

Post-, Proto- and Ana-: Constructions of the Future

Stefan Herbrechter

Children, who will inherit the world. Children to whom, throughout history, stories have been told, chiefly but not always at bedtime, in order to quell the restless thoughts; whose need of stories is matched only by the need adults have of children to tell stories to, of receptacles for their stock of fairy-tales, of listening ears on which to unload these most unbelievable yet haunting of fairy-tales, their own lives; children - ... (Graham Swift, *Waterland*, London : Picador, 1991, p. 7)

A. *Lectures d'enfance* – A Generation Game

Baptisons-la *infantia*, ce qui ne se parle pas. Une enfance qui n'est pas un âge de la vie et qui ne passe pas. Elle hante le discours. Celui-ci ne cesse pas de la mettre à l'écart, il est sa séparation. Mais il s'obstine, par là même, à la constituer, comme perdue. A son insu, il l'abrite donc. Elle est son reste. Si l'enfance demeure chez elle, ce n'est pas quoique mais parce qu'elle loge chez l'adulte. (Lyotard, "Infans", *Lectures d'enfance*, Paris: Galilee, 1991, p. 9)

The post takes me back. I suppose I was one of those (belated) children that Jean-François Lyotard tried to explain the postmodern to. Like the children and the pupils of Mr Crick, the history teacher in Graham Swift's novel *Waterland*, whose subject is being "cut down" (another understanding of the phrase "the end of history" I suppose), I was spell-bound by the stories that my "fathers" (and some "mothers", too) had to tell about their time – their lives. And like the pupils in Mr Crick's history lessons during which he – in good postmodernist fashion – mixes history fact and autobiographical fiction (cf. Linda Hutcheon's famous characterization of postmodernist writing as "historiographic metafiction")¹ – I was at once skeptical of the "factuality" of their discourse (or rather persuaded of *and* by their counter-factuality) but at the same time I was fascinated with the earnestness of their desires and anxieties. Mr Crick comes across as a very nostalgic man, a dinosaur, who has grown up in the Fens and whose childhood is very much a part of the post WWII "sense of an ending" (in Frank Kermode's famous phrase).²

In the filmic adaptation³ Mr Crick is played – extremely well I think, with the suitable mixture of melancholia and *un air désabusé*– by Jeremy Irons, while the teaching takes place somewhere in the US, also very appropriately. Where else should the end of history occur than in the US? It adds a very interesting dimension to the novel, namely the question of globalization, the past, present and future of a certain idea of Europe, the slowness needed for the painful work of re-membering, literally. So like those children I was in a sense the "receptacle" of ideas about postmodernism and living (through) the end of history – "those most unbelievable yet haunting fairy-tales". And I admired and still do the times when ideas about something as abstract as "postmetaphysics" and "the incredulity towards metanarratives" could lead to an intellectual rift between individuals that would last a lifetime and would produce stunning and beautiful,

¹ Cf. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1988.

² Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, Oxford: OUP, 1966.

³ *Waterland*, dir. Stephen Gyllenhaal, dvd, Optimum Home Entertainment, 2006.

provocative and highly idiosyncratic works like Lyotard's *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, or Derrida's *Post Card*.⁴

And I feel that I am gradually turning into a Mr Crick myself – out of joint with “my” time – a time which has become so much more complex, chaotic and unfathomable, so much more difficult to “theorise”, so much less sure of the foundations that need “deconstructing”, and which instead, in fact, increasingly deconstruct themselves, faster and faster. So Mr Crick's exasperation with the next generation is quickly becoming my own – it's turning into a generation game:

I know what you feel. I know what you think, when you sit in your rows, in attitudes of boredom, listlessness, resentment, forbearance, desultory concentration. I know what all children think when submitted to the regimen of history lessons, to spooned-down doses of the past: ‘But what about Now? Now, we are Now. What about Now?’ (Waterland, 60)

So in the face of “legacy” – the haunting of a life, the “here and now”, lose their edge, and the future looks closed while the past opens up like a vast territory, inexhaustible and daunting. Daunting and haunting, history – the only thing that seemingly *IS*, the sum of our material inscriptions or traces, the sum of our effects and affects and their bearings on materiality, the world and time.

So it's about the next generation, and thus about childhood and education. Hence my return to Lyotard, who is very much a philosopher of childhood and of education, one could say. His notion of childhood is far from romantic, however – quite the opposite of Rousseau's idea of the child as the unspoiled proto-human – instead it is, one could argue, posthumanist, or based on the idea of the “inhuman”:

What shall we call human in humans, the initial misery of their childhood, or their capacity to acquire a ‘second’ nature which, thanks to language makes them fit to share in communal life, adult consciousness and reason? That the second depends on and presupposes the first is agreed by everyone. The question is only that of knowing whether this dialectic, whatever name we grace it with, leaves no remainder. (Inhuman, 3)

Childhood as “remainder” (*reste*), this, in fact, is the crux of the “inhuman”, for Lyotard, and it is also one of the main motivations behind his radical questioning of humanism. Moreover, it is that which drives the strange (temporal) logic that is at work in the prefix “post-” in general:

The child is eminently the human because its distress heralds and promises things possible. Its initial delay in humanity, which makes it the hostage of the adult community, is also what manifests to this community the lack of humanity it is suffering from, and which calls on it to become more human. (4)⁵

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Post Card : From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago : U of Chicago P, 1987; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, London: Turnaround, 1992.

⁵ Contrast this with Peter Sloterdijk's account of hominisation and “anthropotechnics” in *Das Menschentreibhaus: Stichworte zur historischen und prophetischen Anthropologie*, Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 2001.

L'Inhumain – causeries sur le temps, the title of the French original of *The Inhuman* is very much a reassessment of Lyotard's earlier work on the "post-", expressed in the shift towards the idea of the "inhuman". Lyotard is no longer convinced of the adequacy of the term "postmodern", which, by and large, has been misinterpreted as some form of linear succession ("after the modern"). However, Lyotard is more than ever convinced of the peculiar temporal logic that is at work in the prefix "post-", but, in *The Inhuman*, he is looking for ways of rearticulating this logic. We are thus dealing with Lyotard's very own attempt to reinscribe the "post-" of the postmodern into something that, today, is increasingly called, not the inhuman, but the posthuman.

