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*Deleting the frames – a grim vision of a posthuman human in  
«Splice» by Vincenzo Natali*

Abstract

Many visionaries have already attempted to approach the subject of a posthuman human from various perspectives. Still, *Splice* by Vincenzo Natali is an original point in case and it is worth noticing if only for the sheer number of different aspects which Natali tries to put together into a coherent whole and which may turn out to be very thought provoking, especially in the context of posthumanism. The main problem of the film concentrates around the eponymous splice, an experiment which ultimately leads to the creation of a brand new being. Constructed on the basis of a patchwork of DNA coming both from various animals and a human being, the creature gets out of control and, in the end, must be killed, which in itself seems to have serious moral ramifications. What leads to this tragic end is a fascinating story of humans crossing virtually all the boundaries regulating human community in normal conditions and so erasing, at least seemingly, well-established frames defining motherhood, sex, gender and the division into species.

Keywords: controlled parameter, posthuman species, the uncanny, genetic experiments, normative heterosexual relationship

Many visionaries have already attempted to approach the subject of a posthuman human from various perspectives. Vincenzo Natali's *Splice* (2009) offers yet another discussion of the whole range of issues reflecting the same problems which appear in posthuman debates. The way the film introduces those problems, though, is truly cutting-edge. It seems to be worth noticing if only for the sheer number of different aspects

which Natali tries to put together into a coherent whole and which may turn out to be very thought provoking, especially in the context of gender studies and posthumanism.

*Within controlled parameter*

The film concentrates on the eponymous splice, an experiment which ultimately leads to the creation of a brand new being. Designed on the basis of a patchwork of animal and human DNA, the creature gets out of control and, in the end, it must be killed. It seems that this splice might have at least a few meanings. First, it is a genetic splice of human genes and those of other beings. This makes the product of the experiment, at the same time, human and “other” on the genetic level. Second, it is a psychological and emotional splice. Dren, the designer creature, manifests human emotions such as love, jealousy and revenge. At the same time, however, it is lead by sheer instincts more characteristic of animals. Last but not least, Dren is a social splice. Even though it is forced to abide by human social norms, unavoidably it agrees more to “other” ways of conduct, which fail to fit human society. As Jerrold E. Hogle comments, Dren

is a crossing among ideological, not to mention previous Gothic, constructs that looks like the most unreal of fantasy-creatures *and yet* a blend of realities too that may betoken a primal mixture and amorphous multiplicity that all of us are afraid of coming from and dissolving into, however much we romantically long for a vague unity embracing all known forms of being in a brave new world [2012, p. 163; emphasis in original].

I use the word “other” so many times in this short paragraph on purpose since Dren is surely the splice of the human and the other, the familiar and the strange, the same and the different in many respects. Along with Dren’s transformation into a posthuman monster, we watch a fascinating story of humans crossing virtually all the boundaries defining traditionally understood human community and so practically erasing well-established frames of motherhood, sex, gender and the division into species. In other words, *Splice* is a portrayal of the eternal human eagerness to learn what will come after

humans and to erase the frames which constrain human cognition. Describing this crossing and erasure is the major aim of this essay.

To perform this task successfully, one has to concentrate simultaneously on two stories which overlap and influence each other in the film. I will describe them in much detail so that I am able to theorize characters' reactions most accurately. The first one is the story of two young people, Elsa Kast and Clive Nicoli, who lead a relatively stable and happy life in a heterosexual relationship. Throughout the film it becomes clear that this relationship can never become fully-fledged since Elsa is very skeptical about having her own children. The underlying reason is the trauma of her own childhood which becomes apparent when Elsa and Clive visit Elsa's mother's farmhouse. Abandoned for some time, at the moment, it resembles a dusty, ramshackle building. On entering Elsa's old room, Clive says that he thought her mother left Elsa's room untouched since she moved out, to which Elsa gives a positive answer. The room is in a terrible condition and fails to resemble a child's room. The paint is coming off the walls and, as for the furniture, there is nothing else but a mere mattress, a chair covered in white cloth, a basin and something only vaguely resembling a desk. Surely, Elsa's trauma is a factor determining her adult life both as a potential mother and as a scientist. This will also be a driving force which will make her flout all the social, moral and ethical norms standing in the way to discovery.

