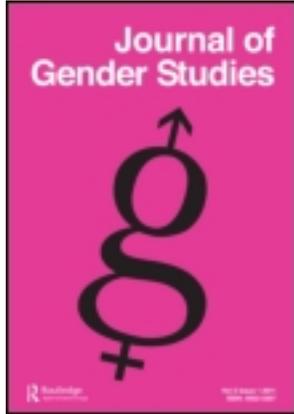


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Grotesque Bodies: A Response to Disembodied Cyborgs

SARA COHEN SHABOT

ABSTRACT *In this paper, my aim is to show some of the problems that the figure of the cyborg may raise, in order to show how in many cases the cyborg has been used, even if in a dissimulated way, to reinstate the 'natural', normative order with its known distinct and very well defined categories and divisions. But, more importantly, I propose here an alternative to the figure of the cyborg which, I believe, has more possibilities of 'keeping the promises' of subverting the normative order of Western thought. This alternative is the one presented by the figure of the grotesque body. The grotesque body, I will argue, contains in itself the seeds of a real hybrid, fragmented, non-binarian thought. The relevance of my proposal is that, in opposition to the cyborg, the grotesque body does not present the dangers of a reinforcement of the old categories which support the powers-that-be in maintaining oppression and domination. Unlike the cyborg, the grotesque body does not make possible a return to the Cartesian frame, with its clear danger of losing one more time the embodied subject (and losing with it the concrete, non-neutral subject), which the postmodern and feminist thought strived so hard to bring to the philosophical and political scene.*

KEYWORDS: Grotesque bodies, cyborgs, postmodernism, phenomenology, embodiment, feminism

Introduction

Literary and poetic figurations which emphasize ambiguity, hybridity and loss of clear limits between the subject and the world have been widely used within postmodern theories. The aim has been to criticize classic and modern philosophies in general and their concept of the subject in particular. The concept of excess, for instance, has been explored as a postmodern figuration by Georges Bataille (1985, p. 97) and Julia Kristeva has reformulated subjectivity and the subject's body as ambiguous, hybrid and fluid through the concept of abjection (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Nietzsche described the Dionysian world as provided from clearly ambiguous and excessive features (Nietzsche, 1967, pp. 549–550) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty theorized in similar terms the world as flesh, which constitutes a central concept in phenomenology, and which can also be seen clearly as a concept preceding the postmodern description of an intersubjective reality (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 137). These theories have aimed to create an alternative thought in which elements such as multiplicity, difference, corporeality, ambiguity, and fragmentation will finally find the place they were lacking within the frame of most Western philosophies.

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Since the apparition of Donna Haraway's 'Manifesto for cyborgs' in 1985 (Haraway, 1985), the figuration of the cyborg has turned out to be one of the most promising postmodern figurations on the way to bring up this new, hybrid order. Such a Cybernetic Organism represented, in the eyes of Haraway and of other feminist thinkers,¹ a challenge to binary sets and to the various structures of power based on clear distinctions and rigid hierarchies. The figure of the cyborg, thus, turned out to be a challenging, transgressive figure aiming at a subversion of the traditional divisions between human and machine, between the self and the other, between inside and outside and between nature and culture. Haraway considered the cyborg as a useful tool in redefining clear-cut categories, in order to generate new, liberating alternatives within feminist and postmodern discourse. As Jenny Wolmark puts it:

For Haraway, the transgressive nature of the cyborg means that it can provide a crucial means of contesting meanings, and thus of developing a more radical set of inclusive politics that cuts across traditional categories of difference such as race, gender and class.

