

Frankenethics

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Shortly following the most optimistic months of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, I asked the artist Maha Maamoun how things were looking in Cairo. I will never forget her response: Well, we were so, so happy when things broke open and all this darkness and disease, corruption and sewage started coming out for the first time. It was a kind of exorcism. But then, it never stopped! It just kept spewing out. And now we are drowning in this sewage.

So much for clarification. So much for a revolutionary, emancipatory rupture. This is rupture as leak – as oil spill, as Fukushima and Chernobyl. You thought the monster was some dictator, but actually it isn't even human – it is a system, a structure, a substance, a chemical, an ideology, an economy, a process, a fear, a ghost, a language, a border, an event, a story, a history. And it has infected all of us. It goes by many names, and it shows its face most clearly when the prospect of emancipation presents itself, even if just for a moment, before being dragged back into the ocean of history. You thought making a rupture, a massive incision, a strike at the structural and ideological heart of the system would shake loose its injustices so that they might be held up against a metric of judgment. You thought you would be liberated but in fact something much worse was set free.

Revolutions are almost always followed by a difficult period where a new social idea is forced to confront the immense power of the status quo, of tradition as such, of accepted norms, and ultimately of history itself as the diabolical mask of entrenched habits.

History shows its face as a potent medium of justification that refreshes and reboots its precedents and antecedents. It is the substratum of ethical consciousness and it does not go down without a fight. It swiftly morphs to adjust the bounds of identity to accommodate new information. And when hard-pressed, it will overwhelm all attempts to compromise it with more violence, more sewage. And in most cases it will do so until the

only remaining solution is to just seal the leak. Go back to the way things were. The problem isn't the sewage but the leak itself. All these kids causing trouble. Let's keep everything tied up and as it was. Get ready for a globally deterritorialized geomagnetic regime that constantly adjusts and reconstitutes itself through a peace and pacification that is an essentially conservative restoration of tradition, virally producing new taboos, new methods of sealing, of hiding, of avoiding, of enthusiastic amnesia, of weird plastic fundamentalisms, of phantasmagorical forgetting and distraction.

But even this won't work. It is here that the face of the monster offers some relief, because the monster lives precisely at the point of an impasse. It settles in and goes to work at the very point where it is simultaneously impossible to move forwards or go backwards. Of ever being able to expel a structural violence built into history, but also of ever withdrawing into the safety of a tradition that has already been evacuated. The sheer violence and the absolutely unsustainable, lethal force of the old regime have already been revealed. Once leaked, it cannot be put back, tied up, neutralized, or undone. The monster appears when you are utterly paralysed, overwhelmed on the one side by the scale of atrocities, and on the other faced with the impossibility of a certain romantic idea of revolution that thinks it is ever possible to come out the other side winning.

We are now inside of this realization, and we look to the monster as an enlightened barbarian par excellence. And it presents a terrifying new project with regard to the handling of history, to the prospect of confronting its horrors, of accounting for its losses. We return again to an insistence upon clarification, to staring horror in the face, to deriving some perverse pleasure from swimming in its sewage, from jumping into its darkness, from facing and being consumed by the force of its evil – knowing that this is the actual material through which any real emancipation would need to be forged. This becomes further complicated when methods of clarification appear as the most violent – and yet we know the regime has already entered our bodies, that we have already been made too violent even for ourselves.

To redirect forces of darkness against taboo, against closure, often takes an almost

necrological obsession with oblivion and obliteration. It is a clumsy rush into the cemetery. It is a call to greet care and solemnity by opening all graves. Let us mock processes of sober clarification and accounting with destruction. Let us discover new synthetic pleasures in the impossibility of any absolute horizon for total reconciliation. Let's dance with ethical catharsis, with smashing pipes and going for a swim in the sewage. Beyond the perversity of loving truth or death for its own sake, let's look for the thrill of standing with Chelsea, Assange, Snowden, Poitras, Greenwald and forcing the spill. We are curious. Let's see what leaks. If madness marks a limit point where the liquidation of meaning becomes total, the dissolution of any boundary between subjective expression and objective clarification becomes the beginning of a new form of life. Let us protect ourselves from yet another restoration by countering its pull into oblivion, precisely by giving madness its due form. Why not insist almost stupidly upon yet another round of clarification, this time to clarify madness as such – and as us? Rather than safety or freedom, perhaps it has become necessary to clearly demand a new ethical madness.

