

“BACK TO THE ELEMENTS”? POSTMODERNITY’S COLLAPSE OF ONTOLOGICAL CATEGORIES

Maria-Ana Tupan  

¹ Doctoral School of Alba Iulia University, Alba Iulia, Romania



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Corresponding Author

Maria-Ana Tupan, m_tupan@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Although the posthumanist tag is applied to the society where men and machines compete for power, the mutation earning this name was the one that affected the perception of man's identity through the collapse of ontological categories. Human nature changed as the historical self was replaced by deconstructionists with the instance saying “I”, man's cognition was redefined as biological epistemology by [Maturana and Varela \(1972\)](#), quantum physics relegated relations of causation to invisible and unpredictable process at the subatomic level, phases of civilization made room for temporary plateaus generated by signifying particles within the eternal flow of things and energy [Deleuze and Guattari \(1980\)](#). What used to be perceived as reality has become an amorphous mixture of elements, in which bodies are no longer discrete entities but processes, emerging forms of life. If the Deleuzian “becoming animal” of 1980 stirred anxiety around the human body made into a site of various inscriptions and identities, *The Shape of Water* (2018), a novel written by Guillermo del Toro and Daniel Kraus, the homonymous movie (2017) directed by the former, or Robert Bolesto's screenplay of the Polish movie *The Lure* (2015) have recently provided the companion pieces of elementary nature “becoming human” across the human/ animal divide. The quantum picture of a world reduced to a flux of matter and energy in *A Thousand Plateaus* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari had somehow prepared the ground for this posthuman reversal of the Renaissance worldpicture with man at the top of creation. The process, however, had already started some decades before. We are moving back in time locating its origin in the rise of object-oriented philosophy.

Keywords: Object Philosophy, Posthumanism, Becoming-Animal, Becoming Human, Intersectionality

1. INTRODUCTION

A gloomy atmosphere has enveloped for some time a literary genre which in its early history did much in the way of disseminating optimistic expectations regarding man's conquest of the universe through science and technology. The generic hybridization that pushed science fiction across the borderline that had once distinguished it from fantasy or from gothic and horror fiction explains only to some degree the radically changed picture of a futurist society in which robots follow the categorical imperative of not hurting humans. In 1942 Isaac Asimov launched the three Laws of Robotics in a story, “Runaround”, which positioned automata as man's servants. Only eight years later this story was included in a collection significantly entitled *I, Robot*, where, although the Laws seem to be still in place, the author's political unconscious sends to the surface symptoms of anxiety

at the possibility that the pulley of power might lower man and raise machinery to a position comparable to the absolutist power of a medieval king. The analog computer invented by Vannevar Bush leaving military laboratories and heading to mass production in this interval might be an explanation.

Before 1980, though, ontology still operated distinctions among categories grouping entities into taxonomies. The Aristotelian division between physics and metaphysics was refined by Karl Popper's 1972 *Objective Knowledge* to include a third ontological level, beside the physical and the mental ones, reserved for the reified forms of knowledge. Artefacts, theories are mental content cast into some objective form circulated in the intersubjective order of culture. In addition to the comfort of knowing himself separated from nature, man had also created a world of his own populated by figments of his mind. Stanislaw Lem could, therefore, adopt a self-confident tone in his rejection of slogans proposing an antidote to the evils of technology:

The idea of a return to Nature not only becomes utopian but cannot even be meaningfully articulated, because no such thing as a Nature that has not been artificially transformed has existed for ages. We today can still talk of "return to Nature," because we are relics of it, only slightly modified in biological respect within civilization, but try imagining the slogan "return to Nature" uttered by a robot—why, it would mean turning into deposits of iron ore! [Lem \(1975\) web](#).

