Locked in or locked out, or 'la vita delle cose': Gender, agency and (dis)embodiment in Primo Levi and Nicoletta Vallorani's Speculative Fiction

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Abstract – Many of Levi's speculative stories narrate dystopian scenarios in which individuals express anxiety about the creeping power of technology which is reifying and automating their posthuman bodies, affecting their physical and psychological freedoms. This article develops previous scholarship with a specific focus on the gendered dimension of Levi's writing. I show how he critiques the problematic ways in which technologisation impacts specifically on women's bodies. With a view to tracing the contemporary echoes of Levi's work, I place his stories in dialogue with Nicoletta Vallorani's recent, more explicitly feminist novels. I argue that Vallorani's writing echoes and develops many of Levi's concerns about how technology can be employed to constrain our bodies and consciousness, and the explicitly gendered dimensions of this oppression. A critical reading of these texts alongside one another reveals striking resonances and confirms how Levi's intuitions regarding the importance of critiquing unfettered technologised embodiment remain urgently relevant today.

Keywords – Primo Levi; Gender; Agency; Embodiment; Nicoletta Vallorani.

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> ...and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and thinking of the safety and prosperity of one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other… (Woolf 19)

In the field of Italian literature, science-fiction is finally starting to attract some serious critical attention, with several important, original studies being published in recent years that push debate beyond a perception that sci-fi is a «throwaway» genre, and that Italian sci-fi is fundamentally derivative of US fiction.[1] These studies also offer nuanced analyses of lesser known but fascinating texts, and are beginning to engage with questions of gender, although despite there being numerous Italian sci-fi texts that engage with questions of feminism and gender, the critical debate remains relatively undeveloped (Carrara). This article contributes to these ongoing discussions, and seeks to open up new avenues for scholarly reflection.

I preface my analysis with a citation (above) from Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay, *A Room of One's Own,* as she ponders the impact of gender on women's safety, economic security, access to culture and their status as intellectual and creative beings. In this article, I explore this idea of being locked in or locked out, in relation to gender, embodiment and agency in what I will call 'speculative fiction', by Primo Levi, the Holocaust witness, author, chemist and public intellectual, and Nicoletta Vallorani, scholar, University Professor and author. Through this new comparison, I show how it can be instructive to bring Levi's work into dialogue with more contemporary writing, revealing his prescience in focussing on the body as a tragically privileged site of experimentation in our increasingly technologised world. I explore how certain characters in Levi and Vallorani's fiction are locked out or in, of places, spaces, opportunities, and sometimes their own bodies, in a gendered way, becoming «things» or «cose». As I argue, this analysis reveals striking injustices through the stories that are voiced or to which we are alerted in their texts. I analyse how Levi and Vallorani call out this injustice, and the relative agency and embodied autonomy of their women characters.

Before embarking on textual analysis, I offer some clarification regarding the definition of speculative fiction, sometimes considered a (sub)field of science-fiction writing. For Robert Heinlein, writing in 1947, speculative fiction was a kind of thought experiment:

> the story embodying the notion "just suppose"— or "What would happen if—." In the speculative science fiction story accepted science and established fields are extrapolated to produce a new situation […]. As a result of this new situation, new human problems are created—and our story is about how human beings cope with those new problems. (Heinlein 5)

More recently, but in a similar vein, Margaret Atwood says that her work,

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[1] See, for example, the special issue of *Narrativa* edited by Combierati and Somigli; Baldi; Brioni and Combierati; Ianuzzi.

> invents nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent. Every novel begins with a *what if?* And then sets forth its axioms […] *what if we continue down the road we are already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who has got the will to stop us?* (286, italics in original)

This type of speculative fiction pays close attention to what it *feels* like to inhabit a particular kind of 'futuristic' or hypertechnologised world, rather than how technology functions, or where in the extended solar system we might travel, for example. It places human experience, and particularly the psychological impact of futuristic developments, at the centre of the narrative. For Stanislaw Lem or Philip K. Dick the speculative is the verisimilar, something that is «possible under the right circumstances» based on technological potential and past human behaviour (Lem 28; Dick xiii-xiv). The important point here is the continuity with our known world; it is a step away, almost overlapping. We can imagine it happening. And this may be achieved through narrative, character development, or reference to recognisable artefacts or cultural practices. Here we are in the realm of writing as an urgent warning, as a hypothetical form of modelling that is intended, among other things, to encourage critical reflection on what is already happening, and whether we need to act to stop the texts from becoming our reality. In what follows, I explore the speculative narrations of technologised embodiment in Levi and Vallorani's work. To clarify my methodology, I am not seeking direct intertextual references, or explicit connections between these authors. Rather, using Susan Lanser's concept of *confluence,* or «the practice of exploring related phenomena that may share underlying causal connections», I interrogate the texts to identify where they may share «a cultural deep logic», and the implications of this.