Before we get there, however, and since, as I said before, the post takes me back, literally, to my PhD, – almost 20 years ago – I would like to revisit a few pages I wrote then, about:

B. *The Temporal Logic of the Prefix "Post-"*

And I quote some passages back at you and me:⁶ "The postmodern must be referred to as a phenomenon which has more complex logical and temporal relations with the modern than linearity and causality.⁷ (...) Modernity... is not just any epoch that may end at will, after its complete conceptualisation. The project of modernity is, according to its own definition, interminable. The modern always appropriates and incorporates the new, because anything that is perceived as new is assimilated according to the category of the modern (even though it may be called "postmodern").⁸ The premodifier "post-" testifies to this circularity in the ways it qualifies... modern... by introducing nonlinear and acausal temporal and spatial relations into the performance of the modern. In order to avoid being appropriated by the modern dialectic of the same (the new which can only be experienced after the event and is therefore never new in the strict sense), postmodernity, as the arrival of something radically "new" (that is even too modern to be modern) must remain an alterity or absence that exists only in the uncertainty of an uncanny implication.

What is certain, on the other hand, is the increasing impatience and late modern frustration with the interminability of this "project" of modernity. This is not so much a question of the end of history, but of what can be done for history to begin at last. In Peter Sloterdijk's words, late modernity is the time of the "epilogue":

On the one hand, modernity can perceive only the worst after itself; on the other hand, the worst lies precisely in its own course, which it prevents itself from leaving, because it holds no alternative to itself as thinkable.⁹

To be postmodern must therefore be the sentiment of living somehow after the end, after surviving the last and living on, before the next apocalypse, or *survivance*.¹⁰

⁶ Stefan Herbrechter, *Lawrence Durrell, Postmodernism and the Ethics of Alterity*, *Postmodern Studies* 26, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999, pp. 127ff.

⁷Cf. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time*, Princeton: PUP, 1992, pp. 3-18.

⁸Strictly speaking, the term "postmodern" is therefore self-contradictory in that it cannot possibly hold what it promises.

⁹Peter Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus : Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik*, Frankfurt : Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 292.

Survival, or mean-time [*Zwischenzeit*], could be described as the time of the event, the birth of (the other) history (“*Die Geburt der Geschichte aus dem Geist des Aufschubs*” — the birth of history from the spirit of deferral¹¹). Postmodernism is therefore concerned with alterity in history or the other (of) time. [It is this] feeling of a postmodern weariness of modernity, which characterises the phase of “late modernity” (postmodernism)... It manifests itself in the feeling of the foreclosed future of the modern as “being born old” (...). The ghostly “untimeliness” of the late modern as coming after the possibility of anything new accounts for the sense of unreality, or of feeling “posthumous” (...). This temporal undecidability is inscribed into the very paradox of the “post-” as coming before *and* after:

The “generations” flash by at an astonishing rate. A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Thus understood, postmodernism is not modernism at its end, but in a nascent state, and this state is recurrent.¹²

How does the prefix post- qualify modern, modernism and modernity? What does the postmodern feeling of “untimeliness” indicate? Something comes after the modern, modernism and modernity (logically and historically), but it is not (only) *postmodern*. The postmodern comes “after” the modern, that is after the event, only by implication. It is not periodisable with regard to the modern, for there is no position of the “here and now” — the elusive presence of the modern — from which a “pre-” or a “post-” may be determined:

[I]t is impossible to determine the difference between what has taken place (the *proteron*, the anterior) and what comes along (the *husteron*, the ulterior) without situating the flux of events with respect to a now. But it is no less impossible to grasp any such ‘now’ since, because it is dragged away by what we call the flow of consciousness, the course of life, of things, of events, whatever — it never stops fading away. So that it is always both too soon and too late to grasp anything like a ‘now’ in an identifiable way.¹³

This untimeliness of the postmodern as always too late or too soon with regard to an unrepresentable modern “now”, displayed in the trope of *husteron-proteron*, is inscribed into the literal paradox of the prefix *post-* as the “after” which comes “before”. The postmodern cannot be separated from the modern because it is always already contained in and thus anticipated by it:

[T]he postmodern is always implied in the modern because of the fact that modernity, modern temporality, comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself into a state other than itself. And not only to exceed itself in that way, but to revolve itself into a sort of ultimate stability, such for example as is aimed at by the utopian project, but also by the straightforward political project implied in the

¹⁰See Jacques Derrida, “Survivre” *Parages*, Paris: Galilée, 1989, pp. 117-218. Translation as “Living On — Border Lines”, trans. James Hulbert, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al., New York: Seabury Press, 1979, pp. 75-176.

¹¹Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus* 277.

¹²Jean-François Lyotard, “Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern?”, *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, p. 22.

¹³Lyotard, “Rewriting Modernity”, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, pp. 24-25.

grand narratives of emancipation. Modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity.¹⁴

The relation between the modern and the postmodern is therefore not chronological, but it relies on a particular understanding of repetition as anamnesis (or an “initial” repetition).¹⁵ It is in this sense that postmodernism is a re-writing of modernism and modernity, neither a break nor a simple succession, but a working through [*perlaboration, Durcharbeitung*] that occurs at once forwards and backwards “without finality”.¹⁶ This movement of back and forth within the process of “mourning” the initial forgetting of the unrepresentable (modern) is what Lyotard refers to as a process in “ana”:

[T]he “post-” of “postmodern” does not signify a movement of *comeback, flashback* or *feedback*, that is, not a movement of repetition but a procedure in “ana-”: a procedure of analysis, anamnesis, anagogy and anamorphosis which elaborates an “initial forgetting”.¹⁷

The initial forgetting is the unrecoverable, absent origin of the modern and the illusion on which modernism and the avant-garde ground their “discourse of originality”.¹⁸ Against the modern ideology of the new, postmodernism sets its feeling of belatedness and parodic repetition in order to achieve a “stalling” of the continual process of anticipating and appropriating the new by the modern. The postmodern therefore inscribes itself within the un(re)presentable of the modern,¹⁹ and through the opening of this unsayable and unexpressible sublime, invokes the radical otherness of the event. The possibility of the event in its radical futurity without any anticipation comes before any interpellation, any question and destination; it rather forms the possibility of the question itself:

The event happens as a question mark “before” happening as a question. *It happens* is rather “in the first place” *is it happening, is this it, is it possible?* Only “then” is any mark determined by the questioning: is this or that happening, is it this or something else, is it possible that this or that?²⁰

¹⁴Lyotard, “Rewriting Modernity”, p. 25.

¹⁵It is doubtful, however, if the modern and postmodern are ultimately “dialectisable” in a Heideggerian and Habermasian sense, described by Keulartz as the “dialectic of anticipation and anamnesis”; see Jozef Keulartz, *Die verkehrte Welt des Jürgen Habermas*, Frankfurt a.M.: Junius, 1995, pp. 20 ff., and 56:

Both dimensions of time, the “after” and the “before”, have to be envisaged simultaneously, if one is to be capable of realising the factual possibilities within the “present moment” [*Augenblick*], in order to seize them in one’s acts or to let them pass. The chronological notion of time, therefore, gives way to a kairological notion in Heidegger.

