

From Messianic Diaspora to Biomedia Avatars: New Traits of Eastern-European Reception of the East from Eighteenth to Twenty-first Century[✦]

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on how the motif of avatar was employed on artistic, political and philosophical levels from the original stages of its reception in Romantic orientalism to its contemporary usage in posthumanist orientalism. Eastern Europe, for most of its history situated on the peripheries of Western politics and culture, offers an alternative perspective on the East and the reflection on the motif of avatar is taken from this standpoint. After losing independence to Russian, German or Austrian centres of power, the cultures of Eastern Europe existed in diaspora for over 150 years. On these peripheries and within the diaspora, Western orientalism did take a unique turn. While discussing Romantic orientalism, we demonstrate how the position of superiority present in British, French and German orientalism was displaced by an apprehensive search for liberatory motifs and messianic ideas. While reflecting on posthumanist orientalism, our comparative study of works by Stanislaw Lem, Olga Tokarczuk and Maja Smrekar demonstrates how Eastern inspired motifs can stimulate discourses on the emerging typologies of human enhancement. Whereas the figure of avatar in nineteenth century poetry took allegorical dimensions, in twenty-first century it is taking a pragmatic turn by inspiring both posthuman visions of the future and current applications of bio-engineering on the human body or on the entire species. The

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original vertical axis of avatar descendance is given alternative, non-vertical directions. Indeed, rooted in Indian mythology and represented in contemporary fiction and laboratory bio-art, the transhumanist themes of enhancement, immortality and avatarian transfers between virtual and non-virtual, human and non-human realms, ultimately raise vital issues—and inevitably propose new interdisciplinary trajectories for current postcolonial studies.

KEYWORDS: avatar, Romanticism, posthumanist orientalism, virtual reality, speculative fiction, transhumanism

I. Introduction

Within the last several decades, the concept of avatar became part of global culture. Starting with early adoption of the avatar theme during the Enlightenment period and ending with appropriation of the Hindu motif by the twentieth century gaming culture, avatars come into sight almost everywhere around us. Indeed, contemporary usage of the avatar figure is arguably more popular today than its original Sanskrit usage (Mukherjee 202). Aldous Huxley's prophetic statement that every human will soon become "an avatar by adoption" (56) comes to fruition today not only as a result of ubiquitous digital representations of people, objects and ideas in virtual and augmented realities, but also thanks to the development of biotechnologies, genetic engineering and other technologies of human enhancement. Contemporary and future avatars, as envisioned by transhumanists, will be our designer bodies and body vehicles (Vita-More 58-63) or—as Woodrow Barfield declares—intelligent virtual avatars performing complex, interactive, interpersonal tasks with their place among society recognised by legal, civil rights and perhaps even health care systems (274).

The aim of this article is to establish possible connections between the seemingly disparate discourses of comparative studies, orientalism, posthumanism, transhumanism and computer game studies by the introduction of the concept of avatarism. We hope that some of these connections might enrich the discussed fields in general and postcolonial studies in particular. If Leonardo da Vinci's drawing the *Vitruvian Man*, depicting a human body of ideal proportions is the iconic image and emblem of Humanism, then the contemporary efforts to de-stage that emblem as a hegemonic cultural model, in which Europe is not just a geo-political location, but rather a universal attribute of the human mind (Braidotti 14) is not only posthuman, but also avatarian in nature. As exemplified by contemporary post-anthropocentric appropriations of da Vinci's work which depict a female, a robot, a cat or a dog in the centre of the drawing, the dynamics of shifting an idea or entity from one realm to another and giving it a life in a new environment can be seen as a wider

descriptive category for various cultural, technological and scientific phenomena.¹

II. Eastern European Orientalism

After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the history and culture of Eastern Europe started to be viewed in the context of postcolonialism (Pucherová and Gáfrík 11). Nevertheless, throughout the history Eastern and Central European countries mostly subscribed to the narrative of Western cultural superiority, having their own share of colonial ambitions. Historical moments of selfless and idealistic explorations of Asian culture are equally evident (Borkowska-Arciuch 15-24; Fiut 150-56) and we propose to regard them as a part of the “philological orientalism” which in the view of Edward Said is a methodological heritage of Johan Wolfgang Goethe and Johan Gottfried Herder (Said xix).

In his preface to the last English edition of *Orientalism*, Said, reflecting on classical works of German literary studies and in particular to Erich Auerbach’s philological *oeuvre*, appeals for the use of “positive” knowledge and understanding of different time and cultures in contrast to the existing politics of self-affirmation, belligerency and “outright war” as represented by American and British military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan (xix). This approach, argues Said, is founded on a moral principle based on a secular notion that human beings must create their own history—something that the Western culture failed to bring forth throughout the long periods of European history (xix-xx).

