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MEMORY AND IMMORTALITY: FROM PRINCE CHARMING TO STELARC

Keywords: *memory; immortality; good death; genius; Prince Charming; Gertrude Stein; Stelarc.*

Abstract: *Memory is a defining feature of humanity, at both individual and collective level. At the same time, memory is intrinsically linked to mortality. By applying Mieke Bal's model of cultural analysis, explained and exemplified in Double Exposures: The Practice of Cultural Analysis (1996), this article brings together three cultural artefacts in "preposterous" associations: Petre Ispirescu's scholarly tale "Youth without Age and Life without Death", Gertrude Stein's Everybody's Autobiography (1937), and Stelarc's striking performances. The analysis mainly focuses on the connections between memory, mortality, identity and entity, as they were conceptualized in the above-mentioned works. It tackles death and immortality in the mythical realm of the fairytale, Stein's modernist solution to the problematic issues of identity and her theory of the potential attainability by everybody of the immortality of a genius, and the challenges to human memory brought about by post-humanism in Stelarc's work. For Prince Charming, his painfully achieved immortality was undermined by the outburst of memory and longing, which forced him to embark on a journey back into his humanity, at the end of which he encountered death. For Stein, the immortality of the genius is readily available to anyone, and it is achieved by a masterly positioning of one's self in the "continuous present" of being without doing. Stelarc, on the other hand, advocates a technologically mediated immortality of a body whose capacities to perceive, act and remember are digitally enhanced. A return to Prince Charming, after technologically-mediated expansions of the capabilities of the human body, begs us to consider death of old age as good death, and remembrance as a universally human affordance.*

I didn't give a damn about immortality, and now I'll tell you something else: when I realized one day that it was holding me in its clutches, it terrified me more than death itself. A man can take his own life.

But he cannot take his own immortality.

Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, 1991

This article is a journey and an inquiry into the nexus of memory, time, death and immortality. It is premised on an understanding of the contemporary age

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as marked by technological innovations that seek to expand the limits of the human body, to redefine or re-engineer humanity and with it, memory, the physical affordances of the body and its insertion in space and time¹. To a certain extent, the desire to overcome the limits of the human condition has been a universal desideratum, across cultures and times. I will bring together three such instances of imaginary, imagined, preached or performed attempts at expanding the boundaries of human time and the human body, place them in dialogue and dwell on what they have to say about memory, death and immortality.

My methodological approach is inspired by Mieke Bal's model of cultural analysis, as she delineated it in *Double Exposures: The Practice of Cultural Analysis* (1996). For Mieke Bal, analysis implies a focus on "objects," on artefacts that are brought together to share in analytical contemporaneity, and that are allowed to speak on their own terms, as subjects. "Cultural," in this context, does not refer to a particular culture or a particular understanding of culture, but to the relevance of "objects" within culture. Object is a loose notion that can refer to a text, an image, a myth, or anything that can be analysed as a cultural artefact. Cultural analysis is intrinsically interdisciplinary, inter-temporal and inter-subjective, engaging the subjectivity of the author and the subjectivity of the "object". The "shared time" of the artefacts enables preposterous associations, where preposterous refers not only to the seemingly unreasonable association of objects but also to the possibility of interpreting what came before (*pre*) through the hermeneutic lenses of what came later (*post*)². In this process, the artefacts that are being investigated can turn into theoretical objects, i.e. artefacts through which thought about artefacts can be articulated.

The three objects that this article analyses are a tale from Romania, *Youth without Age and Life without Death*, collected by Petre Ispirescu and published in 1882, Gertrude Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937) and Stelarc's interactive and technologically-mediated performances. They are brought together in the shared time of my cultural analysis to "talk" to each other about memory, mortality, identity and entity, and to highlight the challenges to memory and the body brought by post-human ideology and artistic practice.

¹ To give just one example, the Manifesto of the 2011-founded Strategic Social Initiative "2045," a coalition of scientists, technologists, entrepreneurs and spiritual leaders points out that it aims to achieve a scientific and technical revolution that will improve "man himself" since it is necessary – as their argument goes – to "eliminate aging and even death, and to overcome the fundamental limits of the physical and mental capabilities currently set by the restrictions of the physical body." The ultimate goal is cybernetic immortality via avatars onto which individual human consciousness would be transferred.

(<http://2045.com/manifest/>)

² Mieke Bal theorises her method of doing preposterous history in *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. In the context of this book, "shared time" refers to the alleged coevalness between one branch of contemporary art that references the baroque and the Baroque age itself.

