

# Transgressive Body in Hungarian Literature and film: Matters of the Cyborg-phenomena<sup>1</sup>

Eszter Vidosa  
vidosa.eszter@gmail.com

**Abstract.** Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* attempts to destroy barriers of body, discourse and even society, creating a brand new idea of a half-human, half-machine hybrid, called the cybernetic organism. In my opinion that is what protagonists of many fictional short-stories, novels or films do too: in my article I would like to present some of them as an ancestor of this peculiar creature, which makes philosophers and art and literary theorists redefine concepts of body, repression and actually everything about the Other. With a short overview of different theories (from Michel Foucault to Judith Butler), I attempt to prepare my interpretation of a Hungarian novel and a Hungarian film, *Inkognitó* (2010) by Noé Tibor Kiss and *Womb* (2010) by Benedek Fliegauf, in order to explore the meaning of a being that might be the most unimaginable and misunderstandable of all, and which definitely has a somewhat different meaning, that could lead us to whole new paths of understanding the Other.

**Keywords:** posthuman, cyborg, body, contemporary Hungarian cinema, contemporary Hungarian literature, transgression, feminism, Tibor Noé Kiss, Fliegauf Benedek

What happens when the main focus of the text is an entity whose appearance, body and nature is absolutely controversial in multiple aspects, transgressive and inconceivable? In my essay, after a detailed introduction, I take a look at a novel and a film, which rewrite conventional barriers of body, and even address their *raison d'être*: Noé Tibor Kiss's novel, *Inkognitó* and Benedek Fliegauf's *Womb*. I attempt to read these pieces of art alongside the so called cyborg body-experience, which allows us to seek out new aspects of the theoretical idea which begins with crossing barriers of body and identity. The cyborg entity can appear in different kinds of theoretical texts, but it is worth comparing them to find potential initial points and intriguing ideas in primary texts.

The deconstruction of the body as unity, or its construction, its natural aspects is a frequent theme of literary texts. This body, which according to some classical concepts is rather unified, impenetrable, unbreakable, is only desirable, ideal and healthy if it appears as a whole. In *Homo Sacer* Giorgio Agamben talks about the perfection of the bodies from Paradise, the Glorious Body which neglects the vegetative, biological functions of the body and the senses, and all the existence of internal organs, lymph, as well as the internal necessities. Agamben argues that the two most critical aspects of this idea are obviously the representation of the eating and reproductive organs, amounting to the tension between ambivalent questions related to the ideal body and its actual usage. With glory comes and

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prevails the concept of workless body: disarmedness is not about abilities, but only aims and modalities – practice is written and separated in them. (Agamben 1998) If we take a look at ancient arts, the unbreakableness of the canonical human body, which is envisaged as a unity, is very dominant in painting or statuary. Winckelmann declares that in the representation of the ideal human body creators avoid all the unwanted features. (Winckelmann 2006). All the traces that might indicate illness, and all the roughness of the surface, every sign that marks internal functions and operation is forgotten: usual outlines clearly separate the inside from outside of the body and even from itself. While Virgil's *Laocoön* makes an awful noise, the Greek master's sculpture shows us the pain without rampage, and the opening mouth is just like exhaling a lesser sigh. When Hans Belting examined the European pictorial history of the body, he came to the conclusion that its beginning was the very moment of the crisis of the pictures of the body. The reason for this is the contradictory Christian attitude towards ancient anthropocentric culture, which makes the cult of the body a taboo: the meaning of a new picture of the body is the deprivation from the body (Belting 2011). This unified, outward, impenetrable concept of body is there in literature and cinema, but it seems that as time goes by with different periods of cultural history, it falls apart, changes and relates to other concepts as well.

