

Excess, Unavoidability, Reverberation: The (According to the) Posthuman Body

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The contribution reflects on the crucial role that the body assumes in the context of the posthuman need/process of integral redefinition of the notion of the human. And, dialoguing, so to speak, even with positions from contemporary philosophical thought, such as those of Michel Serres, it specifically comes to highlight body characteristics of excess, unavoidability, reverberation. So: excess, in the sense that the body intentionally comes out of itself, hybridizing with the world and thus becoming a dimension of ontological, ethical, and cognitive construction of the human. Unavoidability, in the sense of the substantial irreproducibility—even in the context of technological hybridization—of the body, precisely by virtue of its anthropological dimensionality. Reverberation, in the sense that the body, as a dimensional space of redefinition/reconstruction of the human within the relationality with alterities, emerges as a reverberating mirror and catalyst of the posthumanist work of building a hybrid thought of (human) hybridization.

Keywords: body, posthumanism, hybridization, Michel Serres

Excess

In the posthumanist¹ process of constitution of a new conceptual and nominal vocabulary, which, as a co-optation and re-elaboration of the terms according to a different response to the demands of present times, can be considered as exaptation², the term body, not exclusively pertinent to posthumanism itself but precisely, so to speak, borrowed and recoded by it, comes to express the dimension of the human being (Marchesini, 2009, pp. 107-134). And to the extent, the body itself is excess, exuberance, motor of hybridization, open to external contamination and heteroorganization; an entity that feeds the world, receives, extends, projects, is invaded, and intentionally (Marchesini, 2020; 2021) exits from itself through feeling/knowing as well as desiring etc. (Marchesini, 2019); and therefore, a space for post-anthropocentrically, post-humanistically, post-dualistically,

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¹ For an overview of the different orientations within the posthuman, I refer to some recent manual and glossary contributions as well as to the bibliographic references contained therein: Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018; Rosendahl Thomsen & Wamberg, 2020.

² It is worth remembering that the theory of exaptations was formulated in 1982 by paleontologists S. J. Gould and E. Vrba in order to solve the question of adaptation, and provides for a distinction of aptations (i.e., characters useful for the survival of an organism) into two subgroups: the ad-aptations, traits selected for their current function; and the exaptations, traits that appeared for a functional reason other than the present one or as a consequence of other processes of change, and which were subsequently co-opted. An example of exaptation is the feathers of birds, originally used as a thermoregulatory organ, and later, also used in flight. In the posthuman case, it is precisely the mutation and reworking of terms of use so to speak non-specific, which, through such a process, acquire new value and new “functions”.

post-centrally³ fully reconstructs the human (Rignani, 2014; 2016; 2018). Through the senses, in a specific way, the body, therefore, exceeds itself; through them, conditions so to speak of this excess, it builds itself and the human animal, and comes out of itself in all senses, living with sensitive in a continuous exchange, passing into the multiple, and becoming hybrid. That is, to say it with Michel Serres⁴ never declaring himself posthumanist but sharing posthumanist emergencies/needs to rethinking the dualism and the boundaries between human and other than human, human exceptionality, and above all the role of corporeality⁵, the body immerses itself in a reality, which it knows through the skin, as fine as the iris or the pupil, in turn as fine as intuition; comprehends through wisdom, the right name for taste, and through sagacity, the proper name of smell; knows and understands through muscles, breathing, running, jumping, dancing (Serres, 1985). Ground of a knowledge founded precisely on the senses, granted to the limbs, as well as emerging from the imitations made possible by its plasticity and flexibility for which it bends and adapts, it plays outside of equilibrium, and in this sense, it opens to the new, and invents (Serres, 1999); it eludes static, establishing its own structure in potentiality, on the path of new and different representations.

As a flexible/dialogic/desiring/hybridizing context, the body therefore, so to speak, claims not to be understood in a fixist and/or essentialist sense, but in terms of an ontology of the possible, not in balance, open even temporally towards the future, without however being finalized.

Relationality, potentiality, flexibility (also in a psycho-physical sense), mimicry/metamorphism, versatility, cognitive-cultural propulsiveness therefore emerge as characteristics of it (Rignani, 2016), which, overall invariant in possibility, is built/reconstructed in the orbit of the transformation, from limit to threshold of passage (Marchesini, 1996), of the status of the relationship and of the border, in becoming sympoietic with a reality, in turn fluctuating, in which it is not possible to definitively establish hierarchies and/or centers.

