Tiziana Terranova

The (European) Posthuman Predicament.
Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* and the Future of the Humanities

A review of Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 229 pp., ISBN 978-0-7456-4158-4

Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* is most definitely not a book of "mainstream posthumanism", which might be defined, as another theorist of the posthuman put it, as the thesis that "the human is transformed and finally eclipsed by various technological, informatic, and bioengineering developments" – although it is a book that does consider science and technology to be important forces in the emergence of the posthuman condition.[1] Neither it is just a book that criticizes and exposes the ideological and discursive limits of mainstream or popular posthumanism – even as it takes issue with their reductive understanding of posthumanity. On the other hand, it is in the first place, a philosophical and political book which is as critical as it is affirmative. For Braidotti, undoubtedly one of the most influential contemporary feminist theorists, the situation "we" find ourselves in is a "posthuman predicament" which materializes at the point of convergence between three overlapping and interrelated crises: the crisis of the human as a species (threatened by global climate change); the crisis of European humanism as ethical and moral project (in Tony Davies" words "[i]t is almost impossible to think of a crime that has not been committed in the name of humanity" (cit. p.15)); and finally also the crisis of the domain of knowledge associated with the human, that is the classical Humanities (Literature, Philosophy, History and such likes) as they are increasingly deemed to be irrelevant or a luxury in a context where research has to be shown to contribute directly either to economic growth or to social cohesion and stability – the two pillars of ordoliberal governmentality.[2] The risk which Braidotti can see is that the methods and frameworks of the natural sciences will simply be mimicked by the humanities in a desperate bid to appropriate dwindling public resources. This is already resulting in a rise, within the human and social sciences, of an anti-theoretical anti-intellectualism which is ultimately producing new "shallow forms of neo-empiricism" (4). Unlike Martha Nussbaum's project of a return to "classic Humanist norms", Braidotti argues that (European) humanism needs to take "the experimental path" in charting a "new robust foundation for ethical and political

[1] Cary Wolfe, "Bring the Noise: The Parasite and the Multiple Genealogies of Posthumanism", in Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xi-xxviii, p. xi.

[2] On Austrian ordoliberalism and its role in shaping European neoliberalism see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

subjectivity" (51). The crisis is thus, for Braidotti, an opportunity for thinking a new foundation for the humanities. The book is thus a contribution to "the pursuit of alternative schemes of thought, knowledge and self-representation" which we can use to chart what we are in the process of becoming (12). Only by doing this, what we might now call the *posthumanities* can hope to produce "socially relevant knowledge" (4). *The Posthuman* marks the definitive exit from postmodern anti-foundationalism by one of the most important contemporary feminist philosophers. As she claims, it is not enough to critique the human. What is needed, she argues, is a "strong affirmative stance". It is not enough to be merely anti-humanist, but "an altogether novel posthuman project" must be founded (38).

Braidotti's cartography usefully records different genealogies of the posthuman – external but also internal to the humanities. The first chapter "Posthumanism: Life Beyond the Self" takes us through the internal critique of Man pursued by the anti-humanism of the French post-structuralist Left in the 1960s and 1970s. These two decades are crucial to the emergent of anti-humanism within the humanities, following arguably the crucial historicization of Man performed by Foucault's "ground-breaking critique of Human in *The Order of Things*" (23). Post-structuralist anti-humanism also attacked the classical and socialist versions of humanism (26), but it is the anti-universalism of feminism and the anti-colonial phenomenology of the likes of Franz Fanon and Aimé Césaire which gave the posthuman its political edge (46). Anti-humanist post-structuralists, anti-universalist feminists and anti-colonial phenomenologists converged in their critique of the "High-Humanistic creed", centered around "He, the classical ideal of Man" – as figured in Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvius Man – and its "civilizational model" (13). This critique of humanism was aimed at its "restricted notion of what counts as human" (16) and implied "the empowerment of sexualized and racialized human others" in a process of emancipation from the dialectics of master and slave (66). Feminist anti-humanism or postmodern feminism can also be seen as a kind of critical post-humanism in as much as it claims that "it is impossible to speak in one unified voice about woman/natives and other marginal subjects" (27). This empowerment allowed for the emergence of a "critical post-humanism" to be found in the writings of Paul Gilroy and Edward Said, but also in a different way in authors such as Achille Mbembe and Iain Chambers. Critical posthumanism is "critical of humanism in the name of humanism (46-47), as when Paul Gilroy's notion of "planetary cosmopolitanism" is deployed to hold Europe accountable for its failures in implementing the ideals of the humanist Enlightenment (47). Critical post-humanism tries to conceive of a humanism without Eurocentrism, as "an adventure in difference" (152). The potential of critical post-humanism lies for Braidotti in the way it displaces "the unitary subject of humanism" allowing for the conceptualization of a "more complex and relational subject" (26) which will later in the book also find support in the post-anthropocentric thrust of science and technology. Braidotti clearly wants to return to the critical posthumanism of