As far as Philip K. Dick is concerned, he was indeed a visionary as Stanislaw Lem dubs him in the title. His concerns about the new actants of the Computer Age in his essay, "Man, Android and Machine," are commonplace nowadays when G5 allows interactions, not only among humans but also among things:

"The greatest change growing across our world these days is probably the momentum of the living toward reification, [...] thing-ness is what we must get away from, in regarding ourselves and in considering life." [Dick \(1976\) web](#)

The flight away from things conceived as the other of something transcending things, specifically human, connects Dick to the time-honoured alchemical dream of freeing the spirit from elemental nature. "Then to the elements" are Prospero's farewell words to Ariel at the end of *The Tempest* (Act 5, Sc.1). Shakespeare's alter-ego is a Renaissance alchemist in command of the elements which are dispensed with on the path to individuation, meaning self-realization in separation from them. Prospero had freed Ariel from the tree in which this character (probably standing for the god of air in Jewish demonology) had been imprisoned by a witch. Now that his aim has been attained in the rise of a postapocalyptic brave New World immune to low instincts and Caliban's libidinal drives the magician can dismiss Ariel who will return to the elements. The plot is informed by Johannes Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*, where black magic, like that practised by Sicorex, has power over inferior elements (earth and water), whereas Prospero, the white magician, controls the superior elements – air and fire.

In the beginning of the new millenium "back to the elements" has come to mean something completely different: they no longer build distinct levels of reality, no longer fit into a hierarchy, both ontological and axiological. Coming to selfhood engages "anthropogenic forces in a non-anthropocentric frame" in "response to the non-human other based on the basic contention that no entity holds a privileged position in the universe of things." [Chin \(2020\) 2](#). The shift from early modern to postmodern vision is seen by David Abram [Abram \(2010\)](#), not only in relation to the divide between sensuous reality and transcendence which calls for the existence of mediators, such as priests, but also to the one between the atomic and subatomic levels of reality – obviously one which has been revealed by quantum physics: "A

thousand years ago these dimensions were viewed in spiritual terms: the sensuous world was a fallen, derivative reality that could be understood only by reference to heavenly realms hidden beyond the stars.[...] Like an old, collective habit very difficult to kick, the sensuous world is still explained by reference to realms hidden from our immediate experience. Such a realm, for example, is the microscopic domain [...] a dimension entirely concealed from direct observation, yet which presumably precipitates, or gives rise to, every aspect of our experience” [Abram \(2010\) 4-5](#).

The fragment sounds unfamiliar, as the subatomic world is also physical, even if it cannot be directly observed, and the process of localization discovered by Nobel Award winner [Anderson \(1958\)](#), whereby subatomic processes generate changes in the Eigenstates of systems show subatomic- and macrophysics to be a continuum.

Nor are the Deleuzian concepts of body without organs or becoming animal pointing to the consubstantiality of all layers of reality, or the removal of boundaries between humans, animals, plants, and inorganic matter. Actually, they are operators of differences produced by signifying and non-signifying particles within the amorphous flow of matter and energy. A book is an assemblage, it is not free-floating but hooked in the empirical world; nevertheless, the book is said to deterritorialize in the world of things (being dismantled into it) and the world to be territorialized into a book, an organism (becoming an organism, or signing totality). As in Anderson’s multilayered structure of reality, this organism, the book, is facing on the one hand reality’s body without organs, and on the other, a name, a signifier:

A book is an assemblage of this kind, and as such is unattributable. It is a multiplicity-but we don't know yet at the multiple entails when it is no longer attributed, that is, after it has been elevated to the status of a substantive. One side of a machinic assemblage faces the strata, which doubtless make it a kind of organism, or signing totality, or determination attributable to a subject; it also has a side facing a body without organs, which is continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate, and attributing to itself subjects that it leaves with nothing more than a name as the trace of an intensity [Deleuze and Félix \(1980\) 4](#)

Abram’s position is symptomatic of a philosophical turn which occurred in the last century, and which may be summed up as deconstruction of the subject.

2. THE POST SUBJECT

As Gerald L. Bruns has put it, becoming animal means “a deterritorialization in which the subject no longer occupies a realm of stability and identity but is instead folded imperceptibly into a movement or into an amorphous legion whose mode of existence is nomadic, or, alternatively, whose structure is rhizomatic rather than arborescent.” [Bruns \(2007\) 703](#).

