
In *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics and Art*, Elizabeth Grosz, a Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies at Rutgers University, uses a philosophical framework shaped by Darwin’s theory on natural and sexual selection and applies it to a variety of social, political, economic and conceptual relations. *Becoming Undone* demonstrates how Charles Darwin’s scientific account of the evolution of species can be utilised to explore specific cultural and philosophical aspects of life, politics, and art to reveal new and provocative understandings of each.

Grosz’s postmodern analysis of Darwinism rests on Darwin’s own hypotheses on the difference between natural selection and sexual selection, and the main principles that regulate both survival and attractiveness. These hypotheses are then explained as ‘mark[ing] both the natural world and the worlds of human culture’ (p.6). She pays particular attention to Darwin’s theory of sexual selection and how a deeper, more multi-disciplinary understanding of this scientific and objective theory can transform the humanities, the discipline of philosophy, an understanding of present male and female relationships, ideas and theories of feminism and identity, and notions of art. By connecting Darwin’s work to the writings of Bergson, Deleuze, Uexkull, Guattari and Irigaray, Grosz is able to enact a postmodern twist on traditional studies of Darwinism. Grosz transforms previous understandings of these works and explores them in a new and evocative light, demonstrating that Darwin’s theories can be used in a surprisingly contemporary way. This unique and stimulating book is saturated in philosophical and theoretical understandings of identity, life and sexual difference but the cultural implications and understandings that can be drawn out of Darwinism can be extracted with some ease by the reader.

This book is located within the field of cultural studies, as Grosz tends to place more emphasis on the theoretical work and implications of other scholars, rather than the historical understanding of feminism, identity, arts and politics. *Becoming Undone* is an ‘attempt to address a series of imperceptible movements, modes of becoming, forms of change and evolutionary transformations’ (p.1) and Grosz is able to do this through the unexpected use of Darwin’s theories. The book is divided into three parts; each explores Darwin’s work in relation to other theorists and identifies what can be extrapolated and applied to our understanding of humanity, art and identity. Part one is dedicated to ‘Human and Inhuman Becomings’, and the first two chapters rest mainly on Darwin’s theories and understanding of life, whilst chapter three identifies how these can be used to explore structural differences between humans – such as race, gender or class. Part two focuses on feminism, and an important refrain in Grosz’s book is her work on this subject and the way in which she uses an in-depth discussion of Darwin’s, Bergson’s and Deleuze’s (who are in no way feminist theorists) writings to provide ‘an alternative to the traditions of liberal political thought’ (p.5), and therefore recast an understanding of this controversial and ever important topic. Grosz insists that Bergson’s understanding of freedom ‘may serve feminist and other radical political thought better than the phenomenological, liberal and Marxist frameworks feminist theory has previously used’ (p.6).
Becoming Undone also includes subjects such as racism and classism and, by resting heavily on work done by Irigaray, Grosz is able to explore how new forms of feminist, anti-racist and class theory could be created through her postmodern philosophy. This section of the text, I feel, offers a particularly original and insightful argument, as Grosz is able to demonstrate how Darwin’s theories of sexual difference and natural selection are able to impact current perceptions of identity and difference. Whilst much has changed in the realm of feminist theory over the last twenty years, within this text Grosz is able to articulate these changes and illustrate the possibilities for the future of feminism, especially the potential to critically engage with the forms and concepts of other disciplines.

Part Three focuses on ‘Animals, Sex and Art’ with the final two chapter of the book focusing on art and animals exclusively. This pairing of art and animals plays an important role in Grosz’s work, as she draws upon the work of Jacob Von Uexkull, Konrad Lorenz, Karl von Frisch and others, to examine how the ‘concept of sexual selection influences the production of art and how art has a genealogy that links it to the sexual forces of animals’ (p.7). By drawing on examples from the art work of Doreen Reid Nakamarra and the Martu Women’s Painting Collective - both part of the Indigenous Aboriginal communities in Australia - Grosz is able to perfectly capture the essence of her argument: ‘art not only represents life as it has been and is ... above all it summons up life to come’ (p. 188). This section of the book is fascinating and demonstrates how Grosz’s new philosophical frameworks can be seen in our everyday world. It is at this point that the reader is able to see both the importance of Grosz’s new contemporary understandings of Darwinism and the implications of this framework in our everyday relationships with each other and the world around us.

Becoming Undone brings to the fore new stimulating ideas on how to view the world around us and sheds some much needed light on Darwin, Bergson, Irigaray, Uexkull, Deleuze, and Guattari’s work. However, this is a book for the philosophy scholar and certainly not for the general reader. The use of the case study on indigenous Australian women allows the reader to immediately recognize the key concepts that Grosz is attempting to demonstrate and by drawing on similar case studies, her central argument would be much easier to identify and follow; the lack of a concise conclusion further hinders the reader’s ability to capture the dominant theme that Grosz is trying to convey. Whilst this book also is weighed down by often unexplained philosophical terminology, it is nevertheless a brilliant book, an insightful and informative interpretation that will no doubt influence philosophy scholars in the future.

Kerriann Shipster, The University of Western Australia