

# Entering the Simulacra World. Aesthetic and Cultural Phenomenologies in Literature, Media, and the Arts

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## Abstract

This issue of *Between* aims to investigate the phenomenology of simulacra and their range of functions (conceptual, cultural, literary, aesthetic, and in the media). What is meant here by 'simulacrum' is any artificial creature or phantasm that imitates or replicates the outward form and/or behaviour of living beings, especially human beings. By doing so, it blurs the boundaries between life and artifice, human and non-human. As a notion, 'simulacrum' covers a variety of hybrid, liminal and often spectral figures populating the premodern, modern and contemporary imagination: from statues to puppets, from golems to homunculi, from automata to robots, from cyborgs to avatars and, ultimately, Artificial Intelligence. The case studies collected here lay the groundwork for an inquiry wherein literary works are assessed from both the point of view of textual analysis and in connection with the compelling relevance that the theme of simulacra has been gaining in the cultural sphere, including contemporary debates on the 'trans-' and 'posthuman'.

## Keywords

Simulacrum; Spectrality; Virtuality; Non-human; Posthumanism

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## 1. Simulation, copy, representation

When entering the world of simulacra it may not be superfluous to make a preliminary distinction between simulation and representation. To represent an object generally means to imitate or copy it, as a referent of reality, while simulation consists in a replication of a real being, object or condition through the dissimulation of their artificial qualities, *as if* they were actually real conditions, objects and beings. The whole difference amounts to this: the simulacrum is not subject to the mimetic regime, because it does not refer to anything outside of itself. It does not simply imitate, but it exists autonomously, so to speak – on its own, independently of the being whose features it assimilates. In Victor Stoichita's words, then, a simulacrum is «a fictional object that does not represent. It exists» (2008: 203). We are dealing with two different – and, in some ways, opposite – models of fiction, on which Jean Baudrillard reflects in one of the most eloquent passages of *Simulacra and Simulation*, where he precisely points out the difference between representation and simulation:

Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, *from the radical negation of the sign as value*, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by

interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum. (Baudrillard 1995: 6)

This is, of course, only one of the possible approaches to this matter, whose implications reach beyond philosophy and literary theory, and concern fiction as a space delegated to a reflection linked to reality in a double sense: as a reflection *of* and *upon* reality. Defining the simulacrum is indeed a challenging task, not only in light of its many different generic meanings (artificial being, statue, illusionary image, phantasm), but also because of the broadness of its implications at the theoretical level. Simona Micali's contribution, "Il Simulacro e la Copia: l'immaginario contemporaneo della vita artificiale" ["The Simulacrum and the Copy: The Contemporary Imagination of the Artificial Being"], lays fundamental theoretical groundwork for a sharper definition of the notions of copy and simulacrum and their interplay with identity issues. Building on the opposition posed by Deleuze between the copy-icon and the simulacrum, the article analyses some contemporary works presenting hybrid figures of artificial beings as copies or 'continuations' of human beings: the *Black Mirror* episode *Be Right Back* and the novels *Permutation City* by Greg Evan and *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro. The issue under scrutiny is whether, in the era of a pervasive digital mediation, the unstable distinction between copy and simulacrum which informs the fictional imagination could be a sign of an ongoing change bearing on the notion of identity, one that blurs the boundaries between authentic and simulated, natural and artificial entities.

## 2. Hyperrealities

Hence, simulacra do not fit into the conventional structures of referentiality. As products of simulation, they rather tend to locate themselves in a second reality, which overlaps with first-degree reality to the point of replacing it completely. In order to describe this peculiar phenomenon, Baudrillard employed the concept of 'hyperrealism', which encompasses what does not simply imitate the real through an effect of similarity, but replaces it as well by making itself autonomous or, more precisely, self-referential. This is a dimension involving «*that which is always already reproduced*» per se, so that we find ourselves plunged in «the 'aesthetic' hallucination of reality» (1993: 73-74).

The literary implications of this aspect are manifold. In the article "Hyperrealities and Simulacra in Goethe's *Faust*" ["Iperrealità e simulacri nel *Faust* di Goethe"], Francesco Rossi analyses the German masterpiece

along the lines of Baudrillard's philosophy of virtuality. In particular, the second part of *Faust* is interpreted in the light of the pre-modern mediation of experience, in which subjects are considered hybrid and disembodied, floating within what can already be defined as a hyperreality. In the characters that populate Goethe's classical-romantic phantasmagoria one can find reflections of a condition in which the human being proves to be increasingly dependent upon his artificial creations.

