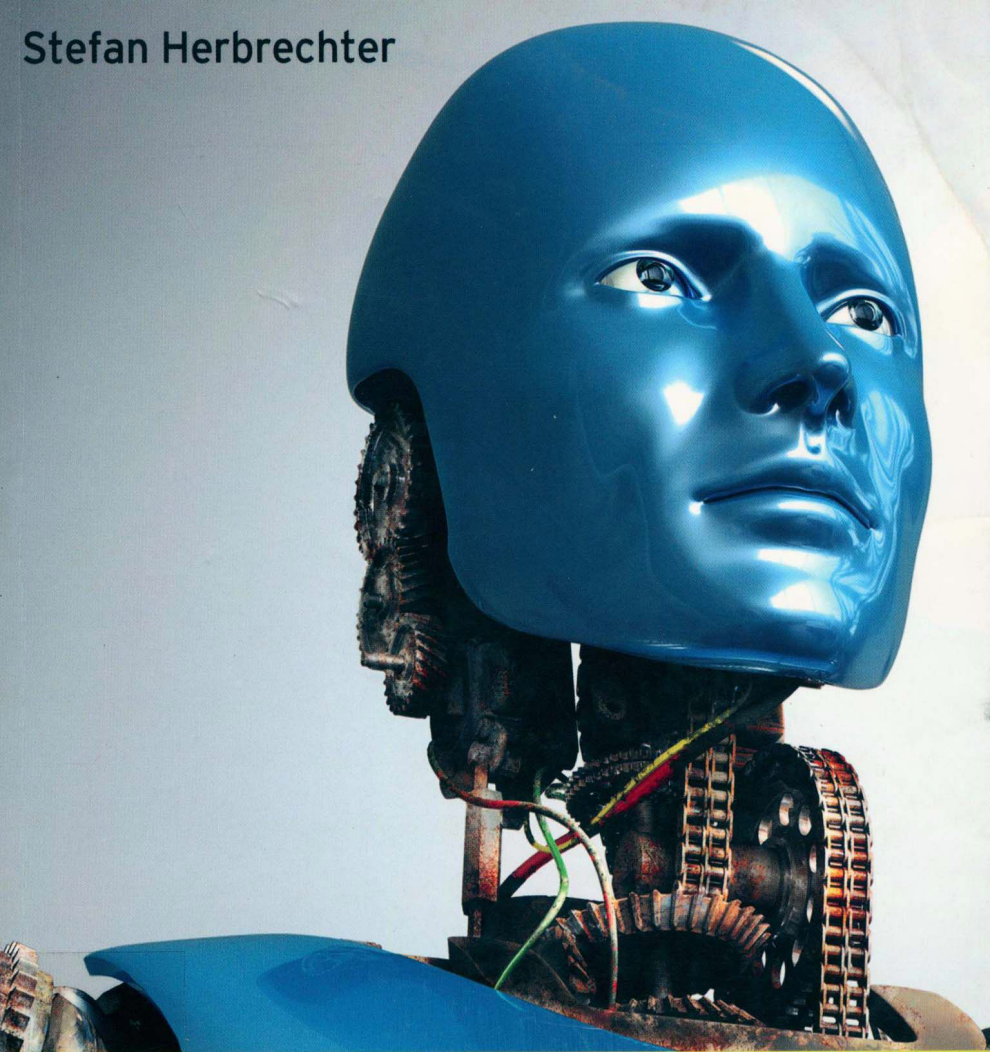


Stefan Herbrechter



POSTHUMANISM

A Critical Analysis

B L O O M S B U R Y

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A critical analysis

STEFAN HERBRECHTER



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Preface

What is 'man'? This age-old question is being asked again everywhere today and with increased urgency, given the current technological developments levering out 'our' traditional humanist reflexes. What this development also shows, however, is that the current and intensified attack on the idea of a 'human nature' is only the latest phase of a crisis which, in fact, has always existed at the centre of the humanist idea of the human. The present critical study thus produces a genealogy of the contemporary posthumanist scenario of the 'end of man' and places it within the context of theoretical and philosophical developments and ways of thinking within modernity.

