

RODICA MOCAN

**FROM CO-CREATOR TO DEMIURGE
A THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON
TRANSHUMANIST ART**

Rodica Mocan

Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Theatre and Film, Cluj, Romania

Email: rodica.mocan@ubbcluj.ro; rodicamocan@gmail.com

Abstract: The paper seeks to explore aspects of transhumanist art, starting from philosophical and theological perspectives on the future of humanity in the 21st century: body/soul/mind relationship, the problem of death and immortality, as well as questions about the nature of the beings that are emerging from technological developments. In the first part, we are looking at the things that unite and separate posthumanism and transhumanism in terms of their origins and current orientation. We are going to review some Eastern and Western Christian perspectives concerning the technological embrace, the challenge to revisit the definition of the human beings brought by transhumanism, and the pressure it puts on theological thinking. In the second part, we analyze some tendencies in transhumanist art practices and the emergence of new forms of artistic creations. We relate to the promises that transhumanism makes with regards to body prosthetics, cyborgism, and transspeciesism. At the same time, we identify religious thinking in the deification of the artist within the context of the new definitions of art in the digital age. Finally, as humans meditate on the future of humanity, we argue for the need to introduce art perspectives into the ongoing dialogue between philosophy, theology, and science.

Key words: posthumanism, transhumanism, transhumanist art, transspecies, cyborg, body art, religion, theology, demiurge.

The Transhuman Artist is committed to his/her individual growth and optimism. The medium through which the Transhuman Artist explores his/her work is secondary to the goals of his individual Transhuman beliefs. The Transhuman creative mind recognizes no boundaries. Natasha V. More

1. Introduction

Transhumanism, a term that includes philosophical, cultural, and critical perspectives on what it means to be human within the context of the rapid development of technologies, has an interest not in past understandings of humanity but rather in its future. Some (Kurzweil 2005; More and Vita-More 2013; Mercer 2015; Bostrom 2011) see transhumanism as a transitional phase of an increasing technological embrace, that will find its resolution in posthumanism, after going through a cathartic moment called *Singularity*. Technological singularity – known merely as *the singularity* – is a hypothetical moment in time when technological developments become significant and irreversible. According to prominent transhumanists like Kurzweil and Bostrom, this event is expected to take place in this century.

However, while posthumanism and transhumanism share “a common perception of the human as a non-fixed and mutable condition” (Ferrando 2013, 27) they come from different historical backgrounds and they do not have the same perspective on the future.

Francesca Ferrando, a leading voice in Posthuman Studies who founded the Posthuman Research Group in New York, emphasizes that posthumanism may be interpreted in a very transhumanist way, since, for some, human beings will eventually transform themselves through technology to such degree that they will eventually become *posthuman*, in a post-Singularity era. However, posthumanism is not solely seen as human enhancement through technology and the life thereafter, but also embraces a post-anthropocentric and post-dualistic approach to what it means to be human. In Ferrando’s words, posthumanism provides a starting point for a multi-layered approach, beyond dualistic and hierarchical models, enabling us to envision a future that surpasses the boundaries of human imagination. Posthumanism is “an empirical philosophy of mediation which offers a reconciliation of existence in its broadest significance. Posthumanism does not employ any frontal dualism or antithesis, demystifying any anthropological polarization through the postmodern practice of deconstruction.” (Ferrando 2013, 29)

Both posthumanism and transhumanism focus on technology as a driving force of change in society but have different ways of reflecting on it.

Posthumanism does not look at technology as something to be feared or avoided due to its potential negative value and the lack of human control over technology (Feenberg 2003). At its core, posthumanism denounces anthropocentrism and renounces the unilateral view on what it means to be human, recognizing more centers of interest, in a pluralistic and multi layered way. But, at the same time, it does not share the determinist, optimist, almost religious view of what role transhumanism will have for the future of humanity.

Transhumanism, on the other hand, is taking anthropocentrism to new levels, focusing on human enhancement through science and technology, with the main objective of achieving – through the use of regenerative medicine, nanotechnology, cryonics, mind uploading and other means – an improved existence, significant life extension and, possibly, the eradication of death itself.

