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Coexistent Perspectives

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De-constructing the human: Self, Identity and Other

‘Who wants to live forever?’ exploring the idea of the eternal life in transhumanism

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Introduction.

Transhumanism is defined in the Cambridge dictionary as ‘the theory that science and technology can help human beings develop beyond what is physically and mentally possible at the present time’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022)

Transhumanism as a concept was first used by Julian Huxley in 1957 in his essays ‘New Bottles for New Wine’ (Huxley, 1957) He discusses the future of humanity and how it might look by utilising science and technology we are able to develop and control our own evolution, by bringing all these things together we could create perfection.

The philosopher Max More went onto to further explain what transhumanism is in his essay Transhumanism: A Futurist Philosophy where he states:

Transhumanism is a class of philosophies that seek to guide us towards a posthuman condition. Transhumanism shares many elements of humanism, including a respect for reason and science, a commitment to progress, and a valuing of human (or transhuman) existence in this life rather than in some supernatural "afterlife". Transhumanism differs from humanism in recognizing and anticipating the radical alterations in the nature and possibilities of our lives resulting from various sciences and technologies such as neuroscience and neuropharmacology, life extension, nanotechnology, artificial ultra-intelligence, and space habitation, combined with a rational philosophy and value system. (More, 1990, p 1)

As humans we have always explored the idea of living forever, you only have to look at most religions that offer everlasting life but not as we know it, for example in Catholicism it’s believed your soul, the essence of you, will leave your body at the point of death and travel to some other worldly realm that no one can ever come back from. (Landy, T. 2015) My own view on this is that these religious beliefs of a promised after life, or rebirth stems from man’s inability to deal with the totality of death. In Frank Tipler’s’ book ‘The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead’ he suggests among other things that Theology is a branch of physics and the resurrection of the dead to eternal

life is possible (Tipler, 1995) whilst the idea of resurrection sounds biblical in Tipler's text we only have to consider the use of cardiopulmonary resuscitation known as CPR.

Developed in the 1960's by Dr. Kouwenhoven, Safar, and Jude, although there is a long history dating back to the 16th century where bellows were used to try and revive a person.

CPR training has been given to over 400 million people around the world, ordinary everyday people have the power to literally bring a person back from the dead. (American Heart Association 2018)

In today's world being dead is no longer at the point of your heart stopping or you can no longer breathe we have the technology to keep a person alive and give them chance for the body to repair itself with the aid of medicine and science.

We are fixated on staying young and prolonging our lives as long as possible with the advances in technology and the sciences over recent decades this is becoming a thing of science fact rather than fiction.

We are living in an era of the Anthropocene (National Geographic Society 2022) where we as humans are having a direct impact on our eco systems, not as a naturally evolving world but one where our technologies are directly impacting and damaging the very systems we need to survive.

In 1800 the global population of earth was 990 million people (United States Census 2022) by 1950 that had risen to 2.5 billion people and then doubled to 5 billion in just 37 years. (fig 1.)

The size of the world population over the last 12,000 years

Demographers expect rapid population growth to end by the end of the 21st century. The UN demographers expect a population of about 11 billion in 2100.

