UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Posthumanism and the 'posterizing impulse'

Jansen, Y.; Leeuwenkamp, J.; Urricelqui Ramos, L.

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Jansen, Y., Leeuwenkamp, J., & Urricelqui Ramos, L. (2021). Posthumanism and the 'posterizing impulse'. In H. Paul, & A. van Veldhuizen (Eds.), *Post-everything: An intellectual history of post-concepts* (pp. 215-234). Manchester University Press. https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526148179.00020

11

Posthumanism and the 'posterizing impulse'

Yolande Jansen, Jasmijn Leeuwenkamp and Leire Urricelqui

Introduction

With the increasing awareness of the devastating consequences of what some call 'the Anthropocene' and others a 'crisis of humanism', the 'posthuman' has become a focal term in contemporary debates at the crossroads of science, politics and the humanities. Participants in this debate in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century, have often claimed that we are living in a historical moment in which the human is losing its centrality by 'its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks'.[1] Over the last decade, the human's imbrication in biological, ecological and geological assemblages has been added to that list.[2] Authors in this field insist that we are living in a critical historical moment 'impossible to ignore', and necessitating new theoretical frameworks.[3] Or as philosopher and gender studies scholar Francesca Ferrando put it in 2013: '[I]n contemporary academic debate, "posthuman" has become a key term to cope with an urgency for the integral redefinition of the notion of the human.'[4] Her colleague Rosi Braidotti argues that we need 'new cartographies' to challenge and go beyond the paradigms of the dominant enlightened humanism that understood the 'human' or 'Man' as the unique and superior form of life.[5] Others, however, consider not so much a *crisis* of humanism, but rather the *enhancement* of the human through progress and technological development as the most crucial aspect of the 'post-moment' we are in.[6] The latter version of posthumanism, also called 'transhumanism', expresses an enthusiasm for science and technology, often in tandem with capitalism, that is on a tense footing with the more critical strand of posthumanism. The 'posthuman' thus inspires quite divergent discourses, in terms of either crisis or progress, that are not easily combinable. Critical posthumanism, transhumanism, extropianism, new materialism, technoscience studies and animal studies are examples of these multiple and contrasting fields and approaches, all of them referring to a notion of the 'posthuman', and their variety brings together some of the big tensions of our time.

Debates on the 'posthuman' have been dealing with these tensions from the moment the notion was coined by literary scholar Ihab Hassan in 1977, at an expanding scale across the humanities and sciences. Hassan, a key figure within postmodernism,[7] talked about posthumanism when reflecting on a perceived convergence between the 'two cultures' that had been separating science and imagination, technology and myth since the nineteenth century, as C. P. Snow had famously argued in 1959.[8] One of these cultures was, in Hassan's terms, the 'abstract, technophile, sky-haunted culture dominated by the male principle', i.e. the culture of science and technology that had announced the actual advent of the *homo deus* that had first only been the product of human fantasy. The other culture was the one of 'moist, earthbound arcadians ruled by the female principle'.[9] As we will see in what follows, within the discourse on posthumanism that has developed since the publication of Hassan's article in 1977, we can trace the two cultures' further intertwinement in the interaction between 'transhumanism' on the one hand, and 'critical' or 'cultural' posthumanism on the other. The ways in which each of these strands within posthumanism interprets the 'post' in posthumanism is pivotal for this interaction.

In an article on the notion of 'postraciality', African American Studies scholar Paul Taylor nicely captures how the post-prefix 'is a philosophical operator that expresses a philosophical impulse', which he calls the 'posterizing impulse'.[10] In connection to what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls 'a space-clearing gesture', Taylor summarizes that 'posterizing' is all at once 'a gesture of repudiation, of indebtedness, of skepticism, and of openness, done with an eye toward the inexorability of change over time'.[11] This impulse is characterized by the use of imagery concerning a 'historic shift, break or rupture … in order to establish distance from some older way of proceeding'.[12]

What we will try to demonstrate in this chapter, is that the 'posterizing impulse' has been part of the posthumanist discourse from the 1970s onwards, but stemmed from the debate about 'transhumanism' that had already arisen in the optimistic 1950s. The actual notion of 'posthumanism', when it was introduced in the 1970s, formed part of the postmodern, reflexive and ironic discourses of the time, which did not so much claim a historical shift or rupture, and did not imply a 'space-clearing gesture' towards a different future, but rather announced a position towards the present, a cultural critique, an explanation of 'how we became posthuman'.[13] This title of literary studies scholar Katherine Hayles's book summarizes this reflexivity: it had more to do with an attitude towards the present in light of a 'posthuman culture' than with a claim about a posthuman age or era, or about 'the future' at all.

It remains a question, however, how much 'post-' was needed here, or whether, perhaps, the gesture towards a 'post-' was rather a 'problem' than a helpful impulse. The latter view has lately quite felicitously been elaborated on by philosopher and biologist Donna Haraway, who understands 'post-' as 'more of a problem.'[14] Instead of 'posterizing', she rather proposes 'staying with the trouble', a rethinking of the place of humanity not among the gods (for the future), but as part of the *humus* that we (sh)are with multiple other species. This rather connects us to a 'com-post' than to a 'posthuman', to what she calls the 'humusities' rather than the humanities or posthumanities.[15]

We will suggest that a philosophical discourse related to 'posthumanism' has emerged today that acknowledges the search for a new 'post' 'beyond' anthropocentrism and modern humanism, especially in the sense of its approach to nature, but that has picked up the reflexivity towards the notion of the 'post' as well, and is aware of how it can remain trapped in the boldness of the posterizing gesture. It therefore seeks an earthly, 'staying with the trouble' kind of 'post', or rather a 'com-post', while being less academic, ironic, and literary than the early postmodern posthuman in the work of Ihab Hassan. See here our zigzag reconstruction.