¹⁶See Lyotard, “Rewriting Modernity”, pp. 24, and 30.

¹⁷Lyotard, “Note on the meaning of ‘post-’”, *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, p. 93.

¹⁸See Rosalind E. Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition”, in *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy*, ed. Ingeborg Hoesterey, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 73.

¹⁹Compare Lyotard, “Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern?”, p. 24: “The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself ...”

²⁰Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde”, *The Inhuman*, p. 90.

From a postmodern point of view, one can say that the “*Ereignis* character of Being” remains unthought in the metaphysical tradition of modernity.²¹ But the event is not to be confused with the commodity of modern innovation; the possibility of an event is open at any time. The postmodern, however, seeks to suspend the modern pre-empting of the event, which is a foreclosure of eventuality leading to the eternal pastness of the modern “present”. It represents this paradox in its use of the future perfect [*future antérieur*] which (in French)

expresses a past event that one somehow transposes into the future — either to mark a supposition — or to attenuate — or else to underline the exceptional character of an accomplished event [*fait accompli*] seen from a future point where one poses oneself in imagination to increase one's ability to judge the contours/depth [*relief*] this event may have.²²

Coming at once too late and too soon — the phrase “this will have been new” — reflects the temporal contradiction within the postmodern as a process of anamnesis: the future as already contained in the past and vice versa. It is only in the performativity of (re-) writing (creating its own rules) that an opening towards the future event is created:²³

The artist and the writer therefore work without rules, and in order to establish the rules for what *will have been made*. This is why the work and the text can take on the properties of an event; it is also why they would arrive too late for their author or, in what amounts to the same thing, why their creation would always begin too soon. *Postmodern* would be understanding according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).²⁴

Although the future perfect “translates the present in its *différance*”,²⁵ it is not so much concerned with the futurity (in its prophetic anticipation) as such but — in conjunction with a (psycho)analytic understanding of the cure — with the undoing, “unwriting” or erasing of a (predetermined) future.²⁶ What is beyond the edge of the postmodern future perfect remains the unnamable absence of the future to come [*avenir/à venir*].²⁷

²¹See Gianni Vattimo, referring to Heidegger, in “The End of (Hi)story”, in *Zeitgeist in Babel*, ed. Hoesterey, p. 137.

²²Maurice Grevisse, *Le Bon usage — grammaire française*, 12th ed., Paris and Gembloux: Duculot, 1986, p. 1299. For the use of the future perfect see also Andrew McKenna, “Postmodernism: It's Future Perfect”, *Postmodernism and Continental Philosophy*, eds. Hugh Silverman and Donn Welton, Albany: SUNY Press, 1988, pp. 228-242.

²³See David Wood, “Introduction: Editing the Future”, *Writing the Future*, ed. Wood, London: Routledge, 1990, pp. 1 ff.

²⁴Liotard, “Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern?”, p. 24.

²⁵Andrew J. McKenna, “Postmodernism: It's Future Perfect”, p. 232.

²⁶See John Forrester, “‘... A Perfect Likeness of the Past’ (Freud): On Dreaming of the Future”, in *Postmodernism and Continental Philosophy*, eds. Silverman and Welton, p. 104.

²⁷Which according to Jacques Derrida can only be imagined as “monstrosity”; see for example *Of Grammatology*, trans. G.C. Spivak, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 5:

The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity. For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue.

(...)

The postmodern waiting for the absolute arrival of the *Ereignis* is time gained for history to occur before the end of history (and of modernity). How far this strategy can serve as a universal value, especially in relation to the postcolonial other, is another question.²⁸ But it may be time used for negotiation and for radical plurality, as set free in postmodernism.” End of quote.

C. Alternative Histories

So what has been happening in this “meantime” called postmodern(ism)? Here I’d like you to indulge me one more time, only for a few minutes, when I quote from an article I wrote for a rather obscure Indian journal appropriately called *In-Between*, in 2002,²⁹ which looks at the question of writing-on (or as I called it then, postwriting), writing-on after the end of (hi)story. The article picks up from the temporal logic of the “post-” as outlined above:

“[In conjunction with the complex (chrono)logical structures that are inscribed within the prefix “post-” the question of] continuity, discontinuity and dialectics in history arises. How to “overcome”, for example, the modern, how to leave, for example, modernity behind? This is the tantalising question of surpassing the unsurpassable or of transcending transcendence or being newer than the new. Hence the increasing impatience and frustration with, for example, modernity’s interminability and the constant surprise that events keep taking place. But when even the epilogue lasts too long, the story of the end becomes incredible. (...)

It is clear that the “Great Narrative” of History — “the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears in the dark” (*Waterland* 62), the inescapable and self-reproducing cycle of (inter)textuality — is the bait for man, the “story-telling animal.” But it is equally clear that (mystical) Reality lies in the Here and Now, which, however, remains inexpressible, for it lies outside the story-telling and beyond (inter)textuality. Between these fragmentary moments of “Messianic time,” which repeatedly crush the individual under their intensified feelings of joy or terror and “announce that time has taken us prisoner” (*Waterland* 61), is only the Void. This void between moments of Reality, which are the moments of true revolution, has to be filled; and this is done by telling stories. The problem is that these surprise attacks of the Here and Now only become accessible *après coup*, that is, in memory. And what else is memory than a story. So it happens that by the very attempt to arrest history in the here and now, it is necessary to tell the story of an end as a never-ending story...

This endless repetition of the same must be resisted. History as the endless war of humanity against itself (after the war is only before the next war) must end. But how to stop a cycle on which one’s own being and even one’s thinking is dependent? How to stop telling stories? How to escape into the absolute Alterity of Un-History? History can only come to an end after the ‘death of man,’ the annihilation of the subject, following

On the “normal monstrosity of postisms” (e.g. postmodernism) as opposed to “monstrous monstrosities” see Derrida, “Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms”, trans. Anne Tomiche, *The States of Theory: History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, ed. David Carroll, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990, p. 79.

²⁸Compare Lyotard, “Memorandum on Legitimacy”, *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, p. 69: “[G]aining time. Is this a universally valid end?”