postcolonial and feminist theory to counter the rise of what she calls "analytical posthumanism" within the social sciences. If critical post-humanism is associated with cultural studies, feminism, and anti-colonialism, analytical post-humanism involves Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) – approaches which have produced, from her perspective, a form of post-humanism which claims for itself "high levels of political neutrality" and, most crucially, one which lacks a focus on subjectivity. On the other hand, she argues, the highly politicized school of Italian Marxism (including authors such Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, Franco Berardi and Maurizio Lazzarato) has a strong focus on subjectivity but does not really closely engage with contemporary science and technology.

This cartography of post-structuralist anti-humanism, anti-universalist critical post-humanism and analytic post-humanism allows Braidotti to construct her own affirmative position: radical posthumanism. Her radical posthumanism aims to refound the humanities, drawing on, but also going beyond, post-structuralist humanism. It also retains the affirmation of difference and situatedness of critical post-humanisms while rejecting the purely analytical stance of STS. This allows her to claim that her radical posthumanism is equipped for taking up the politically bankrupt critical and moral (European) project of Man and transforming it into a posthuman project – a new creative figuration.

The task of definining her radical posthumanism as a new foundation for the (post)humanities further unfolds in the second chapter: "Post-Anthropocentrism: Life Beyond the Species". If post-humanism involves "philosophy, history, cultural studies and classical humanism", post-anthropocentrism is shaping research in "science and technology studies, new media and digital culture, enviromentalism and the earth sciences, biogenetics, neuroscience and robotics, evolutionary theory, critical legal theory, primatology, animal rights and science fiction" (58) This chapter is probably the most challenging for the boldness by which Braidotti states the stakes and range of her posthuman project. The first step in this direction is taking the distance "from the social constructivist approach and the consensus around it" (2), which maintained the humanist separation between nature and culture by privileging the agency of the latter over the passivity of the former. Social constructivism is not enough in the age of the Anthropocene which is also the age of post-anthropocentrism. Paradoxically, in fact, the acknowledgment of the crucial role of the human species in determining new environmental conditions on Earth has lead to a crisis of *anthropos* – a socio-biological and political construction – as in Thomas Hobbes's *homo hominis lupus* or Desmond Morris' 'Naked Ape' – whom she pointedly describes as "the representative of a hierarchical, hegemonic and generally violent species" (65) probably doomed to extinction (a point that African American SF writer Octavia Butler also explored again and again in her writings, see Caporaso this volume). Like Butler before her, Braidotti calls for a "post-anthropological exodus" which, as the crisis of

[3] See Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

humanism did for its subaltern others, would free the "demonic forces of naturalized others" such as animals, viruses and insects (65). In fact, in the post-anthropocentric condition (as for Donna Haraway and Brian Massumi), the "human-animal relation" is a vector of "posthuman relationality" (84).[3] Furthermore, the posthuman subject which displaces anthropos bears the heavy burden of countering the toxic fallout produced by the widespread production of another model of subjectivity which also claims the soul of an endangered pan-humanity: the possessive individual or *homo oeconomicus*, constructed by neoliberal market forces (63). In as much as it continues to enforce and produce a possessive individualist model of the subject (calculative and rational), in fact, for Braidotti the global economy is post-anthropocentric in its very structure but not post-humanistic: its model of subjectivity is rational, calculative and competitive, but not relational and situated. Unlike the possessive individual, the critical posthuman subject is defined not by the possession of one's own self, but according to an ecosophy of multiple belongings: it is relational and multiple, differentiated and grounded, embodied and embedded (49). This "post-individualist notion of the subject" as an "expanded relational self" crucially implicates the existence of "a generative and intelligent vitality" (60). The exodus from anthropos thus takes us towards a vitalist-materialist, eco-sophic ontology which should constitute the new ground for the posthumanities and a new conception of the posthuman subject.

