Motherhood and the Machine

Miglena Nikolchina

Motherhood and the Machine

Miglena Nikolchina
Sofia University

By defining the human in terms of the capacity for revolt, Kristeva unavoidably touches upon issues of robotization, technology, and the virtual. The concepts of animal and machine, though they do appear occasionally and in important ways, are never at the focus of her inquiries and are absent in this text. Yet, these two concepts to a large extent define the field of contemporary philosophical debates of the human. These debates are marked, on the one hand, by the theoretical ramifications of anti-humanism as it was handed down by 20th century French thought, and, on the other, by current scientific developments that intrude on the most intimate aspects of the human being as a living being. This second aspect is frequently perceived as insufficiently addressed by philosophy. It has been noted that the growing technological possibilities are devoid of a project due to the implosion of the political.[1] It has been noted, too, that conceptualizations lag behind actual developments in this field.[2] Yet it can also be argued that the specific solutions pursued by various approaches to the human are subtended by anxieties related to the juxtaposition of man and machine as we experience it today.

Three major theoretical orientations seem to have emerged in response to these anxieties. On the one hand, there is the trend which tries to come to terms with technological novelties and the merging of human and machine, of "organic" and "synthetic" that they imply. This trend unfolds under the rubric of "transhuman" or "posthuman" and of the "enhancement" of man. Fascinated by the progress made in various fields from genetics and bionics to artificial intelligence, this trend takes for granted leaving the human behind. The second trend predominates in animal studies. Mostly in an ethical perspective but also ontologically, this trend, to which Derrida's later writing made a significant contribution, questions the idea of the "human exception" and the rigorous distinction between man and animal on which this exception rests. While apparently antagonistic, both trends align the human with the animal (or "organic") and oppose it to technology. The third trend collapses the distinctions on which the previous two rely through the lens of biopolitics: drawing on Heidegger, Kojève, and Foucault, it regards

contemporary technological transformations as amounting to the animalization of man. The human disappears in the animal, in the machine, or in the indistinguishability of the two, confirming what Agamben has described as the inoperativeness of the anthropological machine.

On a certain level these perspectives continue tackling Rene Descartes' understanding of animals as automata identical to (safe for the complexity and smallness of the parts) manmade mechanisms. In the 18th century this idea was philosophically extended to man by Julien Offray de La Mettrie in his treatise *Man a Machine*, while the famous French engineer and constructor of man and animal-like mechanisms Jacques de Vaucanson (born in the same year as La Mettrie, 1709) attempted to prove in practice, through his inventions, that there was no difference between organism and mechanism. And yet, the fascination his automata exerted on his contemporaries and, later on, on the romantics, facilitated a major paradox: what emerged from the Cartesian identification of animals as automata was the autonomization of the automaton, its subtraction from the biological. We can go back to Homer for the fantasy of *automatoi*, mechanical helpers that can function by themselves, but it is at this point, with this fissure of the Cartesian equation, that the automaton appears as opposed to the animal (and to what will take the form of various streaks of vitalism) and as man's double, a rebellious rival, a challenge to man's identity, and a harbinger of the uncanny: the very introduction of the concept of the uncanny by Freud appears with a reference to E.T.A. Hoffmann's story "The Sandman" about a man falling in love, unawares, with an automaton.

The crucial shift subtending the autonomization of the automaton is a shift from defining the human through the effort at transcending the animal (within) to the uncanny encounter with an artificial double subtracted from it. The human is not subsumed — by the animal, the machine, or their indifference, as the three perspectives discussed above would have it — but is subjected to a novel type of anthropological machine, one that works through Doppelgangers and the threat to identity that they present. In fiction, this shift unfolds as contestation and deadly struggle on the boundary separating the doubles. Already with Mary Shelley and Hoffmann the struggle ends in madness and destruction. Descartes' legacy can be detected in Frankenstein's fiasco as creator: he fails for the simple reason that he has to use unfittingly large parts, hence the fatally monstrous appearance of his creature. External monstrosity thus becomes the sign of the creature's artificiality. The case with Hoffmann's Olympia is more intricate: her artificiality becomes apparent only after a macabre scene of dismemberment. Still, this is a difference which shows through her "parts." What if these parts become indistinguishable from the human? By the time we come to Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* the problem has shifted: far from the glaring distinctness of Frankenstein's Monster, but also of Olympia with her clockwork insides, the difference between artificial