(Wolmark, 1999a, p. 4)

Haraway's cyborg, nevertheless, is not representative of the ways in which the cyborg developed within popular culture. Since its first apparitions in fiction (see, for instance: Gibson, 1984; Rucker, 1980; Sterling, 1980, 1986; Swanwick, 1987), it has become clear that the cyborg is not intrinsically challenging or liberating, and that it may also function as a figure which reinforces patriarchy and other structures of power, and which may take us back to the traditional categories of dominating Western thought.²

In this paper, my aim is to show some of the problems that the figure of the cyborg may raise, in order to show how in many cases the cyborg has been used, even if in a dissimulated way, to reinstate the *natural, normal*, traditional order with its known distinct and very well defined categories and divisions. But, more importantly, I propose here an alternative to the figure of the cyborg which, I believe, has more possibilities for *keeping the promises* of subverting the *natural order* of Western thought. This alternative is the one presented by the figure of the grotesque body. The grotesque body, I will argue, contains in itself the seeds of a real hybrid, fragmented, ambiguous thought. The relevance of my proposal is that, in opposition to the cyborg, the grotesque body does not present the dangers of a reinforcement of the old categories which support the powers-that-be in maintaining oppression and domination. Unlike the cyborg, the grotesque body does not make possible a return to the Cartesian frame, with its clear danger of losing one more time the embodied subject (and losing with it the concrete, non-neutral subject), which postmodern and feminist thought strived so hard to bring to the philosophical and political scene.

My first step will be, then, to present the two main problems that, from my point of view, the figure of the cyborg may pose to feminist and postmodern thought, namely, the reinforcement of traditional categories of gender and the flight altogether from the embodied subject. This second problem – the escape from the organic body and with it from the embodied subject – must be seen, I will argue, as a direct consequence of the first. Later on, I will describe the grotesque body placing special emphasis on the features that make it a good alternative to the cyborg, allowing it to function as a response to the problems presented above.

The Hyper-sexualized Cyborg

The first issue that I want to address in order to explain how the cyborg may present a dangerous figure to postmodern-feminist thought is the hyper-sexuality that the cyborg can be an expression of. By hyper-sexuality I mean *a reinforcement and an exacerbation of the classic, binary divisions of sexual bodies and identities*. The hyper-sexualized cyborg, then, exaggerates stereotypical features of sexualized bodies, creating figures that are easily and clearly identified with male or female entities, without leaving a place for any kind of ambiguity or uncertainty regarding their respective sexuality. Thus, in spite of the important attempts of influential theorists such as Haraway to present the cyborg as a possibility of liberating dissolution of classic categories, the fact is that science-fiction literature and films, which function as the cyborg-terrain *par excellence*,³ present most of the time a cyborg that can be seen mainly as a recreation of an exaggerated masculinity or femininity.

Gibson's cyberpunk trilogy – *Neuromancer* (Gibson, 1984), *Count Zero* (Gibson, 1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (Gibson, 1988) – together with films such as *The Terminator* (1984), *Robocop* (1987), *Total Recall* (1990) and *Blade Runner* (1982)⁴ indeed show us the way in which the cyborg – instead of reverting the usual categories and the normative sexualities – may be responsible of completely the opposite outcome, namely, an exacerbation of normative sexual identities and sexed bodies. In other words, the cyborg appears as a hyper-sexualized body, as if it was the glorification, the supreme expression of the normative body and sexual identity.⁵ In a discussion about the hyper-sexuality that characterizes films such as those mentioned above, Mary Ann Doane (1999) analyses the way in which a bridging of the classical human/technological divide does not bring, by itself, a bridging of other classical categories such as the male/female one. Moreover, Doane argues that in fact, the dissolution of the binary human/technological within the cyborg-literature is mostly the cause of serious anxieties around the loss of the maternal and around the maternal body itself, which brings a perception of the dissolution of normative categories of sex and gender as a threatening, frightful experience, that is to be negated and erased. The anxiety caused by the menace of this dissolution, then, is *solved*, in psychoanalytical terms, by a radicalization of the classic, binary features of normative sexuality.⁶

