

# Zoe in Comic Books

## Post-human Poetics in LNRZ

**Valentina Gamberi**

*Independent Researcher*

younganthropologist87@gmail.com

LNRZ. 2014. *Golem*. Milano: Bao Publishing. 280 pp. € 25.00. ISBN 978-88-6543-257-0

LNRZ. 2015. *Astrogamma*. Milano: Bao Publishing. 160 pp. € 23.00. ISBN 978-88-6543-528-1

This review examines two graphic novels realised by the Italian visual artist LNRZ (aka Lorenzo Ceccotti), namely *Golem* (LNRZ 2014) and *Astrogamma* (LNRZ 2015). These two works share several affinities, so that we can determine a specific poetics of LNRZ. I identify this poetics with what Bennett calls “vibrant matter”, namely the creative spontaneity of the non-human in acting “as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett 2010, VIII). This new conceptualisation of the non-human is a direct derivation of the notion of nature as conceived in ancient times. In fact, the word nature derives from the Latin *nascor*, “to live”, “to be born”, which originates from a Greek verb meaning the vegetative, and so nature would coincide with a meaningful life without thought, something which is generated from its interior but is opposed to what is human, specifically language and intellectual activity (Merleau-Ponty [1956] 2003, 3).

It is precisely the non-constructed feature of nature which would lead one to think of it as an aprioristic given, a primordial origin which incorporates what is established and instituted (Merleau-Ponty [1956] 2003, 4). Accordingly, nature would be conceived of as a permanent entity, infinitely producing (Merleau-Ponty [1956] 2003, 15). Therefore, nature is, at the same time, an object and a subject, a produced matter and a producer.

Nature is indeed an enigma because it is not just an object in front of which the subject was born, and this is true both at the individual and at the social

and historical levels. [...] Nature shows this ambiguity: at the same time it is stratified and is presented as an original that was already here before any stratification. As such it disorients objective thought, as it constitutes the immemorial past that appears at each new moment, the “here and now” of a past that has never been present. It is an involuntary memory, even more radical than that of the body, because it is a memory of Being. If then one still wants to admit that nature exists and has existed apart from being known by a knowing subject, one must recognize a conceptual statute for this notion that is different from that of being-subject and of being-object, a third term which is pre-objective and pre-subjective. Nature is not merely a product because it is at the same time a producer. (Vanzago 2014, 34)

Strictly intertwined with the ambiguity of nature as a product and a producer, there are its features of agency and passivity, *naturans* and *naturata*.

Though nature can refer to a stable substrate of brute matter, the term has also signaled generativity, fecundity, Isis or Aphrodite, or the “Spring” movement of Antonio Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*. This creativity can be purposive or not. The contrast between nature as brute or purposive matter and nature as generativity is nicely captured by the distinction, key to Baruch Spinoza’s *Ethics*, between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*. *Natura naturata* is passive matter organized into an eternal order of Creation, *natura naturans* is the uncaused causality that ceaselessly generates new forms. (Bennett 2010, 117)

The main consequence of this original meaning of nature is a new type of ontology where the hierarchical distinction between the non-human and the human is transcended in favour of a horizontal process of becoming within an *Umwelt* or environment. The aim of this review is to indentify the expressive means by which LRNZ reflects upon this new type of ontology, by advocating a particular post-human ethics.

The link between LRNZ’s poetics and a “vibrant matter” is explicit in the title of the first graphic novel. In fact, “The word ‘golem’ appears once in the *Tanakh* in Psalm 139:16 as the Hebrew *Gol’mi*, which means (my) unshaped outline or ‘matter’ without form” (Weiner 2011, 53), then LRNZ alludes to a protean capacity of transformation. The story is centred around two different perspectives of materiality. On the one hand, the futuristic society in which the story is set, that of “Eurasia” ruled over by “four sovereigns” (with the implicit symbology of the four elements), is based upon a capitalistic ideology, where things are consumed and continually substituted and which controls the citizens and the urban environment<sup>1</sup> through the concepts of purchasing and possession by substituting

---

<sup>1</sup> For instance, in a scene there are two nurses who tell a dying man that it is forbidden to die in public. In a bigger caption, we see the two protagonists of the story, Steno

the citizens' sense of responsibility with a rapacious need for consumption. On the other hand, we have an anarchic community, the *shorai*, established in order to preserve the invention of the nanomachine G, the Golem of the story or the essence of self-production. Created by the father of the young protagonist, Steno, this machine is a particle which recombines matter on a molecular level just by absorbing water and light. As the four sovereigns of Eurasia declare, the nanomachine G destroys the bases of capitalism. So, put differently, we have a society regulated by the dissipation of matter and a revolutionary group that claims matter's infinite productivity. Matter, in LNRZ's narration, becomes a huge organism, characterised by a hybrid and continually changing form. This is particularly clear in *Astrogamma* (LNRZ 2015), where nature's power and energy initially invest insects, which form a gigantic fetus and then something in between a super-human and an ambiguous conglomerate. This analogy between what is made and what grows recalls Ingold's reflection on growing and making and, more generally, on materiality (Ingold 2000, 2007, 2013; Ingold and Hallam 2014). Ingold advocates a kind of ontology where artefacts coincide with organisms. He stresses the importance of the process of becoming, of things as forces, rather than of the forces *of* things, of agency and life *contained in* organisms and things. According to his view, then, the distinction between living beings and artefacts is transcended in favour of the horizontal relationships between them and the surrounding environment. This last consideration is particularly true for LNRZ's graphic novels, especially when we examine the relationships between the characters.

