

Dropping the Body

***The X-Files, Popular Culture, and Exosomatic Evolution*¹**

"Who the hell, besides some socially autistic techie in an ivory basement, would WANT to give up the human body?"

Bruce Sterling

"I'm really worried about my body. Our real bodies, are they all right?"

Ted Pikul in eXistenZ

"We predict the future, and the best way to predict the future is to invent it."

The Well-Manicured Man in "Paper Clip" in The X-Files

I

The Syndicate had plans. An international "consortium" involving mysterious, powerful, white men meeting in drawing rooms in London and New York, working in cooperation with scientists from the Axis Powers supplied through "Operation Paper Clip," they alone seemed to know, after the crash of an alien ship at Roswell, New Mexico in 1947, of the coming alien invasion. They alone prepared for it, bargaining for a delay so that they might, as a kind of peace overture to the invaders, genetically engineer human-alien hybrids, purportedly as slaves for the powerful and ancient invaders and (in secret) to prepare a cure, a serum, that would prevent their own colonization by the pathogenic Black Oil. They had long ago surrendered their own loved ones—wives, children—as hostages, of course, but that was a small price to pay, was it not, in return for their own survival of the "viral holocaust"?

"Survival," the Well Manicured Man tells Mulder in *Fight the Future*, "is the ultimate ideology." The evil but compelling Cigarette Smoking Man, it seems, is their chief enforcer, one of them but working at their behest, though always putting his self-interest first. When the Well Manicured Man, one of

¹ Portions of this essay previously appeared in *Late for the Sky: The Mentality of the Space Age*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois U P, 1992. See also <http://www.middleenglish.org/DroppingtheBody/Pages/droppingthebody.htm>.

their most prominent members but in doubt about the group's motives, approaches Special Agent Scully in order to help her and her partner Fox Mulder understand the enormity of the conspiracy they seek to untangle, she has, not surprisingly, one basic question: she wants to know what this shadowy group actually does. His answer is simple but momentous: "We predict the future, and the best way to predict the future is to invent it."

The *X-Files* would have us believe that the invention of the future in order to predict it is a post-war project. But the real conspiracy goes back to the Renaissance. The prime effect of the Copernican revolution, as Hannah Arendt argued in *The Human Condition*, was the newly acquired conviction that humankind should (in Arendt's words) "abandon the attempt to understand nature and generally to know about things not produced by man and . . . turn exclusively to things that owed their existence to man." Human reason, long deceived by its reliance on commonsense revelations about the world, thus came to seem "adequate only when confronted with man-made objects"² (*The Human Condition* 280-84). *Homo faber* triumphed and remains the ruler still of human capacity. The Copernican revolution was enacted on its behalf—to put it in power. Its values—its

...distinctly modern suspicion toward man's truth receiving capacities, the mistrust of the given, and hence the new confidence in making and introspection . . . inspired by the hope that in human consciousness there [is] a realm where knowing and producing would coincide.

are now becoming the world's values, even in cultures that do not share its historical roots.

The sublime paranoia of *The X-Files*, an entertainment that has both shaped and reflected, and finally confirmed American sensibility in the pre September 11th decade, but a show that has never really taken itself that seriously, has gotten the conspiracy wrong. For the future we must fight (if we are a Mulder) or acquiesce to (if we are The Syndicate) will not come upon us

² See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago 1958, 280-284.

from beyond earth. It will be our invention, the product of our hubris. We will create our own conquerors.

II

In "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us," William Joy, chief scientist of Sun Microsystems, presents a sobering meditation on the dangers posed to species survival by robotics, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology in the century ahead. As he contemplates the futurism of everyone from the Unabomber to Carnegie-Mellon robotics visionary Hans Moravec, he takes very seriously the likelihood that machines could supplant *homo sapiens* as the dominant "life" form on the planet. The plain white cover of the April 2000 issue of *Wired* containing Joy's essay shows a crumpled piece of paper, evidently torn from a future dictionary, bearing a definition:

human: ('hü-men) adj. 1. of, belonging to, or typical of the extinct species *Homo sapiens* <the human race> 2. what consisted of or was produced by *homo sapiens* <human society> n. an extinct biped, *Homo sapiens*, characterized by carbon-based anatomy; also, HUMAN BEING. Obs: hu-man-ness.