The cyborg, then – while being an important tool for bringing together in an ambiguous figure the human and the technological – often presents a total reluctance to create ambiguity concerning gender or sexuality. As cyberspace and cyborg literature are still created and controlled mainly by men, they are still dominated by anxieties around threatened masculinity (Fuchs, 1995; Hollinger, 1999; Wolmark, 1999a). The cyborg, then, is created as a hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine figure in order to *save us* – so it appears – from the threat of ambiguous gender identities. It may even be argued that the ambiguity of the cyborg regarding the human/technological divide is in a way responsible for the reluctance to create ambiguity in the gender and sexual realm: the reinforcement of the normative gender and sexual structures is the only way – from the point of view of the structures of power – to avoid a pervasive ambiguity that will turn everything into chaos and will strongly shake the foundations of domination. In other words: at times when ambiguity, certain kinds of ambiguity (in this case, an ambiguity concerning the human/technology divide), is present, other binary structures (such as the gender structure) are reinforced for fear of *losing everything* as a consequence of a pervasive, chaotic and total blurriness.

Thus, it seems that the fear of losing the human body may be defeated, but not so the fear of the patriarchal order to lose masculinity as the center of power. This is in fact what these hyper-sexualized figures of cyborgs show us: it is easier to give up the human body, to give up the body as flesh and blood, than to abandon the idea of a masculine body as a *basic fact* and as the center of domination. Wolmark comments on this:

... these cyberpunk texts draw back from the possibilities of the interface, in which both self and other could be redefined in non-essentialist terms. Not only are the masculine identities of the console cowboys carefully preserved, even in the virtual realities of cyberspace, but because the artificial intelligences that inhabit the matrix are also defined as masculine, the interface itself is made masculine.

(Wolmark, 1999b, p. 233)

By now, the danger that the hyper-sexualized cyborgs present to postmodern-feminist conceptualizations of subjectivity (for instance, Braidotti, 1994; Butler, 1999; Grosz, 1996; Haraway, 1985; Kristeva, 1982; Stacey, 1997) might be seen as obvious: reinforced stereotypes of masculinity and femininity leave the essentialist myths of *manhood* and *womanhood* untouched, and with them, they also leave unquestioned the roles that men and women *are due* to play in society (mostly technological domination and military control versus reproduction, respectively). Creating an ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the place of the human body in the postmodern world is clearly not enough: as long as the categories of sex and gender will remain fixed (or, even worse, be radicalized), the status of the dominant and the dominated will not change, and women will still be confined to the same conservative roles even within the most *avant-garde* science fiction literature and films.

Escaping From the Body (or: What Do We Need This Meat For?)

The escape from the altogether organically embodied subject in the case of the cyborg may be seen as partly a consequence of the hyper-sexuality I referred to above: the hyper-sexualized cyborg is a kind of posthuman being that defies all the limits and features of the organic body. Such a figure represents no less than the omnipotence of the *more-than-human*. It is a body which overcomes the *failures* and the *problems* of the *old* and *obsolete* organic body: she/he is powerful, almost independent of any external aid; she/he is a strong, highly developed organic-technological-machine who leaves behind all the threats of time-passing: sickness, oldness and, most importantly, death.⁷

The hyper-sexualized cyborg, thus, can be already seen as meaning the abandonment of the organic body, the flesh-and-blood body. The hyper-sexualized body is never a *meaty* body, it is never a perishing body, since it is only the result of an *ideal*, of a *model*, it is, we may say, the representation of a *platonian idea* of the sexed body and, as such, it can not be really corporeal, an embodiment of flesh and blood. This body – for which its sexuality is only a parody – constitutes a hyper-real body, which, together with the abandonment of its *carnal* sexuality, abandons as well all the other features of the *fleshed body*.