The second, equally important story is precisely the story of an experiment, a human endeavour to go beyond what is already known. In this story two aspects are interesting. The first one is certainly the experiment itself: the creation of the posthuman human. The second one is the evolution of Elsa's and Clive's reactions to the changing *status quo*, which is worth investigating and theorizing since differences in these reactions either propel or hinder the experiment. To verbalize Elsa's and Clive's psychological reactions, I apply the whole concept of the "controlled parameter" borrowed from the book by Minsoo Kang *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines*, where he uses it to describe the scale of human psychological responses to automata. Before I present the table where Kang describes in detail those responses, I would like to take this opportunity and explain why the tools provided by Kang can be useful in the context of the following essay.

The experiment in *Splice* has already been described in terms of the tension between human and the other, or the familiar and the strange. The union of the same and the different in the film reflects the discussion by Sigmund Freud in his essay *The Uncanny* where he analyses the concept of the uncanny on the basis of E.T.A. Hoffman's short story «The Sandman». As Freud explains,

[i]n general we are reminded that the word “Heimlich” is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight [1919, p. 224].

The concept of the “uncanny” is crucial to the following essay, where I attempt to describe the journey taken by two scientists who constantly balance between human and the other, the familiar and the strange. It also must have been crucial to Kang when he formulated the table which I attach below. What is described here is the scale of human emotions which accompany people who encounter automata.

Within Controlled Parameter		
Beyond Controlled Parameter		
<i>Physical</i>		
(Controlled parameter is defined by the knowledge that the automaton is not really alive, no matter how good it is at pretending to be)	A machine is inherently harmless and interesting because it is particularly useful or beautiful	A powerful machine that is potentially dangerous but is under control so that it can cause no harm
	FASCINATION	SUBLIME
<i>Conceptual</i>		
(Controlled parameter is defined by the knowledge that the automaton is not really alive, no matter how good it is at pretending to be)	An automaton that imitates life but utterly fails to convince that it is really alive	An automaton that does an excellent job of imitating life though one can tell that it is really alive
	AMUSEMENT	UNCANNY SUBLIME

*Fig. 1*

Even though *Splice* is certainly not entirely the story of automata, in the current essay, I would like to draw an analogy between Kang's understanding of automata and my

understanding of the experiment in *Splice*<sup>1</sup>. The reactions to the experiment in question can be traced following the general model presented above: fascination/amusement, sublime/uncanny sublime, terror/horror. Horror and terror are obviously reactions on different levels. Still, they remain undifferentiated here since they intermingle in *Splice* to the extent that an attempt to separate them would seem slightly artificial. What is crucial at this stage is that the experiment starts with a fascination and amusement derived from entering a new area of research. This is the initial stage when Elsa and Clive manage to create Ginger and Fred, the two larva-like creatures. It coincides also with their happy private life where a normative heterosexual relationship is still valid. It changes very quickly, though.

The two scientists wish to continue their research by splicing animal and human DNA. They are not allowed to do so by their sponsors at Newstead Pharma. Furious, they leave the headquarters. Here begins an entirely different period of their life in which Elsa destabilizes the balance in their relationship and, focused only on her ambitions, coerces Clive into more and more risky phases of the experiment. The first one is a mere attempt to splice animal and human DNA, which already arouses uncanny feelings of what will happen if an experiment proves successful. As it turns out later in the film, at this stage Elsa already cheats on Clive as she puts her own DNA into the experiment, which will have a detrimental effect to their relationship.

This is certainly the amusement/fascination stage of the experiment. Describing automata in this stage, Kang claims that here they are “inherently harmless and interesting because [they are] particularly useful or beautiful” (2011, p.48). Such is also Elsa and Clive’s experiment. Still, this is the time when Elsa is gradually growing to understand that to design a posthuman human she has to shed all her human features. This is done in a series of erasures, the mechanisms of which might be described with Judith Butler’s comments on the relationship between feminist theory and politics:

[t]he very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms. There is a great deal of material that not only questions the viability of “the subject” as the ultimate candidate for

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<sup>1</sup> The only entity in the film which could be classified as automata is the techno-womb, which is described below.

representation or, indeed, liberation, but there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute the category of women [1999, p. 4].

*Splice* tells the story of conscious dissolution of this very category which is triggered by Elsa herself. By deleting her body, gender, motherhood and her heterosexual relationship with Clive, or, in other words, losing her womanhood and humanity, Elsa becomes an asexual test-tube for breeding a posthuman designer creature<sup>2</sup>. To some extent, she resembles women-cyborgs mentioned by Allison Muri: «the pregnant woman as passive vessel carrying the fetus as rational pilot or voyageur» (2007, p. 167). Whether she succeeds in her experiment is a different question, which I will try to address at the end of the following essay.

