

POSTHUMAN PERSPECTIVES:  
 THE STRANGE CASE OF JODIE MACK AND JOHANN LURF  
 Vittorio Lubrano (New University of Lisbon)

*To the community of Doc's Kingdom*  
*Arcos de Valdevez 2019*

«very soon we looked back and saw that  
 he was nowhere any more and our lord was  
 alone, holding his hand in front of his face to  
 screen his eyes, as if he had seen some terrifying  
 sight, one that no one could endure to behold»  
 Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 1648-1652<sup>1</sup>

## 1. POSTHUMAN AESTHETICS? SKETCHES OF A CARTOGRAPHY

The idea of a “posthuman aesthetics” is more puzzling than it may first appear. Such an idea encompasses more than an aesthetics of the posthuman – a particular branch of philosophical aesthetics concerned with phenomena that can be described as posthuman – or an aesthetics that is posthuman in itself, challenging how we conceive of the discipline. In fact, the realm of the so-called posthuman and the domain of aesthetics – especially when understood in its broader sense as *aesthesis* – cannot be dissociated one from the other: they betray a stratified and multidimensional co-implication. On the one hand, the idea of the “posthuman” structurally involves an important aesthetic dimension; on the other hand, artworks provide privileged access to (and a stress test for) many focal points on this new (not merely) cultural and theoretical horizon.

Art has indeed played a central role in the very genesis of a “posthuman convergence.”<sup>2</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that the term “posthuman” was coined in a literary studies article on performance and the metaphor of Prometheus.<sup>3</sup> The seminal exhibition “Post Human,” curated by Jeffrey Deitch in the early 1990s,<sup>4</sup> can be considered the official inauguration of the alliance

between the field of art and the emerging field of posthuman studies in Europe. But there is more than just these generic encounters between theory and artistic practice. Both spheres are in fact entangled at several levels. Hence, many concepts, categories and theoretical elaborations associated with *posthumanism* indicate its embeddedness within the aesthetic domain, for example the frequent use of expressions such as “prosthetic,” “ecstatic,” “inter-action,” and the multiple hints at affective intensity and experimentation in the realm of perceptions. On the other hand, contemporary art strongly engages with the idea of the posthuman. Some artistic currents, such as neuronal aesthetics, living arts (bioart),<sup>5</sup> biotechnological art, and digital art,<sup>6</sup> all of which have flourished in recent decades, refer to it explicitly. Moreover, many artists have explored different kinds of hybridization – between animals, humans and technology, for instance – and the porosity of the human (see, for example, the works of Patricia Piccinini, Matthew Barney, SymbioticA and Ian Chen). Artists like Sterlac and Orlan go so far as to use their own bodies in metamorphic performances of a kind of posthuman avant-garde. And, last but not least, different features that constantly recur in the field of the posthuman have been addressed by films and other moving images in heterogeneous ways. The figure of the cyborg, for instance, has been very popular in culture industrial formats; avant-garde cinema has always experimented with unfamiliar, technologically mediated ways of seeing, and more recent artistic productions such as the documentary film *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, 2012) continue to explore the possibilities of a non-human perspective.

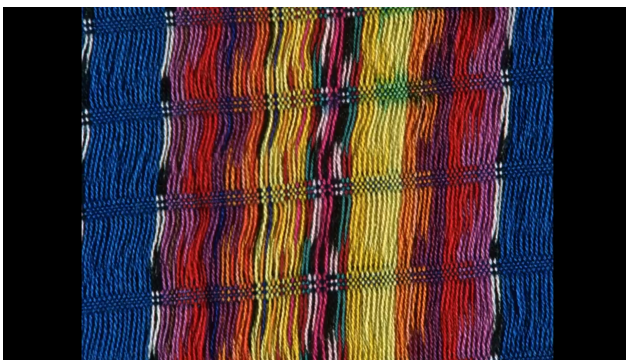
Bearing this in mind, it could thus be stated that the field of aesthetics might well function as a *fundamental laboratory* for imagining posthuman forms of life.<sup>7</sup> If we take this task seriously, the term ‘laboratory’ does not serve as a simple metaphor for the long-term pursuit of a remote goal. Instead, it provides a sensuous space in which to situate oneself in an uncertain domain and to operate experimentally. In such a laboratory, hypotheses and beliefs, convictions and understandings, are constantly exposed to the irony of their limits, entangled with the corporeality of those who are admitted as experimenters and players. The focus on one particular artistic production would thus, in such an experimental laboratory, provide an opportunity to gain insight into the realm of the posthuman insofar as the latter is being put into play in an unpredicted scenario. In other words, the focus on a particular artwork engaged with the posthuman allows us to grasp something about the implicated relations that it generates, re-elaborates, perceives and immanently criticizes. It entails the experience of altering our affective and cognitive attitudes as sensitive beings and its potential reformulation without recurring to the dominant rhetoric.<sup>8</sup> From this standpoint, a singular artwork can serve as an *experimentum crucis*, in which the relationship

between the realm of the posthuman and the realm of the senses is negotiated and reinvented, its inherent difficulties exposed.