Postmodern posthumanism in the work of Ihab Hassan

'Posthumanism' was coined by literary scholar Ihab Hassan in 1977, as a broad speculative concept within postmodernism, which had already been turned, in Hassan's words, into 'a tedious travesty' at the time.[16] Hassan introduced the notion in his parodical article 'Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture? A University Masque in Five Scenes'. Very postmodernly, Hassan does not assume the role of 'author' or 'philosopher' in the article but instead uses the form of a medieval disputation with eight different kinds of texts as dramatic characters, among them 'pretext', 'text', 'mythotext', 'metatext', 'postext'.[17] The latter ironically 'vainly attempts to conclude the nonaction', while 'pretext' superciliously announces 'the emergence of a new type of culture', which it calls 'posthumanist'.[18] The 'postmodern performance' reflects how the different attitudes and voices within the debate about the Promethean possibilities of man hang together with different attitudes towards time and historicity. The most 'posterizing', philosophical, 'grand narrative'-like voice, 'text', at first just signals a process leading to a posthumanist culture, a culmination of 'the growing intrusion of the human mind in nature and history', the 'dematerialisation of life and the conceptualisation of existence', in short, the Hegelian-Christian narrative of universal history,[19] according to which

the emergence of posthumanism is nothing more than the 'natural effect of Western metaphysics'.[20]

In the dynamics of the discussion with 'mythotext', who is focused on the myth of Prometheus, 'text' later on dramatizes this growing intrusion into the announcement of 'a new phase':

> We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must help-lessly call posthumanism. The figure of Vitruvian Man, arms and legs defin-ing the measure of things, so marvelously drawn by Leonardo, has broken through its enclosing circle and square, and spread across the cosmos.[21]

According to 'text's dialogue partner 'mythotext', however, the myth of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, 'mirrors our own present'.[22] Prometheus transformed the human condition by means of his cunningness (corresponding to technological ingeniousness) and through interference with the gods, transcending the boundaries between the human and the divine. Impersonating this double-edged sword of cunningness and hubris, he represents the ambiguity of the transformation of the human condi-tion. As we are reminded by 'mythotext' in a scene ominously called 'the Warnings of the Earth', posthumanism can be seen as the culmination of a cunning attitude that human beings have always had: 'Posthumanism seems to you as a sudden mutation of the times; in fact the conjunctions of imagi-nation and science, myth and technology, have begun by the firelight in the caves of Lascaux',[23] and the optimism connected to the Promethean myth is more 'kitsch than vision', since Prometheus 'is a trickster and thief'.[24] From the mythical perspective, the historical 'post' announced by 'text' is therefore just a matter of myopia missing the continuities of the human condition. 'Prometheus is himself the figure of a flawed consciousness strug-gling to transcend such divisions as the One and the Many, Cosmos and Culture, the Universal and the Concrete'[25] – hence the figure of the hubris of man. The figure of Prometheus thus represents the ambiguity of the human urge for technological and scientific progress: a matter of improvement (hero), but by means of hubristic tricks (thief).

Hassan's article can be seen as capturing all the ambivalences of the posthumanist culture that 'text' is announcing: 'to open oneself with hope to the Promethean endeavor is also to recognize its error and terror, its madness within.'[26] And 'mythotext' adds: 'We know all too well the litany of our failures: pollution, population, power that serves only to suppress – in short, man's deadly exploitation of nature and himself.'[27] The ambiguity of the figure of Prometheus can therefore be seen as paradigmatic for the historical development of posthumanist theory: on the one hand, it entails the attitudes of optimism towards the new possibilities of transcendence of

'the human' that technology enables (seeing the heroic side), while on the other hand, it also entails from the outset attitudes of critical reflection on the particular culture that underlies this need to transform the human condition (seeing the hubristic side).

Posthumanism is then characterized early on by the *performance of Prometheus*: 'Performing' Prometheus in the present is a reflection on a transformation difficult to evaluate and assess both qua 'newness' (post-ness) and qua progress, rather than a singular historical 'post' where one era would be the successor of the other. Posthumanism thus explicitly formed part of postmodernism from the beginning, and it couldn't escape being introduced as a 'dubious neologism, the latest slogan, another image of man's recurrent self-hate',[28] by which 'Zeus & Co' (Inc.) had to perform (once again) the ambivalence of the human access to fire – to knowledge and imagination, science and myth – without having received the wisdom needed to deal with them politically. Hence, ironically and precisely at the time most 'isms' had been declared ideological and dead, Hassan's article both announced the posthumanist culture projecting 'human consciousness into the cosmos, of "mind" into the furthest matter' while at the same time presenting this as just a matter of perspective, the dramatic view of one voice among others.[29] In sum, the emergence of the notion of posthumanism immediately involved a critical cultural reflection on the exploitative tendency that undergirds progressive humanism, while at the same time refraining from the bold historicizing 'space-clearing' 'post' that seems so central to the philosophical gesture of 'posterizing', a gesture that itself formed part in many ways of modern humanism.