2. Philosophical and Religious Post/Trans-humanism

While, apparently, most transhumanists would consider themselves atheistic, some would argue that transhumanism is a new faith, albeit a non-theistic one, tailored for the 21st century. Within Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the existence and importance of both a material body and a spiritual soul is a certainty, as is the existence of a relationship with a transcendent God.

In transhumanism, we see “a fervent and radically individualistic embrace of naked, materialistic, personal re-creation” (Smith 2018), in stark contrast with the dualist body/soul view of the human which is prevalent in Western religious thought or of the Buddhist concept of the world as illusion. Instead, transhumanism is focusing on the enhancement of the body through various technological interventions, with the declared purpose of extending life indefinitely and even defeating death. It emphasizes the prevalence of mind over body and is aiming for the development of a superintelligent being that would surpass any shortcomings of the body.

David Winyard’s introduction in the coming issue of *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, makes a compelling argument about how transhumanism is religious, although not in the way we traditionally think about religion. He refers to the writings of More, Kurzweil, and Bainbridge that demonstrate how transhumanism “embraces a God-like computer, one that emerges in the development of artificial intelligence.” (Winyard, 2020, 71)

Transhumanists aspire to the same things that are promised by religion through salvation: relief from suffering, overcoming death, a promise of an existence without end. While traditional religion is based on

a narrative that comes from the past (through revelation, sacred writings, ancient practices), transhumanism is only preoccupied with the future.

Transhumanism emphasizes the quest for immortality through various technological means: body enhancements and even whole body prosthetics, cryogeny, cyborgism, mind uploading. Their endeavor to redefine existing ethical or moral aspects to life, carries with it a criticism of religion, accusing it of “deathist rationalization” and deriding its role of offering comfort to humans for the loss of one of their own.

Ultimately, without going into more detail but pointing to relevant authors such as (Winyard 2020) (Ungureanu 2019) (Cholbi 2018) (Manoj 2008) (Putnam 2011) (Campbell and Walker 2005) (Genovese 2018) and others, the main themes of transhumanism are religious in nature: (1) a God-like ability to create *super-intelligence* through science and technology; (2) relief from suffering and *super-well-being* through technological advancements; (3) relief from death and virtual *immortality* through life enhancement, cryonics and mind uploading.

While most transhumanists would identify as atheists, some interact in organized, religious-like structures, with tenets and practices similar to other religions, or, frequently, at the same time as other religious practices. One such example is Terasem Faith. Considered a “trans religion,” it is supposed to be able to co-exist with other religions without having to leave them – proclaims: (1) Life is purposeful; (2) Death is optional; (3) God is technological; (4) Love is Essential.

Conversely, some Christian authors support the idea of a Christian Transhumanism, albeit with specific differences between the Protestant West and the Orthodox East. When dealing with transhumanism, we are looking at the debate between the techno-apocalyptic conservative Christians – who expect that the Antichrist will utilize post/transhuman technology – and the trans/posthuman enthusiasts – who are ready to accept anything science can accomplish.

Calvin Mercer, Professor of Religious Studies at East Carolina University, advocates for a trans/posthuman theology needed in dealing with the new breed of transhuman and posthuman beings that seem to be emerging as a result of AI developments (Mercer 2020). In his view, since these beings (also called sentient) will have bodies – enhanced or technologically created, thus consistent with Christian theological anthropology – they would be God’s creations, in need of salvation. His other assertion – situated in an instrumental view of technology as value-neutral – is related to the notion of “created co-creators” (Hefner 1993), meaning that God is working through the human creatures to develop robust technologies, for good. He also asserts that, in order for Christianity to survive, it would have to adapt its practices to this coming trans/posthumanist world. Ultimately, Mercer advocates for prudence that requires a good understanding of both emerging technologies and the

essential teachings of Christianity, or any other relevant religions, for that matter.