1. Gendered Reification in Levi: echoes of the inner lives of the almost submerged

Turning first to Primo Levi, while he is of course best known as a Holocaust survivor and for his moving testimonial writings about his experiences in Auschwitz, such as *Se questo è un uomo* (1947), his sci-fi or speculative stories, which include the collections *Storie naturali* (1966), and *Vizio di forma* (1971), are starting to attract sustained critical interest.[2] These brief but extremely rich short stories, many of which were first published individually in newspapers in the 1960s, weave together science, fantasy, myth, fable, speculation and ethical reflection. In 1961, Italo Calvino called them «fantabiologici»;[3] in a 1964 editorial, they were described as «racconti morali travestiti da racconti di fantascienza», as though sci-fi could not contain a moral message.[4] In a 1966 interview, Levi himself disputed the label of science-fiction, responding to an interviewer's questions by saying: «non sono storie di fantascienza, se per fantascienza si intende l'avvenierismo, la fantasia futuristica a buon mercato. Queste sono storie *più possibili* di tante altre» (Fadini 106). He therefore wanted readers to read them as a speculative warning, in the sense implied by Atwood above.

Storie naturali was initially published under the pseudonym «Damiano Malabaila», for fear that this different genre of writing would not be well received by Levi's reading public, who perhaps saw him solely as a Holocaust witness. However, his real identity was clear from text on the book jacket, and Levi later revealed that the stories *are* linked to his testimonial writing. They were inspired by his perception of various social and moral «vizi» such as the Holocaust, which afflict our lives and societies (Levi, *Opere vol. I* 1434-35). In building speculative narratives around these defects, Levi's aim was to raise awareness of impending socio-cultural

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[2] See, for example, Cassata; Mori; and Ross, *Primo Levi's Narratives of Embodiment.*
[3] Letter dated 22 November 1961, in Calvino 695–96.
[4] Editorial in *Il giorno*, 1964, cited in Levi, *Opere Vol. I* 1439.

Locked in or locked out, or 'la vita delle cose'
Charlotte Ross

problems which were caused by what he called «il sonno della ragione»; he thought that too many of us were sleepwalking into a heinous situation from which it would then be difficult to escape. Levi is referring specifically here to Francisco Goya's acquatint (Fig. 1), illustrating what can happen when we fail in our vigilance against impending threats.

Fig. 1 – Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (1799). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license.

Our duty, therefore, is to remain *awake* to potential threats to our humanity; we might argue that writing these speculative stories was one way to keep his own conscience alert, and to work towards raising consciousness in his readers of the issues that concerned him.

Having sketched out some context for the stories, I want to reflect briefly on Levi's approaches to gender and embodiment in general, before turning to selected short stories to think about how his characters are locked out or locked in. Gender is not front and central in Levi's writing as a whole, but his characters are nevertheless gendered, and, as I have argued elsewhere (Ross, *Primo Levi's Narratives of Embodiment*), a deeply felt awareness of embodiment is crucial to how he depicts human experience. In my work, I have explored how Levi's depictions of human embodiment can be read as inflected by a focus on containment, the body as a container, and its material and symbolic 'contents'. He uses a wide variety of metaphors which evoke containment and containers, whether as comforting, emancipating, constraining or dehumanizing.

In Levi's writing, the relationship between body and world may vary from a sensation of utter alienation from the surrounding environment, to a deeply interactive fusion as the body seems to extend beyond its material boundaries and merge with external objects. In his testimonial writing, he writes of the extreme, traumatic and humiliating processes of dehumanization that prisoners endured in the camps, and the impact of these on their sense of embodiment. In *Se questo è un uomo*, one prisoner, Null Achtzehn, is described as a hollow man: «vuoto interiormente, nulla piú di un invòlucro, come certe spoglie di insetti che si trovano in riva agli stagni, attaccate con un filo ai sassi, e il vento le scuote» (*Opere vol. I* 36).

