Artaud, Barney, and the Total Work of Art from Avant-Garde to the Posthuman

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Abstract: In their article "Artaud, Barney, and the Total Work of Art from Avant-Garde to the Posthuman" Matteo Colombi and Massimo Fusillo discuss the aesthetics of Matthew Barney's video-performance art and the theater of Antonin Artaud. Colombi and Fusillo highlight the characteristics of the posthuman: the rejection of Western anthropocentrism and its subversion through hybridization with human, animal, and mechanical elements, the incorporation of Dionysian imagery of the body, and a commitment to the idea of the total work of art in its blending of different artistic mediums, and indeed, of art and life. Exemplified by Artaud's writings on theater, Colombi and Fusillo suggest that these features are also to be found in avant-garde aesthetics. The most evident link between Artaud's *théâtre de la cruauté* and Barney's video circle *Cremaster* appears the ambition to create a total work of art in which a kaleidoscope of stages/landscapes is brought to life by performers whose corporal training — one centered on the energy produced by means of contraction and relaxation — resembles that of an elite athlete. While both Artaud's and Barney's aesthetics are similar in their rejection of the clear, stable distinctions of rational thought, they differ in their structuring of the artist's struggle to reshape the human body. While Artaud's theater is tied to an avant-gardist utopian teleology, Barney stresses the inevitable inconclusiveness of every total work of art.

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The term posthuman is arguably the most radical of the handful of recent categories to employ the *post-* prefix (posthistory, postdramatic, postgay, and so forth), a trend that underlines the contemporary crisis of categorization. Indeed, revealing the complex interaction between theoretical reflexion and artistic performance and challenging central relationships such as those between body and mind, nature and culture, the posthuman suggests both a disruptive aesthetics of hybridity and a drastic caesura in aesthetic theory and practice. Beyond this web of epistemological, bioethical, and artistic positions, one can nevertheless trace enduring cultural patterns and connections with artistic movements of the past. The main focus of our article is the posthuman's relationship with the avant-garde and Antonin Artaud's poetics of corporality. We do not seek to diminish the novelty of the posthuman, but view it as a new iteration of crucial aesthetic topoi.

The posthuman represents an attack on anthropocentrism and its basic dichotomy between nature and culture; and an attack on the canonical vision of human beings as naturally incomplete and in need of cultural processes in order to transcend their intrinsic limits. The anthropocentric vision is one that stresses purity and division as the most distinctive human features, the result of which is a series of firm binaries. The posthuman vision, on the other hand, does not see nature as a static or fixed concept, or culture as being a deviation from an original, authentic condition, but rather proposes an idea of human identity that embraces alterity and continuous hybridization with non-human elements (such as animals, machines, and other technological devices). A number of contemporary aesthetic experiences are directly derived from these epistemological principles, most significantly, the theriomorphic obsession and the cyborg (see Deitch; Haraway; Marchesini).

For our purposes, it is important to highlight the first kind of hybridity. In the posthuman conception, cultural development represents the mimetic and performative assimilation of animal features, the revival of anthropological traditions that thematize the transgression of rigid borders between human and animal, and the concomitant overcoming of any such binaries. As Leslie Fiedler illustrated in his 1979 study *Freaks*, this kind of division is an inheritance from Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions and the lumbering monotheistic principle of the resemblance between humans and god as opposed to polytheistic traditions and shamanistic practices in which animalization and masks play a central role. Particularly in Dionysian imagery — which is omnipresent in the work of Artaud and Matthew Barney — identification with animals is a characteristic experience of both ritual practices and mythic narratives. Dionysus disturbs every kind of simple binary (masculine/feminine, mind/body, native/foreigner) and from Thomas Mann to Georges Bataille it is hardly by chance that the Dionysian figure is one frequently adopted in twentieth century art and literature (see Fusillo).