On a different note, in his paper *Transhumanism or Theosis: Vladimir Soloviev on Posthumanism and the Kingdom of God*, Dylan Pahman (Pahman 2016) takes inspiration from Soloviev's engagement with Nietzsche's superman. The human being is engaged in the process of becoming until reaching a final destination that surpasses his natural condition. To Soloviev, the resurrection from the dead and the possibility of a future form of life – that may be assimilated to what we call now posthumanity – is deeply rooted in the doctrine of the incarnation of God in the historical person of Jesus Christ. It is debatable whether Soloviev's words can be used as an argument for a Christian view on trans and posthumanism. However, one cannot ignore the effort of Pahman, and many others, to reconcile Christian theology with the new philosophies.

The Russian Transhumanist Movement, founded in 2003, adopted Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov (1829-1203) as an inspiration for their thinking. Eugene Clay revisits some old Christian conceptions about the human nature and human deification, referring mostly to the Orthodox traditions and affirms that, "although not typically Orthodox, Fedorov's philosophy reflected centuries of Orthodox theological examination of human nature, destiny, and freedom. At its best, the transhumanism movement also engages these questions." (Clay 2011, 158)

As we can see, in both Eastern and Western Christianity, some enthusiastically embrace the idea that [all] technologies are good, instruments for co-creation with God, and for furthering the development of humankind into a new form of being. Some use theological arguments to see the technological transformations of the human being as a form of becoming and to look at posthumanism as a form of eternal life. Others – consistent with a traditional position of some religions of staying away from all technological developments that seem to be harmful – reject technology at various levels or all together on account of its potential damaging moral value. Whatever the stance, Christianity does not shy away from engaging in the dialogue surrounding the development of technologies in the 21st century and the posthuman condition that it heralds.

Other religions are equally open and preoccupied to reconcile and adapt their doctrines with transhumanist thinking, mainly due to the need to clarify their position regarding well being vs. suffering or death vs. life extension through various technologies. Our objective so far is to underline the common ground that transhumanism and religion have.

3. Transhumanist Art and the Verge of a Neo-Religion

Transhumanist art is an artistic movement based on the principles and visions of transhumanist thought (More and Vita-More 2013). It is visionary and optimistic with regards to the development of technologies, believing that humans will not only overcome the limits of biological existence but should also overcome limits of art and aesthetics, to holistically approach art, technology, science, and life itself.

Transhumanist artists emphasize the prevalence of the message of the work of art and its deep connection with the social and cultural environment, rather than the medium that is used to produce it. Whether the final product is an object, an art installation, or an art performance, in transhumanist art the combination of technology with biology is creating a wave of shock in the viewer. Consistent with its character of conceptual art, transhumanist art is always about the message and is ready to go to great lengths in order to achieve that.

The new transhumanist way of thinking exalts the importance and prevalence of the mind over the body, considering that the material world is all that has been, or will ever be, and ultimately, that the body is reducible to chemical and electrical exchanges. This view is openly embraced by transhumanist artist Stelarc. In his view, the human body is obsolete, and can be seen as being a construct made out of „meat, metal and code” (Lawler-Dormer 2018).

In the work he has performed on numerous world stages – art festivals, galleries, museums or public spaces – he illustrates visually the relationship between the human body and technology from the perspective of concepts such as extension, decorporalization, amputation, etc.

For "The Third Hand" art performance he built a third robotic arm that he attached to his right hand, enabling it to be operated digitally, including from a distance, through the Internet. His left hand and one of his legs were connected to the Internet by means of electrodes capable of transmitting electrical impulses to the muscles, thus amputating them from the rest of the body and determining their movements outside the performer's control. This work, which explicitly illustrates the concepts of extension/amputation, disconnection of the mind from the body, expresses the social reality in which individuals feel a disconnect between our will and what we can achieve.

