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Posthuman Strategies

Transgressive Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary Body Representation

THESES

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In my doctoral thesis, I argue the relevance of posthuman body images in contemporary art through the practice of foreign and Hungarian artists. In the course of my research, I have already written several summarizing essays, reports and conference presentations, which are part of my publications (Jöjj és lásd! Jake & Dinos Chapman: The Blind Leading The Blind. *Új Művészet* [Art Today], 2014/1-2, 24-26; Határsértő testek. Transzgresszív etika és esztétika a kortárs képzőművészetben. *Új Művészet*, 2016/6, 46-49; Poszthumán formátlanóság. *A festészet jelene. Ez nem kunszt – Az Új Művészet elméleti melléklete* 2017/12, 36-41.). My conference presentation (*Posthuman Strategies*), which is identical with the title of my thesis, is also an important starting point for the structure of the thesis, which was presented at the conference of the Department of Communication and Media Studies of the Doctoral Program in Language and Communication (*New Fields and Concepts in Contemporary (Media) Culture Research*), PTE-BTK, 30 April 2016. These earlier materials served only as a starting point for the preparation of the doctoral thesis, as the dynamics, scope and discourse of the thesis justified the rewording and, where appropriate, rewriting of my earlier texts.

I have defined the relationship between posthumanist philosophy and/or aesthetics and the artistic moments of *transgression* as a subject position throughout the thesis: this position allowed me to shape the text with a method of radical over-identification with the artists/artworks involved, which *performatively* brings the character of posthumanist aesthetics to the stage. Since posthumanist thinking is bound up with the eclectic and juxtaposing, *rhizomatically* organized structures of postmodern sensibility or even with various artistic strategies of appropriation, frequent quotations and guest texts form an integral part of the body of the essay, forming an intertextual web with each other.

The hierarchy-less and fundamentally *hybrid* character of the posthuman body also applies to the text of my essay, which displays the openness of posthumanist body representations through flows and associative thought-folds. This organic body of the text made it possible for me to think fundamentally without pictorial illustrations: the sensuous descriptions of the works in the text are in any case a substitute for the pictorial material, which

I eventually presented as a separate appendix so that the text does not become an illustration of the images.

The unusual scope of my dissertation is underpinned by an ambition to contribute to the incomplete or virtually non-existent domestic reception of the Jake & Dinos Chapman oeuvre spanning more than thirty years. Compared to the original doctoral thesis proposal in 2015, the Chapman brothers' name was no longer included in the subtitle of the thesis submitted in November 2020, as I felt that in the unfolding of the subject position it would have been inevitable that I would not have addressed the domestic offshoots of contemporary posthuman art and, by extension, my own work. Even with the broadening of the horizons of the essay, the sections analysing the oeuvre of the Chapman brothers still account for more than a quarter of the text as a whole.

The main theses of the *Posthuman Strategies* are presented below:

(1.) Posthuman philosophy, which deals with the condition of "posthumanity of man", is inherently active as a consequence of the cultural-scientific changes of the second half of the twentieth century or the turn of the millennium, but the central aim of my thesis is precisely to detect the latent presence of the posthuman and its image of man, determined by hybridity, in the perspective and representation of humanist modernism, and even to define it as an inherent part of the formation and history of man.

(2.) I consider the cultural-historical and philosophical significance of *laughter* in the context of transgression to be of particular importance. I have explored different aspects of laughter through the relevant works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva and Mary Douglas: the eruptive power of laughter to dismantle taxonomic categories is as much a defining feature of the Chapman brothers' work as it is of my own. The crux of my thesis is that it is not possible to understand the borderline acts without the hybridizing role of laughter in many creative strategies, such as the works of Paul McCarthy, the Chapman brothers or Csaba Kis Róka.

(3.) The artistic strategies and methods exemplified in my analysis, however radical, fundamentally avoid teleological intent: one of the essential claims of my thesis is that the state of aesthetic *inertia* characteristic of posthuman works derives from the fact that this non-

teleological approach avoids any utopian, future-oriented idealism, that is, the transgression of the works is created in such a way that it can be repeated over and over again, that is, it refers to the always present: in the context of the posthuman, this is also a critique of the Enlightenment's progression, the realisation of the idea of the perfecting human - in this context, the distinction between *transhumanism* and the reading of posthumanism that is relevant to me is an essential point in my thesis.