Apart from the distinction between a 'posterizing' and a 'critical' posthumanism, Francesca Ferrando distinguishes posthumanism as an 'academic critical position' from a posthumanism in terms of 'a perception of the human which is transhistorical', and which, she notes, is often called transhumanism.[30] In a similar vein, Ranish and Sorgner write:

> Hassan's announcement of posthumanism has little to do with the posthuman in transhumanism. Similar to Foucault's […] proclaimed 'end of man', post-humanism does not mean 'the literal end of man but the end of a particular image of us'. […] In other words, for these theorists, our biological nature may remain unchanged, but the self-concept of the human changes, in particular when we consider the integration of technology in our life.[31]

In sum, the 'post' in posthumanism is itself full of ambiguity, simultaneously engaging a historical, a critical and a transhistorical conception of 'the human'. These three conceptions became further entangled after Hassan's prophetic announcement of posthumanism.

Posthumanism among other 'posts' from the 1970s onwards

As an 'ism' without a prior adjective ('posthuman'), 'posthumanism' came up relatively late in comparison to some earlier adjective 'posts' that had emerged as periodizing markers and sociological-historical adjectives, such as 'post-Christian', 'post-colonial' and 'post-secular'.[32] It came up in tandem with other 'post-isms' such as postmodernism and poststructuralism in the 1970s. These notions were characterized by their origins in academic contexts. However, they soon became public notions that summarized a rejection of the ways in which European modernity had tended to hide its colonial, violent, inhuman dimensions by externalizing them either outside of Europe (colonial violence) or by transformations into fascism, totalitarianism or racism against the 'Other' of the Enlightenment. Thus, these post-isms imply a distance taken from modernity itself and the ideologies and practices that had shaped it, such as colonialism, humanism, liberalism, historicism, Enlightenment, capitalism, communism, and the 'grand narratives' of 'Man' and history.

During the 1980s, at the time of the 'end of isms' culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall, some post-isms became popular (postmodernism in particular) while others lived a largely academic life, making their way through the humanities and social sciences, such as poststructuralism. Posthumanism, for its part, remained relatively reserved to fields of scholarship studying the intersection of science, technology and the humanities, especially in the 1990s (in the work of Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles in particular).[33]

All the post-isms tended to be rather critically approached in mainstream public cultures. The more radical views connected to 'post-structuralism', often named 'antihumanist', departing from Michel Foucault's and Jacques Derrida's generation, as well as their legacies of anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist radicalism, were surpassed in the larger societies by the revival of liberal democracy and liberal humanism in their well-known Anglophone (Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, Anthony Giddens), French (Raymond Aron) and German (Jürgen Habermas/Axel Honneth, Ulrich Beck) versions, and implied a reflexively oriented modernity rather than anything 'post-', even if Jürgen Habermas took his share of conceptualizing 'posts-', postmodernism and post-secularism in particular.

As we already saw, in contrast with the philosophical gesture of 'posterizing', posthumanism emerged from the outset as a form of cultural critique capturing the ironic and ambiguous condition in which both the humanist ideals of modernity and the critiques of modernity by the 'post-isms' had become problematic. Posthumanism thus signalled a new culture where

'imagination and science are agents of change'.[34] For Hassan, imagination and myth were a vital aspect of this change. Therefore, posthumanism emerged not merely as a rational reflection on historical change, but as a critical cultural reflection on the interconnectedness of science and art. It was not only a matter of technological advance, paradigmatic for progressive modernity according to which the 'human form' is transforming rapidly, but also a matter of a change in 'human desire and all its external representations'.[35]

However, it was also through art and the imagination that critical posthumanism became futuristic itself. As a way of reflecting on the limits or ends of man as a progressive being and the gloomy scenarios of where science could take us, art has historically imagined many 'posthumans' in the guise of figures like Doctor Faustus, Frankenstein and Superman, and in stories such as *Brave New World* and *2001 – A Space Odyssey*.[36] This type of imagination was not confined to art, as theoretical reflections on new forms of the 'human' such as Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* and Harari's more recent and popular *Homo Deus* show. According to Ferrando, then, posthumanism came 'along within and after postmodernism' (referring to Hassan), as it developed first as a 'political project' aimed at deconstructing the 'Human' in the 1970s, but subsequently transformed into a critical position within literary studies in the 1990s, ultimately leading to a philosophical position 'enacting a thorough critique of humanism and anthropocentrism'.[37]

Transhumanism and posthumanism

Like with most other post-concepts, it is difficult to delineate an unequivocal historical development of posthumanism, even though the term has a relatively precise origin, as we already noted. Thinking 'beyond' or 'after' humanism can be attributed to many authors, who do not necessarily identify themselves as posthumanist thinkers. Even within the philosophical context, the term 'posthumanism' can be attributed to ideas from radically different strands of thought. Moreover, due to the intertwinement with other concepts, such as 'antihumanism' and 'postmodernism', and the emergence of new, related concepts such as 'transhumanism',[38] there is not one evident genealogical narrative to reconstruct. 'Posthumanism' can, therefore, be very roughly defined as 'an umbrella term for ideas that explain, promote or deal with the crisis of humanism'.[39]

