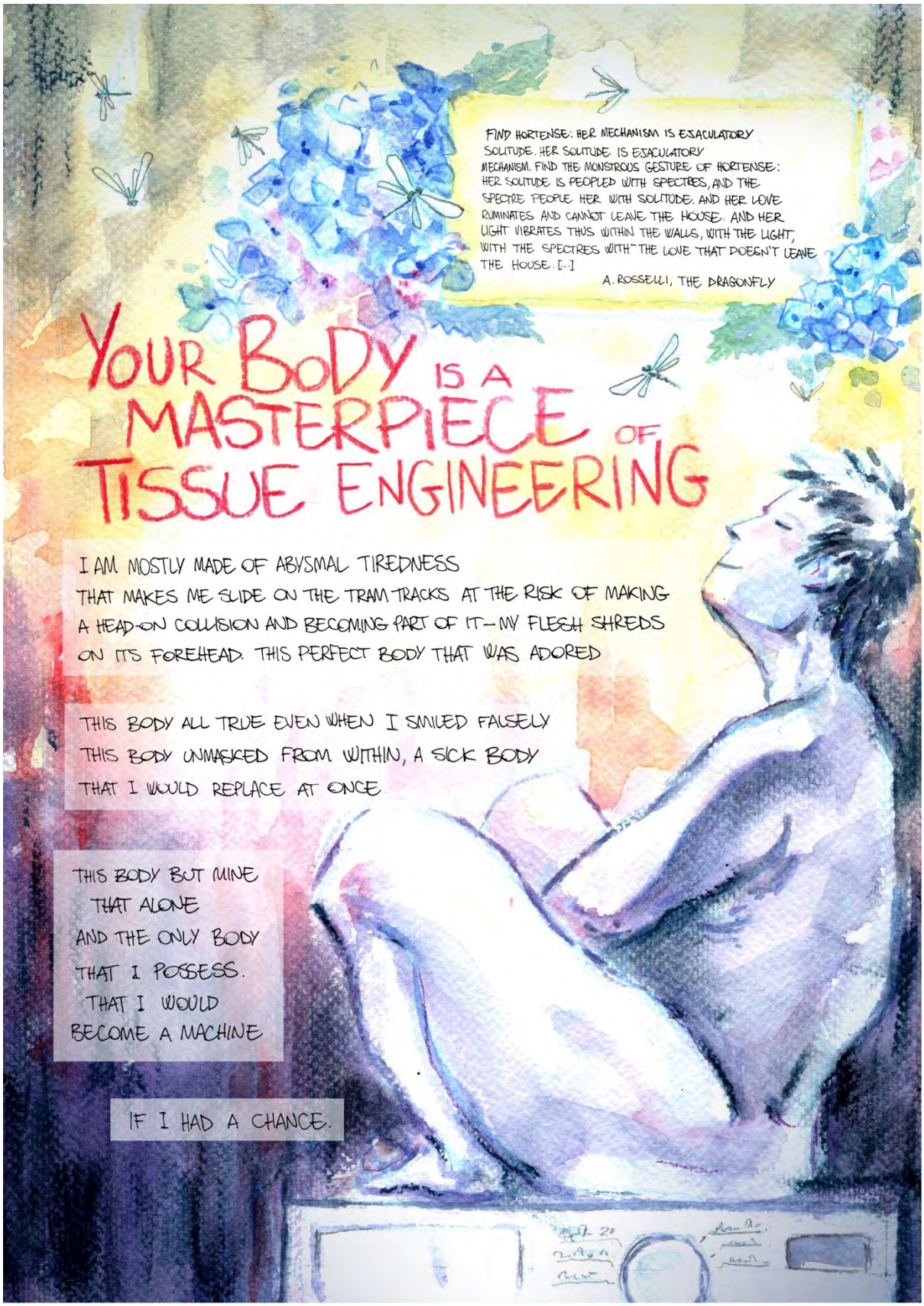
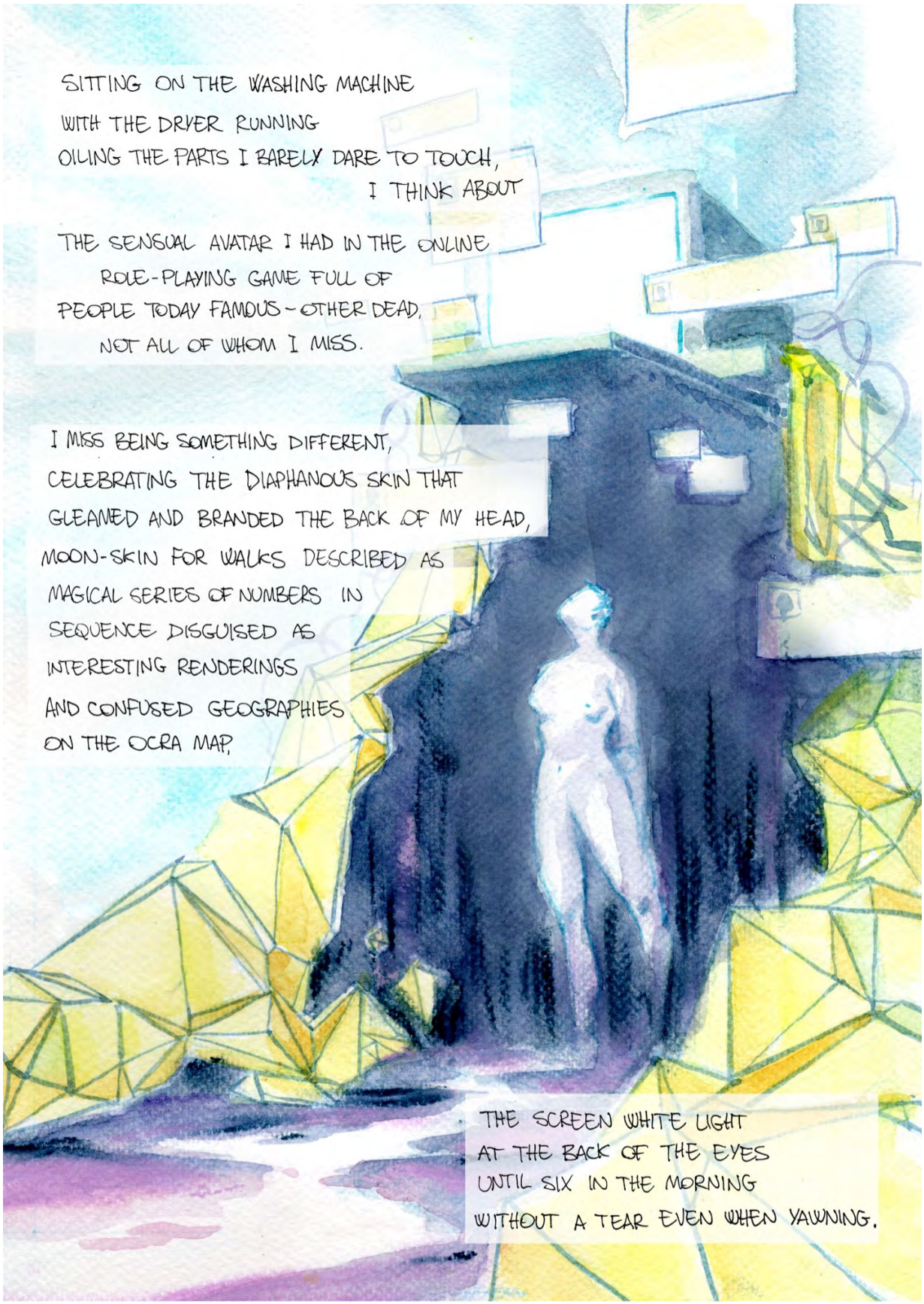
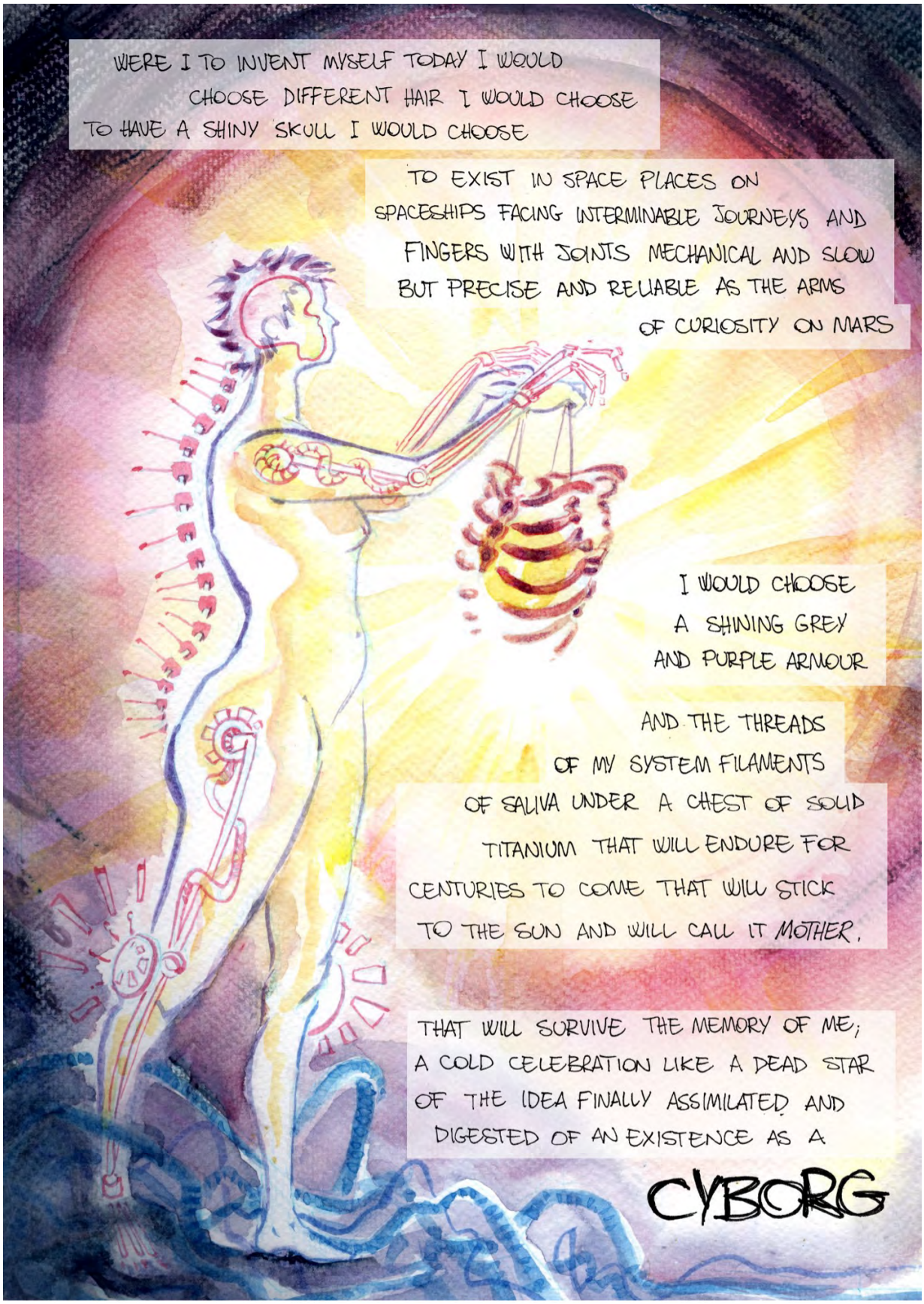
Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy
Università di Bologna, Italy