I will further elaborate the theses in the order of the chapters defined in the thesis.

2. *The Time of Teratology: Posthuman Past, Present and Future*

In the chapter that follows this introduction, I try to highlight how posthuman strategies fit into the question of the relationship between science and art. In the light of the advance of posthumanist discourses and other relevant phenomena in contemporary visual culture, it is becoming increasingly evident that visual representations of organicity/embodiment cannot be disconnected from the changing meanings of humanism and the anthropological-aesthetic tendencies that have destabilised the notion of the human(s).

The philosophy of posthumanism is based on the basic assumption that the progressive modernist narratives of the centrality of man are worn out and fail to capture the cultural, social and scientific changes that are at the heart of the most fundamental issues of the 21st century. DNA research, cloning, artificial intelligence, virtual technologies and digital *simulacra* are technological changes that challenge the conceptualisation of man as defined by the humanist canon.

Through the (Greek) mythological roots of the posthuman body image, I tried to unravel the position, mindset and aesthetics of the posthuman, with special attention to the (horror) filmic aspects and the concept of the monstrous. In defining the differences and connections within the umbrella concept of posthumanism, I focus mainly on the work of Márió Z. Nemes' doctoral dissertation entitled „*Képkotó elevenség*” (2015), as well as the critique of humanism of Márk Horváth, Ádám Lovász and Nemes' encyclopaedic monograph, „*A poszthumanizmus változatai*” (2019). All ramifications of the discourse of posthumanism, which critically examines the anthropocentric conception of reality, agree that "*man is not a static, harmonious, autonomous whole, but an unstable entity in flux*", which I have illustrated mainly through the sculptures of John Isaacs representing the "*formless*" (Georges Bataille) and Patricia Piccinini representing transgenic mutants.

Subsection 2.2 explores the role of the philosophy of transgression in this hybridization process, with its aesthetic and ethical implications, through the writings of Georges Bataille, since the hybrid body is *becoming* by the transgression of the boundaries, and this also provides the possibility for the construction of different posthuman strategies. The essential feature of Bataillean transgression is that the complete crossing of boundaries is impossible, i.e. the transgressive works discussed in my thesis are in fact constantly haunting the impossible: here I am analysing mainly the shadow tradition of the avant-garde, and within it surrealism and focusing mainly on the works of Hans Bellmer as a precursor of the posthuman body image.

3. Abject Art. Carnival of Base Bodies

In preparing this chapter, I have drawn in part on my summary of the 2009 Ernő Kállai Fellowship report (*Abject Art. The Culture of Uneasiness in Contemporary Art*). The third chapter is an organic continuation of chapter 2.2, as it is basically concerned with the abject effect related to the body boundaries, which is an essential part of the interpretation of the transgressive works I have analysed through the category of abject introduced by Julia Kristeva. In Kristeva's definition, the abject is neither subject nor object, but is situated somewhere between the two, in a special relation to both, in which "*the abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I.*" The violation of the symbolic order of security results in the blurring of dichotomies, the erasure of the dividing line between external/internal, Self/Other, living/dead, human/animal, clean/dirty, natural/artificial, unconscious/conscious, whereby the unity of the body and the transcendence of the soul are called into question.

The main cultural-anthropological lesson of Cindy Sherman's relevant photographs and the work of Joel-Peter Witkin or Paul McCarthy is that through the Bataillean "unmasking" of human culture, our ideas of the human are confronted with the artwork by placing the human in the category of the abhorrent, since sterile spirit-centricity is only one aspect of our humanity. The 21st-century extension of the notion of the Bakhtinian laugh and the grotesque body is relevantly represented in Wim Delvoye's human excrement-producing *Cloaca* (2000-2010), which offers a critique of the Enlightenment-derived transparency of the human body through its representation as a machine.

In subsections 3.1 and 3.2, the significance of the posthuman character is articulated through the works of Morten Viskum, Marc Quinn, Damien Hirst and Géza Szöllősi, in which the artistic use of organic materials (blood, flesh) objectifies and alienates the (human) body, while the preservation procedures used in the medical field are brought into the toolbox of fine art.