Examples of this anti-exceptionalist, philological approach to the Other, or the Orient, can be found in literatures of the early-nineteenth-century Eastern Europe: Poland, a country of political significance until the end of eighteenth century, lost its independence and was partitioned into three protectorates under Russia, Prussia and the Habsburg Empires. As a result, Polish politicians, intellectuals and a portion of the land-owning nobility either emigrated, mostly to France, or stayed in country as subjects of one of the three empires. Given the resulting diaspora, the secular notion that human beings must create their

¹ Rosi Braidotti gives several examples of dethroning of the *Vitruvian Man*: *The New Vitruvian Female* by Friedrich Sauer, *Vitruvian Cat* by Maggie Stiefvater or *Leonardo da Vinci’s Dog* by S. Harris (21-73).

own history, was not possible in this context. With British and French colonial expansion, neither the emigrant diaspora nor the subjugated Polish compatriots in the country were in position to align with the imperial ambitions of the West. As a result, Romantic fascination with the Orient, as represented by the Polish Romanticism, took a slightly different turn from its British and French equivalents.

In his poetic travelogue, *Crimean Sonnets*, the best-known Polish Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz explores the then Asian parts of the Russian empire in the spirit of philological enquiry and includes in his work the original text in Persian—a foreword and a translation—of one of the sonnets by Mirza Djafar Topchy-Bashy. Another poet, Juliusz Słowacki, after being expelled from Poland, took the Romantic journey to the Biblical Lands and wrote a poem from the top of the Great Pyramid in which he empathised with the local populations under the British rule and drew parallels to his home country's subjugation to the Russian Tsar. Later, the artist spent a month in a monastery in Lebanon. Poland as a victim of growing European imperialism personified the figure of a Polish artist as an outcast and eternal wanderer: Frederic Chopin, Mickiewicz, and Słowacki, who lived and died abroad, were pivotal archetypes of the nineteenth-century Eastern European orientalism.

Many Romantic voyages to the Orient, like the travels of Barthélemy d'Herbelot, François-René Chateaubriand or Gerard de Nerval, were journeys of internal exploration and individual spiritual revival. The Polish experience was different not only thanks to the anti-imperial position in which exiled Romantic poets found themselves, but also as a result of Poland's own oriental heritage. Historically Polish *Res Publica*, or the Union of Polish and Lithuanian Kingdoms (Kulwicka-Kamińska 39-53), spread from the Baltic Sea to the North to the Black Sea in the South. It incorporated diverse lands and cultures which were for the most part multi-cultural: Catholic and Orthodox Christians lived relatively in peace with the Protestant Christians, Jews and Muslim Tatar minorities, in contrast to the religious wars waged in Western Europe (Davies 554-55). It was in Poland that the first European Koran was translated (Łapicz 129-30). Like in Germany, the Oriental studies started in Polish universities, most prominently in Wilno. For the Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz and his contemporaries, philhellenism of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries ran parallel to orientalism, which Goethe and Friedrich von Schlegel

treated as a new form of Renaissance inspired by the growing European fascination with India and the Middle East (Tzoref-Ashkenazi 717).

Despite the strong affiliations of Polish Romanticism with the French Romanticism (Edmond 181-204), the assimilation of Eastern ideas took place in a more oriental-friendly environment. Additionally, the adoption of Oriental motifs had a unique anti-imperial aspect aligned with the general focus of Polish Romantic poetry to inspire revolutionary, patriotic spirit in the midst of failed national uprisings against imperial rule. As such, the Romantic approach to orientalism is a pre-configuration of postcolonial struggles for independence.

Furthermore, the historical division in Europe among the countries which could or could not benefit from colonial commerce existed (Davies 582): Poland, Slovakia, Hungary belonged to the second group and, as such, their understanding of the Orient—by this very disposition—was more philological. Marta Piwińska, analysing the “oriental Renaissance” during Romanticism, noted that Polish authors chose the method of “intoxicating with the Orient, exploring from within, adjusting the lyrical subject to the Eastern text” (50).

Romanticism thus permeated the collective culture of Eastern European countries far stronger than any other period. Parts of cultural imagination influenced by the findings of the philological approach to the Orient reverberated throughout the following decades until the end of the First World War, after which Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and the Balkan countries gained independence. Today, because the motifs of avatar, migration of souls and body swapping are part of popular culture, science, and art, the gap between their historical and current understandings, implementations, and misconceptions need to be discussed and rationalized.

III. Avatarism as a Context for Posthumanist Orientalism

To connect cultural phenomena which occurred in different historical periods and different cultural discourses, a unifying category needs to be evolved. The breadth of the historical and interdisciplinary discussion will include the different emerging meanings or the same meaning as this is ascribed to different terms. Thus, the category of avatarism needs to be formulated to bridge the gap between the vision of Romantic poets (such as Juliusz Słowacki, Adam Mickiewicz) and that of a twenty-first-century transhumanists (such as Nick Bostrom or Natasha Vita-More), with the avatar as an oriental alter ego in

poetry and avatar as a person's representation in virtual reality. The most common perspective is one in which the object of avatar transmission is a human (body/soul/agency), or a being or reality both very ancient and very contemporary. Here, the human is just an avatar of something more primordial and everlasting: God, for instance, or a human gene.

Avatarism, thus, is a discursive dynamic occurring across a heterogeneous interdisciplinary field of contemporary discourses, from computer games and game studies, posthumanism in literature and art, to genetic engineering. The principle on which this dynamic is rooted is the transfer of an essential attribute or a group of attributes from one entity to another in which the source of the transfer is represented at the destination point. The representing entity becomes an avatar which is an incorporation, embodiment, or representation of selected attributes of the source. Transferred attributes can be of conceptual, mental, or a material (genetic) nature.