FIND HORTENSE: HER MECHANISM IS EJACULATORY SOLITUDE. HER SOLITUDE IS EJACULATORY MECHANISM. FIND THE MONSTROUS GESTURE OF HORTENSE: HER SOLITUDE IS PEOPLED WITH SPECTRES, AND THE SPECTRE PEOPLE HER WITH SOLITUDE, AND HER LOVE RUMINATES AND CANNOT LEAVE THE HOUSE. AND HER LIGHT VIBRATES THUS WITHIN THE WALLS, WITH THE LIGHT, WITH THE SPECTRES WITH THE LOVE THAT DOESN'T LEAVE THE HOUSE. [...]
A. ROSSELLI, THE DRAGONFLY
YOUR BODY IS A MASTERPIECE OF TISSUE ENGINEERING
I AM MOSTLY MADE OF ABYSMAL TIREDNESS
THAT MAKES ME SLIDE ON THE TRAM TRACKS AT THE RISK OF MAKING
A HEAD-ON COLLISION AND BECOMING PART OF IT—MY FLESH SHREDS
ON ITS FOREHEAD. THIS PERFECT BODY THAT WAS ADORED
THIS BODY ALL TRUE EVEN WHEN I SMILED FALSELY
THIS BODY UNMASKED FROM WITHIN, A SICK BODY
THAT I WOULD REPLACE AT ONCE
THIS BODY BUT MINE
THAT ALONE
AND THE ONLY BODY
THAT I POSSESS.
THAT I WOULD
BECOME A MACHINE
IF I HAD A CHANCE.

A KISS TO THE FRIDGE WITH ITS NIGHTLY HUMMING THAT KEEPS ME AWAKE
AND ONE TO THE TOASTER THAT LIKE MY ACETYLCHOLINE SOMETIMES OVERDOES AND
BURNS THE BREAD (SQUARE).
DING
A SALUTE TO THE EXCITEMENT OF TELEVISION
THAT WHISPERS PROGRAMMES AND SCREAMS ADVERTISEMENTS,
A CARESS TO THE CABLES OF THE MODEM
AND ITS FLASHING LIGHTS LIKE THE
INTERRUPTED SIGNALS THAT MY BRAIN SENDS TO MY MUSCLES


SITTING ON THE WASHING MACHINE
WITH THE DRYER RUNNING
OILING THE PARTS I BARELY DARE TO TOUCH,
I THINK ABOUT
THE SENSUAL AVATAR I HAD IN THE ONLINE
ROLE-PLAYING GAME FULL OF
PEOPLE TODAY FAMOUS - OTHER DEAD,
NOT ALL OF WHOM I MISS.
I MISS BEING SOMETHING DIFFERENT,
CELEBRATING THE DIAPHANOUS SKIN THAT
GLEANED AND BRANDED THE BACK OF MY HEAD,
MOON-SKIN FOR WALKS DESCRIBED AS
MAGICAL SERIES OF NUMBERS IN
SEQUENCE DISGUISED AS
INTERESTING RENDERINGS
AND CONFUSED GEOGRAPHIES
ON THE OCRA MAP,
THE SCREEN WHITE LIGHT
AT THE BACK OF THE EYES
UNTIL SIX IN THE MORNING
WITHOUT A TEAR EVEN WHEN YAWNING.


WERE I TO INVENT MYSELF TODAY I WOULD
CHOOSE DIFFERENT HAIR I WOULD CHOOSE
TO HAVE A SHINY SKULL I WOULD CHOOSE
TO EXIST IN SPACE PLACES ON
SPACESHIPS FACING INTERMINABLE JOURNEYS AND
FINGERS WITH JOINTS MECHANICAL AND SLOW
BUT PRECISE AND RELIABLE AS THE ARMS
OF CURIOSITY ON MARS
I WOULD CHOOSE
A SHINING GREY
AND PURPLE ARMOUR
AND THE THREADS
OF MY SYSTEM FILAMENTS
OF SALIVA UNDER A CHEST OF SOLID
TITANIUM THAT WILL ENDURE FOR
CENTURIES TO COME THAT WILL STICK
TO THE SUN AND WILL CALL IT MOTHER.
THAT WILL SURVIVE THE MEMORY OF ME;
A COLD CELEBRATION LIKE A DEAD STAR
OF THE IDEA FINALLY ASSIMILATED AND
DIGESTED OF AN EXISTENCE AS A
CYBORG

Your Body Is a Masterpiece of Tissue Engineering

Find Hortense: her mechanism is ejaculatory
solitude. Her solitude is an ejaculatory
mechanism. Find the monstrous gesture of Hortense:
her solitude is peopled with spectres, and the
spectres people her with solitude. And her love
ruminates and cannot leave the house. And her
light vibrates thus within the walls, with the light,
with the spectres, with the love that doesn't leave
the house.
—A. Rosselli, *The Dragonfly*[1]

I am mostly made of an abysmal tiredness
that makes me slide on the tram tracks at the risk of making
a head-on collision and becoming part of it—my flesh shreds
on its forehead. This perfect body that was adored
this body all true even when I smiled falsely
this body unmasked from within, a sick body
that I would replace at once this body but mine that alone
and the only body I possess. That I would become a machine
if I had a chance.

A kiss to the fridge with its nightly humming
that keeps me awake and one to the toaster that like my
acetylcholine sometimes overdoes it and burns the bread

[1] Amelia Rosselli, *The Dragonfly: A Selection of Poems, 1953–1981*, trans. Roberta Antognini and Deborah Woodard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

(square).

A salute to the excitement of television that whispers programmes
and screams advertisements, a caress to the cables of the modem
and its flashing light like the interrupted signals that my brain sends to
my muscles.

Sitting on the washing machine with the dryer running
oiling the parts I barely dare to touch, I think about
the sensual avatar I had in the online role-playing game full of
people today famous—others dead, not all of whom I miss.
I miss being something different, celebrating the diaphanous skin
that gleamed and branded the back of my head, moon-
skin for walks
described as magical series of numbers in sequence
disguised as interesting renderings and confused geographies
on the *ocra* map, the screen white light at the back of the eyes
until six in the morning without a tear even when yawning.