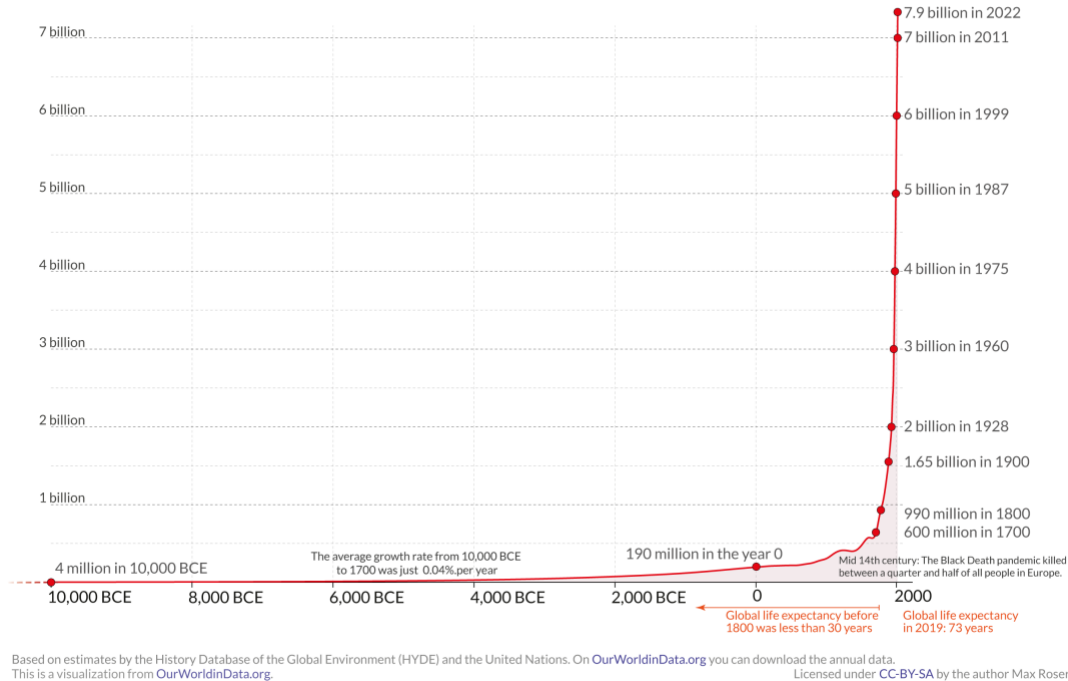


Fig.1

I was born in the middle of that era in 1965. However since then the rate at which the population is growing has slowed down and continues to slow, (fig 2.) On the 15th November 2022 the United Nations declared that the 8th billionth person was born somewhere on the planet. (Frayar, L. 2022)

Time for the world population to double

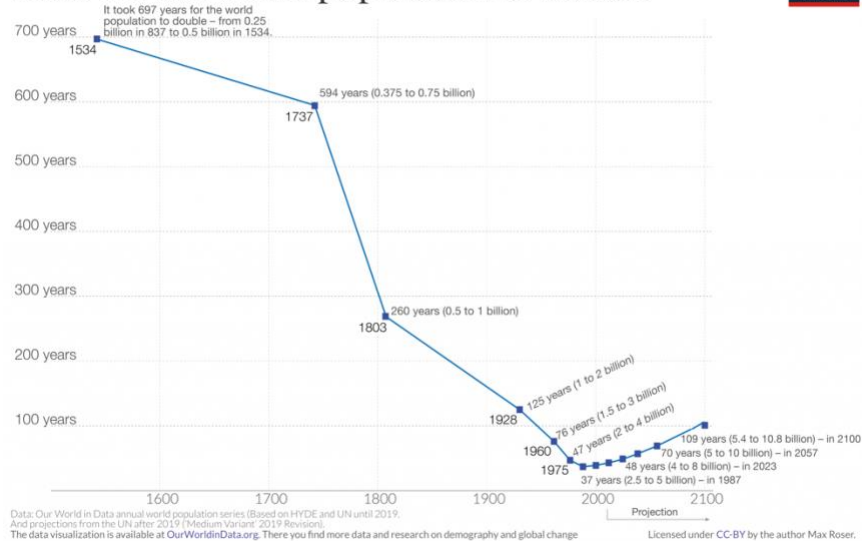


Fig 2

This huge increase in population has been down to the many advances in medicine, for the first time in our evolution we have the technology to control it.

In this essay I will explore the work of three artists, the first being Murray Ballard's project 'The prospect of immortality' and then David Vintiner & Gem Fletcher who have collaborated on their project 'I want to believe' the theme for both these artists is Transhumanism but they have captured images from a very different viewpoint, with Ballard exploring Cryonics and Vintiner & Fletcher capturing portraits of people utilising technology to enhance their own lives. I hope to analyse how each project represents the transhuman in both a positive and negative way. I will be writing this essay from my own viewpoint as a white western female, if my cultural history were different my research and writings would offer a different view point.