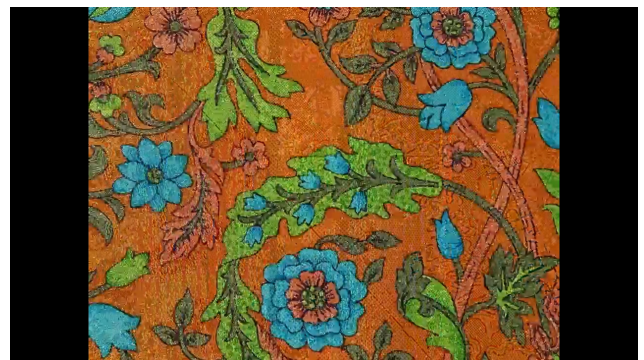
## 2.1. JODIE MACK'S *THE GRAND BIZARRE* + JOHANN LURF'S ★

In this section, we will focus on two artworks – more precisely, two complementary experimental documentaries – with the aim of grasping particular features of the posthuman through aesthetic experience: Jodie Mack's *The Grand Bizarre* (2018) and Johann Lurf's ★ (2017).

Let us begin with Jodie Mack's piece.<sup>9</sup> Based entirely on animation, *The Grand Bizarre* is an exemplary case of the art of putting together and disposing of the universe of textiles through different rhythms and verses. In the span of an hour, we are confronted with a non-stop shifting of diverse symbols and the materials on which they are inscribed: infinite chains of signifiers are depicted on carpets, towels, costumes, and foulards. This “trippy travelogue,”<sup>10</sup> which seems to last indefinitely, conveys the power of patterns and their convergence with the materiality that supports them. With the complicity of the author, a map of the world seems to be reassembled, not through geographical correlations but through symbolic links: the segments of the world are displayed in endless, constantly changing connections that avoid standard, linear associations. Jodie Mack seems to tell us that the world is indeed unified, especially if we consider the overarching analogies between signs that originate from different places such as Mexico, Poland, Indonesia, Turkey, Israel and Greece. Rather than an atlas of territories, we are led through an eclectic kind of geo-symbolism that can be retraced across the globe.



*The Grand Bizarre* extract 00:16:28



*The Grand Bizarre* extract 00:54:34

Undoubtedly, Posthuman tendencies inheres *The Grand Bizarre*. Human presences are few, always marginal, never in focus – for the most part removed from the screen. One could say that this work

can be considered a visual reinterpretation of an object-oriented ontology because of its firm rejection of subjectivity and its praise for the ontological reality of differential elements (*differences that differ*). What monopolizes the space on the screen are brief appearances of objects and forms, which are constantly superposed and exchanged by others. The constant shifting of images is accompanied by an electronic score that imitates some of the basic phonemes of the international phonetic alphabet of human languages (IPA). However, this can be understood only *a posteriori* and through Jodie Mack's explicit admission; when first listening to it, the sounds are indistinguishable from other samples of electronic music.<sup>11</sup> It seems ironic that the only human trace displayed in the film is human speech in camouflage – as if it were a kind of sophisticated revenge against the *zōon logon echôn*, the living being who has language. Picture after picture, frame after frame, a mesmerizing rumble affects the eyes and the body of the spectator. A technological force seems to destabilize those who stare at the screen, an uncanny *horror vacui*: a non-human Unidentified Object.

Nevertheless, some perplexities persist. As in a game of mirrors, this work of art, which certainly points to posthumanism, releases traces and visible fingerprints of *homo sapiens*, although the latter are no longer present. I am not referring to the occasional human traces that we sometimes encounter as apparitions strewn across the screen. Nor am I referring to the human presence that is immediately deducible from the fact that all the materials shown are, in fact, human commodities, even if only via the position of towels on a clothesline.

The human is present despite its disappearance from the screen – not as actor, but both through the idiosyncratic quality of Jodie Mack's animations and editing and in the form of the (human) audience member. While it is true that no human beings are depicted in *The Grand Bizarre*, it is nevertheless also very clear that a human spectator is supposed to watch the film and to engage with its automatic flux and obsessive circulation of signs; hence the persistence of a humanly conceived *perspective*, which is associated with Renaissance art and humanistic culture.<sup>12</sup> The adaptation of reality and the multidimensional complexity of the world to human perception through a bi-dimensional, figurative technique has been (and still is, in some cases) a hegemonic paradigm of vision and representation. This human perspective also orients the gaze in Mack's documentary, and many of the materials appear, well framed, in the center of the screen. This result is most clearly observed when Mack experiments with a vortex effect, the different signs presented in increasing or decreasing order so as to resemble living organisms in transformation.