Were I to invent myself today I would choose different hair I would choose
to have a shiny skull I would choose to exist in space places
on spaceships facing interminable journeys and fingers with joints
mechanical and slow but precise and reliable as the arms of
Curiosity on Mars I would choose a shining grey and purple armour
and the threads of my system filaments of saliva under a chest of
solid titanium that will endure for centuries to come that will stick
to the Sun and will call it mother that will survive the memory
of me; a cold celebration like a dead star of
the idea finally assimilated and digested of an existence as a
C Y B O R G

This contribution offers a first-person reflection[2] on the current condition of artistic practice for queer and disabled subjects, articulated with as much objectivity as the personal nature of the subject permits. I identify as a non-binary queer individual, socialised as a woman for thirty years and frequently misrecognised as such. My journey toward discovering a gender identity that diverges from my assigned sex at birth coincided with the onset of a physically debilitating chronic illness. The intersection of non-cisgender subjectivity and chronic pain constitutes a significant axis of oppression.[3] For me, the intertwining of lived experience and scholarship has become an indispensable framework through which to understand the emergence of a renewed sense of self, a novel mode of self-performance, and a continually evolving negotiation of the possibilities and limitations of the unwell body. This process has also informed a distinctive poetics—one shaped by my positionality through the perversion of gender performance and the attendant themes necessitated by such genre innovation.[4]

Upon initially engaging with poetry—both as an object of study and a form of creative practice—I was immediately drawn to an exuberant passion for verbivocovisual experimentation, a mode of poetic composition that integrates verbal, vocal, and visual elements into a single, interdependent aesthetic experience.[5] From the outset, I was captivated by the graphic qualities of certain textual experiments. The dynamism of words, fragmented across the white expanse of the page, disrupted the continuity of the Italian lyric tradition, which remains

[2] This article is jointly authored. While first-person passages recount the lived experience of Marzia D'Amico, the theoretical–practical reflection should be understood as a collaborative contribution by Marzia D'Amico and Marco d'Alessandro.
[3] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: NYU Press, 2006); Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
[4] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1975): 875–93.
[5] Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos, *Teoria da poesia concreta: textos críticos e manifestos, 1950–1960* (São Paulo: Edições Invenção, 1965).

dominant in canonical curricula despite notable experimental interventions. This visual fragmentation resonated with the fragmentation of being itself and suggested the possibility of recomposition—not as an imperative but as an option—an anti-cisnormative and anti-patriarchal gesture rooted in a conscious embrace of (un)happiness.[6]

The deliberate use of white space as an essential, non-semantic element in relation to the sign—whether meaningful or nonsensical, depending on the poetic operation—demanded a physical engagement from me as a reader. Unbeknownst to me at the time, this exerted a heightened strain on my body, as diplopia (a symptom of my chronic illness) complicated my visual perception. I wrestled with the text in a corporeal encounter—*corpo a corpus*—which amplified my role as co-creator of meaning and underscored the multifaceted nature of textuality.[7] I found particular resonance in poetic works that integrated manual and mechanical typographic techniques: Apollinaire's calligrams, Nanni Balestrini's collages, Patrizia Vicinelli's *tazebao*, and Ketty La Rocca's photo-video performances. These examples—often realised through a symbiosis of hand and machine, whether via typewriters, scanned and digitised physical collages, or handwritten annotations on photographs—moved me profoundly.

The resulting body of work may be situated within media art histories that emphasise hybrid visual-verbal practices, particularly those emerging from the traditions of experimental comics, digital poetry, and transmedia storytelling. Rather than serving as mere illustration, the hand-drawn and typographically manipulated pages function as poetic interfaces—speculative diagrams that reflect and theorise the entanglement of embodiment, fragmentation, and futurity. This methodology resonates with and extends the legacy of practitioners such as Theresa Hak

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[6] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
[7] Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Kyung Cha, Laurie Anderson, and Francesca Woodman, whose cross-disciplinary compositions employ visual, textual, and technological registers to interrogate conditions of voice, visibility, and bodily mediation. By positioning the drawings in dialogue with media aesthetics—as storyboards of corporeal metamorphosis or prosthetic extensions of a disabled poetics—this practice critically examines the page as a space of simultaneous inscription and reconfiguration. Bridging handmade gestures and digital rendering, the visual works participate in a broader lineage of media-based storytelling that challenges representational containment and instead opens onto speculative, denaturalised futures.

By the time I resolved to foreground the visual dimension of my own writing, my illness had advanced to such an extent that even the simple act of holding a pen had become nearly impossible. Today, I compose exclusively on a computer. This necessity has irrevocably altered my spatial relationship to the page; there is no longer a tangible, hand-crafted version of my experiments. While I endeavour to transform this limitation into a fissure for creative possibility, the loss of an artistic practice due to physical disability remains an underexplored and seldom discussed subject. Literature addressing this lived experience is scarce, and poetic-artistic manifestos offering support to experimental poets with disabilities are even rarer.[8] Within this context, body modification should be understood not simply as thematic content but as a formal and procedural condition of the work itself. The transition from analogue drawing to digital composition—precipitated by the progressive loss of fine motor skills—constitutes a lived body–technology interface: a continuous and embodied negotiation of access, adaptation, and expression. The creative act emerges as a mode of material inscription in which the body is not

[8] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Petra Kuppers, *Disability Culture and Community Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

merely represented but actively reconfigured. Writing becomes incision—a performative cut into language and form—while drawing functions as a form of proprioceptive cartography, mapping not a stable or coherent anatomy but a continuously shifting, fragmented, and mechanically entangled corporeality.[9] The tools of production—screen, keyboard, stylus, software—mark a prosthetic entwinement in which the disabled body is not only modified but reassembled through the act of creation. This constitutes an instance of technogenesis: the mutual transformation of human and tool.[10] Here, the interface operates not simply as a medium of mediation but as a site of ontological modification.

Central to this evolving practice is my collaboration with the artist and semiotician Marco d'Alessandro, whose visual reframing of my poetic fragments functions as both an extension of and a resolution to the formal fragmentation occasioned by illness. Our joint work embodies a posthumanist and anarchist convergence of gender nonconformity (in its monstrous residue) and corporeal debility and vulnerability.[11] Through this partnership, the poetic "I" is reconfigured—via care and trust as ethical and methodological principles—into a speculative, relational "we."[12]

We chose to develop the work using traditional drawing techniques (pencils, chalks, watercolours, pens, etc.) and to maintain handwritten lettering. In doing so, we sought to re-ground the loss of artistic practice due to chronic illness, extending the notion of prosthesis (as a computer might function for writing when hands can no longer hold a pen) to a distributed

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[9] Lilian Kroth, *Alignments: Drawing as a Way of Thinking—A Response to the Work of Michel Serres* (n.p.: KrautIn, 2025).
[10] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
[11] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: Sage, 2002); Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
[12] Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

network of human and non-human agencies that allow room for error and serendipitous discovery.

Framing this practice as a form of media experimentation enables a move away from strict disciplinary boundaries toward a speculative and materially grounded engagement with what might be termed crip media aesthetics. The hybrid poetic-visual compositions arise not from high-tech or futurist tools, but through a low-tech, anti-teleological process characterised by slowness, repetition, and bodily limitation—qualities often pathologised within normative productivity paradigms, yet fundamental to any craft practice. What is presented here is the result of a long series of discarded sketches: pages drawn repeatedly until we reached a point of mutual satisfaction; the same words written so many times that their meaning fades, and the gesture remains. It is an itinerary of discovery through mistakes.

In this regard, the work resonates with theories of analog and glitch aesthetics[13], wherein error, degradation, or interference become sites of affective and epistemic potential. The interface—be it a digital canvas, repurposed software, or hand-drawn fragment—operates as a form of poetic prosthesis: a provisional bridge between sensation and articulation, body and medium. Rather than conceiving media as passive conduits for expression, this practice reclaims mediation itself as a generative terrain for the transmission of meaning—unstable, tactile, recursive—thereby situating the work within experimental media traditions that graft intra-active correlations foregrounding dissonance, material friction, and embodied constraint.[14]

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[13] Rosa Menkman, *The Glitch Moment(um)* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011).
[14] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

The translation of this work into digital form—whether via scanning, photographic documentation, or formatting for online circulation—introduces an additional layer of mediation that is both practical and conceptual. In the digitisation process, certain tactile or material qualities are inevitably diminished; yet this mediation also facilitates new legibility and expanded modes of access. This transformation invites a media-theoretical perspective that reconceptualises disability and fragmentation not as deficits, but as compositional conditions. The interface—whether screen, file, or platform—becomes a prosthetic environment in which the hybrid visual-poetic form circulates not despite its embodied constraints, but precisely because of them.

This piece of artistic research, therefore, investigates what the visual can do that text cannot by functioning as a form of pragmatist visual epistemology.[15] The creative, slow, and iterative practice thus becomes not a mere illustration of an adjacent text, but a mode of inquiry: drawing one's way into understanding complex phenomena such as crip embodiment and machinic becoming, while leaving room for emergent and contingent meaning.

Visual language—and especially comics—is particularly effective when engaging with complex and non-linear concepts, owing to its amphibious nature. Situated between opposing poles—images and words, sequential and simultaneous, hierarchical and rhizomatic—meaning multiplies beyond the sum of its constituent parts.[16] The topological organisation of the page encourages active reader participation, prompting the reconstruction of continuity from a flux of fragments, the activation of causal effects and non-linear relationships, and the composition of a

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[15] Chiara Ambrosio, "Drawing as a Pragmatist Visual Epistemology," in *Drawing Processes of Life: Molecules, Cells, Organisms*, ed. Gemma Anderson and John Dupré (Bristol: Intellect, 2023).
[16] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993); Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Giada Peterle, *Comics as a Research Practice: Drawing Narrative Geographies beyond the Frame* (London: Routledge, 2021).

new space for exploration. This structure is capable of holding complexity and contradiction—fragmentation and wholeness, the organic and the machinic, theory and practice, the individual and the collective. Drawing thus becomes an embodied method for introducing doubt into alternative representations, opening onto new modes of becoming and divergent forms of understanding.[17]

Consequently, my poetics now centres on an aspiration toward an unnatural body—one deliberately denaturalised—that, in rejecting the gender and sex assigned at birth, also repudiates the constraints imposed by chronic disability. I envision a cyborg body, radiant and luminous, in which the machine—currently my sole practical instrument—becomes not merely a medium but an extension of my very being, restoring a sense of agency and capability. However, through the anarchic alliance shaped by mutual aid, I now recognise a different possibility—one that refuses isolation. It is the expansion of the self across a multiplicity of shared events, gestures, and creations.

