

# ALCHEMY AND MERMAIDS IN CONTEMPORARY POLAND: *THE LURE*

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## **Abstract:**

*What kind of stories would mythological creatures tell on entering the world of the confused European East in search of identity at about the time of the collapse of communism? The mix of boring and gloomy everyday life and the escapist flights to musical performances and nightclub entertainments bred a tension which remained unresolved for humans feeling more and more like strangers on earth, so much estranged from their human essence as to become prey to the hybrid creatures of the deep. The two mermaids, who step onto the shore and become singers in a nightclub, are ironically called Silver and Golden. Inspired by a fairy tale – Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* –, Robert Boleslo's screenplay for *The Lure*, a movie directed by Agnieszka Smoczyńska (2015), is actually playing upon esoteric plots and symbols, such as the alchemical wedding of the sun (gold) and the moon (silver), or their association with the philosopher's stone. Their singing is indeed fatal, luring humans into their death and losing their identity in the attempt to appropriate human form and relationships.*

**Keywords:** multispecies ethnography; object philosophy; posthumanism; becoming-animal; becoming human.

Signed by Stefan Helmreich, from the first-ranking academic institution in the world, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and by S. Eben Kirksey from the City University of New York Graduate Center, an article published by *Cultural Anthropology* (Vol. 25, Issue 4. 545–576) in 2010 made official the birth of a “new genre of writing and mode of research”: multispecies ethnography. From the margins of anthropological inquiry, subhuman creatures which had only interested researchers as the environmental background of humanity's social worlds were now occupying centre stage: “animals, plants, fungi,

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and microbes once confined in anthropological accounts to the realm of zoe or 'bare life'—that which is killable—have started to appear alongside humans in the realm of bios, with legibly biographical and political lives [...]. Far from being only of biological concern, humans' entanglements with other species are studied so as to cast light on the way they "shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces." (Helmreich & Kirksey, 2010: 545).

This new branch of anthropology is not, however, completely new in the history of ideas. The entity as a thing perceived and conceptualised had already been considered an objective correlative of the intentional human subject by Washington Allston in his *Lecture on Art* (1850), which probably served as the source of T.S. Eliot's definition of poetic encoding in his celebrated essay on *Hamlet*. Object-oriented philosophy, of each entity related to anything else, is generally associated with Martin Heidegger's concept of *Geviert* (fourfold), which binds together all levels of being.

Less known but perfectly fitting in the context were the works of Vyacheslav Ivanov, a poet and theoretician of symbolism. His publications in the early twentieth century urged a return to pre-Socratic philosophy, which endowed elements with an ontogenetic function on a cosmic scale. His slogan, *ab realibus ad realiora* (from visible reality and through it to the more real reality of the same thing, inner and innermost.) His article, "Two Elements in Modern Symbolism," opposes the real symbol of a thing whose supersensual beauty and truth are revealed and the idealist symbol, the poet's whimsical meaning, enforced upon a thing. Poetry should be of a revelatory kind, awakening one to his/her connection with the world. He praises Nietzsche for the rediscovery of Dionysus, torn to pieces by the titans and resurrected, similar to Christ symbolised by the Fish. Earth and sky, mortals and divines, are reunited in a quatrain by Pindar about Dionysius, quoted by Ivanov, long before Martin Heidegger publicised *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1950).

Ignoring the etymology of "anthropology," ethnologists writing in the aftermath of what Donna Haraway called the "species turn" in anthropology blame man's "foolish exceptionalism", his claim to be the crowning of creation. The former hierarchies or chains of being are now deconstructed,

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entities being seen, not as fixed, but in perpetual becoming, emergence:

“‘Becomings’—new kinds of relations emerging from nonhierarchical alliances, symbiotic attachments, and the mingling of creative agents (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 241–242)—abound in this chronicle of the emergence of multispecies ethnography, and in the essays in this collection. ‘The idea of becoming transforms types into events, objects into actions’, writes contributor Celia Lowe (this issue).” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 546).