But Stelarc is best known for his „Ear on Arm” body art/performance that entails a permanent modification to his body. For this, Stelarc surgically implanted an enlarged ear grown from stem cells and human tissues into his arm, after which, through digital technologies that will be subsequently implanted and connected to the Internet, this "ear" will enable people to hear remotely everything that he can hear. Unlike „The Third Arm” where the technology is visible and part of the display, the

effects of the advanced bio-technology that he used here are dramatic, with a strong – shocking even – visual impact, while the technological element that generated them is practically invisible.

Stelarc is treating his body in a way that is consistent with transhumanist thinking, divesting it of any spiritual value and detaching it from the notion of a soul. In this way, reduced to its materiality – meat, metal and code – it can be transformed, manipulated and treated as any other artistic medium.

In body art, the treatment of the human body as a medium for art, open for interventions and transformations, is limited only by the author's imagination and pain/fear/endurance threshold. It benefits from the complicity of surgeons who do not find themselves constrained by ethical or moral considerations.

The major themes that transhumanist philosophy focuses on are: *superintelligence* – an emphasis on improved abilities of the mind and the body through science and technology that would give humans superpowers; *super-well-being* – an emphasis on prosthetics, enhancements and supplements that ensure improved health and well-being; and *superlongevity* – concerned with life extension and a striving for immortality. In one form or another, we find these themes at the core of transhumanist art manifestations.

3.1. Cyborgism and transspeciesism

Neil Harbisson is a renowned transhumanist artist born with achromatopsia, a condition that means he is color blind. During his college years, he developed an application that translates the wavelength of the color of light into sound, enabling him to perceive colors by “listening to” rather than looking at them. A digital camera mounted on his head would “read” the colors and the digital information was sent to an application running on his laptop. The data were then transformed into sound and sent back to a headphone set that enabled him to “hear” the sound of the colors. Because he was wearing these devices all the time, he was the first person to receive – somewhat reluctantly – a passport with what one could call a “cyborg” picture on it, thus certifying that this individual is wearing these technologies as part of his body. Using the same principle of translating color into sound, Harbisson has the technological devices implanted directly in his head. This allows him to perceive colors through an “antenna” mounted directly on his head and to hear the sounds directly in his skull. The application now runs on a mobile device. He can receive phone calls directly in his head and he can connect to the Internet through Bluetooth, being able to receive direct messages from other phones.

Although Harbisson is a visual artist, he is not renowned for his art but for his transformation and for being a fervent cyborg activist. As founder of the Cyborg Foundation and a spin-off association called the

Transspecies Society, he is a fierce promoter of cyborg art and cyborg rights, arguing for the right of humans to modify themselves as a way of saving the planet. Harbisson argues for the right of the person to design oneself, thus saving the planet by not having to transform it in order to suit its needs. (Mint 2018)

Moon Ribas, another cyborg artist, has an implant in her feet that enables her to feel the seismic activity of the planet, which she calls a „seismic sense”. In her definition, a cyborg artist is an artist who creates new senses, merging with technology to such a degree that technology is no longer being used as a tool for creating new experiences but rather becomes part of their body (Design Indaba 2019). Under the framework of Transspecies Society other senses were created, such as the ability to sense weather or atmospheric pressure, the ability to sense North at all times, or the ability to perceive the quality of the air.

A more sophisticated implant is presented by artist Joe Dekni, who has an intricate sonar implant placed into the back of his neck that, through extensions that go into his cheek bones, allow him to perceive objects behind him (** 2018). “The creation of transhumanist beings – which we are slowly becoming – is perhaps the most artistic endeavor humanity has ever dared to pursue. Transhumanist art will help guide us to becoming masterpieces”, says Zoltan Istvan (2014), who heralds the coming of an age of immortality enabled by technology.

Transspeciesism – a concept much more complicated than the purpose of this article – is reflected in art in various other forms of body transformations through surgery, implants or tattoos, that seek to transform the person, at least at first sight, into an exponent of another species, real or imagined. The effects of such transformations can be dramatic, if only we think of Daniel Avner, also known as the Cat Man, who eventually committed suicide after many years of dramatic body transformations.

