

# OF PLASTIC SELKIES AND HYBRID PUPPIES: POSTHUMAN MYTHOPOESIA IN TIMES OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

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## **Abstract**

Against the background of current discourses on ecological crises, numerous scholars and artists associated with the posthuman have speculated on and developed strategies to realise new ways of multi-species coexistence in altered ecological entanglements. Many projects resulting from such efforts are complex synthesis from artistic and scientific practices. Another core element of various projects is the examination of the phenomenon of myth, which has not been researched systematically until now. In this article, I will explore on the relationship of posthumanist philosophy, posthuman art, myth, and ecology, by elaborating on a tradition of reading myth as a poetic or, more precisely, mythopoetic mental power enabling humans to a more comprehensive perception and, thereby, a stronger interconnectedness to their surroundings than pure reason can do. It is my thesis, that such hermeneutics of myth are relevant for various posthuman positions and that an analysis of the mythopoetic structures will provide a promising device to access and understand them. This will be demonstrated by an exploration of the mythopoetic tradition's relevance for the posthuman in art and philosophy against the backdrop of ecological discourses on the relationship of art, nature, and technology, concluding in two case studies of artworks.

## **Keywords**

Art, myth, posthuman, ecology, nature, technology

## **1. More than Reason: A Mytho-critical Introduction**

“Mythology pitches the mind beyond that rim, to what can be known but not told” (Campbell, 1991, p. 163). This statement of Joseph Campbell, one of the most famous mythology scholars of our time, puts a core problem of the phenomenon of myth in a nutshell. Although the terms *myth* and *mythology* refer to the ancient Greek

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word *μῦθος* (word, speech, or lore), in its modern understanding, myth describes very heterogeneous practices of cultural production which often go beyond propositional understanding. Even the meaning of terms such as myth, *myths*, and mythology can not be put in words easily. A universal definition does not exist and there are various traditions of interpretation (Matuschek & Jamme, 2014, pp. 11–15).

In one important tradition being especially influential in western culture, myths and mythology are widely understood as a corpus of meaning making stories often originating in ancient times. Thereby, myths are generally considered to have an ambiguous reputation in terms of their verisimilitude. Various scholars of the ratio-centric tradition, prominently described by Wilhelm Nestle, have reproached them for being irrational, false stories, which are obsolete leftovers of a pre-rational epoch of human history and seem to be displaced in contemporary sophisticated societies (Nestle, 1975). Such disparaging hermeneutics have been influential until today and can be traced back even to colloquial language, where the word *myth* is frequently used synonymously for a story, which is generally believed to be true, even so it is actually not.

Nevertheless, there have been various other influential traditions of interpretation as well, such as the *symbolic forms* (orig: *Symbolische Formen*) of Ernst Cassirer (Cassirer, 1994), the ethnological and structuralist approach of Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss, 1964/1971) or the political myth of Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1964), reading myths and mythology in a more comprehensive way. Thereby, the authors have put their foci not only on ancient stories but also on the analyses of the structural phenomena incorporated in such tales and developed various theories on myth as a basic condition of the human mind and cultural production.

In this article, I refer to a tradition of hermeneutics which has emphasised the poetical and aesthetical qualities of myth in order to address criticism not to the ideas of reason and rationalism in general but to ratio-centric positions and their claims to absoluteness in terms of knowledge production. Such a tradition of reading myth hasn't been connected to posthumanist and posthuman ideas yet<sup>1</sup>. Anyhow, as it has explicitly been associated with art and the relationship of culture and nature, which are also crucial ideas of posthuman positions, I consider it as a promising tool of analysis.

Since the 18th century, manifold theories on the poetic qualities of myth have been developed in international philosophy and art until today. These positions can not be understood in terms of a straight line of historical development, nevertheless, they are characterised by similar structural phenomena. I will elaborate such structures, some central ideas, important steps of development, and influential proponents in order to explain this tradition and contextualise posthuman art

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, I use the terms “posthumanism” or “posthumanist” to explain a heterogeneous, interdisciplinary field of academic scholarship (Sorgner 2022, pp. 52–53). The term “posthuman”, in contrast, describes multifarious associations with ideas and practises, such as critics of classical conceptions of the human or a call for decentralisation and co-creation in more-than-human entanglements, which are also important for posthumanist scholarship but are not necessarily connected to an academic field. Such ideas and practises can be found in the arts, science, economy, and popular culture as well.

systematically with actual and historical discourses which emphasise the relationship of myth, knowledge production, culture, and nature.

