

THE POLITICS OF BECOMING: BREAKING THE IDENTITY GROUND OF CYBORGS/POSTHUMANS AND HUMANS

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Although the fixity of identity constitutes a basis for theory in Identity Politics, the debate on identity as *pre-political* seems to find its limits when confronted with discourses in feminism, technology and ecological thought. This paper will explore a vision of identity that enhances the way we *penetrate* political conflicts, by exploring visions of humanity inspired by science fiction (SF). I believe that exploring figures and creatures in Fiction/SF makes it possible to interrogate theoretical categories of identity; that is, these forms of art enhance our imagination, contest boundaries/categories, transform our understanding and perceptions of the world/realities/subjectivities, and, more specifically, foster how we enter and conceptualize political conflicts and concepts. In this piece, my aim is to consider illustrations of *humanness* as depicted in Mamoru Oshii's film *Ghost in the shell* (1995). Indeed, SF problematizes and embraces a dynamic vision of humanity where body *and* mind are intermeshed. Moreover, when technology *stains* our conception of a pure humanity – destroying the human capacity to reproduce *and* to die – we shall see that the protagonist in *Ghost in the shell* (Heretofore *Ghosts*) seems to discover the potential to mingle both cyborgs/technology *and* humanness.

In my previous research, I focused on environmental ethics, eco-feminism and on how discourses in environmental thought have come to gradually exclude the political. I argued that these discourses tend to rely on ethical or even

moralist positions either by relying heavily on an idea of homogenous scientific knowledge or by raising suspicion toward political (and interested) practices, hence moving away from (or above) the political, that is, the place where debates, discussions and conflicts among communities can take place. Moreover, when assessing the question of ‘nature/environment’ as well as ethics/morality/politics from a feminist point of view, many discourses on the environment tend to conceptualize identities as pre-political. In fact, they reinforce essentialist claims on individuals, specifically women, in associating them with nature which is *metaphorized* through motherhood, purity, myths and virginity. By ‘pre-political’, I refer to identities that are constructed upon either biological or social conditions both of which *essentialize* an individual’s identity based on the immutability of their past; these characteristics fix the individuals into essential(ized) identities which are not performative nor open to contestation or variation when entering political debates or conflicts.

In various ways, pre-political identities can also be associated with ‘essentialism’, or even with a process of *essentialization*. Borrowing from a definition proposed by Elizabeth Grosz in terms of gender:

Essentialism [...] refers to the attribution of a fixed essence to women. Women’s essence is assumed to be given and universal and is usually, though not necessarily, identified with women’s biology and “natural” characteristics. [It] usually entails biologism and naturalism, but there are cases in which women’s essence is seen to reside not in nature or biology but in certain given psychological characteristics — nurturance, empathy, support, non-competitiveness, and the like. (Grosz 1995, 47)

Hence, this paper focuses on the necessity of deconstructing certain political concepts and identities, largely understood as being formed outside of the political realm, and cast within categories that uncritically ascribe these concepts with essen-

tializing confining attributes. I wish to explore a more contingent conception of political identities, pointing toward multi-faceted, fluid, flexible, and unstable processes of identity formation/variation. Cultural representations (in literature and film) of ‘hybrid’ figures, or even *creatures*, prefigure a questioning of received categories and help to challenge our notions of fixity and homogeneity, thereby providing an excellent point of access to the socio-political problems and potentials of such complex intersections.

If most SF stories are concerned with the necessity to either define the human versus the machine, or to posit the pre-eminence of the mind—seen as pure information—over the body, it is possible to witness forms of performativity and embodiment that allow a spiral of intersections between different bodies, body parts, environments, and prosthesis, which modify and are modified by the mind/discourses. Borrowing from Grosz’s reading of Bergson, these intersections are located where body and mind are constructed simultaneously, in a perpetual dialogue with each other, as well as with other bodies, minds, and environments (Grosz 2005b, 121). In fact, if, as in many of Oshii’s films, the spectator is left with the impression that there *is* a hermetic definition that could pertain to humans, the dialogue that he opens up fosters fluidity and instabilities of concepts such as humans, cyborgs, androids, and the intermeshing of humans (and nonhumans) with technology, all of which allows the spectator to witness the creation of uncontrolled creatures and figures that contest systems *and* categorization.