4. Bad Art For Bad People. The Creative Practice of Jake & Dinos Chapman

I have found Jake & Dinos Chapman's creative career, spanning thirty-two years so far, to be the most appropriate way to unpack and summarise the issues raised in this thesis, because their oeuvre is extremely rich in posthuman body representations motivated (also) by contemporary horror culture, and with a unique coherence and theoretical competence, in which the cultural-historical and philosophical aspects of laughter as a means of transgression play a not inconsiderable role.

The reading of their works can be best understood in terms of the Batailleian violation of boundaries, which is also linked to the elimination of the artistic ego or the cult of individuality of modernism. The crux of my thesis is that the Chapmans are able to successfully represent a hybrid program of posthuman body images because they work with a hybrid cultural image (a mix of pop culture and elite culture), and also hybridize/share originality and creative subjectivity, since they work in a dual, even a manufactory.

The constant references to psychoanalytic concepts in Chapman's oeuvre indicate a tactical involvement of the unconscious in the creative process, but each time it also implies a deconstruction of the Self, since, according to Jake & Dinos Chapman, "*anatomical transgression usually elicits laughter which, if convulsive enough, can kill singularity.*"

5. Posthuman Formlessness. Vectors of Local and Network Proliferation

In the last major chapter of my thesis, I will discuss the geographically adjacent art phenomena, domestic ramifications and finally I will also discuss my own work within the network of posthuman formlessness, including the problem of painting. Both the horror tradition of film/internet and art history's tradition of horror dynamize this line of painting, which consciously reflects on its own archaic, repeatedly buried medium: the vitality of the zombie-world of picturization undermines the illusion of progression brought about by technological advances.

Among the posthuman and/or subversive strategies, I would like to highlight a characteristic domestic trend that has been taking shape over the last ten years under the name Budapest Horror. Horror as a visual language is perhaps most concretely represented in this ever-changing formation by the works of Géza Szöllősi, Csaba Kis Róka and my own works. The first comprehensive analysis of the creative characters of the three of us is by Márió Z. Nemes' study „*Antropológiai töredékek*”(2011), which begins with the dilemma of the representation of the human body. Nemes defines the phenomenon of Budapest Horror not as

a specific, closed creative group, but rather as "a sliding network of differences and identities, which in its own malleable way still marks a shift in relation to previous generations. The formulation of their work, which avoids gender, political, religious and metaphysical ideologies, is combined with a visceral aesthetic that is far from unreflective, since it is based on a balance of intellectual and retinal influences."

From the point of view of the subject position of my thesis, the last subsection (5.4) differs from the others only in that here I analyse the most important creative strategies and problems of body representation that I have encountered so far, along the lines of the works I have made. In my own practice, making art is not a self-expression, but a series of reflective problematizations in which the object made is alienated from my own person or what I would define as an imprint of the psyche: my works belong to the world around me rather than to me.

The aesthetic programme of hybridisation not only reveals the unpredictable possibilities of bodily mutations, but also confronts me with the limits of my own artistic programme and its openness, its state of being constantly ready for change – in the words of Imre Bartók: "*In the subtle texture of Győrffy's works, even in their simplicity, lies a disturbing moral: we must not change, but become something else.*"

I see the novelty of my thesis in the fact that, for the first time in Hungarian contemporary discourse, it summarizes the visual art manifestations of posthumanism in a more comprehensive treatise – with a special focus on the life work of Jake & Dinos Chapman – while at the same time summarizing the history of the Budapest Horror phenomenon.

Although the last decade has seen some achievements in addressing the problematic of posthumanism/transgression in the visual arts – Sándor Hornyik's articles in this direction, his curatorial concept for the exhibition *Deathly Nature* (2013), Márk Horváth and Ádám Lovász's numerous writings, as well as some chapters of „*A poszthumanizmus változatai*” published by them with Márió Z. Nemes and several chapters of Nemes's book of essays entitled „*A preparáció jegyében*” (2014) and of his collection of essays entitled „*Ektoplazma*”(2020) – but *Posthuman Strategies* is the first analytical work that attempts to detect the roots and variations of *this* artistic phenomenon under discussion, linking its international and domestic results, by combining the categories related to the subject (abject, horror, transgression, posthumanism) through a personal filter.

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