No character in the novel *The Shape of Water* remains coherent and identical to itself to the end. Some go down into the jungle world, in a plot similar to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, where Kurtz is the epitome of the white colonizer dehumanized by ruthless exploitation of the natives’ resources, while the water divinity of the jungle rises to the condition of the better humanity of books, music and speech.

The book is weaving two narrative threads, one telling a postcolonial story, while the other is a twin *Bildung* story across racial and ontological boundaries.

Oliver de la Paz saw the postcolonial world as a site haunted by the Empire which has left ashes behind and a sense of lack of direction and purpose in a people unaccustomed to the role of agency in history (*Post Subject. A Fable*, 2014). The land

had been charted by the colonizers: atoll, battlefield, boardwalks, bridges, maps, art, meadows, parks, church, mercies, murders In a word, history, but one of a massy world which, as well as in the fictional universe of *Les Années* (2008) by Annie Ernaux, is a rhizome of things, humans, abstractions, artefacts, memories, etc. What Michel Foucault dismisses as ontological chaos of a Chinese encyclopaedia taxonomy (*Les mots et les choses*, 1966) is no longer felt as such in the posthuman age.

Forced into a position of passive subjects, abandoned to their own devices, the natives are going nature's way: "In the days you have left us, we've nothing to do but count the elements: it is not raining. It is raining."

The phrase "post subject" is thus ambiguous: it may mean the one who obeys, but also lack of identity or self-awareness.

The constitution of subjectivity, on the other hand, is a process of ontological transgressions, an entity passing from material embodiment through the subject position (entry into language) and from locutionary instance to the disembodied entity which is spoken about (being replaced by sign).

3. THE SHAPE OF WATER, OR, COMING TO SELFHOOD IN THE ANTHROPOGENIC AGE

"Becoming animal", the reversal of the process of individuation theorized in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, has become a key concept in the posthuman, anthropogenic and post-identitarian age. "Becoming human" is, by contrast, an ancient topos of mythology and fantasy narratives about animal life aspiring to man's estate in the universe. In *The Shape of Water*, such ontological categories and social hierarchies have vanished. The "shape of water" is a metaphor for this intersectionality, entities emerging out of connectivity and mutual realization. The intersubjective genealogy of social selves is now extended to include the entire ecosystem.

This folding of an entity upon itself and the passage along a chain of temporary subject positions build the grammar of a non-anthropocentric scene.

4. SELFHOOD AS THINGNESS

Object-oriented philosophy of the entity as thing - perceived, conceptualized, spatially located, produced, related to anything else, etc - is usually traced back to Martin Heidegger's relational hermeneutics, with later developments from Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, Ian Bongoist or Levi Bryant. Heidegger's fourfold of earth, sky, divinity and mortals is not an assembly of four elements but one and the same entity to the fourth power as it were, that is, folded upon itself and related to everything else. The notion of *Geviert* (fourfold) covers the thing existing in its own right, as well as the one related/exposed to the environment, inserted into relationships according to its essence and primal oneness. [Heidegger \(1985\) 19](#)

With Graham Harman, as he argues with Heidegger in "Dwelling with the Fourfold," [Harman \(2009\)](#), an article published in *Space and Culture* in 2009, the *Geviert* becomes the quadruple object, theorised for its own sake (a theory of objects) rather than as presencing, human access to Being. He is trying to answer the question, how do objects separated from one another communicate? He makes no distinction between things out there in the world and artefacts, only between real objects and sensuous objects (the real object withdrawn from all relationships, which remains more than we perceive of it, and the sensual/ intentional object,

which is less than what we perceive of it). Is an entity possessed of essence, a substance, or is it just a set of relations? Enlarging upon Graham Harman's gloss on Heidegger, Shawn Smith concludes reconciling pure substantialism and pure relationism:

Given that a relation creates a new entity, the being of an entity can only exist in another entity—this leads us toward a non-theistic, “local” conception of occasional cause. In short, another kind of “regress,” now, a descent inside the entity itself. [Smith \(2004\) 140](#)

The idea of the ontogenetic function of relationability explains the dialectics of someone growing a new self through communion with another being or thing which it recognizes in itself.

