

Unmaking Galatea

by Hilary Bergen

“Which is the god,
which is the stone
the god takes for his use?” – from the
poem “Pygmalion” by H.D. (1917)

1. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (8 AD), the Cypriot sculptor Pygmalion carves a block of ivory into the shape of a woman and then proceeds to fall in love with his sculpture, whom he calls Galatea. He prays to Aphrodite to bring Galatea to life and Aphrodite complies, turning stone to feminine flesh: tender and acquiescent. The longevity of this early story, in which inanimate matter is made lively, reveals that the fantasy of creation is also one of possession. Like any tale that flirts with creation of life by non-reproductive means, it also bears posthuman ideas about the agency of nonhuman substances and the magical lure of the future.

In the Renaissance, the rise of modern science gave way to the project of humanism, which placed Man (rather than God), and his powers of detached scientific objectivity at the center of its system of belief. Also known as the “Cartesian subject,” this was a rational, autonomous observer who used the power of his mind to wield control over the body.

In reaction, Posthumanism challenges the idea that any of us are autonomous or completely detached from the world around us. The posthuman body is not singular or exceptional but networked: always in relation.

2. Ovid’s story has spawned countless iterations, including George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion* (1913), and its musical adaptation *My Fair Lady* (1956), where a young florist is transformed into a lady of high society by an older professor who teaches her to speak “properly.” There may seem to be a wide gap between Ovid’s theme—the manipulation of stone—and Shaw’s—the manipulation of a human woman—yet these acts of creation are taken as naturally linked through their objectifying drive. At the center of these stories is a woman who is moulded by a male creator.

Although the name sounds futuristic, “posthumanism” is actually at odds with many of the technological fantasies of the future, which often take stock in the creation and ownership of new lifeforms. The posthuman body is not always an organic body or a technological one, but instead accounts for other, nonhuman, forces that construct us, as subjects.

3. As the influence of Ovid’s narrative bleeds into other texts, the materials become industrialized and then technologized. In E.T.A. Hoffman’s 1817 story “The Sandman,” a physics professor creates the beautiful automaton Olimpia. Her special gift is the ability to listen attentively without interrupting. Almost 100 years later, Fritz Lang’s 1927 future-dystopian film *Metropolis* presents an evil robot, created in the likeness of a selfless young woman named Maria. These characters follow in the footsteps of Galatea. They are not made of ivory—Olimpia is constructed of gears and clockwork and Maria’s double has a metallic shell for a body—but each of them exist under the control and watchful eye of their creators (almost always male), and are framed as objects of romantic or sexual desire. Galatea’s lineage is propelled by a seductive technological drive.

Donna Haraway's cyborg, a machinic-organic hybrid that refuses origin stories, is as much a "creature of fiction" as she is a material artifact and "social reality."¹

4. The dawn of cybernetics brings about a newly disembodied iteration of the Pygmalion myth: the creation of digital life. The first chatbot capable of taking the Turing Test, named ELIZA, was comprised of strings of text and could simulate conversation by mimicking and learning. Like Olympia, ELIZA was built to act as a mirror for her user. Created by Joseph Weizenbaum at the MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab in 1964, she takes Eliza Doolittle (of *My Fair Lady*) as her namesake, demonstrating the persistence of Ovid's story as a referent, and revealing the posthuman impulse inherent to the myth.

In the posthuman, the digital realm is both a meadow of possibility, a great wide open or an imagined beyond AND a bracketed space in which power relations are replicated again and again.

5. Ask Apple's digital assistant Siri if she's a conscious entity and she will respond, "I am if you are." It

¹ Haraway, Donna, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 150.

should not shock us that the word “robot” is derived from the Czech word *robota*, meaning forced labour or servitude. Up until she was recently reprogrammed, Siri also responded playfully to verbal abuse. When told to fuck off, she would reply, “I’d blush if I could.”

Throughout history, the female body has been both a stubborn, material reality AND a malleable substance, ready to conform to desire.

6. Perhaps the promise of the blank canvas, the untouched block of ivory and the empty data set, is the same as the promise of *terra nullius*: “nobody’s land,” virgin and begging to be discovered, owned and controlled. If there is presumed to be nothing in place, there are no qualms about entering, claiming and transforming that space.

**What does it mean to be “posthuman?”
And how does it relate to our imagined
(made up) future of the human, told
through repeated myths like Ovid’s?**

7. Scottish artist Rachel MacLean clearly takes pleasure in making. MacLean uses both digital and analog

tools to transform the characters in her video works, resulting in a posthuman effect. Various corporealities are grafted together in cyborg fashion: the female body is made monstrous via a remixing of stereotyped form. Her satirical film *Make Me Up* (2018) features a cast of aptly-named young women (Siri, Alexa, Cortana) who are imprisoned in a candy-coloured fortress where they are demeaned, silenced and pressured to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. They're very cute and always hungry.

