

## **The Future of the Past:**

### **Body Technology and Myth in the Work of Michael Najjar**

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*“And it won't be too long before you get your claws on our most exclusive privilege – the creation of life itself, as a counterpart to mass extermination as it were. First a virus, then a microbe followed by a worm, *Caenorhabditis elegans*, and then one day you'll engineer a human being in your own image – that even now usually has a doll-like vacuity.”*  
*Harry Mulisch, The Discovery of Heaven (1992)*

In future will we still speak of the human past? Of the post-biological history of humanity? What changes in the image of the human being are being engineered by current or emerging possibilities of genetic intervention in the human body and the rapid on-going development of the human-machine interface? To what extent is the notion of the ‘human being’ - which used to be the exclusive province of metaphor and imagination - bound up with the characteristics of its highly specific yet infinitely complex material body? To what extent will the prosthetic extension of the body and technological invasion of its inner workings create a new awareness of what it means to be human? A new being seems to be emerging in the wake of the old definitions – a body endowed with immortality, generated by machines, a bionically optimized body capable of self reproduction that transcends the restrictions of time and space, eludes sexuality and its discontents and evades traditional notions of humanism which, while positing the human being as an autonomous, responsible subject, still subject him or her to endless regulation, discipline, and control. How far is a new anthro-technology capable of fulfilling the dreams of the old myths?

These issues and the unanswered questions they raise stand at the very center of the work of Michael Najjar, both in terms of the technological possibilities they offer and the mythological dimensions they contain which show that particular figments of the imagination now entering the realm of the possible have in fact been thought of long ago – imaginary scenarios of the future exemplifying artificial bodies and their mythological past in equal measure. What we see in Najjar's work are views of machines, laboratories, archives for the storage of genetic material and whole human bodies all subject to a sophisticated process of digitalization and placed in new settings so that the boundaries between analog and digital, real and fictive, natural and supernatural become indistinguishably blurred as do the lines demarcating representation from imagination, reality from model. One of the works shows a huge, savagely vital and seemingly autonomous operation robot at the Berlin Charité hospital. Its title bears the name “prometheus”. In ancient Greek “Prometheus” literally means “he who

thinks ahead” and refers to the mythical Titan and close friend of the goddess Athena who fashioned humans out of clay and was their first teacher. He also returned fire to the human race which Zeus had hidden from it in retribution for a trick Prometheus had played on him. For which not only he himself but the whole of humankind was cruelly punished. The deceptively appealing beautiful virgin Pandora (“the all-gifted”) brought the fatal box to humankind in which each of the gods had placed a malignant gift. When, despite the warnings of Prometheus, the box was opened, all the evils and diseases inflicting mankind escaped and have infested the earth ever since. Thus the title of the work plays both on the fear that machines - previously used exclusively for mechanical purposes - might suddenly develop their own autonomous wills, and on the perception that incalculable risks are associated with such an evolution that once started would be unstoppable and irreversible. Extending this line of argument, the father of the gods Zeus appears in the video “the singularity” in the form of a proud eagle who must see and recognize that his former divine power and exclusive privilege of creation has slipped from his hands and been taken over by humankind and its machines.

Another work shows a clinically sterile gene sequencing device bathed in artificial white and green light and labeled as ME2-SAL-EM. Read this out loud and you will easily see that it is a play on the biblical figure of Methusalem who, according to the Old Testament, reached the ripe old age of 969, making him the oldest man in the Scriptures. Scholars attribute his advanced age to translation errors inflating a shorter life span, but biblical literalists take it as proof that before the all-destroying flood the original human being was created for a perfect life, for the eternal life taken from us by the fall of man in the Garden of Eden and which we will only return to at the end of time.

Another work (aging box 95+) shows an open freezing compartment in an institute of molecular biology which conserves gene samples from people over 95 years of age – an archive for future history when genetic optimization could enable multiple extensions of our life span. Finally, in another work (cryostat hssv 6-7) three white cryonic tanks can be seen. The viewer remains in doubt as to what is genuine in this work and what is the result of digital processing. The true reality of the work, however, lies in what is concealed from the eye, the fact that each of tanks contains six dead bodies immersed in liquid oxygen at a temperature of – 196° C, the bodies of people who had the technology-induced hope that one day their conserved shells could be reawakened to new energy and ever-lasting life. This has been

common practice in the USA for many decades now and derives much of its legitimacy from the Christian belief in a forthcoming resurrection.

Indeed religious utopias and mythical notions are written large in the long waged debate on transhumanism when it turns to aspirations for ever-lasting life for the human body, the opportunity to become human all over again, and the dream of the final release of the spirit from the filth and torpor of earthly matter – in a move where humankind is no longer a species inflicted with illness and punished by death which must perforce await the end of the world before it can receive redemption, but rather one that can actively advance the agenda, use its own power to assume the role of Creator and make its own intervention in the divine blueprint. Humankind shall rule over what rules over it. This is coupled with the utopias of infinitely networking and optimized intelligence which can be transmitted from brain to brain, but it also evokes social and political aspirations for translocally networking brains and new possibilities of identity. The fact that humankind has already furnished ample proof of its own inhumanity gives the precise grounds for justifying genetic modification – quite apart from the fact that in any case genetic modification is destined to become common cultural practice. From such an evolutionary perspective, technology is no longer viewed as a counterpart to culture and a symbol of the exploitation of nature but rather as an entity which offers us the possibility of surpassing ourselves and redeveloping our natures – of becoming an “Übermensch” in Nietzsche’s sense who can freely shape his or her own existence. The world is not as it actually is but rather how it can be. The risks associated with such a perception are understood and accepted.