*The Grand Bizarre* extract

00:43:22

*The Grand Bizarre* extract

00:43:25

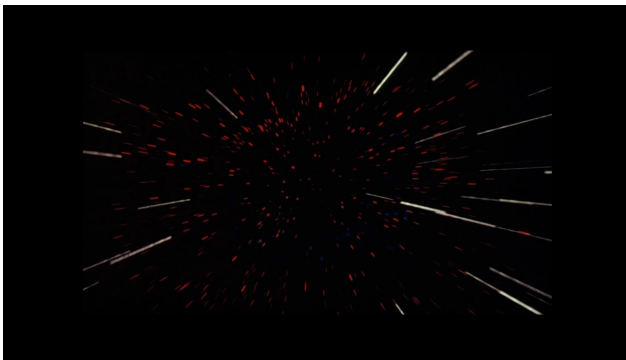
*The Grand Bizarre* extract

00:43:27

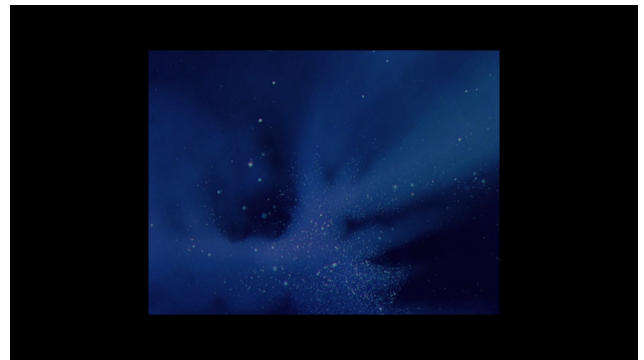
By contrast, Johann Lurf's ★ cuts all encompassing perspectival temptations at their roots insofar as what is displayed takes place not in a human environment – not even on earth – but in that which surrounds it: the universe. Featuring footage originating from “more than 550 different films that are the sources for these starry night skies,”<sup>13</sup> ★ (which is in fact an ongoing project rather than a finished film) can be described as an overloaded, “astral archive of the stars throughout 115 years of film history.”<sup>14</sup> The film does not provide the audience with a point of orientation in this space: “There are no landscapes, no frames for the sky, no objects (unidentified or otherwise), no human figures, no moon, no planets.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, one has the impression of experiencing the eternal return of the “*bestirnte Himmel*” above one, a repetition of differences (or the difference), emerging from looping reiterations, that transforms cinema into a work of *fascination* – in the broad sense of being “bewitching” – that is, something that shifts from being amusing to being strange, while still generating a kind of enchantment. We delve into “a plotless, brain-cleansing and calming movement through the skylscapes of cinema,”<sup>16</sup> following intersections of lights and bright points, starry trajectories and trails. Some of these elements also appear in other works by Lurf, which likewise have a hypnotizing effect on their viewer. In *Cavalcade* (2019), for instance, light is an important element: what we experience are recorded ludo-hypnotic variations of a stroboscopic waterwheel and the reiterated circulation of signs made of light (again, a repetition of difference). *Vertigo Rush* (2007) offers a more extreme audio-visual experience. While a dolly zoom is obsessively instantiated, evoking the experience of swinging back and forth, a constant shifting takes place, until it reaches a paroxysmal point. The spectators' visual experience is pushed to the extreme: at one point, they inevitably lose orientation and enter into a kind of ecstatic trance. This film also deals with repetitions and difference, which forces the viewers to feel the tension and the temptation of light.

Let us now turn to ★. Its title alone is worthy of commentary: unpronounceable as it is, it refuses to be a human “thing of language” at our disposal, one that can be reduced to a phoneme or to an alphabetical sign.<sup>17</sup> A mere symbol, it recalls those unpronounceable palindromes with which

Italo Calvino entertained his readers.<sup>18</sup> In order not to get lost in absolute ineffability, Lurf opts for an iconic definition that subtly reverses, in an inherent reference, that which is shown on the screen (the title appearing in dark shapes against a pale background, while the film projects flashing lights onto dark scenery) and which is at the same time an infallible but mechanic denotation arising through a particular combination of signs on a keyboard (U + 2605). The film itself, even if it is entirely based on human cultural production – as we have seen, the footage stems from existing films and thus has a crucial cultural dimension – nevertheless seems to remove any residual presence of humanity. While all of the images are indeed the fruit of human representation of the universe – through different filmic (that is, technological) means – the punctiform structure and the editing reveal a centerless blanket of stars that is irreducible to any one perspective. Confronted with such an extent of unspecified stellar constellations, we are given the impression that there is no firm, no human gaze that could give it order. After encountering the umpteenth vault of stars, the process of cogitating is overwhelmed by a sensorial overload of lights. It seems that we are lost in a philosophical *Ur-erfahrung* – the ancient experience described in the fable of Thales, who is perpetually gazing at the stars and ignoring what lies under his feet. Reflection is also activated in another sense, however. Before the magnitude of the universe, the disorienting abundance of “deep-space skiescapes,”<sup>19</sup> we as human beings are minimized in our importance to such an extent that the differences between us and other species on earth appear negligible compared to the mysteries of space. This existential experience can reveal the potential of a trans-specific audience that may share an interest in light, as they depend on the same earthly conditions as human beings.



