





Monkey Trouble



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# Monkey Trouble

THE SCANDAL OF POSTHUMANISM

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# MONKEY TROUBLE



Shh! You'll wake up that monkey.

—JOE GILLIS in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)





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## Introduction

No, it was not freedom I wanted. Just a way out; to the right,  
to the left, wherever; I made no other demands; even if the way out  
should only be a delusion; my demand was small, the delusion  
would not be greater. To move, to move on!

—FRANZ KAFKA, “A Report to an Academy”<sup>1</sup>

The human is a source of trouble for posthumanism. Committed to disturbing the opposition between human and nonhuman, posthumanist theory has tended to sideline the human from the scene of its theoretical engagements with otherness. The human has become akin to the “Invisible Gorilla” made famous by psychologists Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons. Seeking to establish the phenomenon of inattentional blindness, Chabris and Simons instructed participants in a psychological study to watch a video of people passing around a basketball. Many participants failed to notice a chest-pounding, ape-suited human walking through the middle of the scene.<sup>2</sup> For those keen to demonstrate their fidelity to non-humans, the human has likewise become a conspicuous blind spot.

To be sure, the nonhuman turn has yielded a wealth of critical interventions that have profitably altered the landscape of the humanities. Fostered by loosely federated areas of inquiry such as animal studies, systems theory, actor-network theory, object-oriented ontology, and speculative realism, this turn does not so much name a singular doctrine or movement as it does a broad theoretical reorientation that aims to shift our attention toward a concern for nonhuman alterity. Thanks largely to the insights of

contemporary theory, “humanism” designates not only an investment in the human as the locus of rationality and agency, or a rejection of religion and the supernatural as guides for ethical and moral action, or a humanitarian appeal to universal worth and dignity. Humanism also implies an ethico-political hierarchy analogous to other forms of discrimination and exclusion, such as racism and sexism. Humanism *qua* taxonomic hierarchy is thus roughly synonymous with anthropocentrism and “speciesism,” a term popularized by Peter Singer in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Presaging contemporary critiques of human hubris by several decades, Singer called for the political inclusion of nonhuman animals on the basis of the same liberal-pluralist principles that fostered the civil rights and feminist movements. More recent efforts to include plants and things have sought to expand the sphere of inclusivity even further. Humanism has thus acquired as one of its contemporary connotations a speciesist insistence on the exceptionality of the human at the expense not only of nonhuman animals, but also of countless insensate and inorganic entities.

Human hubris undeniably spawns a general indifference to the myriad of nonhuman beings and entities that share “our” world. This insouciance in turn fosters a number of contemporary ills: factor farming and other forms of animal abuse, global warming, depletion of natural resources, species extinction, and so on. Although we have known since Darwin that we are also apes, and more recent research shows that we share the majority of our DNA with chimpanzees, our “narcissism of minor differences” endures.<sup>4</sup> Could it be that humans need to believe in their exceptionality despite all evidence to the contrary? Consider, for instance, the double valence that the term *Anthropocene* affords. To what extent does embracing this vocabulary concede the deleterious effects that humans have wrought on the environment as well as provide a form of ironic consolation? Perhaps we have utterly screwed up the planet, we tell ourselves, but at least we can take credit for it! The human thus reasserts its power in the same stroke as it improves itself.

Does what we call the human retain any sense outside the discourse of anthropocentrism? Or is the human indistinguishable from what Giorgio Agamben calls the “anthropological machine,” which distinguishes human and animal *within* the human itself? According to Agamben, the modern post-Darwinian version of this machine operates “by animalizing the human.”<sup>5</sup> This animalization is but the precursor to our humanization insofar as the machine seeks to isolate our specifically animal attributes as a means of defining what is “essential” to the human. The demarcation of human from animal is far from neutral, bearing all the traces of a sovereign



decision that operates according to human self-interest. As Agamben observes, “*homo sapiens* . . . is neither a clearly defined species nor a substance.”<sup>6</sup> Drawing from an analysis of Linnaean taxonomy, he observes that Linnaeus initially identified *homo* by appending the ancient adage, *nosce te ipsum*, “know thyself.” This expression was later shortened to *homo sapiens*: from the Latin verb *sapere*, “to be sensible or wise.” The circularity of this formulation leads Agamben to deduce that “man has no specific identity other than the ability to recognize himself. . . . Man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human.”<sup>7</sup> The human is irreducible to biology because it is overlain with countless discursive mechanisms through which it reproduces its own image.