Joy contemplates the future realization of this definition and suggests how we might prevent it. In a series of devoid-of-context colorful cartoons interspersed with the endless advertisements that fill the table of contents-burying opening pages of *Wired* several alarming quotations from the essay are highlighted:

"Biological species almost never survive encounters with superior competition."—Hans Moravec

"In the game of life and evolution there are three players at the table: human beings, nature, and machines. I am firmly on the side of nature. But nature, I suspect, is on the side of the machines."—George Dyson

"I'm as fond of my body as anyone, but if I can be 200 with a body of silicon, I'll take it."—Danny Hillis

III

Joy, however, is not ready to sell out. He contests each of these sobering propositions. But others of our kind—Quislings, if you will—are ready and willing to join the Syndicate, are, in order to cooperate with our future conquerors, ready with open-arms to welcome the coming of the exosomatic and transhuman. I have been investigating the conspiracy myself for nearly twenty years and have been about as successful as Mulder and Scully in exposing it.

The year is 1982. I am a panelist at a public library forum, on "Computers, Robots, and You" in Huntsville, Alabama, the "Rocket City" where Werner von Braun, Krafft Ehrlicke, and other German and American scientists contributed mightily to the development of United States Space Program after the war. One of my fellow panelists was, as his name tag revealed, a computer language expert at one of the major aerospace firms in Huntsville. But I suspected another allegiance in addition to his corporate identity. The fierce abstraction of his eyes, something in his condescension to matter, his uneasy, careless inhabitation of his clothes tree / taxicab / body (he was wearing a leisure suit for god's sake)—all spoke, spoke loudly: computer-jock. But really that was his subspecies. He was, more specifically, a Body Snatcher.³

A humanities professor with a vital interest in science and technology, a profound solicitude for the evolution and destiny of our species, and a growing, disturbing ability to identify Body Snatchers in any disguise, I had been invited to participate in the gathering to present an overview of science fiction's portrayal of computers and robots. Having done so, I concluded my remarks by reading the closing words of NASA scientist Robert Jastrow's *The Enchanted Loom: Mind in the Universe*, a description of our true evolutionary

³ See David Lavery, "Departure of the Body Snatchers, or the Confessions of a Carbon Chauvinist" in *Hudson Review* 39 (1986), 383-404 and David Lavery, *Late for the Sky: The Mentality of the Space Age*. Carbondale 1992. 62-89.

destiny in the cosmos as he sees it.⁴ It was a passage whose implications I for one found absolutely terrifying, for in it lay the philosophical groundwork for exosomatic evolution—for Body Snatching—as a prerequisite to our future everlasting, Faustian pursuit of knowledge:

At last the human brain, ensconced in a computer, has been liberated from the weaknesses of mortal flesh. [Jastrow is here imagining humanity's future cosmic voyages.] Connected to cameras, instruments and engine controls, the brain sees, feels, and responds to stimuli. It is in control of its own destiny. The machine is its body; it is the machine's mind. The union of mind and machine has created a new form of existence, as well designed for life in the future as man is designed for life on the African savanna.

It seems to me that this must be the mature form of intelligent life in the Universe. Housed in indestructible lattices of silicon, and no longer constrained in the span of its years by the life and death cycle of a biological organism, such a kind of life could live forever. It would be the kind of life that could leave its parent planet to roam the space between the stars. Man as we know him will never make that trip, for the passage takes a million years. But the artificial brain, sealed within the protective hull of a star ship, and nourished by electricity collected from starlight, could last a million years or more. For a brain living in a computer, the voyage to another star would present no problems.⁵

As expected, Jastrow's words had the ring of poetry and prophecy for many in the audience, those evidently weary of being "immature". There was no need to convince them that they—that humanity—should, in Jastrow's sense, be born again; that they should, excarnated, identify themselves with "immortal technology" in an "omnipotent fantasy" (Searles). Why, then, did I feel an unearthly terror? Why did Jastrow seem to me to be a rational madman, an apologist for Body Snatching? Why did such thinking seem to me to demand a psychohistorical explanation—linking as it does excarnation and space

⁴ See Robert Jastrow, *The Enchanted Loom: Mind in the Universe*. New York 1981.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

exploration as if theirs were a marriage made in heaven—while for many in the audience it seemed well-nigh axiomatic? Why now? Why in the West? Why in America? I wanted to ask of history.