He himself feels like an empty container, stripped of all the socio-cultural accoutrements, both material and symbolic, that we use to define ourselves:

> Ci hanno tolto gli abiti, le scarpe, anche i capelli.[…] Ci toglieranno anche il nome. […] Consideri ognuno, quanto valore, quanto significato è racchiuso anche nelle piú piccole nostre abitudini quotidiane, nei cento oggetti nostri che il piú umile mendicante possiede: un fazzoletto, una vecchia lettera, la fotografia di una persona cara. Queste cose sono parte di noi, quasi come membra del nostro corpo. […] Si immagini ora un uomo a cui, insieme con le persone amate, vengano tolti la sua casa, le sue abitudini, i suoi abiti. […] Sarà un uomo vuoto, ridotto a sofferenza e bisogno, dimentico di dignità e di discernimento, poichè accade facilmente, a chi ha perso tutto, di perdere se stesso. (*Opere Vol. I* 20–21)

Locked in or locked out, or 'la vita delle cose'
Charlotte Ross

Here we see the husk, or dehumanised shell of a person who is deprived of their shelter, belongings, their technologies of the self, and treated like a thing; we also see a vision of a fully embodied individual, whose sense of self extends into and is nurtured by objects, spaces, the symbolic realm. Levi opposed the Cartesian mind-body dualism that separates the brain—the thinking, psychic self, or *res cogitans*—from the soma—the *res extensa* or material body as appendage that will wither and die. Instead, Levi writes compellingly about how he learns with his hands, through touch, through his sense of smell: «conosco attraverso le mie mani, il mio naso, i miei sensi» (Greer 71; see also Antonello). He describes how his sense of self extends even beyond his body as external objects are prosthetically absorbed. In a 1985 essay, in *L'Altrui mestieri,* "La mia casa", he talks of his home in Turin as a second skin, for example, an extension of his body: «Abito a casa mia come abito all'interno della mia pelle» (*Opere Vol. II* 633–36; 636). Here we are in the realm of phenomenology, where the body is our primary means of knowing and relating to the world and to others, as we extend psychically beyond the material boundaries of our skins in a dynamic intertwining of perception. Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others have explored how we build cultural worlds around ourselves to echo and supplement the body, and to know and interact with the world (146). In this essay, Levi discusses his house through various metaphors: a mollusc's shell, an old friend, as saturated with memories—an extension of and repository for his own memory—and as carrying on its walls the scars of time and the war. It is a crucial second skin. His sense of self is constituted and supplemented by the things and structures around him, endowing them with a projected animation.

Such examples show enforced, traumatic reduction of a person to their somatic shell, and also reveal how we might productively extend our sense of self beyond our bodies. Turning now to the speculative stories, we see many instances of how an alienated consciousness results in characters experiencing their bodies negatively as some sort of container, an objectified, reified husk or shell in which their technologically or ideologically oppressed consciousness resides. Starting with some examples from *Vizio di forma,* in "Le nostre belle specificazioni" we meet Peirani and Renaudo, working in an anonymous state office, dealing with the specifications of «uomo», according to weight, height, and resistance to cold and heat, as if a human person were an object. Peirani has internalised the disciplinary norms of the bureaucracy to such an extent that he resigns from his job, feeling that his body doesn't meet the criteria (*Opere Vol. I* 661-70). He doesn't qualify so is locked out of the status of human. In "Protezione" (*Opere Vol. I* 573-77), we meet two couples who are forced by law to wear futuristic suits of armour, «corazze» as a protection from meteorite showers, that may or may not be an actual threat. The suits have licence plates, like vehicles. Or like prisoners' identification numbers. It emerges that some characters feel that the meteors are a media invention, and the suits are designed to rekindle the economy; others feel at home in their suits, and protected by them, while still others recall painfully what it felt like to be able to touch another human being with their skin; they feel locked in, against their will. The stories seem intended to critique consumerism, rationalisation and rampant technologization at the expense of our fully embodied, autonomous humanity; moreover, some of the stories do raise concerns about specifically gendered forms of injustice and exploitation.

Perhaps the clearest example of this is "La bella addormentata nel frigo", an early playscript, dating from 1952, which then appears in *Storie naturali.* The protagonist Patrizia, cryogenically frozen in 1975, is now in 2115. She is partially unfrozen on her birthday each year, and so has the potential to experience a long future that she would not have lived to see without her life-support technology. However, the consequences of cryogenics on her are pretty horrific; aside from lacking autonomy and being unable to maintain any level of meaningful relationship with other people, she is a mere observer of history. She is also repeatedly raped by one of her male hosts while in a semi-frozen state. She is locked into the machines that preserve her life, and

Locked in or locked out, or 'la vita delle cose'
Charlotte Ross

locked into a body that is abused and becomes a passive site of violence; she is also locked out of the dynamic interplay of broader social and cultural life.