Youth without Age and Life without Death: Memory and Immortality in a mythical framework

Youth without Age and Life without Death is a fairy tale that taps into a universal desire for immortality. As the story goes, an emperor and his wife find themselves in the unfortunate situation of lacking a progenitor. Eventually, the empress becomes pregnant but when the time of birth comes, the son in her womb starts crying so hard that no doctor can calm him down. The emperor promises him the most beautiful girl in marriage, riches and things, but the son only stops crying and is born when his father promises him youth without age and life without death. At the age of fifteen, Prince Charming asks his father for what the latter had promised, but since the emperor cannot act on his word, the son decides, against the advice and prayers of his family and local lords, to leave the kingdom and look for what he had accepted to come into the world for: immortality. With the help of his father's weapons and of a winged horse, Prince Charming overcomes various obstacles and reaches the land of life without death and youth without age.

In this fairy tale, immortality is a site without memory or history, a site of monotonous bliss experienced in the present continuous of myth and in the observance of a restriction: never to step into the Valley of Wail. Yet, one day as he was hunting a rabbit, Prince Charming enters the valley and all of a sudden, he starts missing his family and the places where he was born, to the point that out of utterly subjective necessity, he has to return. The journey back is a journey in time, into an unknown future that is oblivious of the past of Prince Charming's memory: no one remembers the characters/ obstacles he had encountered and nothing has remained of his father's kingdom, though the time-traveller is quite sure that it has only been days since he had left them behind. It is only the throne that has remained from the splendour of the old court, under which death itself crouches, weak with old age. Prince Charming, by now an old man himself, who has aged by the minute, dies at the hand of the nearly dying death...

"Remembrance is an act of love," argued Fr. Alexander Schmemmann (36). By regaining his memory, Prince Charming regained his humanity. Thus, the fairy tale implies that to be human means to remember, to love, to age, and to die. The sudden death of the hero lends tragic notes to the end of the fairy tale: unlike most fairy tales that end in marriage and the promise of eternal bliss, *Youth without Age and Life without Death* shows a hero who came into this world with a sense of mission, who accomplished it and then failed to preserve his immortality through the unawares trespassing of a norm. As Constantin Noica noted, the fairytale expresses directly "the fullness, the measure and the truth of what could be called: being" (104). By fulfilling the promise for which he accepted to be born into the world, he exited the "normal" realm of human becoming, to find his abode in the realm of pure being, of life without death. The realm of being was predicated on forgetfulness, on 'mild amnesia' (Noica 123) while in our earthly world, memory is ontologically inherent to human existence. The impending urge to return to see his family and birthplace re-situate Prince Charming on an orbit of human becoming, on which he ages at accelerated speed. Back to human time, he drowns into memory, frantically looking for relics of his past life, only to find Death in a secret

hiding, waiting for his home-coming. Thus, Prince Charming dies alone, unknown by anyone but by aging Death itself.

In anthropological terms, the solitary death of Prince Charming is a bad death – a death without witness, without mourning, without the possibility to reinscribe it into the community. In her study of Greek laments, Nina Seremetakis defined bad death in the following terms:

The silent death is a public shame. Death must always have its accompaniment. The silent death is considered a naked death. The naked death is also a symbol of “poverty”. Poverty is not simply lack of material goods but the absence of a large turnout of mourners, of “numbers” (76).

The tragic end of the fairy tale leaves us with a bitter afterthought: even when one has made fantastic efforts to overcome the human condition, it takes only a trifle (a moment of carelessness) to slip back into the limits of the human mortality, and thus to regain one’s condition.

Gertrude Stein’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*: entity and temporality

Everybody’s Autobiography (1937) documents Stein’s life as a “real celebrity” and gives a record of her post-scriptum comments on *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). The latter had made Stein famous and placed her within a culture of celebrity that she perceived as threatening her sense of the self.

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas is written in a prophetic mode; it depicts Stein not necessarily as she was – in the eyes of the public – but as the autobiography itself made her to be: a “genius” (in Stein’s intention), or rather a celebrity (in the direct outcome of publishing the autobiography). Stein’s self-proclamation as a genius has stirred suspicion. If genius is understood in its Romantic acceptation formulated by German philosophers and poets, to call oneself a genius may be rightfully considered an act of vanity. Yet Stein did not take over a raw notion of genius; in her lexicon, “genius” refers to the “vitally singular” individual who, by connecting with transcendence through his or her pure self that exists beyond time and beyond contingent relations, is capable of producing masterpieces (Will 8). At the same time, genius is an open, inter-relational mode of being that could be shared among all; genius sets Stein apart from her audience and legitimates her cryptic aesthetics, but it is also the key term that characterises the relationship between an author and her audience in the co-creation of modernist compositions.