and natural creatures has become extremely difficult to verify. What is still there, or even more so, is the threat, the hostility, the terror of an otherness which is not sufficiently other. The protagonist Rick Deckard (a transparent poke at Rene Descartes) has to perform the Cartesian operation of discerning the automaton from the human. He does so through psychological tests but also through plunging headlong into an all too human experience. Strangely for his dark and terrifyingly slippery anti-foundationalist vision, in the novel Dick provides a criterion for discernment (empathy marks the human). This is no longer the case in Ridley Scott's film version *Blade Runner* and, in fact, reversals become possible such as the one in *Alien 4: Resurrection* where the protagonist Ripley, realizing that one of the characters is a droid, remarks: "I should have known. No human being is that humane."[3]

What risks getting lost if we ignore the subtraction of the automaton is that the subtraction brings about a significant transformation in the operation — rather than inoperativeness — of the anthropogenetic machine. Technically, the transformation involves a shift from a tragic and sublime to a comic or uncanny mode of defining the human.[4] Revolt in the Kristevan sense is another aspect of this transformation. Why in the Kristevan sense? Because the point of total technological annihilation of the human is explored in its potential for infinite recreation. If tales of robots in so many cases are tales of revolt (machines against humans, humans against machines), this is because, in subtracting, the automaton subtracts the question of the human. "I revolt, therefore we are (to become human)" is the principle subtending these narratives where the artificial creature gathers like a lens the reminder that we are in so far as we are in revolt.[5] If we so frequently wonder what all these riots and protests nowadays want — what are they against? What are they for? over and beyond nihilisms, fundamentalisms and sheer purposelessness — the answer might be precisely this, by remembering the potentialities of revolt to make sense in the face of the growing superfluousness of the human.

In recent decades, however, there has been a further shift in robotic parables. Fictional artificial creatures are by definition motherless and fathered by science. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein creates his Monster after ideologically parting ways with alchemy. E.T.A. Hoffmann's Olympia is the offspring of the nefarious alliance between a scientist (the physics professor Spalanzani) and a dark arts adept (the lawyer Coppelius/Coppola). These two troubling creations appear at almost the same time in two different languages and in different parts of Europe (Hoffmann's short story "The Sandman" appeared in his collection *Night Pieces* in 1817; *Frankenstein* appeared in 1818; both works were conceived in 1816). Toward the close of the 19th century, Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *The Future Eve* (1886) introduced one of the key terms for designating artificial humans - *android* ("*une andréide*," more precisely) - with an interesting twist. The "future Eve," a perfect manmade woman is, once again, the product of a male scientist

whom Villiers de l'Isle-Adam chose to name after the "electrician" Thomas Edison. While *The Future Eve* is justifiably analyzed in terms of its blatant misogyny, it reiterates the deficiency of motherless procreation: the scientifically constructed artificial body is animated by some sort of occult femininity, Edison's mysterious assistant. With Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R.* (1920), which institutes the word *robot*, the brushes of science with the supernatural have been completely abandoned in favor of a male couple better fitting the times that are with us still: there is the scientist obsessed with his inventions and there is the capitalist whose only concern is profit. The marriage of science and business becomes the progenitor of robots as cheap artificial laborers whose rebellion brings about the destruction of the human race.

From their inception these haunting narratives of manmade creatures explicitly foreground a competition between scientific and divine creation; yet it is obvious that the (male) scientific hubris aspires to replace female generative power. Knowingly or not, maternity is hence aligned with the divine. Its absence produces a shifting deficiency in the artificial creatures, which then becomes the force driving the plot: from oddly catastrophic ugliness (the Monster stitched together from parts that are too big because, as Descartes pointed out, man cannot compete in this respect with God's machines) to incapacity for or lack of love, and to the Kantian problematic of choice and freedom powerfully and disturbingly introduced in Hoffmann's "Sandman."

