

GRAŻYNA GAJEWSKA

Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu

Polymorphic Perversion of Human and Other-than-Human Bodies

1. Between Human and Other-than-Human

We have grown accustomed to conceiving the human as an exceptional entity that represents the peak of evolution, equipped with various skills and enjoying unique privileges.¹ This concept finds its counterpoise in the

- ¹ In the treatise *On the Soul*, Aristotle advanced a three-partite and simultaneously hierarchical division of beings. In that arrangement, plants occupy the lowest rung, animals rank somewhat higher, whereas humans are the supreme beings. The criterion which served to set animals and humans apart was both the soul (according to Aristotle plants had no more than a vegetative soul, one that all living beings possessed), as well as the conviction that plants are passive and insensitive beings (Aristotle 2013). Meanwhile, in the Old Testament story of the origins of the world and humankind, God is claimed to have said: “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*, Gen. 1:26). Here, the human is not only separate from the natural world as the only entity created in God’s likeness, but they are also granted the right to rule over animals and all kinds of natural resources. This is affirmed further on in the Genesis: “... have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen. 1:28). Non-human creatures were thus given as a gift to the human, so that the latter may fulfil God’s will.

non-anthropocentric approach, developed within post-humanism and new materialism. Research thus oriented emphasizes the crucial contribution of the non-human, more- and other-than-human to the species and cultural condition of the human. One of the paths to deconstruct the notion of “the human,” which presumes a strong, exceptional and privileged subject, pursues a non-anthropocentric vision of subjectivity. Thus, these are not only humans but also the relationships between humans and non-humans that co-create social reality or the human—non-human collective. What is more, from the standpoint of critical post-humanism and new materialism, the biological *Homo sapiens* “intrinsically harbours” animal-plant-bacterial Others;² therefore, human life (in terms of species) is very closely linked to the non-human. Non-anthropocentric humanities have already witnessed the so-called turn towards animals, then plants and microorganisms, so as to underscore the role of human and non-human agency in the Anthropocene. This paper presents some of my impressions regarding the “vegetal facet of the human.” I set out with the premise that the anthropomorphization of plants, so firmly entrenched in Western culture, is counterbalanced by non-anthropocentric reflection which manages to identify both evolutionary and cultural relationships, where the vegetal and the human element co-exist and cooperate. I pay particular attention to the role that plants happen to play in shaping gender and sexual phantasms, as well as focus on the use of plant-related symbolism in the concept of posthuman sexuality.

2. Anthropomorphization of Plants

Anthropomorphism, consisting in attributing human traits to objects, phenomena, notions or animals, is well rooted in the western tradition. Plants have not been immune to the practice either; it may suffice to mention the talking flowers and the walking trees appearing in quite a few fairy tales, or the allegorical figural compositions of fruit and vegetables in the paintings of Giuseppe Arcimboldo (Fig. 1). Besides the magical and allegorical function, anthropomorphization of plants is often associated with finding “the human” in the flora, whose seeds, blossoms, leaves, etc. may bring elements of the human anatomy to mind. Here, one could cite the captivating images of flowers resembling female lips (*Psychotria Elata*), figures of dancing men (*Orchis Italica*), swaddled infants (*Anguloa Uniflora*), or the picture posted

2 The sequencing of the human genome in the early twenty-first century played an important role in that respect.

online which shows the section of a blade of grass in 20-fold magnification, in which cells are not unlike smiley faces. The caption, “Having a bad day? Cells of the *Ammophila arenaria* send their smiles!;)” quite tangibly evinces that anthropomorphically-minded attitude (Cafe Nauka).



Fig. 1. Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Summer*, 1563, oil on panel (From Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository)