If we understand posthumanism as announcing and theorizing the end of man as the centre of the universe, the origins of this idea can be said to have developed long before the term was used. Several authors go back to

Marx,[40] Nietzsche,[41] Heidegger,[42] or Foucault[43] to signal the beginning of the movement they retrospectively call 'posthumanism'. They argue that these theorists were pivotal for establishing the idea that man is not so much the Cartesian rational and autonomous subject that was envisioned by the humanist ideal of Man, while they were also not doing so from an anti-modern standpoint. According to Rosi Braidotti, a shift in how human nature is conceptualized is at the core of all posthumanist theory:

> Far from being the n[in]th variation in a sequence of prefixes that may appear both endless and somehow arbitrary, the posthuman condition introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet.[44]

In short, according to Braidotti, posthumanism should be seen as a historical moment, or rather shift, in which the traditional ways in which human beings as a biological species and as moral creatures have been conceptualized have increasingly become regarded as untenable. However, the question of which idea(s) gave a significant urgency to this shift is difficult to answer.

The diversity regarding the origins of the concept has everything to do with the sort of 'posthuman' that is envisioned. As mentioned, we can generally distinguish two different but interrelated strands of posthumanism. Even though both share 'the notion of technogenesis',[45] as Francesca Ferrando[46] points out, it is in their differences that, crucially, lies an understanding of these two philosophical approaches. First, the strand usually called 'transhumanism' departs from the idea that technological, genetic and biomedical developments can and should ultimately lead to the emerging of a new type of human – the *posthuman*.[47] David Roden calls this more futuristic line of thought 'speculative posthumanism' as it is 'not a normative claim about how the world ought to be but a metaphysical claim about what it could contain'.[48] The second perspective, developed by Stefan Herbrechter, among others, can be called 'critical posthumanism'. It draws on the idea that the humanist ideal of man as a progressive being must be critically reconsidered and revised. It can, therefore, be seen as a 'philosophical corrective to humanism'.[49] If posthumanism aspires to challenge and overcome humanism, transhumanism considers the intellectual and physical limitations of the human being as something that needs to be overcome by the technological control of biological evolution. In what follows, we will go into the central characteristics of both currents to better understand the aspects in which they differ or, even, are radically opposed.

In 1957 the biologist Julian Huxley coined the term *transhumanism* to refer to the possibility of the human species transcending itself in its total-

ity: 'It [transhumanism] is the idea of humanity attempting to overcome its limitations and to arrive at fuller fruition; it is the realization that both individual and social developments are processes of self-transformation.'[50] Although he did not assign to it the same meaning as his successors, the term ultimately denoted a radical transcending of man's biological limitations.[51]

In the 1980s, transhumanists began to identify themselves with this term and line of thought, forming the modern philosophical notion of transhumanism that prevails today. Over the decade, FM-2030[52] and Natasha Vita-More began teaching classes on transhumanism in Los Angeles, Eric Drexler founded the Foresight Institute, and Max More established the Extropy Institute. In 1990, More wrote the foundations of modern transhumanism in *Principles of Extropy* and *Transhumanism: A Futurist Philosophy*. In 1998, philosophers Nick Bostrom and David Pearce founded the World Transhumanist Association and, together with the authors already mentioned as well as others, approved the Transhumanist Declaration.[53] Based on the ideas conceived by More, transhumanism is here defined as:

(1) The intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate ageing and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities.
(2) The study of the ramifications, promises, and potential dangers of technologies that will enable us to overcome fundamental human limitations, and the related study of the ethical matters involved in developing and using such technologies.[54]

In this way, transhumanists believe that the existing forms of the human are at an intermediate stage that needs to be challenged to advance towards a human form in which bodies, as well as intelligence, will be enhanced for a higher utility and purpose. Reaching this goal means, for them, entering the stage of 'the posthuman'. According to transhumanists, the enhancement of human nature towards a posthuman nature will be reached through technological development: 'By thoughtfully, carefully, and yet boldly applying technology to ourselves, we can become something no longer accurately described as human – we can become posthuman.'[55] The posthuman is thus the future human that will overcome all those undesirable characteristics of the present human condition, such as ageing and death. Furthermore, 'posthumans would also have much greater cognitive capabilities, and more refined emotions (more joy, less anger, or whatever changes each individual prefers)'.[56] Transhumanism is, in this way, a techno-deterministic and techno-utopian form of posthumanism in which the *telos* of humanity's future will be achieved through technology.[57]

For Bostrom, transhumanism is a combination of Renaissance humanism (hence Hassan's reference to the Vitruvian man) together with specific ideas from the Enlightenment period, where rational humanism, empirical science and critical reason are understood as the path for learning about the world as well as for providing the grounds of morality. Transhumanism is thus rooted in 'rational humanism'.[58] It is what transhumanists understand as a 'eupraxsophy',[59] which is a 'nonreligious philosophy of life that rejects faith, worship, and the supernatural, instead emphasizing a meaningful and ethical approach to living informed by reason, science, progress, and the value of existence in our current life'.[60] That is the above-referred-to extension of the humanist project based on enlightened principles such as reason, progress or secularism. It is a thinking that wants to bring humanism beyond itself, and that understands limits as something to be transcended, to be challenged.