Broadly speaking, posthumanist critiques of exceptionalism challenge the presumption that animals lack a number of allegedly unique human capacities, such as language, tool-use, reason, imagination, a temporal sense, and awareness of mortality. Posthumanism has also alerted our attention to how species difference does not exclusively function as a figure for some other category, such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class.<sup>8</sup> While the category of species often supplies the metaphors through which racism and other sociopolitical hierarchies are constituted, species has come to be viewed as worthy of critical analysis in its own right. In the nascent years of animal studies, this attention to species led Steve Baker to ask why animal representations—whether literary, pictorial, or filmic—almost always generate interpretations that reduce the animal to its function as a “transparent signifier” of the human.<sup>9</sup> Baker argued persuasively that the “denial of the animal” has the unfortunate consequence of “ruling out one whole area of potential meanings by assuming that whatever else they may have to do with, the meanings prompted by these representations are *not* to do with animals.”<sup>10</sup> More recently Jonathan Burt has argued that animal studies must “bring the animal center stage as the main focus of study, sidestepping the issue of the human-animal boundary, and set this study within the overarching context of human-animal relations—not the overarching context of theorizing about humans.”<sup>11</sup> Baker and Burt both recall Walter Benjamin’s often-cited remark regarding Kafka: “It is possible to read Kafka’s animal stories for quite a while without realising that they are not about human beings at all.”<sup>12</sup> Benjamin might be taken here to be expressing a certain posthumanist standpoint *avant la lettre*, urging us to resist allegorical interpretations of Kafka in favor of engaging with animal alterity as such. Yet can and do we ever engage with animals *as such* (literary or real)? Can we utterly dispense with the *as if*, the speculative projections, that we as humans bring along with us? Do we not risk *denying the human*—

or rather the persistence of its phantasm—in our enthusiasm to mark a decisive “turn” toward the nonhuman?

Edmund Husserl observes that the earth does not move insofar as it functions as the ground body for our perception of other astronomical bodies. The earth may not be the center of the universe *as such*, but we experience it *as if* it were.<sup>13</sup> This book argues that the human is likewise quasi-immobile insofar as it conditions all attempts to think what is other to it. An originary “detour” through the human—an irreducible *antehumanism*—renders possible any ethical and political reorientation toward the nonhuman. To claim that the nonhuman turn is *irreducibly humanist* is not to say that it is *exclusively human*, as if animals, plants, and things are simply passive objects to whom we are giving a voice. Antehumanism is *not* the antehuman, or even worse, the archehuman: it does not name an essential humanness that emerges prior to our co-constitution in relation to nonhumans. Antehumanism thus differs from human exceptionalism, which rests on a dialectic of possession and dispossession that jealousy guards human ownership of various self-certified abilities.

Antehumanism also contrasts with anthropomorphism, which is often disparaged for uncritically projecting “human” qualities onto nonhumans. The objection to anthropomorphism presupposes that the characteristics one attributes to nonhumans are proper to the human. The accusation thus fails to recognize how the human self-anthropomorphizes by giving itself this or that capacity whose declared absence among nonhumans performatively delineates the contours of the human. In response to the charge of anthropomorphism, some theorists have eagerly embraced it. Jane Bennett, for instance, sings anthropomorphism’s “virtues,” while Brian Massumi describes the allegation of anthropomorphism as a “risk” that must be assumed.<sup>14</sup> Massumi is no doubt correct that we can productively identify similarities between human and nonhuman in a manner that avoids the “goo of undifferentiation,” yet to promise “not a human politics of the animal, but an integrally animal politics,” an “*animo-centrism*” in which the human “loses its a priori dominance,” is to sidestep the phantasm of the human.<sup>15</sup> Massumi concedes that starting from the animal point of view is “somewhat arbitrary . . . because the poles of tendential movements are ideal: movements from a starting point that was never occupied, because in point of actual fact there has never been anything other than mixtures in nature.”<sup>16</sup> Yet whether we call our departure point human or animal, *we experience it as a starting point*, no matter how arbitrary or false. For her part, Bennett affirms anthropomorphism in a manner that too closely reflects the values of traditional humanism. Her efforts “to give voice to a