Even though terms like 'posthuman', 'posthumanist' or 'posthumanism' have a surprisingly long history, they have only really started to receive attention in contemporary theory and philosophy in the last two decades where they have produced an entire new way of thinking and theorizing. Only in the last ten years or so, posthumanism has established itself – mainly in the Anglo-American sphere – as an autonomous field of study with its own theoretical approach (especially within the so-called 'theoretical humanities'). The first academic publications that deal systematically with the idea of the posthuman and posthumanism appeared at the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s (these are, in particular, works by N. Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, Neil Badmington and Elaine L. Graham). In conjunction with this theoretical debate, Francis Fukuyama's book *Our Posthuman Future* (1999) about the importance of new biotechnologies for a return to the debate on eugenics opened up a more general philosophical and political discussion. Ever since, a much wider public has shown growing interest in the proliferating ideas and visions of 'our posthumanity'. Many anxieties but also utopian hopes are projected onto new bio-, nano-, neuro- and infotechnologies. These are circulating in the traditional mass media and increasingly, of course, in the so-called 'new', 'digital' and 'social media'. Whereas Fukuyama's contribution to the discussion about the future of the human had been motivated by rather conservative

and moralistic motives based on the apparent opposition between technological development and human nature, there has been sheer delight in 'transhumanist' circles at the prospect that these new technoscientific developments might transform us in a not too distant future into a new digital species with fantastic new potential (cf. Hans Moravec, Max Moore, Vernor Vinge and their followers).

The present volume understands itself as a mediating force between these two extreme positions. The kind of critical approach that is being promoted here first attempts to relativize the apparent radical novelty of the 'posthumanist' phenomenon. While the current context might indeed be new and singular, the idea of posthumanism relies on questions and problems that have a long history and are therefore closely connected to other past and present contexts. On the other hand, it is also important to show the truly innovative potential of a *critical* posthumanism. Most welcome is, for example, the new and extensive possibilities for co-operation between sciences (and the new bio- or life sciences in particular) and the humanities and social sciences. In this respect, the question of the relationship between humans and technics, or to be more precise, the role of technology for human (and nonhuman) evolution, is of particular importance. In addition, one should not underestimate the fact that the current developments and thus also the discussion about posthumanism are taking place within the context of radical changes affecting the material economic base. This change constitutes a radical transformation within increasingly globalized late capitalism from an 'analog' (humanist, literate, book or text-based) to a 'digital' (posthumanist, code, data or information-based) social, cultural and economic system.

The present volume hopes to do justice to all of these complex connections by dealing with posthumanism as a 'discourse', or as a combination of material, symbolic and political changes which are 'constructed' within knowledge production and information politics. As with every critical analysis, the questions that are most prominent in this respect are: Who is the main beneficiary of this discourse? What does the discourse presuppose? What does it exclude? What alternatives are thinkable?

Stefan Herbrechter
Heidelberg and Coventry 5 November 2012

Contents

Acknowledgements vi

Preface vii

- 1** Towards a critical posthumanism 1
- 2** A genealogy of posthumanism 31
- 3** Our posthuman humanity and the multiplicity of its forms 75
- 4** Posthumanism and science fiction 107
- 5** Interdisciplinarity and the posthumanities 135
- 6** Posthumanism, digitalization and new media 179
- 7** Posthumanity – subject and system 195

Afterword: The other side of life 207

Bibliography 214

Index 228

1

Towards a critical posthumanism

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the haughtiest and most mendacious minute of "world history" – yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die.

One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it. But if we could communicate with the mosquito, then we would learn that it floats through the air with the same self-importance, feeling within itself the flying center of the world. There is nothing in nature so despicable or insignificant that it cannot immediately be blown up like a bag by a slight breath of this power

of knowledge; and just as every porter wants an admirer, the proudest human being, the philosopher, thinks that he sees on the eyes of the universe telescopically focused from all sides on his actions and thoughts.