Furthermore, the fact that it remains the same while opening to the new and the future in bending, adapting, deforming/transforming itself in mixing with the world, implies and makes manifest that it has a certain structure, that is not a pure content or container but is something just like a possibility, that has a structure so to speak potential, and that is mixed precisely by virtue of this. So, it can be said that the body is essentially ecological-relational/potential and that precisely as such it hybridizes, and camouflages/metamorphoses: it hybridizes as a (potential) structure, and as a potential (structure) it camouflages/metamorphoses itself, doing this reversibly, i.e., by not deploying (except in a reversible way) its potential, its fluid capacity. In which the psycho-physical dualism dissolves (the mental state is the result of the functions expressed by the whole body; knowledge is located in it and is its expression; feeling is widespread, i.e., is the body that feels), the sympoietic/mimetic/metamorphic/creative/cultural interrelation with the world takes place.

³ Posthumanism, in its various forms, critically rethinks the anthropocentric-humanist-dualist vision, according to which the human species, the *Anthropos*, is distinguished, by superiority, compared to other species on the ontological level (the human essence is superior to the others), epistemological (human knowledge is the model and reference of other forms of knowledge), and ethical (man is the only bearer of moral values), and man is exclusively the male, white, Western, educated, which, as such, is the center (of reference) of the world, and is separated from all the rest. An incisive synthesis of all these topics is provided by Ferrando, 2019.

⁴ On Serres I remember, as regards the themes of this contribution, Polizzi, 1990; Rignani, 2012; 2014; 2016; 2018; Watkin, 2020; Aa. Vv., 2020.

⁵ Although I have always doubted, and continuing to do so, the heuristic profitability of the "assessment" of Serres' posthumanism or not, especially considering the fluidity of the posthuman and the intellectual independence of Serres himself, I have nevertheless found and highlighted isomorphisms between them in relation precisely to the conception of human/body and of the interface between it and the world. I have developed these positions specifically in Rignani, 2014; 2016; 2018.

Exceeding, so to speak, in its transience/transitivity, the definitional fixation as well as the hierarchies and dualisms themselves, the body emerges precisely in co-evolutionary relationality and in a hybridizing attitude towards the world itself, the biosphere, the zoo sphere, the techno sphere. Thus, for example, the non-human animal loses the “humanistic” connotation of categorial alterity and regressive figure as to acquire the epiphanic value of a non-narcissistic mirror in which and through which the human knows, measures itself, and thinks⁶. And the technique no longer has the “humanistic”, and at least apparently also trans/hyper-humanistic, status of an instrument that adapts to the body, preserves its purity, compensates for it and strengthens it, to assume instead a co-factorial valence of infiltration, of a virus that induces in the body itself new connections and new hybridization possibilities, i.e., forges it forging it, influences it retroactively, (re)opens spaces for potential to be declined in new predicated⁷.

No Escape From the Body

In this regard, it should be noted incidentally that the instrumental/empowering vision of the technique associated with an instrumental/accessory consideration of the body, as mentioned above, seems, at least in broad terms, to emerge not only in humanism, but also in the transhumanist proposal⁸ of technological reprogramming/strengthening of the body itself to optimize its vehicle performance towards a condition, so to speak, of technological earthly immortality; reached which, now useless, will be put aside. Body and technology, in this perspective, therefore, appear as apparatuses that man uses to overcome the limits of life and access an immanent post-organic/post-biological perennial; the value of the former seems to reside in balance and stability on which, thanks to technological redesign and enhancement (reduction of the threats of disease, old age, and death, increase in performances, etc.), can count on carrying out the transshipment of man in a meta-biological/meta-specific dimension of immortality; the value of the second seems to be precisely that of reprogramming/strengthening the body itself and of producing, so to speak, the conditions of this same immortality. All of this, in a perspective of centrality/superiority/separation of man from non-human alterities.

If the gap with respect to the posthumanist perspective appears to be indeed considerable overall, it is still possible to identify/think of a “proposal” for a partial reduction of this distance. The relevance accorded by posthumanism to the body as an anthropo-poietic ecological-relational dimension in a hybridizing relationship with an infiltrative technology that recovers/opens spaces of virtuality, is in the transhumanism in general an instance of reprogramming/enhancement, entrusted to a technology, instrument and guarantee of survival and prolongevity, as well as a condition/context of future immortality. If it is true that the general element of distinction between the two perspectives can be found in the instrumental idea of the body and technology, it however would seem that they have in common the attention—albeit differently situated—reserved for the body, in relation to which one can come to think of technological interventions as a restoration of the potential

⁶ See specifically Marchesini, 2014, and, for an overview, Timofeeva, 2018, and Man Chan, 2018. The reflection on these issues that Michel Serres handed over to the pages of his unfinished *La Fontaine*, published posthumously in 2021, also moves in a similar direction.