The posthuman also suggests a new vision of the body, a body no longer based on autarchy and isolation, but on multiplicity. It is a body open to external invasion and technological transformation subject to ongoing manipulation from both within and without, all of which leads to an attendant re-inscription of its position in the aesthetic. This vision is synthetized by the metaphor of the body as landscape or city and expressed most radically by the performances of visual artists such as Orlan and Sterlarc, in the science fiction of Philip K. Dick and Stanisław Lem, and in the auteur cinema of David Cronenberg. Yet it is in Dionysian *sparagmos*, the destructive experience of dismemberment that culminates in the creation of a new energy and identity, that a mythic antecedent of the posthuman vision of the body can be located. Also worth remembering is the poetological quality with which the image of Dionysian *sparagmos* is imbued. Posthuman performances and installations likewise underscore the idea of artistic production as the creation of unstable and ever changing equilibriums, as destruction that makes way for the circulation of new energies.

Gesamtkunstwerk — total work of art — is a key concept in understanding posthuman aesthetics. First conceived by Richard Wagner as a way to reshape musical theater and recover the synthesis of the arts at the core of Greek tragedy, the total work of art played a significant role first in Symbolism and Aestheticism (particularly in the poetics of synesthesia) and then in the utopian subversions of the various avant-gardes. The formal strategy linking these phenomena is the blending of artistic

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languages, which — when welded to a political and existential function — seeks to create a new relationship between art and life. The central goal is regeneration of the public function of artistic creation, one opposed to mass culture, technology, and entertainment, yet which in an ambivalent and ambiguous relationship is simultaneously dependent on them. Although Wagner exploited several technological innovations in order to achieve his aesthetic program inspired by Schiller's aesthetics, he nonetheless defined *Gesamtkunstwerk* as an organism standing in contrast to the mechanized nature of industrial modernity. Moreover, his work influenced the various and contradictory realizations of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the twentieth century — from the delirious aestheticism of nazism and Stalinist propaganda to Eisenstein's cinema, Brecht's epic theater, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* to Stravinsky and the Ballets Russes and on to Walt Disney's theme parks and Andy Warhol's camp recycling of mass culture (see, e.g., Groys; Roberts; Wilson Smith). The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is thus a perfect example of how utopia can easily be transformed into dystopia, of how the avant-garde can be absorbed by the mass media, and ultimately how every sublime can easily become kitsch.

The question now is what remains of the total work of art in our time, one characterized by the end of utopias and avant-gardes and by fragmentation and dissipation. At first glance, it appears that the revolutionary, romantic, and totalizing elements of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* are today all but lost. In a postmodern age the total work of art represents a peculiar variation of intermediality, a concept presenting a persistent challenge to comparative literature (see, e.g., Finger; Tötösy de Zepetnek). In essence, intermediality is a practice that subverts any essentialist vision of the artistic languages, aims at a complex blending of perceptions, and is amplified by new media and the syncretic and hybrid nature of cyberspace. This notwithstanding — given that posthuman art has a complex philosophical background — we can again locate something similar to the utopian tension characteristic of this category: the fusion between art and life that goes back to the Romantic revolution and that animates any avant-garde experience. The slippery concept of totality thus becomes two-fold, at once subsuming the complex web of perceptions, energies, and stimulations that alight upon the spectator of performance art, video art, and installations, while simultaneously evoking a comprehensive, anthropological vision of human identity.

The aesthetics of *Gesamtkunstwerk* constitute an exemplary starting point for any comparison between Artaud and Barney, the former a leading light in the historical avant-garde of the first half of the twentieth century and the latter a key player in the millennial posthuman turn. Artaud is considered to have played a prominent role in the complex panorama of the avant-garde's various conceptualizations and realizations of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (see Roberts; Storch; on Artaud and *Gesamtkunstwerk* see, e.g., Fromet de Rosnay). Indeed, there is a plurality of avant-gardist approaches to the total work of art. Although the existential-political engagement of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* — its longing for a radical renewal of collective and individual life through art (and vice versa) — is an integral part of every avant-garde poetics, in seeking this renewal different movements and different artists have pursued very different paths. David Roberts outlines the distinction between the "archaic" avant-garde on the one hand (Surrealism), and the "techno-utopian" avant-garde on the other (Futurism, Constructivism) — a Janus-faced division that points not only to the relationship between biomorphic and mecanomorphic avant-garde imaginaries, but also to the posthuman fascination for animals and machines. Whereas the archaic avant-garde struggles to reshape human life through a return to pre-modern social and psychological structures, the iconoclastic techno-utopian avant-garde founds its own visions of renewal based on the promise of modern technologies. Roberts underlines that these two poles are by no means mutually exclusive, but are connected both by virtue of the fact that artists may move freely between them, and likewise, because the archaic and the techno-utopian approach are, to a certain degree, reciprocally implied— the former presents the return to origins as an anticipation of a utopian future, while the latter depicts technology as a mythical force. While identifying commonalities is certainly illuminating, identifying the specific features of the various avant-garde groups and distinguishing between their different challenges to the cultural *status quo* is as necessary as ever.