Be that as it may, simulation and hyperreality are typical features of contemporaneity (Hayles 1999), and particularly of what has been defined as the post-medial condition (Eugeni 2015), with its drive towards an ultimate de-materialization and disembodiment of communication, in which the new media become more and more ubiquitous and pervasive. In "«We accept the reality of the world with which we're presented»: The Truman Show Effect" ["«Accettiamo la realtà del mondo che ci viene presentato»: l'effetto Truman Show"], Biancamaria Rizzardi pursues a line of inquiry connected with the notion of a 'similarity effect' that ushers in a hyper-real dimension where counterfeits and fakes half-mockingly take centre stage. By drawing inspiration from Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998) as well as Marc Augé's and Jean Baudrillard's theories, Rizzardi investigates the features, dynamics and paradoxes of artfully concocted, make-believe worlds such as the model town in Peter Carey's *American Dreams* (1974) and the theme park in Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998). In particular, light is shed on the discursive and material processes whereby real places are eventually superseded by narratively credible ones and on the 'magic spell' that the latter cast on both visitors and readers. These spectacularised replicas or simulated constructs of late-capitalism postmodernity can be seen as disturbingly taking on a life of their own. In "White Noise, ovvero la realtà come ritorno del represso" ["White Noise, or Reality as the Return of the Repressed"], Stefano Brugnolo highlights the ambivalence of Don DeLillo's perspectivation on the 'civilisation of appearance' in his famous novel. He argues that the author is both fascinated by the coming of a new world and interested in real-life events as opposed to their representations and simulations. In this sense, the novel can be seen as depicting a 'return of the repressed' built on a disturbing 'return of reality'.

The emergence of a simulated reality has also a remarkable impact on contemporary aesthetics and poetics. Giovanni Melosi's article, "Simulacri poetici: estetica dell'automatico e *Computerdichtung* in ambito germanofono" ["Poetic Simulacra: The Aesthetics of Automation and *Computerdichtung* in the German Context"], tackles this specific question by focusing on *Computerdichtung*, a concept that encompasses stochastic and algorithmic

poetry produced in Germany since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this case, the phrase 'poetic simulacra' refers to mechanical devices that can fulfil the requirements of artistic creation, albeit undermining some theoretical and aesthetic principles on which man-made literature is based, i.e., authorship and textual referentiality. Indeed, one can hardly overestimate the fact that computer-generated poems are not completely accessible through the lens of traditional arguments. As argued by Max Bense, among others, they do call for a specific poetics of automation.

### 3. Archaeologies of the simulacrum

These first considerations on contemporaneity do not cover all the implications of our topic, which is deeply rooted in the ancient and pre-modern world. Among its foundational myths one can mention the story of Narcissus, in whom Andrea Pinotti has recently identified the archetype of the immersive experience connoting augmented digital realities. The legendary boy might be seen as a sort of prototype for the «experiencer who grasps the image as if it were itself reality, and not a mediation of it» (2021: 19, our translation). Another important archetype is that of Pygmalion, the artist who was able to turn one of his sculptures into a real woman. Besides setting an illustrious precedent in the long series of statues brought to life by the skill of their creator (albeit often by divine intercession too), Pygmalion also paves the way for a fictional paradigm. This paradigm is precisely what the aforementioned Stoichita considers as fundamental for the investigation of any «artificial construct, devoid of an original model» and somehow «existing in and of itself», because it «does not necessarily copy an object from the world, but projects itself into the world. It exists» (2008: 2).

The literary representations of the relationship between creator and creature are often steeped in religious imagery. In "'Ad imaginem suam'. The Adamic Model and Exclusive Monoanthropism in Human Simulacra" ["'Ad imaginem suam'. Il modello adamitico e il monoantropismo esclusivo nei simulacri umani"], Matteo Zupancic shows to what extent the Adamic model of the Biblical tradition can influence literary works on human simulacra. Turning to some exemplary case studies taken from different periods and cultural contexts, Zupancic outlines a theoretical framework concerning the thematic relationship between the maker and his creations, while also drawing on Warburg's concept of *Nachleben*, which enables him to shed light on a number of crucial *topoi* of this tradition.

