

ALBERTO SAVINIO'S HYBRID BODIES: INCORPORATING SCIENCE AND TECHNE

[italianmodernart.org/journal/articles/alberto-savinios-hybrid-bodies-incorporating-science-and-techne](https://www.italianmodernart.org/journal/articles/alberto-savinios-hybrid-bodies-incorporating-science-and-techne)

Nicole Gercke **Alberto Savinio, Issue 2, July 2019**

<https://www.italianmodernart.org/journal/issues/alberto-savinio/>

Abstract

Savinio's representations of science and technology in his literary works (primarily from the early forties) add yet another dimension to his reinterpretations of classical myths and Biblical tropes. By incorporating scientific theories and technological developments, Savinio offers new perspectives for exploring the liminal spaces between human and machine, animate and inanimate, life and death, and changing understandings of the relationships between the body, mind, and soul. Furthermore, his stories of 'mad scientists' warn against the potential dehumanization of individuals in the name of scientific inquiry, and serve as cautionary tales against excessive faith in any one authority.

Introduction

As a glance through the catalogue of his personal library held in the Fondo Savinio at the Archivio Contemporaneo of the Gabinetto Vieusseux in Florence can attest, from the end of the thirties through the forties, Alberto Savinio showed an increased interest in science and technology,¹ fields he looked to as yet additional sources of inspiration for *dilettantismo*, or the playful freedom of thought that embraces contradictions and multiple truths. As he wrote in 1948:

To me, the "form" of the scientific theory or whether it's true isn't what matters. (How many truths has the history of the world seen?) What's important is that the scientific theory is such that it inspires ideas of movement and freedom.²

In Savinio's writings from this time, scientific theories and technological developments are used and reelaborated to add even more dimension to his reinterpretations of classical myths and Biblical tropes. This paper will look at three works in particular: the decades-long "Vita di Mercurio" project (Life of Mercury, 1920s–1949), the unpublished final version of which, in a complete

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

reversal from the original, is a Frankensteinian reckoning for a hubristic scientist; *La nostra anima* (Our soul, 1944; figure 1), a radical retelling of the ancient myth of Psyche and Eros, with Psyche as a human-bird-machine powered by electricity and trapped by a scientist in the basement of a fleshworks museum; and "Paradiso terrestre" (Earthly Paradise, 1942), in which a renowned scientist, called Padreterno, completes his re-creation of heaven on earth by murdering two young lovers and preserving their bodies for public display in diorama form.

Savinio wrote that his interest in looking to scientific theories and technological developments lay not in a desire to faithfully and accurately illustrate them, but in their ability to inspire in him "ideas of movement and freedom," to spark his imagination, to provide additional points of departure and associative possibilities. In these works, ideas of "movement" and "freedom" play a fundamental thematic role, specifically as they pertain to the concept of the human as hybrid and continuously transforming, and to the physical and mental autonomy of the individual, by illustrating the ways in which external forces,



Figure 1. Alberto Savinio, "La nostra anima" (Our soul), 1944. Lithograph, 7 1/14 x 4 13/16 in. (18.5 x 12.2 cm). Printed in the first edition (300 copies) of "La nostra anima" in 1944 (Rome: Documento).

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

from positions of authority, might interfere with or obstruct the liberty or autonomy of an individual's body, mind, and soul.

The "Vita di Mercurio" project, *La nostra anima*, and "Paradiso terrestre" each address the relationship of human and machine, animate and inanimate, life and death, with an emphasis on the physical body (and its relation to the mind and soul): the first sees the transformation from statue to human and the eventual passage into eternity; the second shows an ambiguous human-machine "talking statue" stuck in subterranean limbo; the third looks at the transformation of the human body into statue, and the creation, therein, of a new form of earthly immortality. Savinio drew upon theories of the relationship of electricity to the body, increasingly lifelike automata, psychoanalysis, and techniques of embalming and petrification to offer new perspectives for exploring liminal spaces in between as well as alternatives to traditional binaries, and to articulate, in literary form, figures that may be in part considered reincarnations or updates of the mannequins of the Ferrarese metaphysical school of painting.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, emerging technologies (from microscopes and telescopes to the X-ray, photography, and cinema) had been pushing the limits of the visible; and scientific advancements (like organ transplants) challenged the notion of the human body as stable, integral, unique. New technologies gave scientists increased capacity to simulate and give the illusion of life, as well as to detect, prolong, and possibly (re)create life. With applications of electricity to machines and to the body, it was becoming possible to create machines that resembled or approximated human movement and functions, and human bodies that performed like machines. Ever since the Enlightenment period, the production of automata that could replicate human and animal activity in an ever more convincing manner fascinated and astounded philosophers and the public alike, rendering the boundary between bodies and machines increasingly "porous."³ The introduction of electricity to automata, with its uncanny ability to "awaken" the machine, served to nudge their performance from mere representation (as in puppets) to increasingly convincing simulation of the human, which included not only physical movement and processes but mental functioning and "thinking" processes as well. From public performances of the attempted reanimation of recently deceased corpses by Giovanni Aldini and Andrew Ure in the early nineteenth century, which generated unsettling convulsions in dead bodies,⁴ to Duchenne de Boulogne's manipulation of the facial muscles to reproduce human expression in the mid-nineteenth century, to Ugo Cerletti and Luigi Bini's development of electroshock therapy in 1938, which

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

switched off and “restarted” the brain, in a sense, experimental scientists had indeed demonstrated that the human body could be externally “operated” by turning on or off the electricity.