#### *Deleting the body – the techno-womb*

Elsa and Clive ultimately succeed in splicing human and animal DNA, the event to which they react in completely different ways. Clive seems to be quite satisfied with the result and, realizing that the experiment has already gone too far, he is convinced they should stop at this stage. Elsa's ambitions, on the other hand, are rather boundless. She takes over the whole initiative and becomes a driving force of the experiment taking both of them into the unknown.

The clash between Elsa and Clive is fairly visible. From the very beginning of the experiment, Clive is apprehensive and indecisive. He seems to passively guard the current *status quo* which is regulated by the protocol in the lab and moral values in social relations. As such, he might be described as a reactionary, weak male element which blindly complies with the reality to which he was introduced. Elsa is in total opposition. She is a dynamic, female agent who is not only bored with the surrounding reality, but

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<sup>2</sup> The dissolution mentioned by Butler is certainly a broader issue and pertains to the whole of Western culture. Amaleena Damlé explains that «[t]he dissolution of the boundaries of the human subject is a critical concern running through late twentieth-century France and European thought. From Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, to Giorgio Agamben or Jean-Luc Nancy, thinkers have been concerned with destabilizing a deeply entrenched individualism and anthropocentrism in the history of Western civilization and philosophy» (2012, p. 303).

also who actively shapes it, no matter the cost. Moral and ethical considerations virtually cease to exist for her and, even though, at one point, she claims that what she really cares about are millions of people suffering from terminal diseases, her true motivations are rather fueled by the excitement and the uncanny feelings drawn from the desire to know more. This is also the moment when their heterosexual relationship loses its balance and starts disintegrating. As a man, Clive fails to show enough charisma and, quite soon, he seems to be more of an addition to the whole experiment.

This relationship might be described with Erika Nelson's words used in the context of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978 and 1993) as a «thwarted heterosexual alliance» (2011, p. 57) where one of the members unsettles the reality and the other one finds it unbearable. The dissolution of this alliance is slow but steady. At some point, it becomes barely possible due to differences in expectations as far as gender roles are concerned. Clive appears to support more traditional gender division, which is hinted at in their discussion concerning having children. He would actually like to have them and, even though there is no clear allusion if he would like to get married, he seems to opt for a patriarchal model of the family. Elsa, on the other hand, does not share Clive's enthusiasm about staying in a normative heterosexual relationship and having a child. What is more, since she takes any possible means to reach her objectives, at some stage she initiates the process of desexualizing herself. The use of an artificial womb to create a brand new being is surely an important step to do so and as Alison Muri observes it has appeared in contemporary culture quite frequently:

In the twentieth century film and fiction, two dominant versions of the female cyborg emerge. One is the coldly rational and highly sexualized or even fetishized machine who is in control of her own destiny and who may be lethal threat to the male heroes; the other is the horrifying representation of the disembodied and independently reproducing organic-mechanical womb. Extracted from and distinct from the mother, the independent techno-womb is a gruesome exaggeration of monstrous industrial machinery combined with dripping mucal organic tissue [2007, p. 167].

The first signs of the crisis in their relationship appear when Elsa persuades Clive to initialize the cloning process, which is nothing else but a mere coitus. The fact that it is

Clive who hits the “Enter” button to fertilize an ovum is by no means accidental. The scene appears to be fairly clear about that. Here, the tension is significantly increased to amplify the scale of the problem which Clive is trying to solve. The viewers can observe a few close-ups of Clive’s face and of the “Enter” button. Finally, he decides to yield to Elsa and perform his male procreative function, namely impregnating a woman’s ovum. Elsa, on the other hand, seems to be a voyeuristic witness, who is active, though, as she keeps pushing Clive to perform his task. In other words, Elsa coerces Clive into taking part in a sexual act which is one of the initial phases of the experiment. The crucial aspect of this situation is that human cells given for the experiment are actually hers, which makes plausible a claim that it is as if Clive had a sexual intercourse with Elsa. It is obviously not Elsa herself but a mechanical womb. As Allison Muri claims: «[t]he womb as reproductive machine frequently and disquietingly exists, accordingly, in vitro: independent from and extraneous to the ‘natural’ body, the womb-machine in fiction and film is monstrous both in terms of magnitude and horror» (2007, p. 171). With its impossible size and all the machinery attached to it, Elsa’s techno-womb fits this description perfectly.