An inspiration and the founding metaphor of the discursive dynamics of avatarism is the concept of Avatara. This originates in Hindu mythology and religion and originally refers to the ten incarnations of the God Vishnu descending to Earth and assuming human and animal forms (Roy 2). Although the transcendental axis of the descent of God into the mortal realm is a universal phenomenon known in other religious practices and cultures, for example in animism, shamanism, and in ancient Greece and Rome, Avatarian types of transfer from divine to human or animal realm are abundant in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Reasons for the popularity of the oriental concept of avatar have not been studied. It might have something to do with the semantic autonomy of the term that held it bound to particular Western discourses and practices. Should appropriation of the term and the idea be considered yet another colonizing gesture? Demonstrating the Romantic and literary origin of avatarism could help in dispersing such fear. Aldous Huxley's use of the term in a context vividly opposed to Western exceptionalism supports this line of thought:

Because Christians believed that there had been only one Avatar, Christian history has been disgraced by more and bloodier crusades, interdenominational wars, persecutions and proselytizing imperialism than has the history of Hinduism and Buddhism. Absurd and idolatrous doctrines, affirming the quasi-

divine nature of sovereign states and their rulers, have led oriental, no less than Western, peoples into innumerable political wars. (51)

Today, the concept of avatar influences cultures extensively and has been adopted globally. Patterns and processes of avatar transfer manifest on several levels. They are evident on a metaphorical level: for example, the term avatar in common usage is a synonym for representation. They can be found on the cultural and intertextual level where avatar is a motif in literature and art. Lastly, in the contemporary context, avatarian processes are discussed at a very pragmatic level in the applied sciences. In bioengineering, the concept of avatar refers to the transfer of genes from one generation or species to another. An inherent element during the process of avatar transfer is a change of realm, medium, or physical environment by the transferred entity.

Although the motif of avatar is evident in various cultural registers, one can distinguish two distinct and opposing dimensions. On each of these discursive poles the relation between representation and its object is treated differently. In computer games and virtual reality, avatar is a virtual representation of the user, from a simple dot or cursor to sophisticated graphical renderings of human body. The object of transfer is human agency: the sensory and linguistic intentionality of the user. In biology and genetic engineering, the representation and its object change places. The body becomes an avatar of a gene. The object of transfer is genetic information. Interestingly, the Hindu concept of avatar functions as a foundational metaphor in both types of avatarism.

An intriguing double metaphor of information embodiment emerges in light of the current discussion. In its first instance, data related to the body is transferred and represented in digital realm. In the second, genetic data is transferred into the body. The figure of avatar and the dynamics of avatar transfer can serve as a new theoretical impulse or framework reflection on the duality of human body and the mind, which plays a crucial role in posthumanist and transhumanist discourse.

In the context of world literature, postcolonial and comparative studies, reflections on avatarism situate neo-orientalism in a fresh relation with new discourses on freedom, power or gender, but also with problems of transhumanist consciousness, biotechnologies, and the ever-evolving new media. These illustrate the dominance of themes with oriental origins, given the

examples drawn from parts of the world previously regarded as less relevant to the evolving postcolonial discourse. This emerging reality might further advance the scope and development of postcolonial and comparative studies.

IV. Romantic Avatars

It is well established that the romanticist view of the Orient was a distorted one and it participated in the projection of stereotypical forms that allowed for a domestication and control of the East (King 92). On the level of poetic imagination, one cannot dismiss the superficiality of clichéd poetic accessories: sand, oasis, palms and hurricanes. Nevertheless, many oriental references and symbols associated with Romantic orientalism became well established in language and the collective cultural imagination. One of these potent cultural borrowings is the motif of the avatar: the descent of God into man or other perceptible forms in the human world (Parrinder 111). Originally referring to the god Vishnu and its twelve incarnations, the concept of *Avatara*, along with that of transmigration of souls, is one of the two key concepts in Hinduism (Roy 1). During the early reception of Hindu mythology and symbolism, these two concepts became intertwined. In Honoré de Balzac's *Vautrin's Last Avatar* (1842) and Goutier's *Avatar* (1856), the avatar is used in a body swap motif: a human soul migrating into another human's body.²

In early Romanticism, motifs of avatar and transmigration of the soul appear in parallel to the lyrical dismantling of the self (Janion 8-9). Lord Byron was documented saying to his wife that he believed himself to be an "avatar of a fallen angel" (McGann and Soderholm 23). The characters of Byron's poetry are often dressing up, changing masks, and representing someone else. The mask as a motif was popular in German Romantic Drama in the works of E. T. A. Hoffman and August Klingeman. The motif was popularised by Goethe (Paulin 133). Byron is masking himself as Childe in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812; McGann and Soderholm 104); Gerard de Nerval in *Aurelia and Les Chimeres*, on the other hand, constructs his infamous, almost clinical alter egos (Burwick 241-42). Although the concepts of the avatar or the processes of reincarnation are rarely mentioned *expressis verbis*, the

² The motif of the avatar equally fascinated the early Romantics as the motif of the *doppelgänger*, a double, popularised by German authors, most known perhaps from the works of E. T. A. Hoffmann and his novel *The Devil's Elixirs* (Labriola).

masquerading and the body swapping often occur in exotic environments and are the basic components of the oriental repertoire of poetic devices. The representation of a displaced and multiplied self in the context of the Gothic mode of storytelling or the Romantic Frenzy is vividly theatrical. As such, the exotic masquerade is a vehicle of otherness, where the poetic subject is seen exploring its detachment from the mundane context (Piwińska 49) and giving way to something, or to someone, Other. The otherness comes either from the past (e.g., popular motifs of medieval ruins), or from folklore, or from the East.

