

# The Grotesque and the Techno-grotesque

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# THE GROTESQUE AND THE TECHNO-GROTESQUE

Bernard SCHÜTZE

The hybridization of the body and the incorporation of new technologies into the body itself has given rise to situations that can be qualified as grotesque. There are two sides in the body/technology problematic, the immaterial, light and virtual side, with as its image the angel, and the material, heavy and mechanical side, with as its image the monster. The comparison between the art of the grotesque and the body/technology relationship, unlike the immaterial approach with its appeal to the disembodied virtual, is based on the materiality of the body in its prosthetic couplings with technology. The proposition here is to examine the monstrous and grotesque side of the prosthetic alliance between the body and technology, with all the impure mixtures and heteroclitic combinations that it may give rise to.

The grotesque is made manifest in the combination of heteroclitic elements that allow fundamentally disparate things to co-exist within the same image. In the art of the grotesque it is almost always the body which suffers all sorts of alterations, distortions and exaggerations, with the objective of going against the established rules and to reveal the dark side of humanity. The grotesque is amply present in the fantastic universe of Hieronymous BOSCH, with its strange hybrid creatures, the bizarre vegetable portraits of ARCIMBOLDO and in GOYA's depiction of human barbarity, to name but a few. In these works of the grotesque the body becomes the theatre of a wide gamut of distortions, grafts and mixtures resulting in a monstrous image. Besides the figure of the monster there are three characteristic aspects of the grotesque : *ars combinatoria*, the *membra disjecta* and the cave, *la grotta*, which forms the root of the word grotesque. The *ars combinatoria*, practically a synonym of the grotesque, consists of the combination of heteroclitic images in which elements of vegetable, mineral and animal kingdoms are randomly assembled and mixed. The *membra disjecta* refer to the body as an assembly of detached and detachable parts in a variety of possible, and usually unnatural, reconfigurations. The cave is the place where these deformations are most at home, it is a closed, dark and often artificial space with a strong symbolic charge.

The techno-grotesque resides in the relationship between the body and technology, in their combinations which blur any defining boundaries between the organic and the technological, the human and the machine. The term grotesque is not used in pejorative sense here, but rather as an aesthetic concept which best describes these multiple, excessive and anomalous characteristics that are the basis of monstrosity. The monster, by its very nature, represents the radically other, it is a being outside of an origin which cannot be categorized within an order of succession. With the techno-grotesque it is no longer the biological anomaly which creates the monstrous, but the introduction of the biological into the technological. It is the image of this new sphinx where the human and the machine merge, this undefined zone where prosthetic devices make the emergence of cyborgs possible. There where the body slips into the machine and is digitalized, amplified, endowed with new functions and another perception, and there where the machine is grafted onto the organic, to the pull of flesh, the flow of blood and all the interior sensations of a living body. The techno-grotesque appears in this transitional space where one form slips into another, opening new spaces of potential transformation, but it is also where the radical separation between the two categories, the breach between technos and bios is made glaringly evident. It is in the interstices of this encounter, where the sensors touch the skin, the implants the organs, the interface the gaze that the monstrous is born.

These techno-bodies, cyborgs and mutants are close to the grotesque representation of the body of the *ars combinatoria*, this hybrid body,

impure and multiple which mixes and recombines elements from incompatible categories. The monster forces one to confront that which cannot be categorized and delimited in an hierarchical order. The monstrous grotesque collapses the distinction between species, it transgresses the laws of rationality and the aesthetics of the beautiful with its ideal proportions.

If today we can speak of a technological grotesque it is because the body has become the locus of a vast gamut of techno-organic recombinations, some of which are straight from science fiction and the popular imagination, while others are from the fields of science (technological, medical, military, etc.) The grotesque body which is coupled, hooked up and permanently, or temporarily, plugged into the technological is indicative of the arrival of a new body which no longer fits into the category of what we know as human. Another aspect of the techno-grotesque is related to this growing desire to hook up with the machine, no matter what, without out any examination of the social, political or aesthetic factors that are necessarily expressed through technologies. This headlong jump into technological reconfigurations of the body in part constitutes that which we call the techno-grotesque. The techno-grotesque may just be an early symptom in an increasing fusion between the biological and the technological, a symptom characterized by the fact that this fusion is always interrupted by a profound incompatibility which stops the flow and calls attention to the rupture. In order for this fusion to proceed flawlessly the body must attain a higher degree of plasticity in the virtual world and the technological envelope must be able to provide a veritable sight for sensorial expression and experience.