Rather than representing disability or gender transition from a distanced theoretical perspective, the work performs these conditions, inscribing a state of becoming in which form, process, and embodiment are inseparable. This aligns with the assertion that disability aesthetics does not seek to overcome impairment but instead insists upon its centrality to aesthetic production.[18] From this vantage point, impairment is neither an obstacle nor a metaphor, but form itself. Artistic creation becomes a tactile, affective extension of the self in flux—a transcorporeal practice that resists closure and embraces discontinuous identity formation.[19] The

[17] Ambrosio, "Drawing as a Pragmatist Visual Epistemology."
[18] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).
[19] Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (London: Routledge, 2012).

resultant poetics of form is thus not concerned with the body per se but enacted through it: a practice in which making and becoming co-occur, each gesture inscribing a body no longer anchored in normativity but expanded across technical, sensorial, and conceptual dimensions.

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Digital Inclusion: Artificial Intelligence, the Body, and Voice in Posthumanist Practice

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the intermedia artwork *Transplantatio*, presented at the contemporary art festival Biela noc. Created by Paulína Ebringerová and Peter Mazalán (Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava), the work combines artificial intelligence and 3D modeling with a neurodivergent subject, engaging with themes of digital embodiment and bodily modification. Through this integration, the artists enabled a nonverbal boy with autism spectrum disorder to "speak" using an AI-generated voice, resulting in a unique performative act.
The study interprets *Transplantatio* through the lens of critical posthumanism and disability studies, with particular attention to embodiment, voice, authenticity, and artistic representation. The analysis situates the work within a critical framework that challenges normative understandings of identity and communication. Presented in a setting where the subject was placed in direct relation to both technology and audience, the work extends beyond aesthetic concerns and becomes an intervention that reconfigures dominant notions of presence and agency. Although the generated voice is not biologically authentic, it fulfills the function of voice as a marker of subjectivity and co-created existence. *Transplantatio* thus opens a discourse on inclusion in which technology operates not merely as a supportive tool, but as a co-creative agent in shaping new modes of being and expression. The paper reflects on the ethical and philosophical implications of representing difference and considers how art can expand the space of neurodivergent and technologically mediated forms of communication.
Keywords: posthumanism, intermedia art, inclusive art, performative art, neurodiversity, AI-generated voice

Introduction

Imagine the silence of a festival space, where suddenly a voice emerges—not an ordinary one, but a gentle child's voice generated from vocal fragments of a non-verbal boy with autism spectrum disorder. At the moment, when the boy, together with his mother, steps from the audience toward the screen, and his 3D-modeled face comes alive through projection while the AI-generated voice speaks in his tone, we feel the trembling of reality. As the mother later described the moment: "Suddenly I wasn't the only one speaking for him. He was truly present—people heard his world, not his diagnosis." This collaboration with the family, shaped by emotional ambivalence and trust—where the boy's vocal outbursts and intonations served as training data for ElevenLabs—was not merely a technical gesture, but a transformation of his embodied presence.

The artwork *Transplantatio*, presented during the 2024 contemporary art festival Biela noc (Bratislava, Slovak Republic) by artists Paulína Ebringerová and Peter Mazalán, represents a unique intersection of artistic expression, artificial intelligence, and neurodiversity. The project—in which a non-verbal boy with autism spectrum disorder "spoke" for the first time through an AI-generated, simulated voice—challenges traditional understandings of communication and subjectivity by enacting a form of digital body modification—not surgical, but performative. It crosses the boundaries of the biological body; subjectivity emerges in a hybrid space where technology extends non-verbal expression into a resonant presence encountered by the audience.

This paper approaches *Transplantatio* through the theoretical lens of posthumanist thought, which critiques classical humanism's focus on the autonomous, rational individual and instead emphasizes the emergence of relational, technologized, and hybrid subjects. Building on

the work of theorists such as Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, and Donna Haraway,[1] the analysis explores how technology functions not merely as a medium, but as a co-agent in processes of embodiment, bodily transformation (body modification), and meaning-making.

At the same time, the work engages with critical disability theory, particularly the contributions of scholars such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Melanie Yergeau, and Alison Kafer, who reconceptualize disability not as a deficit but as a generative and expressive mode of being. From this perspective, *Transplantatio* does not attempt to "restore" a missing voice; rather, it creates a new way of being heard—embedded within synthetic, performative, and affective dimensions.

A central aspect of the work lies in its engagement with the concept of bodily modification. Through the technological simulation of voice and the use of digital body modeling, the artwork transcends the boundaries between the biological and the artificial, between what is innate and what is constructed. In doing so, *Transplantatio* demonstrates how subjectivity can emerge through interventions into the body—not surgically, but through digital and performative means—thus expanding artistic explorations of the body in the posthumanist era. In this context, it is useful to situate *Transplantatio* alongside other experimental artistic practices that explore neurodivergence and technological mediation. A notable example is Graham Sack's *Neuro-Theatre*—a hybrid project that integrates real-time biometric and neural data with narrative performance.[2] Like *Transplantatio*, Sack's work investigates how internal

[1] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
[2] Graham Sack, "sol_AI_ris," a live immersive neuro-theater project combining brain-computer interface (BCI) data, AI, and performance to explore distributed cognition and human–machine interaction, Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics, accessed March 20, 2026, https://bioethics.jhu.edu/research-and-outreach/the-dracopoulos-bloomberg-bioethics-ideas-lab/projects/sol_ai_ris/.

cognitive or emotional states—often inaccessible or nonverbal—can be externalized, aestheticized, and mediated through technological systems. Both works destabilize normative models of authorship and agency, proposing instead distributed and technologically mediated forms of expression.

Finally, this paper examines how *Transplantatio*, through its use of artificial intelligence and digital modeling, enables new forms of representation while also engaging deeply with philosophical and ethical questions related to voice, identity, embodiment, and inclusion. It asks how technologically co-created art can expand not only representational but also ontological space for neurodivergent subjects—not simply by "giving them a voice," but by redefining what it means to speak, to be present, and to be recognized.

Theoretical Framework

Posthumanism offers a productive framework for reevaluating contemporary notions of humanity, agency, and embodiment in the context of technological transformation. As Braidotti states, technology in posthumanist thought does not function merely as an external tool, but as an integral part of subjectivity that emerges through the interweaving of biological, technological, and environmental processes.[3] Body, voice, and consciousness thus cease to appear as exclusively human attributes and instead take on the character of modular, relationally constituted entities.

This shift builds on artistic practices that have thematized the body as a technicized and mutable site since the late twentieth century. The performances of Stelarc and Orlan challenge the notion of the "natural" body as an autonomous, closed whole: whether through technological extensions or surgical interventions, the body becomes a medium that can be overwritten,

[3] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*.

expanded, and culturally reconfigured.[4] Their work demonstrates that subjectivity emerges in cooperation with technology, rather than in opposition to it.

These artistic strategies are further developed in Bernadette Wegenstein's theoretical reflection, which understands the contemporary body as a semiotic and technological interface—open to mediation, inscription, and medial circulation.[5] This perspective is key to interpreting *Transplantatio*, in which voice and presence do not stem from biological speech capacity, but from technologically mediated performativity. Here, the voice is not proof of the body's "functionality," but a sign of its relational existence.

Transplantatio can thus be read as a performative materialization of these theoretical foundations. Enabling vocal expression in a nonverbal autistic boy through an AI-generated voice is not simply a case of technological assistance, but the emergence of a new communicative subject—one that is simultaneously human and nonhuman, natural and artificially constructed. Within a posthumanist understanding of subjectivity, this represents a configuration in which the boundaries between medium, body, and voice are disrupted and reconstituted through relational complexity.[6]

At the same time, the work problematizes the representation of neurodiversity. Rather than adopting a medical model that frames autism as a deficit, *Transplantatio* implicitly aligns with an inclusive understanding of difference, close to critical disability studies.[7] In this context, the aim is not to "fix" a missing ability, but to create a space in which the subject can express

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[4] Stelarc, "The Obsolete Body: Stelarc and the Chimera of Cyberculture," in *Stelarc: The Monograph*, ed. Marquard Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 246–255; Orlan, "Carnal Art Manifesto," in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 315–316.
[5] Bernadette Wegenstein, *Getting Under the Skin: The Body and Media Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).
[6] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.
[7] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Disability and Representation: The Body in the Cultural Imagination," *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* (2005); Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

itself differently. The spectrum-based model of embodiment allows the voice to be understood not as a normative capacity, but as a situated and conditioned phenomenon.[8]

The question of voice is also central from the perspective of authenticity. Although technologically generated, the voice mediates the subject's emotional and identity-based presence. This leads to a reevaluation of voice as a sign—not as biological proof of authenticity, but as an event that creates a relationship between speaker and listener. In this sense, *Transplantatio* becomes not only an intermedial work, but an act that enables "being heard" beyond the limits of biological language.

This understanding resonates with Adriana Cavarero's philosophy, for whom voice is a primary expression of being addressed to the other.[9] Voice reveals the subject not through semantic meaning, but through its very sounding—its presence. Similarly, Maurice Merleau-Ponty understands voice as part of the phenomenology of the body, as a mode through which the body manifests itself in the world.[10] In *Transplantatio*, the artificial voice does not negate embodiment, but extends it into acoustic space, where the subject can emerge as a resonant being rather than a diagnostic category.