*Stars* extract from the trailer



*Stars* extract from the trailer

The soundtrack further adds to the destabilizing effect of the decontextualized images and sequences in Lurf’s film. Although re-edited, the audio that accompanies the visuals is nonetheless a recuperation of the soundtracks of the original footage.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, fragments of sentences, exclamations, and both long and brief discourses pop up here and there among the stars, without

resulting in coherent meaning. At times, it seems as if the human presence in *★* is conceived of as the waste of non-human protagonists. Despite this tendency to erase all signs of human presence in the film, however, a presence of this sort nonetheless persists – not only because every single image has been made by a human being – every framing, editing choice and animation has undergone the mediation of both the original filmmaker and Johann Lurf – but also because certain audio/video combinations were clearly intended by the latter to be seen by human beings. For example, the very last frames of the film indicate a fundamental reference to human activity: featuring a seemingly endless list of quotations akin to the index of an archive, the form and content of the closing credits seem to allow for a rational classification of the visually overwhelming experience that precedes them – conjectural analogies, a “cinematic archaeology” of representation of the universe through films, and the generational past of starry visions ground every image in a context. The film thus reveals an explicit *philological* intention that is manifested in the chronological nature of film – alongside an entirely anthropocentric timeline. It is thus an underlying idea of order that motivates the film. An architecture full of meaning gives the work a human face. This type of analysis always presupposes an *anthropomorphic transcendental*. To be specific, both a human timing and an anthropocentric order animate the scenes of this machinic documentary, and it is precisely this familiarity that transpires, despite our disorientation, which triggers our enjoyment when following the delicate maneuvers in Lurf’s work. Indeed, it is undeniable that among the theatrical effects of the film, the so-called “public response,” its humor is an important element. Mainly due to the audio track, an ironic moment is unleashed that is perhaps something more than a *boutade* in the performance. In this respect, this work is still permeated with a *postmodern* (rather than a *posthuman*) flavor insofar as the meta-cinematographic *genius* of the author dwells in the way he pilots cross-references that otherwise remain random and excessively destabilizing. When we grasp how Lurf has reconstructed sense out of the complexity with which he is faced, alongside his cine-erudite *esprit de finesse*, we respond with complicit astonishment and a frank, liberating laughter.

And yet some questions remain: What would happen if this bastion were to fall? What if the machine were to take the lead, once and for all? What if our gaze, or properly our whole body, were to be immersed without an ironic filter in a posthuman documentary? Would we still be in the mood for laughter?

## 2.2. DREAMS OF MACHINIC DOCUMENTARIES

In order to take our enquiry into a posthuman approach further, in this section we will investigate two features shared by the two films analyzed above: 1) both point to a certain crisis of authoriality,

and 2) both intensify affective spectatorship. These aspects are oriented toward a precise *ligne de fuite*: the generation of a machinic perspective.

### 2.2.1. AUTHOR AND COMPOSITION

In the two experimental documentaries we are examining, the binomial relationship between author and artwork, director and filmed material, is even more uncertain than it always is when one deals with filmic material. Representations of signifying material are substituted by a chain of effects and automatism. This shifts the perspective of the traditional idea of art: rather than conveying the idea of an artistic subject (creator) expressing something through her artwork (creature), we are confronted with automata, not authors, that trigger the connections between images.

With reference to Mack's and Lurf's creative processes, what appears is a tendency to abstract ways of conceiving films through redundant strategies of combined repetitions that supersede the intentional production of meaning: we are confronted with a complex *program* for the circulation of images rather than a subversive intentional *mise-en-scene* of filmed material. Especially in <sup>★</sup>,<sup>a</sup> certain randomness in the flux and its relentlessness suggests that the film proceeds quasi-automatically. Watching the film, one is given the impression that a machinic intelligence lies behind its images – an autonomous algorithm, able to edit audio/video according to a predefined, mathematical logic. It would seem that film production has already moved beyond human involvement, replaced by independent, machinic agencies. Whereas in *The Grand Bizarre*, by virtue of a combination that is apparently automatic, what is projected on the screen imitates a serial production (thus pointing to modern capitalism and industrialization), in <sup>★</sup> the process of automatic selection appears as an abstraction from materiality and fabrication processes.<sup>21</sup> At first sight, this de-subjectivation through mechanic proceduralism seems to be aimed at the *dream of emancipation from human labor* (including creative fatigue) by means of a substitution by the *automaton*: algorithms are now able to proceed independently, to lead deliberation; the composition can be reduced to simple operations generated by a computer program without the need to recur to human time and living labor. The documentary seems to compose itself, as it were, while the author and her/his body seem to step behind it, thereby becoming increasingly superfluous. The artwork increasingly appears to be *techno-logy in action* – the autopoiesis of the technological itself.

