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# *Out of Body* Transgressions

**Abstract:** This research focuses on the discovery of new connections for extending the framework of analysis and understanding of corporeality, at the intersection of art, philosophy and science, in this "era of media convergence" (Paul Martin Lester). The introduction outlines some important considerations in the context of contemporary debates on this topic, indicating, from the perspective of body art, at least three significant artistic attitudes for transgressing the physical, mental, cultural and technological limits of the human body, situation that contribute to the expansion of the concept of *body transgression*, considering the highly influential background of the bio-philosophical ideology of transhumanism. First of all, based on the some relevant explanations (Philbeck), some conceptual and terminological delimitations of terms such as *posthuman* or *transhuman* are presented, because, in the opinion of the mentioned author, they still cause confusion in various contexts of their use. Next, the research addresses various perspectives on the relationship between *identity*, *mind*, *body* and *technology*, analyzing concepts such as *augments* and/versus *normals* and the political and social implications of *body enhancement* (Frodeman), new nanotechnological enhanced body (Kurtzweil), or *accessibility* and *equity*, in the wider context of redefining the frameworks for both utopian/dystopian scenarios towards a possible bio-technological democracy (Haraway, Kornwachs), in connection with other correlative concepts such as the *therapy versus enhancement dilemma*, from an ethical point of view (Bryant) or the "medial body" as a "transitional environment" from "fiction" to "faction"(Butnaru) towards new dimensions of cyborg corporeality in terms of "transhuman body" or "posthuman body" (Ferrando).

**Keywords:** transgression, body, corporeality, enhancement, augmentation, enhancement, tranhumanism, hybrid

## Introduction

Although in the avant-garde "tradition" artistic *transgression* refers to the challenging of borders, the "offensive" subversion of moral, ethical or social limits, and to the culture of divergence and destabilization through a rhetoric of psychological and anti-aesthetic shock, in relation to the current (augmented) "corporeality", its conceptual framework expands considerably beyond the aesthetics of mere scandal. According to Anthony Julius (2002), transgression in art may be considered through the lens of at least three general relational contexts: an intrinsic context shaped by the *violation of its own rules*, a context of dissent from dominant moral codes through *the violation of taboos*, and a context of *politically resistant art*. In his words,

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(…) there is an art that repudiates established artistic practices, an art that violates certain beliefs and feelings of its audience, an art that defies the rule of the state." (Julius, 2002, 102)

The advent of New Realisms, Body Art and, particularly, Performance Art brings about a tendency to test the physical, psychological, perceptual and cultural limits of the Body as an artistic *act* or *medium*.

In the case of the Body Art, one can observe, in time, at least three general tendencies that outline a certain type of relational dynamics between the instrumentalization of the body, as a discursive-ideological vector, and the *otherness* of human identity and physicality, as a limit. A first direction tests the physical and mental limits of the body in relation to time and existence, according to a strictly established performance scenario. Tehching Hsieh's famous "One Year Performances" are emblematic for those impossible ordeals of body art, now known as "endurance performance." In Hsieh's art, as can be seen later in some of the artistic actions of Marina Abramovich, the main continuator of this type of bodily approach, pushed before to extremes by the Taiwanese artist, the allusive or direct critical discourse is almost absent. Hsieh's performances, emblematic for "an ontology of performance" (Heathfield, Jones, 2012), challenge the boundaries between personal biography and public life, addressing various existential impossible situations, or at least risky for his physical and mental health, with an outstanding self-imposed regime of restrictions and constraints, focused on testing and documenting all existential reactions triggered by these special conditions in which the artist must endure hunger, cold, pain, loneliness or sleep deprivation.

A second direction, which tests the perceptual and cultural limits of body-identity hybridity, in a predominantly critical discursive context, can be observed, especially, in Orlan's "carnal art", using her expression. What becomes emblematic for this type of body discourse is, in C. Jill O'Bryan's words (2005), the concept of "self-hybridization", which questions, from multiple provocative perspectives, the alterity of body-identity "dichotomy" in the transgessive context of various media of artistic expression. Her bodily actions, by modifying/ refacing her biologic outlook through cosmetic surgery, thus incorporating various visual references of femininity in art history, incite debates about the relationship between the body and the intermediate condition of the *carnal* artist in transgressing and demystifying the "iconic" identity with all its symbolic, social, cultural, anthropological or political correlatives.