It is obvious that (medical) science affected philosophy and even literature: as the body becomes unfoldable from a closed, unified material, which is created analogically to God's portrait, it also makes its way to literal texts. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a meaningful example of this idea, because in the story, often mentioned as a Gothic horror, the main opposition is the idea of the creator versus created, and living versus dead, where the visualisation of human body parts as fixtures, installed and defined by a human itself, are highly remarkable. It is also important that Frankenstein creates a monster, in which he defines the roles of all of the body parts, making a creature that definitely breaks those rules of body which are established, classical, or as Butler calls it, naturalised, meaning that it is marked as natural by the forces and processes of power (Butler 1990, 6). We don't know what is the gender of those parts constituting the body of the monster – which entails a very important aspect of gender too: from a point like this, barriers between sexes can't really mean anything. In the centre of the text there is a marginalised and traumatised protagonist with many complexes. The undetermined identity of this transgressive entity keeps the narrative going. Addressing and abolishing the unity of the body as manipulation of the body is obviously a privilege of God, which is demonstrable by the Bible or ancient mythology. In *Metamorphoses* transformation is generally in the form of intervention and punishment:

Actaeon's penalty is getting transformed into a deer, after he sees Artemis bathing. The goddess also punishes Callisto with transformation, but we can think of Daphne, who ends up as a laurel after running away from the love of Apollo. What is most remarkable about the transformation from human to another organic material, whether in the case of Ovid's stories or the paintings and sculptures trying to seize this moment of transgression, is the goal of capturing that very moment of change. In the texts, it seems like the transformation goes step by step, from one body part to another: we can almost see the process of metamorphosis through the detailed, pictorial portrayal. It is notable that despite the transformation, there is a beating heart beneath the crust, pointing out the fact that, after this change, something essential is still there from the girl who turned into a tree. In my opinion, those pieces of art that have the potential of presenting these stories in the most impressive way, are always the ones that are showing this transgressive moment, that trice of transformation when there is some unique ambiguity about the protagonist, for example about Daphne. This game with human and non-human body parts entails the birth of a hybrid entity – just like in Ovid's writing, Bernini's famous sculpture or Poussin's painting – that can become imposing and meaningful, and also inexplicable and indescribable, thanks to its ambiguity. While we keep getting closer to the question of robots and cyborgs, it is intriguing to think about Talos, the automaton of Hephaestus: a hybrid entity, created by the Greek god. This bull-headed, bronze colossus had just one vein in its body, which went up to its head from its knee, and it killed the enemies with its hot embrace or just its gaze. This robot-like creature is inherently positive in the story, since its job is to defend Europa in Crete, but is still an unnatural, dreadful and feared freak – in many ways, it is like a pre-cyborg creature.

Attila Atilla Kiss investigates cyborgs – now by this we mean cybernetic organisms in general – in postmodern films. He declares that the focus on the theory of body developed and enhanced the sensitivity of cultural semiotic and cultural political parallels, which can be interpreted unattached to any structuralist and organicist modelling ideas (Kiss 2006). He examines barriers of body, the lymph, the sexualised and truncated body parts in the context of horror movies. The main question of his essay is how these films impact the conventional structures of society and culture – through the example of consuming space and time, mocking history or devaluating any inventions. It is important to take a look at the phenomenon of horror films that integrate cyborgs to the narrative: why do truncated, dislocated body parts and morbid monsters make viewers feel joy after all? György Kalmár argues that horror films can be read as the unsealed meaning, as discourses on the instability of the subject (Kalmár 2012). In his opinion this brings us back to the fact that classical horror

movies usually do not have a denouement, they impact the subject by conflicting oppositional ways (sadism and masochism, the subject and the Other, joy and fear etc.), and they bring in the question of subject by presenting its impossibility. There is a somewhat similar thought in *Being and Time*, in the chapters about the call of conscience: the call invoked by anxiety makes it possible to the presencing to project itself (Heidegger 1962). Horror films and even cyborgs make point and make something visible by decomposing, questioning and looking further.