²⁹Stefan Herbrechter, “Postwriting: Intertextuality and the End of History in Durrell, Swift and Barnes”, *In-Between* 11.2 (September 2002): 241-62.

the paradoxical phantasm of a world of a finally subjectless object (who would live to see it? Only the absolute gaze of the psychotic).³⁰ (...) [By thus] invoking the arrival of this absolute alterity — the Other (of) history — writing becomes ‘performative’ in its exercise of asceticism. Writing becomes writing about the end of writing, about its own exhaustion, or its (impossible) abstention while waiting for the Event which would transcend all writing. This concept would be best described as ‘postwriting’ and is a kind of opposite to the Derridean notion of *archi-écriture*. How may this apocalyptic waiting that constitutes postwriting be filled? By telling stories, of course.

So let me tell you... about the history of the end of history, or the postmodernist history of *askesis*, and about the theory of the postmodern. Postmodernism is sometimes also seen as a liberation or a return of the historical. In a certain undogmatic manner tradition re-enters the stage. The postmodernist ‘presence of the past’ is not an imitative but a transformative and plural engagement with tradition(s); it is by no means a neo-historicism, and it is not teleological as such. It is precisely the eschatological *telos* which postmodernism sets out to debunk and criticise in modernism, the modern and modernity. Postmodernist tradition always involves a translation of the old into the contemporary, thereby creating a multilingual plurality of historical synchronicity; it re-opens a historical dimension for the critique of the modern.

With its pluralist ideals, postmodernism is radically opposed to a return of universalist historiography, because historical discourse always depends on the exclusion of its silent others.³¹ Never, however, has so much attention been given to other histories, provoking an inflation of historiographies of ‘othering’ and difference; never has the acceptance of alternative, oppositional and repressed histories been so great. To preserve the futurity of the event as the experience of the other, and as the possibility of history, revolution and justice, involves an “affirmative experience of the coming of the other as other.”³² This is not in opposition to modernity, or a rejection of the past as inheritance or tradition; rather it is an affirmation of memory as essential in the process of working through the modern for “the moment at which the worst threatens to return is also the moment when the worst is being remembered... One ghost recalls another.”³³ For Jacques Derrida the un(re)presentable moment of non-contemporaneity of the present with itself [Swift’s slippery ‘Here and Now’] opens up the historical possibility for the very idea of justice as a trace or *différance*, and it also makes the process of history possible, establishing a new relation with repetition and deferral.³⁴ But this historical moment cannot be thought of as unity or oneness; it is the always “more-than-one” [*plus d’un*] of the ghost that inhabits the untimely [*l’intempestif*] always escaping the present moment. What therefore comes ‘after history,’ is the return

³⁰See Alain Badiou, “On a Finally Objectless Subject”, in *Who Comes After the Subject?* Ed. Eduardo Cadava, et al., London: Routledge, 1991, pp. 24-32.

³¹Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. T. Conley, New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1988.

³²Jacques Derrida, “The Destruction of Actuality: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” *Radical Philosophy* 68 (Autumn 1994): 36.

³³Derrida, “The Destruction of Actuality” 36.

³⁴See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, intro. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg, New York and London: Routledge, 1994, p. xix:

Without this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question ‘where?’ ‘where tomorrow?’ ‘whither?’

of this ghost; and postmodernist theory must therefore specialise in “hauntology” (or, spectral ontology):

Repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost... Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time* makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a *hauntology*... How to *comprehend* in fact the discourse of the end or the discourse about the end?... After the end of history, the spirit comes by *coming back* [*revenant*], it figures *both* a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again.³⁵

Repetition starts with the return of a ghost [*revenant*, literally “one who returns”], by a feeling of *déjà vu*; and it is in the difference created by repetition that the singularity of the event can be perceived as an echo or trace. The discourse of the end of history is itself belated and merely announces the end of a certain concept of (the end of) history. In the promise of the end of a certain history the final becoming historical of history is announced.

The (postmodernist) historical feeling of *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness) calls for a messianic philosophy in the Derridean, Levinasian and Benjaminian sense. It is only by embracing the problem of repetition that postmodernism can dissolve the teleology of the modern. For repetition involves difference, which is to say a critical distance, a ‘twist’ or ‘turn’. But this is always already a transgression of mere repetition and can be appropriated by parody or irony.³⁶ Repetition is also the very condition of knowledge, according to Gilles Deleuze, who reverses Freud’s idea of the compulsion to repeat: it is not because one forgets/represses that one is forced to repeat or that the repressed returns, but it is because one repeats that one forgets. Repetition in this sense is a selection in which only difference returns while the same is eliminated during this process of selection. Only by affirming the process of repetition does one gain access to the different. It is only the third repetition, the third occurrence, that gives birth to difference:

Only affirmation returns — in other words, the Different, the Dissimilar. Nothing which denies the eternal return returns, neither the default nor the equal, only the excessive returns: how much distress before one extracts joy from such a selective affirmation? Only the third repetition returns.³⁷

The logic of the psychoanalytic cure with its transference processes is based on this idea of repetition of the different and of a recognition *après coup* (by the doubling of the occurrence). Paradoxically, history can thus only be articulated in the future, and within the process of this articulation, a reorganisation of the past and the future can occur. By transference the past becomes the present so that the future can once more be an open question. The primal event needs a ‘double articulation’ of *Nachträglichkeit* to give away its meaning. Repetition and trauma mutually create each other, so that memory can alter past events *après coup* by transforming the repressed into traumatic post-eventness. The symbolic process that takes place during the analysis realises the anachronistic

³⁵Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 10.

³⁶Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, London: Athlone Press, 1994, p. 5.

³⁷Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 299.

paradox of *Nachträglichkeit* in the future perfect: this will have been 'it.' Thus, one has to travel into the future to encounter the repressed:

From where does the repressed return? (...) From the future. Symptoms are meaningless traces, their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively — the analysis produces the truth; that is, the signifying frame which gives the symptoms their symbolic place and meaning. As soon as we enter the symbolic order, the past is always present in the form of historical tradition and the meaning of these traces is not given; it changes continually with the transformations of the signifier's network. Every historical rupture, every advent of a new master-signifier, changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another, new way.³⁸

Knowledge is presupposed in the other, by which the subject hopes to gain insight into his/her own meaning. This knowledge is a necessary illusion (for the other 'lacks' it) until one finds out and constitutes it oneself *après coup*. The journey into the past, the historical enquiry can only occur on the symbolic level of the signifier, and only in language (or writing) can one know and bring about the past:

This, therefore, is the basic paradox we are aiming at: the subject is confronted with a scene from the past that he wants to change, to meddle with, to intervene in; he takes a journey into the past, intervenes in the scene, and it is not that he 'cannot change anything' — quite the contrary, only through his intervention does the scene from the past *become what it always was*: his intervention was from the beginning comprised, included. The initial 'illusion' of the subject consists in simply forgetting to include in the scene his own act ...³⁹

This describes the form of historical repetition that gives rise to historicism as self-fulfilling prophecy. The subject necessarily overlooks his/her blind spot, in the way his/her acting is already part of the state of things he/she is looking at, the way his/her error is part of the truth itself. Truth arises from this misrecognition, by a change of the symbolic status of the event; repetition recreates the traumatic event as symbolic necessity *post factum*. It is a retroactive justification through repetition as interpretation: "the interpretation always sets in too late, with some delay, when the event which is to be interpreted repeats itself; the event cannot already be lawlike in its first advent."⁴⁰ Unfortunately, there seems to be no short cut to the processes of truth-finding than through this form of misrecognition and repetition." End of quote. And this is precisely the point at which I would like to move, "forward" as it seems, namely to the idea of the...