With regard to the face, Orlan's (self-)images render deviations from the norm. Her hybrids are offspring of the carnival freak and the humanoid. But her hybrids also mark the differences between the bounds of the body

and the unbounded virtual body—between the reincarnation of Saint Orlan and Orlan as self-hybridation. (O'Bryan, 2005, 135)

A third direction involves the transgression of the biological limits of the body in the transhumanist perspective of artificial augmentation, or *body enhancement*. Stating that (biological) "body is obsolete", Stelarc is one of the first recognized artists to make the transition from a predominantly critical, counter-discursive body art, to *cyborg* corporeality, through the scientific study of the relationship between biology and technology, the human body being only an alternative experimental space, to test the future possible perspectives of this relationship.

## Altered States of Corporeality

The cultural and political impact of the concept of body *transgression* requires, at the same time, a constant re-assessment of corporeality in a general sense, and, especially, a cautious but creative analysis of the ideological effects produced by transhumanist *biophilosophy*, seen nowadays as the most prominent and influential trend. First, a series of terminological delineations are necessary to distinguish between such terms as posthumanism, transhumanism or post-human condition, and to clarify the differences and similarities between these two famous contemporary philosophical trends. Starting from the premise that technology is changing "the ontological models" by shaping the entire experiential context of human knowledge and that "transhumanism and posthumanism both address this continuing trend in techno-human integration", Thomas D. Philbeck (2020) underlines the various connotations of the term "posthuman", common to both transhumanism and posthumanism, and thus points to the different ontological frameworks modeling the two posthumanist types of discourse. On the first hand, transhumanism stands on a "physiological ground" and refers to artificially enhancements of simple/ realistic (prosthetics) and complex/ idealistic (transferring mind from brain into a computer) human skills and capacities through the integration of various technologic gadgets and systems. On the other hand, posthumanism stands on a "philosophycal ground" and "(...) it delineates an entity that defines and understands itself differently than trough the contemporary notion of 'human' because of technology's impact on basic human characteristics." (Philbeck, 2020, 175)

Authors such as Robert Frodeman (2019) consider from various perspectives "the political implications of the transhumanist attempt to develop abilities, and a length of life, beyond the norm." (Frodeman, 2019, 23) He anticipates a series of Orwellian (*1984*) or Huxleyan (*A Brave New World*) scenarios in which the fundamentals of democracy could be

progressively altered to favor the citizens who possess technology-augmented abilities and powers. This situation, not entirely hypothetical today (not all citizens can afford the latest gadgets), could degenerate into a high-tech plutocracy, like Tyrell Corporation from the cyberpunk Los Angeles depicted in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* movie, or, more recently, the *ad infinituum* self-cloned aristocracy from the *Carbon* sci-fi series. Social segregation, unequal resource distribution or the reiteration of social organization by castes, according to Plato's limitative democracy model – with golden, silver, or iron citizens depending on their abilities and skills –, would inevitably lead to a widening gap between *augments* and *normals*.

> The rise of a class of augments could lead to any number of political stratagems short of the outright repeal of democracy. For instance, augments could be given multiple votes. Or we could end up with a new form of republicanism: normals could be allowed to choose from among a slate of augments who would exercise the voting franchise on their behalf. But however events would work out, the bottom line is that it is unlikely that those with greater abilities would be willing to be subject to the whims of "normals." (Frodeman, 2019, 24-25)

Moreover, if stress is moved from classes to races, this type of scenario could become catastrophic in nature, going as far as the system's total assimilation of the "normal" people, like in the case of the famous interplanetary predator bio-tech "hive" called The Borg from the sci-fi series *Star Trek*, or their annihilation once the AI becomes autonomous, a moment when, taking into consideration that we cannot anticipate *how* or even *if* the AI could "perceive" itself, the posthuman condition would no longer belong to the human. From another point of view, based on the critical questioning of the ideological and political context that *fuels* the cyborg myth, "the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism" (Haraway, 1991, 151), Donna Haraway emphasizes three "crucial boundary breakdowns" that make possible new analytical perspectives on a possible more inclusive political vision. The first refers to the nature-culture dichotomy, to overcoming the separation between human and animal, between life and social sciences, to new perspectives of debate, in the sphere of "biological determinism", on new meanings of "human animality", while considering that the cyborg myth appears "where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed." (151-152). The second refers to "technological determinism" and emphasizes the relativization of the border between biological and technological, between "animal-human (organism) and machine", the ambiguity of the difference between both mind and body and natural and artificial, between "self-developing and externally designed" (152), caused by

the accelerated evolution of technology in the latter part of the twentieth century. Finally, the third turning point, derived from the second, refers to the weaker distinction between physical and non-physical, due to the evolution of research in quantum physics and technological "miniaturization", the discussions on the cyborg myth being oriented, in this case, to other horizons of knowledge, in terms of "consciousness" or "simulation" (153)

