

Born of the Earth

Description

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Androids are made not born. â??Cyborg replication is uncoupled from organic reproduction,â?• wrote Donna Haraway.

Automata are not the only beings denied parentage. Remember, â??The Lord God formed man of dust



ward 4 minutes into the recent video installation by Bill Viola man rising from the dust of the earth in slow motion.

Socrates asked how parents produced offspring in the early days. He was told by a wise counsellor, â??Quite simply, Socrates, they didnâ??t: there was no such thing at that time as parental procreation. It was the earth-born race, whose existence once upon a time we hear of in our stories, which was born: that was the time when they began to rise up again out of the earth.â?• (Plato, *Statesman*)

A creature born of the earth is an *autochthon.* According to the OED itâ??s a person traditionally thought to have been born out of the earth, or whose ancestry can be traced back to the earth. In more prosaic terms itâ??s an *indigenous* person; an earliest known inhabitant: someone who really belongs in the place. But the possibility of being â??born of the earthâ?• forms a potent element in ancient, modern and high tech myths.



Family trouble

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The anthropologist Claude LÃ©vi-Strauss explained the age-old Oedipus myth in terms of *autochthony*. Oedipus killed a man in self defence and married that manâ??s widow. The man turned out to be his father and the new wife his mother.

When they discovered their incest, the son (Oedipus) blinded himself, and his mother committed suicide. Itâ??s a tragic tale that Sigmund Freud wove into his account of family life and its troubles. Sons canâ??t get what they want, and will never admit to what they really want anyway â?? That kind of thing.

Levi-Strauss offered an alternative interpretation. Thereâ??s more to the story. Oedipus has a brother (Cadmos) whoâ??s looking for his sister (Europa) after she was raped by the father of the gods (Zeus).

As part of his quest Cadmos kills a dragon. Oedipus also does battle and kills the Sphinx (a monster with a womanâ??s head and lionâ??s body).

As it happens, Oedipus means â??swollen footed.â?• According to one version of the story he had his feet tied together when he was a child and he was pegged to the ground and left to die.

In a version of the play Iâ??ve seen Oedipus walks with a limp. The name Laios (Oedipusâ?? father) means â??left sided.â?• The names are significant. For LÃ©vi-Strauss these various elements of the story indicate a cluster of conflicts.

- Some people insist on keeping it all in the family: an over-emphasis on blood relations (the extreme case of marrying oneâ??s mother)
- There are those for whom family loyalty doesnâ??t count for much: under-rating blood relations (killing oneâ??s father)
- Being physically incapacitated: the names of Oedipus and Laios pertain to difficulty in walking characteristic of humans in stories of primal origins, stories in which humans stumble out of the earth

- There are those who wish to deny any possibility of direct lineage from the earth, symbolised in the stories by killing the earth monsters.

Followers of historical dramas are familiar with regal obsessions about lineage and mixed loyalties (Shakespeareâ??s plays, and historic soaps such as *The Tudors* and *The Borgias*). LÃ©vi-Strauss examines the relationships between these clusters, concluding that:

> The myth has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous [comes from a single parent] . . ., to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman. .. the Oedipus myth provides a kind of logical tool which relates the original problemâ??born from one or born from two?â??to the derivative problem: born from different or born from the same (216).

Autochthony and automata

The complex of autochthony is still relevant. Clones, machine intelligence, androids, and autonomous half human robots, in actuality or in prospect, are produced by means independent of bisexual reproduction.

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Itâ??s a drama re-enacted in the antagonism between the natural and the artificial. Speculation about artificial life reworks the ancient conflict between being â??born from different or born from the same.â?• The ancient conflict anticipated the modern putative clash, fusion and reconfiguration involving life and its simulation, the natural and the artificial.

The image below is from a conference presentation by Stelarc, the cyborg artist, delivering his paper from within SecondLife. Itâ??s all about body parts, body fluids, prosthetics â?? monstrous in a way â?? but also down to earth.



Notes

- I discussed autochthony further in the context of Freud and Lacan in *Technoromanticism*.
- The first picture in this post is a group of cairns placed by tourists in Iceland near the site of the meeting of the continental plates. The second picture is a stone Sphinx in the grounds of Hopetoun House near Edinburgh taken at the time of a â??Moon walk.â?• The scarecrow below wears a National Trust badge and was in the grounds of the Red House, Bexleyheath, London.
- There are lots of organic monsters that emerge from the ground: zombies, Tolkienâ??s Orcs, Jules Verneâ??s Morlocks, Ray Harryhausenâ??s skeletons in *Jason and the Argonauts* (1981) (video). In the vintage science fiction movie *Invaders from Mars* (1953) the Martians suck people into a sandpit and spit them out as aliens. Cyborgs donâ??t tend to come out of the ground, literally, but they do stagger (C3PO, Transformers, Gerry Anderson marionettes, etc).
- The godess, Gaia, Mother Earth, gave birth to the hills and the sea, born without a father. See The Theogony of Hesiod (129-132).
- Platoâ??s account of autochthony includes a reversion to childhood in old age. â??I mean, itâ??s in keeping with the idea of old people turning into children that people would reform in the earth where they were lying after their death and would come back to life from there, in conformity with the reversal undergone by all natural cycles.â?•
- Also see blog posts Whatâ??s wrong with Posthumanism and Moody atmospheres and electric auras.

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References

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