Seen in the above context, Artaud's interest in *Gesamtkunstwerk* can be considered an example of the archaic avant-garde. His theater aims at a "retour aux sources" seeking to abolish the gap that modern rationalism has created between self and world, and words and things (see Borie). Artaud's

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conception of theater is indeed marked by his experience as a member of the Parisian Surrealist circle in the mid-1920s. His criticism of psychologism in theater is indicative of the Surrealist dislike for rational thinking and a fascination with the "other logics" of the unconscious. Whereas psychologism deals with emotions as if they were abstract ideas and tries to describe and understand them rationally, Surrealism considers emotions as energies, which — emanating from the depths of the human unconscious — must be experienced at a distant remove from the judgements of the rational mind. Artaud demands a theater that puts the unconscious and its emotions-cum-energies on center stage, hence his interest in non-Western(ized) cultures, whose performative ritual and magic traditions are based — as Artaud is wont to claim — on an "energetic" view of the world.

Artaud's 1926 rupture with the Surrealists was in large part owing to a fundamental divergence of opinion on the role of materialism, communism, and political engagement in the reshaping of modern culture (see "A la grande nuit," "Point final"), yet the notion of the unconscious remained central to his theater. In his 1932 *Le Théâtre de la cruauté (premier manifeste)*, he urged that theater must provide spectators with "truthful distillations of dreams where its taste for crime, its erotic obsessions, its savageness, its fantasies, its utopian sense of life and objects, even its cannibalism, do not gush out on an illusory make-believe but an inner level" (*The Theatre* 65) ("de précipité véridiques de rêves, où son goût du crime, ses obsessions érotiques, sa sauvagerie, ses chimères, son sens utopique de la vie et des choses, son cannibalisme même, se débordent sur un plan non pas supposé et illusoire, mais intérieur" [*Le Théâtre* 89]). In these terms, dreams are an open door to the conflicting energies that populate not only criminal passions and obsessions, but also illusions and utopias. As Western cultures give their all to forget that the human is located at the crossroads of non-rational forces, theater must thus act as a reminder subjecting spectators to a surrender to these forces during performances.

It is widely accepted that Artaud's search for a theater able to evoke and transmit energies remained an almost exclusively theoretical one. In his lifetime, his staging of Shelley's *The Cenci* at the Théâtre de Folies-Wagram was his only attempt to put the principles of his thought to practice, yet he remained dissatisfied with the results (see Ruffini). His 1938 treatise *Le Théâtre et son double* is, however, instructive about his staging ideas. As a supporter of the early-twentieth-century theater reform movement, Artaud held scripts as no longer fundamental to theatrical performance. Given their reliance on logic, he considered the scripts of Western dramatic writings as an impediment to the release of the irrational energies at the heart of theatrical activity. Although his praxis precluded neither the use of words nor the possibility that a dramatic text might also be able to move beyond rationality, Artaud considered both but a single component of the theatrical work of art. While a script certainly had semantic uses, it also offered a partial soundtrack to a performance, one in service of the acoustics of theater, a dimension that Artaud's aesthetics of *Gesamtkunstwerk* held as inseparable from visual and corporal aspects. As Artaud states in *The Theatre and Its Double*, staging has to impress the public with "those expressive means usable on stage such as music, dance, plastic arts, mimicry, mime, gesture, voice inflection, architecture, lighting and decor" (27) ("tous le moyens d'expression utilisable sur une scène, comme musique, danse, plastique, pantomime, mimique, gesticulation, intonations, architecture, éclairage et décor" [*Le Théâtre* 37]).