This future alliance between the technological and the human, this coming of the post-human, is being increasingly expressed in the popular imagination. The science fiction vocabulary, now having become current, where the body is jacked in, wired, etc. is itself indicative of a grotesque view of the body in its relation to technologies. In the sense that body is becoming but another part to be integrated into the technological, something to be adjusted, re-engineered and made to function within a larger whole. As in the *membra disjecta* of the grotesque iconography, the body becomes a machine which can be recombined in multiple ways, but this time, the *membra disjecta* are made out of metal and plastics as well of flesh and blood.

In the postmodern age where the multiple, heteroclitic mixes and diversities have become the rule, one can situate the techno-grotesque at the junction where the assemblies and juxtapositions of the body and technologies create monstrosities. The body then as a site for creating outrageous hybrids, a body wired to all sorts of machines with a relay of information between body and machine, whether it be in the increasingly sophisticated bio-medical application, in space exploration or in artistic experimentations. What is common to all these meeting grounds of body and technology is the implementation of prosthetic devices which link and bind the two domains. In those spaces where the body and machine are sewn together and plugged in, the spaces where the prosthetic devices bridge the organic and the inorganic is where the techno-grotesque is most apparent.

Prosthesis can be divided into two major groups : those which are directly implanted into or onto the body, the neuronc prosthesis from the bio-medical fields, and those that provide increased perceptual capacities, interface prosthetics, developed in the military, aeronautic and communicational fields. The neuronc prosthesis include among others, auditory, visual and neuromuscular devices as well as bionic limb implants. These prosthesis add or amplify the body's functions. The interface prosthesis include voice recognition, video conferences, virtual reality and telepresence to name but a few. They extend and amplify our perception through communication media.

In the first category it is the integrity of the organic body that is altered, either through im-

plants to the inside or additions on the outside of the body ; it is the order of the incorporation of the technological in the organic, the heavy material body, the techno-organic body. The second category is characterized by everything that allows one to increase the perceptual field beyond the immediate space of the body, it is the prosthetic envelope. In the first case something is added to the body, and in the second it is the body itself that is added to a larger entity. These two categories can of course be mixed or be combined in a single prosthesis, the gear of virtual reality is probably the closest approximation of a total prosthesis.

The cyborg is a being that integrates these two prosthetic categories, combining the amplification of physical functions with an extension of perceptual and cognitive functions through its connection into broader communicational entities, such as computer networks, which then function as environmental prosthesis. In this process the intelligent machine is acquiring somatic functions, while the body acquires computational functions in its integration into machine languages and codes.

The body of the techno-grotesque is this wired, amplified and reconstructed body, which finds itself projected into the virtual worlds via the environmental prosthesis. This body has simultaneously become a site of multiple transformations (increased motor capacities, perceptual and cognitive functions, etc.) and an abandoned, empty space (the body that is left behind while one is plugged into a virtual environment). The techno-grotesque body is this impure construction, not quite organic anymore, and not yet altogether technological. It is not entirely embodied in the virtual, nor entirely virtual in the disembodied. In its awkward array of wires and plugs, as of yet uncertain how to move within the virtual environments this techno-body is in the image of the grotesque. ●

Translated from French by Bernard SCHÜTZE

## DANCING WITH THE VIRTUAL DERVISH : VIRTUAL BODIES

Diane GROMALA et Yacov SHARIR

*Dancing with the Virtual Dervish : Virtual Bodies* is a collaborative project in virtual reality (VR) by visual artist and designer Diane GROMALA and choreographer Yacov SHARIR. It was funded with a major grant from the Cultural Initiatives Program of the Department of Communications Canada through a two-year residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada.

*Dancing with the Virtual Dervish : Virtual Bodies* resulted in several dance performances where the dancer and audience members performed and interacted with a virtual environment in real-time. Large-scale video projections of what each interactor experienced created another level of VR in the performance space, and further encouraged participation. The opportunities and limitations of the technology were embraced and explored, resulting in new creative strategies and directions for further technological development. The following notes are derived from the journals of the artists.

### Bodies

**GROMALA** : My first technologically-mediated virtual experience was with my own body when, awake during surgery, I watched my own viscera being altered and manipulated on a large screen in a research hospital's surgical - theatre. » Since then, I've insisted on my place in both the subject and object position of this medicinal discourse ; a voyeur of the instrumentality of medical imaging, I collect and personally finance, with