> So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work. One of my premises is that most American socialists and feminists see deepened dualisms of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in the social practices, symbolic formulations, and physical artefacts associated with 'high technology' and scientific culture. (Haraway, 1991, 154)

Moreover, Haraway draws attention to the need to strengthen the social unity of  people, given the prospect of an unprecedented intensification of technological-political domination, taking into account, from an equidistant position, both utopian / dystopian possible near future scenarios. On the one hand, a "cyborg" society can be the fulfilled dream of any authoritarian discourse, which would follow, according to an imperialist logic, "the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet" (154). On the other hand, a cyborg democracy cannot be imagined without taking into account the accessibility to technological freedom, the freedom of coexistence and symbiosis between the older, natural, and newer, artificial, species. The author's position stands for mediation considering both (cyborg) authoritarian and libertarian possible perspectives on a transhumanist future, concluding that "single vision produces worse illusions that double vision or many-headed monsters." (154)

In this respect, questioning the real long-term benefits that bio-technological and, especially, AI developments would bring to humanity, Klaus Kornwachs (2021) approaches transhumanism from a moderate yet critical standpoint, seeing it as a form of "derailed anthropology" in which the next evolutionary step is man's technological *transcendence*, which the author sums up in five possible steps: human-robot coexistence, human-robot symbiosis as cyborgs, the superiority of robots, slavery and extinction. Furthermore, he also warns against the "irrationality" of the transhumanist promise, being of the opinion that it "must have a psychological source, and the conjecture will be here that this source is based not on a religious image of man but of a pseudo-theological transfiguration of the machine as such." (23) Kornwachs makes a comparative analysis of various contexts of

interaction between the human and the artificial which may determine the degree of (human) autonomy in the "cyborg" condition.

> If these systems, which are seemingly neutral, only user-dependent, are a carrier of interests, the path is ready for the confusion between what we have manufactured by human efforts and what is natural, i.e. produced by natural processes, and not influenced by human interaction. These questions touch upon the fundamental question of philosophical anthropology: Is man still autonomous or even free (according to Kant) if he is embedded in such seemingly autonomous artificial systems of life-world—having no criteria to distinguish between fakes and facts or the natural and the artificial? (Kornwachs, 2021, 32)

Additionally, he considers the situations that could create the new conditions in which the systems/machines would rapidly surpass human evolution in terms of technological enhancements or data processing, which would inevitably lead to two possibilities for the human to be "ontologically" re-defined, and whose effects on what contemporary technology still calls *human centered design* would actually favor the autonomy of technological *beings* and the exclusion of Frodeman's "normals" from the "artificial paradise" of transhumanism.

> The paradise is paid with the superiority of machines over the man; they will know better what may be good for individuals, and for society. Will they become gracious bullies? According to different variants of this prophecy, there will be either an evolutionary melting or convergence between man and machine to a new man or the distinction of the human species. (Kornwachs, 2021, 36)

Other researchers, such as the biologist John Bryant (2013), analyze the possible effects of transhumanist hi-tech-optimism on ethical values, stating that, especially if we refer to the genetic modification or manipulation of the human body, we should understand the difference between the medical benefits of biotechnology (therapy) and the improvement of traits that increase our performance beyond natural limits (enhancement), turning us into Nietzschean Übermensch/superhumans. However, beyond the *therapy vs enhancement* dilemma, just like Kornwachs or Frodeman, Bryant is more interested in the way this context impacts on psycho-social *biodiversity*, the "validity" and "equality" of access to the benefits of transhumanist technoculture, and less in the "possibility" of its materializing what it promises. Once more, we may come upon the unavoidable limitations of "terms & conditions" and of double-standard policies. Taking into account some perspectives of this possible impact, from a "biomedical" (207), "pharmacological" (221), "digital" (223) or

"biomechanical" (229) viewpoint, Bryant also examines the possible effects of genetic engineering beyond the sphere of its medical research applications. He is of the opinion that humanity faces two major issues for the first time in its history. The first refers to the "equality of opportunities" and suggests that corporate interests will take over scientific goals, and that the inevitable gap between the rich and the poor, the *augments* and the *normals*, will become even wider. Starting from this, it could be speculated that, in a wide sense, *natural selection* will be taken over by *artificial selection*:

> Gregory Stock, the influential commentator and policy-maker from the University of California, suggested in his 2002 book *Redesigning Humans: Choosing our Children's Genes* that the free market should prevail in this area. If parents want to undergo these procedures, society should allow them to do so if they are willing to pay for it. (213)