In Jodie Mack's *The Great Bizarre*, we also encounter another dimension of the alliance between filmmaker and technology, which is not directly visible in the film but becomes apparent in her "making of" lecture at Doc's Kingdom.<sup>22</sup> This time, this concerns the engagement of the filmmaker's own body, which seems to be *mechanized by the machine*: the laborious process of



animating material.<sup>23</sup> The filmmaker's body seems to be trapped in a frenetic combination of repetitions, recalling the assembly line satirized by Chaplin in *Modern Times* – a symbiotic, undefined organic-mechanic agent reiterating the same actions, over and over. In Mack's case, instead of being expelled by the machine, the human body is retroactively reshaped by its feedback stimuli. In a dialectic of inversion, what is being created re-creates its creator, forcing the entity that has organized the performance to react – as in a puppet show.<sup>24</sup> What we encounter is thus a contamination with the machine as an alternative to substitution. Both in filmmaking and in the diligent post-production phase, the director thus tends towards a *continuum with the machine that recalls the productive transformation of our time*:<sup>25</sup> being a machine or becoming a machine, being this body *as if it always already belonged* to the machine. At least in the act of supplanting authoriality and making room for a sort of *machinic hybrid*, there seems to be hope for a possible reconciliation of documentary formats with the experimental energy that motivated the avant-garde works of the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, these experimental documentary practices reiterate a particular cinematographic moment – perhaps the most significant one: the cinema of attractions.<sup>27</sup>

### 2.2.2. RECEPTION AND SPECTATORSHIP

In *What Makes a Film Tick?* Anne Rutherford asks herself: “How can we develop an aesthetics of documentary that acknowledges the role of affect and embodied experience in cinema spectatorship?”<sup>28</sup> This is a particularly important task with regard to the works of Mack and Lurf, which rely heavily on the production of sensuous, bodily experiences. Their films undoubtedly trigger strong physical reactions, which make it impossible to take a contemplative stance toward them. Insofar as they directly impact the body, the latter is stripped of habitual forms of coordination – as if the *machine* turned the body itself into a machine, functioning according to impersonal directives. Nausea and exhaustion derail our control over our psycho-physical apparatus; confusion and growing excitement are provoked – in any case, a placid, passive quietness is made impossible. There is no narration to follow, no inner meaning to discover in the mesh, while the body is constantly stimulated through rhythm and light. We are confronted with mere depersonalizing fluxes through which, it seems, localized hallucinations occur: an ecstatic experience.

This evokes a new kind of protagonism of the body, which neglects both its impermeability and its Vitruvian purity<sup>29</sup> so as to open it up for unexpected encounters with “eteromorphic emergence.”<sup>30</sup> A process of de-subjectivation, already ongoing on the part of the author, is referred to the side of the spectator and seems to reactivate the expectations of an effective cinema that will

initiate a posthuman revolution – a revived Vertov, with neither man nor camera. The machinic documentary moves in the direction of those once-minoritarian attempts to rethink the aesthetic reception of documentary film. For example, Mack and Lurf help us to relativize disembodied imaginings and to take an interest in reactivating the “mimetic faculty”<sup>31</sup> and haptic spectatorship beyond visual mastery.<sup>32</sup> The cinema functioning as a fetish<sup>33</sup> that holds the power to alienate our usual standards of hearing and viewing is here undoubtedly present. The cinematic experience recalls the impactful derailing of the Deleuzian “noochock”: “It is only when movement becomes automatic that the artistic essence of the image is realized: producing a shock to thought, communicating vibrations to the cortex, touching the nervous and cerebral system directly”,<sup>34</sup> he writes in *Cinema 2*. What he describes is the moment when the automatic processes implicit in cinematographic praxis are finally unleashed and intensified up to the point of generating a *zoe*-technological apparatus: metamorphoses of a machinic-pulsional *assemblage*.<sup>35</sup> A similar idea can be found in Shaviro’s *Cinematic Body*, where he describes filmic images as the “raw content of sensations” and emphasizes that “human perception and consciousness are only secondary differentiations within this field of images in play.”<sup>36</sup> Machinic documentaries thus correspond to the description of cinematographic experience in terms of “viscerality” (beyond monoprospectivist spectatorship), “vulnerability” (the exposition and hybridization of the body), and the transfiguration and profanation of the Ego.<sup>37</sup> In addition to this, however, they add an *uncanny element* by virtue of their posthuman torsion, which complicates calls for the emancipation of the senses or a renewed bodily awareness. If rethinking spectatorship is a mandatory premise of rejecting hegemonic approaches to documentary film,<sup>38</sup> *The Grand Bizarre* and *★* push the focus on bodily experiences to the extreme. Reiterations and accelerations on the screen generate physical stimulations so intense that the issue of bodily sustainability arises in the face of non-human automatism. Indeed, the extent to which the body can sustain this invasive capacity of the technological machine remains uncertain. This forces us to reconsider the very meaning of filmmaking, of experimentation beyond human limits.<sup>39</sup> The extraordinary effort of posthuman aesthetics would then consist in surpassing Shaviro’s intuitions in order to articulate a principle of spectatorship *beyond masochism*.