The archaeologies of the simulacrum are also at the forefront in Marco

Battaglia's "*Beyond the Wall. Renaissance Embodiments of the Old Norse God Freyr*" [*"Beyond the Wall. Epifanie rinascimentali del mito norreno di Freyr"*]. This paper deals with the literary and iconographic tradition of a well-known Old Norse divine triad, which underwent all sorts of syncretism, starting from 15<sup>th</sup>-century Sweden. Such images of an allegedly barbaric world also become an example of a very particular kind of gender transition through simulacra: a form of early, unexpected evidence of the fluid stereotypes embedded in the concept. Battaglia's argument thus capitalises on the metamorphosis of that triad, wherein the male god Frigg becomes the (otherwise misplaced) Frigg, in an analogy with the Old Norse fertility gods of Freyr and Freyja.

In the backdrop of medieval and pre-modern civilisation, magic and technology shared a common stem which included all forms of human interaction with nature via spiritual means. In this context, the simulacra world comprised homunculi and innumerable golemic creatures (LaGrandeur 2013) through which alchemists pursued the ancestral dream of parthenogenesis. Be they man-made or supernatural, those simulacra were creatures at the edge of the human, whose monstrous features could take on moral and even metaphysical meanings. Luca Baratta's "*«Shall the Head neuer come to that Nature requireth»*". *Acefalia come simulacro della colpa e del caos nell'Inghilterra della prima età moderna*" [*"Acephaly as Simulacrum of Guilt and Chaos in Early Modern England"*] deals with the representation of acephaly in early modern English street literature (particularly throughout the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century) as a symbol of the lack of guiding principles and, therefore, as a public sign of guilt. Baratta shows how, in many pamphlets of the period in which monsters were widely present, deformity played an ambivalent role. On the one hand, the phenomena related to it aroused curiosity, as they were perceived as traces of a divine message; on the other hand, deformity acted as a means of collective moralisation and even as a political or religious dispositif.

Matei Chihai's and Alejandro Ferrari's "*Artificial Life in Horacio Quiroga: Commercial Advertisements, Cinema, and the Prompted Suspension of Disbelief*" [*"Vita artificiale in Horacio Quiroga: gli annunci pubblicitari, il cinema e la sospensione dell'incredulità"*] probes instead how far the simulacrum's influence can go in modern popular culture, especially in connection with the press. By looking at the way in which artificial life is handled in the works of Horacio Quiroga, a Uruguayan-Argentinian writer, Chihai and Ferrari extrapolate two different models of literary invention. The first one is interwoven with the history of technology and owes much to Quiroga's own passion for science and the cinema. The second

one is associated with forms of publication such as the illustrated magazine's serialised novellas, commercial advertisements and other kinds of illustrations. The analysis also reconstructs Quiroga's growth as an author, thus pointing out how behind the making of the artificial being stands the making of the artist.

#### 4. Fictional reconfigurations of the human

Simulacra can also be seen as special cases of a liminal anthropology that has always been present in literature (Achilles *et al.* 2012), even before it found its way into science fiction (Haney 2006; Caronia 2008). Simulacra consequently belong to the collective imagination. They could be approached as fictional articulations of a paradigm in which the human clearly tends to lose its central position, or, at least, to assume a different relevance from that of the Vitruvian Man and his glorified place at the centre of the universe. At the same time, such a centrality was anything but alien to the status of the hybrid, since it consisted in an uncanny mid-position between different instances, which was always negotiable from a symbolic, moral, and material point of view.

Hence, one of the reasons for the uncanniness of simulacra is to be found precisely in their cross-border character, whose gothic and fantastic ramifications in literature at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – not only Mary Shelley's creature in *Frankenstein*, or Jean Paul's and E.T.A. Hoffmann's automata, but also the manifold extensions of human beings via their doubles (Jourde - Tortonese 1996; Stoichita 2006; Fusillo 2012b) – are probably epiphenomenal expressions of this deep-lying liminality. In "Il duello con sé stessi: *Il cavaliere doppio* di Théophile Gautier" ["Duelling with Oneself in Théophile Gautier's *Le chevalier double*"], Paolo Tortonese provides an in-depth analysis of Gautier's fantastic tale in relation to its overt and less known sources. *Le chevalier double* appears to echo some of Poe's and Hoffmann's earlier works, while also drawing on a tradition dating back to 17<sup>th</sup>-century Spain. Tortonese proceeds to highlight the different meanings that Poe and Gautier gave to duels as well as the momentous motif of duelling with one's own double.