I. GHOST IN THE SHELL

The story portrays a futurist Japan where a criminal nicknamed the ‘Puppet Master’ is perpetrating various crimes on the international scene by hacking into what is identified as people’s Ghosts. In this future world, the Ghost refers to the spirit/mind/self-identity of each individual, in a world where technology and human bodies are intimately intermeshed. In extreme cases, human brain cells are sometimes the only remaining elements left for differentiating humans from machines/robots. This is the case of the main protagonist, the Major, a cyborg elite police agent whose entire body is a highly sophisticated machine, equipped with various prosthetics apparatuses which increase her physical and mental capabilities. In this futurist society, police agents are *designed* as ultra-cops, with enhanced capabilities to resolve complex technological crimes, such as ghost-hacking.

Interrogating her ‘humanity’ as she confronts the almost entire fusion of her body *and* mind with technological and mechanical parts, the Major is dramatically living an existential crisis which is exacerbated by her work on the case of the ‘Puppet Master’; a case she works on with her colleague, Bato. At various occasions, she shares her concerns about her own identity, her “humanity”, with Bato. She searches for isolation through long underwater diving sessions which worries her colleague. In response to his concerns, she claims that ‘death’ is not really a concern of hers. Memory is a central theme of interrogation in the movie and is explored through the Major, who explains that the main reason she feels ‘human’ most of the time is due, in part, to her memories, but more accurately, since “*people treat her as*

a human being” (*Ghost*), she is constantly reminded that she *is* human and can act accordingly.

While investigating and actively hunting the ‘Puppet Master’, the Major realizes that the mysterious character is also searching for *her*, trying to contact her through the various technological networks she constantly accesses through her duties as a police agent. Their first encounter occurs when the movie reaches its climax; in this encounter, she learns that the Puppet Master is an intelligent and self-conscious entity, a ghost that is not human nor solely *robotic*, and that *it* was created as a result of the constant flow of information it gathered while *ghost-hacking* for the service of an illegal organization. In other words, it is a program, but as a program, it lacks both the capacity to die *and* to reproduce. In order to attain these qualities, its aim is to merge with the Major and become a new entity that is neither completely cybernetic-artificial, nor totally human. Although the Major raises various doubts about merging with the Puppet Master, especially the fact that, in merging, there would be no guarantee that her self-identity would be preserved—a doubt simultaneously expressed by her anguished colleague, Bato, who must passively witness the whole encounter as he is unable to ‘dialogue’ at their level of abstraction—she accepts the Puppet Master’s proposal, animated by curiosity as well as a sense of indeterminacy in becoming this entirely novel creature.

II. THEORIZING FROM THE GHOST

Philosophically, Oshii wishes to problematize how we understand humanity and memory/ies as well as how we encounter technologies and fluxes of information.

In this section, I shall explore various elements of reflections coming out of the film, borrowing a theoretical and philosophical framework from feminists Elizabeth Grosz and political theorist Jane Bennett, and their readings of philosophers Deleuze and Bergson.

As we see in *Ghost*, both the Major and the Puppet Master are concerned with and suspicious of the damages and risks entailed in over-specialization *and* survivalist notions of purity. These figures both conceptualize societies and subjectivities as collectivities in the sense that variety, multitudes, and *differences*, allow life to emerge, and to be preserved as a dynamic process through diversity, transformation and (non-teleological) ‘evolution’. When investigating the case of the Puppet Master, the Major explains the necessity to achieve variety and multiplicities of characters and elements in a collectivity, reflecting the argument that the sameness of all elements would lead to blindness and even inefficiency. As if proving this argument in technological terms, the Puppet Master, as a self-conscious program, realizes it cannot reproduce itself except as a mere copy, always identical and consequently subject to the threat of viruses and destruction. Despite being a novel and highly sophisticated technology, it is doomed to decomposition due to the purity and overspecialized entity it embodies. Through variations and amalgams of differences, through *assemblages*, the Puppet Master and the Major express how the very ‘nature’ of both organisms and collectivities need complexity in their composition, multitudes which ensure a perpetual continuity of *life*.