The second issue relates to the prospect – bleak, from a humanist standpoint – of a fundamental alteration and dilution of the concept of *identity* and of its moral and social correlates, *dignity* and *autonomy*, as, in Bryant's terms, the "commodification" of genotypes through cloning (choosing one's future child) would definitively change the natural parameters of the relationship between (human) individuality, body perception and corporeality. Moreover, the issue becomes even more complex if we imagine the dystopian scenario in which the mix-breeding of the cyborg with the mutant – where the former, still a *symbiont*, owing to research into bionics, nanotechnology and smart materials, is already surpasses by the latter – would produce a super-posthuman or a post-*Superman*, similar, maybe, to the maleficent humanoid *metamorph* from the first movie of the *Terminator* series. In another imagined scenario, once we are able to choose the genes of our future generations, if the technology able to transfer consciousness from the biological to the artificial is also available, we could opt for an artificial continuation of our life in a different body or several bodies, transgressing, in an ironic way, the limitative corporeality of our biological nature, dominated by the Cartesian body-mind dichotomy (*Ghost in the machine*), towards the augmented, fluid and trans-individual artificial corporeality, definitively *freed* from existential dilemmas, turned into nothingness in the cybernetic beatitude of a digital Nirvana (*Host of the machine*).

Beyond the *liberalization* of reproductive technologies, Bryant analyzes the latest scientific research conducted by the SENS Foundation and the implications that its goal, i.e. "to help build the industry that will cure the diseases of aging"[1], could have in the near future. He points to the unprecedented demographic effect brought about by the development of technologies aiming to extend the lifespan of the human body as much as

possible, seeing that, as previously mentioned, access to *the elixir of immortality* would be granted to everyone.

> I will make two brief points. First, if ever this research does yield significant results, will the benefits (if in fact they are benefits) be available for all, or is this yet another case of the haves and haves-nots? Secondly, assuming for the moment that this was widely available, with the world's population already above 7,000 million, how would we cope if people started living much longer? (220)

The new biotechnological context sheds a new light on the old mind-body dichotomy, beyond the well-known philosophical or epistemological framework related to this topic, from the Cartesian *cogito* to Gilbert Ryle's *Ghost in The Machine* (1967), the focus being rather on the phenomenological aspects of the relationship between mind and body, the *interdependence* or *independence* from each other once we enter the (still) unknown territory of the bio-technological interfacing scenarios. In this sense, Stephen Lilley (2013) analyzes the possible effects of the transhumanist concept of "radical transformation" of the human body in consensus with their quasi-religious ideal "for elevating consciousness over embodiment." (Lilley, 2013, 25)

Associating both the ideal of (conscious) biotechnological independent mind (post-human, AI singularity scenario or trans-human, cyborgic enhanced body / mind scenario) and the exclusive concerns of bodily augmentation beyond biological limitations, in accordance with many studies that advance the hypothesis of mind transfer outside the human brain, in particular, Lilley explains how the advancement of research in neuroscience, computing and robotics strengthens the hypothesis of the superiority of the mind over the body.

> Research in brain machine interface has relevance for individuals who have suffered amputation or spinal injury, with work underway on how to allow human subjects to operate an artificial limb or exoskeleton by thought. Here again the mind is understood to be the active and independent agent. (Lilley, 2013, 27)

Transgressing the famous philosophical *mind and body* dichotomy towards "mind *over* body", also understood as *mind alternative embodiment* possibility, the author questions why many transhumanist researchers who promote "radical transformation" of the human body beyond the strictly therapeutic concerns of prosthetics, for example, consider the biological body to be nothing more than a *substrate* for the mind, a replaceable,

improvable, and updatable tool, a temporary avatar of the old imperfect human corporeality.

> If the organic brain is seen as a limiting factor, "uploading" or copying the mind to a more promising medium would be the next step. That level of technological prowess, if ever reached, opens up even more radical options such as digitizing the mind to allow existence in virtual worlds, thereby leaving behind human biology altogether. (Lilley, 2013, 27-28)

On the other hand, considering the rapid evolution of medical prosthetics, molecular biology and genetic engineering, in addition to cybernetics and robotics, Ray Kurtzweil (1999) states that we are much more advanced in body enhancement technology than in the development of the human mind. He believes that a whole range of natural bodily limitations, from various serious diseases such as diabetes or cancer to other genetic errors, such as the gene responsible for suicidal tendencies, will be, quoting Stelarc, "obsolete", thanks to nanotechnology. In his opinion, the proetin-based chemistry of the human body will be replaced, "atom by atom", by a new nanotechnological enhanced body and that, in his words,