The burst picture of the anthropomorphic universe centred on humans literalises the human/ non-human connectedness, which once had only a symbolical meaning. There are no more odd, weird creatures inhabiting the elements. The creaturely world is just one amorphous animal body, which can be territorialised/ mapped out into provisional and quite unstable and vaguely defined species.

The borderline separating ontological layers of reality is commonly being subverted. Teaching has become a common scene, the distinction between species being, therefore, of a cultural rather than biological kind.

The failure of elemental worlds fusing into oneness on the ontological level is compensated by the generation of communicational channels and codes, as in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), a movie directed by Steven Spielberg. The contact between divines and mortals is realised on a piece of rock which resembles a gothic cathedral’s aspiration to heaven. It is created by inner ascensional forces of deep layers of the earth forcing their way upwards like humans’ aspiration to heaven. The divines are teachers, sending mortals a coded message in the form of a musical phrase with five tones, each tone being paired with one colour of the spectrum. The pentagon is also an esoteric symbol – the endless knot, two triangles which can be drawn ad infinitum without raising the hand from the paper. The musical phrase contains full tones, a major third, a perfect fifth and an octave. Light is decomposed into the spectre, while sounds are reminiscent, as it has been noticed, of a medieval *Dies Irae* but also the *Dies Irae* in Mozart’s *Requiem*. The day of wrath is the mortals’

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encounter with God. Sound and light, the breath of the Word and the light from which the universe was created, are staged for a new genesis. The inside of the cosmic ship is a space out of time, as the pilots who had disappeared come back at the same age. As far as the mortals are concerned, they cannot escape embodiment, the language they respond to the aliens being body language: Curwen Hand Signs.

In Guillermo Torres's *The Shape of Water* (2017), the laboratory janitor who has lost her voice because of maltreatment at an age she cannot remember is reduced to the subhuman condition precisely because of social violence. From an object philosophy perspective, Eliza, the janitor, and the watery creature tied in chains and kept under observation can only receive an identity through mutual recognition. Eliza, too, is reduced to body language; she can only communicate through signs. In a scene which allegorises the Eucharist

Eliza shows an egg to the creature, which is the amorphous element coming into shape, accompanying her gesture by the corresponding sign in the alphabet of the dumb. The missing voice contradicts the traditional logocentric hierarchy with Logos/speech/ voice at the top. As well as in object philosophy, the real thing is no longer transcendent by some abstraction, concept, or divine essence. The form (the creature's or Eliza's obsession with shoes which place her on earth through the mediation of a mould, a pattern) is a process of individuation through recognition of self in an embodied otherness.

The revolution effected by loosening boundaries between species can be fully realised, both in the life sciences and within the context of culture, through comparison between humanism, which reached its peak in the Renaissance and the posthuman age.

Cornelius Agrippa, in *De Occulta Philosophia* (Ch. 1), draws a picture of the universe in which are deployed the three levels of being governed by divinity:

“Seeing there is a Three-fold World—Elementary, Celestial and Intellectual—and every inferior is governed by its superior, and receiveth the influence of the virtues thereof, so that the very Original and Chief Worker of all doth by angels, the heavens, stars, elements, animals, plants, metals and stones convey from Himself the virtues of His

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Omnipotency upon us, for whose service He made and created all these things: Wise men conceive it no way irrational that it should be possible for us to ascend by the same degrees through each World, to the same very original World itself, the Maker of all things and First Cause, from whence all things are and proceed." (Agrippa).

The liberation of the spirit/ Intellect from the elementary is the alchemist's work, a prototypical figure being Shakespeare's Prospero, who releases Ariel (the god Air in Jewish demonology) from the pine wherein Sicorex, the witch practising black magic over the elements, had imprisoned him.