As it has already been mentioned Elsa is not willing to have children. One of the reasons is her childhood trauma. Another one, as she confesses to Clive, is that it is actually she who will have to carry the baby. A mechanical womb, external to her natural body, solves this problem. A mad scientist, Elsa decides to splice her own DNA creating her child and a product of a fascinating experiment at the same time. Emphasizing that Dren is both a child and an experiment is crucial as it has certain ramifications later in the film, which will be discussed below. For the time being, the important fact is that a techno-womb figuratively becomes one of Elsa’s body parts and one of the crucial ones at that. It seems to be a means for fulfilling her ambitions as a scientist to create a posthuman human and realizing her suppressed need to have children. Again, here she behaves as a voyeur, who is very much involved in the situation since the fetus which is growing in the womb is obviously her child. At the same time, as the techno-womb is located in the centre of interest, her natural body becomes obsolete. This might be compared to Claudia Springer’s discussion in *Mann and Machine*. She argues that «the boundaries separating men, women, and machines are in a state of flux during the late



twentieth century. Conventional ways of defining what makes each one unique have started to give way, and the human body has become a terrain of dispute» (1996, p. 161). In *Splice* one cannot witness these fluid boundaries between human body and machine; nevertheless they are problematic.

From the moment when Elsa and Clive decide to design a hybrid of a human and an animal, a technological womb becomes a prominent element. First of all, it replaces, in a way, Elsa in a sexual intercourse with Clive. Secondly, it is a space where her own child develops to become a posthuman creature. These two elements are very telling since they unambiguously reveal that the only sexual intercourse resulting in pregnancy, which Elsa is psychologically ready to have, is the one outside her natural body. To remain stable, she has to delete her natural body and ascribe its functions to a machine. This, in an obvious way, desexualizes her body and gives her «an alternative form of asexual reproduction» (Nelson 2011, p. 52). In this way, she can safely observe how the fetus develops and, in case something goes wrong, she can just press the right button which would kill it. The motivations for such conduct are twofold and impossible to be separated, namely her childhood trauma and the uncanny accompanying this experiment. One way or another, already at this stage the heterosexual alliance starts disintegrating as the proceedings of the experiment violate the normative heterosexual relationship. Since the experiment itself stays within controlled parameter and does not even go beyond the phase of fascination/amusement, their relationship remains fairly stable.

### *Failed motherhood*

Deleting the concept of motherhood from her life is another step Elsa has to take to free herself from the constraints which are put on her by the very fact she is a woman living in the patriarchal society. Certainly, this is the necessary step for her come closer to the creation of a posthuman human since staying in the normative, oppressive paradigm of thinking and behaviour would not allow for this. Deconstructing Elsa's motherhood begins with a very unusual childbirth. Elsa starts delivering her own baby and acts as her own gynecologist. This scene is a precursor to the (uncanny) sublime stage as the birth

itself is quite dramatic and almost gets out of control but finally the fetus is contained. Attempting to examine the fetus shortly before the birth, Elsa puts her hand inside the mechanical womb and is bitten severely by the fetus. Clive rescues her by breaking the glass walls of the container where the womb is placed and cutting it in an act which closely resembles the C-section. The fetus, at first, seems to be a shapeless creature.

Soon, it turns out that what was delivered was just a kind of incubator for another being – the ultimate product of the splice. Immediately, a visible bond between Elsa and the creature, Dren, is established and slowly develops into a typical mother-daughter relationship. This is clearly perceptible in the way Elsa feeds Dren, dresses her and finally lets her out of her enclosure. The latter outrages Clive. This is precisely the moment when one can observe their varying attitudes to the experiment. In the scene in question Clive calls Dren «a specimen which needs to be contained». For Elsa, though, Dren is already her child. She forbids Clive from calling her a specimen. This new bond poses another threat to a heterosexual relationship between Elsa and Clive. He is not in the least ready to accept Dren as his child. This is the case even though, figuratively speaking, he did take part in the sexual intercourse which brought Dren to life. For him, it is again the breach of the norms which should regulate human community.