By the first half of the twentieth century, electricity had for centuries been implicated in discourses surrounding the relationship of human and machine, life and death: from applications that simulated or gave the *appearance of life*, but could not provide or restore it, could not fully or persistently animate lifeless automata nor bring bodies back from the dead, to applications that simulated or gave the *appearance of death* (electroshock, for example, which triggered convulsions and lapses into unconsciousness), employed with the goal of restoring or “rebooting” physical capacity or psychic life.⁵

While Savinio was not anti-science, what emerges in his writings from the late thirties and forties is a distinct skepticism about the figure of the scientist and a concern about the potential dehumanization of individuals for the sake of scientific inquiry or spectacle. In a review of a theater performance from 1938, he wrote: “In the common medical man, the open door to the secrets of our organism and of our psyche is a constant temptation to ‘play’ with our secrets, an invitation to delinquency.”⁶ This temptation, on the part of doctors and scientists, to “play” with “the secrets of our organism” extends beyond manipulations of the living body and mind to the great mystery of life and death, in a search for immortality that interrupts the normal biological processes associated with death either through their reversal (reanimation) or their immobilization (lasting preservation of corpses). For Savinio, who wrote “the true goal of life: to disappear” in *Dico a te, Clio* (Speaking to Clio, 1939),⁷ attempts at earthly immortality obstruct the natural flow of life – similar to the Heraclitean *panta rei* – and prevent the passage on to desired eternity. As he noted in the preface to *Casa “la vita”* (Home “the life,” 1943), death – and dying well – is important precisely because it “provides the passage” from this earthly adventure to eternity.⁸

Savinio’s primary target of criticism and parody in these works is the doctor or scientist, “mad” or enamored of his own ability to create, to build, to manipulate; who from his position of power violates the dignity of the patient, whom he objectifies and exploits for his own purposes, in pursuit of knowledge, in his quest to achieve a certain result. However, the critique of the doctor-scientist in these works can be extended more broadly to modern Science, and specifically to a Positivist Science that does not accept what is not demonstrable, provable, visible; in so doing, it denies, ignores, or violates the “secret” and “mystery” of life.

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

Furthermore, these works, written in a moment of particular crisis (through the end of fascism and during the Second World War), read as cautionary tales not only about the danger of interactions with single “mad” scientists whose personal ambitions exploit the vulnerability of the patient, but against the risk inherent in sacrificing individual liberty and dignity to any Authority, in the granting of too much power to, or in the excessive faith in, any idealized One, be it Science, one God, a Totalitarian State. Moreover, the warning is not directed only against the authority figure. Rather, we – the reader and the public – are also implicated, in our willingness and haste to blindly grant any single Unifying Principle to that authority.

The “Vita di Mercurio” Project

“Vita di Mercurio” is a series of published and unpublished writings that span three decades and provide a unique perspective on Savinio’s evolving representation of the scientist. Here, we will examine in particular: some early handwritten notes likely from the twenties to early thirties; a film story line from the forties;⁹ and an unpublished typewritten filmscript whose final version – “la stesura definitiva della *Vita di Mercurio*” Savinio wrote on it – is dated December 19, 1949.¹⁰ This tentative chronology – from early handwritten sheets to film story line to screenplay – traces a development in Savinio’s representations of the relationship between electricity and the body and of the figure of the doctor-scientist. The versions all share the same basic premise: the god Mercury, trapped in statue form, longs to become human so that he might die and pass from earthly immortality to much desired eternity. Each version also includes a scientist who describes in fairly elaborate detail his particular electrical theory of the body, composite versions of contemporary theories which allude variously to animal magnetism, electrotherapy techniques, and popular comparisons of the human body to a battery and of the nervous system to communication and electrical networks, which identify the brain as the power center.¹¹

What is striking in these different versions is the dramatic shift in Savinio’s portrayal of the scientist and of the effects of his treatment. In the early handwritten notes, Maurizio, a Savinian alter ego, accompanies Mercury to an electrologist who administers his electrical therapy to the god with full success: Mercury’s limbs soften and gain a humanlike agility, and this treatment significantly furthers his process of humanization. In the later versions, on the other hand – the film story line and script – the plot splits and there are parallel narratives: one follows the humanization of Mercury accomplished through the *experience* of the full range of human impulses and emotions, and ultimately

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

completed through love and without scientific intervention; the other describes a scientist's disastrous attempt to reanimate a dead man. In these reanimation scenes from the later versions, Doctor Speranza and his assistant Doctor Z ero have reassured a woman that they can bring her husband, who inadvertently shot himself, back to life. When they hook the body up to their machine, though the electricity does provoke lifelike movement, it results only in the man's mechanical reenactment of his last action (i.e., his accidental suicide) repeated in a continuous loop, which Savinio likens to the sound of a skipping gramophone.¹²

Between these two later versions, however, there is significant divergence in the characterizations of the doctor-scientist's reaction. In the short film synopsis, the doctor, like his visitors, is dismayed not only at the horrific scene, but also because his experiment has failed: production of physical movement alone cannot be considered life (i.e., a return to movement cannot be considered a return to life). In the filmscript, on the other hand, in the face of the same horrific result Doctor Speranza revels in his "success," deeming it his "capolavoro!" (masterpiece!) and criticizing as petty the wife who screams "This is not life!" In the name of science, this later version of Doctor Speranza seems to have reduced his definition of "life" to an observable "action-reaction" sequence, and he does not concern himself with broader, less quantifiable meanings of life (in one scene cut from the manuscript, he dismisses the concept of the soul because it has too many variables and complicates his calculations). What's more, we soon learn that the doctor has an entire room filled with automata-like "reanimated" corpses, experiments all of them, just like the husband who has been reduced to a mechanical parody of human life, an electromechanical short circuit, a glitch, the eternal repetition of a paradoxical gesture (suicide), like a broken record. The scene ultimately ends with the automata-experiments trampling Doctor Speranza. And the story turns again to the successful humanization of Mercury – not through scientific intervention, but through his experience of the very "human" emotions of love, hope, empathy, compassion.

La nostra anima

In *La nostra anima*, a Doctor Sayas takes Nivasio Dolcemare (a recurrent Savinian alter ego) and his partner on a tour of a bizarre museum, in which the scientist explains to the visitors that they are in a type of wax museum, except that, instead of wax, here the figures are made of flesh.¹³ In the basement of this museum, at the doctor's prompt, a caged human-bird-machine named Psyche recounts a radical, seemingly protofeminist retelling of the myth of Psyche and

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

Eros: upon uncovering the identity of her husband, who in this Savinian version is ultimately revealed to be nothing but an enormous winged phallus – “monstrous both by excess and reduction,” notes Keala Jewell¹⁴ – Psyche is thoroughly repulsed and completely rejects him.