In Polish Romanticism, the most prominent example of the motif of dislocation of lyrical self in poetry is found in Adam Mickiewicz's poetic travelogue, *Crimean Sonnets* (1822). Not unlike Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the poetic journey of self-discovery is a journey to the East. This time though, the Orient of Mickiewicz is neither Mediterranean nor Biblical. The poet sets foot in the grassland and mountainous areas of Crimea inhabited by Tatar minority and Muslim tribes of Mongol origin. Although multi-cultural Poland has its own set of oriental cultures, including Polish Tatars living in parts of today's Belorussia, it was the Crimean Tatar culture that made Mickiewicz feel really immersed in different, exotic surroundings which enabled him to "see the orient in miniature" (Kwaśny 341). What may seem surprising for an observer is that Mickiewicz's oriental travelogue was a cornerstone for the building of Polish national identity (Kalinowska 80-82). This paradox was made possible by structures ingrained in the work: the duality of the sonnet form (its descriptive octave and reflexive sestet), the duality of the publication (cycle of love sonnets in the first part, and travel sonnets in the second), and the duality on the discursive level (Oriental in subject, yet Polish in substance). Equally innovative was the twofold development of the lyrical self. Two characters are introduced in the poetic cycle: Pilgrim and Mirza (Kwaśny 342-45). The former is the traveller from the West, the latter the guide from the East. Both alter egos are engaged in a continuous dialogue. Within the space of a single sonnet, the reader is presented with two perspectives of the same subject, scene or idea as experienced by the travelling party—or indeed a travelling self—split into its two lyrical embodiments. On metaphorical and lyrical levels, these fictional entities function as avatars of the self, and of poetic inspiration and a poetic genius.

Crimean Sonnets continues the theme of avatar displacements present in Théophile Gautier and Balzac, and the theme of multiplication of subjectivity

on a Romantic journey of self-exploration. The sonnet cycle is the work of an author born in the country of vast oriental frontiers populated by diverse cultures, who is himself a victim of imperial expansions of European powers, an outcast and wanderer, and thus his lyrical avatar of Mirza speaks both from the outside and from within the Orient.

A similar perspective is found in the poetic travelogues of another Polish romantic poet: Juliusz Słowacki. Raised and educated in the same environment as Mickiewicz, where learning Sanskrit and Arabic was equally important as Greek in the neo-classicist curriculum (Nowakowska 59), Słowacki was eager to see the Orient for himself. His journey to biblical lands happened just after the Polish national uprising was suppressed by the Russians in 1831. His poetic reflections from the Great Pyramid, echoing the elegiac spirit from the home country, found a potent motif in an empty sarcophagus. The empty tomb encountered by the poet inside the pyramid becomes an allegory of a homeless wanderer, a country without a king and—later in Słowacki's *oeuvre*—the lamentation for civilisation as a whole (Kalinowska 16-18). Although his journey to the Holy Land was undertaken and aligned with the standard oriental set of references (Said 177) and inspired by Chateaubriand, the motif of empty tomb and the accompanying historiosophical reflection deepened the impact of Romantic orientalism beyond the experience of one poet pilgrim rewriting another. The empty Egyptian sarcophagus led Słowacki to the exploration of the Hindu idea of transmigration of souls. In his later works, especially in *Genesis of the Spirit* (1844) and the epic poem *The King Spirit* (1847), Hindu and Buddhist inspired metempsychosis is employed in the project of a gnostic, romantic messianism. The eponymous King Spirit is an eternal, emancipatory force which through the millennia and countless avatars raises humankind from animal to angelic and almost God-like forms. The “rhapsodies” of the historiosophical epic poem feature different avatars of the spirit of mankind, from Popiel, an ancient Polish pagan king, to other historical figures from Slavic history. In another work, *The History of Sofos and Helion* (1848), the ever-evolving Spirit finds its avatar in an Indian girl. She is the incarnation of Sofos/Heloise—a female version of the same force found in *The King Spirit*, with her avatars manifesting themselves in Mesopotamia and ancient Greece.

During the late-Romanticism, India featured prominently among the accolades of the historiography as a legendary birthplace of all Slavs who then migrated to Eastern Europe. The myth of a foundational role of India played an

important part in the formation of post-Romantic, national Slavic identities (Sabatos 3-14). Słowacki's late works feature a mixture of these mythologies, gnosis, messianism and esoteric Christianity. The oriental motifs and archetypes in this period were used in an instrumental fashion, beyond the philological approach. The Indian avatar of Heloise as presented by Słowacki, was just an evolutionary step towards the more "enlightened" epoch and a more "evolved" religion (Nowakowska 68). Far from the spirit of original early-Romantic fascination with the East, the late-Romantic approach, even in its Eastern European version, carried visible traces of Western exceptionalism and superiority.