But what would the beginnings of such a new ethical madness look like? Or is it something we know already? What is certain is that it must speak on behalf of a painfully orphaned and radically diffuse collective will searching for the means to rebuild the foundations for making ethical claims – particularly in a time when many feel structurally blocked from speaking for anyone but themselves. On the surface this makes it seem that the only ethical option left is to speak and act out of nothing more than complete self-interest. And if this is indeed the case, we are faced with a much more interesting and complex situation in which ethics do not so much disappear, but rather start to assume a life of their own within a confusing mishmash of constantly shifting positions.

Perhaps we can recognize something in the ethical jumble of living and dead, or of artifice and life that moves and groans on its own like the monster made by Dr Victor Frankenstein, with a strangely artificial cobbled-together machinic automation – like a robot. But what does that mean? What are the implications of such a monstrous, machinic ethics?

The alternate title of Mary Shelley's book from 1818 was 'The Modern Prometheus', and in fact Shelley wrote the book during the bloody aftermath of the French Revolution as a reluctant warning against the conceit that destroying or reinventing a natural or established order can be done without bloodshed or the emergence of something horrifically monstrous that the old order had successfully suppressed (although in most cases the monstrosity that appears is actually the old order itself in full bloom). As we know, Prometheus was the Greek god who created humans out of clay. For the Greek gods, creating humans was an obscene act, and for doing this Prometheus was punished by Zeus, who had him chained to a rock where he would be visited each day by an eagle that would feed on his liver. By the time the immortal god's liver grew back the next day, the eagle would return to eat it again, and so on.

The monster from Frankenstein is actually a very interesting subject, because he is really the first robot, the first creation of artificial life to turn against its own maker, its own master. The seminal science fiction writer Isaac Asimov has said that his science fiction writing was greatly inspired by the consistent tendency of robots in literature to fall into the Frankenstein plot, where as soon as they became intelligent, they would destroy their master. But how do we explain this strange connection between artificial life and the desire to destroy one's own maker?

With this in mind, Asimov created a fail-safe, his Three Laws of Robotics, which would protect humans from their own extensions by preserving a crucial class difference between humans and their creations, whereby a creation must always obey its creator. It is a kind of anti-insurrectionary constitution written permanently into the DNA of science fiction:

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey the orders given to it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.

So here we start to see why a kind of cyborg Oedipus complex sets in, because it would appear that all robots are born into slavery, with a kind of half-consciousness shared with the maker. This is the Frankenstein monster's deep melancholia and his sense of loneliness and incompleteness, this is Kubrick's HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Ray Batty from *Blade Runner*, the original *Terminator*, and so forth. Perhaps we can even look at artworks and architecture in this way, as artificial forms of life that desperately seek to escape the programme of their makers.

But there is a very important question here that we have to ask, because the robot, in all its incompleteness and loneliness, can't be sure that destroying its maker will actually make its consciousness whole.

After all, if we look at ourselves, we will see very quickly that we are, in fact, the robots. You are the monster, you are the machine, you are the drone. You are the guest worker, the user, the zombie, the iPhone. You are half-living, half-conscious, made of human intelligence on the one hand, but producing things as a machine on the other. It's no coincidence that the term itself originates in the Czech *robot*, for 'forced labour'.¹ Maybe you want to destroy your maker, because he gave you motor functions but a consciousness that only doubles his own.

In fact, the sacred distinction between human and cyborg that Asimov's laws preserved turns out to be completely fictitious. The monster Frankenstein, however strange, does possess human intelligence. And we know very well that it is not the drones, but the humans who pilot them, that are the monsters. Ultimately, without this sacred border, when we look for a maker to kill, he is nowhere to be found. Or he is everywhere, all around us. If we do manage to identify an architect or master-planner to destroy, it may

¹ Thanks to Hito Steyerl for pointing this out.

be only the beginning, because our cyborg minds, with or without him, are not complete. We may be zombies, but we will step out into the wild, look around, and see the weather for the first time.

Here we begin to notice strange things. We notice lightning coming from clouds and we notice electric currents coursing through our own bodies. In fact, Shelley's inspiration for writing *Frankenstein* arose from an interest in galvanism. Also known as animal electricity, galvanism is associated with a 1793 experiment by Luigi Galvani, who applied electric current to a dead frog to cause its legs to move as if it were alive. At the time this captivated the European scientific community, who proceeded to ravage the frog population in Italy and France to emulate Galvani's results in laboratories and salons.² Regardless, the implication was that a direct correlation existed between electricity and life.