Alessandra Ghezzani's "Simulacro e usurpazione dell'identità in alcuni racconti di Borges" ["Simulacra and Identity Usurpation in Some of Borges's Stories"] is closely related to this topic. Ghezzani investigates the dynamics of identity usurpation as a device for the creation of doubles in some of Borges's stories. Such doubles participate in the intricate panoply of inverted, symmetrical, recurrent and overwritten destinies that have crammed the Argentine author's work since its narrative beginnings. The

way Borges approaches this issue is, on the one hand, linked to his concept of personality (i.e., a succession of states of consciousness as opposed to the notion of the ego as a totality) and to a more general 'idealistic' interpretation of reality (as filtered through Berkeley, Hume, and Schopenhauer). On the other hand, it builds on the idea of the imperfect copy derived from Gnostic doctrines.

In both cases, we are faced with characters or situations taken from literature, or from the collective imaginary, that are revisited by authors in different ways and guises, from the portrait up to the ghost and *Doppelgänger*. Without taking anything away from psychological explanations, the supernatural dimension of these figures concurs with the revival of beliefs that do not seem to have been overcome by modern rationality. Their return joins ranks with an inhuman or even posthuman 'otherness', which mysteriously breaks through the artificial surface of simulacra and eludes human control. But this is also the reason why uncanniness (*das Unheimliche*) can manifest itself under the heading of both horror and seduction.

Heinrich Heine is a master in this kind of ambivalence. 'Imperfect simulacra' are, according to Alessandro Fambrini ("Simulacri imperfetti: corpi mortali e creature immortali" ["Imperfect Simulacra: Mortal Bodies and Immortal Creatures"]), those who appear in the scattered pages of "Florentinische Nächte" (Florentine Nights), one among Heine's most elusive and intricate prose writings. The simulacra which populate this spooky story – connoted with grotesque and subtly ironic traits, too – embody a particular type of posthuman phenomenology that, despite its 19<sup>th</sup>-century imprint, foreshadows features of the contemporary posthuman, such as the dialectical interplay between the consciousness of human mortality and the (human, all-too-human) aspiration to immortality.

## 5. The 'ghost in the machine', and in the statue

The relationship of the human with the transcendent – be it of a divine, natural, or artificial origin – raises the issue of the interconnections that exist not only between the organic and the mechanic, or reality and virtuality, but also between living and non-living things. Against this backdrop, simulacra are often characterised by an operational autonomy, sometimes even an independence of thought. Because of their hybrid and transitive nature, they have been associated with the sphere of spectrality, and it is no coincidence that 'simulacrum' and 'phantasm' are contiguous terms in Deleuze's critique and reversion of Platonism. The expression 'ghost in the machine', first used by Gilbert Ryle in the 1940s in order to call into



question the Cartesian mind-body dualism, sums up one of the uncanniest aspects of simulacra. That is to say, the fact that they can be endowed with an intelligence or a soul of their own, not subject to either the machine or the organic structure that houses it – and, of course, independent of their creator. This sort of intelligence which unexpectedly reveals itself in the artifact is perceived as uncanny precisely because of its relation with biological matter and a cognitive quality commonly considered as exclusive to living beings. For this reason, simulacra in literature frequently remind of ghosts, whose apparition transgresses the fundamental rules on which the conventions of realism are based (Puglia *et al.* 2018).

In “Simulacri dell’invisibile: voce umana e strumenti musicali nel Romanticismo tedesco” [“Simulacra of the Invisible: The Human Voice and Musical Instruments in German Romanticism”], Giovanna Cermelli delves into a widespread theme in the literature of German Romanticism, namely the one regarding the connections between musical instruments and the human voice as alleged manifestations of a soul in the artefact – a ghost-in-the-machine case ahead of its time. Indeed, this *topos* can be traced to the paradigm of the competitive imitation involving the machine and the human being, an important trend in 18<sup>th</sup>-century culture taken up by E.T.A. Hoffmann in several of his works. Paolo Bugliani’s article on “Spectral Simulacra of Authors in Henry James’s and Max Beerbohm’s Decadent Short Stories” [“Simulacri spettrali dell’autore nei racconti decadenti di Henry James e Max Beerbohm”] projects the question of spectrality onto the poetological and metaliterary level by establishing a connection between this thematic field and the post-structuralist concept of the ‘death of the author’. Through the analysis of some Decadent short stories by Henry James and Max Beerbohm, Bugliani foregrounds how, in contrast with any Promethean exaltation of the individual creator, the disembodied authorial image is here mostly marked by the traits of ‘otherness’ typical of spectral figures.