The *documentaire machinique*<sup>40</sup> virulently extends its effects and contaminates production and perception, interpretation and composition, alike. In doing so, it disrupts our usual orientation in film production and reception, forcing us to rethink the limits of multisensory spectatorship and new connections in experimental film. *The Grand Bizarre* and *★* are ambiguous projects in this sense: on the one hand, they repress human presence; on the other hand, residues of the human persist on a level beyond the representational. We are confronted with a becoming-machine that

facilitates new bodily experiences while being phagocytized into a machinic flux that overtakes the metabolic capacity of the body.

### 3. OEDIPUS AS *ANTHROPOS*

Both *★* and *The Grand Bizarre* can be understood as part of a thoughtful laboratory of posthuman aesthetics.<sup>41</sup> They are certainly not self-evident, *exemplary cases* of posthuman art, however, for although they reveal the potentiality of new forms in the broad field of documentary film, they risk a double aporetic stalemate. On the one hand, they still linger in an *anthropic complex* in which, despite the strategies adopted, an ineluctable human trait appears to disturb the project of overwhelming anthropomorphisms in art. On the other hand, however, the process of de-subjectivation that involves both subject-author and subject-spectator makes room for the emergence of a mechanic hybridization while exposing the body to regimes of cyborg toxicity and to its own potential unsustainability. We are thus dealing with a *strange case*, an insidious experiment that twice risks ending in a human tragedy – the destruction of the body – while at the same time revealing an uncommon, ecstatic potentiality. This potential can be understood by bringing into play the figure of Oedipus, giving emphasis to a particular aspect that is briefly noted by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>42</sup>

Oedipus' story is the tragedy of the *anthropos*<sup>43</sup> – more precisely, the tragedy of chasing (away) the *anthropos*: (hu)manh(a)unt. In this sense, the tragedy can be interpreted as a perennial compassing of the polysemic reference to the *anthropos*. *Anthropos* is precisely the long-awaited hero who must save the city from the menace of the “riddling Sphynx”; *anthropos* is the word needed to solve the riddle; *anthropos* is the infesting presence that must be identified and expelled from the city. *Anthropos* is Oedipus, and therefore he is the one to be chased. Once chased – and chased away – in the tragedy at Colonus, he will again be the chased *anthropos*: the object of a manhunt by Polyneices and Creon, for a different purpose.

Part of the fascination with this tragedy results from the progressive captivation of Oedipus in this *anthropic complex*: the more he tries to erase *this* human being (the human being he is) from the public sphere, the more he is involved in misunderstandings. He is the one who will be flushed out and then expelled, eternally chased away. He is the one who must fulfil this assignment, even though he cannot divest himself of his own being-human – he is both hunter and hunted, haunting and haunted. His machinations are therefore destined to face the impossibility of eliminating his own humanness and to assist, at the same time, in his return as a destabilizing factor for his entire existence. A human trait opposes his obsession and condemns him to a never-before-seen end – the

destiny of never seeing what lies before one. The same trait returns, then, notwithstanding the systematic repression.

Addressing Oedipus from this standpoint allows us to conceive of him as a paradigmatic figure of the *vertigo* that we encounter in posthuman aesthetics. A subtle affinity with the myth resounds in the relentless battle to expel the infesting (although apparently reassuring) presence of the *anthropos* and in the idea of focusing on the human as a modern bias that compromises the possibility of a more decentered, “ecological”<sup>44</sup> kind of thought. If a promising and liberating potential inheres in problematizing human presence and deconstructing it through artistic practice, the attempt to wipe out the influence of the *anthropos* testifies both to its perseverative subterranean, insidious reappearance and to the difficulty of imagining a completely dehumanized horizon.<sup>45</sup> In other words, we are confronted with two complementary aspects when trying to think of a posthuman attitude: first, the perpetual removing and returning of the *anthropos*, and second, the emergence of radically other forms of life that shatter all preceding aesthetics. Here, one may locate one of the most decisive moments in conceiving of the possibility of a posthuman proposal for the arts.

Oedipus, the hero who bears the “human” on his lips, is also the man who stabs himself in the eyes. The radicalness of his gesture lies not in the act of wiping blood from his eyes (as it appears in the films of Lucio Fulci or Quentin Tarantino) but in the generation of a visual rupture through which the gaze of the *anthropos* is irremediably lost. Oedipus eradicates his eyes and is lost in visual non-sense, but, at the same time, this allows him to make room for a new, hitherto unknown, unexperienced sense. After so many misunderstandings, this new sense finally *makes sense*. What the films of Jodie Mack and Johann Lurf may be insinuating is that the production of a new kind of gaze can enable us to find room for a different ecological and techno-mediated sensibility, beyond self-destructive anthropocentric perspectivism. With Oedipus, we venture towards other senses, to the brink of non-sense, but in order to reach these we must deprive ourselves of the senses on which we have hitherto relied. Herein lies the ineffable, unlocatable, blinding oedipal wisdom achieved at the end of his journey.<sup>46</sup> We will hopefully achieve this wisdom at the end of our artistic *dérives*. There, our aesthetics may be called posthuman, even if this implies an apparent delirium.