From this perspective, voice also has an ethical dimension: to be heard is to be recognized. *Transplantatio* thus redefines the concept of "having a voice"—not as a normative capacity to speak or a biologically guaranteed sign of subjectivity, but as a relational and performative event emerging between body, technology, and listener. Here, voice functions not as a property of the subject, but as a process through which the subject becomes present within a

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[8] Fiona Kumari Campbell, *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).
[9] Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).
[10] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962).

shared space of meaning. This shift allows digital voice to be understood not as simulation or assistive replacement, but as an ethico-ontological form of presence that has not yet been systematically addressed in existing scholarship.

Methodology

This study of the artwork *Transplantatio* is situated within a qualitative research framework that integrates hermeneutic, performative, and critical posthumanist approaches. Rather than adopting a purely descriptive perspective, the methodology is grounded in an interpretive and interdisciplinary lens, aiming to uncover the layered meanings of the work through philosophical reflection, visual analysis, and ethical inquiry. The empirical dimension of the study is based on detailed analysis conducted during the creation of the artwork, as well as interviews with the autistic boy's mother and his special education teacher. The methodological structure rests on four key pillars:

1. Posthumanist Interpretive Analysis

This analysis is based on the premise that subjectivity, the body, and voice are no longer exclusively human attributes. Drawing on the works of Braidotti, Haraway, and Barad, as well as N. Katherine Hayles, we approach *Transplantatio* as a performative articulation of hybrid subjectivity—one in which technology does not function as an external aid, but as a co-creator of being.[11] The voice in the work, generated through artificial intelligence, becomes a new form of relational presence that challenges boundaries between body, code, and meaning.

2. Semiotic and Performative Analysis

This section focuses on nonverbal communication, the representation of the body, the role of the

[11] Braidotti, *Posthuman*; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*; N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

sonic layer (especially the synthetic voice), and the ways in which these elements interact to generate tensions of meaning. *Transplantatio* is interpreted as a form of performance in which a new type of subject emerges—one that is not defined solely by biological embodiment, but is co-constituted through relationships between body, technology, and identity. Here, identity is understood as undergoing transformation within a hybrid and mediated space.

3. Ethical Reflection on Representation

This part examines how *Transplantatio* engages with the ethics of "giving voice" to a subject who cannot communicate in conventional ways. Does the AI-simulated voice represent the subject, or does it replace them? How are consent, agency, and authenticity negotiated in this context? The methodology incorporates interviews with the boy's mother and special education teacher, offering critical insight into the emotional and ethical dimensions of the work. Including the perspectives of the artists themselves is considered an additional step toward a deeper understanding of artistic intention and collaborative dynamics.

4. Cultural Framing and the Dis/ability Discourse

Transplantatio is situated within a broader cultural and artistic discourse surrounding inclusion, neurodiversity, and techno-human interrelation. Through the lens of critical dis/ability theory, the work is interpreted not as a compensatory gesture, but as an ontological and cultural intervention—one that challenges normative assumptions about ability, visibility, and voice in art and society. This multilayered methodology ensures that *Transplantatio* is not perceived as an isolated artistic work, but as a complex discursive event in which philosophy, technology, and social practice converge.

Ethnographic Approach

The ethnographic component of this research was conducted through semi-structured interviews and participant observation during the preparation and presentation of the artwork *Transplantatio*. The aim was to explore the personal, emotional, and interpretive dimensions of participation among key actors: the mother of the nonverbal boy with autism spectrum disorder, his special education teacher, and selected audience members.

1. Interview with the Mother

The interview took place in a home environment and was conducted in an open and respectful manner, allowing the mother to speak candidly about her experiences, concerns, and moments of joy. She emphasized that the possibility of "hearing her son's voice," even though technologically generated, represented a deeply emotional and transformative experience. The project was not only an artistic event, but also a moment of profound personal validation and recognition of her son's individuality.

> Suddenly, I wasn't the only one speaking for him. He was truly present, and people heard him—not his diagnosis, but his world. No one saw him merely as an object of care, but as a person with an inner life. That voice—it wasn't just a technical gesture, but something that changed the way he was perceived.[12]

She described the collaborative process of creating the voice recordings, which included nonverbal vocalizations, emotional responses, and repetitive sound fragments regularly present in his behavior. This material was provided to the artists as training data for the AI model (using the ElevenLabs tool). The mother also noted the emotional ambivalence of the process—

[12] Interview with the participant's mother Veronika Kita Mazalánová, conducted by Paulína Ebringerová, Bratislava, March 20, 2026.

although the voice was not "his" in a traditional sense, it emerged from a shared effort and deep emotional investment.

2. Interview with the Special Education Teacher

The special education teacher, who has worked with the boy over an extended period in a school setting, highlighted the project's uniqueness within the context of inclusive education:

> In special schools, children like him often receive only the most basic support—unfortunately, our system often does not allow for more due to limited capacity, staff shortages, and the generally low societal priority given to this area. Here, however, we are speaking about a completely different level of recognition: integrating these children into a broader social context, where they are not seen as a problem, but as equal bearers of meaning, creativity, and human value.[13]

3. Observation During the Performance

During the live presentation of the piece at the festival, a profoundly moving moment occurred when the boy and his mother stood up from the audience and approached the screen. His physical presence—combined with the synthesized voice and the 3D projection of his face—created an emotionally charged atmosphere. The observation recorded audience responses: deep silence, visible emotional restraint, and several individuals (especially mothers) moved to tears. These reactions suggest a strong affective impact, in which the boundary between performative experience and lived reality began to dissolve.

4. Visual Documentation

As part of the ethnographic documentation, photographs were collected. Video recording and

[13] Interview with the participant's special education teacher "name withheld", conducted by Paulína Ebringerová, Bratislava, March 20, 2026.

artificial lighting were deliberately avoided, as such stimuli could have been overwhelming for the autistic boy. The artists sought to eliminate factors that might cause additional stress. His younger brother was also present and was gently included in the process through play, serving as a supportive presence.

Figure 1. *Transplantatio.* Photograph by Marko Erd.

The ethnographic perspective on *Transplantatio* reveals that the artistic outcome is not merely the product of creative work, but the result of a layered network of relationships—between technology and the body, between voice and silence, and between artist, audience, and represented subject. It is precisely these interactions—captured through interviews and direct observation—that give the work its depth, allowing it to be understood not only as an aesthetic experiment, but as an ontological act.

Transplantatio

Transplantatio can be understood as a multi-layered artistic intervention that merges digital media, creative expression, neurodiversity, and technological simulation in order to open a new space of representation—particularly for subjects whose voices are often silenced, both literally and symbolically.

Figure 2. *Transplantatio.* Photograph by Matej Kováč.

On a formal level, the work consists of a digital 3D model of the body and face of a nonverbal boy with autism, whose "voice" was artificially generated using AI—specifically the ElevenLabs tool, trained on a dataset of fragmented audio inputs. These data included emotional reactions, syllabic outbursts, and other vocal fragments used to simulate the tone and texture of his voice.[14] By combining the 3D model of the boy's body and face with the AI-generated voice,

[14] Google Research. "Project Euphonia: About." Accessed March 20, 2026. https://sites.research.google/euphonia/about/.

a performative act of "speaking" emerges—one that cannot be understood solely as the result of audiovisual synthesis.

Figure 3. *Transplantatio.* Photograph by Matej Kováč.

During this act, the autistic boy was physically present at the venue together with his mother. At a key moment in the performance, both stood up from the audience and approached the projection screen on which the narrative was unfolding. This gesture created a powerful moment of connection between body, technology, and audience. In this hybrid space, a new form of subjectivity emerges—one not bound by biological functionality. From a philosophical perspective, *Transplantatio* articulates a posthumanist position: the autistic subject extends into a synthetic space, where his existence is expressed through technological mediation.

The emerging voice is mediated—it does not negate the body but extends it into the digital sphere. The visual layer of the work emphasizes the fragility and vulnerability of the body: the boy's face is rendered with delicate detail and a uniform tonal palette, while his

expression remains largely static. This tension between apparent stillness and vocal expression produces a dynamic interplay between silence and speech, between muteness and testimony. At this point, another interpretive dimension emerges—an ethical one—in which the viewer becomes a witness to a moment of speech that would otherwise remain unheard. The work thus redefines the boundaries of representation: it is not merely "art about disability," but an intervention that enables an alternative mode of existence within the social sphere.

Figure 4. *Transplantatio.* Photograph by Marko Erd.

In the context of contemporary discourse on inclusion, *Transplantatio* carries a strong social dimension. It offers not only an aesthetic experience, but also a vision of a possible future in which technologies function not merely as compensatory tools, but as extensions of subjectivity—not replacements, but mediators of alternative modes of being.

AI Tool and the Posthumanist Philosophy of Voice

A key component of *Transplantatio* is the use of ElevenLabs, an AI-based voice synthesis tool employed to create a voice that had never physically existed. Unlike traditional speech synthesis systems, which require a large number of articulated phrases, ElevenLabs is capable of generating realistic speech from fragmentary, often non-linguistic vocalizations. In this case, the training dataset consisted of audio fragments such as syllabic outbursts, emotional sounds, and tonal inflections collected from a nonverbal boy. The resulting voice is therefore not an imitation of an existing speaker, but a synthetic construct that suggests an imagined sonic identity.