The abandonment of the altogether organic body, or the flesh and blood body, with all its *imperfections*, may be seen, again, as a frequent characteristic of the popular imagery of the cyborg. It is true that a cyborg is not a machine, and that it can not be comprehended as a purely technological construction. The cyborg, different from the robot, is a mixture of

the organic with the technological. It represents the body that has lost its conventional limits and has intertwined with the technological. Nevertheless, the cyborg has lost its organic features, and we should ask, then, why has it? Why has the cyborg lost its meat, and why, rather than regretting this loss, does the cyborg feel *proud* of it?

In her article 'The pleasure of the interface', Claudia Springer (1999) refers precisely to this abandonment of the flesh when she explains how the genre of the cyberpunk⁸ often presents the source of pleasure of its characters as arising from this *disappearance of the meat*. Losing the meat, the flesh and blood body, provides happiness, pleasure and a sense of security. As an example of this, Springer brings the words of Topo, the protagonist from the comic book *Cyberpunk* (Rockwell, 1989), when he mentally enters the 'Playing Field' (a kind of cyberspace): 'it's the most beautiful thing in the human universe' he says, 'if I could *leave my meat behind* and just live here. If I could just be pure consciousness I could be happy' (Rockwell, quoted in Springer, 1999, p. 39, my emphasis).⁹

This abandonment of the flesh and blood body has been interpreted as a result of anxieties regarding the vulnerability and the fragility of the carnal body and all that is related to it – the maternal and the organic processes in general, for instance (Doane, 1999; Springer, 1999; Sofia, 1999).¹⁰ The *meaty* body is indeed a perishing body, a body that can be corrupted, that may get sick and which will ultimately die. The extreme vulnerability that bodies confront in this post-nuclear era, an era which is plagued with threats of massive annihilation, by sicknesses or by environmental disasters, brings with itself the desire of re-making a self that is able to escape the body and with it, the threats to its destruction (Springer, 1999). Avoiding the maternal means avoiding a self that is born out of an organic process and which for this reason, is absolutely weak and perishable. The individual born out of the maternal is one that is completely dependent on a temporary structure, one that will degenerate and die. This is why the cyborg has become a *meat-hater*, a technological–organic structure that relates with fear and hatred to its organic core. In order to keep its promises of powerfulness and immortality, the cyborg must get rid of its meat and of its maternal origin.¹¹

In sum: the cyborg contains in itself the seeds of a liberating, disrupting figure. It is a figure that finds itself in the middle ground between the technological and the human. Haraway (1985) tried to present it as a new way to dissolve the obsolete binary categories of Western thought and as a promising figure to postmodern feminist postures, a figure by which it could be possible to overcome the rigid patriarchal structures of gender. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the temptation to jump from a technological–human body, to a body that is no more a *meaty* body, to a hyper-sexualized body, an omnipotent body which does not have to confront any more the imperfections and limitations of the organic body, is certainly a big temptation – one which, in most cases, the fictional cyborg does not appear to be able to avoid. This is the reason why I would like, next, to present the figure of the grotesque body as an alternative to the problematic figure of the cyborg.

The Grotesque: The Importance of Being Flesh

Before explaining why we may regard the grotesque body as an alternative to the figuration of the cyborg, I will briefly explain why it is of great importance to keep the meaty body in the postmodern discourse in general, and in the postmodern feminist discourse in particular. Losing the flesh and blood body may mean a return to the Cartesian subject, a subject that can separate herself from her mind, and, as a consequence, maybe *throw her*

body away (and with it, throw her possibility of difference as well). To think about ourselves as possible disembodied creatures, irremediably brings with itself a feeling of omnipotence that makes us forget about the most meaningful experiences of human life, those that make us the historical, cultural and social creatures with existential worries and questionings that we actually are. Such experiences are precisely the corporeal ones – the pleasant, such as the enjoyment of food, moving our bodies, sex or dancing; and also the painful, such as sickness, aging, and, finally, dying. These are all the embodied experiences that constitute our phenomenological *being-in-the-world*. Running away from the fleshy-body means leaving behind all the elements which conform to the embodied existence, that is, the carnal experiences that I named and, as I sustained before, also the possibility of gendered existence. The hyper-sexualized cyborgs, as I have shown, are mostly not real gendered subjects, but creatures that escape all the features of the embodied existence, gender included, in order to become *platonic ideals*, transcendent beings. This act of transcendence maintains many of the power structures intact, and it also brings with itself the danger of giving legitimacy to undertake a struggle in order to achieve *perfect beings*, a struggle that can be so easily associated with fascist or racist ideologies.¹²