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<sup>1</sup> Sophocles. *The Oedipus at Colonus of Sophocles*. trans. Richard Jebb. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1889.

<sup>2</sup> Braidotti, Rosi. *Posthuman Knowledge*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Hassan, Ihab Habib. "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?," *The Georgia Review* 31/4 (1977): 830-50. See also, Ferrando, Francesca "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations," *Existenz* 8/2 (2013), 27.

<sup>4</sup> In Lausanne and Rivoli in 1992, then in Athens and Hamburg until May 1993. See Deitch, Jeffrey. *Post Human*. Lausanne: FAE Musée d'Art Contemporain, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Braidotti, Rosi and Hlavajova Maria. *Posthuman Glossary*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 64-65; See also Ivi, 285-287.

<sup>6</sup> LaGrandeur, Kevin. "Art and the Posthuman," in *Posthumanism. The Future of Homo Sapiens*. edited by Michael Bess and Diana Walsh Pasulka, 377-388. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Macmillan Reference USA, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> In this direction see also Wamberg, Jacob. "Dehumanizing Danto and Fukuyama: Towards a Post-Hegelian Role for Art in Evolution," in *The Posthuman Condition. Ethics, Aesthetics and Politics of Biotechnological Challenges* edited by Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, Jacob Wamberg, 141-156. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2012, 151.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Chen, Nancy N. "'Speaking Nearby: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha'" *Visual Anthropology Review* 8 (1992): 82-91.

<sup>9</sup> I had the privilege of attending the International Seminar on documentary film "Doc's Kingdom" in 2019. This was part of an intense week of debate, screenings and meditative moments.

<sup>10</sup> Clarke, Cath. "The Grand Bizarre Review - Trippy Travelogue to Who Knows Where." *The Guardian*. [Guardian News and Media](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/apr/08/the-grand-bizarre-review-jodie-mack-travelogue-documentary). last accessed 29 June 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/apr/08/the-grand-bizarre-review-jodie-mack-travelogue-documentary>

<sup>11</sup> Ivi: "The DIY soundtrack is a trance-y smorgasbord of traffic noises, bippy-boppy electronic beats, birdsong, the clanks and rhythmic whirs of industrial sewing machines, and even that universal sound of connectivity, the Skype ringtone."

<sup>12</sup> For a critical approach to humanism, see also Cacciari, *La mente inquieta*. Torino: Einaudi, 2019; Davies, *Humanism*. London: Routledge, 1997, chapter 3. On the photographic paradigm in perspective, see Hoelzl, Ingrid, and Remi Marie, *Softimages. Towards a New Theory of the Digital Image*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Clarke, "The Grand Bizarre Review - Trippy Travelogue to Who Knows Where."

<sup>14</sup> Perrin, David. "The Reflection of Stars: An Interview with Johann Lurf." MUBI. last accessed 26 June 2020. <https://mubi.com/pt/notebook/posts/the-reflection-of-stars-an-interview-with-johann-lurf>

<sup>15</sup> Carroll Harris, Lauren. "Space Is Not a Landscape: Johann Lurf's ★." *Kill Your Darlings*. last accessed 26 June 2020. <https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/article/space-is-not-a-landscape-johann-lurfs-star/>

<sup>16</sup> Ivi.

<sup>17</sup> I would like to personally thank Johann Lurf for this posthuman insight, which has remarkable consequences for internet search engines. From the 2019 Press Kit for ★: "The only title of the film is ★ and not Star, (Star), Star-Film, \*, Star Symbol, ... or any other verbal form. Your graphic designer may copypaste the symbol from this PDF or use its Unicode Character ›black star‹ (U + 2605). However you can use the font of your choice."

<sup>18</sup> See Qfwfq, Kgwgk and Pfwfp in Calvino, *The Complete Cosmicomics*. London: Penguin UK, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Carroll Harris, "Space Is Not a Landscape: Johann Lurf's ★."

<sup>20</sup> From the 2019 Press Kit for ★: "The spoken languages are: English, Japanese, French, German, Russian, Spanish, Dutch, Italian, Swedish, Hindi, Finnish, Norwegian, Bulgarian and Portuguese. No subtitles will be provided in any form for this film."

<sup>21</sup> This parallel may give rise to equivocation: although undeniable attention is given to the human fabrication of textiles, in *The Grand Bizarre* the latter are always understood as products, conclusions of the process of labor and the deposited result of working activity. Consequently, they are objectified entities that can easily be translated into signifiers for abstract composition.

<sup>22</sup> Jodie Mack held a *lectio magistralis* titled "Motion's not dead" at Doc's Kingdom 2019 on 5 September.

<sup>23</sup> In a minute, hundreds of images alternate with each other. Cf. passages from the interview given by Mack: "That film, and this idea of animated long takes. I couldn't shoot anything longer than 30 seconds because that's the duration of a full wind on the Bolex, and so while I did have a couple of shots that go the

full 30, most of the time you have this ultra-compression of time under the illusion of a long take, where you can see the light passing super-quickly”; in Williams, Blake (2018) “The Grand Bizarre (Jodie Mack, US) — Wavelengths”. *Cinema Scope*, 76.