Artaud's noted about his never realized theatrical project "La Conquête du Mexique" (written in 1933) clues about the kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* he sought in practice (on Artaud and Mexico see, e.g., Su <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2151>). The performance was to be staged with giant objects evoking Spanish *ex-voto* and souvenir-like props similar to the landscape miniatures contained in bottles or glass balls. The entire *mise-en-scène* was to tremble with objects, floating carpets, and the shadows of wild horses circling overhead. The figure of the Aztec king Montezuma was to appear divided into two parts by a trick of light cutting across certain sections of his body, hands emerging from his dress like a totem or statue of a god. While Artaud stressed the importance of the visual dimension of theater, he concomitantly insisted that scenography alone was insufficient. Appropriately trained actors are indispensable in freeing the disruptive and chaotic forces of the unconscious in conjuring and transmitting energy flows which might traverse human dreams, nightmares, instincts, and hopes — the actor's task requiring a corporal discipline akin to that of an elite sportsman or woman. In "Un athlétisme affectif" (*The Theatre* 93) — a chapter of *Le Théâtre et son double* originally written in 1935 ("athlète du coeur" [*Le Théâtre* 125]), someone who can propel energies from the

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heart and body like an athlete — as he maintained, "every emotion has an organic basis" (*The Theatre* 99) ("toute émotion a des bases organiques" [*Le Théâtre* 125]). With proper stimulation of their organisms, actors are able to induce certain emotional states both in themselves and in the public. Such a belief explains Artaud's interest in theater, meditation, and athletic techniques of many non-Western cultures. It likewise explains Artaud's influence on the school of post-1960 theater devoted to staging the Western tradition through the study of African, US-American, and Asian performance practices including Julian Beck's Living Theatre, Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret, and the work of Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook (see Borie).

Artaud asserted that the link between emotions and corporal techniques is, like breathing, always founded on a sequence of contractions and distensions: "We localize this breathing, distributing it between contracted and decontracted states. We use our bodies like screens though which willpower and relinquished willpower pass" (*The Theatre* 97) ("et ce souffle nous le localisons, nous le répartissons dans des états de contraction et de décontraction combinés. Nous nous servons de notre corps comme d'un crible où passent la volonté et le relâchement de la volonté" [*Le Théâtre* 130]). The same image is used by Barney, who speaks of his artistic performances in sporting terms, the product of (de)contraction dynamics that join and/or oppose his body in the fulfilling of his desires. Yet corporal discipline is not the only feature Artaud and Barney have in common. The "living landscape" of "La Conquête du Mexique" and Montezuma's fragmented, proliferating, and deformed/reshaped body is typical of the posthuman aesthetics of Barney's sculpture-performance videos. The aims of Artaud's theater and Barney's performances are today programmatic for posthuman aesthetics questioning the prominence given to rationality by Western anthropocentrism while shaping a new, transformational image of the human based on the hybridization of the body with both animals and the larger environment.

Barney's five-part 1995-2002 *Cremaster* video cycle is one of the most refined and complex achievements of posthuman art. Its refusal of any hierarchy among artistic genres, its monumental and protean contamination of mythological traces, historical materials, and space-time references offer scholars plenty of food for thought particularly in terms of interartistic comparison. Barney presents himself as a sculptor and the visual element is certainly prominent in his work. As anti-narrative cinema, Barney's *Cremaster* recovers stylistic features from the films of the historical avant-gardes and re-uses manifold literary materials from Greek tragedy (the five-part structure recalls this archetype) to Norman Mailer's mammoth *The Executioner's Song* Mailer himself makes an appearance, impersonating Houdini, who functions as a crucial figure for the poetics of continuous metamorphosis.