Chapter 1. Murray Ballard – The Prospect of Mortality

The title for Ballard's work was taken from a book of the same name written by Robert Ettinger a physics teacher living in the USA. Ettinger is credited as being the founder of cryonics. It started with a story he wrote in 1948 where a man could be frozen until such time as technology could revive them and allow them to live again. (Ettinger, R 1948)

He expected scientists to show an interest and perhaps explore this idea but no one did, so he researched this himself and published his findings on his 1962 book. The book laid out his idea that humans could be frozen and kept at a particular low temperature for an indefinite amount of time, ultimately when technology and science have developed to the stage where they could bring a frozen human back to life without causing irreparable damage to the cells. (Ettinger, 1962) He founded the Cryonics Institute and the Immortalist Society and following his death he became a patient at the Cryonics Institute in Michigan.

Ballard himself began researching Cryonics after reading a news article about a French Dr Raymond Martinot who had frozen the body of his wife following her death in 1984, after his own death in 2002 his son also preserved his father by freezing his body, later a problem with the freezer saw their temperatures raise to -20C from -65C, they were both later cremated. Ballard in his research stumbled across Alan Sinclair who lived a short distance away from him and became the first subject of his images. Sinclair had built a freezer facility in his garage and had arranged a training weekend for other like minded individuals he allowed Ballard to capture images of his world.



Fig. 3

Fig. 3 This is the first image I will discuss, it shows Sinclair's friend Frank on a training event, practising for a time when he could be called upon to help.

In Roland Barthes book *Camera Lucida* he explains that a photograph contains three elements the operator, the spectator and the spectrum. The operator being the photographer, the spectrum is the subject and the spectator being the viewer. He further explains that the spectrum has two parts firstly the 'Studium' which is based on cultural understanding that we as the spectator will better understand what the image is trying to tell us. The second part being the 'Punctum' in Latin it means 'a wound' something left by a sharp instrument that cuts through the image, he states "A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me.)" (Barthes, 1980. p27).

With this in mind I find the Punctum in this image is the smile I cannot see as its hidden behind a mask, everything about the image, the body language, the pose, the story behind the image tells me that the subject was comfortable with the photographer I am drawn to eyes and the face which is well lit and bright in comparison to the rest of the image and those eyes are smiling subtly out from the frame. When considering the Studium as Barthes explains we are using our own cultural references and understanding so on initial viewing of this photograph you could be forgiven for thinking that the image had been taken in recent years through the pandemic where the wearing of a blue surgical mask or any mask was the norm, the setting itself is outdoors in a garden outside a shed, there is nothing to suggest there is a medical reason for the mask, but indeed the image was taken in 2007 and was captured on a large format 5x4 camera.

The choice of camera is interesting in itself the resulting images have a different depth and richness to them which differs greatly to digital images. When Ballard chooses to use this medium to capture his images the whole process needs to be slowed down, it takes time to set up large format cameras and so for the photographer there is more time to develop a

conversation and understanding with the subject and of the subject, as a result it is clear that the image is deliberately staged and posed in this way by the photographer.

In Susan Sontag's collection of essays *On photography* 1977 she argues that photographs are not a true reflection of reality, they are left open to the viewers interpretation especially when the viewer does not have the history or story behind the image, she states "To take photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt." (Sontag, 1979. P34) in this sense what does this image tell us, without the knowledge of what Ballard's project is about as a whole and what he has set out to capture this image as a stand alone does not convey to the viewer the theme of Cryonics, it's a middle aged man, standing in his garden in the middle of the pandemic, maybe the shed was his place of solitude somewhere to disappear to from his partner or family or other persons sharing his home. If you compare it to this second image (Fig.4) which shows the Operating Room, at Alcor Life



Fig. 4

Extension Foundation, Scottsdale, Arizona, USA. Taken in October 2006 there is vast discourse between the two. Many people find the idea of freezing a person after death to be science fiction and unobtainable perhaps the idea of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein springs to mind when you are looking at Frank standing outside the shed but seen in a medical setting with white walls and modern machinery you are drawn to the idea that there is science and technology working together with educated people understanding the processes needed to make this a reality. We have found the science to freeze someone isn't it obvious that at some point in the future the ability to bring them back will be discovered.