A further instance of gendered enforced somatic docility is Maria in "Lumini rossi", in *Vizio di forma* (*Opere Vol. I* 626–29). We meet her husband, Luigi as he leaves his bureaucratized workplace and returns home, his every move controlled by a red light. At home he attempts in vain to avert his eyes from the red light that shines unblinkingly from his wife collarbone, prohibiting sexual intercourse during her fertile days since they already have two children, and a third would be taxed heavily. Their interaction is weighed down by the significance of this light and by fear of inspections, so that even their conversations are stilted and difficult. Luigi would like to take a screwdriver and remove Maria's light, but it is by now so much a part of her that this would not be possible, as she explains wearily, «rimane sempre una traccia» (*Opere Vol. I* 628). Her body is irreversibly altered, technologized, regulated by the state, essentialised as a sexed and gendered reproductive vessel. The traces of state intervention are ineradicable, inescapable, turning spontaneous, organic bodies into obedient, desensitized automata.

Other stories which also identify the gendered ways in which technology can impact on bodies, and lock characters *into* their bodies, are the NATCA stories, in *Storie naturali*: these include "L'ordine a buon mercato", "Alcune applicazioni del Mimete" and "L'ordine della bellezza". In these stories, we meet Simpson, a salesman for NATCA products. The acronym NATCA is not ever explained, as far as I can make out, which is part of the mystification surrounding the company. We are in the realm of postwar American corporate consumerism, the era of Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, the creation of false needs through capitalism and the withering away of critical thought. We follow Simpson as he convinces various clients to try and buy his products. These include the Mimer, a duplicating machine, and a Calometer, which measures external physical attractiveness. The impact of these devices is highly gendered, as one customer, Gilberto, clones his wife, Emma, to produce Emma I and Emma II. He does this without her consent, having drugged her and moved her into the Mimer when she is asleep. We are told that his motivation was that she is so useful, why not have two? (*Opere Vol. I* 462). Emma is seen as matter, an object or a device; she is denied agency and does not speak.

Here I want to tease out a what we might understand by agency for these gendered, embodied subjects. Fundamentally, this means the ability to self-determine, to have autonomy and control over one's life, body and actions. For Judith Butler, identities are performative; that is, they come into being through actions, which construct and confirm the idea of the gendered subject within the discursive realm. There is no being before doing, no gender prior to gendered performance, which is then problematically read as confirming some imagined innate essence. Cutting across the construction of the docile subject, agency is a form of subversive action that becomes possible in the gaps between the repeated performance of the normative gendered behaviours that seem to offer a consolidated, stable identity. They write:

> all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; *agency* then is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition. If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of domains of alternative cultural intelligibility […] then it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that subversive identity becomes possible […] the task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself. (185, 189)

In Butler's perspective, agency has an inter-relational component—on some level, the ability to do gender differently relies on the recognition of this by others. It is also linked to language, making the ability to speak quite crucial.

The stories of Patrizia, Maria and Emma's lack of agency and imprisonment in their own objectified bodies are narratives of the demolition of embodied, autonomous life on multiple

levels. They become things, rather than subjects with free will. We see the technologization of the body and its reification; in relation to Emma, using Walter Benjamin's terms, the cloned self loses its «aura» or uniqueness; drawing on Jean Baudrillard's thought (99), the body becomes a sort of worthless prosthesis. The coherent selves of these characters have been rendered meaningless; they are locked into a forcedly docile body and locked out of interactive, meaningful life. These women characters are not operating the machinery, developing or selling or even buying the technology on offer. All this is done by men. The perils of being locked *into* a particular form of consumerist, capitalist and elitist technologized patriarchy are thrown into stark relief.

Here, it is worth recalling that Levi was not a stalwart technophobe; rather, he was sensitive to, and critical of, the potential for unethical exploitation that technological development offers in unscrupulous hands. He argued that new technologies can enhance our lives and are potentially positive additions: «il rapporto uomo-macchina non è necessariamente alienante, ed anzi può arricchire o integrare il vecchio rapporto uomo-natura» (*Opere II* 1444). Strikingly, while in this statement he uses language that privileges men as the human standard, invisibilising woman, Levi also displays sensitivity to gendered exploitation. However, in the stories I discuss here, he does not offer any more positive models of technologized embodiment to counteract these stark tales of gendered alienation. Indeed, he also shows how many men are dehumanised by irresponsible and alienating technologization. The 'I' narrator of the NATCA stories, an unidentified man, is rather shocked by Gilberto's actions, and sceptical of Simpson's sales patter about the benefits of these gadgets. What we see, through the eyes of an onlooker, who acts as a bridge between us and this possible future, is a world in which technology impacts negatively on both men and women; but it is substantially more difficult for women to assume agency due to the misogynistic inflections of the types of technology that are developed. In Levi's stories, we may encounter alienated, sad men, locked into a bureaucracy which is not of their choosing; however the impact of this alienation is not sexual exploitation, as suffered by Patrizia, or being treated like a clonable object, as is the case for Emma I and II. It is a feeling of estrangement from their bodies, or a feeling of being locked into a system, a logic, with which they disagree and from which there is little prospect of escape.