(NIETZSCHE, 1982 [1873]: 42)

This well-known passage from Nietzsche's 'On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense' (1873, §1) may serve as a starting point for, but also as an anticipated summary of, the notion of 'posthumanism' this volume wishes to investigate. Nietzsche's nihilistic, relativist and provocative challenge to 'man', the 'clever animal', is directed against the pettiness of humanism inspired by Christian values and his/its self-inflicted state of godlessness. At the same time, Nietzsche's critique prepares the ground for the supposedly liberating, life-affirming coming of the 'overman'. It appears that Nietzsche's 'revaluation of all values', which dismisses the traditional distinction between truth and falsehood in a moralist and humanist sense, and instead aims to describe a radically new, non-moralist and posthumanist situation, is within reach today. Whereas Nietzsche's nihilism mocks the arrogance of the human species along with its self-proclaimed anthropocentric view of 'world history', some humans, inspired by the vision of a technologically induced self-surpassing, thanks to new cogno-, bio-, nano- and information technologies, are pushing the hubris of their species to new extremes. It is likely therefore that even though Nietzsche has repeatedly been proclaimed as a proto-posthumanist thinker, he would probably not be particularly impressed with the current widespread posthumanist techno-euphoria. To project the 'missionary' aspect of the 'human intellect' purely onto the machine-prosthesis is certainly not enough to produce the desired coming of Nietzsche's overman, who, on the one hand, would be humble enough to communicate with a 'mosquito', to learn from it, and, on the other hand, would be powerful enough to overcome humanism's narcissistic pathos.

Yet how exactly is the philosopher to tilt his 'telescope' in order to avoid recognizing humanity as already everywhere at work, either in its glory or its deprivation? This could prove to be the most difficult

and therefore most important, most urgent and most 'critical' role of a 'postanthropocentric' and thus truly posthumanist philosophy. There are many approaches to this idea. However, a particularly powerful one lies in so-called poststructuralism and deconstruction, with their apparent radically 'antihumanist' critiques. This volume therefore addresses the current technology-centred discussion about the potential transformation of humans into something else (a process that might be called 'posthumanization') as merely the latest symptom of a cultural malaise that inhabits humanism itself – humanism in the sense of an ideology and a specific discourse. To perform a critique of the widespread idea of a supposedly inevitable passing of the human species with its associated apocalyptic or euphoric scenarios, it is important to again confront current forms of (techno)cultural criticism with the 'antihumanism' of theory in the 1970s and 1980s. While some prophets of a coming post- or transhumanity joyfully proclaim (once again) the 'end of man', the kind of critical posthumanism advocated in this volume seeks to investigate the possible crisis and end of a certain *conception* of the human, namely the humanist notion of the human, and, if possible, contribute to the accelerated transformation of the latter. Or, in other words, the underlying rationale of this volume could be: whoever cares about humans and their past, present and future might want to critically engage with humanism's anthropocentric ideology.

This could indeed be regarded as a preliminary definition of posthumanism: it is the cultural malaise or euphoria that is caused by the feeling that arises once you start taking the idea of 'postanthropocentrism' seriously. To be able to think the 'end of the human' without giving in to apocalyptic mysticism or to new forms of spirituality and transcendence – this would correspond to the attitude that the phrase 'critical posthumanism' wishes to describe. The word 'critical' here has a double function: it combines, on the one hand, openness to the radical nature of technocultural change, and, on the other hand, it emphasizes a certain continuity with traditions of thought that have critically engaged with humanism, and which, in part, have evolved out of the humanist tradition itself. The task is, therefore, to re-evaluate established forms of antihumanist critique, to adapt them to the current, changed conditions, and, where possible, to radicalize them.

An interesting starting point can be found in Jean-François Lyotard's essay 'A Postmodern Fable', which takes up Nietzsche's fable motif again. Its opening gambit runs like this: 'What a Human and his/her Brain – or rather the Brain and its Human – would resemble at the moment when they leave the planet forever, before its destruction; that, the story does not tell' (Lyotard 2001: 12). Lyotard plays here with the possibility of a 'disembodied' narrative. Should there still be any humans by the time our solar system is dying they will have to have completely transformed themselves technologically and evolutionarily in order to survive the explosion of the sun. Should there be a sequel to the narrative after this most extreme of all ends, some narrating species inevitably has to escape the inferno. For Lyotard therefore some form of posthumanization seems an inevitable transformation process to enable humans to face the conditions that would have to be met in order to send some (quasi-)human form onto future intergalactic travels.