V. The Motif of Avatar in Twentieth Century: Computer Games and Art

The dynamics of avatar transfer occur on two main axes and follow two different hierarchical directions. The original, transcendental axis of avatar descendance presents a top to bottom configuration with a heaven to earth movement. During the Romantic reception of the motif, perhaps as a result of mixing together two main principles of Hindu religion—*avatāra* and transmigration of souls—the avatar theme suggests a horizontal dimension. In Gautier's *Avatar* and in Balzac's *Vautrin's Last Avatar*, the transfer of the soul happens between human subjects. Moreover, a Christian influenced description of the direction of incarnation takes place. In Juliusz Słowacki's *The Spirit King* and the *Genesis of the Spirit*, the movement of spiritual entity always proceeds upwards on the hierarchy of realms. Polish Romantic poets could not accept the idea of God or a human incarnating into an animal form (Nowakowska 50).

Interestingly, the twentieth century understanding and popularisation of the theme of avatar bring back the original verticality of the Hindu concept as it influences the cultural mainstream. In computer games and virtual reality environments, the avatar is the player's representation or personae in the digital realm (Damer 15-17). No matter how complicated the ontology of the game avatar and its relation to the user might be (Swanstrom 73), the human to avatar dynamics mirror the cyclic descences of Vishnu into the human realm. In literature and philosophy, instances of alternative dynamics of avatar embodiment are found. Speculative fiction, science-fiction, and futurological reflection often present the motif of the avatar from new and unexpected angles. Instances of avatarism in Eastern European literature transcend the motif of

avatar as prosthetic telepresence (Klevjer 17) in the discourse of computer games and popular culture to give the concept new dimensions. In fiction, the verticality of avatar incorporations (Mukherjee 203) is expanded by horizontal and non-hierarchical transfers. Moreover, it is important to affirm that the avatar becomes a vehicle for crossing the threshold not only between biological and digital, mortality and immortality, but also between life and death.

The term avatar gained enormous popularity within the computer game culture and the wider discourse of virtual reality technologies (VR) beginning in 1986. The term was first applied by Chip Morningstar, designer of the videogame *Habitat* to denote the player's real-time presence in the online world. Neal Stephenson's Hugo-Award-winning cyberpunk novel *Snowcrash* (1992) further popularised the concept in relation to the virtual, digital worlds. James Cameron's blockbuster science-fiction movie *Avatar* (2009) affirmed the place of the avatar in popular culture.

Philosophical and ontological implications of the avatar theme in computer games have been extensively discussed: a three tier typology of relations between users and their representations in the digital environment emerges from the current game research. One can speak of representation, incorporation, and embodiment as different degrees of human presence in virtual worlds. At the most basic level, the avatar is understood as any representation of user's agency on the screen. A cursor (Strehovec 49) or a blurred icon of a 2D game character is often referred to as user's avatars. These representations mediate agency, but—as Rune Klevjer points out—hardly incarnate as “embodied subjects” (19). The second degree of avatarism in games, most often evoked in the context of the Oriental origins of the concept, is incorporation. At this level, the end point of the transfer of agency is a virtual body acting in a fictional world. Scholars take notice of a double axis or a performative paradox of avatar status in 3D games. On the one hand, the player is incorporated into the virtual environment, but on the other, the virtual environment is incorporated into the player's mind (Calleja 185). In other words, one can feel simultaneously remotely controlling the avatar and being controlled by the virtual world and its rules (Venus 436).³

³ Calleja points to a processual aspect of incorporation. It is more of becoming an avatar, than being an avatar in a holistic sense (Mukherjee 187). Mukherjee demonstrates how this processualism is reflected in the source narratives of Vishnu and its incarnations (203-06).

The third degree of avatar transfer into the digital realm suggests the use of the term embodiment, which is more relevant to the occurrences of avatar motifs in literature (Tokarczuk), art (Smrekar) and the philosophical or ethical reflection on human enhancement, in contrast to the two previous types.⁴ User's embodiment in this case happens not necessarily in fantasy worlds where the avatar is a vehicle for role-playing, as in *World of Warcraft*. Embodiment implies a higher degree of identification because the design of the virtual environment encourages players to model the avatars based on their real-life personas. The best example of such a system is *Second Life*. Participants of this once-popular social platform were able to replicate not only their own appearances but also their real-life environments, homes, schools, workplaces and public institutions. At the same time, they were able to craft a new alternative identity and become, in 3D representation, anyone they wished (Baldwin 161). Calleja makes a distinction between micro and macro involvements of users and their avatar (38). Micro involvements happen during gameplay in the game-world (kinetic, ludic, spatial). Macro-involvements relate to offline, post-game engagements of players (affective, narrative, and shared involvement). Expanding these two types with a third one, identity involvement, makes the relationship between the source and destination of avatar transfer even more complex, but at the same time more aligned with the Oriental dynamics between the deity and its avatar. Identity involvement is distributed across various elements of the virtual environment. This embodies a player in a mirrored self while his whole world is mirrored in the digital realm. For Sandy Baldwin, *Second Life* "becomes the unconscious" of the first one with a special "language" that articulates the truths of the first life (157).