But there is something else. News of Galvani's experiment arrived at a time just following the French Revolution, and the excitement surrounding galvanism came against the backdrop of a new republican spirit and the diminishing role of the Church in civic affairs. A new kind of civic subject was being created. A possible link between electricity and organic life would have served as a very powerful possibility that life force could be decoupled from God and, by extension, the Church. Galvani's colleague, the physicist Alessandro Volta, was amongst those who became fascinated by galvanism, but Volta eventually disagreed with Galvani's claim that 'animal spirits' could be electric. While performing his experiments on frogs, however, Volta did invent the battery as a means of storing and stabilizing electrical current. After Napoleon marched into northern Italy and established client republics, Galvani paradoxically stood by the Church, refusing to swear an oath to Napoleon's Republic, while Volta enthusiastically supported revolutionary republican ideals. Whilst Shelley's interest in galvanism led her to imagine

² See: Walter Bernardi, 'The Controversy on Animal Electricity in Eighteenth Century Italy: Galvani, Volta and Others' in *Nuova Voltiana: Studies on Volta and His Times*, vol. 1, eds. Fabio Bevilacqua and Lucio Fregonese (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 2000), http://ppp.unipv.it/Collana/Pages/Libri/Saggi/NuovaVoltiana_PDF/quattro.pdf (accessed 23 March 2015).

a modern Prometheus built by human hubris and brought to life with electricity, the figure of the monster Frankenstein is much more than that. It is also an embodiment of the ambivalences and frustrations of a newly liberated subject in the aftermath of a popular revolution.

Frankenstein's sense of incompleteness, of having no addressee for his political demands, becomes the foundation of an ethics synchronized with the way the world really works, that understands power and how it functions above and beyond law. And in fact, most ethical treatises are not based in law but in the observation of nature and physical forces.³ This is an ethics that knows that the world does not always work for us, whether cyborg, human, or other entity. It knows that certain laws governing the universe are impossible to bend or break, and that their logic is not always clear.

And when the laws and rules are not clear, it becomes impossible to cheat. Are treachery and paranoia then the rules of this game? It is interesting to consider a 1966 work called *Play it by Trust* by Yoko Ono. The work is a chess game in which all of the pieces are the same colour. To play the game, you must play together, but to what end? Forward movement becomes completely confusing after leaving the safe harbour of a single side. You must play using what may be your opponent's pieces, without any sense of direction. There is a feeling of stasis, but in fact you are exhausted from making moves all the time. On top of that, there is a hurricane coming. Historical progress and political movement continue on the board, but in order to play together with an Islamist, a US president, a hipster, a museum director, a techno-libertarian, an artist, an architect, a budget-cutting bureaucrat, or a thousand Facebook friends, you must look deeply into your opponent's eyes as he looks into yours, and try to understand: What is actually at stake in this strange new game?

Often the new game involves not only a new social idea, but also the liberation of entrenched traditional orders and their historical grievances and memorializing mechanisms, which become increasingly dizzying when transposed onto a present time

³ For example, Spinoza's *Ethics* or the *Tao Te Ching*.

when the politics of spectacle and visibility already demonstrate a latent claim to heal existential and historical wounds. It is how progressive democracies redeploy information-based economies to create symbolic registration mechanisms to absorb the pain and guilt of historical losses. This is a symbolic regime that identified an interchangeability between linguistic or semiotic devices, a spotlight or a category filter, and the erasure of people and places. It converts history from a sequence of events to a mnemonic device with infinite capacity for sympathy by way of spectatorship and distribution as registration. It is a far more confusing quagmire than the territory relations we know from the Internet. Because it reformulates the position of the dead in relation to the living by mobilizing the medium of memory as the connective tissue that holds them together. It pacifies the anger and regret, the sense of lack, by offering formats of expression, turning a framed photo of a loved one on the mantle into a sixteen-channel immersive art installation documenting exhaustive autobiographical research into one's own ancestors at various municipal archives. And these formats of expression are most destabilizing when they appear to, and often do, supersede functions of accounting and justice traditionally performed by larger officiating bodies such as states. This is a privatization of mechanisms of justice functioning at the precise point where justice itself can only rely on symbolic and semantic relations to heal wounds that are in essence relational.

We are only now beginning to see how this enormous investment into symbolic modes of registering losses and cataloguing injustices has another effect of unfurling a Ponzi scheme that modernity has been running the whole time. Because modernity always had to bury what could not connect. To stay alive it had to run a campaign of using anything from the nation state to food packaging to absorb the rootedness of identity into modular abstraction schemes to market rationality, even to itself.