Embodied existence, then, is the one that describes our way of being in the world. We are situated in the world as embodied subjects and it is through our bodies that we participate in the world of objects and of other subjects (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 142; De Beauvoir, 1948, pp. 12–22). This is the reason why, if we want to propose a figuration that stands for our experience of being in the world, we must search for figurations that successfully express our presence and our situation in this world as incarnated subjects. This means we must search for a figuration that describe subjectivity as conformed by the elements which can be seen as essential to the embodied existence and its being in the world. Such an embodied subjectivity should be described, for instance, as gendered, mutable, and perishable. Also, in order to avoid describing this subjectivity by means of old and obsolete philosophical paradigms, which made of the subject an abstract concept, alienated from his body and from the rest of the world (through the artificial, arbitrary binary divides mind/body and subject/object), a new figuration should present such an incarnated being also as open to the world and, above all, as provided with an ambiguous existence. We are *in* the world, our limits are blurred, our bodies are open, and that is the reason why there is no true division between ourselves and the world. We are, then, ambiguous beings, hybrid creatures, subjects and objects at the same time, inseparable from the different scenarios in which we act. We are also ambiguous beings regarding our *ways* of existing: our gender, our looks and our thoughts, constitute an ever-changing flux that can never be absolutely defined or contained by an abstract, purely conceptual, incorporeal subjectivity. This is the reason why the figuration that will present such an *ambiguous being*, must try to avoid, above all, a return to forms of being that escape the body and its imperfect features, especially when we know that such an escape may result – even accidentally – out of a *good intentioned* attempt to create new, empowering descriptions of subjects (as in some cases of the cyborg).

I would like to propose the grotesque body as a figuration that may stand for such an embodied, ambiguous, hybrid, open and permanently changing subjectivity. The grotesque body seems to express a perfect description of the *non-closed* human subjectivity, of the open and *connected-to-others* embodied subject. On this, the commentaries on grotesque bodies of Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the most important theoreticians of the grotesque, appear as highly illustrative:

The grotesque *unfinished* and *open* body (dying, bringing forth and being born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is *blended* with the world, with animals, with objects. It is cosmic, it represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements ... Thus the artistic logic of the grotesque imaged ignores the *closed*, smooth and *impenetrable* surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths ... [The grotesque is] the most vivid expression of *the body as not impenetrable but open*.

(Bakhtin, 1965, pp. 26–27, 317–318, 339, my emphasis)

The grotesque has been described by its various theorists (Bakhtin, 1965; Harpham, 1982; Kayser, 1963; Kuryluk, 1987; Russo, 1994; Thomson, 1972; Yates, 1997)¹³ as a concept originally referring to visual arts, which has come to address concrete subjects and their bodies. Grotesque bodies are hybrid bodies: mixtures of animals, objects, plants, and human beings.¹⁴ Hence, the grotesque has been recognized as a concept evoking monstrosity, irrational confusion, absurdity, and a deformed heterogeneity.

The grotesque subject, provided with such embodied and open subjectivity and constituting a *radical deviation from the norm* – mainly by way of *exceeding* it (Russo, 1994, p. 10) – is *unrepresentable* or *unknowable* by way of any normal system of knowledge or representation, i.e. by any system governed by rational principles, and which in consequence looks for a *clear framing* of its object of research. As such, the grotesque subject becomes a clear example of phenomenological and postmodern conceptualizations of the embodied subject.