Through the process of contextualizing and reworking this traditional myth, Savinio also wove in contemporary theories of the mind, especially inspired by the field of psychoanalysis: it is a tale of Psyche and psyche (and *anima*).¹⁵ When Nivasio inquires about an insistent, jarring, and disorienting ambient sound that the visitors hear, Doctor Sayas responds that “it’s the electrical current that animates the flesh figures.”¹⁶ This strange and, to an extent, dehumanizing characterization of a figure who traditionally represents the human soul picks up on centuries-long debates about electricity as an animating force, fluid, and energy, but also specifically alludes to contemporary understandings of the role of electricity in the nervous system, and perhaps – with this administration of electricity directly to P/psyche – also to the emergence in those same years of electroshock therapy, developed by the Italians Ugo Cerletti and Lucio Bini in 1938. At first the coverage of the new therapy was not widespread, but by the early forties it was becoming more extensive, as the fascist regime sought to hail these two scientists as representative of the Italian genius.¹⁷

And while on the one hand *La nostra anima* represents a reproposal of the ancient myth in a modern scientific setting, on the other the story might be read as a critical review of the mythology/iconography of the metaphysical school in technological terms: the mannequins of the twenties, most famously represented as still figures in painting, are now reborn as organic-electromechanical bodies who give the appearance of moving and performing “(semi)autonomously” when properly supplied with electrical current; certainly they are still manipulatable like the painterly mannequins, but this updated representation contains the additional suggestion that their actions may be programmed or remotely transmitted, playing directly upon popular ideas of cinematic, radio, and domestic-appliance technologies.¹⁸ In other words, one could ask whether Psyche is the first literary character who is “plugged in.” But for whose benefit? Though Psyche may recount a tale of liberation from the god Eros and from a hypermasculine authority figure, her unhappy condition trapped in the museum under Doctor Sayas’s watch reads also as a cautionary tale against merely replacing one authority with another. Doctor Sayas has brought the visitors to the museum to show them the marvelous spectacle of P/psyche: he claps his hands like a “trainer” (*domatore*) to get her to start, delights in her

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

performance, and just as she's about to go off-script and reveal to Nivasio the meaning of "true love," Doctor Sayas asserts his authority over *la nostra anima*: he pulls the plug and shuts her down.

"Paradiso terrestre"

In his article "Fallatajà," published in *Oggò* on October 9, 1939, and later included in *Ascolto il tuo cuore, città* (1944),¹⁹ Savinio included a section discussing the works of the notorious *pietrificatore* Girolamo Segato,²⁰ who had developed techniques of preserving corpses that not only retained the form of the bodies, but also the color of the tissues. Savinio's text imagines the creation of a "museo di famiglia" that would replace the usual portraits of deceased family members with their actual petrified bodies, and envisions a cozy intergenerational scene that reads as a nostalgic and fanciful version of a family reunion; the description is not without some sense of irony.²¹

Savinio returned to the process of petrification in "Paradiso terrestre," composed near the end of the fascist regime, in the middle of the Second World War.²² This story reads as another cautionary tale against demiurgical tendencies taken too far and against the potential abuses of science, authority, and excessive efforts to realize an Ideal. The scientist in "Paradiso terrestre" is a renowned embalmer, Signor Didaco, known also as Padreterno. Savinio's description of him mentions specifically that Padreterno studied the techniques of Egyptian mummification and has tried his hands at Segato's petrification methods. So, the sense is that this embalming is meant to last – ideally not only to slow, but indeed to halt the normal processes of decomposition. As an old man, Padreterno uses his embalming skills to realize his dream project: a version of Earthly Paradise within which all plants and animals are perfectly preserved. One day he returns home to find his young wife, whom he has already renamed Eve, and her lover/his assistant, whom he has already renamed Adam, asleep at the base of the Tree of Knowledge. He promptly kills them and embalms them to complete his Garden of Eden. Signor Didaco is proud of this work – it is also called his "capolavoro!" – and he invites his friends and clients to come see it.

Whereas in "Vita di Mercurio" and *La nostra anima* the figures of god and scientist remain distinct and, to an extent, juxtaposed, in "Paradiso terrestre" Savinio collapses them into the embalmer Padreterno, unambiguously warning of the scientist who sees himself as a "creating god, or a demiurge."²³ Particularly noteworthy in this story, as well, is Savinio's description of the public's reaction to the completed diorama: initially the men, women, and children who come to see

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

it praise it, admire it, are amazed by it ("lodavano, ammiravano, stupivano"),²⁴ without really pausing to consider what means led to this end. Finally, however, someone understands what has happened, and the spell is broken ("Infine qualcuno capì e l'incanto fu rotto").²⁵ Savinio describes this public as enchanted, entranced by the world the scientist has created and by his technical virtuosity – so blinded by the marvels before them that they almost forget to question how they came to be. While in "Vita di Mercurio" Maurizio does initially seek the aid of Doctor Speranza in reanimating the dead husband, and in *La nostra anima* Nivasio agrees to Doctor Sayas's tour of the fleshworks museum, they are never described as enchanted, and their reactions to the scientists are fairly early and consistently represented as horrified and suspicious, respectively.²⁶ "Paradiso terrestre," in contrast, explicitly warns against the subliminal power of artful science, emphasizing that it is the public's responsibility to recognize and call out potential abuses.

Again, in these works by Savinio, science and technology are not targeted; instead, the focus is on the misuse and the potential for (in)advertent harm and dehumanization at the hands of those who, whether blinded by personal ambition or operating idealistically "in the name of science," value their own pursuit of knowledge or creation over the *human* and dignified treatment of the individual. In inviting us to consider the hybrid nature of the human (human-animal-machine) – which we see throughout the entirety of his work – Savinio especially criticized the scientist's attempts to meddle with the natural processes of death – through reanimation and the fixing of the body in earthly immortality – and to obstruct the passage into eternity.