The decision to use ElevenLabs was not purely technical; it was also an ethical and philosophical choice that frames voice as an event rather than a static property of the body. Within a posthumanist framework, voice is no longer understood as a stable index of identity anchored in the body, but as a dynamic articulation of relational subjectivity. Cavarero argues that voice is not merely a carrier of linguistic content, but a performative expression of the subject in a relational space.[15] In this context, the AI-generated voice does not replace the biological voice; rather, it inaugurates a new possibility of being heard.

The fact that the voice is generated rather than "restored" challenges traditional notions of authenticity and expression. It raises a fundamental ontological question: can a voice be "real" if it was never biologically spoken? The artwork responds affirmatively—not by claiming technological fidelity, but by reconfiguring authenticity as a function of intention, affect, and collaborative creative process. The mother, educators, artists, and the child himself all participated in the creation of the voice—even if nonverbally. The result is not a simulation of identity, but a distributed act of meaning-making.

[15] Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*.

This form of technological "voicing" is not only inclusive—it is generative. It enables the emergence of subjectivity that would otherwise remain inaccessible within dominant linguistic and corporeal frameworks. As Barad writes, agency does not reside in individual entities, but arises through their intra-actions.[16] In *Transplantatio*, the AI-generated voice functions precisely as such an intra-active agent: not an external aid, but a co-creative element of the subject's presence.

Discussion

Transplantatio contributes to contemporary discourse on inclusion, technology, and posthumanist thought. By enabling "speech" from a subject traditionally excluded from the realm of communication, the work moves beyond the conventional framework of artistic expression and enters the domain of ontological and ethical transformation.

While many inclusive approaches focus on removing barriers within existing structures, *Transplantatio* proposes a more radical shift: it creates a new mode of existence in which the neurodivergent subject is not a passive recipient of care, but an active co-creator of their own representation. The voice that emerges in the work is not merely a functional output of artificial intelligence, but a performative act that challenges normative conceptions of communicative competence.

This form of vocal agency situates *Transplantatio* within a broader artistic discourse exploring the transformation of the body, communication, and subjectivity through technology. The work aligns with practices that investigate expanded forms of embodiment, cognition, and mediated voice. Stelarc's performances, for example, explore the body as a communication interface, extending bodily experience beyond biological limits. Similarly, Orlan's *Carnal Art*

[16] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway.*

foregrounds the body as a site of inscription, modification, and authorship, challenging dominant visual and cultural norms.[17]

A conceptually related project is *Neuro-Theatre* by Graham Sack (2021), an experimental practice integrating biometric and neural data into live, interactive performance. Sack investigates invisible internal states—such as brain activity, affect, and cognitive fluctuation—as performative agents translated into aesthetic form. In both cases, the aim is not simply to convey voice or thought, but to reconstruct them as artistic events.[18]

The use of artificial intelligence to generate a voice that has never biologically existed raises fundamental questions of authenticity. Traditional notions of subjectivity as the "truth of expression" give way to a relational model of authenticity. Although the voice does not biologically belong to the subject, it becomes an expression of an otherwise inaccessible inner world. In this sense, the work invites a reconsideration of truth in relation to marginalized bodies and voices.

While technology is often understood as a tool, in *Transplantatio* it functions as a collaborator. It is not merely an instrument, but a medium of subjectivation—an active participant in shaping what is perceptible, audible, and shareable. In Barad's terms, this constitutes an intra-active relationship in which subject and technology do not pre-exist their interaction but emerge through it.[19]

Transplantatio demonstrates that art can operate as a space for testing new models of subjectivity and communication. It does not simply represent disability but creates conditions in which modes of being and perception are transformed. The aesthetic experience thus becomes

[17] Stelarc, "The Obsolete Body: Stelarc and the Chimera of Cyberculture"; Orlan, "Carnal Art Manifesto."
[18] Sack, "sol_AI_ris."
[19] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

transformative for the viewer, who encounters an alternative configuration of voice, body, and presence.

Through its hybrid nature, the work operates at the intersection of artistic research, neurodiversity, and technological experimentation. In this respect, it resonates with practices that reconceive technology as a partner in articulating otherness and inner experience.

One relevant example is *Project Euphonia* (2019) by Google, which uses machine learning to adapt speech recognition systems to individuals with atypical speech patterns. Rather than "correcting" deviation, the system learns from unique vocal expressions, pointing toward more inclusive technological design.[20]

Another related example is the work of Neil Harbisson, who, through a sensory implant (a sonochromatic antenna), is able to perceive color as sound. His practice similarly challenges conventional boundaries of perception and identity, demonstrating how subjectivity can emerge through technological extension.[21]

From a participatory standpoint, the *Sensory Toolkit Workshops* (2020) by Sarah Evelyn Marsh are also relevant. These workshops create a space for neurodivergent participants to construct their own sensory environments.[22] Rather than pursuing adaptation, their aim is the active shaping of perceptual conditions—a principle closely aligned with the ethical gesture of *Transplantatio*.

These parallels demonstrate that *Transplantatio* is not an isolated project, but part of a broader cultural movement that resists passive representations of disability. Instead, it enables

[20] Google Research. "Project Euphonia: About."
[21] Neil Harbisson, "I Listen to Color," TED Talk, 2012, https://www.ted.com/talks/neil_harbisson_i_listen_to_color.
[22] Sarah E. Marsh, "The Sensory Toolkit Workshops Initiated by the Open School East (UK)," Open School East, 2020, https://www.evelynarts.co.uk/.

the emergence of new ontological configurations in which technology co-creates subjectivity—its intelligibility and its right to be heard.

Figure 5. *Transplantatio.* Photograph by Marko Erd.

Conclusion

The artwork *Transplantatio* demonstrates that contemporary art engaging with artificial intelligence can move beyond the framework of aesthetic experience and address deeper ontological, ethical, and social questions. Through the combination of 3D modeling, AI-generated voice, and performative visuality, a form of subjectivity emerges that is not bound to biological speech capacity, but to relational presence—the possibility of being for and with others.

The analysis shows that *Transplantatio* is not merely an artistic presentation but operates as an ontological act that expands the concepts of voice, communication, and inclusion. Within a posthumanist framework, voice is not reducible to phonation or speech. In the light of Adriana

Cavarero's concept of vocality as relational presence, the AI-generated voice in *Transplantatio* can be understood as an event: it does not simulate a "real" biological voice, but creates the conditions under which the subject can be recognized.[23] Even in the absence of conventional speech, voice becomes a performative force that constitutes the subject as someone who can be heard—as someone who exists in relation.

This reconceptualization carries significant ethical implications. If voice marks the threshold of recognition, then enabling someone to have a voice—even a synthetic one—is not merely symbolic, but a material intervention into how society constructs intelligibility, agency, and empathy. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests, voice is not simply an expression of the body, but a mode through which the body becomes present to others.[24] In *Transplantatio*, this presence is not diminished by technology; rather, it is extended through it.

Although the work opens possibilities for applied research and inclusive practice, its primary significance does not lie in practical application. Instead, *Transplantatio* demonstrates that having a voice does not mean possessing a normative capacity to speak, but the ability to enter into relation and resonate within a shared space. Art here does not function as a representation of difference, but as a means of its ontological reconfiguration. This constitutes its central contribution: showing that presence does not arise from biology or technology alone but emerges through their collaboration with others.

Acknowledgements

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[23] Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*.
[24] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

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An Idea to Live In: On Lifelong Investigations, Fakir Musafar, and the History of Body Modification

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In 2004, I met the artist and body modification subcultural icon Fakir Musafar. Our paths would continue to cross until his death in 2018. In 2025, I released a feature film about him titled *A BODY TO LIVE IN*.[1] Most of my work is, in some way, internal, made with people I know, so this isn't entirely outside my norm. Yet this figure, who is more a stand-in for a series of ideas than a person, his modeling of the body as porous and distinct from the self, his tension between reverence and irreverence, embodiment and dissociation, has held my interest for 22 years.

Is the goal of Fakir's extreme body modification to own the body, to deeply inhabit it? Or is it to leave the body behind? The tensions that remain in this work, the parts that evade filmic narrative, are perhaps the most interesting. I don't seek to resolve them, but I do enjoy speaking those tensions into the air, hanging with them. The following words are a blend of loose association and cogent reflection on the film I made and its adjacent tangents.

[1] http://www.abodytolivein.com

Like many young queer punks in the early 2000s, I had encountered the zines *Search and Destroy* and the RE/Search books *Modern Primitives* and *Angry Women*. They were standard coffee table reading material of the era, just as *On Our Backs* was standard bathroom reading. No longer isolated to the West Coast of the 1990s, these countercultural, freak-flagging publications were now available at home in the Midwest.

I can't pinpoint the initial draw to these materials. Likely, it was my budding interest in BDSM—an attraction to the overt display of the body's porousness and the erotic potential therein, the inclusion of ritual and magic, how hardcore it looked, its closeness to death, and/or its visual depictions of the plasticity of gender. In the RE/Search book *Modern Primitives* (a movement title that has not aged well), these elements were documented in words, but more importantly for me, in photographs, specifically, Fakir Musafar's photographs.