As Cary Wolfe critically puts it, transhumanism 'should be seen as an *intensification* of humanism'.[61] Thus, instead of presenting a framework to approach the problems that a hierarchical understanding of the human versus all other species presents, as we will see critical posthumanism does, transhumanism, on the contrary, strengthens this hierarchy. The human is understood within a linear timeline in which there is demarcated progress to achieve through technological development to become a superior form: the post-human. The post-human will challenge the limits that the body presents for the mind. The post-human(ity) of transhumanism is thus a goal to be achieved. It is the purpose towards which transhumanism heads and therefore remains an intermediate phase between the human and the post-human.

This type of 'posthumanism' can, therefore, be seen as remaining within the humanistic framework – the idea of man as a being that can be improved through knowledge and science remains central. For this reason, Stefan Herbrechter describes this strand of posthumanism – which he calls 'the current technology-centered discussion about the potential transformation of humans' – as 'merely the latest symptom of a cultural malaise that inhibits humanism itself'.[62]

Contrary to transhumanism, *critical posthumanism* presents a theoretical framework where two critiques converge: on the one hand, posthumanism criticizes the classical humanism and the idea of man as a unique being, that is, 'the universalist posture of the idea of "Man" as the alleged "measure of all things"'; on the other hand, posthumanism questions 'species hierarchy and the assumption of human exceptionalism'.[63] That is, posthumanism presents a post-anthropocentric critique of the established hierarchy of the species, in which man is placed above the rest as a superior being:

> In the West, the human has been historically posed in a hierarchical scale
> to the non-human realm. Such a symbolic structure, based on a human
> exceptionalism well depicted from the Great Chain of Being, has not only
> sustained the primacy of humans over non-human animals, but it has also
> (in)formed the human realm itself, with sexist, racist, classist, homophobic,
> and ethnocentric presumptions.[64]

Posthumanism's critique, therefore, opposes transhumanism's goal. It is 'a
critique of the Enlightenment subject's claim to mastery, autonomy, and
dominance over material and virtual worlds',[65] to put it in terms that clearly
echo Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of Enlightenment rationalism in
Dialectic of Enlightenment.[66]

According to Pramod Nayar, posthumanism proposes a deconstruc-
tion of the dualisms that encompass the idea of 'the human' as a neutral
and timeless idea, which can be universalized to define the exclusivity and
superiority of the human species. Critical posthumanism 'rejects both
human exceptionalism … and human instrumentalism',[67] that is, it rejects
the uniqueness of human beings as well as the belief that humans have the
control over the natural world. Thus, this critical approach questions
the philosophical projects of humanism and transhumanism that situate
human reason and rationality in the centre, by proposing a broader and
more inclusive understanding of the concept of life. As such, posthuman-
ism aims, first of all, to debunk the belief, central to humanism, that man
alone has dignity in contradistinction to animals because he has reason and
consciousness.

An important source for the latter idea was Renaissance humanist
Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.[68] In this
text – later denoted as 'the manifesto of humanism'[69] – Mirandola aims to
specify what it is about human nature that makes 'man' such a miraculous,
admirable and eminent creature.[70] In his characterization of the human
Mirandola distinguishes 'man' from both animals and the divine, and
concludes that the excellence of man is characterized precisely by this inter-
mediate state: unlike animals, man has the capacity to overcome the con-
straints of nature because of his intellectual capacities, which brings man
closer to the divine, but the real wonder is man's potentiality and openness
towards different ways of being:

> But upon man, at the moment of his creation, God bestowed seeds pregnant
> with all possibilities, the germs of every form of life. Whichever of these a
> man shall cultivate, the same will mature and bear fruit in him. If vegetative,
> he will become a plant; if sensual, he will become brutish; if rational, he will
> reveal himself a heavenly being; if intellectual, he will be an angel and the son
> of God.[71]

Mirandola thus thought that the dignity of man consists in his capacity to transcend the natural constraints of nature through his free will and intelligence to develop into a higher form of being (the posthuman perhaps).

Another, interrelated, point of critique that is central to critical posthumanism (and not to transhumanism) is what Herbrechter calls the 'ideology of development'.[72] This denotes the humanist and Enlightenment belief that man is a progressive being, open to all kinds of development in virtue of his rational capacities. This idea is epitomized in Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, which became a symbolic figure for Western humanism. This humanist conception of man invokes a higher form of humanness, or *humanitas*, which is embodied in the Vitruvian Man: the *homo universalis*. This 'universal man' (explicitly not female), which is central to the cosmos, is meant to characterize a human being that has developed all his potential talents and intellectual faculties to perfection, and, as such, has distinguished himself from the lower, mere 'natural', beings and positioned himself in a more approximate relation to the divine. This metaphysical conception of man became rationalized during the Enlightenment, in the form of Descartes' *res cogitans* and Kant's transcendental reason, but this did not mean that these conceptions were any less metaphysical.