Grotesque bodies are opposed to the classical bodies represented, for instance, during the Renaissance. They are not clean, closed, well-defined, clear-cut, beautiful bodies striving for symmetry and order. Rather, the grotesque body is a body that defies clear definitions and borders and that occupies the middle ground between life and death,¹⁵ between subject and object, between one and many. This should be understood mainly as a consequence of the grotesque's ambiguous essence. The grotesque body is inherently ambiguous: it is not an isolated body, but at the same time it does not lose itself in the homogeneity of an undifferentiated wholeness. The grotesque body (as described by Bakhtin, for example) is a *differentiated* body, but which, at the same time, remains *intensively connected* to the world and to its others.

This *excessive* body which constantly outgrows itself and escapes from its own skin, constitutes a body that cannot be framed. The excessive body cannot be absolutely contained, that is, it cannot be disconnected from the rest of the world or from its others. It finds itself in a constant and intensive intertwining and intermingling with its outside. For the grotesque body, its connection to the world is a condition of subjectivity: the embodied subject is, *in itself*, open, fragmented and connected to the world and to others. In Bakhtin's words:

... the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is *unfinished*, *outgrows* itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are *open* to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself *goes out to meet the world* ... The body *discloses* its essence as a

principle of growth which exceeds its own limits ... This is the *ever unfinished, ever creating* body ... This specially strikes the eye in the archaic grotesque.

(Bakhtin, 1965, p. 26, my emphasis)

It is precisely this figuration of the grotesque body which grounds the subject in corporeality and in an ambiguous gender identity, that in fact protects this subject from becoming a neutral, de-sexualized (or hyper-sexualized) subject. This kind of grounding in *fleshed-specificity* protects the grotesque subject from a possible escape from embodied existence and corporeality altogether. It is not difficult to see now in what way the grotesque subject stands as an alternative to the hyper-sexualized or disembodied cyborg: embodiment and (ambiguous) sexuality are ineludible for the grotesque subject; they are at its core.

The Grotesque as Embodied Ambiguity

The kind of *embodied intersubjectivity* represented by the grotesque emphasizes *at the same time* both interconnectedness and heterogeneity, both connection and difference. This kind of *embodied intersubjectivity* stands at the basis of some phenomenological and postmodern epistemologies, as in the case of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity, mostly developed in his *The Phenomenology of Perception* and later on in his last, unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Merleau-Ponty considered ambiguity the central element of a phenomenological and existentialist description of reality and of the relations of individuals among themselves and the world they inhabit. At the basis of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project is the idea that there are no clear-cut divisions between humans as embodied subjects and the rest of the world. Our being intimately, *carnally* mingled, intertwined with the world, constitutes the root of our ambiguous existence, and precludes our epistemological and our ethical conditions. It is precisely our situation as embodied subjects that connects us ineluctably with other subjects, objects, and the world as a whole:

Now why would this generality [Sentient and Sensible], which constitutes the unity of my body, not open it to other bodies? The handshake too is reversible; I can feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching ... *Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each?* ... For, as overlapping and fission, identity and difference, it brings to birth a ray of natural light that illuminates *all flesh and not only my own*.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 142, my emphasis)

Thus, we are basically *ambiguous*: we are subjects and objects at the same time, 'touching' and 'touched', 'sentient' and 'sensible'. We are *in* the world, but we are not the world: we are temporal, finite. We are *fleshed* subjects, who relate to the world, to objects and other subjects, by way of our embodied subjectivities, through our carnal eroticism and sexuality, through our ineludible fleshed existence. 'Unlike pure consciousness', says Monika Langer paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, 'we "*blend*" with, and compose, a *common situation* – an intersubjectivity. Further, we feel the need for others' recognition' (Langer, 2003, p. 101, my emphasis). Being flesh, then, is what allows us to be part of the world, to be materially and concretely part of it. Also, this is what in fact allows us to be subjects

open to others and to the other's concrete, specific situation; we share our carnality and, consequently, we are also able to share our condition of being alive and, at the same time, of being mortal. Had we been *pure consciousness*, with no body (a kind of Cartesian or Platonic ideal), we would be a totally different kind of being, a kind of god, who, among other things, would not have any need for ethics.¹⁶