In this polymorphous, experimental, open-ended counter myth for the new millennium, energy plays a crucial role. Starting from the first moments of an embryo, *Cremaster* aims at depicting and celebrating sexual non-differentiation, perpetual motion, and transformation. In an introductory essay to *Cremaster* entitled "Only the Perverse Fantasy Can Still Save Us," Nancy Spector writes that "in Barney's project terms likes 'human,' 'vehicle,' and 'animal' designate not separate entities but zones of interpenetration. Taxonomic classifications premised on hierarchy and quantifiable variation yield to the anarchy of hybridization" (23). Set partly in a desert landscape with aseptic science fiction images, *Cremaster* melts systematically ancient Irish sagas of giants, modernist mythology (such as the construction of the Chrysler Building in the 1930s or Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum), and postmodern aesthetics. Thus romantic opera binds with a Busby Berkeley musical, animal imagery with a plethora of machines, classical iconology with contemporary industrial materials (plastic, polyester, Teflon), exalting the recurrent theme of fluidity, and at the same time reinventing Beuys's shamanistic vision of art as a struggle with poor and rough elements (the 2007 exhibition *All in the Present Must be Transformed: Matthew Barney and Joseph Beuys* at the Guggenheim Museum in Venice illuminated the parallels between the two artists). Yet anarchy and heterogeneity do not imply an absence of control. On the contrary, Barney employs many biological metaphors and athletic practices (often the same used by Artaud) in order to stress the importance of the retention, accumulation, and storage of energy. The collapse of differences, the fusion between organic and inorganic, the idea of body as landscape (and of landscape as body) are derived from intense mental discipline.

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Screened in both movie theaters and museums as a huge, labyrinthine installation, in its full sixteen-hour duration the five-part *Cremaster* exemplifies the contemporary total work of art at its best. A sense of totality is produced by the violent tension between chaos, anarchy, and fragmentation on one hand and by the control of a subtle and subterranean system on the other. In the postmodern age the firm division between high and low culture has vanished leaving almost nothing of Wagner's ambivalence. Barney exploits several elements of pop imagery even straying into camp, yet subordinates them to his totalizing vision, one that exalts protean metamorphosis as a universal force. The opposition between organism and mechanism found at the core of Wagner's system (also present to an extent in the avant-garde) remains active, but becomes less of a dichotomy. The full technological potential of video art — cinema being the most notable heir to *Gesamtkunstwerk* — is exploited in order to evoke organic life, particularly its primary phase: the cremaster muscle promotes spermatogenesis. The entire cycle contains frequent sections devoted to primordial life (giants, aquatic life) mixed with hypertechnological episodes, all of which produce a dissonant hybridity.

In Barney's complex artistic organism — which is for most part visual — literature nevertheless plays a significant role as a storehouse of mythical figures and patterns, as an ensemble of narrative techniques, and as a creative source of collaboration. Mailer's epic non-fiction novel is indeed more than a source, displaying a consonance in expressive strategies; a fresco making use of extremely heterogeneous material. The recurrent image of Barney's athletic body, both author and actor, dressed like a dandy, and at the same time like an ancient satyr, condenses a posthuman aesthetic in which Dionysian imagery — revived through Nietzsche, Artaud, and Girard — coexists with bodybuilding and aestheticism creating a new, disruptive hybridity.

In bringing our comparison of Artaud's avant-garde theater and Barney's posthuman video art to a close, we reverse the course of time and ask whether Artaud would have liked Barney's performances had he lived to see them. It seems probable that he would have had his reservations. Although Barney uses his body in the medium of performance, it is a body filmed. From the 1930s onwards Artaud considered the camera/screen system a barrier to the circulation of energies between actors and spectators maintaining that while cinema has affective qualities, it cannot really shape for the spectators "the myths of man and of the life today" ("The Premature" 314) ("les Mythes de l'homme et de la vie d'aujourd'hui" [Artaud, "La Vieillesse" 84]). Yet as a screen actor and script writer who was partly inspired by the language of cinema in his rethinking of theater as *Gesamtkunstwerk* (see Païni and Trujillo; Ruffini), Artaud would have possibly remained open to *Cremaster*.