<sup>24</sup> Puppeteers of the past would commonly deform, distort and shape their gestures in a symbiotic relation to the puppet. In a certain sense, the puppeteer is captivated by the creature he is trying to animate. He therefore ends up re-animating himself, restructuring his bodily functions so as to energize what would have otherwise been a clumsy assemblage without coordination (giving rise to a paradox: the puppeteer himself becomes an uncoordinated, clumsy assemblage for governing the action). On marionettes, puppets and mimes, see the pioneering works by Elenio Cicchini. Cf. Cicchini, Elenio, *Vita mimica. Etica e linguaggio dei mimi*. Cagliari: Università di Cagliari, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> See Lazzarato, Maurizio. “Immaterial Labor,” in *Radical thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* edited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2010.

<sup>26</sup> A philological reading will easily detect quotations from structuralist films, from the delirious cyclicities of Snow, or the acoustic-visual distortions of Sharits and Blach’s *The Cut-Ups*, etc.

<sup>27</sup> See Tom Gunning’s list in Webster, Sam. “Works Consulted.” film110/ Works Consulted. last accessed 10.11.2020. <http://film110.pbworks.com/w/page/12610319/Works%20>

<sup>28</sup> Rutherford, Anne. *What Makes a Film Tick? Cinematic Affect, Materiality and Mimetic Innervation*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2011, 126.

<sup>29</sup> On the impermeability of the body (the belief in the integrity of the body profile as a container of all perception) and on Vitruvian purity (a self-transparent, soon-to-be-clothed body according to the most creative variations of the *techne*), see Marchesini, Roberto. *Estetica Postumanista*. Milano: Meltemi 2019, 7-62; on the Vitruvian Man as a paradigm, see also Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, 13-55.

<sup>30</sup> This formula recalls a recent attempt to define the mutation of the modern paradigm, from a reception based on aesthetic reflective judgments to a new kind of interaction with non-human alterities. See Marchesini, *Estetica postumanista*, 248. The “technomorphic sublime” could be a fair definition in this case.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Benjamin, Walter. “On the Mimetic Faculty.” in *Reflections*. New York: Harcourt. 333-36 and Laura Marks’s reinterpretation of it.

<sup>32</sup> Marks, Laura. *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, 129-193.

<sup>33</sup> The word “fetish” recalls William Pietz’s idea of an object whose power of representation comes by virtue of our contact with it.

<sup>34</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, 156.

<sup>35</sup> In *Anti-Oedipus* and *Milles Plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari discuss this aspect at length.

<sup>36</sup> Shaviro, Steven. *The Cinematic Body*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 29-30.

<sup>37</sup> On “masochistic aesthetics” see especially Ivi, 57-65.

<sup>38</sup> Laura Marks insists on the metaphor of the skin, which is helpful for expressing porosity and open-ended relationality (see also Preciado, Paul Beatriz, *El deseo homosexual*. Barcelona: Melusina, 2009) but without taking into account the element of toxicity and radical pervasiveness of posthuman aesthetics. In this sense, the threshold of a membrane-like contact with the body is still an irenic vision compared to that of molecular “strangeness.”

<sup>39</sup> Will we need (more-than) human enhancements in order to endure the new frontiers of aesthetic experimentation?

<sup>40</sup> This expression was coined in a friendly conversation with Jean-Jacques Adrien, Jacques Lemièrre and Rui Teigão.

<sup>41</sup> A set of elements testifies to the departure from the human referent: the absence or highly reduced presence of humans on the screen, as well as their gazes, their faces, their words; the compositional form of sequences – compulsive repetition, obsessive loops of images and sound, the absence of a narrative *fil rouge*; the centrality given to non-human elements – a certain matter and its symbolic implications or certain symbols and its material implications; a certain estrangement or *Benommenheit* in perception (this impedes interpretative approaches based on author/spectator identification, on the hermeneutics applied to the plot, and on the “psychologizing” of the author’s intentions); a mechanic/automatic component that involves both production and reception. These remarks do not pretend to be exhaustive, but they support the above hypothesis.

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<sup>42</sup> See Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, 4: “Oedipus’s answer to the riddle of the Sphinx – ‘That being is man’ - is repeated indiscriminately as enlightenment’s stereotyped message.”

<sup>43</sup> The word *anthropos* has two referents that are distinguished in many modern languages: ‘Mensch’/human being – the generic universal for the *rational animal* – and ‘Mann’/man – the most privileged and impositive kind of *Mensch*.

<sup>44</sup> Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> “The technique of reflexivity favored by posthumanist thinking implicitly follows a humane-itarian politics of visibility that reinstates the very form of life that posthumanism strives to displace” in Rangan, Pooja. *Immediations. The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*. London: Duke University Press, 2017, 175.

<sup>46</sup> “The extinction of sight is the positive condition for a new space and time, the strange realm of fascination and the image” (Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 54).