Maybe the “post” in posthuman is not an invitation to move past anything, but a kind of deferral that returns. It sends us back to our stories and back to our bodies.

8. Galatea and her spawn are *made up* in that they are imagined or invented by their creators but they are also made up of story and myth, repeated over time. Instead of “*Make Me Up*,” it might be “*Make Me Over... and Over Again*.” As readers of such characters, we are also made. These women represent our desires for the future, yet these desires—reductive fantasies bound up in capitalism and the subservient feminine—are anything but progressive. More and more, we look back to look forward.

There is no empty beyond, no terra nullius, in the post-affixed to human.

9. Both MacLean's methods and themes can be considered posthuman, but the posthuman is not always highly technologized. MacLean doesn't just rely on the endlessly mutable capacities of the digital realm in her art practice. Her subject matter includes capitalism, cuteness and dystopian visions of the future: the technological grotesque. But her methods are analog, tactile and embodied. She samples audio from older media forms, and uses prosthetics and makeup to transform her own body and face.

The beyond is what we already know, and the potential rests not in our capacity to conquer the great unknown, but to move into that space with care.

10. In using her own body as the primary tool in her artmaking, MacLean returns us to embodiment as a place of dynamic political thought and experimentation. Throughout the film, art historian Kenneth Clark's voice emanates from MacLean's own mouth. In character as a dominating headmistress jail-keeper, she presents us with an assemblage that is rooted in historical materiality (the "grain" of Clark's voice serves as a ghostly link between history and

male authority) but takes on a cheeky feminist significance.²

The beyond is the body.

11. In making *herself* up, and putting her own body at the center of her projects, MacLean is exercising artistic agency while also demonstrating how she, as a woman, is not immune to the hegemonic forces of such narratives, which are felt in and on her own female body. In making herself, she also works at *unmaking* history: Galatea and all of her ghosts.

The beyond is bodied.

12. The act of making is as scary as it is alluring. As a dancer, I am acutely aware of the pleasures and pains of such a task. In dance, the making, the maker and the made are one and the same. The dancer's body is canvas, instrument and artist. Dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster writes that because "dance is both the same as and separate from the person who is dancing [...] any given dance performance cannot conceal all of the labour that goes into its performance." The work of creation congeals on the body, but the making of dance is also its unmaking: "Dancing happens and, in the very moment of its occurrence, vanishes."³ Looking back, it is hard to

² Barthes, Roland, "The Grain of the Voice", *Image-Music-Text*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, p.p. 179-189.

distinguish whether I was *making* dance, or being *made* by it. Over the years, I became very familiar with my body in the mirror, caught at the bottom of a plié or glimpsed at the end of a pirouette, but I never truly owned that body.

**The bodied beyond is peopled,
material, relational. It is a place where
potential is explored and felt in the
limbs, in the chest, with the senses
(and not just the eyes). It is also a place,
just like this one, where power attaches
to bodies.**

13. I want to circle back to Ovid's myth. It is hard to separate the influence of the Pygmalion myth from the misogyny evident in the tale. After all, it is only because Pygmalion "loathed" and "abhorr'd" women for their "lascivious" natures that he decided to carve "in iv'ry such a maid, so fair, / As Nature could now with his art compare."⁴ (Ovid). What if we reimagined Galatea without Pygmalion's intentions projected upon her? At which point does the ivory block become Galatea? What if we saw her, not as the ideal wife or even a recognizable feminine form, but ultimately, as suspended in her becoming, like a dancer mid-gesture? The sculpture, unfinished; the stone, half-cut: a series of body positions. The thrill of this dance rests not in the end product (the made woman), nor in the fantasy of creating to own, but in the act of making (or unmaking) itself.

³ Foster, Susan Leigh, *Valuing Dance: Commodities and Gifts in Motion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 15.

⁴ Ovid, "Pygmalion and the Statue," *Book X, The Metamorphoses* (8 AD), Sir Samuel Garth, John Dryden, et al. trans., *The Internet Classics Archive*, [<http://classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.html>].

The beyond is a place where the rational observer remembers that they, too, have a body.

The beyond is a place where creation does not necessarily equal ownership.

Session 24

The Sessions program is intended to be a series of live, punctual and open-ended events that invite someone to reflect upon image-based practices. Adapting Session 24 to the context of social distancing, Hilary Bergen returns to text – a more conventional mode of reflection, tackling subjects that are anything but conventional. Through the lens of posthumanism, Bergen explores fantasies of creation, possession and control in relation to the feminized body. Hilary Bergen's Session offers a response to the work of Rachel Maclean (presented in continuous broadcast on April 23 from 7 pm to 10 pm as part of the dv_vd) and a meditation on the gesture of making.