In *La nostra anima*, Nivasio observes Psyche and a question torments him: "What is she, a living creature or a mechanical one?"²⁷ As she begins to speak, the hybrid Psyche solidifies her own mystery. And just as this thought comes to him, Nivasio abandons his attempt to solve the mystery, to determine whether she is alive or machine. The same uncertainty governs Savinio's "Il signor Münster"(Mr. Münster, written in 1941, published in 1943),²⁸ which is, to an extent, a companion piece to *La nostra anima* (written in the same years).²⁹ It tells the story of a man who, as he goes about his daily activities, one day realizes that "he has begun to die [...] he has begun to be dead."³⁰ The plot unfolds as a sort of Frankenstein-construction in reverse, where instead of being assembled from a collection of body parts and made to "live," Signor Münster instead watches his transition from living to dead: he becomes lighter and lighter as body parts slowly fall away, one at a time, surviving only as *anima*.³¹ Whereas Psyche has become heavy, caged in the basement of the museum, the soul trapped within

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

the body – or become the body itself – with Signor Münster, the soul is liberated from the body, buoyant and wandering through the streets of Rome. On the mystery of Signor Münster's life that continues after death, the narrator says:

There remains to be unveiled the mystery of his life which continues even after the death of the body, of this light that burns even after the destruction of the lamp. But does not Mr. Münster know, he who has long meditated on these problems and has written so much, that it is indelicate, and not only indelicate, but imprudent, and not only imprudent, but immoral, and not only immoral, but vain *to seek to lift the veil over the mysteries of the soul*, and that *the metaphysics of life* it meant to be taken without examination, without diffidence, with a soul as pure and thankful as poetry?³²

The implicit suggestion here is that metaphysics is precisely the *poetic* mystery of life and death, its source is our uncertainty before the animate and inanimate, what Freud called “the uncanny.” After using the metaphor of the lamp (arguably the central object of Psyche's tale) to describe the relationship of body and soul, the narrator in “Il signor Münster” suggests that it is not only indelicate, imprudent, and immoral, but also useless (*vano*) to attempt to lift the veil on the mysteries of the soul (*anima*). As Nivasio looks upon Psyche (*la nostra anima*), he also concludes that it would be “useless” to continue to try to interrogate this mystery, and elaborates on why:

Besides, it would be useless to try to penetrate this mystery by starting from the current principles of the means of knowing the nature of things. It is no longer a case of effecting a “transvaluation of values” by considering as natural that which is taken as artificial and vice versa. The puerile, Nietzschean procedure would leave us with a mere duplication of the error that clouds the human spirit. Man thinks badly because he thinks in circles. He always returns to the same thoughts and he takes for new thoughts the other face of thoughts already thought. That is classical though. Closed thought. Conservative thought. Thought that, as its own centre, finds God. He who has the courage to renounce this “divine” conclusion breaks the circle and sets out on a road straight and free, without a destination, without a conclusion, because it is infinite.³³

Our ways of knowing the nature of things cannot penetrate the mystery of the Psyche, the mystery of the *anima*. Whether she is alive or machine is not the fundamental question, as the contraposition of artificial and natural sets up a false binary, and leaves us trapped within circular thinking. Savinio saw the circle not as a form of perfection, but as a prison³⁴ – and a prison that traps people in the inhuman condition of immortality instead of allowing for the most human and desired death (*umanissima morte*).³⁵ If we were to manage to escape the

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

circle – break from the “divine” conclusion and the authorities (in these works, the scientists) who would confine us, not only would we be liberated on our own paths, set free to explore and understand beyond the binary of natural and artificial, but we might eventually reach the stillness of eternity.³⁶

The Roles of Artist and Scientist

In both “Vita di Mercurio” and in *La nostra anima*, the figure of the scientist is juxtaposed with a Savinian alter ego (who is, we might suggest, a stand-in for the artist): in “Vita di Mercurio,” the mechanical farce of life that Doctor Speranza manages to recreate in “reanimating” the husband, consigning him to a grotesque performance of earthly immortality, is countered with Maurizio’s guidance of Mercury through the range of human experience so that he can achieve his desired passage into eternity; in *La nostra anima*, Doctor Sayas’s thinly veiled manipulation of his caged Psyche’s narrative is questioned by the skeptical Nivasio, to whom, in going off-script, she is about to reveal the meaning of “true love” – a concept perhaps the artist is better equipped to understand than the Positivist scientist (as it is, of course, not quantifiable).

However, the two roles are not entirely distinct: the artist borrows from scientific theories and vocabulary to imagine his works, and he employs deeper understandings of the way the body and mind work to produce more lifelike and complex (hybrid) representations of the human; in a long tradition of interventions on the body and mind, the scientist performs his operations with the intent of producing the desired functional results, but also often attentive to aesthetic considerations, particularly in the presentation of his work to the public (think of Andreas Vesalius’s highly aestheticized anatomical text *De humani corporis fabrica* [1543], Clemente Susini’s anatomical wax models from the early nineteenth century, or Jean-Martin Charcot’s demonstrations and representations of hysteria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, for example).³⁷ Both the artist and the scientist generate works of movement (the rhythmic arts, music, and also words, images, and sounds that derive from and spark inspiration and the imagination;³⁸ here, the ironically faltering mechanistic efforts of electrically animating Psyche and reanimating the husband), for both craft or construct forms of immobility (in the plastic arts, in the petrified bodies of Signor Didaco). One primary distinction, it may be argued, is that the artist does not *directly* (re)produce life and death, but offers a poetic version or interpretation of it; the scientist, as Savinio represents him in these works, instead operates directly on the human body and mind, positioning himself as arbiter of life and death, manipulator of human movement and expression.

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

These cautionary tales illustrate the potentially greater stakes involved when the (mad) scientist, rather than the artist, indulges his demiurgical fantasies: Doctor Speranza's horrifying results in his attempt to reverse death; Doctor Sayas's caging and exploitation of "our soul"; and, in the ultimate tale of "playing god," Padreterno's murder and immobilization of the young lovers.