Displacing the binary of nature and culture through the notion of a "natureculture continuum", Braidotti calls for a return to Spinoza's monism: "matter is one, driven by a desire for self-expression and ontologically free" (56). One of the most audacious and deceptively easy leaps in the book is probably this: making Spinoza's monism of substance and expressionist philosophy the precursor and philosophical foundation of the sciences of self-organization (and in particular molecular biology). Is it enough to say that Spinoza's emphasis on the unity of matter has been "reinforced and updated by scientific understandings of the self-organizing and smart structure of matter?" (57) Isn't there a risk here that a kind of subalternity to the natural science is perpetuated by making in a way Spinoza's ontology a truth confirmed by science? In any case, it is clear that Spinoza's philosophy allows for the constitution of the embedded and relational but also vital materialist foundations of the posthuman subject as Braidotti's project comes to be defined by the conjunction of feminist, anti-racist and post-colonial cultural politcs with a vital-materialist ontology. The monistic, but relational structures produced by such intelligent vitality allows for the posthuman subject to become differentiated by the social coordinates of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race. Such social coordinates, however, are dramatically changed once difference is dislocated "from binaries to rhizomatics", from sex/gender or nature/culture to "processes of sexualization/racialization/naturalization" (96). The task of mapping this complex "nomadic subjectivity" evokes the notion of the posthumanities as a kind of "social branch of complexity theory" (87). And yet, the posthuman subject

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cannot be simply known. In this sense, we might think of Beatriz (now Paul) Preciado's experiment with testosterone and writing or as in Johanna Hedva's feminist figuration of "Sick Woman Theory" as the kind of "empirical projects" that can show us "what contemporary bio-technologically mediated bodies are capable of doing" (61).[4] At the core of radical posthumanism, then, Braidotti poses an expansion towards the non-human as zoe –that is a move from Foucault's biopower to a vitalist zoepower (97). Unlike Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's Marxist political vitalism (for whom the constituent biopower of living labor is opposed to the constituted power of biopolitics), Braidotti does not base her notion of zoepower in labor, but in the natureculture continuum.[5] Further from indicating passivity, essentialism and mechanicism, Braidotti's zoe displays traits of hybridity, nomadism, diaspora and creolization. Her "posthuman eco-philosophy" is "an attempt to rethink in a materialist manner the intricate web of interrelations that mark the contemporary subject's relationship to their multiple ecologies" (99). Her radical posthumanism thus comes to rest between the "oneness" of matter and the "not-oneness" and "non-unitary" composition of a subject based on ontological relationality (100) – with expressive processes of differentiation acting as a bridge. As a result, her conception of posthuman subjectivity sounds strangely paradoxical: it is characterized as nomadic and embedded, relational and diasporic, differentiated and communitarian. It becomes clear at this point that Braidotti's radical posthumanism arises out of the encounter between the anti-universalist and critical posthumanisms (difference) and an eco-sophic concept of zoe (oneness and relationality). The possibility of a new "virtual social ecology" is thus opened which renews Felix Guattari's differentiation between the "three ecologies" (environmental, social, psychic).[6] Posthuman societies, then, require a new form of ethics: a posthuman ethics as "micropolitics" and "ethics" of relations actualizing by means of transversality.

The explicit vitalism espoused in the second chapter is further specified in the third chapter "The Inhuman: Life Beyond Death" which records, by referring to Jean François Lyotard's homonymous work, "the alienating and commodifying effects of advanced capitalism on the human (108).[7] Here Braidotti returns to the "modernist inhuman" (its "heart of darkness" as we might call it) as "affect of modernization" (120): a "core of structural changeness or productive estrangement" or the "non-rational and non-volitional" force haunting the subject of humanism (109). What is the posthuman version of the inhuman, she asks? What are the "inhuman variables of the posthuman digital universe?" (113) What is the role of "illness, death and extinction" in the posthuman if radical posthumanist zoepower dispenses with distinctions between life and death? (115) Braidotti here wishes to account for the "posthuman Inhuman" in the new forms of necropolitics described by Arjun Appadurai and Achille Mbembe as a new "semiosis of killing" embedded in "necropolitical modes of governance" (124). The posthuman inhuman is linked to new post-anthropocentric weaponry such as

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[4] See Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013); and Johanna Hedva, "Sick Woman Theory", *Mask Magazine,* January 2016, http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory, accessed 24 January 2016.