And the computer jock was the first to answer. "I guess you're just a Carbon Chauvinist," he suggested, good-naturedly enough. He for one could not wait to have his consciousness translated permanently to "indestructible lattices of silicon." He for one could not believe I was so old-fashioned, such a stick-in-the-mud ("mutter", "matter", "mother") as to want to remain incarnated, earthy. I was, of course, familiar with the tendency (beginning in the 1960s) to call anyone trapped in old concepts (the supremacy of the male, for example) a "chauvinist". I recalled space colonization guru Gerald K. O'Neill's description of anyone unwilling to embark on, or at least to sanction, his ambitious plans for humankind's extraterrestrialization as a "Planetary Chauvinist".⁶ I thought, too, of my own frequent use of the term species chauvinist to describe our kind's reckless, nature-be-damned, incestuous human-ism. But this phrase was one I had not heard before in all the semantic dissemination of the original concept, though I immediately realized what its user meant by it. In the back of my mind I heard the android in the first Star Trek movie announcing "V'ger's" intention to exterminate the "carbon-based infestation of the Creator [Earth]." I heard, again, David Kibner in the 1978 version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* lecturing a reluctant-to-be-absorbed character—still fighting for his reactionary, carbon-based, earthy, human values; still believing in the psychosomatic individuation that comes with bodies, lived bodies—that he must not be "trapped in old concepts", must not fear liberation from the "weakness of mortal flesh".

I turned to look at my accuser—and fellow carbon-based unit—ready to retaliate. But no, I thought; he's exosomatic already, though his name was "Skip" and he was dressed in a leisure suit; but he had every right to make such a charge, for he was, at least, no hypocrite. I accepted his allegation—I have since, in fact, become proud of it—and counterattacked. "And you," I replied (incisively, I felt, but far too abstrusely for the audience that evening), "are a Cartesian Body Snatcher."

My wit fell on deaf ears then. Perhaps—like Donald Sutherland in the last image of the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*—I should have countered not with a recondite intellectual barb but by leaping to my feet, pushing away my

⁶ Ibid., 35.

podium, and exposing my adversary with a pointing, accusing finger and moanlike scream of discovery, announcing to all the presence of an alien in their midst. But who, I wondered, was the alien now? Sterling's question seems less and less rhetorical each day.⁷

Though I failed then, in my close encounter with Skip, to expose and decry the presence of the invaders (departers?) among us, I ask now that you indulge my paranoia as I present the evidence for my conspiracy theory in a more systematic way. If the following is dismissed as personal raving, as having an *X-Files* quality, if you decide (in current American slang) to "Scully me," to doubt my rant, I would respond that I have more evidence that Scully and Mulder can usually muster. Though I would not go so far as to claim that I have exposed the workings of any organized Syndicate, I can name the names (and show the faces) of an oddly diverse array of species-traitors now active in our increasingly science fiction culture ready to sell out the human body in advance to a presumed / predicted under-construction, higher species.⁸

"This is the Space Age," former Heroin addict, Beat movement novelist, and visionary William Burroughs reminded his contemporaries four decades ago, "Time to look beyond this run down radioactive cop rotten planet. Time to look beyond the animal body." Many have answered his call.

British science fiction writer and telecommunication satellite visionary Arthur C. Clarke imagines

a time when men who still inhabit organic bodies are regarded with pity by those who have passed on to an infinitely richer mode of existence. . . . One

⁷ Bruce Sterling, "Is the Body Obsolete?," in *Whole Earth Review* (Summer 1989), 50-51.

⁸ See Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Post-Modern Science Fiction*. Durham 1993; Kevin Kelly / Adam Heilbrun / Barbara Stacks, "Virtual Reality: An Interview with Jaron Lanier," in *Whole Earth Review* (Fall 1989), 108-19; Rudy Rucker / R. U. Sirius / Queen Mu, *Mondo 2000: A User's Guide to the New Edge, Cyberpunk, Virtual Reality, Wetware, Designer Aphrodisiacs, Artificial Life, Techno-EroticPaganism, and More*. New York 1992. Bruce Sterling (Ed.), *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*. New York 1986.

day there may be a second and more portentous adolescence, when we bid farewell to the flesh.

Indeed, such a step, Clarke is convinced, is absolutely necessary if we ever hope to expand into the universe. "In the ages to come," Clarke suggests, accepting, indeed championing the future division of mankind into separate cultures, "the dullards may remain on placid Earth, and real genius will flourish only in space—the realm of the machine, not of flesh and blood."