⁷ In this latter regard, the contributions of the posthuman are numerous and varied, but the basic message is precisely that of an encounter, a hybridization of the body with a non-neutral technology, capable of modifying it as well as being modified by it, in an anthropo-poiesis played on the horizontal exchange of agencies.

⁸ Of the wide and varied transhumanist, and on transhumanism, literature, now largely known, I will limit myself to recalling some significant contributions: Bostrom, 2005; 2008; Moravec, 1988; 1998; Capucci, 1994; Tondo, 2013; Manzocco, 2017; Allegra, 2017; Ferrando, 2018; Sorgner, 2020; 2021.

of the body itself, or, in other words, as a sort of normalization of it in its potential. And, after all, is it so easy and obvious to draw the line between care/normalization and enhancement?

Taking for granted and almost inevitable the inherent weakness of a proposal, such as this one, to reduce the distance between perspectives as posthumanism and transhumanism, which in their more striking features appear different, the very general message that, upstream of every declination/differentiation, can be made to pass, is that of the permanence of the body itself in anyway new and neuralgic roles and/or forms, according to a radical transformation, a passing beyond which is renewed indefinitely, and in which, however, all in all the scenarios of technological reductionism are not unavoidable (Rignani, 2020).

What if, as Serres asked and would ask about it, the body defined the limits of what networks and software are unable to achieve, at least for the moment? What if the body constituted a sort of adherence resistant to computerization? What if, despite everything, the flesh, the embodied body continued to distinguish us from machines, human intelligence from artificial one? So, what cannot be done without the body? Serres would have replied and replay: the unpredictable suddenness, the infinitesimal “curl” between sensitive reception and muscular response, gait, posture, etc. ... And what, instead, to do without it? Serres would have answered and answer: everything, except a residue of essentials (Serres, 2011).

Reverberation

However, apart from these observations, promoter/propeller/catalyst, as mentioned, of hybridization, the body manifests itself in this as a link, bridge, builder of bridges (encounters, interactions, mixture between inside and outside, matter and spirit, etc.), open to the scale of living beings, in spatial continuity with the biosphere, the zoo sphere, the techno sphere, and in temporal continuity with evolution; crossed by things and in exchange with them in an interactive dynamic within which it remains the same, i.e., potential and condition of possibility, thus standing out in its anthropo/techno-poietic-cultural cruciality.

And therefore, in the final analysis, relationality, exuberance, excess, flexibility, mimicry, versatility, propulsiveness, conditionality/transcendentality are characteristics which, so to speak, converge in the constitute its anthropologically dimensional value (“being a body”, to say it with Marchesini, 2020), with which and for which it represents a nodal element of posthumanist thought.

Jutting out as a dimension of the human, the body in fact reverberates the key themes of posthumanism: the re-declination of the state of the border into that of the threshold of passage, the hybridization/hybrid ontology of the contagion, the idiosyncrasy towards the centrality of the center, and opening to pluralist perspectives.

Nerve center, in transformation and transmutation, of transformation and transmutation of the interior into the exterior and vice versa, of overcoming the limen between them as well as that between soul and body, place of knowledge, culture, condition and dimensional space of redefinition and (re)construction of the human in the relationality, in the exposition, in the partnership with the alterities, dimension of its existence, designer of the profile of its dialogic, the body, in short, is the catalyst of the posthumanist work of building a hybrid thinking of hybridization; of declination of the idea of overcoming, not of the human, but of humanist, anthropo-centrist, dualist humanism; of design/proposal of a humanity beyond this very humanism.

To conclude on all this, some pregnant serresian metaphors/similes help, taken, the first, from *The Five Senses. A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (Serres, 1985, p. 82), the second, from *Variations on the Body* (Serres,

1999, p. 100), the third and fourth, from *L'Incandescent* (Serres, 2004, pp. 93, 86). They, respectively, render body flexibility/metamorphism, versatility, propulsiveness/cultural catalyzation⁹.

In mixing with the world, the body bends and adapts, enjoying at least three hundred degrees of freedom; it is knotted to reality and draws, from the feet to the head or the tips of the fingers, a variable and complex path of exchange between things, changing, in doing this, like a seaweed on the bottom of the water (Serres, 1985, p. 82). It rolls and pitches boat that floats and does not sink in rough seas (Serres, 1999, p. 100). Bow of exo-darwinian (cultural) history, the body plays the role of cultural totipotent; omnipotent, it potentially contains all cultural varieties (Serres, 2004, p. 93). From it everything derives, departs, and is specified; everything springs from it as from an inextinguishable source; it, our branchless trunk with cultural severed branches (Serres, 2004, p. 86).

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⁹ For an examination of these metaphors in the context of Serres's thought, in its isomorphisms with posthumanist reflection, I refer to Rignani, 2018.

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