

In Einer Fatalen Welt: Gender, Abjection, and Pessimism in Hans-Joerg Mayer

by Marc LeBlanc

The climax of Terminator II ranks as one of the most spectacular in science fiction. If you haven't seen it or don't recall, it ends in a steel mill, that old symbol of American deindustrialism. After an incredible chase down a Los Angeles freeway, the T-800 (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) have ended up here. It is in the mill's gears, catwalks, and pools of molten steel, that they will navigate in effort to protect Sarah's son, the future military leader and savior of humanity, John Connor (Edward Furlong), from being killed by the T-1000, a shape-shifting android whose reason for being is to murder the boy. The four play a lethal game of cat and mouse where eventually Schwarzenegger's cyborg body is crushed and impaled, leaving Sarah and young John to fend for themselves. After firing multiple blasts from her classic Remington 870 shotgun, Sarah pushes the T-1000 only to the edge of the catwalk. Quickly recovering he begins to advance on the pair, but not before Schwarzenegger's barely functioning machinic body appears atop a massive gear and fires one last round from his Hawk MM-1 grenade launcher into the already stunned T-1000. Irreparably wrenched open by the blast, the T- 1000 lets out an synthetic shriek before plummeting in the molten metal below. Submerged, the machine thrashes wildly as it regressively morphs back through all the people it murdered and subsequently embodied in its shape-shifting pseudo-life – the LAPD police officer, the doctor working the late shift, John's adoptive mother, and ultimately, Sarah Connor herself. The machine's long-winded, dramatic death lays bare the oedipal core of the T1000's cyborg-schizophrenia.

HJM: Against Interpretation

One of the more deeply embedded pathos in the history of modern art is seated in subject-specificity - how individual aesthetic development is categorized, interpreted, and comes to be representative of art history. Art historians use standards of style and semiotic legibility to create extensive taxonomies by which the individual artist is a single subject, qualifying what their work means for their contemporaries and the successive generations they are perceived to have influenced. Historically, most artists become iconic to their generation when their work is capable of creating and stereotyping a new visually cognitive category – this notion of a 'signature style' is founded by the work's perceived cognitive autonomy to the rest of the category.

The task of creating autonomous work was always a recurring challenge in the practices of artists throughout the 20th century. Like many artists born in his generation, this axiomatic condition of

homogenizing one's aesthetic was of principal concern to Hans- Joerg Mayer. More so than many, Mayer has, in what he makes and how it's made, skillfully and significantly challenged the assumed necessity that autonomous self- expression only arises from a concretized and cognitive subjectivity.

Mayer's oeuvre is full of wormholes and gnawing abscesses. It's confusing and incongruous, lacking simple cohesion and obvious narratives, it evades being brought into the light of critical inquiry. It purposefully resists the aim of a text like this one. Mayer has made the deliberate decision more than a handful of times in his career to stop and start anew somewhere else – no segue, no transition, just vanishing. In fact, abrupt absences and unpredictable cuts are the dominant constant in Mayer's practice. Each body of work is performed by a new character- artist, and when Mayer tires of it, it's never seen from again. Works like “Go-Go” (1985) or “Ohne Titel” (1995) bear basically no resemblance to the artists' figurative works of the early Noughties like “Chor” (2001), let alone a more recent work like the shittily tape-stenciled “Dog Beach” (2010). The lack of cognitive similarity in his work is only further compounded when one is familiar with his “signature” HJM neon works, his just-good-enough paper sculptures with their crass watery texts, or his rare masturbation films and the countless other drag-as-dreck works that flesh out his oeuvre.

If there's any continuity, it's in what Mayer paints. It's through these subjects that Mayer lets his gambit be known. And this world is frighteningly deep. Ultra-violent, hyper- sexualized, and harrowing in its casual horror, it is a catacombs where a bizarre cohort has its refuge, a gory orgy den of Lovecraft and Linda Lovelace, Jeanne d'Arc, Spock, Clint Eastwood, and Kirsten Dunst. With a predication towards weird stories, science-fiction, fantasy, gore, and celebrity tabloids, it is clear what catches Mayer's voyeuristic eye - taboo and death – abjection at large.

For so much of Hans-Joerg Mayer's career, writing about his work has responded by relating his work to pop art, trying to comprehend his position in the development of the 90s in Cologne or as German disciple in the post-Warholian age. While Mayer's work has typically been interpreted by addressing what influence Pop Art or Hollywood may have upon his work, I find that these things weigh little on how Mayer makes his work. In order to do this, one must not only omit so much in Mayer's oeuvre and look only at selected

localized instances, but also have a less than cursory understanding of the characters he elects to paint. Given who he chooses to represent, such an approach is futile to unpack the work. With such a chimeric oeuvre, Mayer's work begs for significant questions to be answered about the villains and criminals, the porn stars and cult celebs he portrays, these quasi-subjects that probe at the heart of what it means to say “I”.