These characters recall similarly docile, alienated and decimated people that Levi encountered in Auschwitz: the figures of the Muselmänner in the camps, who have lost the ability to speak and are like automatons (Ross 2011 52). They are, in Hannah Arendt's words, «ghastly marionettes with human faces, which all behave like the dog in Pavlov's experiments, which all react with perfect reliability even when going to their own death» (455). As noted above, Levi commented openly on his ongoing fear that the horrors of Auschwitz and the Nazi genocide could be repeated. He remarked specifically how this came not out of chaos and anarchic violence, but deliberately, calculatedly, out of organised, technologized bureaucracy: «Dopo aver verificato come uno Stato moderno, organizzato, tecnicizzato, burocratizzato abbia potuto partorire Auschwitz, non si può non pensare con spavento alla possibilità che quell'esperienza si rinnovi… Questo lo vedo e lo temo» (De Melis 158) We can of course read these stories as inspired by this fear. Here we have moved away from speculative writing as a vision of a possible future, through fiction as a continuation of our present, to hypotheses of a transposed repetition of our past. The dangers are real to Levi, and to many of his readers.

Thus the stories evoke the horrors of the camps but also their banal, quotidian beginnings in ordinary life, making them also resonate powerfully on a more everyday level; the many tiny ways in which technology impacts on our freedoms and status; a sci-fi or speculative version of the Everyday Sexism project, in which multiple incremental forms of discrimination are

logged to reveal systematic discrimination.[5] We see the banality of the destruction of humanity, or of oppressive gendered regimes. The ghastly marionettes of the camps were beyond saving; they were the «sommersi», of whom he wrote, who have been so deeply damaged and traumatised were no longer able to speak or act to save themselves (*Opere II* 1056). In contrast, the characters we meet in Levi's later stories are on the slippery slope towards reification, but may manage to retain some agency. Many are aware that they are being locked into a system determined by red lights, for example; they feel their bodies and minds harden and their movements being curbed. We read of their anguish; their inner lives are narrated—subtly, obliquely, tentatively, but unavoidably. Levi shares with us the silent anxieties of people as they are becoming reified.

The characters we meet are numerous and variegated, but do tend to fall into a pattern: men who are megalomaniacally fired up by the commercial and/or patriarchal potential of technology, like Simpson and Gilberto; men who are sceptical or anxious but don't feel able, or quite motivated enough to act to change things, like the narrator in the NATCA stories; women, who are particularly disadvantaged in gendered ways. Their experiences are almost always conveyed via the male first-person narrator or a third-person narrator. It is rare for these women characters to speak directly or at length. However, this silence or textual distance from the voices of the women characters also allows Levi to make a point about how technology can impact more harmfully on women because of existing social inequalities. This feels deliberate to me, for example in the NATCA stories, the narrative construction of the first-person narrator telling the story means that this voice recounts Gilberto's actions, relates the narrator's own shock at these, and encourages the reader to find Emma I's predicament entirely unacceptable. Her silence isn't just silence as in *absence* of a narrative: we are asked to *witness* her fate.

Here it is worth briefly noting that this story may have some intertextual references, and be a sort of retelling, with a gendered twist. In my view, the intertext is Isaac Asimov's 1956 work "First Law", in which male scientists discuss 'female' robots, Emma I, II and III, and problematically praise these robots for behaving like good wives and mothers (Asimov 253-56). One of the Emmas breaks the Second Law of Robotics, by failing to carry out an order given by a human being. She is pardoned by the human scientists since she was prioritizing the safety of her robot daughter, Emma Junior, displaying the «holy ties of mother love» (Asimov 256). Thus it is a rather improbable story that tells us more about normative masculinity than about technology. Unlike Asimov's Emmas, however, Levi's depiction of Emma I specifically invites criticism of patriarchal uses of technology. She is a device that was constructed to replicate a normative idea of womanhood, but is also a dissenting figure in an exploitative patriarchal regime. She has very little agency: drugged and cloned without her consent, she has little recourse to resolving her situation. Moreover, the narrator doesn't actively try to help her. Nevertheless, we *see* the injustice. We are *made* to see it.

In a more positive vein, Patrizia, actually *does* escape her cryogenic prison. And she does it by asserting agency: by subversively repeating normative feminine behaviour, and flirting with a man who she convinces to unfreeze her, before absconding alone into the night. He was just a means to an end, whom she duped, but now she has regained her autonomy. The witnesses to her subversion or displacement of normativity are of course us, the readers. We are witnesses to the «thingification» of these individuals, to their inner lives and silent, secret fears, and in this one instance, to their escape.