In a similar context, Giovanni Bassi’s “«As ‘twere he». Alcune considerazioni sul ritratto fotografico nella cultura letteraria inglese del tardo Ottocento” [“«As ‘twere he». Some Reflections on Photographic Portrait in Late-19<sup>th</sup>-Century English Literary Culture”] tackles the notion of photographic simulacra against the backdrop of *fin-de-siècle* technological innovations in the field of photography and as a reworking of a long-standing trope in Western literary culture, namely the portrait of the beloved. Delving into Thomas Hardy’s photography-related poetry and prose, Bassi demonstrates how, in this body of texts, such portraits undergo a process of fetishisation until they turn into ghostly surrogates for absent persons and/or desired bodies. Frequently used by many other late-19<sup>th</sup>-century

English writers and poets, these fetishised images are strikingly in tune with later theories of photography and simulacra. They also look back on earlier literary portraits of beloved ones within Western culture's abiding ekphrastic imagination.

The living statue remains one of the most popular characterisations traditionally associated with the simulacrum. In "*Ciranda de Pedra: Manifestations of the Living Statue in Portuguese-language Literatures*" [*Ciranda de Pedra: declinazioni della statua viva nelle letterature di lingua portoghese*"], Valeria Tocco and Sofia Morabito investigate some typical manifestations of this presence in a diachronic perspective. Their contribution focuses on how Portuguese-language literatures give shape to simulacral figures – statues, in particular – and on the role attributed to simulacra in relation to the sphere of the human. To achieve this goal, Tocco and Morabito call attention to the ways a number of classical, romantic, modernist and post-modernist writers, such as Camões, Melo, Carvalhal, Sá-Carneiro, Clarice Lispector, Pepetela, and Jaime Salazar Sampaio, have developed this topic.

Exploring another side of the multifaceted relationship between artistic manufactures and the semantics of simulacra, Marco Maggi's "*Rianimare il mito. Un simulacro di Fedra in Guido Gozzano*" [*Reanimating the Myth. A Simulacrum of Phaedra in Guido Gozzano*] singles out a short story by Guido Gozzano, *Alcina* (1915), which ironically revisits the *topos* of the sculpted beauty coming to life. In comparison with the slightly earlier *Gradiva* (1903) by Wilhelm Jensen, in which the phenomenon remained ambiguously poised between reality and illusion (or delusion), in Gozzano's text the supposed animation of the bas-relief is explained away in terms of a hallucinated perception from a first-person narrator affected by meningitis. Maggi also reads this *denouement* by counterposing it to Gabriele d'Annunzio's *Fedra* (1909). While d'Annunzio's work is an attempt to revive the myth as well as the tragedy canon, Gozzano does not seem to aim to archeologically restore the past. On the contrary, in the age of technical reproducibility, he develops a layered, complex idea of temporality in which the present is not easily substituted by the past. Rather, the present and the past coexist in a conflicting and paradoxical way within the simulacral image, much like copies no longer fit to represent reality.

## 6. Interfacing with the non-human

Predominantly inspired by science fiction and its media transpositions, our current imaginary is populated by different kinds of *homo artificialis*,

ranging from cyborgs to the contemporary avatars of digital media, up to cutting-edge forms of artificial intelligence. Even if these creatures are not the only ones in the simulacra world – which also includes supernatural beings whose origin does not entirely fit into the mechanistic paradigm – Baudrillard's typology has acquired a distinctive value in this regard. His categorisation distinguishes between three orders of simulacra, respectively called «counterfeit», «production», and «simulation» (Baudrillard 1993: 50). The latter corresponds to the kind of virtuality which triggers the «precession of simulacra» phenomenon (Baudrillard 1994: 1-42), typical of a world where digital devices tend to anticipate reality, so that simulation eerily 'precedes' its own referents.