Popular culture and advertisement also provide numerous examples of such representations of plants whose shape elicits associations with sex: phal-lus-like fruit and vegetables, folds of bark which are suggestive of a vagina, or similarly looking corollas. In the first scene of the 1989 erotic film entitled *Wild Orchid*, the protagonist applying for a position in a corporation speaks

about her motivation to take up new challenges and mentions her fascination with Oriental cultures and exotic nature, and immediately afterwards a vase with orchids appears in the shot. The flowers are featured in each scene with a strong erotic overtone. The fact that the film is set in Brazil, as well as the linking of exotic plants with the protagonist—an object of desire—produces an effect similar to the juxtaposition of exotic animals with racially diverse human bodies, which are sometimes shown as submissive, sometimes as dominant and lascivious (Gajewska 71–84). As a legacy of colonialism, this erotic imaginary adds to the range of phantasms, exploiting not only fauna but also flora to make up its content, also on the symbolic plane. When the protagonist enters her hotel room after work, the camera looks at a bouquet of delicate white roses (a symbol of purity and innocence). In the subsequent scene, in which the woman—wearing strong make-up and an elegant ensemble—is going on a date, the vividly coloured “birds of paradise” (*Strelitzia reginae*) appear on both her sides, symbolizing uniqueness, exoticism, and sexual appeal. While watering garden irises in *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, Slavoj Žižek observes with some tongue-in-cheek that flowers are the most perverse plants and children should not be allowed to look at them. The spectrum of such imaginings is delimited by the misogynous fear of what is called *vagina dentata* on the one hand, and the celebration of the aesthetic, sexual and procreative function of the vagina, as in the commercial of *Viva La Vulva*, a Libresse line of female intimate hygiene products, in which singing objects, shells, flowers and fruit imitate the natural movements of the vagina. The main verse of the song, “I have you celebrate you baby; I have to prize you like I should,” combined with the flowers, fruits and various vagina-shaped stuff, goes beyond misogyny but not beyond the popular associations of plants with the parts of human anatomy (*Viva La Vulva*). Clearly, a kind of search to discover the human in plants is palpable there.

3. Plant Side of Human

However, the advances in biology and genetics demonstrate the contrary, namely the existence of vegetal legacy in the human body (with algae being the probable common ancestor). Bearing this in mind, a bio-transfiguration researcher argues, “we no longer look for the ‘human side of plants’—as we used to in the former anthropocentric spirit—but for the plant side of the human” (Bakke 134). This very aspect was addressed by one of the pioneers of the so-called transgenic art, Eduardo Kac, in the project entitled *Natural History of Enigma*, which he developed in 2003–2008. The project yielded Edunia,

a plantimal also called a human plant. This particular life-form harbours the DNA of the artist in the cells of a petunia, a plant with ornamental flowers (native to South America and found in horticulture around the world). The pink petals of the flowers bear a criss-crossing pattern of dark-red vessels expressing Kac's gene. On the outside, the plantimal does not display any signs of human-plant symbiosis, but the description of that artistic-scientific undertaking shows that Edunia was a result of molecular procedure, in which a gene was isolated from human blood and then inserted into the genomic sequence of the plant (though in Edunia human DNA occurs only in the dark-red vessels which do resemble vascular patterns observed in humans). The author of the project also took a series of pictures showing how he tended to Edunia. Kac waters it, talks to it, looks at it with tenderness as if he were in the presence of a distant ancestor and a child at once; after all, Edunia may not be his flesh but it is, quite literally, his blood. At the same time, he took care to ensure that the plant-human traits were passed on in the subsequent cycles of reproduction.

The bio art project *Natural History of the Enigma*, comprising Edunia, a large-scale sculpture, photographs and graphic works, compels one to re-think the boundaries between humans and non-humans, plants in this case, as well as highly advanced technology, given that the plantimal is the effect of artistic-scientific-technological intervention into living organisms. On the one hand, Edunia makes one realize that nature has long been subject to human intervention; one can even go as far as to say that it has been manufactured: land development, planting forests, creation of artificial lakes or breeding transgenic plants and animals are as much a part of the order of nature as they are of culture. Today, nature itself is hybridic and, just as artificially obtained varieties of plants that adorn gardens attached to human dwellings and the genetically modified animals, it is perceived as something "natural." For instance, many of the contemporary ornamental garden flora, as well as fruit trees and shrubs are genetically modified to achieve more attractive flower colours or fruit resistant to changing climatic conditions. On the other hand, the plantimal reminds humans that from the standpoint of nature, we are a part of the evolving life and that legacy has been encoded in our genes, hence the title of the project, which refers both to nature and the name of the World War II encryption device. In this sense, science and technology—those human instruments—take an active part in deciphering and disclosing the heritage about which we have failed to remember.