> it will become possible to reverse engineer and replicate the physical and chemical functionality of any human cell. In the process we will be in a position to greatly extend the durability, strength, temperature range, and other qualities and capabilities of our cellular building blocks. (Kurtzweil, 1999, 102)

In what regards the expansion of knowledge related to the concept of *body identity*, in the context of the current debates on the body and corporeality, heavily influenced by biotechnological advances, a challenging viewpoint comes from the transdisciplinary hypothesis of the "medial body" as a "transitional environment" (Denisa Butnaru, 2020), which examines the "reinvention of corporeality" through in-depth knowledge of the phenomenology of biotechnological *hybridization* while analyzing, at the same time, the con-substantial nature of two body-imaginary regimes: *the fictional* and *the factual*.

> Certainly, hybridity processes have constantly marked the development of human beings. What is new, however, is that if various objects and technologies previously accompanied the human body from the outside, at present, as the cyborg example shows, objects are incorporated in the biological structure of the body, challenging its biological consistency. (Butnaru, 2020, 7-8)

The author analyzes the ways in which the reality of our bodies, understood as "social structures", tends to already encompass as it is various imaginary models of identity hybridization spread by the sci-fi culture, stating that,

> (...) forms of corporeality which until recently were the subject of science fiction have entered the realm of the real, disputing such categories as identity or intersubjectivity, inseparable from corporeality. (Butnaru, 2020, 7-8)

Noting that there are insufficient studies on the transgression of imaginary from *fiction* to *faction*, the author advances new ways of understanding body "mediality" by analyzing the interchanges between the fictional body models presented in various science-fiction works and the actual potential of them being implemented. She also explains that the term "faction" should be understood contextually as an "intermediary imaginary" of corporeality and, most of all, "what it means to be a body, and more specifically to be a body which reinvents its own corporeality" (Butnaru, 2020, 9), in the context of the fluidization and hybridization of the virtual and the real.

In this sense, the reinvention of one's own corporeality requires a fundamental reconsideration of the primacy of biological physicality, as the dominant referent of corporeality, through a paradigm shift in the "ontology and epistemology of human body perception" (Ferrando 2020). The author notes that *physicality* is no longer the main medium of social interactions because the development of cybernetics and biotechnologies has caused a radical redefining of the concept of *human*. By reanalyzing some key-concepts, such as "body", "human", "embodied self", "posthuman body" and "transhuman body", Ferrando states that because of the "decentralization of the self into virtual bodies and digital identities" and of the deconstruction of the notion of "natural conception" we can no longer draw a clear line between the natural and the artificial, which means that "the semantic demarcation between humans and cyborgs has been blurred." (Ferrando, 2020, 213) or, from a different angle, as Donna Haraway already stated in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women. The Reinvention of Nature* (*A Cyborg Manifesto*, 1991), "(…) the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion." (Haraway, 1991, 149)

> Envisaging posthuman bodies is a philosophical and a political task, involving human agency. Histories and herstories of the human body are herstories and histories of the cyborg. Not only contemporary posthumanist and transhumanist thinkers shall freely refer to them, but future generations of humans, post-humans and intelligent machines will

have to process them, in order to access a deeper understanding of themselves. (Ferrando, 2020, 223)

## Possible conclusions

Even if in the near future, the "technological determinism" referred to by Haraway will inevitably push us to choose between various biotechnological benefits, more or less accessible, or acceptable, if we consider the scenarios described above, thus becoming, in Brodeman's terms, *augments* or *normals*, the fundamental relationship between identity and corporeality will be determined, in my opinion, also by the "human" paradigm, as long as we still operate with concepts such as "self", "identity", "body", "embodiment" or "mind" and "consciousness". In the happiest case, the ontological and biological horizon, the capacity for knowledge, based on reason, and the human sensory system will widen, without escaping, however, our oldest and most intimate enemy, the fear of death. Sensory-genetic augmentation and enhancement will probably open up a new wide field of existential opportunities, beyond any expectation, a situation in which, at the meeting point between *homo sapiens* and *robo sapiens*, we may turn into designers of bodies and minds, becoming unimaginably good or unimaginably evil, in relation to life, on a planetary level. Maybe the technology will heal the biology. I will end with a play on words, paraphrasing Kurtzweil's famous title, asserting that in the Age Of Spiritual Machines, humans will have to decide to be their *masters* or *servants*.

**Notes**

[1] See www.sens.org.

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