I want to think of photography as the beginning of our collective human death march. Maybe it was the written word; maybe it was the railroad; maybe it was Fordism; maybe it was the internet; maybe it was all or none of these things. But for the purposes of this meditation on the ethos of the film, I will take photography as the technological innovation that fully transformed our world at the turn of the twentieth century. As André Bazin suggests, it is the "embalmed" image.[2] Our entire contemporary relationship (pre-AI) to time and memory is or was built on this innovation: the idea that something was objectively real and could be marked in time.

First and foremost a photographer, Fakir Musafar was born in rural South Dakota in 1930. His earliest self-portraits, made at age fourteen, are utterly riveting. He gazes wistfully past

[2] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," trans. Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Summer 1960): 4–9.

the camera, arms floating in a pseudo–reverse plié, fully nude, his waist cinched tightly with a piece of twine that demarcates grooves in the flesh of his prepubescent abdomen. In one image, he has wrapped tire chains around his entire body. As a prop, under their weight, he would dance himself to exhaustion, a kind of trance-inducing state not unknown to club kids, ravers, long-distance runners, artists, and holy people. He covered his entire body in clothespins and relished the pure sensation.

Later, Musafar would engage in extreme waist training, corsetry, extended sensory deprivation, suspensions, restrictions, constrictions, and other interventions, most notably, extreme body piercing practices, often driven by the question, "What if?" As his partner Cléo suggests in the film: "What if you cannot? You cannot sit, you cannot lie down. You cannot move. What happens to you?" When she says this, she means, in essence: where do you go, inside?

These questions of ontology and phenomenology are foundational to any artistic practice. But the spiritual (read: cosmological) questions embedded in his particular weaving of practices—photography, performance art, eroticism, and spiritual quest (the "God Hole"[3])—are what have kept me engaged with this figure for 22 years.

A BODY TO LIVE IN moves somewhat chronologically to introduce Fakir's work, influences, motivations, and collaborators. But as the film unfolds, it becomes less about Fakir as a person and more about the histories and practices that entwine his life with larger movements and concerns. Through and across underground art practice, mainstream disgust, cultural

[3] I am drawing on a conversation with Ron Athey in which he uses this phrase to suggest that humanity has an inherent hunger for spirituality—such that it is a hole that cannot be filled.

critiques of appropriation, the necropolitics of the AIDS crisis, and the subcultural elevation of an icon, Fakir becomes a stand-in for our collective need for communion.

How do we make new rituals? And if nothing is sacred, then what is the point? This is a question often posed by performance artist Ron Athey as well.

In my research, performance scholar Dominick Johnson told me that Fakir and the notable body-based performance artist Franco B. met in London in the early 1990s while sharing a performance bill. Full of argument, as Fakir often was, they entered into a discourse that ended with Franco B. simply stating that he was a punk and Fakir was a hippie. This sentiment gets at the flesh, the stretch and pull between reverence and irreverence.

Is modifying the body an act of worship, or of reverie? An act of dissidence? Are we checking in or checking out? Is it a "fuck you, dad" move? Do we have to choose?

For Fakir, there was something rooted in the body that allowed for both genuine reverence and profound irreverence at the same time. He often said, when speaking to young people, "Your parents don't own your body, God doesn't own your body, you own your body." For me, what I get caught up on in this sentiment is the concept of ownership. What does it mean to own something, rather than simply living in it? It is hard for me not to read a colonial subtext there.

Yet this entwining of reverence and irreverence, or perhaps a larger field of irreverence within which sits a smaller pocket of reverence, keeps me thinking about it still, 22 years later. For Musafar, body modification was not solely about release, accomplishment, spectacle, or testing the limits of physicality, but also about the deepest human desire to connect with something larger than the self. Body modification was the methodology, but the goal in achieving this state was to leave the body altogether, a lifelong preparation for death.

In his earliest out-of-body experiences, he describes encounters with “the white light.” He recounts flying out of his body (what other schools of thought might call astral projection or a near-death experience) over his small town as people rise at dawn. He describes his ability to speak to dead animals, as well as his prepubescent telekinetic talents, which mysteriously vanished after adolescence, a possible nod to a gendered gift lost with the onset of testosterone. Artist Gordon Hall does not make work “about” the body, because that framing implies that bodies are singular rather than plural, or that one body could stand in for all bodies. Within their analysis is a sense of refusal, they resist the notion that the body is distinct from personhood. Yet I can’t help but think that buried within this refusal is a utopian promise: that we might somehow leave the body behind altogether.

In Musafar’s thinking, much prioritizes the plurality of the body, yet it is also about leaving the body—his body. At the same time, it is not that the body is a vessel (a notion that Hall resists), but that it is a passageway. Or, as he would say plainly, “Body is the door to spirit.” In this logic, if the body is merely the entrance to the portal, then why such emphasis on the pleasures of the body? On its animality? On its erotic potential? On the gendered and genderless shaping of the body? Is the draw that it is perverse, or simply that the sensations produced by these practices feel good? Again, why choose?

This friction between staying in the body (aligned with somatic therapies and the concept of being “present”) and leaving the body (as a way to explore beyond this world) remains one of the many ongoing tensions I have with this work.

Fakir’s resistance to staking a claim, to self-identifying, to clearly positioning himself anywhere, appears as an act of defiance within our skittish and sensitive culture of deep codification, where everything must have a place, a marker, a mode, a descriptor. You are

expected to know everything about someone before even meeting them. But of course, because you haven't met them yet, everything you think you know about them is filtered through whatever hyper-stylized sociocultural framework you inhabit—one that dictates your narrow perception of a person not yet known. How sad. And how liberating it must feel to refuse taxonomy.

"But was he trans?" I was asked this question many times while pitching the film. Funders and investors needed to know whether it was a "trans narrative." Note that these pitches were largely happening before the second Trump administration and the recent NEA cuts, when "trans" was still something that people in small, select cultural spheres were supporting, sometimes because they wanted to report diversity stats to their board, but often due to genuine care and interest. I would respond: why does it matter?

Fakir's lovers attest that, had he been born in the past forty years, he would almost certainly be trans. But I resist subscribing to this claim, because all the conditions and frameworks that shaped his interests would also have been different, in a million possible permutations. And yet, it is clear that gender was at the forefront of his consciousness throughout his life, and that skin was a barrier to be overcome, and eventually, shed. Some of us are hyper-aware of our skin: how it sits, how it folds, how it looks and feels when opened.

Let me turn to the skin of the film. The film is one rupture after another, interspersed with lengthy images that suggest a kind of wholeness within that unending fracturing. It often moves in three-frame still images (approximately one-eighth of a second) of unrecognizable grain. The gutters of Fakir's photographs create a backdrop against which these frame-within-frame images emerge, still images of his photographs, lingering on screen long enough to sit with them, but briefly enough to leave us wanting more. Technologies of image-making spanning 1930 to 2025

collage the screen; historical live-feed video art overlays the image, creating visual forms untethered from talking heads, while oral histories proliferate like haunting voices guiding a tour. The film, like the photographs, makes it all real. But unlike the photographs, the film makes it all a story. It places these elements into narrative form for the ease of audience consumption, a tactic that will always remain a point of internal tension for me.

Yet these tensions are what sustain my long-standing curiosity. In the film, I sacrifice many unanswerable questions in favor of narrative, as a way of inviting the viewer in—welcoming them on this journey. It is, after all, a movie, rich with pathos. Moving chronologically carries an inherent sadness: we witness ontogeny on fast-forward, a body transitioning from robust to frail. We encounter this passage up close through documentation of one of his final suspensions before death.

I'm not sure what Fakir would think of the film, but I know he loved story and understood, instinctively, its role in ritual and collective experience.

I cannot offer a neat "this is what I learned from this project" conclusion. I have no answers, only lingering questions, loose tissues longing for connection. Inasmuch as *A BODY TO LIVE IN* documents something real, it also constructs a history, one woven not only from Fakir's life, but from the monumental shifts in American identity across the mid-twentieth century, the dissemination of queer knowledge, the commodification of our lives, and our collective edging closer and closer to the other side(s).

"Edging" is likely not a word Fakir would have used. But here, it makes sense to me: to get as close as possible to the thing without being consumed by it, until it is your time. And then, to move seamlessly into nothingness.

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Sculpting the Post-Body

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As gender continues its necessary unravelling, the body emerges as a dynamic site of cultural and political contestation. Cosmology and digital art practices can become spaces for resistance and transformation, as one might argue they have long been—largely unperceived by the West. Within Central Asian, South Asian, African, and Middle Eastern traditions, we can observe how myths and mysticisms disrupt binary conceptions of gender, reconfiguring embodiment as mutable, relational, and divinely ambiguous. These traditions are not merely historical residues but contemporary resources for theorizing gender fluidity and post-body embodiment. Myth, far from being premodern or fantastical, is a living epistemic technology of cultural meaning-making: one that enables the articulation of gendered and postcolonial subjectivities otherwise suppressed by colonial and normative epistemologies.

Through the lens of media theory, digital creation may offer speculative and decolonial tools for reconfiguring the post-body in other (metaphysical) spaces. Digital sculpting enables the creation of surreal, mythic digital bodies, forms that exist not to mimic reality, but to propose new ontologies. These figures emerge from both ancestral knowledge and imaginative practices enacted through digital means. Enacting a form of gender anarchy, they offer a practice of myth-

making and prefiguration attuned to the urgencies of queer, postcolonial (more precisely, conditions of ongoing coloniality), and media-embedded lives. To mythologize is to externalize abstract cultural forces, to give form to what is otherwise ungraspable. This work of imaginative rendering of crafting figures through which to encounter and reinterpret the world is inherently political. It allows us to contest and transform the metaphysical undercurrents of cultural identity and post-body embodiment.