Due to scientific and technological developments during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the conceptualization of humanity as a progressive species and 'civilization' became a central idiom, which nonetheless culminated in a 'system' which had dehumanization as its counter-narrative. As Herbrechter explains: '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 …'.[73] The first type of inhumanity is related to the anthropocentrism which is presented as universal and must be countered by acknowledging that '[h]umans and their humanity are historical and cultural constructs … and they therefore have to be placed within larger contexts like ecosystems, technics or evolution'.[74] The second type of inhumanity is related to the way in which humanist essentialism creates inferior forms of being, and posthumanism in this sense, therefore, means 'to acknowledge all those ghosts, all those human others that have been repressed during the process of dehumanization: animals, gods, demons, monsters of all kinds'.[75]

These two tendencies of antihumanism have resulted in both the externalizing of the nonhuman to other species, sexes, races and premodern stages of evolution in order to define the Western humanist (modern) subject as natural dominator over other forms of life (the 'other inhuman'), as well as in the creation of dichotomies between the rational essence of man and its internal otherness (the animality, physicality, instinctiveness, subconsciousness, and

mortality inherent to human life). However, as the creation of this 'external other' is generally understood as a way of dealing with the 'internal other', where physicality, irrationality and animality are projected on the external other, the effort to go beyond the humanistic discourse through recognizing antihumanist tendencies within (historical materialism, Freudian unconsciousness, Lacanian structuralism or the Nietzschean will to power), risks losing from sight the constructive relation of this tendency with the external inhuman other. This becomes clear when we consider the way in which 'anti'-humanism played a role in critiques of modernity.

The fact that humanism projected inhumanness onto external others has resulted in critical responses from (formerly) dehumanized others to the mechanisms of subordination that relegated them to this status. Noteworthy examples are Simone de Beauvoir's feminism and the anti-colonial and anti-racist works of, among others, Aimé Césaire, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Frantz Fanon. Many of these responses were not so much a wholesale rejection of Western humanism or a desire to move beyond it, but in many cases the response was to advocate for a new notion of humanity in which other forms of being could be positively affirmed and alternative forms of experience could be metaphysically grounded. Fanon recognized that Western humanism had created an ideology of European whiteness that had dialectically created the Black Other as a necessary negation of the White Subject, but in order to overcome this negative relation he foresaw the emergence of a new type of humanity as the only viable way to assert oneself ontologically and politically in the world. He writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

> It [decolonization] brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the 'thing' which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself.[76]

For Fanon it is precisely the affirmation of the colonized subject's humanity which becomes the mechanism that sets them free (from being *damnés*). From that perspective, negating the humanist and modernist framework and its Manicheist logic from a 'post-' position would rather be remaining within the framework of humanism. To reject humanism in this context would then risk denying a new form of humanity that emerged precisely out of a critique of the inhuman tendencies within Western humanism. In this vein, Africana philosopher Lewis Gordon stated in the 1990s that only the dominant group has the privilege to move away from humanism since, after all, it has always been their 'humanity', while other communities have to fight for 'the humanistic prize'.[77] In addition, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson has argued that posthumanism leaves aside the critiques on humanity

produced by black scholars. Posthumanists began to present criticisms of 'man's' 'epistemological integrity'[78] by questioning different conceptions whose roots lead to Enlightenment thought. However, as Jackson notes, posthumanism has remained 'committed to a specific order of rationality, one rooted in the epistemological locus of the West, and more precisely that of Enlightenment man'.[79]

Paul Taylor has drawn a similar conclusion in his discussion of 'postraciality'. He argues that we should reject strong versions of postraciality, as the 'idea that we have achieved a postracial condition is part of the ideological dimension of a particular racial paradigm' which is characterized by 'its determination to whitewash racial history and the mechanisms of ongoing racial stratification – to obscure, ignore or erase the evidence that race still matters in a variety of definite, concrete, and distressingly familiar ways'.[80] This means that 'the act of repudiation',[81] which is common to all 'posterizing gestures', risks dismissing and obscuring the particular histories, traditions and experiences that developed from racial systems in favour of a non-racial universalism.

In other words, the critiques that developed in reaction to Western humanism have themselves been part of its history and development. Even though these responses wanted to leave behind a certain type of essentialist and exclusionary logic, rejecting all the hierarchizing dichotomies that humanism had generated, they simultaneously risked rejecting, obscuring and disregarding the histories, ideas and imagined futures that evolved from and within these dichotomies. In this sense, 'posthuman' imaginaries still have tended to invoke a universal teleology towards an abstract – genderless, colourless and bodiless – human, creating a blind spot for present forms of racism, sexism and colonial legacies.

Posthumanism in the present

Why is there a new interest in these 'post' phenomena over the last five or ten years, and perhaps why is 'posthumanism' one of the more popular ones? A few sequences of events in the first decades of the 2000s seem to have stimulated the re-emergence of the post-isms. The easy neoliberalism that wanted to be no -ism of the 1990s was first shaken by the events of 9/11 and their aftermath, then further by the financial crisis of 2008, the rising levels of inequality and the sealing off of the 'white world' from the Global South, after that by rising populism, and, since about 2015, by increasing public awareness of the depth of the global environmental crisis and the role of humanity in it, summarized by the term 'Anthropocene', and later the 'Capitalocene'[82].