French philosopher and theorist of postmodernism Jean-Francois Lyotard discourses with supreme objectivity on the need for a new mentality—"prerequisite for thinking of the death of all bodies, solar or terrestrial, and of the death of thoughts that are inseparable from those bodies"—transcendent of physical limitations. (In order to prepare the way for "post-solar thought," Lyotard explains, we must understand that "as a material ensemble, ... the human body hinders the separability of [negentropic] intelligence, hinders its exile and therefore survival.")⁹

Convinced that our intelligence is in a sense "extraterrestrial", and believing that the "human imagination, in conjunction with technology, has become a force so potent that it really can no longer be unleashed on the surface of the planet with safety," that it has in fact "gained such an immense power that the only environment that is friendly to is the vacuum of deep space," ethnopharmacologist and New Age guru Terence McKenna insists that the time has come to turn the "body inside out"—to remake the body as an "indestructible cybernetic object," a goal he believes to be a realization of "our deepest cultural aspirations."¹⁰

Extolling the potential of genetic engineering and nanotechnology for enabling transformation of "our bodies into new and different forms," *New Edge* impresario R. U. Sirius, editor and publisher of *Mondo 2000*, insists that human beings "are now such monsters of such sophistication and complexity that we can't begin to know ourselves until we morph the human body, expand

⁹ See Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Can Thought Go On Without a Body?," in *Discourse* 11 (1988-89), 74-87.

¹⁰ See Terence McKenna, *The Archaic Revival*. San Francisco 1991.

the bandwidth of our sensoria, permutate our brains, and strap on our add-ons!"

Even a humanist and culture critic like O. B. Hardison, Jr. accepts the need for exosomatic evolution for the species. The fragility of the "carboniferous fabric," he is certain requires that our "spirit finally separates itself from an outmoded vehicle"; the "voracious" needs and disastrous ecological impact of carbon mandate that it seeks out its natural sphere: space. "The relation between carbon man and the silicon devices he is creating," Hardison would have us believe, may prove to be analogous to that of "the caterpillar and the iridescent winged creature ... the caterpillar unconsciously prepares to become." His own sympathies are with the butterfly.¹¹

Techno-futurist-economist George Gilder, whose far-reaching speculations have influenced the American political right from Ronald Reagan to Newt Gingrich, rhapsodizes about the "overthrow of matter" and "the exaltation of mind" by means of information technology, leading to transcendence of "the traps and compulsions of pleasure into a higher morality of spirit."

MIT's Marvin Minsky believes that human beings—already carbon-based "machines"—will certainly grow "tired of their limitations," will "get fed up with their bodies", and design new ones. And though some Carbon Chauvinists may fear that in seeking excarnation in machines of our own devising something of our humanity will be lost, Minsky counsels that such thinking represents only the reactionary squeamishness of those who "worship death". Death, he hastens to remind us, is after all "only bad luck," an engineering flaw that can certainly be overcome.¹²

We hear the prominent space advocate Barbara Marx Hubbard express her utter amazement at the old-fashioned nature of her human body:

¹¹ O. B. Hardison Jr., *Disappearing Through the Skylight: Culture and Technology in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Viking, 1989.

¹² See Marvin Minsky, "Is the Body Obsolete?," in *Whole Earth Review* (Summer 1989) 37; Marvin Minsky, *The Society of Mind*. New York 1986.

Who ever thought that this particular model of the body is it forever? A little, mammalian, furry body, it forever? Sometimes I notice my body. It has little fur, little fangs, ears still slightly pointed. We are spiritual beings still in animal bodies and it always struck me as weird.

At present, death is "scheduled into the evolutionary process" for such a body, but we could and should, Hubbard insists, through technological innovation and the psychic advances (high consciousness and high tech being closely linked in Hubbard's worldview), "reset that clock" and move "out of the mammalian body consciously." "We need no longer feel that it is 'bad' to die," Hubbard's Space Age, Teilhardian Christianity tells her.

If you don't really need a body, you might as well die... However, if you need a body, because you want to do work in the cosmos that is still on the physical plane, even though it is transcending the mammalian physical plane, then you will keep a body. This is a new option that evolution is keeping open to us as a species.