5. INTERSECTIONALITY

A fusion of the things or beings that come into contact and reach a sort of self-recognition in an otherness, becoming a Harmanian quadruple, happens in *The Shape of Water*, a novel which is heavily codified and nourished by critical theories of the postwar age.

The protagonists are a weird creature fished in the Amazonian waters by an American officer, and brought to the Occam Aerospace Research Center in Baltimore, and a janitor working in that institute.

The fictional universe is an ecosystem in which everything is connected to everything else. Officer Richard Strickland goes over to Amazonia covering a land whose geography is that of the human body: “The last leg of Orlando to Bogotá, to Pijuayal, the knuckles of the Peru-Colombia-Brazil fist.”¹

As he voyages to the dark heart of the jungle, the Amazonians see in him a Gringo killer, a throat-cutter which he really becomes.

The reverse is also the case, Eliza Esposito, the cleaner in the Baltimore institute, having her wretched life inscribed on her body: “Her neck scars are a road map, too, aren't they? Places she's been best not to remember.”

Strickland acquires a different body, that of a jungle god, insensitive to suffering, ordering executions, feeding the captain's log to an eagle which dies as a consequence thereof. The bird chokes with it, as there is utter incompatibility between pure nature and writing or artefacts. The bird will not come out of hiding, of its essential thing-ness.

Nor does Strickland socialize with the aborigines whose bodies are to him dead, unredeemed nature:

He sees them. More than that, he sees into them. Along the crooked canals of their wrinkles. Deep inside the forest of their hair.

The camera moves from the creature to Elisa Suposito and backwards again to the waters of Amazonia. Eliza's origins, family, history are unknown. She is the victim of poverty and of ill treatment at an orphanage, where she is “vapourised” into a figure: 22. She lost her voice when her vocal chords were stabbed under unknown circumstances. She is a mother figure, feeding a lonely painter and later the creature, her motherly conduct earning her the “Mum” nickname. In a scene suggestive of the Eucharist, she offers the creature an egg accompanying her gesture with the sign language she uses to communicate with her friend, a black woman

¹ The edition of *The Shape of Water* quoted in this paper is the one published by Macmillan (New York) in 2018.

named *Zelda Delilah* Fuller. The egg is symbolical of the twin rebirth of the two beings or of the growth within them of a new personality as a result of their entry into a relationship. There is perfect parallelism in the construction of the two characters. The creature is pending between the watery element and a divinity of sorts, his names having the same Cratyllic fullness of meaning or inner form. As in a *topos noetos*, he is identical in physics and in a sublimated form of existence: he is a Devonian, not an individual, but a category, the Devonian age being also known as the Age of Fish when the earth was inhabited by numerous branchial creatures. In an attempt to include reality in the narrative web, fossils living in that age are also mentioned. The creature is like an embodiment of the essence of water, an element raised to the power of Heidegger's *Geviert* or Harman's quadruple object (fish, species, eidos, divinity which remains connected to its embodied form: Deus Brânchia. His scales sparkle like the jewels of heavenly Jerusalem, and his eyes are shifting through all the colours of the spectrum.

In the beginning Eliza is nobody. Her worn out shoes betray her being poor and carry traces of dancing on the polished floor of the laboratory.

She sits on the bed to put them on. It is like a knight shoving his hands into a pair of steel gauntlets. As she wiggles the toe for fit, she lets her eyes stray across the slag heap of old LPs. Most of them were bought used years ago, and nearly all carry memories of joy pressed, right along with the music, into the polymer plastic.

Later on, as her acquaintance with the creature gives her self-esteem, she will look at a pair of superb shoes in a shop window and in her imagination she seems to be wearing them. One might say that the first pair of shoes resemble the peasant shoes painted by Van Gogh as commented by Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1950): the shoes that are constituted through dwelling in the world, absorbing the environment and the way humans interact with it. On the contrary, the shoes in the window resemble Andy Warhol's diamond dust shoes –assets of the consumer society and reminiscent of the time the painter had spent in Club 54, the time of *disco*, *lamé* and stiletto. The shoes ready at hand, real and betraying her mode of living, are now replaced by an object of desire, of symbolic identification and awakening consciousness.