In the posthuman vision of the world, the foundations of the biological life of the *Homo sapiens* are not always the prime concern, as it may also focus

on the life of plants in extensive ecosystems involving other plants and animals, human animals included, and on the mutual functioning of those elements. Such an approach is evinced in the interspecies ballet-performance entitled *Metamorphosis of Plants* from 2016, created by the Polish botanist Urszula Zajązkowska and inspired by the eponymous work by Johann Wolfgang Goethe. The several-minute-long film shows the development of plants the author tended to over a period of two years. Their growth, transformation and barely perceptible movement were rendered in an expressive dance performed by a young man. *Metamorphosis of Plants* is an artistic experiment fusing the subtle undulations of the plants with the dynamic, convulsive motions of the dancer, which conveys the unhurried growth of plants in a sped-up mode. Simultaneously, the piece amounts to a philosophical reflection on our relationship with non-human lifeforms. As Zajązkowska explains:

What this video presents is a series of my thrills about indeterminacy in the world of plants. We have a lot in common with plants. However, our human perception is deceptive since it humanizes everything around us. There is a lot of haughtiness within this idea, because why on earth should a plant resemble a human being? Nevertheless, such perception may also be used to suggest that a leaf is an arm, an apex is a head, and that a plant 'bothers with' reorienting its body towards the sun. (Nunes)

Until recently, the predilection to “humanize everything around us” had been predominant. Zajązkowska does not negate this, and even suggests certain advantages of employing the analogy between plants and human life, making use of it in her 2017 volume of poetry entitled *minimum*. Her position is anchored in the solicitude and sympathy for the felled trees, and she pursues a critique of such a human subject who set themselves apart from the surrounding nature and the entirety of what it has inscribed in our bodies over the millions of years. As she observes in the first verses of the poem “On the Galapagos” (Na Galapagos):

“On the Galapagos” (fragment):
I was born four million years ago
on the island of Galapagos,
and this is my whole world, my universe
open and wind-swept,
but you, you explain to me

that it is but a fraction of it,
 a point merely visible on some finite
 maps. (Zajączkowska 2017: 28)³

In other pieces, Zajączkowska dialogues with trees (“a place at the window” [“miejsce przy oknie”]), reflects on the genetic differences that gave the distinct forms to plants and humans (“the meadow” [“łąka”]), watches flowers grow, blossom, and wither (“only do not bloom”), discusses places whose climate and fauna favour the birth of a butterfly (“a good place” [“dobre miejsce”])—fig. 2.



Fig. 2. Fragment of the picture: Maïa Zer, *Insects and Butterflies 1*, 2018, oil on wood panel, Tel Aviv Museum (photo: Grażyna Gajewska, Tel Aviv 2019)*

3 Original: Urodziłam się 4 miliony lat temu / na wyspie Galapagoś, / i to jest właśnie cały mój świat, wszech-świat / otwarty i wietrzny, / ale ty, tłumaczysz i, / że to tylko jego okruch, / ledwo widoczny punkt na jakichś mapach / skończonych.

* In a posthumanist idea, one life becomes another life/lives. The different life forms are dynamic, ever-changing systems of connection and change. In this approach, people, animals, plants and microorganisms constitute a living tissue of various elements of the

The volume devotes much space to reflecting on the cycles of life, on the transition of death of some organisms into the life of other entities, and the obsession of the modern human with measuring, counting, classifying (“the droplet” [“kropla”]) and ultimately subjugating nature.

The work of this author represents ecopoetics dovetailing with posthuman ideas. One of its crucial traits—which makes it relevant for these deliberations—is that it conveys relationality and reciprocal networking of people and nonhumans, more-than-humans, and other-than-humans. Here, nature is neither a setting of human affairs nor a space of appropriation or subjugation, but constitutes an encounter, coupling, correlation and co-existence instead. Another feature of ecopoetics is departure from the dualistic vision of nature vs. culture in favour of the liminal, post-human conception of nature/culture. In Zajączkowska’s poems, scientific laboratories, working methods and procedures employed by a biologist (as already underlined, the author has a background in biology) have an impact on the studied plants and the thoughts and emotions of the researchers alike. The words—like nimble tightrope dancers—jump from

biosphere, which for a moment is formulated into a specific form of being, and then transformed into new ecosystems. This dynamics and transformation is shown by Zer in the painting *Insects and Butterflies 1*, and Zajączkowska describes in the poem “a good place” (*dobre miejsce*):