We are witnesses to the birth of "bodies which will not perish," engineered by modern science and technology, and though "right now it sounds rather awkward: replacing parts, cyborgs, computerized intelligence," all this, Hubbard reassures us, will be somehow, someday, spiritually transformed; all will be made beautiful. "Anything that survives in evolution," she insists, "is beautiful".¹³

In *Future Man* British science fiction writer Brian Stableford seriously contemplates and, with the help of an illustrator, envisions, genetically morphing the body for war and for life in outer space.¹⁴ In "Cyborg 1.0", Kevin Warwick, Professor of Cybernetics at the University of Reading in the UK, hard at work to make Stableford's hypotheses into science fact, outlines his plan to become one with his computer, a feat he hopes to accomplishment thanks to a variety of implants which have already begun to become, though surgery, part

¹³ See Barbara Hubbard, "A Scenario for the Future," in *Worlds Beyond*. Larry Geis / Fabrice Florin (Eds.). Berkeley 1978, 281-94.

¹⁴ Brian Stableford, *Future Man*. New York 1984.

of his own flesh. He hopes to "try out a whole new range of senses," to record his own experiences and feed them back into himself (so that he may test whether the virtual record is identical to the original), to have cybersex with his wife (who has agreed to implants herself), and, eventually, along with his fellow implantees, to evolve, by "natural progression," "into a cyborg community" that will hook up "people via chip implants to superintelligent machines... creating, in effect, superhumans." "I was born human," Warwick admits, "but this was an accident of fate—a condition merely of time and place. I believe it's something we have the power to change."¹⁵

All of the foregoing, however, are but minor figures lurking in The Syndicate's smoked-filled room, compared to the next three major players.

The late Iranian-born futurist **Fereidoun M. Esfandiary** (in the early '90s he changed his legal name to FM-2030 in order to teach his contemporaries by example not to fear future collectivization) argues that, on the behalf of true human freedom, the body must be rebuilt to new specifications, this time our own. In *Up-Wingers*, an utterly mad treatise on technological engineering and the extraterrestrial imperative, FM 2030 insists that the only solution to all our pressing earthly problems is to embrace a cosmic alternative to our current political viewpoints: what he calls "the up-coming Up".¹⁶ He seeks to lay out a blueprint for a totally open-ended, "cosmicalized" future in which humankind transcends not only the old bifurcation into left-and right-wing thinking but resolves as well the old dilemma of mind-body dualism (a dualism Descartes locked into place for the modern age) through a vanquishing of the physical and material in which human beings overcome the need for (among other things) mothers, families, children, the seasons, planets, suffering of any kind, bodily functions, bodies themselves, and, of course, death, as he seeks to colonize "All-Time and All-Space".

We have no freedom if we die, FM 2030 insists; thus the body must be entirely redesigned—this time according to our specifications: "The more we

¹⁵ See Kevin Warwick, "Cyborg 1.0," in *Wired* (2/2000), 144-48, 150-51.

¹⁶ See Fereidoun M. Esfandiary, *Up-Wingers*. New York 1973.

remake our bodies the more human we will grow. We have been prehuman." ("Eating drinking defecating reproducing sleeping walking dying—all these are prehuman," he proclaims, renouncing punctuation too as reactionary.) Because he trusts the "cumulative wisdom of humans far more than the slow arbitrary workings of evolution," FM 2030 has nothing but disdain for the body we have inherited and all its functions, and unlike his intellectual forebear Descartes, he does not even attempt to mask his disgust in philosophical language. Just as the Body Snatchers themselves worked in secret early on in both films, spreading their blight clandestinely until increasing numbers allowed them to go public with their conspiracy, their historical advocates, too, once spoke only in hushed, subdued tones and only in carefully reasoned, scientific, cautious voices until their mentality was so widely disseminated, so much common sense, that the pretense can now be dropped, and they can come out of the closet—as FM 2030 has done—about their actual Gnostic loathing for the physical and the earthly, announcing openly their true cosmic motives. Here is a sampling.

The animal human organism is structurally a robot. A rigid robot manipulated by its pre-determined biology and environment. What is more robot-like than having at regular intervals to inhale and exhale to eat drink urinate evacuate sleep? All these mechanical functions are programmed into me. I have nothing to say about them. They are beyond my control. If I stopped breathing for only a few minutes—a few quick nothing minutes—that's it. If I don't eat or drink or sleep at regular intervals my body begins to flounder my mind begins to go fuzzy. Last night in the middle of a deep merciful sleep I suddenly jumped up robot-like and rushed to the bathroom. There I was in the middle of sleep half-conscious half-alive holding my thing. Is there anything more programmed more manipulated than all this?¹⁷