They look like hooves in the best way: of unicorns, of nymphs, of sylphs. Every inch of lamé is encrusted with glittering silver, and the inserts are as shiny as mirrors—she can literally see herself in them. The shoes stir in Elisa feelings she thought that the orphanage had beaten out of her as a youth. That she could go places. That she could be something. That all was within the realm of the possible.

Unlike Rilke's sermon about man as subjectivity surrounding, over or below, but always alien to things in his *Duino Elegies*, Toro's self remains permanently grafted on objects like Ariel imprisoned in the pine.

In the counterpointed script, Strickland is spiralling down the trajectory of an entropic plot progressively aggravating his lack in being. He returns from Amazonia in the translator's clothes, whom he had killed because he knew too much. Whereas the creature learns the language of signs and the codes of the arts, Strickland allegorically loses the subject position as source of meaning (he is only a body in a translator's clothes, and, in fact, even less, a ghost of the one he used to be). The scene of the kitchen sink omelette carries verbal echoes: the abortive Operation Omelette of the British special forces during World War II meant to use T. Gulbrandsen as a double agent (Strickland himself being led by the nose by his scientist, Hoffstetler, who is a Russian spy), as well as Lacan's pun, "l'hommelett," in

his gloss over Shakespeare's most famous character -not a hero but a scrambled egg, an immature youth who mixes up everything and causes disasters. Unhooked from the world of sensuous objects (empirical objects perceived by the senses), Strickland is raving about biblical myths which he applies to real-life persons and situations, as misfit as Cervantes' knight, so appropriately troped by Foucault in *Les mots et les choses* as "l'écriture errant dans le monde parmi la ressemblance des choses" Foucault (1966) 44 - *an errant text* (roaming but also erroneous) in the world of things. His head is full of received narratives for which there is no prop in reality: man born in the image of God ("I do not know what God looks like," replies commonsensical Delilah), the paranoid idea that the name Delilah has a reality effect upon the black female janitor. He is proved wrong in all of his suppositions. Delilah does not kill her lover, saving him instead. Hoping to persuade him into sparing his life, Strickland appeals to the Amphibian Man calling him God, although the latter looks like anything except the biblical divinity.

In his turn, Giles, the artist who is Eliza's neighbour and friend, cherishes an exalted idea about art and its transcendental function. He keeps painting disembodied heads, focusing on their facial expression. Delilah sets things right, taking the paintbrush from his pocket and attacking Strickland in order to save Eliza and the creature. The instrument of art is thus rendered ready-at-hand for redressing social wrong. Likewise, the water in the bath where Eliza is taking the creature is flooding the theatre beneath her flat - another symbolical scene of the elements turning art into "the real thing."

The characters go through a process of Harmanian enhancement: from creatures deprived of access to speech, the two protagonists get across through the language of the body. Looking at each other through a glass - a metaphor of the mind -, they "communicate in separation", the sensuous image becoming vibrant with the revealed eidos of a man and a woman as instances of pure, sexed bodies, irrespective of differences among species.

Back to the elements, with the creature returning to water and Eliza following him, the protagonists are actually projected into a virtual state of super sensuous probabilistic thinking, as Delilah is wondering about their fate.

The colour progression is that of the alchemical process, from *nigredo* to *rubedo*. ("The water is black, it is blue, it is purple, it is red."). What has been revealed, however, is not the spirit but water, the matrix of life, which has come into shape.

Identity is created by relations characterised by the dynamic of intersectionality, whose meaning is summed up by Delilah, a black janitor, before her lover, an artist: "She reaches out to him. To herself. She understands now. She holds him, he holds her, they hold each other, and all is dark, all is light, all is ugliness, all is beauty, all is pain, all is grief, all is never, all is forever."

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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