## 2. Healing the Gap: the Call for a New Mythology

In 1744, Giambattista Vico, in his *Scienza Nuova*, no longer understood the old myths as an expression of superstition, but as the *poetic wisdom* of a necessary past stage in human cultural development. Following Vico, such *poetic wisdom* enabled human beings to address and communicate further dimensions of the human consciousness, especially in terms of sensuality, aesthetics, and emotions which are not accessible by analytical reason (Vico, 1924, p. 151).

Several artists and scholars since the late 18th century, more than all the proponents of *English Romanticism* such as Lord Byron and Edward Burne Jones as well as the leading thinkers of *Deutsche Romantik* such as Caspar David Friedrich, Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling elaborated and developed the idea of *poetic wisdom*. For their thinking was deeply coined by the idea of humanity has fallen apart from a unity with the world in modern times and the desire of a reconciliation, they considered the poetical qualities of myth as a device to restore such a broken unity (Buchholz, 1990; Brand, 2005, pp. 133–143). While Vico saw myth as a superseded stage of human thinking in ancient times, these scholars and artists reinterpreted it as a basic anthropological condition of the human mind to perceive and communicate with its surrounding world in a broader and more immersive way than pure reason could do. According to their ideas, even so, this basic mythic condition might had been suppressed through the expansion of ratio-centrism in western history and culture, it has remained until today and could still be reactivated. Such a reactivation was not meant to be a lash back into a prehistorical thinking or an absolute opposition to reason, but as a supplement in terms of a more comprehensive way to experience the world and reunite with it (Buchholz, 1990).

To perform such a reactivation or re-mythification in modern times, several authors turned their focus on fine arts, music, and literature, for they considered the arts aesthetic qualities as a predestined vehicle for the mythic condition to enfold. Karl Phillip Moritz, for example, emphasised in his *Götterlehre* (1791) the connection between mythology, art, and beauty (Moritz, 1981, pp. 611–614). Johann Gottfried Herder examined in his essay *Vom neuern Umgang mit der Mythologie* (1764) on the relationship between myth and poetry and the relevance of myth as a poetic tool in modern art (Herder, 1994, pp. 427–429, 439).

The idea of such a poetic dimension of myth has remained relevant for the theories of several scholars until today. So, for example, for Friedrich Nietzsche in the 19th century, who in reference to the ideas of Georg Friedrich Creutzer and Arthur Schopenhauer saw especially music related to the mythic condition (Jamme, 2017). Even contemporary academics from different fields of studies are still occupied with the relationship of the mythic condition and the arts. So does Gottfried Boehm, a scholar from visual studies, who coined the terms *mythopoesia* (orig. *Mythopoesis*). This term describes an artistic transformation of intensive personal experiences, attitudes, and ideas into something super-personal and collective, by using a common visual language, such as historically long-running and

still prominent figures like gods, heroes, and monsters from classical mythology, and staging them in an exalted, expressive, and effective way, not only to give a symbol of an artist's or author's personal experience but also to evoke the intensity and quality of such an experience in the beholders mind (Boehm, 2004, p. 416).