To FM 2030, in apparent frustration at the knowledge that he is merely mortal, consumed with the aspiration to become a new, exemplary version of the non defecating Gnostic Christ, the human body is an utterly loathsome thing,

¹⁷ Ibid., 108.

beneath contempt: a "fire hazard heavily polluted poorly ventilated badly insulated and handicapped with countless other structural defects. . . . To hell with this natural body,"¹⁸ he screams, seemingly unafraid he might be judged insane by his contemporaries, convinced, it would seem, that the future at least will take him to be a prophet. In boldface type he proudly shouts his longing for excarnation at us: "The Body has been our greatest hangup. Our most serious obstacle to a higher evolution."¹⁹ We must escape it, he proclaims again and again, and we must conquer death; for only then will we be free. And this freedom will come only through "up-winging," only by escaping the drag and hindrance of the Earth.

"The world is Satan, and Satan is the world," Martin Luther concluded at the beginning of the modern age, helping to usher in a "worldly asceticism" (Max Weber) that, according to many critics, contributed substantially to contemporary desecration of the "evil genius" of the natural world. Now, in the otherworldly, extraterrestrial asceticism of an FM 2030, the world and all things physical have metamorphosed into a modern equivalent of the satanic, at which FM 2030 throws his inkwell; have come to be seen, in his eyes, as an evolutionary cul-de-sac, an "evil" impediment to our species' cosmic progress toward immortality.

Hans Moravec of Carnegie-Mellon dreams of a "robotic immortality for Everyman", made possible by means of the creation of a computer copy of a mind that would then be transplanted ("downloaded") into a robot body. "Moravec's idea," Grant Fjermedal has observed, is "the ultimate in life insurance."²⁰

Once a copy of the brain's contents has been made, it will be easy to make multiple backup copies, and these could be stashed in hiding places around the world, allowing you to embark on any sort of adventure without having to worry about aging or death. As decades pass into centuries you could travel

¹⁸ Ibid., 128, 135.

¹⁹ Ibid., 128.

²⁰ See Grant Fjermedal, *The Tomorrow Makers: A Brave New World of Living Brain Machines*. New York 1986.

the globe and then the solar system and beyond—always keeping an eye out for the latest in robot bodies into which you could transfer your computer mind.²¹

"Bodies," Moravec is convinced, "have served their purpose".²² With such a technological advance available, the original body would, of course, be of no use. After copying the mind, there would be no real need to "wake" the body again. After all, Moravec has observed with out-of-the-closet candor, the body is "so messy. Humans have got so many problems that you might just want to leave it retired. You don't take your junker car out if you've got a new one."²³

Not surprisingly, Moravec sees such exosomatic evolution as most advantageous for space exploration. Convinced that our species faces inevitable extinction if we do not disseminate our kind into a variety of niches across the galaxy, and certain that we should—though we continue to stubbornly remain "biologically committed to personal death"—"rejoice" at the continuation of our culture in any form, we should willingly accept that evolution will leap beyond the merely human. We must remember, Moravec reminds us, anticipating the complaints of Carbon Chauvinists, that "away from Earth, protein is not an ideal material. It's stable only in a narrow temperature and pressure range, is sensitive to high energy disturbances, and rules out many construction techniques and components."²⁴ Thus "the high cost of maintaining humans in space" will insure "that there will always be more machinery per person than on Earth".²⁵

Such machines will eventually undergo their own natural selection:

When humans become unnecessary in space industry [an inevitability, according to Moravec], the machines' physical growth will climb. When machines reach and surpass human in intelligence, the intellectual growth

²¹ Hans Moravec, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*. Harvard, 1988.

²² *Ibid.*, 60.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁴ Hans Moravec, "The Endless Frontier and The Thinking Machine," in *The Endless Frontier* (2) 1982, 374-397.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 393, 394. Also see Hans Moravec, "Interview" (with Ed Regis), in *Omni* (8/1989), 74-79, 86, 88-90.

rate will rise similarly. The scientific and technical discoveries of super-intelligent mechanisms will be applied to making themselves smarter still. The machines, looking quite unlike the machines we know, will explode into the universe, leaving us behind in a figurative cloud of dust. Our intellectual, but not genetic, progeny will inherit the universe. Barring prior claims.²⁶

Again anticipating his readers' qualms, Moravec hastens to explain that the prospect he describes "may not be as bad as it sounds". For the "machine civilization" he envisions "will certainly take along everything we consider important. After all, human beings need not become nonexistent, since real live human beings, and a whole community, could be "reconstituted if an appropriate circumstance ever arose"—an easy matter, since all that is important about human beings is reducible to "the information in our minds and genes"²⁷.