“a good place”
 over a brook
 a leaden shadow
 rustling in the
 thicket of sycamores
 and unapproachable alders
 a hot stench of carcass
 rises like vapour.
 so I think
 a good place
 has been chosen
 for the transfigurative
 pupation.
 there’ll be butterflies tomorrow. (Zajączkowska 2017: 51)

(Original: nad potokiem / ołowianym cieniem / szeleszczącym / w gęstwinie jaworów / i olszyny nieprzystępnych / gorący odór padliny / paruje. / więc myślę / że to dobre miejsce / zostało wybrane / na to przeistoczenie / przepoczwarzenie. / jutro będą motyle.)

the order of culture into nature and back again, creating a coherent performance, as in the initial verses of “800 W”:

“800 W” (fragment):
 at the laboratory
 I grow plants, all of which I shall
 kill afterwards as a matter of course.
 a lightbulb shines overhead, a mighty
 800 watt. it suffices to make a day.
 I sit down there sometimes and think to myself that in fact, the
 lightbulb is God. (Zajączkowska 2017: 42)⁴

The author of *minimum* smoothly traverses the orders of science and poetry, merging nineteenth-century plates showing cross-sections of plants, diagrams, or measurement readings with the art of poetry. For instance, she juxtaposes a graph and its description with the piece entitled “Gaussian Function or Normal Distribution,” which begins with “mister Gauss is strolling / among us / smiling tepidly / and mows everything down” (Zajączkowska 2017: 16). Thus, in terms of printing layout, *minimum* relies on bricolage, by which I mean repetition, variation, and recontextualization of recognizable cultural elements, yielding new stylistic forms and their interpretations.

Localness is another characteristic of ecopoetry, in that flora described in relation to human bodies, emotions, thoughts, and actions is in itself local (as opposed to global), since the species presented are situated in a specific geospace and climate. Hence, Zajączkowska’s poetry features Central European flora: panicles of reeds, poplars, pines, leaves of water lilies, apples. In contrast, Judith Wright, an Australian botanical poet, refers to, for example, the sun and phaius orchids, while Les Murray writes about “Flowering Eucalypt in Autumn.” In his analysis of Australian and American poetry and prose in the light of posthuman ideas, John Charles Ryan emphasized the direct, affective and at times idiosyncratic perceptions of the environment, whereby aesthetics combines with ethics; the “engaged aesthetics” is based on the interaction of humans with non-humans, more-than-humans, and other-than-humans within a broad spectrum of nature/culture (Ryan 112–121).

4 Original: w laboratorium / hoduję rośliny, które naturalnie / wszystkie potem zabijam. / nad nimi świeci żarówka, potężna / 800 W. jest wystarczająca by zrobić dzień. / siadam tam czasem i myślę sobie, że ta żarówka to przecież Bóg.

4. We Are Multiplicity

From the standpoint of the posthuman, anthropocentrism represents an oppressive approach towards other beings, and an attitude which imposes limitations on the humans themselves, who cling stubbornly to the conviction of their own uniqueness; this precludes the possibility of a spontaneous opening up to a different version of oneself. According to philosopher Jolanta Brach-Czajna:

the strong subject of the former philosophy is too narrow in its rigidity and therefore not capacious enough to accommodate the possibilities we have discovered, and it is questioned for that very reason. I suppose that the old, rigid subject is not dismantled to be annihilated but to be expanded. (Brach-Czajna 120)