From a cosmic point of view, the prehistory to this fable is a narrative that explains how the energy that was unleashed during the big bang spread out according to the laws of entropy, and how, under very specific and highly unlikely circumstances, at a local level, systems and forms of life could emerge, despite entropy, among them planet Earth and humans. The system called 'human' further displays highly improbable evolutionary characteristics like bodily and symbolic techniques (cf. tools, language). These techniques, moreover, are 'self-referential', which makes them adaptable and transferable to future generations. They are conducive to the creation of communities and social systems. Among these social systems, eventually, a particularly successful form gains the upper hand, namely a system called 'liberal democracy', against other socio-political economic organisations of society, thanks to its ability to subordinate its authoritarian control mechanisms to the idea of free creativity, which allows for self-optimization. As a by-product, this system also creates the eschatological device of 'progress'. The only obstacle that remains for this system is the aging of its solar system and with it the required self-transformation of its humans, who will have to survive under radically altered conditions:

At the time this story was told, all research in progress was directed to this aim, that is, in a big lump: logic, econometrics, and

monetary theory, information theory, the physics of conductors, astrophysics and astronautics, genetic and dietetic biology and medicine, catastrophe theory, chaos theory, linguistics and potential literature. All of this research turns out, in fact, to be dedicated, closely or from afar, to testing and remodeling the so-called human body, or to replacing it, in such a way that the brain remains able to function with the aid only of the energy resources available in the cosmos. And so was prepared the final exodus of the negentropic system far from the Earth.

(Lyotard 2001: 16)

Despite its apparent 'realism' this narrative is in fact no longer entirely 'realist' in the humanist, literary and stylistic sense, since it is not the human who is the real hero of the story but the struggle between entropy and negentropy. Humans are merely a by-product of the story so to speak. It is thus a story without 'subject':

The human species is not the hero of the fable. It is a complex form of organizing energy. Like the other forms, it is undoubtedly transitory. Other, more complex forms may appear that will win out over it. Perhaps one of these forms is preparing itself through techno-scientific development right from the time when the fable was being recounted.

(17)

Who (or what) will represent the complex system – humans, cyborgs or an entirely different form of organization – remains unpredictable. In any case, it will have to be a more complex form of life which will need to be able to survive the conditions that will reign as soon as the sun turns into a supernova. This is why the fable does not literally presuppose a 'survivor', since it is questionable whether the required form of a system of negentropic organization can still be a recognizable life form at all. It is this uncertainty, however, which propels the narrative and represents the necessity of 'fabulation', and which guarantees the inventiveness on which technological progress depends. And technological progress, in turn, is what is needed for survival. Lyotard terms this fable 'postmodern', because it is situated

'after it has succumbed to the contagion of modernity and has tried to cure itself of it' (18). At the same time, however, one could argue that this narrative is 'posthumanist' if, like Lyotard, we see modernity as coterminous with Christianity, Augustine and Neoplatonism, and understand it foremost as a form of 'eschatology':

It is essential for the modern imaginary to project its legitimacy forward while founding it in a lost origin. Eschatology calls for an archaeology. This circle, which is also the hermeneutic circle, characterizes *historicity* as the modern imaginary of time.

(19–20)

In contrast, the postmodern (or posthumanist) fable referred to is neither eschatological nor historical in the strict sense, but merely diachronic. Rather than circular in a hermeneutic sense, it is circular in the sense of a 'cybernetic loop' (20). The fable also does not correspond to a 'new', final or ultimate, humanist-anthropocentric 'grand narrative' of modernity the kind of which Lyotard described in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) by referring to the 'Enlightenment', 'Marxism' and 'Liberalism'. Instead, it is rather 'inhuman' (Lyotard 1991), in that it expresses at once the unlikelihood of the energetic system 'human/brain' as well as its necessary finality:

The Human, or his/her brain, is a highly unlikely material (that is, energetic) formation. This formation is necessarily transitory since it is dependent on the conditions of terrestrial life, which are not eternal. The formation called Human or Brain will have been nothing more than an episode in the conflict between differentiation and entropy. The pursuit of greater complexity asks not for the perfecting of the Human, but its mutation or its defeat for the benefit of a better performing system. Humans are very mistaken in their presuming to be the motors of development and in confusing development with the progress of consciousness and civilization.