In this context, avatars become more than a player's representations, and reflect contemporary dreams, hopes and anxieties around the issues of identity formation and emancipatory politics which in many ways define the socio-cultural milieu of the first decades of the twenty-first century. Independent game developers and artists who use *Second Life* as a platform for artistic expression tend to blur and transcend the common understanding of the

⁴ In the works of most of the cited game scholars, embodiment is used as a synonym for incorporation or incarnation. Klevjer makes a distinction between a simple, representational embodiment and "vicarious embodiment" of 3D fictional worlds (21). Our narrower understanding of the embodiment makes it firstly a non-fictional process and, secondly, a transfer with some degree of metonymical relation between the player and her avatar, where the avatar who bears some resemblance to the player retains some of her traits, for example, to some extent resembles the player's real-life appearance.

relationship between the player and the avatar. In the simulation game *Force of Nature* (2014), the players are incorporated into a swirl of tornado that damages towns and destroys buildings and people. In *Becoming Dragon* (2009), a mixed-reality performance by Micha Cárdenas, the artist over-imposed her *Second Life* avatar into real life and its domestic surroundings. Through a head mounted display, motion tracking systems and video feed, her broadcasted sessions of *Second Life* turned the real person into an avatar. Even the view from the window was mediated by a video feed. At the same time, the artist's *Second Life* avatar—a transgendered persona—became more real day by day because the artist was in the process of undergoing the one-year requirement of “Real Life Experience” that US transgender people must fulfill in order to receive Gender Confirmation Surgery (Cárdenas et al.; Swanstrom 73-74). The last case illustrates how the avatar's function of representing a subject as designed by a game system is being subverted and taken into a level where it engages in play of identities. What is at stake here is the sexual, social, and political standing of the subject of avatar transfer. The last part of the article focuses on how the avatar theme can be taken even further from the literal character of its treatment in the discourse of the gaming culture.

VI. Literature and Art: Avatars of Stanislaw Lem

Enormous popularity of avatarian representation in digital culture did not broaden the scope of avatar dynamics. On the contrary, the oriental motif in computer games is treated as a direct rendition of the original motif. Regardless of the degree of the motif's incorporation, whether it is a simple representation or a much fuller sensory embodiment, the dynamics between the subject and object remain vertical and unidirectional. Computer game avatars mirror the pattern of Krishna or Kalki representing Vishnu in the human realm. Also, in general, the avatar representation is treated pragmatically. The function of the avatar is to represent or embody the user in order to fulfill the goals of the game or virtual platform. Possibilities for self-reflexivity in the relations between the avatar and the world, the avatar and the entity it is representing remain open but not realised. The somewhat one dimensional and literal rendition of the motif of the avatar in virtual worlds comes from the medium specificity of games. On the semiotic scale, they are close to films because their dominant semiotic mode is pictorial, not linguistic. The avatar acts within a fictional world to be depicted

by graphic and cinematic means. Although indie games and digital art try to break through these limits, the very fact that games and virtual worlds belong to an “image camp” and not the “word camp” (Elliott 2), makes them more conservative in representation and mimesis in contrast to literature.

With the emergence of science fiction, dystopian literature and speculative fiction in the twentieth century, the idea of transfer between different bodies, dimensions and other worlds became a common cultural theme. Some authors continue the legacy of avatar-like displacements started in literature by Gautier and Balzac and inspired by Hindu sources. “The Mask” (1976)—a gothic sci-fi story by Stanislaw Lem—is a monologue of a cybernetic machine incarnated into a human body and awakened into a world resembling the European Romantic period. From the start, the readers are thrown into the mind of an avatar who just begins to be aware of its body, as well as its historical and social surroundings. Initially, the stream of consciousness is gender neutral. Then, with a slow re-awakening of senses and the “rush of gender,” the narrator finds herself a woman in a royal palace ballroom, surrounded by other guests and festivities, and with the king present (Lem, “Mask” 184). In a pursuit of self-discovery triggered by blurred memories of at least three previous lives, the avatar learns that she is programmed to be an assassin and the target happens to be a guest she meets at the ballroom, for whom she starts to have feelings. The recognition comes when the avatar is facing a mirror. The moment when she tears the human flesh apart to discover a cybernetic, metal maid, her prospective lover enters and a long chase begins, during which the self-reflective narrator questions her “program” and ponders on a moral dilemma between her duties to the king who ordered the assassination, and the victim whom she desires and loves (184).

There are three crucial thresholds in the avatar dynamics in Lem’s story: the “rush of gender,” when the avatar incorporation (in thoughts, language, and body) reaches its sexual determinants; the moment of self-doubt, which makes the avatar more human than cybernetic; and the moment of a special, avatarian type of death. The avatar becomes a vehicle of transgression. The motif of passing through a threshold of realms, a passing that is not one directional and involves death in one of the realms, marks a unique contribution to the theme of avatar descendance and its literary reception.