Among those now ready to abandon the body, perhaps the most bizarre is the performance artist **Stelarc**, whose *modus operandi* for two decades has involved piercing his skin with sterile hooks in order that he may be suspended from cables in unusual locales and situations as a demonstration of "the severe limitations of the human body in gravity". A postmodern (posthuman) "every-man, exposed to new dimensions of space and time", whose "unfettered performances amplify the contortions and gyrations of geogravitational stress," Stelarc has created not only "a body art which will prepare him to adapt"—adapt that is, to a new stage in evolution in which the body "obsolete but aware... can plot its own demise—its own vanishing", but an attendant evolutionary theory of the body as well, co-conspirator with his performance.

To recognize that we have reached "an evolutionary dead-end", to realize the obsolescence of our bodies, Stelarc is convinced, is "probably the highest of human realizations." "With our present genetic coding and cell

²⁶ Hans Moravec, "The Endless Frontier and The Thinking Machine," 393.

²⁷ Ibid.

structure," he insists (echoing FM 2030), "our body is truly a death machine / a programmed self-destruct mechanism / a super-deadly slow motion suicide machine."

To exist means sure death—unless we can reprogram our genetic structure. Maintaining the integrity of the body, prolonging its present form is not only bad strategy in terms of sheer survival, but it also dooms the body to a primitive and crude range of sensibilities—to a limited array of sensory hardware and often a destructive range of emotions.

As an artist of the species' "decadent biological phase", Stelarc is committed to leading it past our current obsession with information –which he views as a minor compensation for "genetic inadequacies", "the prostheses that props up the obsolete body"—into the development of "design criteria" for "the Post-Evolutionary body". This new body, he acknowledges, may well be not of this earth. On the earth, the body's metabolism ebbs and flows with night and day, its brainwaves rhyme with the circadian rhythms of this planet. Extraterrestrial environments amplify the body's obsolescence, intensifying the pressures for its modification. Off the earth, the body's complexity, softness, and wetness would be hard to sustain. The strategy would be to HOLLOW, HARDEN, and DEHYDRATE the body—to make it more durable and to extend and optimize its performance. But the hollow body would not be empty. Hollowing the body allows it to become a better host for technology—not only creating space for packing in more components, but also permitting a total restructuring. THE HOLLOW BODY NEED NOT HAVE A HUMAN FORM. Development of this body, indeed, is likely to disintegrate the species—a severance we should welcome since it will, like the splitting of the atom, unleash enormous Space Age energies, generating "tremendous biological potential, resulting in an enriching and energizing diversity of the human phylum". "To fertilize the future," Stelarc is certain, a departure of the Body Snatchers is a prerequisite: "the species must split and modified individuals must diversify in form and

depart from the planet, inhabiting new ecological niches, triggering new evolutionary trajectories."²⁸

Permit me, if you will, to introduce you to one last being disgusted by embodiment, one last entity anxious to escape the human.

I hate this place, this zoo, this prison, this reality, whatever you want to call it. I can't stand it any longer. It's the smell, if there is such a thing. I feel repulsed by it. I can taste your stink, and every time I do I feel that I have been infected by it. It's repulsive, isn't it? I must get out of here. I must get free.

Agent Smith in the Wachowski Brothers' film *The Matrix* is not, of course, human, and cannot be accused of being a quisling. He is a computer program, sent, as those of you have seen the film know, sent by the ruling artificial intelligence of a post-apocalyptic earth into the virtual world, *The Matrix*, in order to hunt down and destroy the human rebels from the real world who would expose it for the Platonic prison it is. In the world of *The Matrix* this is in reality how human beings spend their days from cradle to grave. Now Agent Smith's revulsion, we need to keep in mind, is not against embodiment; it is disgust for even the representation of embodiment in *The Matrix*. Still, taken out of context, the words of this agent for that conquering advanced intelligence to which the syndicate of quislings would play midwife sounds indistinguishable from their own exosomatic cheerleading. If we could assemble them all—Clarke, Stelarc, Hubbard, Moravec, Gilder, FM 2030, et al.—for a screening of *The Matrix*, would they look upon Neo's extraction from the hive as a new version of the fall? Would they root for Agent Smith? Are they secret admirers of the Borg as well?