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[5] Details on the project are available at: <https://everydaysexism.com/> (Accessed: 23/08/2023).

2. Beyond locked bodies: Towards a Collective, Gendered (After)life of Things

Having briefly discussed some of Levi's stories, I would like to suggest inserting them midway into an arc of textual and narrative development of sci-fi/speculative fiction, from complacently patriarchal gender normativity to gender-focussed feminist narratives. Examples of gender normativity might include some of Asimov's robot stories, but also works by some of Levi's Italian contemporaries: Dino Buzzati's *Il grande ritratto* (1960), for example, in which a male scientist engineers a brain in a vat as a reincarnation of his lost wife Laura. We might read this as a male desire to create a docile, programmable woman. The 'real' Laura is described in infantilising terms; the brain in a vat is accused of being «hysterical», in a stereotypical interpretation of femininity (Buzzati 150). Or we might think of Roberto Vacca's *Il robot e il minotauro* (1964), in which male scientists are associated with technology, intelligence and the future, while women are reduced to stereotypical sex objects. The men are gradually more disembodied—becoming *res cogitans*—while the female character is reduced to her somatic, fleshy being. These novels certainly raise many problematic issues related to technology and gender, but I am not persuaded that the authors were seeking to instil in their readers a critical sense of the dangers of normative impositions of technology.[6]

In stark contrast to these author's treatment of the interface between bodies and technology, the contemporary author, Nicoletta Vallorani, *does* overtly seek to alert her readers to problematic gendered abuses of technology, and the impact it may have on our embodied selves and agency. Here, she can be seen to be following the trailblazing work of Margaret Atwood, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, and other feminist authors of speculative fiction, which she knows well, being a Professor of English Literature.[7] Other Italian women writers of speculative fiction have also engaged with gender, but Vallorani is perhaps the most overtly feminist of them.[8] Her novels have been described as a mix of speculative science fiction, *noir* and cyberpunk (Jansen and Milanesi). She was the first woman to win the Premio Urania, the Italian prize for science fiction, in 1993, for *Il cuore finto di DR*. More recently, she has written a trilogy about a futuristic Milan, *Eva, Avrai i miei occhi,* and *Noi siamo campo di battaglia*, which follow a shifting group of characters, with some recurring key figures, as they fight for survival in a dystopic, technologised, autocratic and grimly disturbing vision of Milan. I focus on the second of these, *Avrai i miei occhi*, which won the Premio Italia for the best science fiction novel in 2021.

Vallorani's novels are certainly futuristic but often refer to historical events, such as wars and conflict. For example, *Eva* refers to the 1990s conflict in the former Yugoslavia; *Avrai i miei occhi* is punctuated by aesthetic and verbal references to the Holocaust. For example, the novel opens with a heap of dead female bodies, each of which has a tattoo on the inner forearm, the significance of which is made clear to the reader:

> Quando ci arrivi, il corpo è quasi completamente coperto di neve […] con delicatezza, spolveri via il sottile strato di neve dal braccio sinistro […] Il numero è lì.
> Pensi che non siamo mai cambiati. Il numero è lì. Chi si è divertito a introdurre questo sistema per marchiare le cavie sapeva di certo in quale circostanza è stato inventato. (215)

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[6] For an expanded discussion of these issues, see Ross, "Creating the Ideal Posthuman Body?".

[7] On feminist science fiction, see, for example, Little; and Wolmark.

[8] Baldi analyses the work of Anna Rinonapoli, but argues that her novels retain a normative tendency. Looking at more recent fiction, Carrara compares Vallorani's work with two contemporary women authors, Violetta Bellocchio and Veronica Raimo, and concludes that only Vallorani really endows her women characters with agency.

Locked in or locked out, or 'la vita delle cose'
Charlotte Ross

Here, Lanser's idea of a shared, deep cultural logic, a confluence of anxiety, between Levi and Vallorani's narratives, is clear, although Levi evokes the Holocaust only obliquely, while Vallorani makes a more explicit reference. We might consider this an instance of Vallorani shaking awake the sleeping reason which so concerned Levi: her text points baldly to the monsters before our eyes, and deliberately highlights the link between this and the past.

The second person narrative voice which Vallorani uses here, which aligns with different characters as the narrative progresses, compounds this direct interpellation. It invites the readers to immerse themselves in the action, to empathise with the characters; it requires the readers to act as witness, on an emotive, psychological and physical level. We learn that the piled bodies are female clones. The narrative centres around a mystery as heaps of female clones are found abandoned around the city and taken to mass graves; they both are and aren't 'real' people. Vallorani's characters who are seeking to resolve the «non-crime» of dead, or non-functioning clones, often repeat the statement «Non sappiamo niente della vita delle cose», which implies that apparently non-sentient things may indeed be sentient (the clones may *feel*); it also evokes the terrible dehumanisation of prisoners lost in Auschwitz and other camps, where people are treated, and disposed of, as things. A further shared logic with Levi's narratives is apparent here.