Conclusion

The figuration of the grotesque privileges embodiment over disembodied consciousness and excess and hybridity over clean, measured, well-equilibrated and perfectly defined spaces. It comprises singularity, heterogeneity *and* difference. The body and its excesses, I argue, form the predominant site of absolute difference. The body functions as the individuation principle, as the clearest principle of particularity and singularity. It is the body which constitutes us as singular beings and draws the limits within the particular minds which, according to the majority of classic and modern Western philosophers, are essentially the same for all individuals. Emphasizing embodied subjectivity means emphasizing the temporary, the accidental, the finite; it means a return to the historical, the contextual, the cultural. Thus, such an embodied subjectivity appears as the paradigm of the anti-philosophical when the philosophical is understood as an attempt to represent the Same, i.e. the eternal, the universal, the general, the a-historical.

The excesses of the body (and excesses in general) also constitute an important way of representing difference. The excess is that which has to be cleansed or eliminated when we try to overcome difference. The need for erasing excess has been overwhelmingly present in philosophy. The grotesque is plagued with excess, and, consequently, plagued with a difference that is concrete and irreducible. Neither philosophy nor science can abstract, reduce or generalize excess, since it is by definition resistant to reduction. There is no way to deal with difference, heterogeneity and otherness except by renouncing the aim of reaching an absolute, a-historical, universal, and abstract knowledge. Dealing with the particular, the irreducible, the accidental and the finite, as the grotesque does, means dealing with difference. That which exceeds us, that which threatens our sameness, our 'normality', our well-defined and protected presence in the world, constitutes the different.

I have argued that it is within the power of the figuration of the grotesque to shed new light on postmodern critique and, most important, to bring an alternative to the hypersexualized and disembodied cyborg. Approaching the grotesque may be a new and creative way to contribute insights to postmodern thought in general and to the postmodern thought on the *embodied-subject* and its philosophical and political implications, in particular. Nevertheless, even if we do find in the figure of the grotesque body a positive figuration in order to describe the embodied postmodern subject, some problems still remain. Concretely, we should talk about our impossible escape from cyborgs and technologically transformed bodies. Technology has become a part of our bodies, an important feature of our daily lives. Imagining figurations that avoid dealing with the issue of technology and the impact on our subjectivities cannot work if the aim is to explain or describe precisely the postmodern subject. Still, I believe that a return to the concrete, organic, carnal body – even if just for a brief moment – may remind us of the impossibility of definitely running away from the *imperfections of the flesh*. New figurations, which include the technological, but which, at the same time, ground themselves strongly in the body, must be created.