Lem's fictional world is already posthuman. In "The Mask," the machine is incarnated into human form, becomes self-conscious, and, after killing off the human body, finds itself back into the machine. Yet even in this form, she is able to engage in a conversation with a monk about the consequences of overwriting of her program. The monk treats it as a confession like any other, with no distinguishing between the human and non-human. This is clearly in line with posthumanism and transhumanism, where the central position of the Vitruvian human is no longer valid (Braidotti 21). Interestingly, the avatar, even if rejected, proves to have a transforming quality. The wearing of the avatar mask that makes the machine more human turns her into a hybrid state where both human and non-human perspectives are internalized, although not equally accepted. In another work by Lem, *Wizja lokalna* (*Observation on the Spot*, 1982), the posthuman diversity of life forms is grimly unbalanced, leaning heavily toward the non-human condition—paradoxically—in the name of immortality!

In the unique rendering of the motif of the avatar, in Lem's *Wizja lokalna*, humans aim at becoming their own immortal selves by means of nanotechnology. The main protagonist Ijon Tichy explores an anthropomorphic civilization where ubiquitous molecular-sized nanobots called "bystry" (quickies), after beneficently contributing to law enforcement and ethics, are given the task of ultimate enhancement of the human body (Lem, *Wizja lokalna* 96). Because quickies permeate reality at the atomic level, the transformation of human body takes place from within: quickies replace every mortal atom in human cells by immortal ones. The result is a form of immortal avatar, or a living and breathing mummy, which can live forever and act like a former living person but is already and ultimately dead. Lem presents a distorted, grotesque, and paradoxical version of the futurological theme of altering the human condition by means of technological development (also developed by authors such as Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, and Robert Heinlein). Although the word "avatar" is never mentioned in the book, this ironic transhumanist ascendance of mortal human into an immortal shell features all traits of a reversed avatarian transfer (human to god-like state) which never leaves the human body, yet involves the passing through a threshold between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead and ends in avatarian death.

VII. Olga Tokarczuk: *Transfugium*

The ideas of human enhancement which at the time of the publication of Lem's stories were considered science-fiction are becoming part of contemporary discourse. An intriguing dimension of these once science-fiction themes can be found in Olga Tokarczuk's short story "Transfugia" (2018). The story is set in an unspecified time in the future and its main protagonist, Renata, undergoes a process of "*transfugium*," an incarnation into an animal form, that of a wolf. The procedure is carried out under medical and psychological supervision in a specialized clinic with curated animal reserves on its grounds.

The center of the story is a family meeting at the clinic where the loved ones, most of whom with reluctance, dismay, and confusion, come to say their last goodbyes to Renata. For most of the family, the process is equal to death, and the meeting is nothing short of a funeral. From their point of view, the "transfugium" (Latin for escape, desertion) is understood quite literally, as a desertion from human world. For Renata herself, it is a crossing of a threshold between civilization and nature, a welcome shift from a human-centred life to an unknown but alluring alternative. In a carefully staged ceremony, the transformed protagonist's avatar body is carried over the lake on a craft towards an island inhabited by wolves. The avatar motif is brought back by Tokarczuk into the religious, ritualist context with a clear post-anthropocentric, post-dualistic understanding of human spirituality, death, and rebirth (Ferrando 251). "Why"—asks one of the characters of "Transfugia"—"a divide between you and this larch is philosophically more imposing than the divide between this larch and that woodpecker?" (Tokarczuk 132).

For the main protagonist, incarnation into animal form does not necessarily mean death, but metamorphosis. A number of intertextual references to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Carl Gustav Jung, and Eastern religions point toward the Western and Orientalist cultural contexts for Renata's transition. *Transfugium* seems to encompass both cultures, while not being either of them. The avatarian transfer is a conscious decision, not a random occurrence, as exemplified by numerous cases in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. At the same time, the subject of the transfer does not want to be placed in a hierarchical position where the transfer is understood as a descendance from higher to lower realms. Tokarczuk's protagonist is transferring into an alternative life-form, but not a lower one. Early in the 1990s, before her

influential book *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles predicted that the avatar in cyberspace would become more than a puppet: it will have a chance to represent “a zone of interaction that opens the subject to the exhilarating realization of Otherness” (qtd. in Weinstone 19). In Olga Tokarczuk’s vision, the avatar has a biological form, and the “realization of Otherness” is achieved via a luminal transfer afforded by bioengineering technologies: the transfugium between human and animal realms. Posthuman and transhuman views on life are articulated in the story by Professor Chio who supervises the process of biological change of Renata, which lasts several months and leaves space for philosophical discussions between the two. Being himself a designer baby, an enhanced human of unspecified gender, Chio represents a paradox that the transhumanist movement brings into posthumanist discourse. On the one hand, as someone who quotes Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and explains biological and evolutionary closeness of humans to other forms of life, Chio represents a fusion between West and the East. On the other hand, as an enhanced human, he reinforces the central position of humanity and as such is Renata’s antagonist. One might say that the depiction of Chio resonates techno-orientalism, a set of contemporary Western stereotypes of high-tech, futuristic Asia (Roh et al. 10). But at the same time, the tension between the two characters (Renata does not like Chio’s condescending tone of someone who knows better) might best illustrate a more general duality of life forces, as expressed by Eugene Thacker: “life is human-centered and yet unhuman-oriented” (ix). In the fictional futuristic world of Tokarczuk, the avatarian transformation and avatar body of wolf function as a means of overcoming this paradox, which was investigated by philosopher Thomas Nagel in an influential philosophical essay, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” (435-50). As a result, one is able to escape the human cage and finally stop seeing the world only through the human eye.