The most fundamental difference between Barney and Artaud seems to be a philosophical one. Both artists want to carry out a *sparagmos* of Western anthropocentrism, yet the new human being that arises from their work of deconstruction is not the same. In Artaud's vision, the end result of *Le Théâtre de la cruauté* is the harmonization of all human energies, the transformation of all negative life forces into positive ones, a kind of final redemption of the human being: "Like the plague, theatre is a crisis resolved either by death or cure" (*The Theatre* 21) ("Le théâtre comme la peste est une crise qui se dénoue par la mort ou par la guérison" [*Le Théâtre* 31]). Either recovery, then, or death — an uncompromising position matching the totalizing demands of renewal that Roberts considers the very core of the modern *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In contrast, Barney's *Gesamtkunstwerk* contains no possibility for total and redemptive liberation, only a display of the "work of energies" in constant transformation, never reaching a final form, but churning from one *sparagmos* to the next. Moreover, biological limits seem to condition the human possibility to deconstruct and reconstruct body and mind. Indeed, the sexually undifferentiated embryo of the *Cremaster* cycle is forced by nature to "specify" itself as a male. Thus the total work of art in Barney's aesthetics does not redeem life, but simply expresses its energies. While these are, at least in part, controlled and shaped by human beings, they cannot be harmonized completely or expanded infinitely. To put it another way, art sets people free, but only for a certain amount of time. Sooner or later human desires demand other transformations which nature may not be able to deliver. Barney's acknowledgment of the constraining function of nature has been read occasionally as a nostalgic backwards glance at classical modern culture with its hierarchically structured worldview and its binaries (see Fasolo). If we accept this thesis, Barney's aesthetics must be distinguished from those of the avant-garde, which sought to disrupt the certainties of classical modernity. From this perspective, Barney proves himself to be more

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conservative than Artaud (see Fasolo 131-34). On the other hand, Barney relies heavily on avant-garde aesthetics in his work and like Artaud he considers polymorphism and transformation preconditions to creativity. The most relevant difference between the two artists is in their approach to desire and its limitations. Artaud represents himself as an "athlète du coeur" striving for his goal uncompromisingly and prepared to leave the remains of his pounding heart on the track. For his part, Barney is a sportsman who prepares his body for a race that he knows and accepts has no finishing line. Seen in this light, the relationship between the two artists — exemplary of a wider comparison between the avant-garde and the posthuman — seems an excellent starting point to differentiate between the late modernity of the first half of the twentieth century and postmodernity.

Indeed, the comparison between these two cultural settings has been at the core of many scholarly debates since both late modernity and postmodernity call the worldview of classical modernity into question although they seem to do it in different ways. Peter Zima (among others) resumed the discussion about the relationship between late modernity and postmodernity in his 1997 *Moderne/Postmoderne*. Zima demonstrates that the task of recognizing their similarities has revealed to be easier to scholars than the definition of their differences. Zima notices that scholars generally agree on the fact that both late modernity and postmodernity developed within — and push forward — the double crisis of self-representability (crisis of the subject) and of the world's representability (crisis of the language) and argues that most scholars also point out the common late modern and postmodern relativization of the power and value of rationality whose criticism establishes several avant-garde and posthuman discourses and practices. Yet Zima also highlights the fact that the investigation of the differences between late modernity and postmodernity has led to disparate interpretations of their relationship. On the one hand they can be considered in continuity with each other, postmodernity being possibly seen as a radicalization of late modernity. On the other hand they can be opposed to each other and postmodernity can represent alternatively the positive or the negative pole of the relationship depending on the value scholars accord to the postmodern weakening of the distinction between high and low culture. Zima himself seems to be inclined towards the latter position yet its criticism is not directed against the intermingling of high and low culture in principle. Rather, he distinguishes between the ambivalence of late modernity and the indifference of postmodernity towards the cultural narratives of modernity considering the former as a valuable attitude and the latter as a negative approach to the heritage of Western culture (Zima 285-365). According to Zima, late modernity has a double relationship to modernity since it deconstructs modern universal master narratives, but it longs at the same time for new and still universal *récits* (no matter if only a part of late modern culture believes that it is possible to find them whereas another part weeps over their disappearance). On the contrary, postmodernity is characterized in Zima's interpretation by radical indifference towards all modern master narratives considering them as interchangeable and aiming at their deconstruction. Zima criticizes the postmodern practices of radical hybridization because in his opinion they do not express any metaphysical yearning anymore.