thing-power,” for instance, may seek to deprive humans of our exceptional claim to agency, but the ascription of vitality to nonhuman actants is all-too reminiscent of the self-presencing fiction of human sovereignty, the vigorous self-determination of an “I can” that seeks to stave off the ultimate powerlessness: our vulnerability to finitude.<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Bentham famously asserted that philosophers have been asking the wrong question about nonhumans: at issue is not so much whether animals can speak or reason but whether they can suffer.<sup>18</sup> Homing in on the intransitivity that Bentham’s question implies, Jacques Derrida observes that “‘Can they suffer?’ amounts to asking ‘can they not be able?’”<sup>19</sup> Suffering does not belong to the realm of the volitional subject presupposed by the discourse of reason and speech: “Being able to suffer is no longer a power; it is a possibility without power, a possibility of the impossible. Mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals.”<sup>20</sup> Suffering involves a condition of exposure and vulnerability, an “*impouvoir*” that interrogates the principle of agency itself rather than simply extend it to nonhumans.<sup>21</sup> Anthropomorphism can impute “human” power to nonhumans only by first *crediting* this power to humans as such. To defend oneself against the charge of anthropomorphism by insisting that nonhumans and humans alike bear a capacity for agency thus does nothing to weaken the exceptionalist, sovereign fantasies through which our conception of the human is irremediably filtered.

### *Posthuman Error*

Human exceptionalism is no doubt a phantasm, but phantasms have a way of persisting. However indefinite and empty, the human attracts a *weak* univocity as soon as we assert its equivocality. How else can we declare the human’s fictionality except by presupposing some degree of intelligibility to the identity whose error we have just pronounced? Only on the condition of insinuating this fragile sense to the human is the determination of its indetermination possible.<sup>22</sup> As Michael Naas observes: “the phantasm is not an error to be measured in relation to truth. . . . [It is] not a representation or misrepresentation of the way things are but a projection on the part of a subject . . . of the way one would wish them to be—and, thus, in some sense, the way they become, with all their real, attendant effects.”<sup>23</sup> This displacement of the truth/error opposition resonates to some degree with the argument advanced by Dominic Pettman in *Human Error*, where he writes that the human is a case of “mistaken identity—or better yet, the mistake *of* identity.”<sup>24</sup> He clarifies that the point is “not to *avoid* mistakes,

since this is impossible, but to consciously cultivate more *interesting* ones: mistakes not based on the us-and-them principle of the anthropological machine,” errors that are “not structured and limited by fixed taxonomy, by defensive or aggressive sovereignty.”<sup>25</sup> Pettman wants to reconceive the relation between human, animal, and machine in terms of a “cybernetic triangle,” a “*humanimalchine*” in which all three points of this triad interact equally and thereby deprive the anthropological machine of its privilege in “framing and determining the other two.”<sup>26</sup> The cybernetic triangle is no doubt a more interesting error than the most rigid forms of anthropocentrism. Similar to Massumi, however, Pettman fails to appreciate that the human—however misrecognized and misnamed—remains the zero point of our relation to alterity. The phantasm of human exceptionalism cannot be so easily vanquished because its error is also its “truth.” The human that declares the fallacy of its own exceptionality can do so only from the position of its phantasmatic centeredness. We turn back even as we turn away; or rather, we never turn away from ourselves precisely so that we can turn away from ourselves.

Pettman’s assertion that “*we* are the anthro-machine, and our error is to disavow the machinic part of ourselves as well as the animal aspect” builds on Agamben’s claim that the human occupies “a space of exception” that is “perfectly empty.”<sup>27</sup> Given this fragility of the human, Agamben draws the lesson that the anthropological machine can be stopped: “To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean no longer to seek new—more effective or more authentic—articulations, but rather to show the central emptiness, the hiatus that—within man—separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man.”<sup>28</sup> Does it follow from the recognition of this essential vacuity that the phantasm of human sovereignty can be overcome? How can it be arrested if the power and responsibility for its cessation rests with the human? Given how the human has historically defined itself against animal lack, we ought to remain cautious about laying claim to any power to outright jam the anthropological machine. This force risks becoming yet another self-accredited capacity thanks to which the human redraws the human/non-human distinction through the very movement of its alleged erasure. We find a particularly “strong” version of this line of thinking in the recently consecrated philosophical movement of speculative realism, which revels in stressing that “the world can do without humanity.”<sup>29</sup> How does the apparent modesty involved in underscoring our relative insignificance