This idea is strongly connected to a Bergsonian reflection on the meaning of ‘life’, as described by Grosz. In fact, she explores how Bergson understands life as a reply to the intermeshing of culture/nature:

Becoming is not a capacity inherited by life, an evolutionary outcome or consequence, but is the very principle of matter itself, with its possibilities of linkage with the living, with its possibilities of mutual transformation, with its inherent and unstable volatility. [...] The becoming of life is the unbecoming of matter, which is not its transformation into (inert) being, but its placement in a different trajectory of becoming. (Grosz 2005a, 10-11)

In *Ghost*, the Puppet Master’s goal is precisely to become as matter linked with the living by merging with the Major. Yet, as the Master’s argument continues, the Major does raise various concerns, and most notably, her desire to preserve her self-identity. Nonetheless, the Puppet Master reiterates its offer, and informs her that there *can be no* guarantee of preservation, rather “*everything changes in a dynamic environment, and that [her] desire to stay who [she is] is in fact what limits [her]*” (*Ghost*).

In terms of individuality, a fixed self-identity is never achievable, since identities are always dynamic and constructed both in the mingling of bodies and mind, the embodiment of context/environment, as well as through interactions with other actants¹ and environments:

One is what one has done, but also what one can do, what is actualized but also what is virtual. This is partly why sexual and other forms of identity politics remain limited; they tend to understand identity as the synthesis of one’s past, what is already there rather than a synthesis oriented to an open or indeterminable goal, a trajectory or direction. (Grosz 2005b, 233)

¹ ‘Actant’ has been theorized by Bruno Latour in *We have never been modern*. As Bennett explains: “*unlike the term ‘actor’, an actant can be either human or nonhuman: it is that which does something, has sufficient coherence to perform actions, produce effects, and alter situations. [...] Agency appears to [Latour] as a continuum, as a power differentially expressed by all material bodies.*” (Bennett 2004, 355)

It is indeed the desire, curiosity, and indeterminacy of life itself as a dynamic motion creating subjectivities², that fosters these assemblages, the merging of the Puppet Master with the Major, which is not to be understood as an addition of both identities, nor as a domination of one over the other.

Hence, prosthetics are practical *and* theoretical metaphorical tools used to activate *virtualities*, to transform/contest/dialogue with the actual. Self-identities—which are fixed identities—are, for Grosz *and* the Puppet Master, impossible in *temporal* terms; they are liveable, as construction/contestation, in between processes of becoming *and* unbecoming. Furthermore, relying on Deleuze’s reading of Bergson, there is no such *thing* as a ‘pure thing’, rather ‘things’ are a composite of matter *and* perceptions. Indeed, Bergson criticizes how (classical) theory presupposes that perceptions have a direct access to knowledge, to the true ‘being’ of things; for him, it is problematic insofar as this vision focuses solely on things as *result*, as deprived of what they are not, of the *nuance*³. According to Bergson, the ‘being’ also contains the difference of a thing, that is, what escapes and then participates in what the thing becomes as assemblage, mixture, *impure*. This concept inevitably eludes science and metaphysics which are incapable of theorizing *time*—which takes into account the process of *differentiation* in *duration*—and merely inscribe their inquiries *spatially*, as a discourse capable of accessing the pure beings of things (Deleuze 2007, 25-27).

Acknowledging this limitation through a feminist reading of Darwin, Grosz thus refuses to associate her work on ‘nature’ to ecology which tends to perpetuate a

² Here, ‘subjectivities’, ‘subject’, cannot be understood as fixed, given, nor applicable to a sole individual. More precisely, they are composites, assemblages, created with the emergence of an event, through interactions.

