



# Toxicity and the Equidistance of Biotechnology and Biopolitics

Dr. Melentie Pandilovski

Video Pool Media Arts Centre  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
vpdirector@videopool.org

## Abstract

The paper looks into how “Toxicity” entrenches itself into what Phenomenology sees as the co-constitution of society and technology. The cultural deciphering of the toxic societal terrain resonates with current socio-economic global transformations. The topic of toxicity reconstructs the current environmental situation and socio-political contexts by looking into modes of contemporary cultural and technological production. Biopolitics maintains an extended role today by shaping life and attaining central role in society. It adds a complexity of layers that allows radical reconstruction of relations between politics and nature, allowing for a reassessment of how we look at life today. The trajectory of development of Biopolitics is altered, for life appears not to be what we have originally assumed that it was, and therefore its regulation cannot continue under previously granted premises. The dualities of power and right, sovereignty and law, do not leave the contemporary Biopolitical discourses for a minute. The Bio-political characteristics of Toxicity are seen by some in line with eugenics, as the toxins will most certainly lead to sterility of the indigenous population, and are to be seen in correlation with the degenerative pathology of the prevailing illnesses such as alcoholism, STDs, obesity, diabetes, cancer, etc.

## Keywords

Toxicity; biotechnology; biopolitics; Foucault; Heidegger; bio art; phenomenology; Enframing; bio-society; apparatus

The idea of *Toxicity*, in its theoretical and practical results, entrenches itself into the standard phenomenological understanding of the co-constitution of society and technology. The cultural deciphering of the toxic social terrain resonates with current socio-economic global transformations. The topic of toxicity reconstructs not only the current environmental situation, but also sociopolitical contexts by looking into modes of contemporary cultural and technological production, the extraction of minerals, toxic waste, local and international policies, community-based responses and processes of production, consumption and disposal.

We are continually subjected to processes whose full impact is hard to comprehend; the phenomenological approach allows us to reveal these processes. The Heideggerian *Dinge* (Thing) contains within itself the possibility of gathering together the contents of the universe, *toxins* included. Relations between Things become crucial, acquiring different features depending on the contexts of

where and how they are situated. The discourses of biotechnology are evolving, showing us that their latest theoretical and practical developments have a potential to cause a tectonic shift in our society and culture, wherein we experience the world at the intersection of the engineered and the biological. *Toxicity* appears precisely at this intersection, and its biopolitical modes must be understood. Marshall McLuhan noted that the creation of the technological world has created a neural exoskeleton. I maintain that this skeleton has become tainted by Toxicity in numerous ways, from the bioenvironmental to the info-financial.

The extended role of biopolitics today focuses on the crucial question of how biotechnology shapes life and comes to assume a central role in society. Biotechnology, through its complexity, radically reconstructs the relations between politics and nature, allowing for a reassessment of how we look at life today. Under biotechnological pressures, the regulation of life cannot continue under the premises of what had been previously taken for granted. The dualities of power and right, sovereignty and law, do not leave biopolitics for a minute. Additionally, biotechnology generates its own internal conflicts (e.g., Monstanto vs. Dupont in regard to GMO seed patenting.) We become witnesses of a process in which the state control of the biological is increasingly being ceded to biotech companies. In Michel Foucault’s words: *For capitalist society it is the biological that is important before everything else; the biological, the somatic, the corporeal. The body is a biopolitical reality, medicine is a biopolitical strategy.*

Life, politics and economics intersect at such speeds in the globally-connected society that a novel biopolitical model is emerging which alters this society’s operational functions. I refer here to the social and political functions of the Biotech Revolution. The technological and psychosomatic constitute the two poles in this emerging biopolitical discourse. At the centre of this discourse is the notion that *life* can now be moulded as we see fit, enabled by biotechnology. Biopolitics is therefore able to control life by taking it out of the *natural domain*, reshuffling it at will and subsequently using it in a functional or structural form, thereby *freeing life* from nature. This intertwining of nature and technology makes the schematic of biopolitics increasingly complex. The question of articulating sovereignty no longer depends on the suppression of life; our understanding of life and death has altered. Biopower, embedded in biopolitics, now concerns itself with the mere reshuffling of biological units of data. We have moved a step closer to

the fulfillment of Foucault's prophesy about the extension of biopower: *the excess of biopower appears when it becomes technologically and politically possible for man not only to manage life but also to make it proliferate, to create living matter, to build the monster, and ultimately to build viruses that cannot be controlled and that are universally destructive. This formidable extension of biopower, unlike what I was saying about atomic power, will put it beyond human sovereignty.* Thus, we have effectively banned experiments with plutonium, but we continue to be quite liberal with the experimentation, research and use of biotechnology.