It is no longer the postmodern “multiplied subject,” but one which opens up to its environment. Inner mobility supersedes the erstwhile concept of external mobility because we are a fusion or, as Donna Haraway concludes, “to be one is always to become with many” (Haraway 58–98). It is not merely that the animal and plant legacy is inscribed in our bodies, but that other life forms and ourselves jointly create comprehensive, dynamic, sensitive, and constantly fluctuating systems (*sympoiesis*). Acceptance of what is ontologically impure in ourselves and that “making-with” invariably manifests itself in liquefaction or blurring of the boundaries between the human and the animal/vegetal, between the corporeal and the mechanical, between the internal and the external. In the posthuman paradigm, humans are the living tissue amalgamated from various elements of the world, which temporarily constitute the human body only to transform subsequently into other systems. The project of “inner mobility” and “making-with” presupposes reconfiguration of the network of notions, use of new metaphors that would be capable of conveying the symbiotic relationships linking the humans with the air, rocks, and plants. For instance, Rosi Braidotti advances the postulation that one should adhere to the principle of not-One in the deep structures of our subjectivity, because this ethic presumes the substantial importance of the bonds that tie us with multiple Others in a vital network, or complex, reciprocal relationships (Braidotti 100). Thus, developing an expanded and flexible identity requires a change in the approach to humans/non-humans, a new in-dwelling among stuff, animals, plants, bacteria which henceforth would be spoken of as participants and contributors to human life as well as life in general.

The posthuman rearranges the ways one perceives various ecosystems and the place of the human within them, changes how we comprehend—thanks

to genetic research—the vegetal and animal legacy of the human species. In this approach, we have never been humans in the sense of subjects isolated from among other life forms but a multiplicity; our material bodies assembled from cells are “inhabited” by Others: evolutionary remnants of plants and animals, as well as millions of bacteria thanks to which the body functions. The differences of gender race, or species, which once demarcated the boundaries of subjectivity, have been undermined. In their place, alternative subjectivities have emerged: transversal, liminal, transcending sex/gender and race, going even beyond the human. “We are multiplicity!,” posthumanists affirm emphatically.

5. Posthuman Sexuality

However, what happens with gender and race, with the sexuality and eroticism of the human moulded by nature-culture? Do they vanish? One of the claims made against the posthuman in the spirit of new materialism—or biomaterialism—is that by separating the matters of biological life from “social materiality” it loses sight of the multilayered relationships of power, oppression, regulation, or biopolitics, in which sex/gender and race play a crucial role. As argued by Peta Hinton and Xin Liu, the predominant drive to engage in anti-anthropocentric and posthuman analyses make that particular current of thought drift away from the still relevant questions of race and gender (Hinton, Liu: 128–145). Braidotti, attempting to fill in that gap of the various currents in the posthuman, suggests rethinking the networks of the reciprocal relationships between human and non-human subjects in biological, social, and psychological contexts. Another aspect that needs to be reconsidered is sexuality without genders, which may be feasible upon a return to polymorphic, wayward, non-reproductive structure of human sexuality. The emphasis shifts from the sex/gender distinction to sexuality as a process. Consequently:

... sexuality is a force, or constitutive element, that is capable of deterritorializing gender identity and institutions. Combined with the idea of the body as an incorporeal complex assemblage of virtualities, this approach posits the ontological priority of difference and its self-transforming force. (Braidotti 99)

The posthuman sexuality evades binary oppositions of woman/man, heterosexual/homosexual, sex/gender and turns towards “polymorphic perversion.” This derives both from Foucault’s assertion that human sex and sexuality have nothing to do with “nature” but represent a project of social control over the

body and pleasure, as well as from feminist and queer projects aiming to subvert heteronormative conceptions of sex/gender and sexuality. Interwoven in that mode of thinking is the semiotic play with plant life. In the text entitled *Orchid Love*, Phoebe Hart describes herself as “a filmmaker, journal writer, academic, and mother to adopted daughter... Additionally, I am a 46XY chromosomal woman: I am intersex.” The author explains later:

‘Intersex’ occurs in individuals where the reproductive organs are at variance with the genetic sex. Historically, a person with an intersex variation may have been known as a hermaphrodite. Nowadays, many intersex peer-support groups and health care specialists also term an ‘intersex’ variation as a Disorder of Sex Development or DSD. (Hart 2017: 169)

A quote from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* provides an epigraph to her article:

Both bodies in a single body mix,
A single body with a double sex.