D. Posthuman

Everything that was said about the post in connection with the postmodern applies in principle to all postisms, the latest ones, posthuman, posthumanism and

³⁸Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989, pp. 55-56.

³⁹Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, pp. 57-58.

⁴⁰Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, p. 62.

posthumanisation included. Obviously, the stakes in post-human-ism have been raised again and hence the sense of urgency of the ending invoked here usually has the effect that in engaging with the posthuman we tend to have even less time for the quite intricate logical and conceptual “side-effects” the posting process brings with it. Instead, there is often exasperation with the postmodern or the impression of being stuck in a time-loop,⁴¹ something we can ill afford in a time when “we” are increasingly overtaken by “events”. These events and their eventness – one of the main issues for postmodern theory – are usually associated, on the one hand, with technology (digitalization, virtualization, prosthesisation, medicalization...), and, on the other hand, with extinction scenarios and thus with ecologies.⁴² Rosi Braidotti’s book on the posthuman captures this moment well and can be seen as representative of it:

While conservative, religious social forces today often labour to re-inscribe the human within a paradigm of natural law, the concept of the human has exploded under the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns. After the postmodern, the post-colonial, the post-industrial, the post-communist and even the much contested post-feminist, we seem to have entered the post-human predicament. Far from being the nth version in a sequence of prefixes that may appear both endless and 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. (pp. 1-2)

Difficult to disagree with this breathless and sweeping account of the raised stakes of the last post. I would nevertheless like to point out a number of reservations, as much as I am in agreement, and as much as I am myself guilty of advocating the need for a posthumanism, if, as I would insist, a critical one (my book *Posthumanismus – Eine kritische Einführung*, which appeared in 2009, “before” Cary Wolfe’s and Rosi Braidotti’s surveys of the new scene – and which is only “now” appearing in English next Summer – an interesting repetition of the post- and ana-logic outlined by Lyotard above). Talk of the posthuman, or the *discourse* I would call posthumanism, is in many ways much “older” than postmodernism and encompasses many aspects of it – within the problematic history of humanism (whose ultimate untraceable origin would lie in some moment of “recognition” of the first humans, let’s say, that would have constituted an awareness of representing a distinct form of being, group or species, and hence the beginning of the idea of a community (of humans) or humanity). But at the same time, of course, posthumanism claims to be postmodernism’s successor. In fact, posthumanism is all about succession in the sense that it asks the anxious question: “what comes after the human?” (Whereas postmodernism (or poststructuralism) “merely” asked: “what comes after the subject?”).⁴³ The “ends of man”⁴⁴ – that peculiar endism that folded back onto the idea of teleology and finality is the very thing that still exercises posthumanism,

⁴¹ For by now classical examples of the prominent motif of the time loop structure see for example the films *Groundhog Day*, *Twelve Monkeys* or, above all, *Terminator*.

⁴² For a good summary of the implications of this argument and its relation to the notion of the “anthropocene” see Claire Colebrook’s “Introduction: Framing the End of the Species”, in her edited *Extinction, Living Books about Life*: <http://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Extinction?>

⁴³ Cf. Cadava, ed. *Who Comes after the Subject?*

⁴⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, eds., *Les Fins de l’homme : A partir du travail de Jacques Derrida*, Paris : Galilée, 1981.

but now more “literally”, rather than mainly “metaphorically”, as in Foucault’s famous passage towards the end of *Les Mots et les choses*.⁴⁵

My reservation would be that Braidotti’s account (and I say it again, it would be difficult to disagree with it) is, somewhat ironically, fast becoming the new and possibly ultimate metanarrative - just as we thought we had thoroughly embraced Lyotard’s idea of our hard-won “incredulity towards metanarratives”. As mentioned above, however, Lyotard is not only the thinker of the post of the postmodern, he is also, and maybe even more so the thinker of a certain posthuman “before” the posthuman – a point to which I will return...

What concerns me first and foremost, however, is the idea of the “qualitative shift” that Braidotti evokes in the passage quoted above, the qualitative shift from a “human” and to what must be called a “posthuman condition” (cf. Pepperell).⁴⁶ It certainly *seems* that there is a future-oriented urgency about the posthuman and its discourse. So it may appear that after almost half a century of epistemological skepticism about the future, its knowability, its heterology, its ineffability and radical openness as “to-come”, as ethical source of our “responsibility”, which all characterized the “postmodern” attitude, the posthuman condition can’t wait any longer, in the face of the urgencies of our own demise, and that of the planet. It is thus as if “ecology” has become the master-signifier of this supposedly new paradigm. But what does this signify? Is this really a shift towards something else, something new, for example, a shift from “post” to...

E. Proto-, or Alternative Futures?

My reservation, as you can imagine, moves into another direction. However, this is obviously not meant to be a conservative argument that denies the “reality” of global warming; it is also not anti-environmentalist, but I would argue it is more “historical”, maybe even “materialist” in a very traditional sense. Some forms of posthumanism are from my point of view in danger of returning to a less self-reflexive stage in what I would call the problematic history of “constructions of the future”. To recapitulate, as a result of the postmodern “disavowal” of the “future” outlined above, our stock of “figures” that describe the “transformation of time” has significantly increased. Here is a list of some of the imaginable “scenarios” (each would require an almost interminable analysis of its own):

- the always already... scenario
- the we have never been... scenario
- the “time is out of joint” scenario: hauntology, survival, zombification, ghosts...
- the problematisation of “invention” (invention of the other) and the “production of the new” scenario

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966, p. 571-2 :

L’homme est une invention dont l’archéologie de notre pensée montre aisément la date récente. Et peut-être la fin prochaine. Si ces dispositions venaient à disparaître comme elles sont apparues, si par quelque événement dont nous pouvons tout au plus pressentir la possibilité, mais dont nous ne connaissons pour l’instant encore ni la forme ni la promesse, elles basculaient, comme le fit au tournant du XVIIIe siècle le sol de la pensée classique, - alors on peut bien parier que l’homme s’effacerait, comme à la limite de la mer un visage de sable.