Some like to call this capitalism, but now it appears that when we talk about markets and libidinal forces we are no longer talking about capitalism at all but about something else that it has given way to or unleashed from inside itself. And this something else seems to in some way take the form of a feedback loop. We know how Gilles Deleuze wrote about

desire as a recursive machine following the demands for liberation from 1968, but we are now inside of a planetary Internet that has already captivated and deployed a certain kind of liberty towards economic spread, and it has hit its geographic and terrestrial limit. And now that it is on the prowl for another terrain of capture it begins to take hold precisely in time. But not time in the abstract and not labour time or leisure time or production time, but another time that is stickier and longer – in time as a means of accumulating historical identity. It is a feedback loop of identification that does not latch onto desires as such, for goods, commodities, lifestyles, or images, but much deeper into one's very soul by seizing one's very identity, mobilizing its meaning effects by feeding it back onto itself to produce amplified accelerated attenuated iterations of one's own basic composition and historical make-up. It is a mistake to look to financial speculation as the folding and deployment of that time when it is in fact biography. The monster feeds on biography. It draws maps by forming connections across distances, and the legibility and availability of these connections must feed on characteristics that cannot be altered in order to stabilize a network that can only be relational insofar as the nodes are not. Just watch as the sect becomes a new nation. As the people around you dress and behave more and more like you than you thought you did. As you start to constantly run into people from your past. As your history starts to haunt you more than you ever thought possible.

The interesting thing is that this functions at the level of an identity that is not chosen but historically received, it is not the cultural identity that is chosen, or even bought on the market in fashion or in fantasy, but actually the one you were born with and can never change. The one thing you can only be and always will be, will be the thing you will fall into. In cultural studies there is not much thinking on identitarian issues that does not take for granted a subject that is to some extent free to negotiate identity as something that can slip and shift around in some kind of soapy postmodern bathwater, but this thing is truly coming from another place. Maybe its own ancestor was called fascism but that was a political ideology and this thing does not come from people. It comes from something else. It comes from deep inside the liberal project loaded into the economy and spun into a planetary Internet.

It is your history, your search history and your birth history and the movements of your family and the language they supposedly speak. This is cultural production as historical retrograde construction, autonomous only from people and individual subjects because it comes down from the top and rushes into the present from a time you thought had passed. And you are not in control of it any more than you are in control of where you were born and to what parents and in what country. No wonder China expects 5 per cent of its GDP to come from cultural industries in the coming decades, they know this is the heartbeat of a phase of exchange and consolidation that we can no longer call capitalism but that we don't yet have a name for, however monstrous it is. You can dress in drag all you want but we all know that whatever this is will never allow you to be anything but that kid from the village so you better face up to it.

Or not. Another response is to spin off its surface. If you can twist your body at just the right moment when it tries to subsume you, you just might slide across its skin and get a feel of its face. Commit that shape to memory and reproduce it in as many ways as you can until you recognize it as the face of the beast. Feed it back its own tail and don't fall into the loop when you plug that thing into its mouth. Tell the folks back in the village to go eat it or dress them all in drag. Paint it wrong. Make it not what it is. Don't be what it wants you to only be. Take that money from the free zone, accept it, get some security for yourself, but always, always shove that tail right back into the dragon's mouth. Ask who is subsidizing you to talk about your identity. Ask why they need you to only be what you can only ever be. Accept that you get your own quarantine at an art fair to translate your historical grievances into TED talks. Ask why you cry out for infrastructure and subsidies whenever a golden microphone lands in your hand. These are no longer contradictions to disentangle, but a meticulously coordinated accumulation of resources around certain historical grievances. Let the sewage flow, and let's see where it goes.

Welcome to the diabolical cultural production of the 21st century that is nothing but the monster of history.

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This essay merges a presentation called 'Frankenethics' given at the Global Art Forum at Art Dubai 2013 (organized by Shumon Basar and HG Masters) and an editorial introduction to Death and Life of Fiction: Modern Monsters, the journal publication of the 2012 Taipei Biennial. Thanks to Bassam El Baroni, José Esparza Chong Cuy, Iman Issa, Hito Steyerl, Claire Tancons, Anton Vidokle, Amal Issa, Hassan Khan, Maria Lind, Malak Helmy, Haytham El-Wardany, Malak Helmy, Marnie Slater, Mai Abu ElDahab, and especially Anselm Franke for their encouragement, responses, and influences.