Savinio's personal artistic "metaphysics" conceived of the metaphysical as a "continuation" of, or extension through, the physical world; not an "ipotetico dopo-naturale" (hypothetical after-the-natural-world),³⁹ but rather a larger and superior reality, everything that exists beyond the obviously visible or perceptible. Again, as he recounted in 1948, his (and his brother's) metaphysical poetics aimed to represent, fundamentally, the "spettro delle cose," their internal appearance, internal anatomy, architecture, geography;⁴⁰ hence, Savinio tended in these works not only to critique the external forces that operate on individuals (the doctor-scientist), but also to incorporate scientific theories and technologies that explore how the body, soul, and mind "work" internally, or what – perhaps invisibly – powers them from within (electricity, psychic mechanisms). In his elaboration of his new "metaphysics," Savinio challenged traditional binary relationships of human and machine, animate and inanimate, life and death, that trap us within circular thinking; he contested, on the one hand, the positivistic, materialistic, mechanistic views of the human generated in the Enlightenment, and, on the other, the idealizing myths employed in the promotion of contemporary ideologies and authorities, arguing instead for new and multiple formulations of the continuously transforming human: "It's not explaining nature that stops it, polarizes it, and demeans it: but explaining it "in only one way."⁴¹

Savinio considered the figures of both the scientist and the artist – specifically in the roles they assume in the treatment and representation of the human and in their function as mediators and creators of worlds – architects of animation and immobility, transformation and preservation. Victoria Nelson argues that after the Renaissance the figure of the magus divided along two lines: the "good magus" becomes absorbed into the figures of the artist and writer; the "bad magus," meanwhile, "with its supernatural powers linked to the dark grotto of the underworld, [is] absorbed into the figure of the scientist." This, she contends, is ultimately the origin of the trope of the "mad scientist."⁴² Looking at the works examined in this paper, one could argue that Savinio indeed favored a characterization of the scientist as "mad," or at least willfully ignorant or dismissive of the dehumanizing effects that his actions have on his patient-object-ward. Through his treatment and consideration of his patients as resources for experimentation and as puppets of performance, the doctor-

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

scientist, in his *hybris*, contributes to the devaluation and dehumanization of the individual, and in a broader context, of humanity itself. If scientists are hailed (or regard themselves) as all-powerful priests of a new secular religion, in Savinio's works the artist is positioned as a counterbalance to their power, one whose primary and fundamentally important function is to remind us of the multiple values and dimensions of truth (the role of the artist is, after all, to "increase the number of truths so that the reconstitution of a single Truth becomes impossible");⁴³ or in other words, the artist is a counterbalance who importantly provides the innumerable perspectives of the larger and superior scope of reality that art is often better positioned to capture and suggest.

Bibliography

Baldacci, Paolo, and Pia Vivarelli. *Alberto Savinio*. Milan: Mazzotta, 2002. Exhibition catalogue.

Bellini, Davide. *Dalla tragedia all'enciclopedia: le poetiche e la biblioteca di Savinio*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2013.

Bonaventura, Enzo. *La psicoanalisi*. Milan: A. Mondadori, 1938.

Buttier, Rosanna. *Savinio giornalista: itinerario bibliografico*. Rome: Bulzoni, 1987.

Carrel, Alexis. *Man, the unk nown*. Translated by John Rodker. London: H. Hamilton, 1935.

David, Michel. *La psicoanalisi nella cultura italiana*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1966.

Della Valle, Carlo. *Girolamo Segato (1792-1836)*. Rome: C. Voghera, 1934.

Jew ell, Keala J. "Features of Difference: Myths of Monstrosity in Savinio's *La nostra anima*." In *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, edited by Keala J. Jew ell, 27-50. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001.

Morus, Iwan Rhys. "A Grand and Universal Panacea: Death, Resurrection and the Electric Chair." In *Bodies/Machines*, edited by Iwan Rhys Morus, 93-124. Oxford: Berg, 2002.

Nelson, Victoria. *The Secret Life of Puppets*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2001.

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

Roussel, Raymond. *Locus Solus*. Translated by Rupert C. Cunningham. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970.

Savinio, Alberto. *Ascolto il tuo Cuore, Città*. Milan: Adelphi, 1984.

Savinio, Alberto. *Capri*. Milan: Adelphi, 2014.

Savinio, Alberto. *Casa "la vita."* Milan: Bompiani, 1943.

Savinio, Alberto. *Casa "la vita": e altri racconti*. Milan: Adelphi, 1999.

Savinio, Alberto. *Dico a te, Clio*. Milan: Adelphi, 1992.

Savinio, Alberto. *Il sogno meccanico*. Edited by Vanni Scheiwiller. Milan: Libri Scheiwiller, 1981.

Savinio, Alberto. *La nascita di Venere: scritti sull'arte*. Milan: Adelphi, 2007.

Savinio, Alberto. *La nostra anima; Il signor Münster*. Milan: Adelphi, 1981.

Savinio, Alberto. *Opere, I. Hermaphrodito e altri romanzi*. Milan: Adelphi, 1995.

Savinio, Alberto. *Nuova enciclopedia*. Milan: Adelphi, 1977.

Savinio, Alberto. *Palchetti romani*. Milan: Adelphi, 1982.

Savinio, Alberto. *Scritti dispersi, 1943–1952*. Milan: Adelphi, 2004.

Savinio, Alberto. *The Lives of the Gods*. Translated by James Brooks and Susan Etlinger. London: Atlas Press, 1991.

Savinio, Alberto. *Tutta la vita*. Milan: Adelphi, 2011.

1. See also Pia Vivarelli, "Alberto Savinio, artista dallo sguardo 'leggero.' Un percorso tra mito Greco e scienza moderna," in Paolo Baldacci and Pia Vivarelli, *Alberto Savinio* (Milan: Mazzotta, 2002), 11–18.
2. "A me non importa la 'forma' della teoria scientifica e che la teoria sia vera. (Attraverso quante verità è passata la storia del mondo?). Importa che la teoria scientifica sia tale di forma da ispirare idee di movimento e di libertà." Alberto Savinio, "Navighiamo sopra un mare di fuoco," *Il Corriere della Sera*, November 27, 1948; reprinted in *Scritti dispersi, 1943–1952* (Milan: Adelphi, 2004), 964. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this essay are mine.