With its attempts to understand its operation and substance, the structure of the body fell apart before to even smaller pieces and blended into different discourses. A philosopher and doctor from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Julien Offray de La Mettrie compared human body and organs to mechanical parts, and in *L'Homme Plante* he even makes parallels with other biological organisms. He writes about the very own vibration and mechanical movements of the body, stretching and limped cogs: the body is just like a watch, where fresh lymph is the watchmaker (La Mettrie 1994). Farkas Kempelen explores the operation and possibilities of human (and animalistic) language in his essay, *The Mechanism of Human Speech*, utilising the analogy of human and machine, thus creating a mechanical concept of understanding the functions of internal organs and the body. He made a speaking machine that had a detailed installation guide: he required every organ to speak as a device, made by fixtures (whistle, windbag), which were operating like the original organs. Kempelen's former great invention is the chess machine, which served as inspiration for several artists, including Poe and Hoffmann. The secret of the Turkish figure was a living human, hiding inside him, who reacted to the opponent's turns, using mirrors and other hidden methods to trick everyone. Thus creating humans with mechanics became more and more usual in many different areas, thanks to telescopes, microscopes, cameras and projectors. Questions like what is perception, how it can be represented and whether it is as natural as we thought became addressed by sciences and arts as well. Peter Bexte names the 17<sup>th</sup> century as the epoch of the revolution of optical instruments, when humankind could not believe what it saw any longer: these were the times when medium, picture and perception together began their circulation, that makes them going on nowadays too (Bexte 2009, 29). The very first of those Blickmachines, as he calls them, was the eye itself: along with the experiments and dissections of this organ came the experiments with photo machines or microscopes. Eye becomes a medium, the camera obscura, where picture is the screened image and perception, and vision is the process of screening. What is interesting about this theory is that Bexte sees an organic, human-animal part as something machinelike. His essay counts these Blickmachines as permanent and

significant objects of the past and the present: by asking one, we may look into another (Bexte 2008). When Kittler talks about the history of seeing and creating the science of optics, he emphasises the importance of classical Greek culture. He believes that the eye itself was the broadcasting object, its activities reached things in the world, and after that, they made signs to the spirit (Kittler 2009). According to this idea, the ray of sight that tended to the source made it possible to see an object: the concepts of the eye, light, seeing changed over and over (Descartes for example saw seeing as a talent, which helps us notice objects, and light, its size etc. as a feature of the actual object), but it was indeed the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the famous Siècle des Lumières, which was a turning point according to Kittler as well. This complex epistemology of the eye almost gives authorisation to evaluate seeing as something more than just a simple organic phenomenon. This thought is also available to the whole human body, its deconstruction and mechanicalisation, for example in the case of puppets, automatons, robots, so the adequate question is whether this complexity is enough reason to strain borders of nature and “naturalness” with the myths of hybrid creatures, robots, etc.?

Questions of relations between machines and living organism from a theoretical, structural or ideological angle, the phenomenon of disappearing barriers between organic and artificial entities, with the related mysteries and myths served as inspiration to many scientist, artist, critics and philosophers. Mechanical humans, or robots, automatons, machines with human features are usual topics in modern and postmodern texts. In cultural and literary studies this could have various functions, and whether it is about philosophy, matters of utopias, tools of horror stories or just writing science fiction, destabilising the (seemingly) static system is often very effective. If we take a look at the phenomenon of transformed human body from the animalistic-human, the living-dead, the mechanical prosthesis body parts, we may reach the absolutely transgressive cyborg entity. A cybernetic organism is the ambiguous, controversial, both biological and mechanical creature, that is often a popular topos of science fiction, thus it can be called the most transgressive cultural and literary figure.