### **3. Between Gaia and Gorgons: Myth in Posthumanist Philosophy and Posthuman Art**

Even so, academics have turned increasing attention to the intersections of posthumanism, literature, and art, which is proven by the comprehensive publications of McHugh/Aloi (2021), Wolfe (2022), and Sorgner (2022), a relationship to the phenomenon of myth is only sporadically addressed (Hassan, 1977, p. 207; Sorgner, 2022, pp. 11, 83, 106–107). In general, the relevance of myth for posthumanism and posthuman ideas is not systematically researched neither, even so there are some promising case studies (Umbrello & Lombard, 2018; Kjellgren, 2019; THOMPSON, 2019; Sen, 2021). This might be surprising giving that the phenomenon of myth is quite present in posthumanist scholarship, so, for example, in the works of Rosi Braidotti who establish with her idea of the *nomadic subject* a new political myth (Kjellgren, 2019). Elaborating such a political myth she refers, especially in her *Metamorphoses* (2001), to ancient mythology as well as popular cultural figurations and deconstructs or reinterprets them through the lens of anti-essentialist feminist philosophy (Braidotti, 2001). Prominent associations with myth and posthuman ideas can also be found in the neomaterialist theory of Donna J. Haraway or the actor-network-theory of Bruno Latour. Thereby, the relationship of those authors to the heterogenous tradition of philosophical posthumanism is controversially discussed.<sup>2</sup> In any case, given that Latour and Haraway promote central posthuman ideas such as different degrees of decentralisation from the anthropocentric perspective as well as complex conceptions of more-than-human networks, entanglements, and ecologies including non-human species and technology, they can not be ignored in the argument of this article. Furthermore, they prominently operate with the intersection of science, myth, and art.

Back in 1984, Haraway used the figure of the cyborg as a counter myth to the traditional scientific world view and to dissolve classic binaries such as human and machine, male and female, or body and mind (Haraway, 1991, pp. 153–176). Also in her later texts, she turned creatures from Greek mythology such as the Gorgons or self-created hybrids from animals and literary figures such as her interpretation of Chthulu into mythical epitomes of her *tentacular, sym-poietic* ecologies (Haraway, 2016, pp. 52–55). Similar did Latour with his reinterpretation of the ancient Greek earth goddess Gaia and the Gaia Principle developed by Lynn Margulis and James Lovelock (Margulis, 1998), whom he transformed into a mythical figuration of his concept of an integrative ecological network based on actor-network-theory (Latour,

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<sup>2</sup> Several authors, more than all Haraway, have distanced themselves from posthumanist philosophy in the early 2000th (Haraway, 2004). Nevertheless, Latour and Haraway have recently contributed stubs of their main ideas to McHugh's and Aloi's reader *Posthumanism in Art and Science* published in 2021, which might indicate a new approximation.

2013; Latour, 2018). Such (neo)mythic figures—so my thesis—do not only work as illustrations, rather they incorporate a special mythopoetic condition as well to criticise the classical ratio-centric scientific tradition by using a common and striking visual language. Thereby, the mythical references are more than just illustrations, they rather work as functional arguments to communicate aspects of the author's theories which can not be explained by scientific language only.

Similar mythic references and mythopoetic strategies are hallmarks of various positions in contemporary art as well. Actually, many posthuman oriented authors, do not only include artworks into their scholarship, they frequently cooperate with artists and are prominent figures in the international art scene too. So for example Rosi Braidotti with her interviews and reviews of the works of Patricia Piccinini (Braidotti & Piccinini, 2019) or the iconic talk with Pussy Riot and Judith Butler at *First Supper Symposium* 2014 (The First Supper Symposium, 2014). Another example is Bruno Latour who inspired and intervened in actual art critiques and exhibition praxes (Mersmann, 2019). Donna J. Haraway has closely cooperated with several artists as well, and was a consultant at dOCUMENTA (13), where she presented her cooperative project *The Worldly House* in 2012.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the important British magazine *Artreview* tellingly listed her amongst the *power hundred* of the art world from 2017 to 2019 (ArtReview, 2020). Such an impact of prominent scholars on the art scene, however, does not mean that artists find only inspiration from philosophers and/or translate their theory into art. To the contrary, many artists have inspired scholars as well, and the relationships between them are complex and versatile. There are projects resulting from close cooperations, sometimes one inspires the other, and in some cases (mutual) references are only sporadical and fragmental. Anyway, given that all artists, artistic collectives and collaborations have developed their own mythopoeitic strategies in order to critic ratiocentrism, perceive the world in a more comprehensive way, and elaborate on new entanglements, each project deserves to be analysed as an independent and unique piece of work.