This said, Baudrillard's taxonomy should be taken with a degree of flexibility. In *Towards a Posthuman Imagination in Literature and Media*, Simona Micali notes that the three orders cited above might actually be detected in various sorts of technological simulacra. As a matter of fact, each of those simulacra is provided with an «interface» connected to the human (counterfeit), with a «machine» constituting the body of the simulacrum as a material artifact (production), and with an «artificial intelligence» (simulation) whereby the machine acquires a subject status (2019: 123-130). Micali goes further by placing the simulacrum among the figures of the 'non-human', that is to say, «what evokes the 'human' by analogy or similarity without being such, a being which is characterized and perceived mainly or exclusively for its *difference* from man. As in the Freudian negation, 'non-human' points at humanness through its negative, expressing and denying at the same time» (*ibid.*: 15). This definition stimulates debate over our topic and also envisages a different direction than the one taken by the so-called 'non-human turn' (Grusin 2015). If the latter conceptualises the wiping out of differences between human beings and other creatures, the focal point of any research dealing with simulacra should precisely define the peculiarities and, possibly, the reasons behind such differences. Some case studies collected here address the issue.

Giulio Milone's "Umani, androidi, divinità. I simulacri di Kazuo Ishiguro" ["Humans, Androids, Gods. Kazuo Ishiguro's Simulacra"] looks at the *mirabilia mechanica* sphere through an intriguingly blurred lens that positions itself halfway between the artificial-intelligence predicament and a reforged human(ised) perspective. Attention is drawn to Ishiguro's eighth novel *Klara and the Sun* (2021), where the eponymous first-person narrator is one of the androids that an imaginary society of the future has been producing and customising to the needs of families with sick or unsuccessfully 'lifted' children. A solar-powered Artificial Friend, Klara lives up to her

assigned role by duly assisting the seriously (if temporarily) ill Josie. In the meantime, Klara is prompted to follow a trajectory which sees her distance herself from the automaton's ingrained ontological otherness and deeply sympathise with humans. By welcoming and celebrating the life-giving force of the Sun, Ishiguro's AF might be said to further reverse paradigms and set foot on the only-too-human soil of affective ties and metaphysical beliefs.

Roberta Ferrari's "A Plunge into Otherness: Ethics and Literature in *Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan" ["Un'immersione nell'alterità: etica e letteratura in *Machines Like Me* di Ian McEwan"] makes a foray into the uses and effects of Artificial Intelligence with regard to fundamental aspects of human life such as interpersonal relationships and moral behavior. When compared to Ishiguro's novel, the text analysed here manifestly stretches the boundary towards the uncanny. Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019), a 'What if novel' mainly set in the 1980s but also playing on alternative/apocryphal history, similarly focuses on an android. However, the consequences of this creature's growth and agency are definitely more disquieting. The ominously named Adam is in fact a hyper-sophisticated, smart machine that ends by upsetting the main characters' lives and posing questions on codified norms, dominant ideologies and, ultimately, the meaning of humanity itself. Facing Adam, a human-like simulacrum forged out of robotics and cybernetics' technologies, is like engaging in a wearing strife between an anthropological selfhood and a soulless, judgemental avatar.

From this angle, the issue of the simulacrum ties in with contemporary discussions concerning transhumanism and posthumanism (Caronia 2020), two attitudes and philosophical views whose refractions in literature are often loaded with ambiguity. This is confirmed, for instance, by Fausto Ciompi's "«The Future of Humans in the Posthuman»: *Frankissstein* by Jeanette Winterson" ["Il futuro degli umani nel postumano': *Frankissstein* di Jeanette Winterson"], where the investigation is carried out through a discursive terrain that pays heed to Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault, Haraway and Heidegger, among others. Ciompi provides insights into the compelling intricacies, metaphorical fields and narrative structure of Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019), a work that simultaneously builds on the postmodern genre of historiographic metafiction and on theories grounded in Post- and Transhumanist Studies. Partly a rewrite of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and its composition process in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Winterson's book also revolves around present-day England and the interconnections between a transgender doctor (Ry Shelley) and

a transhumanist scientist (Victor Stein), alongside their feats in matters of AI, augmentation, and cyborgification. Ciompi illuminates this context in a way that raises questions on an alleged «better biology» which is actually unable to bring forth any real upgrading. In Winterson's novel, the future of humans in a posthuman world seems then to keep pace with a population of «boundary creatures straddling alternative ontologies and often acting as less than humans».