⁴⁶ Cf. Robert Pepperell, *The Posthuman Condition*, Bristol: Intellect, 2003; see also Ollivier Dyens, *La condition inhumaine: essai sur l’effroi technologique*, Paris: Flammarion, 2008.

- the “side-shadowing” scenario: trauma, *Verwindung*, après-coup, belatedness, untimely...
- the “*mise-en-abyme*” scenario: pluralisation, fragmentation, specularisation...
- the impossible utopia scenario
- the retrofitting and remediating scenario...
- the space-time compression scenario...
- the speeding-up scenario: hypermodernity, fatal strategy, asynchronicity...
- the prolepsis or “remembering forward” scenario: “rewriting”, alternative...

These figures are indeed unlikely to disappear, but will continue to problematize any “post”, and increasingly so, given the ever-rising stakes involved in the metaphysics of the “postal principle”.⁴⁷ And in this context I would like to, by way of “beginning to conclude”, compare and contrast two moves: Mikhail Epstein’s characterization of the present as “proto”, in his recently translated book *The Transformative Humanities – A Manifesto* (Bloomsbury, 2012),⁴⁸ and Lyotard’s “post-postmodern” approach in the various pieces collected in the volume *The Inhuman*. In his chapter, “From post- to proto-: Toward a new prefix in cultural vocabulary”, Epstein points towards what he calls the current “transition from finalizing to initiating approaches in the humanities”. I will not, again, engage with the aspect of “finalizing” that is here ascribed to the prefix “post” and which I believe has been sufficiently problematised above. The post is so much more than a simple attempt to either describe or “provoke” the end of something. Epstein’s approach more or less deliberately – mainly due to its manifesto style – cuts through the ambiguities of the post to promote instead the apparent transparency and dynamic of his suggested successor prefix: “proto”. The particular mode of the proto, as Epstein points out, is the “what may be”, not the predicative or promissary “what will be” (23). The proto hence describes *possible* futures, not *necessary* ones; it is all about potentiality and becoming, fired by the desire to escape the stagnation of the various “endisms” of the era of the posts and the shift in attitude “from retrospectivism to prospectivism” (25). Negativity is thus ascribed to the “post” and positivity and progressiveness to the “proto”. Inevitably, the driving force behind the “proteism” is technological and scientific development: the prospect of artificial computer intelligence makes our time “proto-intelligent”, the prospect of artificial genetically engineered life makes our time “proto-life”, new media and electronic networks characterize our moment as “proto-global” and the emerging collectivity of the networked community invoke our current state as “proto-mind”, etc. Epstein, in a somewhat shameless twist, then moves on to appropriate N. Katherine Hayles’s notion of the posthuman⁴⁹ and aligns it with Moravec’s idea of downloading the human consciousness into a computer⁵⁰ – an idea that Hayles’s entire volume, *How We Became Posthuman*, actually sets out to critique. Epstein, however, designates both, the posthuman and the “transhuman”, as “proto-human” – the human as having the potential to become other: “the so-called ‘posthuman’ does not involve any elimination of the human, but rather the expansion, even the extension of embodied awareness through a system of electronic implants and digital enhancements” (27). This largely revisionist argument in terms of

⁴⁷ Cf. Derrida, *Post Card*, *passim*.

⁴⁸ Mikhail Epstein, *The Transformative Humanities: A Manifesto*, trans. Igor Klyukanov, New York: Bloomsbury, 2012.

⁴⁹ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1999.

⁵⁰ Hans Moravec, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990.

materialism and embodiment leads to a rather cynical emphasis on “the humanistic potential of new technologies” (27). This shift in perspective is in fact what seems to justify the liberating and almost triumphalist experience and tone in Epstein’s account:

A ‘post-post-postmodern’ culture suddenly views itself as a proto-global, proto-virtual, proto-biotechnic, proto-synthetic one. Everything that the previous generation perceived under the sign of the ‘post-’, this generation views as ‘proto-’; not as a completion, but rather as a first draft of new cultural forms.” (28)

There is of course – as in any manifesto – a deliberately provocative shamelessness about these claims attempting to escape the “fin de siècle” dynamic that is “doomed to repetition and self-repetition” (28). How to force a new beginning, a post-decadent “*début de siècle*” departure, or, in other words, a new avant-garde? The contempt of the “old guard” in this renewed generation game is played out in the revisionism of the “*règlement de compte*” game: “The cultural world, which seemed doomed to self-mirroring and self-deconstruction, witnessed with a sense of surprise the impulses to expand into the new territories of psycho-reality, info-reality, and bio-reality” (30). The futuristic tone in this naïve and at the same time desperate incantation of a “break” is inevitably articulated along the lines of “intensity”, transgression, and revaluation: “a new intensity of experience and a broader horizon for the individual” (32), and culminates in the “transhumanist embrace” of the new (formerly post, now proto) human condition:

...take the death of the human, proclaimed by the posthumanists inspired by Michel Foucault. Just as humans once departed from the animal kingdom, today we depart from our biological species, enhancing our bodies technologically. Everything that humans have created as a part of their external technical and cultural environment now integrates back into human beings themselves and transforms their organic nature. We should, then, talk about the triumph rather than the death of the human. We should view this “death” as a new stage of the humanization and intellectualization of machines and tools, which progressively acquire the capabilities of movement, calculation, perception, and perhaps even thinking. (32)

You cannot imagine how disheartening this passage is for a child of Lyotard’s postmodern. Everything that has been assiduously and patiently deconstructed in the past three decades or so is here brushed aside, revaluated, superseded. If this is to be the programme for the “transformative humanities” there is indeed good reason to renew with and even intensify a certain “apocalyptic tone”. Let’s just briefly take in turn the assumptions that the “post” had problematized: Foucault’s “death of man (not the human)”, like that of Barthes’s “death of the author” was aimed at a certain metaphysical humanism prevalent (and here unreflectedly reinscribed by Epstein) in the humanities and social sciences. Humans never departed from the animal kingdom, and the animal kingdom never was a kingdom other than in the minds of humans denying their precarious and utter implication within animal and other forms of “nature”. From a materialist point of view it is nonsensical to believe that the technological transformations of the body (which presumably started as early as the first human-animal tool-use) will keep the “essence” of the human somehow intact. The human environment, which does not exist “for” the human (this is the most blatant monotheistic anthropocentrism), is not “external” to the human, just as the human’s

cultural and technical environment is not outside “nature” but inextricably implicated in and with it. The separation between organic and inorganic is deeply problematic both “within” nature as within any notion of “culture”, if they were indeed separable. Humanization or rather hominisation is a pretty violent story and its development is certainly not intrinsically teleological – this would be a very unreflected use of the idea of evolution indeed. It is completely undecidable whether we are in a process of becoming more or less human, whether technology is humanizing or dehumanizing etc. Complexity and the “intellectualization of machines and tools”, or, as David Wills calls it, the logic of the prosthesis,⁵¹ is not necessarily good news for humans or indeed others, and requires a “postanthropocentric” ecology, not a neohumanism that seems to be at work in Epstein’s “proteism”.