Notes

- ¹ See also Balsamo (2000), Farquhar (2000), Plant (1993, 1995), Sobchack (2000) and Sofia (1999). These authors broadly consider the cyborg as a figuration which might give place to a new kind of agency that is not necessarily connected with the traditional subject, with the traditional body. The cyborg as destabilizing classical definitions of binary identity (Foster, 1999).
- ² On the cyborg as not challenging neither gender nor race traditional categories, see Gonzales (1999) and Lykke (2000). On the cyborg as reflecting profound anxieties about reproduction and the feminine (and reassuring for this reason the traditional structures of gender), see Bundtzen (2000), Creed (2000), Doane (1999) and Fuchs (1995). On the cyborg as a conservative identity, see Nixon (1999). On more ambiguous ideas on the cyborg (as potentially liberating, but still in general at the service of power structures, reproducing traditional models), see Braidotti (2002), Hayles (1999) and Hollinger (1999).
- ³ Here I am taking into account non-scientific, science fiction literature only. The place of the cyborg in science presents different characteristics, which I will not address in this paper. My discussion will cover the place of the cyborg as it appears exclusively in fiction. For the place of the cyborg in science see, in medicine: Casper (1995), Clarke (1995) and Hogle (1995); in space engineering and in space and war: Driscoll (1995), Figueroa-Sarriera (1995) and Hables Gray (1995).
- ⁴ For an analysis of the problematic that the figure of the cyborg rises within these films see Holland (1995) and Landsberg (1995).
- ⁵ For more on cyberspace as repressing difference and presenting a *normalizing* sexuality see Wolmark (1993, ch. 5, 1997).
- ⁶ On this, see also Springer (1999).
- ⁷ On the problem of the cyborg as avoiding the issue of *aging*, for instance – an important marker of difference – see Woodward (1999).
- ⁸ The cyberpunk is the body of fiction dating from the early 1980s, built around the work of W. Gibson (Gibson, 1984, 1986, 1988) and other writers, who have constructed visions of the future worlds of cyberspaces with all the vast range of technological developments and power struggles. Its major subject is a not-so-far urban future where the limits between the human and the technological have disappeared. For more on the cyberpunk see Hollinger (1999), McCaffery (1991), McHale (1992) and Peters (2003).
- ⁹ Other examples of cyberpunk characters opting for a different mode of ontological existence and leaving their bodies behind are Gibson's characters at the end of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, which have left their organic bodies in order to enter the cyberspace plane, Sterling's hero Abelard Lindsay in *Schismatrix* who leaves his body preparing himself to adventure through the cosmos with an alien Presence, and finally, Rucker's characters in *Wetware*, which transform into dolphins at the end of the story. For more on the phenomenon of *leaving the meaty body behind* within cyberpunk see McHale (1992, pp. 256–257).
- ¹⁰ However, it is important to consider other possible interpretations to the phenomenon of *leaving the body* in cyberpunk. McHale, for example, argues that in opposition to other genres of fiction, such as modernist or detective fiction, science fiction in general and cyberpunk in particular, deal with ontological rather than with epistemological questions. That is the reason why cyberpunk mainly addresses the question of how the world and myself are *constituted*, rather than the question of how do we understand or know the world. Leaving the body behind or adopting other kinds of non-human body features appears, then, as an excellent way to explore new ontological possibilities, new ways of existence in the world (a world which mode of existence is questioned as well). For more on this see McHale (1992, p. 247).
- ¹¹ This desire for powerfulness and immortality has often filled cyberpunk fiction with *ghosts*, all kinds of disembodied creatures which exist in or out of machines. Examples of this are the 'wireheads' of Sterling's *Schismatrix*, Cadigan's *Symers* – human selves which leave their bodies turning to be configurations of information in computer and communication networks – and the 'personality constructs' of Gibson's trilogy, ROM units preserving the selves of deceased characters.
- ¹² On the linkage between the search for *perfect beings* and totalitarian, racist ideologies and movements, see Traverso (2002).
- ¹³ Mikhail Bakhtin refers in his work to the Grotesque Realism, especially in the context of Medieval and Renaissance Carnival; Geoffrey G. Harpham, Ewa Kuryluk and Philip Thomson deal with the grotesque as a literary category, going through its different features; Mary Russo analyses the grotesque from a feminist perspective; Wilson Yates explores the grotesque's religious implications and Wolfgang Kayser mainly deals with the fearful and uncanny aspects of the grotesque.

- ¹⁴ On the grotesque as hybrid see Kuryluk (1987, pp. 17, 75–76, 319), Harpham (1982, pp. 11, 21, 62), Thomson (1972, p. 50) and Yates (1997, p. 16).
- ¹⁵ On the grotesque as in-between life and death see Thomson (1972, p. 35) and Kuryluk (1987, p. 318).
- ¹⁶ On embodiment as a precondition for ethics see De Beauvoir (1948).

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