The criticisms voiced by the last proponents of humanism are easy to imagine: who will bear responsibility for this? Who decides which means are to be allowed the technical resources of biopolitics which can now reach deep into the very source of life itself? Who will hold the political power over the power of knowledge? What will become of values such as “individuality” and “identity” when the relationship between original and copy morphs into its very opposite, when copies can be generated and arbitrarily reproduced without recourse to the original, or when the copy far outstrips the original? What means of discrimination will still remain for us? Are reality and image superimposed in such a fashion that we can no longer distinguish between reality and its pictorial representation – as has long been the case with digitally processed photography? Is a genuine hypereality of human life now being created similar to the digital illusions which are such a hallmark of science fiction movies?

Yet if we look back into the cultural history of the body – which was always by way of a cultural vision with privileged projection in the figures of myth and the fine arts – we see that nearly everything which is now in or entering the domain of the technically feasible was already postulated in the myths of antiquity. Making visible these dreams and imaginings in which humankind construed itself, and revealing the analogies they present between the technological here and now and the myths of antiquity is a central concern of Najjar's work series. For instance, it shows a replica of the famous Laocoön group of figures. When this marble copy came to light in 1506 in Rome it caused a sheer sensation. It is most probably a copy of a Greek original dated circa 200 BC which has since been lost. It shows the grisly death agony of the Trojan priest Laocoön and his sons as described in Homer's 'Iliad'. Laocoön was vehemently against bringing the legendary wooden horse into the city which the Achaeans had apparently left as a sacrifice to Athena goddess of victory and as a seeming token of their armies' withdrawal. He hurled a lance at the belly of the horse in which the Greeks were crouching waiting to embark on the final destruction of Troy. Angered by his act, the goddess Athena sent two monstrous sea-serpents to strangle Laocoön and his twin sons. However, in Michael Najjar's reworking of it, this well-know sculpture from antiquity, whose pathos and drama have long been discussed in the annals of art theory, becomes a symbol of ambivalence. On the one hand the image appears as an expression of the rapture and fascination those involved feel about the new form of a possible existence; on the other, it can be seen as a cautionary warning about a potential, incalculable catastrophe which - at least in mythical terms - really did happen. The glass snake becomes a metaphor for the invasive technology of networking which holds the partly natural, partly artificial bodies in its tight embrace. Here, too, the natural bodies which served as models for the work can no longer be distinguished from their digital constructs set against a preternaturally white background. The twin brothers have now become son and daughter just as bereft of navels as is their dubious natural father, a discreet sign that theirs was not a natural way of conception.

Yet another role model from mythology and art history is offered by the old story of Danaë of which Titian's masterly rendering from 1556 is perhaps the most famous exposition. Danaë was the daughter of the Greek king Acrisius and the lover of Zeus. Warned by an oracle that this relationship would result in his own death, Acrisius locked his daughter up in a bronze tower in his fortress at Argos. Yet Zeus saw the lamenting girl and impregnated her with an immaterial shower of golden rain that could penetrate through the metal walls. Afterwards she

gave birth to the demigod Perseus who was indeed destined to kill her father. Once again the scenario unfolding is one of prophecy and threat but also - and more crucially - touches on the divine ability to take on an immaterial form capable of penetrating matter, including the matter of the human body, and transforming it. The cloned Danaë now lies spread like a Barbie doll, naked and ready for artificial insemination. The golden rain consists of visualized atoms of gold whilst contemporary nanotechnology as their present day embodiment is capable of penetrating the recesses of subatomic particles, the domain of antimatter and the last keys of the microcosmos.

A similar relationship is discernable in the two works entitled “figura serpentina”, in their female and male versions, which draw on the famous group of figures sculpted in 1583 by Giovanni di Bologna in Florence showing the mythical “Rape of the Sabine Women”. If the stuff of legends, which dates back to the early days of the city of Rome, talks of the need to abduct women from a neighboring city to overcome the grave lack of females in Rome’s own population and thus assure the survival and continuity of the city, Michael Najjar’s digital reinterpretation focuses solely on the vision of single sex self-reproduction. This dispenses with any need for gender opposites for reproductive purposes since the new type of reproduction relies solely on gene technology. Identical copies grow from copies of copies with no original blueprint. As the work “spare room” compellingly demonstrates, an endless series of copies of the same body serve as a potential surrogate storehouse for bodies which can be produced and reproduced ad infinitum.

Are new angels being created, a species whose gender classification, even in religions and mythologies, remains shrouded in mystery? Bionic Angels perhaps? The eponymous work shows a seemingly hyperreal woman whose head is enclosed in a network of the scanned neuronal fibers of her own brain which float around her like a spider’s web, a network that can be connected to many other networks to form a SuperNetwork; a SuperNetwork in which many brains can fuse together to form a MetaBrain; a brain in which many identities can be linked to form a SuperIdentity: a utopian dream – or “telematic dreaming” as the title says!

The dream of inhabiting another body, which in mythology was the exclusive precinct of the gods, seems now to be entering the realm of what is actually feasible. Myths could become reality and no longer mere aspirations and projections. Were they to do so, this would mark the beginning of a new chapter in human history that would leave humanism with

fundamental new questions to answer. The new sets of anthropological and biopolitical issues, which have now emerged or are slowly crystallizing and which are broached by Michael Najjar in visually striking images informed by the whole canon of western cultural history, might include such issues as: What kind of life is worth living and merits conception and cloning, reproduction and resurrection? Who shall determine this and hold the reins of power over it? What will happen if political authority and the power of knowledge and technology break down? Will this result in biopolitics in the term used by Michel Foucault, which will have totally new dimensions quite unlike anything that has gone before? Or, on a more positive note: What opportunities will a posthumanist arena of thought offer us? Which of those human aspirations and dreams could be fulfilled that, as we have now seen, have always formed the anthropological component of our history?