However if you consider the writings of Max More and Natasha Vita-More in their book *The Transhumanist Reader* where they state:

‘Toward the end of this century, we will have largely defeated aging, and human biological immortality will be as normal as treating -pathogens with antibiotics and antivirals is now.

People will still die of aging-related diseases, but only after living extremely long health spans. More perhaps will die of accident, homicide, suicide, or -infection by that time’

(More, M. Vita-More, N.2013)

Cryonics could become a thing of the past, if we resolve the problem of dying from old age and all the debilitating conditions that comes with age and the diseases such as cancer and the like of which we cannot fully cure at this moment in time, the reasons many people turn to cryonics will no longer be relevant. As Nick Bostrom says in his *Letter from Utopia* (2008)

‘Death is not one but a multitude of assassins. Do you not see them? They are coming at you from every angle. Take aim at the causes of early death – infection, violence, malnutrition, heart failure, cancer. Train your biggest gun on aging, and fire. You must seize control of the biochemical processes in your body in order to vanquish, by and by, illness and senescence. In time, you will discover ways to move your mind to more durable media. Then continue to

improve the system, so that the risks of death and disease keep receding. Any death prior to the heat death of the universe is premature if your life is good' (Bostrom, 2008. P 4)

Chapter 2 - David Vintiner & Gem Fletcher 'I want to believe'

This project started back in 2012 where Fletcher had attended a series of debates held by a futurists group, where they spent time discussing what a posthuman world could look like. Fletcher had worked with Vintiner in the past and these debates sparked an interest in the world of Transhumanism. Together they started the 'I want to believe' project to capture portraits of individuals who were using technology to enhance their own lives. What started as 6 images initially has grown to around 80 portraits from around the world.

One of the first images they captured was of Rob Spence, (fig. 5) from Toronto, Canada. He has become known 'The Eyeborg' as a child he was playing with a shotgun owned by his grandfather Spence lost an eye as a child while playing with his grandfather's shotgun. Spence was interested in documentary filmmaking and inspired by shows like 'The Six Million Dollar Man' he was able to design a small video camera that would fit into the eye socket, it was connected wirelessly to a computer so although it did not provide him with sight, the video recorded was from his perspective.

In this first image it shows Spence wearing his false eye which has been fashioned to replicate the look of the 'The Terminator'