Thereby, various strategies of artistic mythopoesia such as the reinterpretation, restaging and actualisation of mythic figures and topics of the Greek and Roman mythology have a long tradition in western visual culture. How drastically the cultural conditions and conceptions—especially the concepts of nature—framing such actualisations have changed, shows a comparison of the mythopoetic art and philosophy in the 18th and 19th century, in which the poetic reading of myth became prominent, and the contemporary posthumanist and posthuman tradition.

#### **4. From Idyllic Nature to Ecological Crisis: on the Arts and Technologies of Making New Bounds**

Essential for the Romantic interpretation of myth in 18th and 19th century Europe was an idealised and nostalgic idea of nature in terms of an untainted idyll such as the biblical Eden or the utopian interpretation of the Greek Arcadia, where mankind

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<sup>3</sup> Comp. Haraway, Donna, J. *The Worldly House*, Installation. *dOCUMENTA (13)*. Kassel 2012. <https://d13.documenta.de/#/research/research/view/the-worldly-house>

was said to live in harmony with the world (Brand, 2005, pp. 133–143). Such conceptions of a harmonic unity of humanity and nature in the past, which were also popular motives in fine arts from the etchings of Carl Wilhelm Kolbe to the paintings of Arnold Böcklin (Borchhardt, 2017, pp. 121–140), were often connected to the idea of a prerational *mythic thinking* (orig: *Mythisches Bewusstsein*) attested to ancient cultures (Cassirer, 1994). This mythical thinking as an immediate, sensual, and affective way of perceiving the world was believed to enable early humans to live in unity with nature, while the development of the ratio-centric perspective and the suppressing of the sensual and emotional qualities was blamed for breaking such a unity. Many aspects of cultural and especially civilisational development resulting from ratio-centric thinking such as systems of government, technological progress, and urbanisation were also seen critically in this tradition. Thereby, the call for a *New Mythology* (orig. *Neue Mythologie*, Buchholtz, 1990) and a re-mythification was an attempt to overcome such a historically grown culture-nature dualism not in terms of a relapse into a prehistoric irrational consciousness but as the creation of new systems of relationships between human, culture, and nature. On that account, myth was attested to have a special *reconciling* potential mediating between polarities such culture and nature or rationality and irrationality. Thereby, myth was considered as a networking force to (re)integrate the human into this broken unity within the nature.

Such an idealised idyllic image of nature was a hallmark of the Romantic tradition which has been deconstructed already since the late 19th century by Charles Darwin's (1859/1988) theory of evolution, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, and Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilist philosophy (1883/1885, Vorrede, 3). In our contemporary world facing more and more the consequences of the Anthropocene (Clark, 2015, pp. 1–28) in terms of pollution, species extinction and climate change, conceptions of nature as an untainted idyllic paradise to return to seem to have become more obsolete than ever. They have been replaced by more comprehensive ecological concepts renegotiating the relationship of culture and nature in the light of such a crisis. Against this backdrop, the call for new ecological networks, bounds, and entanglements between human and non-human entities becomes louder and louder in international posthumanist philosophy and posthuman art. It is my thesis, that either of them also takes a chance on the idea of myth as a poetic and uniting force to create and communicate such new more-than-human networks and entanglements. To do so, similar to the posthumanist scholars mentioned before, artists develop aesthetic strategies to elaborate the (re)activation of the mythopoetic condition and the actualisation of traditional mythological figures in order to access sensual and emotional aspects beyond reasonable understanding. Different to the poetical myth of the Romantic tradition, which was built upon a nostalgic idea of an idyllic nature, posthuman myth in philosophy and art is characterised by an increased sensibility for an irreversibly broken nature and the current ecological crisis. Such a crisis can not be escaped by taking flight to an idealised past, on the contrary, it is radically future oriented in terms of finding new ways of creating and co-creating more sustainable ways of coexistence.