It must be underscored that, while looking forward to the self-overcoming of the human, transhumanism continues to rely on an essentially anthropocentric worldview, in the conviction that the mind/body enhancement could be achieved via biomedical and mechanical engineering. Indeed, this is a hypermodern as well as archaic phenomenon related to auto- and alloplastic practices that have set the scene for the semiotic interactions between the anthropic subject and the environment since the beginning of time. These practices even remind of the emotional and prerational dynamics of phantasmatic substitution through the fetish (Fusillo 2012a). Along similar lines, Cristina Savettieri analyses an interesting case of the interplay between literary discourse, body enhancement and technology. In her article "Hybrid Bodies between Utopia and Trauma in F.T. Marinetti" ["Corpi ibridi tra utopia e trauma in F.T. Marinetti"], she looks at a selection of texts by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti with the aim of throwing new light on the role that the experience of the First World War's combat played in the evolution of the narrative of the body in Marinetti's imagination. With the outbreak of the war, pre-war futurist simulacra and human-mechanical creatures that used to objectify radical utopic homosocial fantasies turned into actual prosthetic bodies. However, in such an unprecedented by-product of technological warfare's extreme violence, steel and flesh mingled while prostheses did not seem to foreshadow the birth of any immortal creature. If different social discourses (medical science, politics, war propaganda) attempted to frame this traumatic re-codifying of the human soma, Marinetti adjusted his earlier utopic constructs by transforming them into uncanny entities, devirilised, and sexually vexed.

## **7. Posthuman perspectives**

While transhumanists cling to the notion of the centrality of mankind, albeit at a higher level of mind-body performativity, posthumanists set out to definitively eclipse the realm of their own species. The goal of posthuman thinkers is to supersede the extolling of the human by duly taking into consideration other forms of existence which are impermeable to dichoto-

mies such as man/machine, male/female, man/animal, and so forth. Post-humanism, then, is *not* an anthropocentric current of thought, although one could still find in it different sets of ethical values and perspectives (Herzberg, Watzka 2020). On the one hand, it embraces the domain of technological utopianism, along with issues steeped in the IT-field's dazzling progress throughout the last few decades, including the "Great Singularity" discourse (Kurzweil 2005) and mind-uploading. On the other hand, posthumanism endorses a form of radical criticism of anthropocentrism, namely of a human-centred worldview, which is seen as a univocal and normative – and, therefore, potentially discriminative – construction. In her "Cyborg Manifesto" (1991), Donna Haraway had already cast cybernetic organisms as configurations which crossed the limits of the traditional humanistic subject and that consequently acquired simulacral traits. This school of critical posthumanism (Herberchter 2013) goes beyond conventional humanistic categories in order to leave room for a nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti 2013) in dialogue with present-day forms of communication, interconnection and hybridisation encompassing human beings, animals, and the machine.

This aspect has been emphasised in various ways by contemporary authors from the areas of literature, cinema, and the theatre. Among the articles collected in this issue, readers can be referred to Lucia Della Fontana's "Analogue Film, Ghostly Ontologies and the Fairy-tale in *Bella e perduta* and *Lazzaro felice*" ["Pellicole analogiche, ontologie spettrali ed elementi fiabeschi in *Bella e perduta e Lazzaro felice*"], which shares Micali's theoretical ground and focuses on two recent Italian films: Pietro Marcello's *Bella e perduta* [*Lost and Beautiful*] (2015) and Alice Rohrwacher's *Lazzaro felice* [*Happy as Lazzaro*] (2018). They both give cinematographic shape to the impossibility of establishing a distinction between nature and culture, virtual and real, human and non-human. In these films, the clash is no longer located between reality and hyperreality, but in a phantasmatic dialectic that rediscovers the value of the biological body by placing it in a network of historical, social, and technological relationships. Pivoting around the organic element, these works showcase characters that are ontologically liminal, hovering between the human and the animal sphere. Moreover, they both explore a hybrid type of narration at the crossroads between the documentary and the fairy-tale and encourage a form of ecological engagement.

Moving from an exploration of the pervasive presence of animals in Sarah Kane's experimental *oeuvre*, Sara Soncini's "Performing Simulacra: Human/Animal Intersections in the Work of Sarah Kane" ["Simulacri sulla

scena: intersezioni umano/animale nell'opera di Sarah Kane"] addresses a hitherto neglected dimension of Kane's joint engagement with the boundaries of subjectivity and those of theatre. The by-now massive scholarship on Kane has tended to see her work as epitomising an overcoming of the dramatic paradigm and as equally marked by increasingly dehumanised constructions of subjectivity that culminate in the disembodied theatrical landscapes of her late plays. By combining textual and performance analysis, the article charts the complex, changing configurations of Kane's thought-provoking intersections between animals and human subjects on stage and offers an extensive discussion of the role of animals as key players in Kane's dramaturgy of simulacra.