[5] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, Mass: Bellknap Press, 2011).

[6] Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008).

[7] Jean François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1992).

war robots and drones, which she names as "the perverse form of the posthuman constructed by capitalism" (9). Against such "posthuman death technologies" or "necro-technologies" (9), Braidotti deploys vital-materalism as a form of post-secular spirituality, where death becomes a form of transformation of matter endowed itself with "relentless generative powers" (121). A posthuman death theory should think, she claims, "with and not against death" (129) as vitalism sees death as "the inhuman within us which frees us into life" (134). It is in its encounter with the inhuman that the book is at its most visionary and lyrical as the vitalist materialist cosmic energy of chaos and impersonal absolute speed threatens to be too much intensity for single subjects swept by death as force of the virtual. The posthuman subject thus meets the capitalist inhuman by (more or less ominously) "self-styling one's death as an act of affirmation" (135).

Befittingly, the book closes with a chapter – "Posthuman Humanities: Life Beyond Theory" – which returns to the problem of the "identity crisis of the humanities" as the result of "high levels of technological mediation" and the "multicultural structure of the globalized world" (153). This is the chapter where Braidotti explicitly locates the site where her battle for the re-foundation of the post-humanities takes place: the university or better "the multi-versity" – a term deployed to define the effects on the old models of the University (Kant's and von Humboldt's especially) of the "explosion of taks and demands imposed on major universities" (178). Here we return to the pressing question of the corporatization of the university which risks reducing the Humanities to "luxury consumer goods": how to reverse this trend without returning to classical Humanism in a context where not the academic, but the administrator is the new central figure around which Universities are becoming re-organized? (178) Faced with these threats (manifesting themselves in the form of financial cuts), the risk is that those who once fought the disciplines might find themselves rescuing them to save them from institutional decline (146). For Braidotti, however, there is no need to fall into "cognitive panic" (155) as the post-humanities are for her already defined by an extraordinary vitality, which she associates not so much with the classical disciplines but with the alternative definitions of the human provided through the invention of new interdisciplinary areas which call themselves "studies" (gender, feminism, ethnicity, cultural studies, post-colonial, media and new media etc). Braidotti identifies in the so-called "studies" the rise of a counter-discourse, marked by "methodological inventions and a critical genealogical approach" – although one, it could be argued, not immune from the "shallow neo-empiricist" temptation. New "trans-disciplinary discourses" have thus already started to emerge around the edges of the classical Humanities and across the disciplines drawing on "enviromental evolutionary, cognitive, bio-genetic and digital" theories (146). The posthumanities call for poly-lingual universities where new fields can emerge (such as Humanistic Informatics or Digital Humanities and Cognitive or Neural Humanities, enviromental and sustainable humanities, and bio-genetic and

global humanities [184]). This "innovative interdisciplinary scholarship" is "an expression of the vitality of the field, not of its crisis" (155) and demonstrates that the humanities are already in part adapting "to the changing structures of materialism itself". New feminist scholarship (from Luciana Parisi and Patricia T. Clough to Elisabeth Grosz and Karen Barad) is called on as evidence of the creative reworkings of new concepts of matter as both "autopoietic and self-organizing" (158). Controversially, but appropriately, Braidotti here comes forward with a full-fledged new normative model for knowledge production, which she defines as the methodology of the posthumanities: cartographic accuracy, critique of power, non-linearity as method, combining creativity and critique, fostering an "ecosophical sense of community" and "embracing the multiple opportunities offered by the posthuman condition" (172).