Eventually we learn that the clones are linked to sentient humans: they are linked virtually to young women who are imprisoned, strapped down and sedated. The clones, a future development of snuff movies and virtual reality, are used by violent, abusive men who derive sexual gratification from inflicting pain on women. The 'real' women provide the sentience: their bodies remain physically unharmed but they experience the pain of the wounds that mark the clones' bodies, and their pain is conveyed to the abuser by the clones' echoing of their reactions. The system was developed because the male perpetrators were no longer getting gratification from abusing clones because they were seen as things, and their suffering was considered insufficiently authentic. Thus, in this novel, several young women are locked into a situation of hellish torture; a more extreme version of Patrizia's fate in Levi's story, who was cryogenically frozen and then raped while partially defrosted. Vallorani highlights the supremely gendered forms of technological abuse at work here, as equipment, programmes and devices are designed and used by an elite of misogynistic, violent men. She goes far further than Levi in terms of the horrors she narrates and the critique her characters offer. The what ifs are more terrifying, and the slippery slope seems steeper.

It is worth noting that Vallorani is writing several decades after Levi, in light of the influential feminist theories of Donna Haraway, who cautioned about unethical use of technology but also suggested that cyborg bodies could be free from normative and disciplinary discourses; she argued that they have the potential to be «post-gender» and «not subject to Foucault's biopolitics» (150, 163). As we have seen, these more emancipatory, alternative forms of technologised embodiment were not on show in Levi's fiction, but nor are they in evidence in Vallorani's text. The focus for both authors remains, in different ways, a critique of patriarchal abuses of technological power of domination.

A close comparative reading of these texts reveals further similarities between Levi's and Vallorani's approach to embodiment. For Vallorani too, the material body is a fundamental aspect of the self, and not merely a *res extensa* of the mind. We read, «Siamo il corpo che portiamo, e se non siamo quello, non siamo nulla» (*Avrai i miei occhi,* 259). Moreover, like Levi's phenomenological approach to embodied being in space, in *Avrai i miei occhi* there is an almost symbiotic relationship between the characters' bodies and the city, as these citations show:

> Questa città è tatuata come i nostri corpi.
> Camminiamo lungo cicatrici fresche, rinnovando il dolore. (65)

> Io sono la città, il corpo di ogni cosa. (245)

Locked in or locked out, or 'la vita delle cose'
Charlotte Ross

La città è respiro, e noi con lei. (265)

Questa è la mia città.
Questo è il mio corpo.
Questi sono i miei occhi, ma non solo i miei. (223)

This is an intertwining of bodily flesh and the flesh of the world. As Merleau-Ponty wrote: The «environment» (*milieu*) becomes a «home» […] in a reciprocal relation of «interiority» […] The world and I are within one another» (cited in Lorelle 197). In Vallorani's novel, there is also a sense of collective suffering, which comes from a common disenfranchisement as cast-out rebels; they survive and resist existence beyond the walls of the elite city for the privileged few. It also comes from a shared sense of gendered vulnerability for the women characters, including the clones. There is a recognition that these feminized automata *do* have an inner life, do suffer and do merit assistance. This collective sense of both shared risk and solidarity in action is distinct from the feeling of overwhelming isolation in Levi's stories.

In light of these reflections on the body as our connection to others, I return to the question of agency and the different experience of the women characters in Levi and Vallorani's stories. As we have seen, some of Levi's speculative stories quietly draw our eyes to individual gendered oppression by technology, which impacts on women's sense of embodiment. However, with the exception of Patrizia, it stops there. Vallorani, in contrast, a different writer working in a different socio-cultural moment, takes several further steps. She imagines a horrific scenario of mass-scale gendered abuse, involves the reader more directly through a second person narratorial voice, and shows us how these women assert their agency. Indeed, as Carrara has noted, while Vallorani focuses at length on the violated female body, her women protagonists are not victims (2021). In part, this is achieved through refusing to allow themselves to be circumscribed by the limits imposed in this dystopic Milan. The futuristic city is deeply divided by walls, zones of safety and privilege as distinct from those of criminality, hunger and dangerous anarchy; these starkly contrasting environments are quite familiar in sci-fi stories. The protagonists, the underdogs, are locked out of the laboratories and seats of power, but manage to gain access in order to enact a kind of revolution. In this novel, the self is, or craves to be, deeply embodied, but many bodies are ethereal, dissolved as a result of some technological punishment or as a survival strategy. The solution to the mass-scale abuse of women is to entwine together, both with the city, depicted as a living, breathing, suffering but resilient entity, and with each other. Olivia, one of the protagonists, joins forces with a band of rebels and unites herself through the sinister network to the entrapped women experiencing the abuse, in order to free them. She repeats a performance of subjugated femininity deliberately, subversively, at great risk, in order to explode the network. By becoming one of them temporarily, she can free them all. Women's bodies are the site of their suffering; but Olivia's body also becomes a way to achieve liberation.