Posthumanism is perhaps the 'philosophy of the time', as Rosi Braidotti and Francesca Ferrando claim, because it brings together the reflexive attitude of the other 'post-isms' with a relatively large arsenal of alternative ways of thinking and doing, of affirmation instead of being mainly critically oriented, and because it has been directed, from the beginning, towards the sciences as well as the humanities.[83] It thus brings together a few of the older post-World War II grand narratives of deception with modernity and capitalism, referring to Heidegger's critique of technology in the first place, with an awareness of the impact of humanity and modernity/coloniality on the whole world and the Earth itself. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss had formulated this constellation early on in 1979, after having been asked whether he saw himself as an antihumanist:

> What I have struggled against, and what I feel is very harmful, is the sort of unbridled humanism that has grown out of the Judeo-Christian tradition on the one hand, and on the other hand, closer to home, out of the Renaissance and out of Cartesianism, which makes man a master, an absolute lord of creation.[84]

It is the increasing awareness of the falsity of this lordship, the how and the why of it, as well as the awareness that it has to end, that is a shared sense among the more critical versions of posthumanism, as well in the larger public, which can explain the notion's popularity. However, we are not sure that 'post-' helps to find a helpful temporal orientation here. We, the authors of this article, tend to feel closer to Haraway's wager that commemorating, com-posting, *sympoiesis* in multispecies practices of kinship-making, rather oriented towards the *re-* than to the *post-*, even if reflexive rather than futuristic, would be a stronger, more imaginative way to go.[85]

Notes

1 Cary Wolfe, 'What Is Posthumanism?', in C. Wolfe (ed.), *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. xi–xxxiv, pp. xv–xvi.

2 See, for example, Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the new Climatic Regime.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: Living in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

3 Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism*, pp. xv–xvi.

4 Francesca Ferrando, 'Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations', *Existenz:*

An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts, 8:2 (2013), 26–32, 26.

5 Rosi Braidotti, 'Posthuman Feminist Theory', in Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 673–98, p. 689; 'Posthuman Critical Theory', in D. Banerji and M. R. Paranjape (ed.), *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures* (New Delhi: Springer India, 2016), pp. 13–32, p. 17; 'Posthuman Critical Theory', *Journal of Posthuman Studies*, 1:1 (2017), 9–25, 11. Braidotti here defines cartography as: 'a theoretically based and politically informed map of the present or 'actual moment' in terms of scholarly and dis-cursive production.' Its task is 'to provide insights into multiple dimensions: to be critical about the actual conditions, but also creative in terms of new figura-tions or navigational tools that aim at *actualizing* the virtual' (ibid., 11).

6 Francesca Ferrando and Rosi Braidotti, *Philosophical Posthumanism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 2; Ferrando, 'Posthumanism, Transhumanism', pp. 26–7, n. 1; Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 34; Neil Badmington, *Posthumanism* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 2; N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 247.

7 For a discussion of Hassan's work in relation to postmodernism, see Hans Bertens' chapter in this volume.

8 C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1959] 2001).

9 Ihab Hassan, 'Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?', *The Georgia Review*, 31:4 (1977), 830–50, 839.

10 Paul C. Taylor, 'Taking Postracialism Seriously', *Du Bois Review*, 11:1 (2014), 9–25, 16.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*.

14 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 212, n. 2.

15 Ibid., pp. 11, 32.

16 Hassan, 'Prometheus as Performer', 832.

17 Ibid., 831.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 835.

20 Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*, p. 34.

21 Hassan, 'Prometheus as Performer', 843.

22 Ibid., 832.

23 Ibid., 835–6.

24 Ibid., 847. See also Trijsje Franssen, 'Prometheus: Performer or Transformer?', in Robert Ranish and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner (eds), *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014), pp. 73–82, p. 74.

25 Hassan, 'Prometheus as Performer', 838.

26 Ibid., 847.

27 Ibid., 848.

28 Ibid., 843.

29 Ibid.

30 Francesca Ferrando, 'The Body', in Ranish and Sorgner (eds), *Post- and Transhumanism*, pp. 213–26, p. 219.

31 Robert Ranish and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner citing Foucault (*The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 1966) and Hassan (*Prometheus as Performer*, 1977), 'Introducing Post- and Transhumanism', in Ranish and Sorgner (eds), *Post- and Transhumanism*, pp. 7–27, p. 15.

32 Stefan Herbrechter notes that the concept 'posthumanism' was already used by Thomas Blount in 1656, and 'post-Human' by H. P. Blavatsky in 1888 (Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*, pp. 33–4). It could be interesting to trace these old versions of the notion, but they do not form part of the scholarly culture of post-war 'posts' on which we are focusing here.

33 Donna Jeanne Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), pp. 3–90; Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*.

34 Hassan, 'Prometheus as Performer', 838.

35 Ibid., 843.

36 For an overview of these 'posthumans', see 'Chronology I: The Posthuman', in Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. xxv–xxix.

37 Ferrando, 'The Body', 219.

38 For all the subcategories that can be said to fall under 'posthumanism', see Ferrando and Braidotti, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, p. 1.

39 Ranish and Sorgner, 'Introducing Post- and Transhumanism', p. 14.

40 Badmington, *Posthumanism*, p. 5.

41 Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*, p. 31.