In order to contemplate fully the notions of life, flesh and the body, we must now surpass the Heideggerian dichotomy between existence and life. We are witnesses and participants in the creation of the Biopolitical Apparatus in all of its paraphernalia. And when we speak about this Apparatus, we should remind ourselves of Vilém Flusser's remark that apparatuses are based on technical and political programs which are highly ideological and always biased. There is no value-free technology. And indeed, we can see that biopolitical conflicts are accelerating in both the real and virtual worlds among governments, NGOs and corporations over genetic-technological practices, stem cell research, bioethics and bio-patenting. Public engagement in biotechnology can be seen in the increasing interest in DNA profiling, personal genomics, biodata gathering and, most recently, genetic social networking. One of the possible outcomes of this arrangement is the creation of a genetically based value system. Another outcome may be the development of appealing forms of neo-eugenics and the creation of new utopian communities. Biology has a long history of being politicized, but we must admit that the biotechnological changes in the past two decades are indeed profound. *Historically, all technological revolutions have resulted in an alteration of the political, social and economic spectrums of society. We find ourselves as a society facing radical changes in power relationships in the local and international domains.* This biopolitical shift registers at the economic (bio-capitalism) and cultural (bio-culture, bioart) levels. This shift, generated by the Biotech Revolution, configures the biological as political and economic. *The biological as political* includes notions of human rights, the changing and increasingly toxified environment and bioterrorism. *The biological as economic* sees bio-capitalism as the latest stage of capital's development, but also discloses a certain negation of profit-oriented values and the necessity of growth, thereby holding an ambivalent ethical position regarding capitalist production values.

As contemporary biopolitical discourses intersect in the re-contextualization of the relations between state apparatuses, scientific protocols and cultural systems, the consequences of the Biotech Revolution become apparent in the political and economic spectrum. These relations coalesce in the construction of a global Biopolitical Apparatus, encompassing new vectors of power with regard to social, political, economic and administrative mechanisms, as well

as knowledge structures which have the capacity to create, maintain or destroy contemporary society. Biotechnology thus enables a certain neo-politicization by putting into motion control mechanisms based on a coding system, altering the dynamics between state and individual and resulting in an increasingly programmable and disciplined society. This up and coming Biotech era has the potential of inaugurating a very different constellation of political visions and social visions just as the Industrial era did. The current debate over cloning human embryos and stem cell research marks the beginning of the new biopolitics.

Félix Guattari taxonomizes the apparatuses of subjectification in three ways: as *pathways of power, pathways of knowledge and pathways of self-transformation.* The relations between these three pathways determines how society is established and whether the Biotech Revolution will create the conditions for new *existential territories* for humanity, rather than replicate and continue present alienation systems. I am of the opinion that in order for the pathways of self-transformation to influence the pathways of knowledge and power, we will have to embrace collectively the idea of *biopolitical and biotechnological responsibility*, which will assist us in further developing the governmentality of *bio-society* according to the theoretical and practical pathways of self-transformation.

The overall implications of technology are exemplified in the everyday relations that technology establishes. The disclosure of the world through technology also is a disguise of these relations, relations that can, however, be unconcealed. In "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger noted that the essential unfolding of technology harbours within itself what is least expected, the possible rise of a saving power. Where does this saving power of technology reside? Will salvation be found in art and activism, that is, strategies of resistance? Perhaps the Biotech Age will allow us to witness what Heidegger called the second beginning of thinking, the meeting of the world in historical time-space, and perhaps this space can be built only in art.

At the same time, artistic and cultural research into biotechnology has questioned established philosophical systems, ethical beliefs and cultural practices by proposing new ways of looking at life and society, as artists, critics and theorists navigate the maze of the global Biopolitical Apparatus. How art and technology interrelate, how this interrelation changes in the cultural, sociopolitical and ecological landscape and how biotechnology infiltrates into everyday life are important research areas. Artistic responses have included examining biopolitical conflicts in the real and virtual worlds; pollution; corporeality and somatic biopolitics; energy control, fuel material and alternative energy sources; the inheritance and programmability of life; the causes and consequences of environmental changes; environmental sustainability; micro and macro-ecologies; life, empathy and questions of ownership; GM products; death and appearance; and the ethical implications of working with biological media in an art context.