An almost haphazard growth of maternal feelings could be described as a moment of Elsa's weakness since it was precisely purging all the features defining a woman in a patriarchal society which was to get her closer to a successful end of the experiment. The fact that Elsa loses her scientific perspective seems to have triggered events which finally lead to the experiment's fatal end. A dramatic climax is reached when Dren turns against her mother as a result of the Electra's complex, which she seems to be suffering from. At one point, it becomes clear that she is sexually attracted to Clive and Elsa, her mother, stands in her way. Soon after Dren's attempt to intimidate her mother, Elsa regains her scientific coldness and, in a sadistic mutilation, she takes revenge on a being who she recently believed to be her child. It is too late, however, to improve the situation. The events will gradually start getting out of control, even though Elsa fails to realize it yet. For the time being, though, everything remains contained. Dren appears to be successfully pacified by Elsa. Elsa realizes that Dren is not her child and she will never become her mother.

*Deleting species division – beyond controlled parameter*

Certainly, the most visible way in which the borders between species are violated in *Splice* is the experiment itself. Here, the merging of DNA of various species results in the creation of a creature who heralds the coming of entities designed from scratch. There is, however, another crossing of boundaries between animals and humans: the two sexual acts between Dren and Clive and Dren and Elsa. These encounters lead to the ultimate deletion of the remaining valid social norms, as well as, human subjectivity.

In both of these sexual encounters, Dren shows magnificent power over human beings. She feels sexually attracted to Clive and wants to replace her biological mother in a relationship with her partner: she eventually has sex with Clive. The second sex act is, in fact, a repetition with a difference. It happens after, quite unexpectedly, Dren changes sex and becomes male: the Oedipus complex. Dren rapes his mother and kills Clive and, hence, replaces his figurative father. This sex act differs significantly from the first one: the former was intentional and what happens now is an incestuous rape and patricide<sup>3</sup>.

These events are crucial for several reasons. In the first place, bestiality seems to be an instance of the ultimate crossing of the boundaries between animals and humans. Secondly, the events obviously dissolve what is left of the heterosexual relationship between Clive and Elsa and social norms regulating the functioning of the family and society. Thirdly, bestiality can be treated as an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of human subjectivity. According to Colleen Glenney Bloggs this undermining “emerges via the criminalization of bestiality”:

By demanding that human beings ought not to engage in sexual acts with animals, the law regulates the boundary between human beings and animals. This act of prohibition simultaneously defines the difference between human beings and animals as absolute yet fungible [2010, p. 102].

If sexual acts with animals are understood in these terms, they must in effect lead to the dissociation of human subjectivity whenever they take place. In *Splice*, they function

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<sup>3</sup> For an interesting discussion of incest and totemism in primitive cultures, please see Freud’s discussion in his the collection of essays titled *Totem and Taboo*.

as a rite of passage thanks to which Elsa is prepared for the coming of a being she desired to create.

Obviously, after Dren's seeming death and quite unwelcome resurrection, the situation slips out of control. The film enters the terror/horror stage. Dren now poses a physical threat to both Elsa and Clive. He actually proves his dominance when he rapes Elsa and kills Clive. Paradoxically enough, this is the necessary stage which Elsa has to go through to approach the creation of a posthuman species. After terror and horror fade away, Elsa is left pregnant carrying a creature she has been striving to produce for so long. Traumatized, she seems to realize that what happened was a necessary evil which she, a mad scientist, had always been ready to face. As she explains at the end of the film, the worst thing that could happen would be putting an end to the experiment. Now, to continue it, she decides not to kill the fetus but to give birth to it. Her body again is reduced to an asexual carrier for the baby which seems to be an even more advanced version of its artificially created father. This baby will be delivered naturally.

##### *5. A grim vision of a posthuman human*

The experiment proved successful – even though the consequences were enormous. Elsa seems to have gone through all the phases which seemed essential to reach the point where she could really create a posthuman human – a posthuman species. At the same time, she seems to have made considerable personal gains as she apparently freed herself from the oppressive normative heterosexual relationship, patriarchal society and gender roles. The truth is, however, that she fails to go beyond these paradigms. To achieve her goals she uses the tools which are given to her “within” the limits of a patriarchal society. For instance, she behaves like a mad scientist, a role which in the history of the Western culture has been ascribed to men. Furthermore, it turns out that to create a posthuman species she ultimately has to be reduced to a sexual object. That is again a stereotypical treatment of a woman within the frames of a patriarchal society. Even though Elsa struggles fiercely to unchain herself and to create a posthuman species, her experiment

fails. To successfully conduct it she would have to venture beyond human society. The vision of a posthuman experiment in *Splice* remains only a vision.

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