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

3. Ian Rhys Morus, "A Grand and Universal Panacea: Death, Resurrection and the Electric Chair," in *Bodies/Machines*, ed. Ian Rhys Morus (Oxford: New York, Berg, 2002), 94.
4. Among their many performances, Aldini, in 1803, and Ure, in 1818, each famously administered electricity from a galvanic battery to recently executed criminals, provoking convulsive movement of the limbs in each case and eliciting mixed reactions of approval and horror from audiences.
5. For histories on medical electricity, see, for example, Paola Bertucci and Giuliano Pancaldi, *Electric bodies: Episodes in the history of medical electricity* (Bologna: Università di Bologna, 2001); and Margaret Rowbottom and Charles Susskind, *Electricity and Medicine: History of Their Interaction* (San Francisco: San Francisco Press, 1984). For histories of automata, see, for example, Alfred Chapuis and Edmond Droz, *Automata: A historical and technological study* (Neuchâtel: Éditions du Griffon, 1958); and Jessica Riskin "The Defecating Duck, or, the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (Summer 2003): 599–633.
6. "Nel medico uomo comune, la porta aperta sui segreti del nostro organismo e della nostra psiche costituisce una tentazione costante di "giocare" coi nostri segreti, un invito alla delinquenza [...]." Alberto Savinio, *Palchetti romani* (Milan: Adelphi, 1982), 279–80; originally published as "Il dottor Klitter," *Omnibus*, August 6, 1938.
7. "La vera méta della vita: sparire." Alberto Savinio, *Dico a te, Clío* (Milan: Adelphi, 1992), 12.
8. "[...] nella vita 'degli' uomini la cosa più importante è la morte. Morire è un problema. Vari sono i problemi che ci tocca risolvere nel corso di quest'avventura terrestre nella quale non per volontà nostra ci siamo trovati implicati. Problema di saper vivere, problema di saper invecchiare, problema di saper morire: il più importante di tutti perché è il problema ultimo e che dà il passaggio." *Casa "la vita"* (Milan: Bompiani, 1943), v.
9. In *Il sogno meccanico* (Milan: Libri Scheiwiller, 1981), Vanni Scheiwiller published the *soggetto cinematografico* with the date 1949, and in the bibliography gives it the range 1945–49. The introductory essay to Scheiwiller's book, Mario Verdone's "Savinio e il cinema," dates it 1945. Records (letters of receipt) contained in the Fondo Savinio indicate that a version of the "Vita di Mercurio" story line was submitted to the Società Anonima Film Italiani Roma (SAFIR) in 1941 and in 1943. It is not clear whether it is the same version or whether this published story line has undergone alterations.

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

10. Savinio began this forty-five-page typewritten filmscript on December 19, 1949; it includes handwritten edits presumably from after this date. Though not entirely precise, this does seem to indicate that the screenplay is the final version on which Savinio worked. The early handwritten notes and this later typewritten filmscript can be found in the Archivio Contemporaneo Gabinetto Vieussieux, Florence, Italy, Fondo Alberto Savinio 21.7 and 21.8.
11. The analogy of the brain as a power center had been common for years, and it was supported by Alexis Carrel and articulated in *L'Homme, cet inconnu* (1935, Savinio owned and had underlined the Italian edition, *L'uomo, questo sconosciuto*, from 1938). See Alexis Carrel, *Man, the unknown*, trans. John Rodker (London: H. Hamilton, 1935).
12. This result has a direct antecedent in Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus* (1914). Savinio admired Roussel as a writer and mentions him by name in multiple works and articles. In a lengthy passage, Roussel describes his protagonist-scientist Canterel's production of eight *tableaux vivants* in which corpses, through the administration of an electric current along with the substances *resurrectine* and *vitalium*, reenact the most important moments of their lives. The purpose of this reenactment is not to bring the corpses back to life, so much as to enable a faithful re-presentation, a tribute, a re-evocation of these highlighted moments in celebration of the deceased, to give comfort to those who are still alive; it's a commemoration, perhaps, or an externalized memory. Canterel gives particular attention to providing these moving corpses with all of the props and stage settings that will allow for the most natural and reassuring recreation of the moments, but again, there is no insistence that the corpses have been restored to life. Savinio, on the other hand, not only has the husband reenact a dubiously proud moment of his life (his own accidental suicide), but deprives him of the props (the revolver) that would make sense of that action in a physical reenactment; the husband's continuous re-performance of his own suicide then results in a scene that repeatedly focuses on his death (not a glorious moment from his life), and does so in a manner made more ridiculous by his jerky awkward motions, gesticulations with bad consequences.
13. "As you will see, it's a sort of Museo Grévin, only that instead of wax, the figures are made of flesh." "Vedrete, è una specie di Museo Grévin, con questo in più che le figure non sono di cera ma di carne." Alberto Savinio, *La nostra Anima; Il signor Münster* (Milan: Adelphi, 1981), 14.