3.2. The promise of immortality

Marius Ursache, a Romanian medical doctor, digital media activist, entrepreneur, and a sought-after speaker, is developing a proposal for a different kind of immortality, where one would live eternally through an avatar, powered by the digital footprint created online during one’s life (www.eterni.me).

As part of an entrepreneurship workshop at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, together with Nicolas Lee and Rida Benjelloun, Ursache founded a company working on developing an application called „eterni.me”. The app would collect the customer’s digital footprint, processing the information through an artificial intelligence algorithm, and then create an avatar available for interaction with loved ones, long time after the person is deceased. The idea sparked a whole range of reactions varying from interest on the part of transhumanist enthusiasts

who can see one of their visions fulfilled, to outrage on the part of psychologists who can weigh the consequences of playing with the grieving human mind. Since the initial idea, following years of research, trials and failures, as well as some very personal experiences with loss and grief, the project has toned down its ambitions promising to „preserve your most important thoughts, stories and memories for eternity.”

The use of immersive technologies such as VR, AR, and MRE are surpassing the experiential approach to life after death, and the illusion of immortality through AI that Eterni.me and other similar projects are trying to employ. In a recently released video clip from "I Met You," a documentary produced by South Korean Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (Houser 2020) we can see a Mixed Reality Environment (MRE) simulation of a reunion of a young mother with her deceased daughter.

In the clip, we are able to observe the virtual environments in which the encounter was created, based on three separate scenarios. The real environment, in a chroma key studio, presents the rest of the family observing the mother who – with the help of a VR headset and haptic gloves – is completely immersed in the emotional encounter that takes place in the virtual world. The environments and the respective scenarios were created from memories and pictures shared by the family and the girl was created through motion capture technology that recorded the movements of a child actor, who was later used for the creation of a very realistic image of the daughter. The AI technology behind the project enabled the virtual girl to relate quasi-realistically with the mother and to provide answers and interactions that were built into the scenarios. The experience appears to be very powerful for the mother who is emotionally devastated, while the rest of the family is more reserved, watching from the distance.

As more and more companies and start-ups are entering this uncharted territory, the call for addressing the important ethical and moral questions that arise from such practices cannot be more urgent.

The Immortality Project is a three year interdisciplinary research project headed by professor John Martin Fisher of the University of California, Riverside, and funded by the John Templeton Foundation with one of the largest humanities grants ever awarded. It already has generated a large volume of scholarly research into the topic (books, articles, artistic productions), investigating from different perspectives the possibilities of science and technology significantly extending the human lifespan and the consequences for the future of humankind. This extensive research generated many questions. The *epistemology of immortality* – or the question of “what role do non-physical sciences such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, or history have in helping us understand immortality?” (Cholbi 2018, 23) – should be extended to include the arts.

The artists play an essential role both in creatively exploring ways in which the quest for immortality takes form and in conveying to the public scientific findings in such a way as to make them accessible, and even desirable. Science fiction cinema is one of the most notable art forms that present in compelling ways scenarios of possible futures. *Transcendence* (2014) is a cinematic masterpiece that explains the theory of Singularity and the possible outcomes of the future of humanity. At the same time, *Black Mirror*, a Netflix sci-fi anthology series, takes into a strikingly familiar future where we can explore the consequences of the technologies we develop. Other titles of transhumanist science fiction include *The Matrix* (1999), *The Avatar* (2009), *Gattaca* (1997), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *Her* (2013), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Lucy* (2014), *Ex Machina* (2014) and many others.

3.3. The new demiurge

By adopting multiple and interchangeable centers, posthumanism abandoned the idea of centrality, a process already started in postmodernism. While anonymous at first in art, the artist becomes the central figure ever since Renaissance. The abandonment of "centrality" affects the conception of art because the author/artist, at least apparently, vacates center stage in order to invite the audience to take part in a process meant to go beyond the mere reception, towards a call for a change of behavior. By doing this, particularly in art performance and other forms of interventionist art, the artist gives art a militant role and endows the public with a responsibility to embrace change.