Finally, other posthuman physiognomies that are gathering momentum in contemporary speculative literature concern organic humanoids or eugenic mutants, who reify a nomadic subjectivity mainly cleaving to a material and biological substratum. Fed through various channels, be they technical-scientific or esoteric-mythopoeic, such a substratum becomes the natural element of hybrid and metamorphic creatures that, while situating themselves at the human/nonhuman species interface, can be shown to develop, adapt and acquire cogency in protean and challenging ways.

In Camilla Del Grazia's "Remades and their Sociospace in China Miéville's Bas-Lag Trilogy" ["I 'Remades' e il loro spazio sociale nella trilogia di Bas-Lag di China Miéville"], the notion of the biotechnological hybrid is magnified and appraised through a political lens. The so-called Bas-Lag series (2000-2004) by British author and activist China Miéville is self-declaredly imbued with 'weird fantasy' traits and references to steampunk technology that give a vivid imprint to contemporary speculative-fiction writing. In the multiracial, imperialistic and half-magical universe of Bas-Lag, "Remades" are lawbreakers of various species whose bodies have been purposely re-engineered as a punishment for their offences. Availing herself of a posthumanist as well as Foucauldian approach, Del Grazia meditates on how such modified, re-created, human-animal and partly mechanical creatures could be cast as simulacra of a changing social panorama where the dictates of capitalist economy, civic control and the centralisation of power are prime moving forces. Indeed, Remades are physical embodiments of «discursive as well as material practices that define social living in different spaces» within the Bas-Lag confines.

Francesca Mussi's "North American Indigenous Perceptions of the Apocalypse and a Renewal of Kinship Relationships through the Imagination" ["Le percezioni dell'apocalisse sul fronte indigeno nordamericano e il rinnovarsi dei legami di parentela attraverso l'immaginario"] enters the

simulacra world through an oblique route whose milestones are constituted by archetypal and iconic symbols as well as figurative paradigms from the imaginary of Indigenous peoples across Canada. By interweaving Eco-criticism, Postcolonial and Indigenous Studies, Mussi tackles the notions of climate change and environmental apocalypse through the historical and mythopoeic filter of an indigenous episteme. In so doing, she lays emphasis on what those peoples already perceive as a post-apocalyptic condition coinciding with the aftermath of settler-colonialism and its disruption of ancestral kinship relationships. Mussi then highlights how speculative-fiction works such as Lee Maracle's "The Void" (2016) and Daniel H. Justice's "The Boys Who Became the Hummingbirds" (2016) can be instrumental in conveying a powerful message of healing and renewal. By enhancing Indigenous traditional knowledge systems and kinship values that take into account both humans and the land, these texts cut ties with a shadowy universe of simulacra with the intent of restoring one of living entities.

In "Blackbeard and the Post-Anthropocene Humanoids: Tracing the Post/Transhuman in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy" ["Blackbeard e gli umanoidi del Post-Anthropocene: una disamina del post/transumano nella trilogia *MaddAddam* di Margaret Atwood"], Laura Giovannelli takes her point of departure from the post-apocalyptic setting of Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013) in order to investigate the meanings and phenomenologies of a simulacrum conceived as the materialisation of a hybrid, osmotic and nomadic ontology. This kind of organic simulacrum is the result of 'mad scientist' Crake's brash biotechnological experiments, which have redesigned the human along post-anthropocentric lines and *vis-à-vis* a global-scale environmental disaster. In what is dramatically portrayed as a new, posthuman geological era, the 'humanimalised creatures' that Crake has forged via genetic engineering do emerge as the fittest inheritors of the Earth. Giovannelli looks closely at the Crakers' identity as multispecies humanoids hovering between an anthropological and a zoomorphic dimension. She finally observes how, if capable of establishing bioegalitarian relationships with the ecosystem, such pseudo-primates also show uncanny features that come to the fore through their leader Blackbeard, in whose progressive familiarisation with rational and symbolic thought one may catch a potentially transhuman, back-to-human longing.

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