Among other things, Hart’s article discusses *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure*, the autobiographical film she had made in 2010. The title of that visual, personal narrative is justified as follows:

... these ornamental flowers of the genus *Orchideae* are an especially potent symbol for people with intersex variations, particular for those with AIS. The etymology of the word ‘orchid’ derives from Latin *orchis* and from Greek *orkhis*, which mean ‘testicle.’ Certainly, the protuberances within the orchid’s flowering structure are reminiscent of the male gonads. Many people with AIS undergo an *orchidectomy* or the removal of internal testes to reduce the risk of cancer at some point in their lives, and as such, often refer to themselves as orchids in their own life writing. (Hart 2017: 170)

For Hart, the orchid is a symbol of intersex resonance, while also signifying gender-sexual-emotional complications in a heteronormative society, a community accustomed to the sharp duality of the masculine and the feminine. The author of *Orchid Love* responds with embracing her own chimericity, hybridity, and hermaphroditism inherent in the “the possibility of acceptance of non-heteronormatively gendered and sexualized identities for those people who could

or would be *Orchids'* most antagonistic or reluctant audience members" (Hart 2017: 169–170). Although the orchid functions here as a sign, a figure, a symbol (by means of which it reproduces the semiotic perspective), at the level of sex and gender Hart's self-reflection clearly manifests what I have defined above as posthuman sexuality.

The plant is discussed from a similar standpoint by art historian Jim Endersby in the 2016 monograph entitled *Orchid: A Cultural History*. His attention focuses on the botanical research concerned with the species as well as the perceptions of orchids in various periods and contexts, including attribution of meanings which often proved to be mutually exclusive. Analyzing ancient myths, as well as the later works of literature, art and cinematography, the author demonstrates how perception of the orchid corresponded with or contributed to particular discourses: colonial, patriarchal, feminist, or queer ones. In the colonial paradigm, the stress is on fascination with exoticism: the incredible shapes and colours of the orchids that symbolize unique beauty of women and men; there is also fascination with its wild facet, as the flower grows natively beyond human settlements, often in hardly accessible areas, which makes it exciting and dangerous as well (the insectivorous varieties becoming figures of predatory, destructive sexuality). In the patriarchal approach, orchids are primarily strong, exceptional specimens, refined in their dignity, nobility, as well as rapacity. As the emancipation of women—also in the sexual sphere—comes to the fore as a social current in the nineteenth/twentieth century, the plant becomes a signifier of the *femme fatale*, with a plethora of ambivalent references and connotations: ecstasy, fascination, delight, disquiet, lasciviousness, fear, degeneracy, evil. On the other hand, the reinterpretation of the myth of Orchis, who was turned into a flower, as well as the association of the plant's structure with intersexuality manifesting in a proportion of people, became vital points of departure for the queer discourses. In the latter case, the plant tends to be invoked as a figure of homosexual desire or a symbol of intersexuality. Endersby arrives at the following conclusion:

Yet these contradictory uses, rather than diluting the potency of orchids as sexual symbols, seem to have enriched it; what united these seemingly contradictory associations was a kind of sexual dissidence—orchids could be used to symbolize anyone who refused to fit conventional sexual roles. (Endersby 199)

In such a perspective, sexuality is separated from reproductive functions, because sex and gender roles are "dismantled," even abrogated. The posthuman

sexuality duly appreciates the connections between diverse beings, underscores fluidity, processuality, and multiplicity. In *Adaptation* (2002) directed by Spike Jonze, an orchid breeder speaks of the symbiosis of the plants with insects, highlighting the beauty of those relationships founded on sexual attraction. The scene is a prelude to showing a broad scope of correlations between human actions and their emotions, passion, and phobias, in which actual and phantasmatic references to “stormy sexual life” of plants play an important role.

In the posthuman approach, the emphasis is placed chiefly on the ethical facet of the symbiosis between humans and more-than-humans. Such a picture emerges from James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), in which humans, nonhumans, other-than-humans, and more-than-humans inhabiting the planet Pandora live a closely interconnected life marked by mutual respect. The behaviour of humans from Earth—soldiers seeking to conquer Pandora—is depicted as aggressive colonialism, capitalist technocracy and merciless, rapacious exploitation of nature. The film delivers two visions of the human: the anthropocentric (epitomized by the human soldiers) and the posthuman one, which eschews anthropocentrism (represented by the inhabitants of Pandora, who coexist with animals, trees, sand, water, and accept synergy and immersion between beings). The latter arises as a consequence of the new perception of the human—no longer a self-contained, stable subject that stands out from among other beings, but a subject construed in accordance with Braidotti’s “not-One” and functioning “with many” (Haraway). Experimenting with the capacities of the perverse polymorphic bodies is not confined to the coupling of post-structural, feminist and queer reflection with biological sciences and life sciences, as technology has become their significant complement. The advances of the latter in the twentieth and the twenty-first century have had a considerable impact on how the human and the non-human are comprehended. Returning briefly to the orchid as an actual plant and a phantasmatic figure of polymorphic perversion, it may be noted that since the mid-nineteenth century it became possible to cross-breed its varieties. In the century which followed, biotechnological tools enabled the creation of hybrid orchids, “[h]ybrids which early growers may not have even imagined became possible” (Yam, Arditti 1). The remark may not only be applied to orchid growing, but also—given the context discussed here—to the marriage of various bodies and sexualities with technology.