Whereas *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* instantiates a dialectics of identity between the self and the other, and an understanding of the self as the other, *Everybody’s Autobiography* is focused on entity. The thesis on which the autobiography can be said to have been constructed is that “everybody,” i.e. any individual (or “identity”) can become a “genius,” i.e. an “entity.” Stein’s understanding of the commonly shared potentiality of everybody to become a genius was much influenced by Otto Weiningen’s book *Sex and Character* (1903). Weiningen argued that

Genius is the highest morality, and, therefore, it is everybody's duty. Genius is to be attained by a supreme act of the will, in which the whole universe is affirmed in the individual. Genius is something which 'men of genius' take upon themselves; it is the greatest exertion and the greatest pride, the greatest misery and the greatest ecstasy to a man. A man may become a genius if he wishes to (qtd. in Will 65).

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas constructed identity through narrative and put forth an understanding of the self as the product of narrated experiences and of one self mirroring another. In *Everybody's Autobiography*, the ontology of a genius implies non-recognition, non-dialogism and non-mediation, as well as the absence of self-awareness.

The minute you or anybody else knows what you are you are not it, you are what you or anybody else knows you are and as everything in living is made up of finding out what you are it is extraordinarily difficult really not to know what you are and yet to be that thing (*Everybody's Autobiography* 92).

Ultimately, the condition of Stein's genius is similar to the condition of immortality that Prince Charming reached in the fairy tale: a void of memory and of becoming, a fixed way of dwelling in time. For Stein, this fixity of time can be achieved subjectively, by the simultaneous inner co-perception of past, present and future:

I meditated a good deal about how to yourself you were yourself at any moment that you were there to you inside you but that any moment back you could only remember yourself you could not feel yourself and I therefore began to think that insofar as you were yourself to yourself there was no feeling of time inside you you only had the sense of time when you remembered yourself And so I began to be more and more absorbed in the question of feeling of past and present and future inside in one (*Everybody's Autobiography* 298).

Identity thrives on memory and on (the illusion of) the continuity of the self through time. It also relies on consistent performances in inter-relations and on acts that define the self as an agent in social praxis. For Stein, identities **do**, while entities **are**. Entity has no need of memory or of agency. Like saints, geniuses have to "sit around so much doing nothing, really nothing" (*Ibidem* 70). One becomes a genius by disengaging from the mundane world of action and by choosing to live in the present continuous. Identity – be it performative or relational – is not stable; it exists as multiple possibilities that can become actualized in social life and during one's life time; entity, on the other hand, is stable and it exists outside the passage of time, in the eternity of a "now" that makes it contemporary to itself and to whoever encounters it in reading what that entity has produced. Yet, "you have to be a genius to live in [time] and know it to exist in it and express it to accept it and deny it by creating it. (*Ibidem* 281)

In *Narrative Time*, Ricoeur used Heidegger's distinction between three levels at which time can be said to exist: "within-time-ness," "historicality" and "temporality." The "within-time-ness" differs from linear time (though it tends

towards linearity) because it depends on points of reference in the world and is datable, public and measurable; “historicality” places a heavy weight on the past and is what makes it possible to recover the “‘extension’ between birth and death in the work of ‘repetition.’” Temporality is the level at which past, present and future are united in their plurality (171). Stein’s genius lives precisely in Heidegger’s temporality, in an expanded “now” that brings together “coming forth,” “having been” and “making present” (Heidegger’s terms, qtd. in Ricoeur 181). At the level of style, temporality is achieved by the topological rather than a sequential organisation of narrative, in which past, present and future are brought together, as in Connor’s kneading metaphor, to touch upon each other in viscous motility and create a “*tonic mass*”³ of temporal continuity (Connor 225).