Nevertheless, this future orientation does not mean a total breach with history and tradition, which is even proven by the references to motives from traditional classical myths actualised in terms of posthuman thinking. Thereby, the mythic protagonists and images of posthuman aesthetics<sup>4</sup> are no celestial anthropomorph gods in idyllic landscapes, but rather figurations incorporating hybridity, proliferation, and mutability such as hybrid, telluric, and chthonic deities like Haraway's Gorgons traditionally banished to the realms of demons and monsters (Haraway, 2016, pp. 52–55). These hybrid mythic elements mediate not only between conceptions of different species and entities but also between the past, present, and future and culminate in new myths of permanent becoming full of unsettledness, ambiguity, and tension. Similar ideas of ambiguity and unsettledness in times of severe ecological crisis not only as something troublesome and disturbing but also in terms of a creative driving force of a permanent development and co-creating are frequent ideas in posthuman(ist) theory. So, for example, in Rosi Braidotti's political myth of *nomadic subjectivity* (Braidotti, 2001; Kjellgren, 2019) as well as neomaterialist theory such as Jane Bennet's *Vibrant Matter* (2009) or Donna J. Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016).

Another hallmark of many posthuman actualisations of myth in terms of becoming and co-creation is its interrelation with science and technology. Such techno-philia becomes obvious in various artistic projects, which often result from collaborations with scientists and include technologically modified bodies, landscapes and ecosystems created through an experimental use of cutting-edge technologies. Even so, such collaborations have become increasingly popular during the last decades (Sorgner, 2022), artistic praxis including the use of technology to create new sustainable ecosystems often contradict to historically long-running mainstream attitudes, which are still common in western culture and imply a more or less strict culture-nature-dualism as well as rather techno-critical perspectives. Such attitudes can be traced back to the Romantic tradition, which considered many civilisational achievements such as technology as a result of ratio-centrism, thus in opposition to a mythic way of thinking and a life in harmony with nature. Further influential technophobe stereotypes reading science and technology strongly as misused instruments of power and, therefore, harmful forces to oppress people and destroy nature for economic reasons can be prominently found in the *Frankfurter Schule* and have remained influential until today (Adorno, 1953/1987, pp. 23–26).

In opposition to such widespread ideas, it is one central aim of various posthuman and posthumanist positions to resolve this long-running culture-nature-dualism in more comprehensive conceptions of networks and entanglements which imply an explicit ecomodernist agenda. Following the ideas of ecomodernism, which's tradition goes back to the 1960th, for example, to the theories of Stewart Brand, technology has not only been considered as a force to destroy nature, to the contrary, the responsible use of cutting-edge technologies has been seen as an indispensable device to provide sustainable solutions for the actual ecological crisis

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<sup>4</sup> To different types of posthuman aesthetics in the works of prominent artist such as Patricia Piccinini, Eduardo Kac, and Stelarc also in terms of hybridity, ambiguity, and monstrosity comp (Sorgner, 2022, pp. 64–98).

(Symons, 2019). Against the backdrop of such a reconciliation between technology and nature, in posthuman art and posthumanist philosophy scientific and mythic ways of thinking are not considered as pure antagonists neither. On the contrary, many posthuman artists try to synthesised the uniting and reconcealing potentials of myth and science and catalyse them in artistic practices to find new ways of knowledge production or even to provide some first steps in order to create new entanglements between humans, technology, and nature. This theory will be demonstrated at the two case studies *Imagining Godzilla / Selkie Skin* by Merja Puustinen, Andi Best, and Gary Markle and *ARTE\_mis* by Maja Smrekar.

## **5. Old and New Mythical Creatures: Two Case Studies of Contemporary Artworks**

### *5.1. Imagining Godzilla*

The cultural institution of art is generally considered providing a predestined experimenting ground for synthesis of different ideas, practises and technologies (Holmberg & Ideland, 2016; Borchhardt, 2020). According to this institution's traditional, (self-) proclaimed social function as a special space of experimentation, reflection, and experience with its own aesthetic, social, and legal regularities in various countries, many artists and researchers use the art institution to criticize traditional notions of order and point out aesthetic and material alternatives through an unconventional experimental use of technologies, cultural practices, and artistic strategies of staging. Even so, many people look at the art institution and its spacial situatedness mainly in terms of museums, ateliers, and galleries, various contemporary artists have already abandoned those classical exhibition spaces. So, for example, do the proponents of the emerging field of *Street Art* such as Banksy or Mumia Abu-Jamal performing in urban spaces or the promoters of *Land Art* such as Robert Smithson or Nancy Hold, who create their artworks in landscapes such as fields or forests.