What is it exactly that the alliance of machine and human can offer in the future? If we look at the social effects of it, the pure, productive idea of cyborgs carries the hope of utopias. Michel Foucault sees utopias contrary to the body, when he declares that they are born against the body and to wipe away the idea of body: they are dislocated spaces that a body leaves itself, becomes pretty and clear, transparent, shiny, agile, immeasurably powerful, infinite, freed, invisible, protected and forever changing (Foucault 2006). This forever changing matter, taken out from its framework, is the central idea of postmodern feminist philosopher Donna J. Haraway’s cyborg manifesto from 1985, in which she uses the cyborg concept to

make arguments about the social relations at the end of the century. She believes that this entity is the source of fertile and imaginative ideas, and the fiction that replicates social and material reality (Haraway 2000). In her opinion, relations of living organisms and machines were always battles for borders (of power, reproduction or production), and by disturbing these borders, she attempts to create an idea of a utopia without gender, to contribute to socialist and feminist culture. Thus this myth of cyborgs created by Haraway is about broken borders, its advantages and dangers, mostly in the case of questions about defining and reinterpreting female body.

A cyborg becomes a peripheral figure by disregarding conventional barriers of body. Which are these barriers and what does an ideal body look like? It is important to note that the body and its representation is always something formed by social frames and rules, therefore a cyborg-like creature can only get marginal positions in discourses. Talking about barriers of bodies (of repressors and repressed ones), Bourdieu declares that the body, which is marked by relations of authority, is defined by habitus. The French philosopher investigates this concept in connection of symbolic violence, which is in his opinion the key to understanding this system of power, because talking and noticing habitus leads the way to understanding the system that rules the body as a product of relations of power. In his famous text, *Masculine Domination*, the most important ideas are phallogocentrism, the relations of repression, so it is obvious why feminist or postcolonial theories can benefit from it: in this masculine system of power, magical barriers – as Bourdieu calls them – are created and named and they make and force their mark by which social identity is created, and which leaves a mark on biological nature (by naturalising) becomes habitus (Bourdieu 2001). If habitus, thus human body ruled by symbolic domination disregards these barriers, it places itself outside society. The naturalisation of body can be linked to Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Butler subverted normative and not normative, natural and artificial categories, speaking about marginalised sexual identities, and declared heteronormativity itself as something artificial. Thereby she emphasised the process of naturalisation, she legitimated all identities that are not normative about their sexuality or their body. The concept of sexual identity and the body of an entity is a performative phenomenon, which is made up by different cultural gestures, repeating actions, thus it is not an a priori feature of a person. Knowing about cultural and social constructions, we must dismiss the unquestionable facts of gender's nature, coming from one's biological sex. If the inner truth of gender is a social construction, and if the real social sex is just an act of imagination, which is carved in the surface of bodies and

institutionalised, it seems that genders cannot be true or false, but simply created like the truth that impacts on the discourse of stable and primary identity (Butler 1990).

What can we tell about the post-gender theory and the cyborg phenomenon, especially if we read a book or watch a film? In my opinion the Hungarian transgender novel, *Inkognitó* by Noé Tibor Kiss can answer this question, as the novel shows us how a transsexual person seeks identity. There are two timelines in the narrative: first, there is the late eighties and early nineties in Hungary, when the protagonist is in his teenage years, and also the present of the narration, when we can see an adult person trying to fit in and struggling with relationships. Dynamic alternation of these timelines keeps the narrative fast and tense, but it also creates tension via the unusually long exposition when compared to the length of the entire novel, as it sketches the heavy atmosphere of socialism. The protagonist grows up in a depressing era of Hungary, and as a kid, he likes to play football, his favourite colour is blue. The text emphasises the differences between Tibor's childhood and his adult life. There are many noticeable repetitions in the text and the storyline: "I dusted, vacuum-cleaned the carpet, mopped the floor. I wiped the commode, the shelf and the tables clean. I slowly blew the smoke out of my mouth." (Kiss 2010, 6: translation by me, VE) These patterns aren't just about demolishing the ways of usual, naturalised activities: textual repetitions and monotony can be compared to the process of forming an identity which is ruled by social conventions. Stepping over objects is a recurrent and indicative pattern that can repeat itself in the text, or can come back after different chapters. These moments, like stepping over puddles and doorsteps, might symbolise immobility rather than going forward, the frozen moments of temporality, thus being eternally in-between and helpless. There are those types of repetitions that are stacking different thoughts and sentences and switching words in the text. I think that this next part emphasises the instability of relations of words and their actual meanings, intensifying the idea of the battle against definitions, thus the issues of self-realisation. "The marks of my lips, lipstick, brown like a brick on the porcelain cup. The mark of lipstick, brown as a brick, the mark of my lips on a porcelain cup. My lips are like a brown brick, lipstick mark on the porcelain cup. My lips are marks of lipstick, the mark of the porcelain cup brown as well as a brick." (Kiss 2010, 100: translation by me, VE) According to Judith Butler, norms of gender function by demanding the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity. Expropriating performative acts by queer ideas both imitates and shows the biding power of heterosexualising law, the possibility of its deprivation of authority (Butler 1990, 7). This thought can be important if we take a look at the protagonist, Tibor, who faces the problems coming from the symbolism of clothing. "Women's purse, women's