³ “*Being is the difference itself of the thing, what Bergson often calls the nuance.*” (Deleuze 2007, 21)

nostalgic vision of a *certain nature*, and mourns extinction without considering the new forms that emerge (Grosz 2005b, 220). Theorizing these encounters/composites, and resisting ecology as a fixed-closed system, Grosz contests their often unquestioned desire for preservation, which also problematically informs identity politics. For her, ecology, like identity politics, tends to *reproduce* the past. In this sense, it contests and even prevents the *future* from happening, the ‘event’ that allows the actualization of virtualities. Moreover, in considering other forms of embodiments, she explores how differences when conceptualized as differences of degrees and not of kind⁴ can offer new possibilities of identities, i.e. where women in environmentalism/ecofeminism would not be confined to metaphors such as the mother/goddess/virgin. Donna Haraway phrases it similarly as she states that “[al]though both are bound in a spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (Haraway 2004, 39), articulating how certain metaphors which borrow too heavily from nature myths (as well as myths in general), far from autonomizing the ‘subject’, confines it to a specific place *with* specific functions.

For Grosz, environmentalism resists the potentials of intersections in/through nature, and rather, desires to preserve identities/creatures/ways of being that *already* exist, at any cost. Against this environmentalism, she proposes exploring what exists outside of these systems, what eludes them, what is capable of disrupting/contesting them, what can emerge from different assemblages. Yet, whereas Grosz sees the limitation of ecology, Jane Bennett intends to create a *new ecological approach*. She uses

⁴ Grosz, in fact, understands differences as a process of *creation*: “Difference generates further difference because difference inheres the force of duration [Bergson’s notion of ‘durée’] (becoming/unbecoming) in all things, in all acts of differentiation and in all things and terms thus differentiated.” (Grosz 2005a, 7)

the notion of ‘thing-power’, a new materialism which is based on the idea that things can be *animate* and effect humans/agents; however, things are not divine and they are non-teleological. This notion of ‘thing-power’ for Bennett allows a critical perspective both of the disenchantment tales of the critical theory and many environmentalists, as well as of the desire for a *re-enchantment* of nature through eco-spiritualism, which resources itself with myths and goddesses (Bennett 2004, 356-357). Inspired by the Epicureans, Bennett presents a portrait of nature/things as animated and enchanted, yet not divine. Like Grosz, she refuses ‘organic wholes’ and their determinacy and hierarchy. The notion of ‘ecological’ therefore must encompass assemblages and connections rather than the sole undifferentiated, holistic aspect of space (and containment) (365).

The work of Bennett and Grosz intimately relies on concepts of nature, the mixing of humans/non-humans, as difference and assemblage, and on identities as composites in perpetual motion. When something is lost, something else is gained and created. These changes occur as a response to intersections or processes of fluidity between actants and environments, as an adaptation to changing and dynamic environments. Moreover, although such statements are not innocent, but contingent and potentially risky⁵, Bennett’s argument incorporates a sense of enchantment, a willingness to hazard conceiving a new inter-subjectivity, as proposed by Puppet Master.

Quoting Bennett, in reference to Epicurus:

⁵ This is precisely the intention of Haraway in creating metaphors, which are neither universalizing, nor innocent. The use of metaphors suggests that there is ‘creature’ (nature, women, the other) that resists categorization or symbolic knowledge, closure and hermetic definitions. More interestingly, situated knowledges and metaphors should never be understood as innocent practices, since they are always particular, situated and contingent.

There is no emphasis on the need to acknowledge the necessary failure of attempts to know an Other, for to insist upon the primordially hybridized nature of every thing, in particular the human thing, is to emphasize the interconnectedness of all things across large and notable differences. In Epicurean materialism, everything is, more or less, made of the same stuff, and although the arrangement of that stuff counts a lot, there really is no such thing as “radical alterity.” (Bennett 2001, 88)

Quite obviously, there are *things* that should be preserved, insofar as multiplicities and differences inform the dynamic (re)configurings of identities; otherwise, such discourses have the potential to be recuperated by all sorts of exclusionary and violent practices toward groups and individuals which are different or cultural practices which are shared by certain groups. In other words, this new materialism—insofar as it is immanent and contextual—is profoundly accountable, contingent and needs to be constantly self-critical and self-reflexive.