Another interesting *outdoor* art project was *Imagining Godzilla*, developed by the artists Merja Puustinen and Andi Best in cooperation with Bioart Society in 2019 (Best, 2021, p. 294; *Imagining Godzilla*, 2019). It could be described as an artistic eco-expedition, which has been followed by related projects such as the online seminar *Imagining the Baltic Sea* in 2022 (Bioartsociety, 2022). The material core element of *Imagining Godzilla* was the mobile research platform *Godzilla*, a unique shaped Polynesian-style sailing catamaran designed by James Wharram (Best, 2021, p. 294; *Imagining Godzilla*, 2019). Its aim was to create a larger network of artists and researchers in order to perform a special way of *artistic research*<sup>5</sup> to explore on

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<sup>5</sup> *Artistic research* is a comprehensive term encompassing very different artistic practices, especially in contemporary art. Thereby, artists see their work as a practice-based and innovative form of research and knowledge production. (da Costa 2008, pp. 365–388; Haarmann, 2019) Despite its growing popularity, the concept of artistic research has repeatedly been criticised, e.g. for its undefined nature and the question of added value in comparison to scientific research (cf. Henke, Mersch, Meulen, Strässle & Wiese, 2020), the sometimes problematic claim to provide a holistic tool for exploring the

and produce comprehensive understanding of the Baltic Sea as a special environment with multifarious ecological and social interrelations. According to Puustinen and Best: “The unique aesthetics of the boat create an environment advantageous to artistic thinking and research, in contrast to a conventional scientific research ship or a traditional artistic residency on land” (Imagining Godzilla, 2019). Such a comprehensive understanding should not only include rational knowledge but also sensual perception and empathy by supplementing scientific methods such as data collection with artistic strategies of visualisations and cultural practices like the association with myth. Against this backdrop, the project provided residencies for local and international artists/researchers on *Godzilla* to perform individual projects. Amongst the ten artists in residency were Eva Makali, Samir Bhowmik, Lauri Hyvärinen and Gary Markle with his Project *Selkie Skin* (Best, 2021, pp. 299–300).

*Selkie Skin* can be understood as a contemporary reinterpretation of the mythic figure of the Selkie in the age of oceanic pollution. The Selkie is a mythological creature from Scandinavian folklore which is said to be able to transform from a seal into a human being by shedding its skin in the moonlight. Legend has it, that the Selkie is a liminal and restless entity wandering between the oceanic nature and terrestrial human civilisations, but it remains perpetually unsatisfied with either way of living (Best, 2021, pp. 299–300).

As such a restless and unsettled creature changing between different but inextricably connected ecosystems the Selkie has provided a perfect inspiration for Markle, who has explored in his comprehensive long-standing project *Wear/Were do we belong?* the narratives of identity through the lens of expanded fashion in the Anthropocene. According to Markle, *Selkie Skin* was the materialization of the question “*What do our fashion choices have to do with the ocean?*” (Best, 2021, pp. 304–305) Different to the mythic tradition, Markle’s *Selkie Skin* was not the skin of a seal, but a fisher net shaped swimsuit made from scavenged waste found at the beach, such as plastics bags, yarn and other textile remains as well as maritime plant material (Best, 2021, pp. 308–309). With this project, Markle wanted to explore on the possibilities or impossibilities to find ways to restore the broken unity of human and (maritime) nature in the 21st century. Thereby, the artist states that the *Selkie Skin* enabled him to float in the water and set him in a special and ambiguous state of contemplation by changing his movements, physical awareness, and sensual perception, which made him feel at the same time isolated from and integrated into the ocean (Best, 2021, pp. 308–309). Furthermore, Markle wanted to raise the awareness for the actual state of the maritime nature, which is no healthy and idyllic blue paradise but an endangered environment highly contaminated by human waste such as plastics, which intoxicate the basics of the maritime bios and doom countless maritime creatures, who get entangled into the plastic leftovers. In the light of this environmental disaster, Markle’s *Selkie Skin* with its entangled structure made from such waste turns finally out as a rather ambiguous actualisation of the classical Selkie myth and a pointer on the maritime pollution as well as the inextricable

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world and solving current crises (Ratto & Ferran, 2009), or increasing institutionalization (Cramer & Terpsma, 2021).

interconnectedness of civilisation and maritime nature not in terms of a holistic but a rather broken unity which has still to be bettered and healed. Thereby, Markle used the figure of the Selkie to explore and to raise awareness for this difficult interconnectedness as an important challenge to face in our contemporary world.