The consequences of these developments in art are multiple, affecting the very concept of art itself. In this context, the idea of "the death of art" (Malița 2010, 325) is seen as a consequence of the abandonment of traditional values and accompanies similar "endings": of ideologies, of philosophy, of politics, of history, or the end of Man. In a process of (apparent) self-annihilation, the artist allows his image to be reduced to the idea that he wants to convey. Reflecting on the status of the contemporary artist, Malița wonders: "Should such attitudes attest to the 'death of the author' or, on the contrary, the warning that it was only by the end of the twentieth century that we truly entered the era of the demiurge artist?" (258).

Stelarc's stance on the future of bio-art strongly attests to the idea of the artist as demiurge when he affirms that the artist of the future should be a genetic sculptor, using increasingly genetic engineering and modeling living tissue in order to create matter that would have form and substance, but also a form of life. (Ford 2011)

Artists such as Stelarc, Neil Harbisson, Moon Ribas, Orlan, and many others, proclaim they are engaging in new forms of creation, superior to traditional art by their objective of re-creating the body – the very essence of the definition of the human being in historical, cultural, theological,

and philosophical perspectives. By transforming and manipulating the existing body, by using living cells and human tissue, or by “creating new senses”, in transhumanist art, we see the proclamation of the artist as demiurge.

Art becomes the instrument of the new philosophy, and the artist, who in the industrial and post-industrial era was considered unproductive and dispensable, even assuming anonymity (see Malița), is claiming now his central, demiurgic place.

On the other hand, the scientist himself, who is behind all the advancements in science and technology, is seen as a type of demiurge, co-creator of the future human being through the advancement and integration of new technologies. The [transhumanist] artist is claiming its demiurge status from his super creativity that is freed from boundaries, while the scientist, also freed from ethical constraints, is demiurgic due to his superintelligence.

In this context, posthumanist philosophy helps to create the ground for the re-definition of the human being within the context of the new era, to accommodate the coming changes.

4. Conclusions

Transhumanism is a rather recent term that describes an archetypal quest for self-improvement and self-development to ensure increased well being, life extension and immortality, through the use of new, improved, technologies. Manifesting readiness to embrace technology and desiring relevance, some exponents of various religions seek to reconcile their doctrine with new thinking, developing more or less formal structures and engaging in theological and philosophical discourse with the promoters of transhumanism. In their turn, transhumanists display a propensity for religious spirituality, albeit often non-theistic. While we only focused on the religious thinking found in Western and Eastern Christianity, we identify similar endeavors to reconcile transhumanist thinking to other religions.

The transhumanist artist advocates for a potentially unlimited transformation of the body until we question the very nature of the human being. He does so from a position of entitlement given by the conceptual art label attached to the “artistic” endeavor, claiming the right to improving oneself through technology, through a creative process of self-evolution. By doing this, trans-humanist art intersects with religious thinking. The [implied or self-declared] demiurge artist – obsessed with his status as creator and ultimate visionary of the future of humanity – frequently adds an intense, activist dimension to his artistic performance. By integrating his art into life, he displays his transformations, while, at

the same time, invites others to follow his lead to establish civic and social structures meant to promote the transhumanist agenda.

Art is a fertile ground for ambiguous and outrageous assertions – frequently critically judged only by the passing of time, but minutely recorded and included in art history. Philosophy and theology, on the other hand, know better and possess the instruments to discern and expose ideas that have a toxic potential for the future of humanity. Art is also a vital instrument to express and disseminate ideas emotionally and compellingly and should be a powerful ally in the quest for developing a balanced view for the future of humanity, one that does not hinder further development of the human being but considers the ethical and moral implications of technological developments within the context of philosophical and theological ideas debated over the centuries.

Many authors conclude their works by commending the urgency of an intentional conversation around the critical philosophical and theological questions raised by the emerging trans-humanist and post-humanist theory and practice. Given the influence and visibility of contemporary art, its increased impact and importance, I also conclude by saying that these conversations should also integrate the area of art theory and new artistic practices in the 21st century.

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