Later treatments of the theme accrue other issues (thinking, self-reflexivity, loyalty, empathy, etc.): the significant change that emerges thought them is a re-conceptualization of the anthropological machine as discussed by Agamben. The anthropological machine, the machine which produces the human through differentiating it from the animal, whether projecting the animal on real animals and humans or not, presupposes an internal boundary that needs to be transcended. Tragedy is the proper mode of this transcendence. Transcending it — in and through death — creates the "blinding splendor" which Lacan notes in Antigone: if this amazing creature, man, is described by the chorus at the beginning of Sophocles' tragedy as having conquered everything but death, by the end of the tragedy Antigone demonstrates that death can be turned into precisely what makes the human. The artificial creature, however, functions as a redoubling of the human that confronts it from outside. It thus stirs the risks and the destructive consequences of the uncanny, while never being very far from the structural possibilities of comedy.[6]

One of the consequences of being motherless seems to be the lack of sexual love and reproduction: this issue is already brought forward in Mary Shelley's novel. It is with Čapek's *R.U.R.*, however, that sexual love acquires the status of a proper passageway to the human: at the end of the play humanity is destroyed along with the formula for the robots' production.

But two robotic models, more sophisticated than the rest, have fallen in love and convey the promise that they will become the Adam and Eve of a new beginning.

With the stunning new advances in reproductive technology we might expect a decline in the enthusiasm regarding the divinity of natural procreation. As late as the 1970s, in "Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini," Julia Kristeva is still able to say that "science, despite its effective devices, acknowledges it cannot now and perhaps never will be able to take away [the process of gestation from the mother]."[7] Today, we have to acknowledge that science will be able to do so. Furthermore, as Kristeva has recently noted, women seem to turn to assisted pregnancies without prejudice because, perhaps, "the pre-subjective side of feminine erotic familiarizes them with the loss of self which science imposes on the most intimate…" And yet — Kristeva adds — "feminine fertility and pregnancy not only continue to fascinate our collective imagination, but also serve as a sanctuary for the sacred. The position of modern religiosity would hold the "beyond" as no longer being above our heads but in the womb. Today motherhood is imbued with what has survived of religious feeling."[8]

This might explain the paradoxical state of affairs at the center of a powerful new rendition of the tale of rebellious robots, the 2003-2009 TV series "Battlestar Galactica."[9] An advanced civilization has been completely destroyed by its own creation, the "cylons." A dwindling group of about 50,000 survivors succeed to flee but are relentlessly pursued across the universe by "humanity's children." Initially metallic and machinelike, the cylons have meanwhile evolved to be practically indistinguishable from humans: they bleed, they sweat, they can feel, they have religious ideas and scientific preoccupations. What they cannot do is reproduce sexually and they are ready to go into any lengths to achieve this. Although the story reiterates many of the questions raised throughout the imaginative history of the artificial creature — free choice, sympathy, love, loyalty, sociality, the "need to believe and desire to know," as well as propensity for philosophical questioning — it is sexual conception and mothering that turn out to be the most difficult task for the machines and hence become the node of violence, strife, complicity, and hope.

Events in the saga are hence ultimately driven by the cylons' ambition to bring about "the face of the shape of things to come," a new generation of "God's children," a hybrid race of humans and machines. The question is why? Why should this new race be the offspring of sexual conception and natural gestation and, besides, why should this turn out to be more difficult than other human things, be they physical or spiritual? Why go through a gestating maternal body? These questions, in fact, are raised in the film by a cylon who is against this plan. Says Brother Cavil:

I saw a star explode and send out the building blocks of the Universe. Other stars, other planets and eventually other life. A supernova! Creation itself! I was there. I wanted to see it and be part of the moment. And you know how I perceived one of the most glorious events in the universe? With these ridiculous gelatinous orbs in my skull! With eyes designed to perceive only a tiny fraction of the EM spectrum. With ears designed only to hear vibrations in the air. […] I don't want to be human! I want to see gamma rays! I want to hear X-rays! And I want to - I want to smell dark matter! Do you see the absurdity of what I am? I can't even express these things properly because I have to - I have to conceptualize complex ideas in this stupid limiting spoken language! But I know I want to reach out with something other than these prehensile paws! And feel the wind of a supernova flowing over me! I'm a machine! And I can know much more! I can experience so much more. But I'm trapped in this absurd body! And why? Because my five creators thought that God wanted it that way![10]

Even if we leave aside the social and political circumstances which align robotic rebellion with the contemporary malady of ideality, the question still remains what makes female fertility so central in the face of conflicting scientific and technological facts? What makes it so vital and so crucially desirable that a science fiction saga played out against the background of exploding supernovas and galactic expanses of space revolves around it? One of the episodes ("The Farm") offers a now familiar fantasy of abject female bodies immobilized and deformed by "science"- by the cylons' experimentation to achieve a hybrid, human-machine fetus through technological means. According to the creators of the series, it won't do. It will take love: in terms very similar to Čapek's *R.U.R.* Yet in or outside of the presumptuousness of science we know love is not a case here: pregnancies will result from rape or sheer carelessness; today, they will take place in vitro and through surrogate motherhood; sooner rather than later, an all the way artificial womb will be achieved. So whence the tenacity of placing the "beyond" in the womb which surprisingly emerges in the fantasy of the pregnant machine?