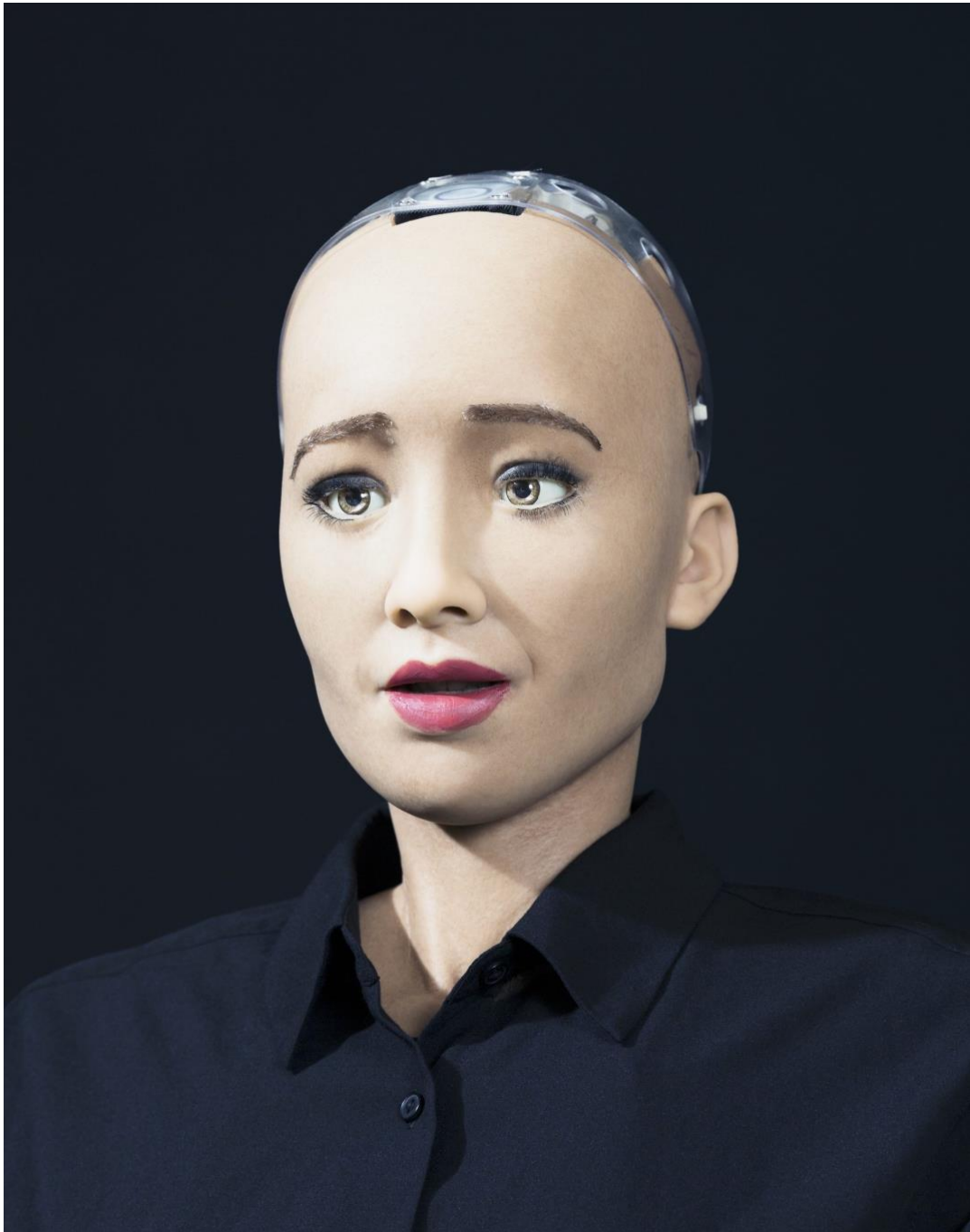
Fig. 5

The image itself is very ordinary, if you didn't know the story behind it, would you even notice the false eye is actually a camera. You wonder what this person is thinking or feeling. The concept of being a cyborg 'is an entity formed by the union of biology and technology' (K.Warwick. 2012) with this definition in mind would you really consider Spence to be a cyborg? The video placed in his eye socket does not provide him with any additional practical use, I would argue that is no different to a person holding their mobile phone and using the video function. Both Spence's eye and phone have the same function, both are

wirelessly connected to a computer and just record what you see, however If you consider Nick Bostrom's 'Letter from Utopia' where he states:

You could say I am happy, that I feel good. You could say that I feel surpassing bliss. But these are words invented to describe human experience. What I feel is as far beyond human feeling as my thoughts are beyond human thought. I wish I could show you what I have in mind" (Bostrom, 2010, p 3–4).

The wearing of the prosthetic eye has another function. Spence already has an interest in this field and by using technology to replace a thing lost as a child is bringing him a sense of self, the image shows him wearing an eye designed to look different and certainly designed to look masculine. In Anne Balsamo's book 'Technologies of the gendered body' she discusses how certain biotechnologies are ideologically shaped by gender considerations and other beliefs about race, physical abilities, and economic and legal status (Balsamo, 1995) although her take on gender considerations revolve around a feminist view point it's clear that in this image the use of the red eye designed to replicate 'The Terminator' a film released in 1984 and classically based on ideas of transhumanism where man and machine have evolved to become a singularity (Grossman, T. 2001) the use of this red eye indicates to the viewer that the subject is asserting his masculinity and strength and that far from being disabled by the loss of an eye it has provided him with something more extraordinary than the rest of us. Balsamo's ideas on the gendered body continue in the second image I have looked at:



It is a portrait of a robot named Sophia created by Hanson Robotics in Hong Kong, and has even been granted citizenship of Saudi Arabia, she is capable of understanding a limited number of hand gestures, is able to recognise different people see their expressions and estimate emotions from that. The first thing that stands out when viewing this image is how life like she has been made to look by her creators. You have to consider who are the makers

and for what purpose have they designed her in this way. She is clearly created as a white, young female and as such following her release into the world has become almost celebrity like having been interviewed by numerous press outlets and TV shows around the world, as can be seen here (Hanson Robotics, 2022) I wonder would there have been the same interest had she been created as an old woman or a different cultural background. In Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey, 1975) she famously coined the phrase *The Male Gaze*, where predominately females in cinematic terms were there purely for male pleasure and heterosexual male pleasure at that. The same could be said of Sophia as Mulvey states in her essay:

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.”

(Mulvey, 1975. P 808)

Sophia was created by a male engineer at Hanson Robotics and no doubt based on his own idea of constitutes beauty. In *Building Better Humans: Refocusing the Debate on Transhumanism*, which is a collection of essays looks at Transhumanism from several viewpoints including religion and world leaders, it considers the regulation of human enhancement and the links between culture and technology, I would argue there is a need to control this area or at the very least we need to aware of much our own cultural views and understanding impact on what we create and show to the world. (Tirosh-Samuelson, H. Mossman, K. 2012)

Conclusion.

Both artists were inspired by the transhuman movement and both have captured some of those ideals from a different perspective. What does each project say about Transhumanism, on the one hand Ballard is trying to show the normalcy of Cryonics capturing images from inside Algor in the USA a Cryonics institute founder by Max More. They appear clinical with and ordered just what you would expect if you were heading into a hospital or ready for an operation. As such the images give an air of authority to the practice of Cryonics even though to date not one person has been successfully revived, the nearest we have come to storing human cells at freezing temperatures and then successfully using them is an Embryo. Some of the other images in his series focus on the 'do it yourself' enthusiast. Images of people standing alongside their makeshift freezers and chemicals needed for the cryonics process to work, give you an air of pity and almost comical in their pursuit of eternity.

In Vintiner and Fletcher 's work their focus has been on individuals who are utilising technology to become living Cyborgs, even using the phrase Cyborgs sounds like science fiction by you only have to consider how people who have lost limbs through trauma or disease have false limbs attached to the body, technology has moved on greatly from a wooden leg, to arms that can be controlled from a chip in the brain to carry out the normal function of the missing limb. In some of the images the technology being used is outside of the body appearing strange and different.

In both cases they have been sympathetic to the subject matter and I would say have captured the awe of what Transhumanism can offer, the concept that we could live forever. Are either of these options good for us though In Donna Haraway's book Cyborg Manifesto she looks at two potential outcomes when it comes to embracing cyborgs, one where the oppressed body is no more and the other that embraces identity in all its fluidity. (Haraway, D. 1991)

In Aubrey De Greys book Ending Aging

“I have been aware for many years that most people do not think about aging in the same way that they think about cancer, or diabetes, or heart disease. They are strongly in favour of the absolute elimination of such diseases as soon as possible, but the idea of eliminating aging—maintaining truly youthful physical and mental function indefinitely—evokes an avalanche of fears and reservations. Yet, in the sense that matters most, aging is just like smoking: It’s really bad for you.” (De Grey, A. 2008 p.25)

Although both projects reflect ideas of the Transhuman Ballard’s best represents De Grey’s vision of focusing on the problem of ageing as a disease that needs for it to be cured Thus potentially, we could all live for ever.

Or maybe we should embrace the thoughts of Rosi Braidotti, in her book The Posthuman

“Making friends with the impersonal necessity of death is an ethical way of installing oneself in life as a transient, slightly wounded visitor.” (Braidotti, R. 2013 p.)

Maybe if we just accept that death is inevitable, we can get on with the job of living.

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