42 Ferrando and Braidotti, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, p. 2.

43 Cary Wolfe, 'What Is Posthumanism?', p. xii.

44 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2013), p. 2.

45 The notion of 'technogenesis' was coined by Bernard Stiegler to refer to the co-evolution of the human animal together with the technicity of tools, a concept that Katherine Hayles adopts as well.

46 Ferrando, 'Posthumanism, Transhumanism', 28.

47 Ranish and Sorgner, 'Introducing Post- and Transhumanism', p. 8.

48 David Roden, *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 9.

49 Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*, p. 3.

50 Julian Huxley, 'Knowledge, Morality, and Destiny: The William Alanson White Memorial Lectures, Third Series', *Psychiatry*, 14:2 (1951), 127–51, 139.

51 Ranish and Sorgner, 'Introducing Post- and Transhumanism', p. 10.

52 FM-2030 was the adopted name by transhumanist and futurist philosopher Fereidoun M. Esfandiary.
53 For information about the association and the declaration: https://humanity plus.org/philosophy/transhumanist-faq/ (accessed 6 February 2020).
54 Ibid.
55 Max More, 'The Philosophy of Transhumanism', in Max More and Natasha Vita-More (eds), *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 3–17, p. 4.
56 Ibid.
57 Cf. Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), pp. 7–8.
58 Bostrom, Nick, 'A History of Transhumanist Thought', *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 14:1 (2005), 1–25, 2.
59 The term was coined by Paul Kurtz, known as the father of secular humanism. See More, 'Philosophy of Transhumanism', 4.
60 Ibid.
61 Wolfe, 'What Is Posthumanism?', p. xv.
62 Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*, p. 3.
63 Braidotti, 'Posthuman Feminist Theory', p. 674. See also Braidotti, 'Posthuman Critical Theory'.
64 Ferrando, 'Posthumanism, Transhumanism', 28. As David Livingstone Smith explains, the Great Chain of Being or *scala naturae* is the conception 'of the universe as a vast hierarchy with God, the supremely perfect being, sitting astride its apex, with inanimate matter lying at its base and everything else situated at one or another of the many levels arrayed in between. Although the details of the scheme vary from one culture to another and from one epoch to the next, all versions of it are broadly similar. Plants are near the bottom, not much higher than the soil from which they grow. Simple animals like worms and snails are more perfect than plants, so they occupy a slightly more elevated rung. Mammals are higher still, and we humans have a privileged rank just below the angels, and two steps beneath the Creator.' It is the representation of the Cosmos 'as static and unchangeable, complete and continuous. There was no room for novelty.' David Livingstone Smith, *Less than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011), pp. 39, 41.
65 Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, 'Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism', *Feminist Studies*, 39:3 (2013), 669–85, 672.
66 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).
67 Nayar, *Posthumanism*, p. 8.
68 Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1496), trans. A. Robert Caponigri (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery, 1951), p. 7.
69 A. Robert Caponigri, 'Introduction', ibid., p. xiii.
70 Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, p. 3.
71 Ibid., pp. 8–9.

72 Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*, p. 8.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., p. 9.

75 Ibid.

76 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), pp. 36–7.

77 Lewis Gordon, 'African-American Philosophy: Theory, Politics, and Pedagogy', in Steven Tozer (ed.), *Philosophy of Education* (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1999), pp. 39–46, 39, as quoted in Jackson, 'Animal', 672.

78 Jackson, 'Animal', 670.

79 Ibid., 672. Jackson refers to the essays by Sylvia Wynter about coloniality and the emergence of the ideas of Natural Man and Natural Reason, in particular to Wynter's article 'The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism', *boundary 2*, 12:3/13:1 (1984), 19–70.

80 Taylor, 'Taking Postracialism Seriously', 13.

81 Ibid., 17.

82 Jason Moore (ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).

83 Ferrando and Braidotti, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, p. 1.

84 Claude-Lévi-Strauss, 'Entretien avec Jean-Marie Benoist', *Le Monde* (26 January 1979), 21–2 (our translation). Original: 'Ce contre quoi je me suis insurgé, et dont je ressens profondément la nocivité, c'est cette espèce d'humanisme dévergondé issu, d'une part, de la tradition judéo-chrétienne, et, d'autre part, plus près de nous, de la Renaissance et du cartésianisme, qui fait de l'homme un maître, un seigneur absolu de la création.'

85 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*. Lévi-Strauss captured this direction in the interview from 1979: 'The respect of man by man cannot be based on certain particular dignities which mankind would attribute to itself, for then a fraction of mankind may always decide that it embodies these dignities more eminently than others. Rather, a kind of principal humility should be established at the outset; man, beginning by respecting all forms of life outside his own, would be protected from the risk of not respecting all forms of life within humanity itself' ('Entretien', 21–2). Original: 'Le respect de l'homme par l'homme ne peut pas trouver son fondement dans certaines dignités particulières que l'humanité s'attribuerait en propre, car, alors, une fraction de l'humanité pourra toujours décider qu'elle incarne ces dignités de manière plus éminente que d'autres. Il faudrait plutôt poser au départ une sorte d'humilité principielle; l'homme, commençant par respecter toutes les formes de vie en dehors de la sienne, se mettrait à l'abri du risque de ne pas respecter toutes les formes de vie au sein de l'humanité même.'