The colour progression in alchemy (*Nigredo, albedo, citrinitas, rubedo*, corresponding to earth, water, air, and sun) usually accompanies the spirit's ascension from unredeemable matter to self-revelation. Here are some examples of Shakespeare's alchemic tropism:

- ❖ "Cleopatra rising to air and fire and leaving earth and water for a "baser life" as she emancipates herself from a sensualist lover to a Roman devotee. Antony: a dolphin rising above the element he is in.
- ❖ Caliban rising from "earth" to the disciple of Prospero, the white magician, redeemer and artist. Taken for a fish by false apostles (clowns).
- ❖ The poet of the sonnets is torn between the air and fire of the fair youth (a "marriage of true minds") and the baser earth of the Dark Lady. His rejection of sensualist love makes him a centaur figure, in whom a human mind has been grafted on the fleshly body, assuming control over his inferior self.

The ladder of alchemical and colour progression is evoked, especially when the human and the non-human worlds know intersections. For instance, in Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid*, about a mermaid falling in love with a young man, a Christian drama of elementary nature is measured against the yardstick of humans' ceremonial religion:

"Far out in the sea, the water is as blue as the petals of the loveliest cornflowers and as clear as the clearest glass. However, it is very deep, more profound than any anchor

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cable can reach, and many church towers would have to be put one on top of another to reach from the bottom out of the water. Down there live the sea people". (Andersen 1930: web).

Robert Bolesto rewrote Andersen's *Little Mermaid* in a screenplay for Agnieszka Smoczyńska's 2015 movie, *The Lure*. The fairy tale is turned upside down:

- ❖ "The mermaids no longer wish for a soul but to be taken by a mortal out of the water and enjoy the life of a nightclub with metal band music.
- ❖ The change does not concern the soul but the body, in exchange for which Silver (one of the mermaids) gives up on her voice – a gift of Orpheus, the sirens' patron".

Silver is *argentum vitae*, the *albedo* which precedes *rubedo*; the last phase of the alchemical process ends with the emergence of *lapis*, the philosopher's stone. The alchemical wedding of gold and silver (the sun and the moon) is unmistakably alluded to through the protagonists' names. Contrary to expectations, Golden is the one who stays alive and kills men without remorse. She reveals the true nature of the fabulous hybrid creature, unlike the Andersen predecessor who chose the path to virtue being rewarded with a soul.

Bolesto's mermaids are caught between two equally disappointing and soulless worlds: the elementary water and the debauchery of cheap and vicious life in Polish nightclubs of the suffocating '80s. Coming to the shore and joining man's world brings no enlightenment or redemption. The elementary nature of the mermaids is suggested by their moody and monotonous lyrics, of very few words, hypnotically repeated: *The city will tell us/ what it is we lack/ The city will tell us/ what is it we lack*. They are not given a chance to become human: Silver is facing a choice whose both alternatives maintain her imprisoned in the elements or beastliness: she will either eat her unfaithful lover or turn to sea foam. There is no Prospero, no teacher, and no redeemer. Mietek will not unite with her so that they might become "the world's first four-handed bass player". On the contrary, she is rejected by the boy she falls in love with in brutally straightforward words: "but to

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me you'll always be/ a fish, an animal./ I can't do this,/ as much as I'd like to”.

Agnieszka Smoczyńska declared in an interview that the mermaids who want to swim to Paris or America resemble East-European migrants, humiliated, abused, and frustrated in their attempt to accede to a better life. In this way, her movie echoes Jacques Tourneur's 1942 movie, *Cat People*, about a Serbian fashion illustrator who turns into a man-eating panther if she is sexually aroused. The asexual mermaids figure in the same plot of the impossible love bond between humans and non-humans, a bond which has nothing spiritual about it.

The Renaissance man had represented himself, as Hamlet says, as the paragon of creation. Elemental life expected the man to redeem it, to give it a soul. The bleak vision of a posthuman world reverses the process: whereas man descends to the status of a “jungle god”, *aqua vitae* is anthropomorphised, gets into shape and is invested with a soul.

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