Practical strategies of resistance such as these need to

address structures of knowledge in order to achieve broader ethical and philosophical concerns concerning biotechnology; they must also look into what Heidegger would have called the Biotechnological *Gestell* (Enframing) of everyday life and address the changes that Toxicity causes in the cultural, sociopolitical and ecological landscape. Of course, those concerned with Toxicity must be aware that this Enframing has infiltrated deeply into the system, aided by lobby groups mediating between the biotech cartels and various governments. Any potential resistance must engage in a robust imposition into mass media channels and make periodic feedback analysis to assess its progress. Phenomenology's meta-social function is necessary for this. In particular, an analysis of the *natural attitude* must be implemented. The phenomenological investigation of the biopolitical must look into element of reflexive interplay between biotech programmers' standards (content development) and the lifeworlds of actual people – the interplay in which new identities are forged. After all, Heidegger tells us that Enframing is *destining* from which the *essence of all history is determined*. Enframing is the essence of modern technology because, for Heidegger, technology is rooted in *tēchne*: it is a means for sourcing true forms and ideas that exist prior to their phenomenal appearance. Heidegger's concept of Enframing can be deciphered today using Eugene Thacker's triumverate of *encoding, recoding and decoding*, as today the dissemination of biological data through information networks either on demand or out of necessity creates a new situation in which the biological is seen as a digitally packaged commodity.

In conclusion, in order to track the changes brought about by the Biotech Revolution, we must utilize both phenomenology and biopolitics. Phenomenologically speaking, the social order and reality of interactions between institutions and individuals are constructions. Society is a fragile construction. It is consciousness that determines the actions of all entities. There is no alternative but creativity in this process, and therefore human beings must act as creative agents in the construction of their social worlds. It is necessary to assert meaning in a process which would otherwise seem chaotic.

As far as biopolitics is concerned, the biotechnological changes that our civilization is witnessing are profound, and as all technological revolutions throughout history have resulted in significant changes in the political, social and economic levels of society, so we find ourselves collectively facing radical alterations in local and international power relations. Thus, we are in a different situation than the one predicted by Foucault, as biopolitics today begins to realize that biotechnology potentially allows for a further emancipation of the human being in terms of its self-understanding, its own genetic make-up, all of its flaws and virtues. The constant advances in biotechnology, and we can note the Human Genome Project as a sign of this advancement, signify a shift in the balance of power in favour of a society that can select and design desirable life-forms in advance.

Thacker reminds us that biotechnology takes place on a

global level, be it in terms of exchanging biological information, controlling epidemics, deterring biological attacks or standardizing intellectual property laws. Importantly, the Biopolitical Apparatus suggests novel blueprints of power allocation in the domain of the governance over life. Thus, any interpretation of biopolitics, in light of these new developments, must take into account how biopolitical discourses have changed in terms of *the biological as political* and *the biological as economic*. This necessitates the articulation of *Biotechnological Responsibility* and the development of *Modes of Governmentality for Bio-Society*. This future bio-society could take upon itself a variety of roles including the role of *hegemon*, and might develop new modes for *governance, economic domination* and the *repositioning of our relationship towards nature*. However, alongside the potentially negative consequences of the Biopolitical Apparatus, we must also consider a more humane role, indicated by Giorgio Agamben in his *What is an Apparatus?*, wherein we learn that at the heart of friendship, philosophy and politics lies the same experience: the shared sensation of being.

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## Author Bibliography

Dr. Melentje Pandilovski is an art historian, theorist, curator, and critic.

He has curated more than 150 exhibitions and organized numerous symposia, conferences, and workshops, in Europe, Australia, and Canada, such as: SEAFair (Skopje Electronic Art Fair) 1997-2011; "Marshall McLuhan & Vilém Flusser Communication & Aesthetics Theories Revisited" in Winnipeg in 2012; "Biotech Art – Revisited" in Adelaide in 2009.

His research deals with examining the links between art, science and consciousness. He was Consultant Editor of *Artlink's* "Bio Art: Life in the Anthropocene" (2014), Editor of *Energy, Biopolitics, Resistance Strategies and Cultural Subversion* (2012), *The Apparatus of Life and Death* (2012), *Art in the Biotech Era* (2008). His publications include: "How

biotechnology and society co-constitute each other”, *Technoetic Arts Journal*, 2012; "On Modes of Consciousness(es) and Electronic Culture", In *Glimpse, Phenomenology and Media*, 2000. Contributor to ISEA (Chicago 1997, Liverpool/Manchester 1998, Singapore 2008, Istanbul 2011).