The Posthuman is a courageous and ambitious book which not only provides important alternative genealogies for the crisis of humanism, but also proposes new directions for the (post)humanities by drawing on existing transdisciplinary knowledges. In reading the book I was struck by the strong emphasis on Europe as the origin and subject of humanism, which, as such, is dramatically affected by its crisis. It is befitting that Braidotti's embrace of situated politics should make her (central) European location a part of the position she speaks from. As a situated theorist, writing, like Haraway before her, from "the belly of the beast", Braidotti seems to me to speak particularly of Europe and to Europe: to its universities in crisis, to its dwindling departments of humanities, to its institutions and funding bodies, to its population of increasingly nomadic and precarious intellectuals. The decline of humanism, a European invention, as "ethical and moral project" strikes at the core of European identity and its relation to the world: its decline directly affects the political predicament of contemporary Europe caught in the terrible pincers of neoliberal market economics, xenophobic nationalism and terrorism (152). Braidotti's book can thus be interpreted as a call for a European intellectual movement which would combine a post-humanism of difference (as in Seyla Benhabib's notion of alternative cosmopolitanisms of migrants, "refugees and stateless people" [51]) and an ecosophic concern with natureculture or zoe. This will mean finding a new ground for an idea of Europe sitting uneasily between the old "blood and soil" nationalisms and new formations which emerge by questioning its boundaries (as for example in the notion of the Mediterranean as "mutable space" of crossings obscured by the European discourse).[8] Unlike modern humanism, furthermore, we can hardly claim for Europe a leading role in the conceptualization and practice of such ecological posthumanism of difference. What kind of difference would it make with relation for example to an African or Indian or Japanese posthumanism? Finally, if the posthuman is a "collective gesture of self-styling" what kind of subjectivities will it have to draw upon and construct in order to materialize its "shared dream" or "consensual hallucination" of the post-human (185)? How is it going to relate, for example, to new forms of

[8] Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke U. P., 2008).

mass intellectuality produced by the entanglement of social cooperation, competitive individualism and radical precarisation as they unfold in the European space?

I also find myself particularly challenged by her call for monist vitalist-materialism as a new ontological foundation for the post-humanities. Can we really pose vital-materialist monism as "the common basis for all posthumanities"? Is it possible or desirable to have one ontology defining the foundation of the post-humanities as a whole? Political vitalism, after all, has already been subject to critique, and it is far from being the only option for scholars wishing to engage in post-humanistic research.[9] Even within the most theoretical branches of the "studies", approaches based in phenomenology, historical materialism, speculative realism, pan-psychism, eliminationism, the "labour point of view" but also new "rationalist and abstract" feminisms seem to push in different directions.[10] The abstractions of mathematics but also a kind of neo-Leibnizian and neo-Whiteheadian genealogy of digitalization and computation also pose alternative ontologies for current research.[11] As sympathetic as I feel towards monist vital-materialism, I also think that the matter is far from being settled. It is not a matter of choosing one over the other (which we do anyway) or falling back into postmodernist relativism (which has become unviable), but acknowledging that anti-foundationalism is something that no contemporary science (either "hard" or "soft") can really completely do without. And yet, the danger of a vitalist-materialist orthodoxy taking over the Humanities seems remote when considering the much more concrete danger of the shallow neo-empiricisms Braidotti rightly warns about – or even sterile returns to a conservative humanism which also affect some feminist readings of biotechnologies. *The Posthuman* sets the pace for a hopefully infectious mood which reminds us that the crisis of Man does not need to result in a surrender to the hegemony of data-driven science and that there are many resources in the humanities which can help us to follow a different route. In this sense, this is a book that seems to me to point us to the right direction: in the posthuman predicament which the humanities find themselves in, lively "methodological inventions and critical genealogies" (such as Braidotti's radical posthumanism) are definitely to be preferred to the *rigor mortis* of disciplinary conformity.

[9] Alberto Toscano, "Vital Strategies: Maurizio Lazzarato and the Metaphysics of Contemporary Capitalism", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 24.6 (2007) 71–91.

[10] On the labour point of view on our relationship with planetary forces see Mackenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2015); on speculative realisms, panpsychism and eliminationism see Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); for a new formulation of a 'rational and abstract' feminism see Laboria Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation*, 2015 (http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/).

[11] Luciana Parisi, *Contagious Architecture: Computation, Aesthetics, Space* (Cambridge, Mass., and Sidney: The MIT Press, 2013).