VIII. Maja Smrekar: Art of Hybridisation

If radical human enhancements and accompanying avatarian transfers have migrated from science-fiction of Lem to the mainstream literary fiction of Tokarczuk, then Maja Smrekar, a Slovenian laboratory bio-artist, brings these ideas and motifs on the level of artistic live acts. Similar to Tokarczuk, Smrekar focuses on the assimilation of otherness and the questioning of the central

position of the human species in the ecosystem. In a series of durational bio-art performances, *K-9_topology: Ecce Canis* (2014), *K-9_topology: Hybrid Family* (2016), and *K-9_topology: ARTE_mis* (2017), Smrekar pushes her lifelong relationship with dogs and wolves to their limits by using laboratory tools of biotechnology (serotonin, canine hormones) in order to blur the border between the human and the animal. The exploration of the historical co-evolution of both species and the establishing of an inter-species communication takes its most radical turn in *ARTE_mis*, in which Smrekar breastfeeds her dog and fertilizes her egg with a dog's cell (a fat cell).

“Animalism makes us human”—this artistic motto of the Slovenian performer propels her projects in two directions (*Ars Electronica 2017*). The first aims towards hybridity and mutual domestication (Barras), the second towards incorporation. It is within the second group that the avatar motif is explored and radically redefined. With the act of fertilization, even if it is biologically futile and thus carried out only on a symbolic, artistic dimension, the oriental theme of avatarian transfer is taken into a new terrain.⁵ One can understand the avatar as a metaphor for the fertilisation of a virtual offspring of the crossing of human and canine, and as a third species, or intermediary being (Thacker 97). One can also see the rendering of the motif by Smrekar more literally and consistently with the bioengineering perspective. Here, the avatar is the body, and the subject of the avatar transfer is the embodied gene. The genetic theory of avatarism is highlighted in *Gene Avatars: The Neo-Darwinian Theory*, by Gouyon, Henry, and Arnould, which treats avatar as a local embodiment or representation of the species in the local community (Gouyon et al. 152). If avatars embody genetic information, then humans are always already the avatars of their genes. In *ARTE_mis*, the Slovenian artist becomes an avatar of a hybrid genetic material, a possible next step in human and canine co-evolution. The avatar dynamics as implemented by Smrekar are in complete opposition to the one popularised by computer games and virtual reality environments, yet most interestingly, it aligns itself with genetic avatarism, which might in the future become more prominent, or even replace the virtual aspects of avatar embodiment with the biological one.

⁵ As emphasised in numerous interviews with Smrekar and descriptions of the performance, there was no possibility for the fertilisation to be successful.

There are striking similarities between the artistic visions of Smrekar and Tokarczuk. Both artists make female protagonists the vehicles of anthropocentric displacement and of embracement of otherness through the use of ecologically inclined biotechnological means. Each artist renders the motifs of metamorphosis and avatar transfer in a way that privileges neither man nor animal, but creates a third entity, which improves both species. If Renata's transfer into animal form is not euthanasia, and if Smrekar's virtual hybrid baby gives a direction for transhumanist vision and technologies, then both artists take the old oriental motif of the avatar into a future which makes mythological incorporations, and human choice realities.

IV. Conclusion

The adoption of the Hindu motif of avatarian embodiment during its initial phase in the early nineteenth century, apart from being used a literary device for presenting an oriental alter-ego, was employed in association with messianic ideals of liberation and the spiritual enhancement of humankind. *King Spirit*, Juliusz Słowacki's epic poem incorporating ideas of metempsychosis and incarnation on narrative and structural levels, envisions that the role of the ever evolving spirit and poetry is to "angelise" mankind. Later in the twentieth century, Polish futurologist Stanisław Lem made a grotesque version of this vision in his depiction of a human enhanced into an immortal avatar which is effectively dead and resembling the human only in form. The irony, the paradox, and indeed the full drama of avatar transfer, vaguely present in the realisation of the idea in computer games, returns in force in the twenty-first century in the posthumanist visions of Olga Tokarczuk and Maja Smrekar.

The discursive dynamics of avatarism, a category proposed in this article and concerned with the historically changing configurations of the original Hindu motif of avatar during its Western reception and appropriation, starts with poetic inspiration and ends with biological embodiment. The category of avatarism encourages the creation of connections between heterogeneous cultural areas. Its potential for comparative studies of similar narrative themes and patterns throughout different historical periods and across different cultures is highly promising, and here only briefly highlighted. Hopefully, this article establishes a connection between neo-orientalist, postcolonial studies and posthumanist thought, specifically through its transhumanist discourse oriented

towards human enhancement and the application of biotechnology in dismantling the Vitruvian Man's privileged position in the established cultural, biological and ecological hierarchies. The avatar might be the most suitable figure for future reflections and present more possibilities for this innovative transfer outlook.

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