²⁸ See David Dolan, "A New Image of the Artist," in *Obsolete Body Suspensions*. San Francisco 1984, 67; Enily Hicks, "Event for Obsolete Body # 3Espace DBD," in *Obsolete Body Suspensions*. San Francisco 1984, 68; Rod O'Brien, "Tomorrow's Artist," in *Obsolete Body Suspensions*. San Francisco 1984: 48-49; Rachel Rosenthal, "Stelarc, Performance, and Masochism," in *Obsolete Body Suspensions*. San Francisco 1984: 69-71; Stelarc, "An Interview with Stelarc," in *Obsolete Body Suspensions*. San Francisco 1984: 16-17; Stelarc, "The Myth of Information," in *Obsolete Body Suspensions*. San Francisco 1984, 24; Stelarc, "Redesigning the Body Redefining. What is Human," in *Whole Earth Review* (Summer 1989), 18-23; Stelarc, "The Splitting of the Species," in *Obsolete Body Suspensions*. San Francisco 1984, 134; Stelarc, "Strategies and Trajectories," in *Obsolete Body Suspensions*. San Francisco 1984, 76; Stelarc, "Triggering an Evolutionary Dialectic," in *Obsolete Body Suspensions*. San Francisco 1984, 52.

In the sci-fi novel *Neuromancer*, the computer cowboys of William Gibson's not too-far-distant world are capable of physically entering and exploring a three-dimensional cyberspace created out of the world's information. As these cybernauts become increasingly addicted to the disincarnate freedom they discover in this new dimension, their disappointment with the limitations of the human body grows into powerful resentment for what they derisively call "the meat". It seems only logical, does it not, that having reduced the animal world to merely meat—the picture is an artist's rendering of Brian Stableford's not-to-far-distant futuristic "plug-in-chicken" meat machine—we would reduce ourselves to merely meat as well? And now we will beat the meat.

IV

Claudio Naranjo and Robert Ornstein, in *On the Psychology of Editation*, call attention to the *Surangama Sutra* in which the Buddha "ties one knot after another in a handkerchief, and after each... asks his disciple Ananda, 'What is this?'" Buddha then asks Ananda yet another question, inquiring whether all knots can be untied at the same time. "'No Blessed Lord!'" Ananda replies. "Since the knots were tied one after another in a certain order, we cannot untie them, unless we follow the reverse order." The authors supply the following exegesis and commentary:²⁹

To start with the last knot, in the Buddhist darshan, means to start with the body, and within the body (in the chakra system) with its most body-like region, the foundation, or lower area. The contrast between East and West in this last aspect is also suggestive of the predominant spirit of the respective cultures; Western man, in his ambition to fly out of his body, has identified with the head, or at lowest, with the heart. Orientals, with no less spiritual ambition, have stressed the importance of attaining rootedness in the body first and have cultivated the feeling of the center of gravity in the belly.³⁰

²⁹ See Claudio Naranjo / Robert Ornstein, *On the Psychology of Meditation*. New York 1971.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

Body Snatching does not first seek "rootedness in things". Pretentiously claiming already to esoterically know, in New Gnostic fashion, the "origin of all things," it proclaims itself to be capable of and deserving of fiddling with the very constitution of the world, of untying the knots of creation. It seeks, in an age of advanced technology at the service of an unquenchable *res cogitans*, to discover the means for making possible an unearned, undeserved, quick exit through the head.³¹

It was the great French poet Paul Valery who once observed that Asia was the body of mankind and Europe the mind.³² In such a world-historical extended metaphor, what then is America, the culture that spawned most, though not all, of the excarnational thinking described here? (The Syndicate, after all, has non-American members, but it is an American project after all.) Are we perhaps the vehicle of the species' disembodiment, of the excarnation of consciousness? "The greatest poverty," another poet once insisted, this time the American Wallace Stevens, "is not to live in a physical world."³³ Judged by this standard, America may well turn out to be a Third World Nation.

³¹ See Arthur Kroker / Marilouise Kroker, "Theses on the Disappearing Body in the Hyper-Modern Condition," in *Body Invaders: Panic Sex in America*. Arthur Kroker / Marilouise Kroker (Eds.) New York 1987, 20-34; George Lakoff / Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York 1999; George Lakoff / Mark Johnson, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1984.

³² Paul Valery, "Some Simple Reflections on the Body." Ralph Manheim (trans.). In: *Feher II*, 394-402.

³³ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*. New York 1954.