In fact, Epstein’s return to the “proteic” sensitivity (which is already at work in Nietzsche’s idea of the “*Übermensch*”) and to “embryology” (futures-in-the-making) gives rise to the most blatant avowal of self-hatred that represents one of the major problems of humanism and anthropocentrism – problems that a *critical* posthumanism mindful of the postmodernist lessons, will have to address again and again:

As a proto-something, I am crawling like an antediluvian monster out from the second half of the twentieth century. I see myself as a thinking protoplasm of the late Communism and the early information age with its primitive psychic life and naively over-complicated computer tools. It is a tragi-comic situation to feel like a prototype of something so unknown that it is uncertain if it will ever become actualized or will vanish in the past having failed to correspond to anything in the future. (33)

These words could have been spoken by Frankenstein’s monster teleported into the present time. And, interestingly, they also resonate with ideas that underpin existentialism. What they are certainly not, however, is posthumanist, in the sense of displaying an “awareness” of the impossibility *and* necessity to understand what it means to be human... or, what I would call critical posthumanism, understood as the ongoing deconstruction of humanism and the “human”.

To be fair, however, there are some redeeming features of Epstein’s “proteism”, which appear, somewhat belatedly, and which concern the temporal logic of the proto, (pp. 39ff). I will return to these at the very end. At this point, however, I want to side-step and look again briefly at the way Jean-François Lyotard was describing the very same attitude at work in Epstein’s account, but under entirely different circumstances and terms. Lyotard focuses on the notion of the “inhuman” rather than the post, trans or protohuman. In *The Inhuman* Lyotard makes clear from the start that he critically engages with the idea that “humanism administers lessons to ‘us’ (?)”: “us”, in quotation marks, followed by a bracketed question mark. Quite obviously, this already is very much a critically posthumanist project which attempts to read the human against “humanist prejudice”, or from a “postanthropocentric” point of view:

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 human? (2)

⁵¹ Cf. David Wills, *Prosthesis*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995.

I would like to read these two questions as: “have we ever been human?” and “will we ever become human?”, according to the humanist sense of the term. The many temporalities that the post sets free are at work in and in between these two questions. Lyotard, consequently, differentiates two notions of inhumanity: the inhumanity of the system (humanism, anthropocentrism, capitalism etc.) “which is currently being consolidated under the name of development” (this clearly resonates with Epstein’s notion of the “proto-” or with the Deleuzian “becoming (other)”) “must not be confused with the infinitely secret one of which the soul is hostage” (2). The inhuman inside every single human being, the “soul”, Lyotard chooses to use this almost quaint and quasi-religious term to highlight the anguish of “a mind haunted by a familiar and unknown guest which is agitating it, sending it delirious but also making it think”. In many ways these two inhumans can lead to very different “posthumanist” answers – one that addresses and thinks through the inhumanity of the system, and one that addresses the inhumanity of the subject. And as Lyotard also recognizes, the inhumanity of the system has less and less time for the inhumanity of the subject: “Discontent grows with this civilization, foreclosure along with information” (2). “Development” is what Lyotard calls the acceleration that new technologies and informatisation seem to bring and which are opposed to the kind of “anamnesis” that is involved in the specific form of “rewriting” (the “post” one could argue) that is required for thinking: “writing and reading which advance backwards (or in “ana”) in the direction of the unknown thing ‘within’ are slow” (3). The transformation of the system is what Lyotard’s “critical posthumanism” as I would insist on calling it wishes to understand, “without pathos but also without negligence” (5). And it is out of this analytic desire that the “post” in “postmodern” is transposed by Lyotard onto the in- or posthuman (system and individual) in the face of the ideology of “development”. The striking thing about what Lyotard refers to as the metaphysics of development (7) is “that it needs no finality” – “it has no necessity itself other than a cosmological chance” and it has only one interest: the “survival of complexity”. The political implications for such a radically “posthumanist”, postanthropocentric and utterly inhuman systemic rationale are formulated by Lyotard in terms that anticipate and as I would argue even surpass current attempts – often restricted to ideas of biopolitics and thanatopolitics⁵² – to rethink the question of life and human life in particular under these circumstances:

Since development is the very thing which takes away the hope of an alternative to the system from both analysis and practice, since the politics which “we” have inherited from revolutionary modes of thought and actions now turns out to be redundant (whether we find this a cause for joy or a matter to be deplored), the question I am raising here is simply this: what else remains as “politics” except resistance to this inhuman? And what else is left to resist with but the debt which each soul has contracted with the miserable and admirable indeterminateness from which it was born and not cease to be born? – which is to say, with the other inhuman? (7)

For Lyotard this debt is first of all a debt to childhood – which returns us to the start of this paper. But before doing so, it is worth spelling out the powerful ethical as much as political implications of these questions raised by Lyotard. The task of thinking – in the Heideggerian sense – is to think this specific unthinkable that lies hidden in the double

⁵² Cf. the ongoing discussion provoked by Giorgio Agamben’s, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998.

nature of the “inhuman”: the debt of the individual soul, or subject, the price of becoming (a) human with the specificity of that condition that remains attached to it; and, at the same time, the critique of the other inhumanity, that of the system, that has its very own and radically inhuman logic, but in which “we” are thoroughly implicated.