Genius exists as a latent capacity in every human being as long as they can live in the “continuous present”⁴. The style of Stein’s later autobiography, as well as the style of her experimental novels, through their false starts, minimal punctuation and drifting flows, aims to create precisely this impression of a continuous present. Hence, one of Stein’s greatest regrets: if more Americans had read her experimental modernist work, they would have become aware of her genius, and they themselves would have had access to the condition of the genius by inserting themselves, in the act of reading, in a literary temporality that is not one of human becoming but of pure being. The very last sentence in *Everybody’s Autobiography* re-instantiates this expanded *now* of the time of writing, of the time of remembering and of the time of reading: “That is a natural thing, perhaps I am not I even if my little dog knows me but anyway I like what I have and now it is today” (318).

Stelarc – post-human challenges in performance

Stelarc is a performance artist who works in a post-human context. A “pioneer of extreme performances” (Cangiano) that involve biotechnologies, robotic systems and virtual reality, Stelarc started his career in the 1970s with a series of suspensions of his naked body, in a still position or in motion, in various indoor and outdoor contexts: 60 meters up in Copenhagen, four stories high in a New York street suspension, in the open air at the Sculpture Space in Mexico, in an abandoned warehouse in Brisbane, and so on. His twenty five suspensions of the naked body, hanging from braces hooked in the skin, exposed the body as pure matter that performs without intention and without will, by virtue of gravity. In retrospect, Stelarc argued that his suspensions were “a strategy to physically exhaust the body, exposing its obsolescence” (“The Cadaver, the Comatose & the Chimera” 49). The obsolescence of the Platonic, Cartesian and Freudian conceptualisations of the self and of the biological body driven by a conscious or unconscious mind enables and even begs – in Stelarc’s view – for “a transition from psycho-body to cyber-

³ “The aim of kneading is to blend together the joined and the disjoined, breadth and depth... In kneading, one repeatedly folds the outer skin of the substance inwards, until it is as it were crammed with skins, is saturated with its outside. The result is no mere mixture but a *tonic mass*, full of tensile potential – as in the strudel dough that can be drawn out almost indefinitely” (Connor 225).

⁴ The phrase was first used in the essay “Composition as Explanation”.

system”, to a system of “spatially distributed but electronically interfaced clusters of bodies ebbing and flowing in awareness, augmented by alternate and alien agency.” (“Zombies and Cyborgs” 52)

A cursory survey of his projects and research shows Stelarc’s interest in cyborgs, zombies, chimeras, alternate anatomical architectures, mixed realities, alternate operational possibilities, movatars, fractal flesh, bio-materials. The *Weltanschauung* behind Stelarc’s (bio-)technologically-mediated performances is rather cold and grim:

We are living in an age of excess and indifference... The dead, the near-dead, the un-dead and the yet to be born now exist simultaneously. This is the age of the Cadaver, the Comatose and the Chimera. The chimera is the body that performs with mixed realities. A biological body, augmented with technology and telematically performing with virtual systems. The chimera is an alternate embodiment. The body acts with indifference. Indifference as opposed to expectation. An indifference that allows something other to occur, that allows an unfolding – in its own time and with its own rhythm. An indifference that allows the body to be suspended with hooks into its skin, that allows an inserting of a sculpture into its stomach and that allows a[n] ear to be surgically constructed and stem-cell grown on its arm. (“Zombies and Cyborgs” 58)

The co-presence of “the dead”, the “near-dead”, the “un-dead” and the “yet to be born” is reminiscent of Stein’s co-existence of the past, the present and the future in the continuous present of the immortality of the genius. Ultimately, post-humanism seeks immortality too – the expansion and modification of bodily architecture, the dis-embodiment of consciousness and its projection into avatars, the dispersed tele-existence of fractal flesh...

In the passage quoted above, Stelarc makes specific references to the Stomach Sculpture⁵ and to Ear on Arm. The latter is part of a larger series of projects that aim to expand the possibilities of the body, and it consists of a surgically constructed left ear, placed on the Stelarc’s inner left arm, with a microphone inside and connected to a bluetooth device, that allows a remote audience to hear the sounds captured by this third ear (see Figure 1 below). Other technologically mediated modifications of the body’s architecture have involved the creation of a third arm, or a third hand, attached to the right arm, whose fingers could split and act as grippers, thus doing more than regular fingers can do (See Figure 2 below). In another project, Stelarc created an Exoskeleton – a six legged walking machine that imitates the biological architecture of a spider and whose pneumatically powered movement is actuated by arm moves (See Figure 3 below).