Against this backdrop, Markle's Selkie remains similar unsettled as its mythical ancestors. In such an actualised state of unsettledness, modern Selkies do not only dwell in the realm of fine arts but they also celebrate their comeback in many genres of popular culture such as children's books, fantasy, and science fiction, so, for example, in Nikolaus Heidelberg's *Wenn ich große bin, werde ich Seehund* (2012). Thereby, popular media does not only actualise characters from classical mythology but operates intensively with the mythopoetic condition as well to create new iconic figures by transforming individual and collective attitudes and experiences into super-personal striking images. It is my thesis that such mythopoetic structures are one core element uniting fine arts and popular culture. Even so, there has been a historically long-running hierarchic distinction between high culture including fine arts and sciences and popular culture in terms of entertainment and mass media, it is a hallmark of several postmodern and not least posthuman traditions to deconstruct and overcome such binary (Sorgner, 2022, pp. 11–12, 82–84, 106–107).

This is also proven by the name of the Catamaran *Godzilla* coining the title of the project *Imagining Godzilla*. The term references not a creature from traditional mythology but an iconic Japanese movie-monster. Godzilla debuted in Ishiro Honda's eponymous movie from 1954 during the aftermath of the Second World War as a visual incorporation of the disastrous consequences of the atomic bomb (Yam, 2020). Followed by several Japanese and US-American movies, adaptations, and reboots, Godzilla is one of the largest and longest running live action movie franchises ever. In its long history, Godzilla's character has often been reinterpreted and rewritten not only in terms of a monitory incorporation of the nuclear threat but also as a guardian of the frail ecological equilibrium, or even as a saviour of the earth. Thereby, Godzilla can be understood as an expression of the mythopoetic condition as well in terms of a visual incorporation of contemporary people's ambiguous attitude towards science and technology with their vast impact on the planet's ecological system equally as a boon equally as a bane (Yam, 2020).

In reference to the ambiguous symbolism of the iconic movie-monster and against the backdrop of the current ecological crises, it was *Imagining Godzilla's* aim to explore the Baltic Sea not just as a research object impacted by human actions but as a powerful and at the same time vulnerable interacting ecosystem of which the artists/researchers became part of and which impacted their ways of living too. The perception as well as experience of such a mutual impact should provide the participants and recipients of the project with new perspectives on the interwovenness of human practises and the maritime environment. Thereby, the goal of *Imagining Godzilla* was to create an altered way of knowledge production including reasonable, reflexive, and scientific as well as sensual, aesthetical, and emotional elements to rise attention for the ecological problems effecting the Baltic Sea.

## 5.2. ARTE\_mis

Some artists go even further with their projects. They do not only associate with altered ways of knowledge production, but they use cutting-edge technologies combined with artistic and mythic practises to create new ecological networks and communicate them to society. One of the most famous and most controversially discussed artworks of this kind during the last years was Maja Smrekar's multidimensional project *K9\_topology* (2017a). The project explored the relationship between humans, dogs and wolves as a struggle for multispecies survival in a post-anthropocentric environment beyond the traditional culture-nature-dichotomy (Smrekar, 2017a). To do so, *K-9 TOPOLOGY* combined various projects such as *Hybrid Family* and *ARTE\_mis* created by Smrekar through several years. It reflected on the common biological origins of all life forms and in line with Haraway's theory of *companion species* on the inextricable and symbiotic relationship between human and dog (and indirectly wolves as the latter's wild ancestors) as a historical basic of many civilisations (Haraway, 2007). The project also speculated on possible strategies for the survival and future development of multi-species coexistence on a planet already irreversibly changed by such co-created civilisations (Smrekar, 2017a). On this account, Smrekar discussed and deconstructed in *K-9 TOPOLOGY* binary categories such as culture epitomised in the use of cutting-edge technologies as a symbol of contemporary technocratic culture and nature by including untamed animals such as wolves and dogs as their domesticated descendants into her works. To blur such categories, she performed somatic and trans-genetic fusion between human and dog/wolf as well. For example, in her project *Hybrid Family*, the artist tried to transcend species boundaries and hierarchies by rethinking stereotype ideological exploitations in terms of motherhood. Therefore, she stimulated her breasts artificially to feed her puppy Ada. Another part of the project was called *ARTE\_mis* (2016), including the creation of a prenatal human-dog hybrid by removing the nucleus from one of Smrekar's ova and replacing it with the nucleus of a dog cell, which she presented in an installation in Kapelica Gallery in Ljubljana (Smrekar, 2017b). In order to explain this unusual *In Vitro* procedure, the artist stated:

Ecologically, ARTE\_mis connects three carnivorous species: human, dog and wolf, where the last two are genetically 99.9% identical. Ever since the beginning of our existence, all three species have been regulating the environment together, (...) Even though the hybrid cell exists frozen in liquid nitrogen, it evokes a public discourse and serves as a reference to the theory of Rosi Braidotti, who requires us to think beyond humanist limitations, in order to embrace the risks that becoming other - than human will bring in the future. ... as well as to embrace the ones we are already facing in the present. (Smrekar, 2017b)

Thereby, Smrekar transformed the historical symbiotic relationship of human and dog in a trans-genetic one to speculate on and give way for future life forms which might be more sensitive to the togetherness of all living beings and better

adapted to the challenges life has to face on the changing surface of planet Earth (Smrekar, 2017b). Besides its technological character, the artwork exposes some conspicuous neo-wholistic and mythic tendencies conjuring a stunning enigmatic ambience. This is proven by the creation and staging of altered bounds and entanglements between humans, wolves, and dogs in immersive striking installations which can be read as another artistic realisation of the mythopoetic power of the human mind bringing into existence ancient mythological creatures and modern popular icons too. Furthermore, the title of the project *ARTE\_mis* refers to the Greek goddess of hunt “Artemis”, who was usually attended by her hounds and able to transform humans into animals. The impact of Smrekar’s complex artwork was ambiguous. On the one hand, it was a crowd favourite and awarded a golden *NICA* in the category of *Hybrid Art* at *Ars Electronic Festival* (Linz) in 2017. On the other hand, several people were outraged that an artist created a prenatal human-dog hybrid cell and the project caused tenacious protests in several media (Gubmüller, 2017; Köhler, 2016). In any case, it attracted the audience’s attention and stoked strong and ambiguous affects between fascination and disgust also raising public discourses on the possibilities, ethics, and consequences of altered ecological networks. Thereby, not least for their aesthetic and mythic qualities, artworks such as Smrekar’s *Arte\_mis* and Markle’s *Selkie Skin* add some complexity to such discourses, as they turn the focus from purely scientific issues or yellow press scaremongering to a larger socio-political perspective, thus stressing the importance of emotions and aesthetics of representation for the social acceptance of cutting-edge technologies and altered ecological networks.

## **6. The Mythic Journey Goes on: a (Preliminary) Conclusion**

Such acceptance seems to be still a long way to go and the unsettled myth of the posthuman with its hybrid or even monstrous aesthetics contrasting to pleasing ideas of harmony, as they were presented in the romantic tradition, are still a challenge to face for many people. However, on our already irreversibly changed planet, there will be no way back to an untouched lost paradise, only a moving forward towards altered ways of coexistence, which have to be theorised and tested out as well (Gan, Swanson & Tsing, 2017). Art can provide a promising testsoil for such efforts not only in terms of experimenting on technologies and aesthetics but also on their public communication and social impact. Thereby, as shown in this article, the analysis of the mythopoetical structures being prominent in various posthuman theories and artworks can provide a promising tool to approach and associate with such complex and hybrid projects often defying pure rational understanding and open up more comprehensive perspective of conceiving and perceiving the world we live in.

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