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

14. Keala Jewell, "Creatures of Difference: Myths of Monstrosity in Savinio's *La nostra anima*," in *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, ed. Keala Jewell (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 37.
15. For discussions of Savinio's use of and familiarity with psychoanalysis, see, for example: Michel David's *La psicoanalisi nella cultura italiana* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1966), in which David writes that Savinio initially "understands [psychoanalysis] badly from a theoretical standpoint, but intuits it readily," ("[la] conosce male teoreticamente, me [la] intuisce prontamente", 358), but adds that even in the early drafts of *La casa ispirata* and *Tragedia d'Infanzia*, from 1920–21, there are signs of an increased familiarity with psychoanalytical theories (359–60). Davide Bellini's *Dalla tragedia all'enciclopedia* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2013) argues that Savinio significantly expanded his familiarity with Freud's works through his reading of Enzo Bonaventura's *La psicoanalisi* (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1938).
16. "È la corrente che anima le figure di carne." Savinio, *La nostra anima; Il signor Münster*, 23.
17. For example, *La Stampa* – to which Savinio contributed fairly frequently – ran a five-part series on electroshock, "Il turbine che guarisce" (The maelstrom that heals), from December 27, 1941–January 15, 1942. The fourth installment in the series ran on January 9, 1942, right next to an article by Savinio, "Il cane," which would later be included in *Capri* (2014), a collection of Savinio's writings about the island that functions as a peculiar sort of travel diary or tourist guide. The headline of the article on electroshock, which speaks in highly mechanistic terms about the body, was "'Agitated' on the threshold of attack. The mechanism and 'sense' of the convulsive attack through which the automatisms of the nervous system are discharged." ("'Agitati' sulla soglia dell'attacco. Il meccanismo ed il 'senso' della crisi convulsivante attraverso cui si scaricano gli automatismi del sistema nervoso").
18. And indeed, hybrid Psyche is not the only monster in the fleshworks museum, as we learn from the experiments in social control of the "autonomous wills." Doctor Sayas explains: "Don't be afraid, madam. In this hall, things happen automatically, without human intervention. [...] The inventor of these mysterious forces, called 'autonomous will,' is experimenting with applying them to social life, and, before leaving this museum, we will visit a hall in which a model of a perfect society is being tested, where people move, eat, work, and make love, not according to their own wills and impulses, but as the effect of an irresistible force that emanates from a central station. That will be the triumph of collectivism.

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

During these trials, they also suffer breakdowns of the generating station, interruptions of the animating force, and it's an edifying spectacle to see the components of this perfect society suddenly collapsing and the perfectly organized life give way to immobility and silence of death." See Alberto Savinio, "Psyche's Tale," in *The Lives of the Gods*, trans. James Brook and Susan Etlinger (London: Atlas Press, 1991), 23–24. Savinio's original:

"Non si spaventi, signora. Dentro questa sala le cose avvengono per virtù propria, non per intervento della umana volontà. [...] L'inventore di queste misteriose forze da lui chiamate 'autonome volontà' sta sperimentando l'applicazione di esse alla vita sociale, e prima di uscire da questo museo visiteremo una sala nella quale è in prova un modello di società perfetta, con uomini che si muovono, mangiano, lavorano, amano non per volontà e impulso propri, sì per effetto di una forza che emana da una centrale e alla quale non è possibile sottrarsi. Sarà il trionfo del collettivismo. Durante la prova si sperimentano pure guasti eventuali della centrale con interruzione della forza animatrice, ed è uno spettacolo edificante vedere i componenti quella società perfetta che cascano giù di colpo, e alla vita perfettamente organizzata succede l'immobilità e il silenzio della morte." Savinio, *La nostra anima; Il signor Münster*, 39. This dystopian "model of a perfect society" (with a hint of Soviet "collectivism") effectively reduces its members to automata who function only in the service of and at the will of the central authority, an external organizing force, and plays off fears of a both a hypnotized and radio-controlled mass and of the more subtle forms of social control and conditioning that results from the exaltation of collectivism and of a higher authority.

19. Also published as "Museo in famiglia," *La Stampa*, January 13, 1941.
20. Savinio owned, made notes in, and quoted from Carlo della Valle's biography of Segato. See Carlo Della Valle, *Girolamo Segato (1792–1836)* (Rome: C. Voghera, 1934).
21. The publication of this article is contemporary with and has the same feel as the publication of the final entries of his "travel diary" series (collected in *Dico a te, Clio* in 1939), which recount Savinio's visits to the Etruscan necropolis, where he had pleasant interactions with the dwellers of cities of the dead. The Etruscans in fact extended to Savinio an invitation to remain with them in their peaceful world and he was tempted to stay, especially as Europe was finding itself on the brink of a horrific crisis: the Second World War.
22. Originally published in *La Stampa*, October 21, 1942; republished in Alberto Savinio, *Tutta la Vita* (Milan: Adelphi, 2011).

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

23. "E padreterno il signor Didaco naturalmente si sentiva, senza sforzo né affettazione, un dio fabbricatore, ossia un demiurgo." Albert Savinio, "Paradiso terrestre," in *Tutta la Vita*, 585–86.
24. Ibid., 589.
25. Ibid., 590.
26. It is perhaps useful to point out that Maurizio and Nivasio are both Savinian alter egos, and so perhaps already share his apprehensions about "mad" scientists.
27. "Psyche's Tale," 24. Savinio's original: "È una creatura viva costei, oppure una macchina?" *La nostra anima; Il signor Münster*, 39–40.
28. See Tinterri, "Note ai testi: Casa 'la Vita,'" in Alberto Savinio, *Casa "la vita": e altri racconti* (Milan: Adelphi, 1999), 933–34.
29. They were, in fact, republished together by Adelphi in 1981.
30. "Non gli rimangono più dubbi. Egli sa che 'ha cominciato a morire' [...] aveva cominciato a esser morto." Savinio, *La nostra anima; Il signor Münster*, 86–87.
31. "Non sente più il proprio corpo. Levarsi in piedi lo ha voluto lui, ma il movimento è avvenuto "a folle." Ora egli potrebbe bucarsi una mano, un piede senza soffrire. La sua anima va in giro, guarda, ascolta, cerca un *altro* amore, diverso da quello che cercava quaggiù e non ha trovato." Ibid., 113.
32. Alberto Savinio, "Mr. Münster," in *The Lives of the Gods*, 118. Savinio's original: "Resta da svelare il mistero della sua vita che continua anche dopo la morte del corpo, di questa luce che arde anche dopo la distruzione della lampada. Ma non sa il signor Münster, lui che tanto ha meditato intorno a questi problemi e tanto ha scritto, che è indelicato, e nonché indelicato è imprudente, e nonché imprudente è immorale, e nonché immorale è vano cercare di sollevare il velo sui misteri dell'anima, e che la metafisica della vita va accolta senza esame, senza diffidenza, con animo puro e grato come la poesia?" Ibid., 87.
33. "Psyche's Tale," 24. Savinio's original: "Del resto sarebbe vano tentar di penetrare esso mistero, partendo dai principi tuttora in vigore sui modi di conoscenza della natura delle cose. Non è neppur il caso di compiere una delle cosiddette "tramutazioni dei valori," siderando naturale quello che è considerato artificiale e viceversa. Questo procedimento niceano e puerile ci farebbe cadere nel duplo dell'errore che annebbia la mente umana. L'uomo pensa male perché pensa circolarmente. Ritorna di continuo sugli stessi pensieri, e scambia per pensieri nuovi l'altra faccia dei pensieri già pensati. È il pensiero classico. Il pensiero chiuso. Il pensiero conservatore. Il pensiero che di se stesso trova Dio. Chi ha il coraggio di rinunciare a questa 'divina' conclusione, rompe il cerchio e si mette per una via libera e diritta, che non conosce meta, non conosce conclusione perché è infinita." Ibid., 40