To sum up: in Western culture we can find many anthropomorphic images of plants, which in a “human way” explain the appearance and functioning of flora. In this approach, the tree branches are like human arms, and the twining vines are like hair, etc. However, with the development of posthumanist ideas, the optics changed—the image of *quasi*-human plants was replaced by the

vision of “plant side of the human.” At the same time, the problematic view of the human being (our multiple relationships with nature and technology) prompts posthumanists to view various beings as a connected, dynamic and changing system. Bodies exist with each other, side by side, thanks to themselves, within themselves—“we are multiplicity.” Posthumanist, polymorphic perversion implies acceptance of this diversity, multiformity and positively marked monstrosity. The orchid—due to the features of its structure, methods of reproduction (natural and technologically supported), functioning in multiple varieties, various geo-biological ecosystems—can be treated as a figure of this polymorphic perversion.

Translated by Szymon Nowak

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| Abstract

GRAŻYNA GAJEWSKA

Polymorphic Perversion of Human and Other-than-Human Bodies

The author examines a range of modes in which the relationship between flora and the human are portrayed. The paper begins with an inquiry into anthropomorphization of plants—a phenomenon firmly established in Western culture—only to show subsequently that such a notional approach has its counterpoise in non-anthropocentric research, primarily in post-humanism and new materialism. It is further demonstrated that the studies which emphasize the “vegetal facet of the human” manage to pinpoint both evolutionary and cultural relationships where the human and the non-human are seen to co-exist and cooperate. Then, the author draws attention to the very considerable role that plants play in creating phantasms relating to human gender and sexuality.

Keywords: posthumanism, new materialism, flora, posthuman sexuality

| **Abstrakt**

GRAŻYNA GAJEWSKA

Poliformiczna przewrotność ciał ludzkich i nieludzkich

Autorka przedstawia różne sposoby prezentacji relacji flory z człowiekiem. Tekst rozpoczyna omówieniem mocno utwierdzonej w kulturze zachodniej antropomorfizacji roślin, by następnie pokazać, że postawa ta znajduje przeciwwagę w refleksji nieantropocentrycznej, głównie w posthumanizmie i nowym materializmie. Wskazuje, że w badaniach akcentujących „roślinną stronę człowieka” wydobywane są zarówno ewolucyjne, jak i kulturowe relacje, współistnienie oraz współdziałanie tego, co ludzkie i nie-ludzkie. Następnie autorka pokazuje, jak dużą rolę odgrywają rośliny w kształtowaniu fantazmatów na temat ludzkiej płciowości i seksualności.

Słowa kluczowe: posthumanizm, nowy materializm, flora, posthumanistyczna płciowość/seksualność

| **Bio**

Grażyna Gajewska, Associate Professor at the AMU, Poznań, is a literary studies expert. Author of three monographs: *Maski dziejopisarstwa. Współczesne formy reprezentacji przeszłości*, 2002; *Arcy-nie-ludzkie. Przez science fiction do antropologii cyborgów*, 2010; *Erotyka sztucznych ciał*, 2016; *Eroticism of More- and Other-than-Human Bodies*, New York 2020), co-editor of several volumes, including *Kulturowy bricolage (po)nowoczesnej Europy Zachodniej* (2015); *Bezużyteczni. Studia nad losami chorych i upośledzonych psychicznie w okresie rządów nazistowskich*, 2016; head and researcher in a number of Polish and international grant projects.

E-mail: gajewska@amu.edu.pl

ORCID: 0000-0001-5293-6757