watch, women's wig. My reflection is a stranger's on the balcony door. My bracelet sparkles, my nails shine." (Kiss 75. Translation by me, VE)

A transsexual protagonist, standing between, and trapped by, traditional categories of man and woman, is a good example if we talk about non-conventional body parts that are not able to reconcile with norms, and can confirm the queer transgression of the body often analyzed by Butler. At this point it is the drag that can be very significant: the transsexual person, who embraces conventional norms of the other gender, and the so-called double drag, which describes the look of a transvestite. Having feminine looks, but a masculine body, while as an opposition to this idea, having masculine body and gender, but being feminine under the surface. A person, described as such, weakens the difference of eternal and external, of physical and spiritual, and points out the fluidity of identity, such as its external social representation. These rather interesting processes, which result not simply in the crossing but also in the fading of the conventional barriers of the body: with these contradictions, according to Butler, all kinds of social marks are liquidated from the discourse of true and false (Butler 1990). The drag and queer therefore levitates in an eternal in-between, appearing as a cyborg of gender aspects, in front of the gaze of the observing power: fear, disgust, exclusion, body that functions in a good or a bad way, death and life, the living and the dead, natural and unnatural are all related concepts. In Noé Tibor Kiss's book, self-reflexivity plays an important role, whether through the protagonist's bodily experiences or through the interpretation of supervising gazes: confusion, disgust and aggression are emphasised by obscene verbal reactions of those observing Tibor's body. I think it can be fruitful if we compare drag against cyborg phenomenon and identity: sexual practices aren't sanctioned by the hegemonic system of power, which induces the concept of transgression of body. There is a parallel between this and the collective fear and repugnance caused by machines, cyborgs, or with the questions of authority and identity as well. Since Haraway emphasises the post-gender essence of the utopian world imagined and traced in her manifesto, in my opinion cyborg entity can be seen as the hardly describable queer individual of science and fiction – and vice versa. Body is not glorified and impenetrable anymore, as Agamben wrote about it, rather it is taken apart along identity, inside and outside.

It is noticeable that violence is highly emphasised in the novel: both in the narrative and in the text. Other than actual violence, for example from the protagonist's childhood, there are many verbal marks of aggression in the novel. Strangers usually don't understand the state Tibor's in: they call him a pervert, ask harsh questions about his biological sex and often berate him without consequences. The opinions of these characters are marked by



silence, for example at the shoe store, when Tibor buys a pair of high heeled shoes, or they are short and obscene: “Fucking faggot, you son of a bitch!” (Kiss 2010, 99: translation by me, VE). These one-sided verbal attacks are expressing fear, uncertainty and the impossibility of understanding the Other. The narrative style of *Inkognitó* consciously plays with these feelings: it is not just about how Tibor and the others react – it also has an impact on what types of feelings we read the story with. While Tibor’s position is completely uncertain, and the text works with this uncertainty: it is more than a usual coming-out story, because it’s also a very cleverly written piece of art.