LNRZ, in the foreword of *Golem* (LNRZ 2014), declares that the entire work can be considered as an alchemical metaphor. It is not coincidental, then, if the graphic novel, as well as in *Astrogamma* (LNRZ 2015), insists on the symbology related to adolescence, as the age of a rite of passage between infancy and adulthood. For instance, the main characters of the story, Steno and Rosabella, are portrayed as androgynous as opposed to the hypersexualisation of their classmates. A type of initiation which is reproduced on an explicit level when Steno is introduced to the community of the shorai. Here, he discovers that the shorai cook on their own and read real books, things that, in the Eurasian society, have been substituted by smart technology which replaces the body's functionality. Then, self-production is also a way of phenomenologically repossessing the body. Some scenes of the graphic novel represent images that are disjointed from the main narration, probably Steno's visions during dream. In these

---

and Rosabella, staring with surprise at a flower, grown in a corner of a concrete building. Even biological existence, then, is subordinated to the laws of consumerism.

scenes, the bond with the body is particularly evocative: we see the reflection in water of a screaming, anthropomorphic body. In another scene, we see two eyes glaring at us in the darkness. Because of the substantial confusion between internal, body sensations and external appearances, those scenes remind me of Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty defines the osmosis or fusion between body's internal mechanisms and external perceived things as flesh, namely when the perceiving body "sees itself, touches itself seeing and touching the things" (Merleau-Ponty [1964] 1968, 146), thus determining a collapse between bodily sensations and the perceiving body. The body grasping a rough thing becomes the sense of the rough, following "a magic pact" (Merleau-Ponty [1964] 1968, 146) between the perceived things and the perceiving body, so that things use the body's surface in order to impress themselves. In this operation, perception is organised and not left to chaos: "The flesh (or the world or my own) is not contingency, chaos, but a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself" (Merleau-Ponty [1964] 1968, 146). The carnal pictures in *Golem*, therefore, are different aspects of the creative flux of becoming and making of the Golem nanomachine or, in other words, of "vibrant matter".

LRNZ does not limit his art work to a carnal depiction of body, but he also describes the relational dynamic occurring within the "vibrant matter". In *Golem* (LRNZ 2014), the nanomachine G is connected to Steno's feelings, so that it is activated when Steno suffers. In *Astrogamma* (LRNZ 2015), an elegant quotation from Leopardi's *Zibaldone* clarifies the fact that suffering is a relative condition. Clearly, the contact and hybridisation with otherness is what allows LRNZ's characters to emphasise with the suffering and feelings of the non-human. The idea that different actors form a unit because of their process of identification was firstly developed by the biologist Uexküll: "[...] an organism is what it is capable of becoming, insofar as it already is the other that it becomes in the harmonious relation" (Buchanan 2008, 34). However, in *Astrogamma* (LRNZ 2015) the "vibrant matter", in the final fight with the super-human Davide (a transmutation of the boy protagonist of the graphic novel), declares that feelings are the reasons why humans have failed in their attempt to impose themselves as a species: the power of the "vibrant matter" derives from the fact that it has no memory, no emotive ties. The strength of this "vibrant matter" coincides both with the capacity of fusing every living form and with contamination. If, on the one hand, this characteristic reflects the egalitarian relationships of the *Umwelt*, on the other hand, it reveals a destructive power.

We have seen in this review that LRNZ expresses a new type of ontology in his graphic novels, as elaborated within the last academic debate

on materiality and nature, with a post-human proposal for an egalitarian dialogue and transcending of the categories of human and non-human. As defined by Llored (2014, 117) in his analysis of Derrida's main argumentation in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, LNRZ's poetics is characterised by a "porosity" between nature/animality and culture/sovereignty.

## REFERENCES

- Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Buchanan, Brett. 2008. *Onto-Ethologies: the Animal Environment of Uexküll, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Ingold, Tim. 2000. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.
- . 2007. "Materials against Materiality". *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 (1): 1-16.
- . 2013. *Making. Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, Tim, and Elizabeth Hallam, eds. 2014. *Making and Growing. Anthropological Studies of Organisms and Artefacts*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Llored, Patrick. 2014. "Zoopolitics". *Substance* #134 43 (2): 115-23.
- LNRZ. 2014. *Golem*. Milano: Bao Publishing.
- LNRZ. 2015. *Astrogamma*. Milano: Bao Publishing.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1956) 2003. *Nature. Course Notes from the Collège de France*, translated by Robert Vallier. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- . (1964) 1968. *The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Vanzago, Luca. 2014. "The Problem of Nature between Philosophy and Science". *Discipline Filosofiche* XXIV (2), Special Issue on *Merleau-Ponty and the Natural Sciences*, edited by Luca Vanzago: 23-44.
- Weiner, Robert G. 2011. "Marvel Comics and the Golem Legend". *Shofar. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 29 (2): 50-72.