⁵ This was a project from 1993, which consisted in the insertion, 40 centimetres down Stelarc’s stomach, of a device that could open and close, extend and retract, and issue a flash of light and sound. Just like in the case of suspensions, the body was inert, while the device was mobile. This re-instantiation of the fixity of the body recalls Donna Haraway’s observation that “Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (152).

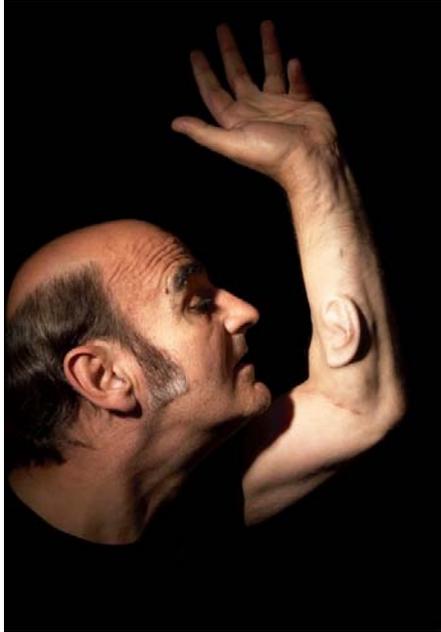


Fig. 1 EAR ON ARM, London, Los Angeles, Melbourne 2006
Photographer- Nina Sellars



Fig. 2 EXTENDED ARM, Scott Livesey Galleries, Melbourne 2010
Photographer- Dean Winter



Fig. 3 EXOSKELETON, Cankarjev Dom, Ljubljana 2006
Photographer - Igor Skafar

Stelarc has also had three projects involving the head: the Prosthetic Head, the Partial Head and the Walking Head. The former is a 3D avatar head that is “automated, animated and reasonably informed” (“Zombies and Cyborgs”). Its artificial memory and sensor and speech system allow it to acknowledge one’s presence, read non-verbal cues and decode the tone of the voice of the interlocutor, as well as to answer questions. In such post-human experiments, memory is a matter of encoding, of specialized databases that make machines increasingly informed and autonomous. The head projects, together with the other projects that I mentioned above, undermine the organic wholeness and uniqueness of the human body, empty it of agency and autonomy, and make it available for technological manipulations under the pretext of revolutionising it in the sense of a digitally induced evolution. In Stelarc’s performances, technology mediates a new form of godless metaphysics; it makes ubiquity, omniscience, omnipotence, omni-remembrance and immortality available to post-humans. But... where is the love, and where is the beauty of spontaneity, of difference and heart-felt emotions?

In this article I have looked at three instances of achieved or projected immortality, in its links with identity, one’s positioning in time and memory. The pre-posterous association of Prince Charming and Stelarc invites us to reconsider the meaning of Prince Charming’s death in light of the alternative performed and preached by Stelarc. If the post-human alternative is life without death thanks to life support systems, a technologically-expanded body and digitalized experiences and memories, the “bad death” of Prince Charming emerges as “good death:” good, because it occurred naturally; good, because it re-asserted his humanity, his ability to reunite with his past through memory, and remembrance as an expression of filial love.

Identity is grounded in memory: Prince Charming, going home as a spectre who was neither recognized, nor recognizing of anything and anyone, set on a journey to regain his identity by remembering, by trying to piece together the scraps and bits of matter that were left over from the time when his parents were alive. For

Gertrude Stein, identity is relational; it is grounded in the historical time of experience, and it is based on one self mirroring another, to the point of becoming interchangeable with the other. Entity, on the other hand, is grounded in a continuous present; it is disembodied and dis-embedded, with the genius as the instance of Being, of pure consciousness that is neither a subject nor subjected, living in timelessness. In post-humanism, the self is augmented, dispersed, colonised by technology, expanded and suspended, living in a new mythic time. The body matters as matter (nature) or as disposable waste, available for bio-and/ or genetic engineering, cultural production and reproduction. It does not act of its own will but it is controlled from the distance; it is an interface, an empty body without organs, whose sensory and motor capacities have been transferred to and arguably enhanced by machines.

What is at stake in post-humanism is, again, immortality, achieved by technological advances that expand and externalise the body, its consciousness and memory. The post-human no longer remembers what it *can* remember, but what has been encoded in disembodied memory. This poses serious ethical issues: death is no longer “the great leveller”; technology has the potential to be a leveller, but only for the few who can afford to pay for their immortality, should they wish it, or should they have the option to “take [their] own immortality.”

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