Zima's remarks on late modernity and postmodernity help us focus on the comparison between Artaud and Barney on the background of the relationship between avant-garde/late modernity and posthuman/postmodernity. Nevertheless, they also reveal themselves to be inadequate for describing the entire complexity of this relation. Late modern ambivalence as Zima establishes it efficaciously conveys the oscillation of Artaud's *Gesamtkunstwerk* theater between a *tabula rasa* of modernity on the one hand and the longing for *palingenesis* on the other. Yet Zima's equation of postmodernity with metaphysical indifference does not seem convincingly apt for interpreting Barney's art production: the *Cremaster* cycle displays a metaphysical yearning if we define such yearning as the longing for sense-giving activities that go beyond the mere perception of phenomena. The metaphysical desire of Barney's total work of art is split by the tension toward two opposite universalizing narratives which play a crucial role in classical modern culture: the need for never-ending motion and the overcoming of nature on the one hand — *Cremaster*'s exaltation of protean metamorphosis — and the search for the deep and stable structure of reality on the other hand to which Barney alludes through the inevitable specification of the embryo as male. Thus, Barney's postmodern posthuman cannot be defined as metaphysically indifferent. It does not ignore metaphysical desire, rather it merely relativizes it by showing how it can be oriented in opposite directions and assume different, always

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cultural encoded forms. Barney's work of art brings to light a limit of Zima's approach to postmodernity: Zima seems to postulate indifference as a necessary precondition of postmodern deconstruction of metaphysics. Yet postmodern deconstruction (not only in the case of Barney) does not occur automatically by virtue of indifference, but in consequence and despite of the sense-giving-desire that postmodern individuals may consciously feel. In this regard, Barney's acknowledging and at the same time distancing attitude to metaphysics reveals significant affinities to Stefan Herbrechter's theorization of a critical posthumanism that thinks postanthropocentrism "without giving in to apocalyptic mysticism or to new forms of spirituality and transcendence" (3). Herbrechter refers to the poststructuralist-deconstructionist postmodern criticism of humanism as a foundation of critical posthumanism (10-11). This criticism does not negate or ignore the yearning for universal narratives and stable meaning structures, yet he considers them dangerous since they are based on essentialist thinking, cultural hierarchies, discrimination, and repression of otherness.

Herbrechter's support of radical deconstruction as a means not to prevent, but to vivify sense-giving-practices can better explain the aesthetics of Barney's *Gesamtkunstwerk* than Zima's parallelization of deconstruction and metaphysical indifference. Barney's use of different narratives and his employment à la Beuys of several materials as "performance props," as well as his attraction to technical and technological devices are so exhibited and artificial that the spectator cannot be but aware of the constructedness of the *Cremaster*'s world and of the narratives it interlaces. This notwithstanding, it is questionable if the idea of a postmodern, poststructuralist-deconstructionist critical posthumanism can entirely highlight Barney's working method and aims. For Barney's aesthetic hybridism does not have showing the relativity of modern — as well as premodern and postmodern — cultural narratives as its sole purpose. His performative video art appears to be too immersive and identification-furthering: *Cremaster*'s recipients not only reflect upon the discursive metastructure of the different hybrid cultural settings they are projected in science fiction, Irish mythology, modernist architecture, etc.: they also enjoy and identify with them. Moreover, the deconstruction of universal narratives is not absolute in *Cremaster* since nature reveals to be stronger then the performer and stops his desire for sexual non-differentiation by fixing his masculinity.