(Lyotard 2001: 20)

As such, this fable is neither explanatory nor critical in a moral sense, but represents pure postmodern (or posthumanist) melancholia, after

the end of the modern and humanistic principle of hope. It has to be understood in merely 'poetic-aesthetic' terms, as a postmodern and posthumanist affect and as the expression of the ultimate humiliation of anthropocentrism (after Galilei, Darwin and Freud). It is not even pessimistic because the idea of pessimism would still imply an anthropomorphic perspective according to which a distinction between good and evil would still be thinkable (21).

What Lyotard's sequel to Nietzsche's fable shows is that, on the one hand, there is no point in denying the ongoing technologization of the human species, and, on the other hand, that a purely technology-centred idea of posthumanization is not enough to escape the humanist paradigm. While popular ideas of posthuman humanity augmented by technology often continue to be influenced by ideologically naïve humanist values, traditional approaches in cultural theory and in the humanities usually remain too anthropocentric in their defense of a notion of the 'human' that is not sufficiently historicized or grounded in a quasi-mystical notion of 'human nature'. Required is thus an approach which takes seriously both the technological challenge as well as the radical critique of anthropocentrism. A posthumanism, therefore, which understands the human species as a historical 'effect', with humanism as its ideological 'affect', while distancing itself from both – a 'critical posthumanism', which does not, from the start, position itself 'after' a humanism, which always remains to be defined (from the point of view of a superior stage of technological development, for example), but which inhabits humanism deconstructively, and for which technology and Lyotard's principle of the 'inhuman' are merely a means and not an end in themselves. A posthumanism which, precisely, is not post-*human* but *post-human(ist)*.

This also seems to be Lyotard's intention in the collection entitled *The Inhuman* (1991), with its subtitle 'Reflections on Time'. The essays in this collection are aimed at humanism's arrogance and they critique the idea that humanism might still be able to teach 'us' a lesson. Instead, humanism's authority, which strictly speaking is based on the resistance to analyse the 'human' as such, is on the wane. Exposing humanism as a form of 'prejudice' Lyotard asks: 'what if human beings, in humanism's sense, were in the process of, constrained into, becoming inhuman ..., what if what is "proper" to

humankind were to be inhabited by the inhuman?’ (Lyotard 1991: 2). The inhuman *in* the human takes two forms: on the one hand, the inhumanity of the ‘system’, which only uses humanism as its ideology, and, on the other hand, the inhuman which inhabits the human as its ‘secret’ core, and to which ‘the soul is hostage’ (2). This is opposed to the idea of an essential humanity on which humanism is traditionally based, for example, wherever there is reference to ‘humanitarian action’. But where exactly would this essential humanity be? In its ‘savageness’ (or the ‘initial misery’ of childhood)? Or in its capability of speech, its culture or social drives (‘their capacity to acquire a “second” nature which, thanks to language, makes them fit to share in communal life, adult consciousness and reason’)? Is the human in fact human because of its ‘nature’ or its ‘culture’? Of course, this is not about a simple opposition between nature and culture – nobody has ever really contested their interdependence. For Lyotard and a way of thinking which is ‘not-quite-humanist-anymore’ it is rather a question of what the dialectic between nature and culture excludes, of the remainder, the ‘other’, the inhuman, which always presupposes the human and its properties and, at the same time, posits the human as its goal, as an unattained ideal, as original *and* copy, etc. The ‘essence’ or true being of the human is in fact its ‘absence’ [*Abwesenheit*]: ‘In short, our contemporaries find it adequate to remind us that what is proper to humankind is its absence of defining property, its nothingness, or its transcendence, to display the sign “no vacancy”’ (Lyotard 2001: 4).

It seems that today this inhumanity of the system has thoroughly embraced the ‘absence of an essence’ and the endless ‘plasticity’ of the human with its secret inhuman core. Lyotard does not refer to ‘plasticity’, which has become a fashionable word especially for cognitive science in recent times (cf. Malabou 2008), but simply to ‘development’. The meaning, however, is quite clear: at stake is the accelerated liberalization, flexibilization, virtualization, etc. of modernity whose internal dynamics and metaphysics corresponds precisely to the ‘ideology of development’. This ideology of development and (self-)transformation has become automated and no longer needs any grand narratives which used to promise humanity’s emancipation. Instead it is now threatening to become the embodiment of the inhuman or even the posthuman, because, for