Returning to Kristeva, one might note that motherhood is in any case an "impossible syllogism," a biosocial module where different codes and programs clash, a meeting point of the alien and the machine. "Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other."[11] There is not and cannot be a subject in this "process of cells, molecules, and atoms accumulating, dividing, and multiplying;" in this place where a mother becomes her own mother, where they become the same continuity

differentiating itself. This homosexual facet of motherhood, which is part of woman's specific double-faced and double-phased Oedipus, is properly speaking subjectless and hence complicit, as already pointed out, with the objectivity of scientific intrusion into the most intimate. To presume that there is a subject in this place, would take us to religion. To utterly evacuate the possibility of a subject being there, however, would lead to instability and the threat of psychosis. It is out of motherhood as this impossible cleft that the future subject is transposed to the dramas of maternal passion and maternal reliance, which threaten and warrant its existence as a creature capable of resisting its programming, a creature in revolt.[12]

What pregnant machines and robotic children subtract has, therefore, been with us for a long time. It is the process that spreads from the multiplying of cells and the clash of conflicting codes to the wagers of being a creature without fixed identity, a creature whose identity has to be constantly re-made. Machines need to be mothered: thus and only thus, those parables tell us, the subtraction of the human, which the automaton performs, will perpetuate the question of humanity's renewal. To put it differently: if the question posed by artificial creatures is "what does it mean to be human?", the answer provided by recent fables and supported by Kristeva's theoretical ramifications would be that the human is this type of machine which has partaken of maternal passion.

---

[1] Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 9.

[2] See, for example, Monique Atlan and Roger-Pol Droit, *Humain: Une enquête philosophique sur ces révolutions qui changent nos vies* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012).

[3] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118583/quotes

[4] See Miglena Nikolchina, "Man As Comedy," in *Lost Unicorns of the Velvet Revolutions* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2013), 88-108.

[5] A recent example would be the "fabricant" Sonmi–451 from David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (Random House: 2004).

[6] In pursuing the transformation of the anthropogenetic machine, I rely on the work on doubles, comedy and the uncanny conducted by the Ljubljana Lacanian School, by Mladen Dolar and especially by Alenka Zupančič. See my "Man As Comedy," "The Concave Mirror: Notes on the Parahuman in Kleist and Rilke," *Kritika i humanism* 22 (2006): 75-92, and "Inverted Forms and Heterotopian Homonymy: Althusser, Mamardashvili, and the Problem of 'Man,'" *boundary 2*, 41/1 (Spring 2014): 79-100.

[7] Julia Kristeva, "Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini," in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and A*rt, trans. T. Gora, A. Jardine, and L.S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 441.

[8] Julia Kristeva, "Motherhood Today" (http://www.kristeva.fr/motherhood.html)

[9] "Battlestar *Galactica.*" TV series. Produced by David Eick et al. Directed by Michael Rymer et al. 73 episodes. BSkyB/NBC, 2004–9.

[10] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0407362/quotes?qt=qt0517581

[11] See Julia Kristeva, "Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini." I rely also on Kristeva's later writing on motherhood and the female Oedipus in texts like "Reliance: qu'est-ce qu'aimer pour une mère?" et "L'érotisme maternel" in *Pulsions du temps* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 25-29 ; 197-215 ; "De l'étrangeté du phallus, ou le féminin entre illusion et désillusion," in *Sens et non-sens de la révolte* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 198-235.

[12] The pregnant machine appears as a metaphor delineating the potentiality of revolt as early as 1976 in Stanislaw Lem's remarkable long short story "The Mask." A machine programmed to assassinate employs all "her" formidable capacities to resist the programming. See Miglena Nikolchina, "Love and Automata: From Hoffmann to Lem and from Freud to Kristeva," in *Functions of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Thirteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts,* ed. Joe Sanders (Westport, Connecticut: The Greenwood Press, 1995), 77-82.