Post-Colonial Literature and Post-Soviet Gaps

African diasporic theorist Sylvia Wynter critiques the historical construction of "Man" in Eurocentric humanism, arguing that the colonial project, often coupled with the agenda of the Enlightenment, which came to define the human around white, male, rational normativity erased other ontologies.[1] In Wynter's view, the post-body is not a futuristic condition enabled by technology, but an ancestral one, already imagined in African and diasporic spiritualities that center sonic, ritualistic, and ancestral knowledges. The spiritual is embodied, but not necessarily in flesh: being may extend beyond materiality into rhythm or invocation. The post-body, in Wynter's framing, has always existed, suppressed not by scientific advancement but by epistemic violence.

South Asian and African postcolonial scholars such as Partha Chatterjee, Romila Thapar, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Chinua Achebe have made myth central to understanding colonial rupture and national identity formation. Chatterjee shows how nationalist elites appropriated indigenous traditions to construct modern national cultures, often erasing subaltern voices.[2]

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[1] Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.
[2] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Thapar critiques the politicization of myth and history in the construction of Indian nationalism.[3] Ngũgĩ insists that oral traditions and indigenous languages are key to resisting colonial epistemologies and reviving cultural autonomy.[4] Achebe, through both fiction and criticism, likewise challenged colonial myth-making and affirmed the political power of indigenous narrative forms.[5]

However, this discursive framework has largely struggled to accommodate the former Soviet sphere, where the collapse of the USSR is rarely recognized in Western scholarship as a process of decolonization. This epistemological gap obscures the imperial history of Soviet control and flattens Central Asia into either a "post-communist" or "emerging nation" space. The coloniality of Soviet power—its imposition of a singular linguistic, religious, and cultural hegemony—often goes untheorized as such. As a result, Central Asian mythologies are commonly studied through political science or transitional paradigms, rather than as sites of epistemic resistance or post-body discourse. As David Chioni Moore observes, postcolonial studies has systematically excluded the former Soviet sphere from its purview, leaving regions like Central Asia caught in a "double silence"—overlooked both by postcolonial theorists and by Soviet/post-Soviet scholars themselves.[6]

Central Asian thinkers like Hasan Bülent Paksoy and Chingiz Aitmatov have worked to recover the mythic imagination of Central Asia. Paksoy's work on *Alpamysh* emphasizes the role

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[3] Romila Thapar, *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities through History* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2014); Romila Thapar, *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[4] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (London: James Currey, 1993).
[5] Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," *The Massachusetts Review* 18, no. 4 (1977): 782–794; Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958).
[6] David Chioni Moore, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique," *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 111–128.

of myth in sustaining collective identity under Russian imperial and later Soviet repression.[7] Aitmatov's novels deploy cosmic allegory and mythic figuration to interrogate the psychological and cultural costs of Soviet modernity.[8] Yet, despite these literary recoveries, there has not been a comparable Central Asian postcolonial theory that brings together myth, embodiment, and subjectivity. This absence has obscured the post-body formations that emerge through oral and literary traditions. The post-body here is not a speculative futurity but an already existing form of knowledge occluded by dominant academic taxonomies. Moreover, the processes by which identity is expressed and distorted are inflected by the medium through which they are articulated.

Transmutations

When one designs a character—first rendering from life onto a two-dimensional surface, whether screen or paper—this already constitutes a transmutation. This transmutation echoes what occurs in postcolonial literature: a text written by a colonized or formerly colonized author undergoes transformation not only in translation but in its very production and distribution. The requirements of legibility and marketability impose themselves, along with their accompanying transmutations, upon the work. Consider the case of *The Dancer from Khiva*, authored by Hadjarbibi Siddikova: the text originates, presumably, in Uzbek, is rendered into Russian, and ultimately published in English, where it reaches its widest audience. In this process, even the author's name is transformed into the more marketable "Bibish."[9] This accumulating cascade of

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[7] Hasan Bülent Paksoy, *Alpamysh: Central Asian Identity Under Russian Rule* (Austin: Association for the Advancement of Central Asian Research, 1995).
[8] Chingiz Aitmatov, *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, trans. John French (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).
[9] Hadjarbibi Siddikova [Bibish], *Танцовщица из Хивы, или История простодушной* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka-Klassika, 2005); trans. Andrew Bromfield, *The Dancer from Khiva: One Muslim Woman's Quest for Freedom* (New York: Grove Press, 2007).

transmutations through translation and renaming exemplifies how the medium (linguistic, commercial, textual) alters not only form but identity and meaning. The body of the text, like the post-body, is multiply modified.

Figure 1. *ANOL1: SU ANA,* 2025. Digital animation, silk satin textile, silver, embedded electronics. Courtesy of the artist.

To design a character in the digital realm, similarly, is to mediate: one perceives from life, flattens it, and then reconstitutes it in imagined space. The sculptural processes that follow enact what myth does: the formation of symbolic, often surreal digital bodies. In the video

installation *I thought you were real, but you called me bourgeois* (2022), I explore these processes through original, surreal figures that stage tensions of identity, ideology, and post-body formation. These include spectral, antagonistic creatures called Gzheztirnaks, who act as furies—judgmental spirits labeling others in activist spaces, echoing the punitive internalizations of identity discourse. Another figure, the Imperatrix du Turkestan, embodies both grandeur and trauma: a Central Asian matriarch fused with imperial nostalgia, evoking the myth of decolonized sovereignty as both fiction and burden. CapitalistWhore, a central protagonist in this work, moves through fragmented, hyperreal spaces. Her name is deliberately provocative; she is both victim and agent, a figure who is commodified and yet mobile. She enacts the contradictions of capitalist subjectivity, especially for postcolonial subjects whose very authenticity becomes a commodity. In the "Tunnel" scene, the Colombian Diva appears glamorous and maternal. She offers help but also represents *pornomiseria*: the spectacularization of poverty and the fine line between witnessing and consuming suffering.

What an artist does unconsciously or subconsciously in practice is not easily communicated consciously. One might surmise, however, that this process is not unlike the reflections produced by a society when it mythologizes, creating imaginary bodies that come to be perceived as entirely real and natural, part of the land and its landscape. The act of sculpting in 3D animation of building figures and environments from fragments and fantasies can thus become a form of myth-making that produces post-bodies through processes of transmutation. Digital tools such as Blender facilitate these transmissions of identity and crisis through the rendering of characters and their social interactions. They allow the artist to scan, sculpt, and reconfigure bodies not bound by the confines of realism.

Figure 2. *ANOL1: SU ANA,* 2025. Digital animation, silk satin textile, silver, embedded electronics. Courtesy of the artist.

My three installments of the ANOL1 series explore a rich tapestry of female mythical creatures from Central Asia, resurrected in 3D digital space as post-body figures. The animations draw on the concept of the monstrous feminine to underscore intergenerational connections and to empower future generations toward decolonial reclamation through these recovered narratives. In the most recent installment, *ANOL1: SU ANA*, the female water spirit Su Ana (Su Anasy), literally "Water Mother," from Kazakh and related Turkic lore is embodied. Typically, she is

depicted as an old woman washing her children and combing her long hair on the river's edge at night. Folklore holds that when displeased, Su Ana can send drought and disease or drown a person; villagers would traditionally appease her with offerings when drawing water after dark, fearing her presence.

Figure 3. *ANOL1: The First Encounter,* 2023. Digital animation, silk satin textile, silver, embedded electronics. Courtesy of the artist.

The animation gives Su Ana a haunting 3D presence that evokes both her terrifying power and her symbolic depth, weaving regional myth with my own family history. In early

twentieth-century Kazakhstan, when most relatives who supported the anti-Bolshevik independence movement were executed during the Soviet Red Terror, only my great-grandmother survived. One day, she went to the village well after dark and died under mysterious circumstances. In family lore, this death was attributed to Su Ana taking her for disturbing the waters at night. This invented story softened the unbearable truth: the grieving woman had likely died of heartbreak after losing her family to political violence.

Figure 4. *ANOL1: The First Encounter,* 2023. Digital animation, silk satin textile, silver, embedded electronics. Courtesy of the artist.

Myth here operates as both concealment and transmission, masking trauma while allowing it to persist across generations. Rather than casting Su Ana simply as a villainous creature, the work reclaims her as a post-body figure of intergenerational strength and loss, blending myth and history to foreground the resilience of Central Asian cultural heritage. The animation underscores how once-silenced stories of mythical women and oppressed ancestors can be resurrected through art in order to challenge colonial erasures and give voice to marginalized narratives.

These works are not merely representations but propositions: what might the post-body become when incorporating history's mutilations? How might one reinsert erased cosmologies into the speculative architectures of digital space? In such worlds, the digital medium becomes not merely illustrative but generative, a cartography of bodies that were always possible, always imagined, and now finally rendered.

When experienced through immersive animation, the medium itself exerts a temporary but notable modification upon the viewer's body. Unlike watching a screen at home or in a theater, immersive formats surround the body, implicating it physically and sensorially within the mythic field. The viewer is no longer outside looking in, but rather in dialogue with and within, transformed by the spatial, affective, and perceptual architecture of the myth-making process itself.

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