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

34. "Protagora nel cerchio vedeva il segno della perfezione, io vedo il segno della prigionia. E questi cerchi che mondi e mondi tracciano in perpetuo intorno a noi, questo infinito girare dell'universo non è se non la forma di uno sterminato carcere: una giostra pazza e disperata." Alberto Savinio, "Giostra," in *Nuova enciclopedia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1977), 205; originally published in *La lettura*, July 1943. Savinio held this view of the circle even from his earliest days of writing: "Quel greco, che si chiamava Protagoras e propugnò la giustezza del cerchio, si diceva filosofo: fu invece un malfattore." Alberto Savinio, "Hermaphrodito," in *Opere, I. Hermaphrodito e altri romanzi* (Milan: Adelphi, 1995), 191; originally published in *La Voce*, March–December 1916.
35. "Per Protagora sofista il cerchio indicava la perfezione. Noi preferiamo l'angolo, il rettangolo, il quadrato. Chi loda Giotto per il suo o, non sa che danno gli fa. [...] Il cerchio è anche il segno dell'immortalità. Questa condizione inumana noi non l'amiamo, non la desideriamo e aspettiamo con fiducia l'umanissima morte." Dated August 16 in Savinio, *Dico a te, Clio*, 49; originally published as "Francavilla," *Il Mediterraneo*, September 16, 1939.
36. "Pensai che per seguire il proprio destino l'uomo deve sfuggire alla rotazione, a qualunque rotazione, alla rotazione della giostra, alla rotazione della terra, alla rotazione universale, la quale vuole chiuderlo nel suo giro e implicarlo nel destino comune. Pensai che anche l'ordine morale è rappresentato da una retta che contrasta al cerchio. Pensai che l'uomo nel suo ideale cammino non deve mai tornare indietro e tanto meno sui propri passi, come lo costringe il cerchio. Pensai che nostro dovere è di rinunciare alla seduzione del cerchio, è di salvarci dal cerchio e da qualunque movimento meccanico o ideale, da qualunque movimento fisico o metafisico, e arrivare a poco a poco, puri di movimento, al cuore dell'immoto: alla nostra eternità." Savinio, "Decadenza della giostra," in *Nuova enciclopedia*, 209–10.
37. See, for example, Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace, *Spectacular Bodies: The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2000).
38. Compare with Savinio's statement "Le arti nelle quali è implicito l'elemento ritmico, s'ispirano all'idea del tempo, del moto, del divenire, della vita insomma," in "Immobilità terrestre," in *La nascita di Venere: scritti sull'arte* (Milan: Adelphi, 2007), 97.

Alberto Savinio's Hybrid Bodies: Incorporating Science and Techne

39. Ibid., 48.
40. "Ricordo l'insistenza di mio fratello e mia, al tempo in cui di conserva illustravamo e commentavamo il carattere della 'nostra' poesia metafisica, a parlare dello 'spettro' delle cose, ossia della loro sembianza interna. Da qui il carattere 'di sogno' della nostra poesia metafisica, di un mondo in condizione di sogno, ossia di nuda interiorità e sgombro delle rivestiture aggiunte dall'esteriorità. E ricordo che l'anatomia interna era un elemento che più spesso ricorreva nella nostra poesia metafisica, come un'architettura,' come una specie di 'geografia' di quella nostra poesia." Savinio, "Taletè e Pitagora," in *Scritti dispersi*, 737; originally published in *La Fiera Letteraria*, February 13, 1948.
41. "Non lo spiegare la natura ferma la mente dell'uomo, la polarizza, l'abbrutisce: ma lo spiegarla 'in un modo solo.'" Savinio, "[Tommaso Campanella]," in *Scritti dispersi*, 61–62 fn.; originally published as the preface to Tommaso Campanella, *La città del sole* (Rome: Colombo, 1944).
42. "The good magus role, with its benign demiurgic powers first divorced from divine inspiration, then aestheticized and psychologized, was ultimately absorbed into the figures of the artist and the writer; the bad magus role, with its supernatural powers linked to the dark grotto of the underworld, was absorbed into the figure of the scientist. The figure of the 'mad scientist' did not arise, as is commonly believed, from a mistrust of the new empirical science's stupendous achievements, good and bad, but rather from a much older mistrust of those who mediate with the supernatural outside the bounds of organized religion. Now, as then, it represents a disguised fear of sorcery." Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 8.
43. "Aumentare il numero delle verità, fino a rendere impossibile la ricostituzione della Verità." Savinio, "[Gigiotti Zanini]," in *Scritti dispersi*, 582; originally published as "Il montanismo di Zanini," *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, November 2, 1947.

About the Author

Nicole Gercke is a Lecturer in Italian Studies in the Department of Classics, Humanities and Italian Studies at UNH. She earned her B.A. in Classics from Dartmouth College, her M.A. in Italian Studies from Middlebury College and her Ph.D. in Italian Studies from Brown University. She was a postdoctoral research fellow and continues to work with the Italian Studies Department and the Virtual Humanities Lab at Brown University. She has been the recipient of several awards including a fellowship from the University of Bologna to research "Humanism, Neohumanism and Posthumanism in the Media Age."