This is where the mentioned “redeeming” features of the proto become relevant from my point of view. As Epstein hints at, the proto is different from the idea of the pre, for example in prehistory. Lyotard’s idea of rewriting (for example, rewriting modernity) which he prefers to the “deplorable” “transformative” use of the postmodern, can be seen, as outlined above, as an attempt to unhinge the modern dialectic between a pre and a post or predetermination and post... and to argue for a Freudian *Durcharbeitung* or a Heideggerian *Verwindung*:

The ‘re-’ in no way signifies a return to the beginning but rather what Freud called ‘working through’, *Durcharbeitung*, i.e. a working attached to a thought of what is constitutively hidden from us in the event and the meaning of the event, hidden not merely by past prejudice, but also by those dimensions of the future marked by the pro-ject, the programmed, pro-spectives, and even by the pro-position and the pro-posal to psychoanalyze. (Inhuman, 26)

The “project” of “rewriting humanity” from the point of view of the inhuman here becomes thinkable and would be the underpinning logic of what I have referred to as “critical posthumanism”. In terms of the proto-informational as described by Epstein, for example, Lyotard’s question raised at the end of “Rewriting Modernity” resonates even more powerfully today than at the beginning of the so-called “information age”:

It being admitted that working through is above all the business of free imagination and that it demands the deployment of time between ‘not yet’, ‘no longer’ and ‘now’, what can the use of the new technologies preserve or conserve of that? (35)

There is in fact a section, towards the end of Epstein’s chapter on the shift from post to proto, that significantly changes in tone and mode. The proto is itself problematized and contextualized and the idea of its implication in the “construction of the future” is addressed:

Proteism... already possesses sufficient historical experience in order to claim its place not in the distant future, but in the distant past of the future that it anticipates. It positions itself not as an avant-garde, but as an arrièrè-garde of those trends that will soon turn it into an archeological layer of our rapidly changing society. (40)

And, in the end, the temporal logic of the proto becomes indeed thoroughly implicated within the temporal logic of the post as outlined at the beginning of this paper:

In the twenty-first century, the pace of innovations has accelerated to such an extent that our generation can already foresee its own decline in a future that views us at its distant past. This double, forward-and-back vision is our distinctive feature. Proteism sees itself as if it were looking through the other end of binoculars; as a result, the contemporary world appears small and recedes into the historical past. (40)

Epstein even in the end refers to certain “humility” of proteism (“a propensity towards litotes, or understatements” (40). The crux, however, comes in the final section called “the paradoxes of the ‘proto-’”. This is, in fact, almost identical to Lyotard’s reference to the *husteron proteron* logic of hindsight quoted above:⁵³ “it is possible to judge anything as ‘proto-’ only once its mature stage and completion have already been reached” (41). What exactly is it, then, that Epstein adds to the idea of the post when he describes the “projected belatedness” of the proto in these terms:

The uniqueness of our contemporary situation is that we can define something as “proto-” in advance, not with hindsight, but rather with foresight... By forecasting the future, we position ourselves in its distant past. Thus, futurology becomes inseparable from the projective archaeology of our own time. (41)

Or, again, from which position does he articulate the following:

Culturally, we rejuvenate at the same time as we grow old. We are super-modern and super-ancient; we are neo-archaics. The rapid renewal that we project for the future determines the speed of our own recession into the past. (41)

It seems that, the post- here may have given birth to something paradoxically “new”, after all – let’s say the future that postmodernism forbade itself from having (disavowal) and which it so much desired as a “to-come”. This shifts the idea of prolepsis, encapsulated in the tense of the future anterior, which projects a pastness into the future (this will have happened) and relocates it within the past itself. One could also speak of a “future posterior” at work in Epstein’s logic of the *arrière-garde* or the neo-archaic. It is important, however, at the same time to resist the technological determinism that is put forward as the reason and driving force behind the perceived “acceleration” of this shift – a shift, which Paul Virilio, in his typically hyperbolic and alarmist fashion describes as “intemporanéité, in “Le futurisme de l’instant” (2009). Virilio seems to be referring to the same “accélération anachronique de la réalité présente” (69) that underlies Epstein’s proteism, and which Virilio sees as “le signe de l’extinction prochaine non pas de l’espèce humaine mais bien de la CHRONO-DIVERSITÉ de la vie sensible” (95).

I confess that I have no conclusion. This is – very much like the future and its construction – work in pro-gress. Most of these things – events, change, futures – happen “behind our back” – they are “dorsal” as David Wills would say.⁵⁴ But as this paper will have tried to show, the attitudes towards the dorsality of the post differ enormously, and this is precisely what raises ethical and political questions that a critical posthumanism will have to address in the face of ongoing human and other transformations of and in time.

Let me give the final word to literature – as that discourse which arguably has the privilege of being purely speculative. Let me give the last word to the history man, Tom

⁵³ Lyotard, “Rewriting Modernity”, pp. 24-25; cf. note 13 above.

⁵⁴ Cf. David Wills, *Dorsality: Thinking Back Through Technology and Politics*, Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 2008.

Crick and outline the questions a critical posthumanism, mindful of the temporalities at work in any present,⁵⁵ might be able to raise:

Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man – let me offer you a definition – is the story-telling animal. (62)

We know now that we will have to tell stories differently – neither animality nor nature justify human exceptionalism, after all. “We” are no longer alone and we never were, of course. In fact, “we” are no longer “we”. What remains of humanism is a certain yearning that I would like a *critical* posthumanism, by which I mean an ongoing deconstruction of humanism that extends both to the constructions of the past and of the future, the always already and the never yet, with all the thinkable shadings in between, to preserve: let’s call it a kind of “care”, not for the self, but for the “other” – the other human, maybe Lyotard’s “inhuman” that might make us human. I can hear this, nostalgic, slightly “tragic”, yearning in moving passages like these:

Children, be curious. Nothing is worse (I know it) than when curiosity stops. Nothing is more repressive than the repression of curiosity. Curiosity begets love. It weds us to the world. It’s part of our perverse, madcap love for this impossible planet we inhabit. People die when curiosity goes. People have to find out, people have to know. How can there be any true revolution till we know what we’re made of? (206)

The question is: since we now seem to know that there won’t be a revolution how can we preserve this “curiosity”? And can we ever trust this desire, this yearning to find out “what we’re made of”? Can one be moved without moving? In the end, in reevaluating the postmodern critique of the “construction of the future” which is an integral part of humanism and “Western metaphysics”, in the face of the impatience of the posthuman, critical posthumanism’s task - “rewriting humanity” - should be aware of the complex temporalities opened up by the “time of the posts” and remember that we haven’t finished with the human yet, and that we’re not ready to “move on”.

⁵⁵ Cf. Russell West-Pavlov’s excellent survey on the topic in his *Temporalities, New Critical Idiom*, London: Routledge, 2013; in particular the chapter on “Postmodern Temporalities”: Postmodern time is a temporal logic in which the suppressed aporias of absolute or universal time begin to re-emerge, often manifesting themselves in spatial form” (p. 137).