HJM: The Accidental Feminist

Mayer has a long history of painting peculiar female subjects. Many of his fastidiously executed large-scale figurative works from the early millennial years contain androgynous females, sporting their coiffed genitalia in fetid settings filled with looming miasmas of color, birch trees, ruined castles, decapitated heads, and spiders. For example, "Pretty Things" (2001) shows a trio of females, each short-haired and wearing dress that is glamorous and militaristic. The uneasy landscape appears simulated, a bile-green sky cuts across behind them, the dirt on which they stand, pulsates a toxic violet-orange and a random rout of snails. Over the past half decade, Mayer has continued making dramatic stylistic changes. While often now focussing on female actors and entertainers whose, like Joan of Arc or Lady Gaga, the artist has abandoned the toxi-realism of his figurative work from the late nineties and driven recklessly into a mode of painting that is quick with slapdash irreverence, often electing to messily paint the name or drawing them as a drippy neon caricature, like a Daumier gone Pollock. From 1985 to 1992, Mayer created paintings alongside a handful of films, most of them centered on militant females. Working initially from images of armed females Mayer had found in National Geographic, Penthouse, and Fangoria, he composed circular vignettes on square canvases, each featuring a figure clutching and pointing pistols and automatic rifles toward the viewer, each in a stance and garb. The corners of each work are embellished with silverware or musical notes, allowing the aesthetic to fall ambiguously between radicality and domesticity.

Critic Isabelle Graw wrote about the psychoanalytic upheaval present in the paintings, stating that by having guns the women have been given a cyborg prosthesis of a penis, she writes, "A woman with a weapon no longer seems deficient in anything: she is no longer a target but looking through a gunsight, and reverses the relationship between active viewer and passive object." i Graw goes on to claim that historically, because it is so forcefully and rigidly conditioned, female subjectivity is actually more malleable and volatile. The role reversal she discusses strikes at the crux of the violence Mayer's exposes in the division between subject and object.

Viewed in the light of another two decades of work, it seems as though it's not just the conditioning of female subjectivity by the oedipal and misogynist apparatuses of post-fordist capitalism in itself - that's only one sick turn in Mayer's puzzle box. The artist has a far more fundamental aggress, one that we find throughout some of modernity's most radical literature and philosophy - specifically, that the individuation that comes with being called human is a prime and perpetual psychological trauma. In recent years, Mayer has continued this thread of female subjects, making a series

dedicated to Lady Gaga – the decade's populist icon for female body modification. With her penchant for cybernetic prosthesis, Gaga builds on Mayer's female characters who are, in regard to Graw's interpretation, phallicized by cyborg technology.

In her seminal work “The Powers Of Horror”, Bulgarian- French psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva discusses abjection in a fashion well-suited for forming a deeper interpretative framework for the gender and gore-based abjection of Mayer's work. Kristeva sees abjection as what lays beyond the symbolic/semiotic order of rationality, “safeguards” or “primers” of culture. She notes how traumatic the abject is to human experience since, “The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to 'I'.”ⁱⁱ

Mayer's work takes aim at the authority of individuality that is thrust upon one, forcing one to identify and classify their bodies, and ultimately stifle and limit their freedom. While the initial focus of Mayer's female subjects lend themselves to Graw's reading of the instability of feminine subjectivity, when viewed in regard to his other works, one can see that Mayer's works oppose what is truly perverse - the romantic staging of subjectivity and individuation, from the single artist creating their unique works and out and onto humanity as a whole.

HJM: Anti

In 2010, Mayer began making small square paintings. Usually on black canvas, sometimes on tacky black velvet, they are painfully inept works made through spraying a stencil or slowly and thinly dripping out texts. Sometimes featuring a crude cartoon rat or a vague cross, the series repeats the same two phrases over and over - 'Anti' and 'No Soul'.

As a cryptic, undead landscape, Mayer's oeuvre has another focus – it's also populated by a thin string of Hollywood's more cultish characters. Of them all, there are two in particular that most evidently enlarge Graw's framework for how subjectivity is reified in late capitalism what it means for Mayer, they are the extra-dimensional 'cenobite' from Clive Barker's horror sage “Hellraiser” (1987) and the recurring spaghetti-western stereotype - 'the man with no name' – most commonly known now for Clint Eastwood's portrayal of this archetype in The Dollars Trilogy (1964-1966). These are cinematic subjects who are presented as not being subjects at all, having no memory, only the conviction that the world is determined and indifferent to human desire.

The fictional Lemarchand puzzle box - or Lament Configuration - is one of the most enchanting objects in contemporary horror. Created by a French toymaker in the 18th century, the box is

capable of forcing a 'schism' in time and space between our dimension and one of the many dimensions inhabited by the cenobites. Although there are many cenobites, Pinhead is certainly the most renowned among Fangoria fans. His role lays somewhere between being one a soul harvester and a director of a theatre of hellish sado-masochism. In *Hellraiser II* (1988), it's revealed that Pinhead was once human. He was a military officer known as Elliot Spencer who suffered greatly from post- traumatic stress disorder and survivor guilt upon returning to England after the war. Having 'lost his faith in humanity', Spencer comes across the puzzle box and opens it, making the horrific metamorphoses into a cenobite and losing his previous consciousness in the process.

