

AMPHIBIA 3.1  
Anura  
Opisthocoela  
Pipa americana



**JAMIE SUTCLIFFE**

# **CRUISING THE COLDSCAPE**

**EL MORGAN'S ANECDOTAL SCIENCE FICTIONS**

Pests, piss and frog genitalia. From the xenomorphic strangeness of quivering rat tail maggots and darting mosquito larvae to humorous tales of intergenerational urination and the disarming security measures of human embryo preservation services, the works comprising El Morgan's exhibition *Tale of the Frozen Bits* unfold a fragmentary yet intimately involving narrative of the biological, political and commercial tracteries that undergird both the practices and popular imaginaries of fertility.

Produced in response to the receipt of a letter in which the artist was informed that she would be charged £350 for the maintenance of the unused fertilised embryos that had been preserved during her own IVF treatment, the short film *Ghosting* (2022) relays Morgan's attempts to "follow-up" on the condition of her own preserved tissue. The film's soundtrack is a conversation that recasts human reproduction as a bizarre exercise in call centre diplomacy. Scored by intermittent hold music, the "ghosting" of the film's title could easily describe the oscillating sense of distance and responsibility Morgan might feel towards these embryos as she tentatively asks "how they are". But it could also describe the awkward dialogue that coalesces around protean matter, the stilted conversational negotiation of "subjects" without personhood.

"It's a brick building just off a junction of the M1," Morgan says detachedly in a second film, *Tale of the Frozen Bits*, while describing the prosaic appearance of the embryos' home within a cold storage facility, "It's between the big IKEA and the dog walking company." Following writer Nicola Twilley we might think of this unremarkable structure - with its dewars full of liquid nitrogen and ominous emergency energy back-up system - as

part of a globally burgeoning "coldscape" or "cryosphere", that "vast and immeasurable volume of thermally controlled space"<sup>1</sup> that combines everything from shipping containers and international seed banks to cheese caves and livestock semen storage into the chilled infrastructure that assists in the production of planetary life today.

Pursuing some of the clues in Morgan's film, we might even append to this list of cold spaces the religious environs of church and abbey, allowing us to chart some strange correlations between the physical and ideological architectures of science and faith. Indeed, the joke shop nun's habit we glimpse the artist wearing as she straddles a toilet, boom in hand, to record her own pee is an allusion to the odd relationship established between the Catholic church and the biotech industry in the early years of In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) development. Following the identification in the mid-1940s by an Italian pharmaceutical company of the role played by follicle-stimulating and luteinizing hormones (FSH and LH) in the stimulation of ovulation, Pope Pius XII would agree to the transportation of huge volumes of hormone-rich nun's urine from catholic retirement homes to assist in the development of Pergonal throughout the 1950s, a fertility drug that continues to be widely used in the IVF process today.<sup>2</sup>

This tale seems almost darkly science fictional, perhaps reminiscent of the sinister techno-theocracy imagined by Fritz Leiber in his 1943 novel of hooded scientific-religious cabals, *Gather, Darkness!*<sup>3</sup> But having been comedically woven into Morgan's fragmentary narrative it becomes somehow autobiographically tamed, a pliable component of a story that might help to elucidate the processes and power structures that have characterised the

artist's own engagement with the often opaque world of fertility treatments.

If this is a kind of science fiction that El Morgan is constructing, then how might we understand its understated, informal approach? Its fusion of personal anecdote, biological specimens caught in states of gestation and infancy, and vaguely delineated pharmaceutical histories?<sup>4</sup> As theorists Mark Fisher and Kodwo Eshun have observed, science fiction as a mode of speculation has, in recent years, evolved a disconcerting relationship with futurity, a dynamic that Fisher came to term "SF capital" and which Eshun would further characterise by its "positive feedback between future-oriented media and capital" in which information about the future "circulates as an increasingly important commodity".<sup>5</sup>

In a period of volatile market futurisms and biotechnological innovations that threaten to subsume the human as we know it, traditional hopes for science fiction's ethical litmus tests seem somewhat naïve. Perhaps subdued science fictional postulations like Morgan's *Tale of the Frozen Bits* might work in the manner of what science writer Stacey Alaimo has termed a "material memoir", an approach to testimony that brings storytelling into useful contiguities with biological matter and amateur medical research to explore the transcorporeal nature of contemporary bodies.<sup>6</sup> Material memoirs operate beneath the level of professional science in the domain of amateur enthusiasms, and they provide their own knowledge practices - from raising awareness of environmental health issues to the identification of corporate negligence - that may be mobilised around or legislated upon.

For Alaimo, these "'scientific'

investigations of one's daily life [...] compliment the studies of risk culture, popular epidemiology, and the ordinary expert by revealing how profoundly the sense of selfhood is transformed by the recognition that the very substance of the self is interconnected with vast biological, economic, and industrial systems that can never be entirely mapped or understood."<sup>7</sup> Morgan's *Tale Of The Frozen Bits* appears to forward an unsystematic science fiction of the self that is deeply bemused and not a little baffled by the personal negotiation of reproductive science and its commercial subsidiaries. In a moment threatened by the imminent privatisation of health services, its peculiar forms of storytelling seem quietly pressed into an uneasy interrogation of the pharmacological and biotechnological matrices that we will likely become all the more reliant upon in a future whose only real current certainty is our species' own precarity.

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#### Notes:

1. Twilley, Nicola. "The Coldscape: From The Tank Farm To The Sushi Coffin". *Cabinet*, Fall 2012. Accessed online: <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/47/twilley.php>
2. See Stakey, Oliver. "Holy Water: The Strange Story Of A Fertility Drug Made With The Pope's Blessing And Gallons Of Nun's Urine". *Quartz*, 26 June, 2016. Accessed online: <https://qz.com/710516/the-strange-story-of-a-fertility-drug-made-with-the-popes-blessing-and-gallons-of-nun-urine>
3. Leiber, Fritz. *Gather, Darkness!* Originally serialised in *Astounding Science Fiction*, 1943. Published by Pellegrini & Cudahy in 1950.
4. Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations On Afro Futurism" in Christopher, Roy (Ed.) *Boogie Down Predictions: Hip-Hop, Time And Afrofuturism* (London: Strange Attractor Press, 2022) 254.
5. Morgan's approach reminds me specifically of the medical fictions of Japanese author Tatsuaki Ishiguro, whose remarkable 1994 tale "It Is With The Deepest Sincerity That I Offer Prayers..." plays with the form of an autobiographically-charged biological procedural. See Ishiguro, Tatsuaki. *Biogenesis* (New York: Vertical, 2015) 9-110.
6. Theorist Stacey Alaimo defines the transcorporeal as a "theoretical site [...] where corporeal theories, environmental theories, science studies meet and mingle in productive ways". "Furthermore," she writes, "the movement across human corporeality and nonhuman nature necessitates rich, complex modes of analysis that travel through the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual."
7. Alaimo, Stacey. "Material Memoirs" in *Bodily Natures* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010) 95.