Soberingly, the outcome for the women who have been caught in the web for some time, and for the clones, is a release through death. This is both a choice and a non-choice, which is debated in some detail in the text. Preparing for the final coup, Olivia visits a painter, and reflects on his depictions of women who died by suicide, including Francesca Woodman, Sylvia Plath, and Virginia Woolf. The painting that inspired this, *Cross Point*, is a 2005 work by the Turinese artist Beppe Devalle (1940-2013).

Locked in or locked out, or 'la vita delle cose'
Charlotte Ross

Fig. 2 – *Cross Point*, Beppe Devalle 2005. Source: <https://www.artribune.com/attualita/2013/02/good-bye-devalle/>. Reproduced with permission from Jolanda Devalle.

Vallorani again links her dystopia with our known history. Is suicide a choice, her characters ask? And they answer themselves thus: «Abbiamo trovato, da schiave, l'unica strada possible per renderci libere. E l'abbiamo presa. Mi vedi, straniero? Io ti sopravviverò» (244). Reason, here, is not passively sleeping while the monsters muster, as in Goya's work evoked by Levi; instead, in Devalle's painting, Woodman, Plath and Woolf are staring us down from beyond the grave, daring us to look, or look away, actively moving towards their last acts. To clarify, I don't read Vallorani's novel, or Devalle's painting, as in any way glorifying suicide, but rather saluting the brilliance of so many women whom we lost earlier than we might have done, who made what they saw as a choice. These women did what they could; as Butler writes, agency can only be expressed within the limits of the intelligible (185, 189). Far from being «som-mers[e]», however, their power long outlasts their lives, as Devalle's arresting painting shows. The inner lives of these women, who struggled with gendered subjugation on various levels, speak to us more or less obliquely through their works and writings, surviving their bodies and, ultimately, us, as Vallorani reminds us. They are simultaneously locked out of one form of existence, and etched powerfully into our shared cultural histories and textual lives. Olivia draws on the power of these women from the past to spur her on to action in the present of her narration. As to those who remain in this futuristic Milan, the distinction between embodied material life and something other, disembodied but still sentient, is extremely porous. Several characters are disembodied, invisible, self-recreating, shimmering apparitions, made of waves and particles. There is an implication that life can continue in this state, if it has to; there is a sentient form of survival after the loss or destruction of the physical body, achieved by merging with the energies of the city and the other disembodied survivors. Or at the very least, there is a release from pain.

To conclude, I began with the idea of being locked out or locked in, excluded or imprisoned, and have discussed texts that explore this in relation to futuristic experiences of gender and embodiment. Comparing texts across time can show how much has changed and how much has not. Without seeking to trace any *direct* lines of influence between Levi and Vallorani's texts, we can identify some striking resonances and shared logics across their work pertaining to how we might understand and articulate the body, particularly the body in pain, in relation to gendered abuses of hyper-technologisation. We can see how speculative fiction is a crucial genre through which to explore this. It is not weighted down by tradition and is therefore supremely open to experiments, with the limits of what can be expressed through the

medium of written language. Both Levi and Vallorani are extremely allusive writers and thinkers, weaving artworks, novels and other written texts into their stories; there is a rich web of intertextuality that animates their writing. In my view, this is further enriched by putting their works in dialogue with each other, by reading their narratives of traumatised characters, struggling with their sense of self and embodiment alongside one another. They are part of a larger web of stories that seek to offer recognition, by seeing, showing and giving voice to those who experience abuse and oppression. Key differences are where their stories start and stop, and the agency of women characters in particular. Most of Levi's stories trail off bleakly, asking us to confront subjugation of the isolated individuals in progress, but then leaving the characters not quite submerged, but almost paralysed in the face of impending reification. We hear the faint voices of their inner struggle as they begin to lose themselves, and only rarely see someone fighting back. Is this sufficient to wake reason from its long sleep? In contrast, Vallorani's women characters take action even beyond their embodied form. They extend beyond themselves to help others like them, creating a materially and virtually embodied network of resistance. Her narrative voice draws the reader inexorably into a closer relationship with these characters, and into their active, subversive displacements of gendered technologized oppression.

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Charlotte Ross

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