An interesting perspective to reflect upon Barney's aesthetics and its relationship to postmodernity comes from Raoul Eshelman. In his 2008 *Performatism or the End of Postmodernism* Eshelman claims that postmodernism has come to an end and been replaced by a new cultural orientation he calls "performatism": "Performatism may be defined most simply as an epoch in which a unified concept of sign and strategies of closure have begun to compete directly with — and displace — the split concept of sign and the strategies of boundary transgression typical of postmodernism. Author, work, and reader all tumble into an endless regress of referral that has no particular fix point, goal, or center" (1). According to Eshelman, performatism represents a reaction to the endless regress of referral carried out by postmodernism and a return to the enclosures of premodern and modern metaphysics, yet a coming back to what does not disregard the postmodern deconstructionist legacy:

Performatist works are set up in such a way that the reader or viewer at first has no choice but to opt for a single, compulsory solution to the problems raised within the work at hand. The author, in other words, imposes a certain solution on us using dogmatic, ritual, or some other coercive means. … The coercive frame cuts off, at least temporarily, from the context around it and forces us back into the work. Once we are inside, we are made to identify with some person, act or situation in a way that is plausible only within the confines of the work as a whole. In this way performatism gets to have its postmetaphysical cake and eat it too. On the one hand, you're practically forced to identify with something implausible or unbelievable within the frame — to *believe* in spite of yourself — but on the other, you still *feel* the coercive force causing this identification to take place, and intellectually you remain aware of the particularity of the argument at hand. Metaphysical skepticism and irony aren't eliminated, but are held in check by the frame. At the same time, the reader must always negotiate some kind of trade-off between the positive aesthetic identification and the dogmatic, coercive means used to achieve it. (2-3)

Indeed, *Cremaster* displays a powerful range of "performatist" ritual immersive devices in front of the observer to let him identify with the dionysian making of a (sexual) subject. The work's appeal to the spectator is to believe in the epic force of the images he/she is watching, to feel the opacity and denseness of the posthuman performing subject, to consider it as beautiful rather then approaching it from a cognitive and critical point of view (Eshelman 8-13). Yet the artificiality of the work's framing,

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the construction of it through scenography, and Barney's body discipline reminds of the artificial structure of what is being presented. The natural imposition of the male gender fulfils a twofold function in this setting: on the one hand it relativizes the spectator's identification with the performer's polymorphic desire, on the other hand it induces the percipient to question the validity of natural laws because he/she perceives them as a dogmatic framing imposed as a *deus ex machina* on the *Cremaster*'s narrative. Eshelman's performatist theory allows a more nuanced comprehension of Barney's aesthetics then Herbrechter's critical posthumanism. Eshelman's theory is equipped more adequately to highlight the structure of Barney's metaphysical desire as a drive not only based on self-acknowledgment and self-deconstruction, but also on self-enjoyment and self-celebration through the *mise en scène* of a total work of art. Performatist theory confirms the difference between Artaud's late modern and Barney's postmodern desire of renewal. While Artaud seeks for absolute and definitive recover — or if this should reveal to be impossible for self-destruction — Barney accepts the open structure of desire, but he requires from art the possibility to enclosure it for a certain amount of time and his framing occurs more on the level of suspension of disbelief than by virtue of rational metadiscourses.

In conclusion, if we follow the theory of performatism as it is elaborated by Eshelman, Barney has overcome postmodernity and its cultural patterns since he no longer relies on a pure deconstructionist approach to reality and art. Yet it is worth wondering if the definition of postmodernity and its relationship to late and classical modernity can be reduced to the only matter of deconstructionism. This is in fact the common denominator between Zima, Herbrechter, and Eshelman: they identify postmodernity with the gnoseological premises of poststructuralist deconstructionism, although they differ in their judgment of it. Indeed, the relationship between postmodernity and deconstruction cannot be overlooked and it constitutes a valuable starting point for defining postmodernity and distinguishing it from other cultural orientations. On the other hand, the accentuation of the role of deconstructionism should not lead to a simplified perception of postmodern culture ignoring its moments of sense-enclosure (shaped also by emotional make-believing). That said, there seems to be signals that "performatist" attitudes displacing or limiting semiotic openness programmatically are becoming gradually more relevant in present culture and that this circumstance is becoming an important topic of discussion also in literary and interart studies.

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