III. WHY THE CYBORG, OR THE POSTHUMAN?

As theorized by Haraway, cyborgs are conceptualized as others, not in a binary opposition, but as different in degrees, in composition, in assemblages. Cyborgs are neither fusion nor disappearance, and they are both partly visible *and* invisible, partly containable *and* always fluid, eluding confinement and definition itself. They allow for different perspectives for the individual, and for various accounts of the interactions and confusion of nature/culture; they contest totality, determinacy, holism, and origins as a myth or a place to return to (Eden); they are monsters, fractured, contradictory and most of all, non-innocent/dangerous, thus forcing self-reflexivity of our theoretical apparatuses (Haraway 2004, 12-13). In the context of *Ghost*, cyborgs clearly embody concrete and technical beings; they actively and directly interact with, and even question, *humanness*. Yet, in the context of social and

political theory, cyborgs are mainly useful as metaphorical and methodological ways to challenge other totalizing and essentializing metaphors, such as mothers, virgins, woman and goddess.

In incorporating conceptions of the prosthesis as explored by Grosz and Hayles, it is possible to enhance concepts of performative and never-given identities, which are always politically contingent and contextual. For Grosz, prostheses (in)form our whole body; the way we move, act, look at things is embedded in how we relate to objects, some of which become parts of our body. As an example, my glasses constitute a prosthesis that modify my aptitude to ‘act’ in the world, to interact with bodies and things. In this sense, how we use technology influences the very construction/metamorphosis of our identities. When taking into account the possibilities offered by a prosthesis the concept of identity takes a whole new meaning/perspective, influencing both how we conceptualize the *human*, and other political identities.

Rather than understanding prosthetic incorporation as the corporeal completion of a plan already given, it can be understood in terms of the unexpected emergence of new properties and abilities. [...] Prostheses may actualize virtualities that the natural body may not in itself be able to access or realize, inducing a mutual metamorphosis, transforming both the body supplemented and the objects that supplement it. (Grosz 2005b, 148)

Objections could be raised that SF tends to posit the superiority of information/mind over the body, since the body acts merely as a container (thus *limiting* our possibilities). Nevertheless, in *Ghost*, the Major and the Puppet Master, as well as the new entity that is created between them, cannot *survive* without embodiment, nor can they over-determine the body; indeed, there is a dialogue, an exchange, between the body and the mind, between the various sets of possibilities and capacities they offer.

Yet, I do believe that this dialogue, both in SF and in theory, as evident in the notion of embodiment and how the mingling of body/mind/context takes place, needs to be more thoroughly incorporated in how we do (and conceptualize) theory in our methodologies. Indeed, in *Ghost*, the concept of memory as information—a sense of *souvenirs*—constitutes one of the characteristics that *makes* humans different(able) from machines. Yet the Puppet Master contests this concept of memory, arguing that his data has a value equivalent to memory; if memory is conceptualized as mere *information*, as a matrix gathering and assembling data, affects, feelings, thoughts, and so on, how are we to differentiate humans from other forms of intelligence? And this is precisely what the figure of the cyborg proposes, both as a technical and as a metaphorical concept. The memory and information gathered by the Major or the Puppet Master is constitutive of the body they use, how it sees, it interacts with others, the very context within which it transforms the environment it encounters. As Hayles demonstrated, information is *always* embodied, in context; its production cannot be extirpated from it and is intimately influenced by and in constant dialogue with context (Hayles 1999, 5).

In conclusion, this exploration of SF has aimed to contest attempts to define/delimit identities as pre-political. When conceptualised as perpetually changing, identities initiate new dialogues with the human, non-human and the contexts in which we find both, and also recognize the impossibility to posit the Ghost/mind as above the body (or below). This is a debate that might seem ‘exhausted’ yet appears as interesting for further investigation when reflecting on the absence/invisibility of instruments, apparatuses and bodies in theoretical works. Indeed, where forms of es-

sentiation seem to dominate our contemporary discourses, a theatrical approach opens avenues of critique that allow for debate on specific political issues, especially environment, feminism, and identity politics. Hence, there is a need to theorize the politics of becoming when it comes to identity politics, which should look at various forms of contextual embodiments as well as fluid and creative assemblages, as I have shown with the exploration of the figure of the Puppet Master and the Major, and the novel creature they were able to create when they merged.

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