The man with no name is an western favorite and Mayer's portraits of Franco Nero and Clint Eastwood are iconic for this genre-character. In all the films, the man is given a name that he is known by – Joe, Blondie, or Django – but his past remains in the plot; he is without content. In each of the roles where Eastwood plays the character, his involvement in the ultimately moral work, whose means is naturally incredibly bloody, is purely happenstance. Although for the man with no name money is always on the line, his involvement in the movie's events are presented as the result of him being lost - wandering through the American west driven only by an unknown chaos. Like *Hellraiser's* Pinhead, the man with no name acts as an impersonal and abyssal center that coldly decimates human desire.

It was Deleuze and Guattari who most strongly made the claim that while the 19th century industrial capitalism might've conditioned the *idée-fixe* of the century's greatest psychopaths, that 20th century late capitalism was a breeding ground for schizophrenia. As technocratic capitalist society cordons all planetary life, the human mind reacts, splintering and fissuring in effort to break free from the horror of fascistic rationality being imposed on the mind. The two theorists seated their claim artistically in the life and writings of Antonin Artaud and Georges Bataille among others, and it is here that they sought to supplant the aged psychoanalysis with what they called schizoanalysis. Their new therapeutic model was not there to create cures, but rather it saw schizophrenia as a tool to escape the growing mental prison capitalism foisted upon one – mental 'normalcy' is instituted on humans and schizophrenia has much to reveal about the psychological implications of hegemony of rationalism.

Mayer's 'ill-minded' characters are as Pinhead describes himself, “explorers in the further regions of experiences, demons to some, angels to others.” They're capable of liminal self-preservation between being a subject and object, nullifying the terms. Mayer looks to bring the dichotomy Graw pinpoints between the passive object and the viewing male subject to a bloody halt. Beyond gender, what Mayer finds abject, is the simple Cartesian distinction between subject and object that forms

the kernel of rational thought.

HJM: End Game

Over three decades, Mayer's work suggests that to resist becoming oedipal capitalism's human waste is futile. One can only run to the bathroom and hope that their mind has enough time to pry open and squeeze out that small dingy bathroom window and survive the long drop into a new and unknown world. Having his particular approach to late capitalism termed as 'accelerationism', the British philosopher Nick Land has suggested that by escalating capitalism's processes, its fundamental contradictions will be exacerbated and eventually bring the entire system toward an early grave and with it theoretically rationality as its practiced. Land notes that in the process, schizophrenia should pour forth from every new rift in capitalist reality; he writes, "Schizophrenia creeps out of every box eventually, because 'there is no schizophrenic specificity or entity, schizophrenia is the universe of productive and reproductive desiring machines, universal primary production.' It is not merely that schizophrenia is pre- anthropoid. Schizophrenia is pre- mammalian, pre-zoological, pre-biological ... It is for those trapped in a constrictive sanity to terminate this regression." iii

Mayer's works are based in a science fiction world that viewers only see in slices – an alternate reality to our own. It's governed by all that's irrational and tears away from identification and visual cognition, its denizens are plagued by mutilation, sex, gore, and scopophilia. Over decades, Mayer has playfully and slyly worked a calculated representation of the horror wrought by - in Nietzschean terms - being all too human. Writing contemporaneously on humanity's insignificance in the cosmos, Eugene Thacker has written at great length on horror – from the history of demons to contemporary occultism. In one of his texts on the varying metaphysical meanings of the term 'black metal', he introduces a term that is quite apt for characterizing Mayer's work – Cosmic Pessimism. Writing to define the term, Thacker explains, "the view of Cosmic Pessimism is strange mysticism of the world-without-us, a hermeticism of the abyss, a noumenal occultism. It is the difficult thought of the world as absolutely unhuman, and indifferent to the hopes, desires, and struggles of human individuals and groups." iv

In Mayer's paintings, figures suffer from the freedom granted by not having any subjectivity. Each is compelled to their state by knowing that the cosmos, in its unconscionable age, will indiscriminately and imminently destroy all of humanity. From his celebrities, his porn starlets, the man with no name, and his fascination with the otherworldly to his refusal of making work that can be consistently identified as his own, all of it smacks of Mayer's overarching conceptual aim to burrow

out a new escapism – to find a mode of autonomous expression left laying in the crypt below subjectivity.

i Graw, Isabelle, "Exchanges in Societies of Participation". Munich: Kunstraum Daxer. 1992.

Published for Hans-Joerg Mayer's exhibition at Kunstraum Daxer.

ii Kristeva, Julia. The Power Of Horrors. New York: Columbia University Press. 1982.

iii Land, Nick. Ray Brassier and Rob Mackay, eds. Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007. Coventry: Urbanomic Press. 2011.

iv Thacker, Eugene. In The Dust Of This Planet. Winchester, UK: Zone Books. 2010.

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