It is unquestionable that the fear of the Other destroyed barriers of body and highly transgressive characters can have key roles in other types of literary works, and of course films too. Science fiction and its predecessors are great examples of showing how body and identity also fall to pieces and their unity becomes a question. Contemporary sci-fis, the androids of Philip K. Dick, the so-called multiorganisms of Margaret Atwood are preceded by the automatons of E.T.A. Hoffmann, but also transgressive stories from ancient mythology, like Medusa, or the already mentioned half-human, half-bull monster made by Hephaestus: the emergence of cyborg entity is thus an immensely interesting process through eras of culture and literature. Finally that is why I mention a film by a Hungarian director featuring an absolute transgressive persona, which, just like in *Inkognitó*, deconstructs the body to its very elements.

In Benedek Fliegauf’s *Womb* (2010), we see a mechanically constructed picture of body and identity that can be copied, which, however, carries many contradiction and problems: as I see it, this is the moment, when this interesting, extremely transgressive and tense game, based on cyborg identity comes into play. The story is about a woman whose lover dies, but thanks to technology it is possible to clone him (which action is considered illegal, blameworthy and excludable), bear and raise him as her own child.



[Fig.1.]. *Womb*

The film wipes away not just barriers of body, but the essence of parent-child relations and identities, which is emphasised through the dialogue. “There are no two alike.” – says the boy, who does not know then that his mother cloned him: he is the copy of an exactly same entity, who is dead by now. This entity is the same, but yet completely different: this is the kind of ambivalence that absolutely disturbs every character, and the spectator as well. Not only the identity of the growing child becomes a question, but the identity of the one who bore him, and who has a very strange sexual connection with him.



[Fig.2.]. *Womb*

“Who are you?” – he asks her mother at the end of the film, when he finds out that he is a clone of somebody. After that, he has sex with his mother, and the picture hints at the possibility that he impregnates her as well. Different types of body-barriers are broken in this

narrative: there are no more exact lines between lover and parent, child and adult, the entity and identity of one and another.

It is an important aspect of the narrative that cloned entities, so-called Copies are not welcome anywhere, and they occupy a space at the periphery of society. When ordinary people speak about this issue, there is an obvious importance about the contrary between artificial and natural materials, about how organs sense difference and about experiences of the body: “Copies smell. Copies have a weird smell. They smell like window cleaner. It comes from their skin.” Or: “Dima is a victim of artificial incest. Her mother gave birth to her own mother.” It is worth noticing that the child, who is actually born and raised by the protagonist, also learns, uses and embraces the practice of exclusion, without knowing his own origins.



[Fig.3.]. *Womb*

This picture addresses problems about how human body and identity can be constructed when the seemingly stable system falls apart: at one point the mother says to the child that she decided to clone him, because that way she could give a new life to her lover. Just like in *Inkognitó*, fear is an important impression in the film: not only the people fear these postmodern cyborgs, called Copies, but also the mother and the viewer. The cloned boy grows up, and the viewer sees it from the mother’s ambivalent perspective, who desires her child from the first time, but also fears him. This fear is about the consequences after committing a crime, the fear of her feelings, and also the fear of the unknown Other, who appears to be somebody she knows well, yet he is someone else after all.

I think fear from something almost entirely incomprehensible, and the emerging aspects of the Other are the main reasons to examine *Inkognitó* and *Womb* in parallel: the

source of fear is always an immensely transgressive character, marked by the attributes of nowadays' cyborg entity. I believe that tracing the background of cyborg as the absolute transgressive character of posthuman literature helps us understand and rethink science in postmodern novels and pictures. The protagonist of *Inkognitó* breaks social rules and norms with his ambiguous identity and the norm-breaking appearance of his body: it is very hard to understand and often implies fear and disgust. In *Womb*, the mother makes almost a human-machine out of a neutral material which is a result of technology and living substance, a transgressive, frightfully unrecognisable Other, who breaks all barriers of body. A cyborg which is exactly the same, yet it faces all identities, all bodies which had a picture of unity, impenetrableness, naturalness emphasised by many scholars, and that will probably serve as a conceptual inspiration with its ambivalence in upcoming socio-cultural discourses.

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