Postfiguration, or, the Desire of the Posthuman

Stefan Herbrechter

> It was so easy to imitate these people … But at the time I was not interested in the human point of view. (Kafka 1983: 257, 262)

Posthumanism is heavily invested in 'figuration' as a rhetorical and political apparatus. Figuration might even be seen as one of posthumanism's master tropes, especially in its feminist and new materialist varieties. This raises the question of what kind of rhetoric the available politics of the posthuman and posthumanism rely on and by what kind of desire they are informed. Is it the desire to overcome the human or humanism, for a start? Is it the desire *for* the posthuman that drives a specific form of theorising or is it precisely the analysis of this desire – the desire of the posthuman – that is to be explored? And what might a posthuman, if such a 'thing' existed, (still) desire? In this context, figuration – and thus the question of how and what to figure – is fundamental. It is fundamental in any politics without any doubt, but maybe even more so – more fundamental than fundamental – in the kind of *speculative* politics that necessarily drives posthumanism due to its utopian register.

As a first move, I propose to look at some examples of (the politics of) figuration in action, so to speak, in posthumanist theorising and thinking. More specifically, I will be referring to some examples in Haraway, Braidotti and Hayles and their respective takes on figuration. In a second move, I propose to

investigate the temporality of posthuman / posthumanist figuration, by exploring the notions of pre- and postfiguration and their relation to the question of representation. In a final move, I will attempt a critique of figuration on the basis of some examples taken from what one might call posthumanist and maybe 'postfigurative' (or 'post-mimetic'), animal art.

A. Posthumanism – discourse and figure:

While I dedicated quite a few pages to explaining what I meant, by 'discourse', following and adapting Foucault's notion, in my *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (2013 [2009], I feel I didn't put enough effort into explaining what was meant by 'figure'. I assumed that the posthuman was quite self-evidently a *rhetorical* figure while posthumanism was the discourse trying to materialize what started out as if not an empty then at least an entirely underdetermined 'trope'. I should have asked a little more insistently, what a figure is and does, at the time. So, I apologize in advance if the following may look all too obvious and / or belated.

My admittedly still very humanist instincts drive me towards the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, which tells me that the word 'figure' comes from French *figure* and goes back to Latin *figura*, whose stem is *fingere* – to feign, which, in turn is a rendering of Greek *skhema* (scheme). The definitions it gives are:

1. a form of anything as determined by outline (bodily or geometrical) shape; appearance, attitude, state, bodily frame, person;

2. a represented form, image, likeness, phantasm, statue, effigy, character, emblem, type;
3. a delineated form, design, pattern, illustration, scheme, table, dance / skating movement;
4. a written character, symbol, amount, number, sum of money, scale;
5. a rhetorical figure, metaphor, image, similitude.

Figuration, from the French *figuration*, takes its root from Latin *figurare* – to fashion, and designates an:

1. action or process of forming into figure, determination to a certain form, the resulting form or shape, contour, outline;
2. action of representing figuratively, allegorical or figurative representation; figurative style of painting;
3. action of framing figures or shapes in dreams or designs.

While it seems obvious, as Roberto Marchesini points out, that: "Without doubt, the principal subject of the posthumanist debate concerns the term 'nonhuman alterity'" (Marchesini 2016a: 162), it may be more accurate to say that posthumanism is either proactively or critically invested in *figurations* of nonhuman alterities. Ivan Callus and I tried to capture this, in an article entitled "What is a posthumanist reading?", in the following terms:

[The] posthuman 'other', understood as a threat or promise, is a product of human anxiety and desire … that other takes shape in figures and representations which tap into the long history of humanity's excluded (the inhuman, the non-human, the less than human, the

superhuman, the animal, the alien, the monster, the stranger, God …) and reflect current 'posthumanising' practices, technologies and fantasies. (Herbrechter & Callus 2008: 97)

Consequently, a posthumanist reading is called upon to "evaluate examples of posthuman representation in terms of their potential for a critical *post*-humanism: a discourse that strategically and critically 'inhabits' traditional humanism and which may even contrive to find itself prefigured there" (*ibid*.). This means that, as a political-rhetorical stratagem, "a posthumanist reading may be critical both of representations of the posthuman and of humanism, and instead envisages the human as something or someone that remains to arrive, as a potential that remains to be defined or realised". The strategy is based on the assumption that, "through a materialist and deconstructive reading of the cultural politics that underlie the actual representations of the posthuman and the processes of ongoing posthumanisation, [a critical posthumanist reading] helps to envisage alternative conceptualisations of both the human and the posthuman, and of their mutually informing relationship" (*ibid*.). In fact, this constitutes a politics of figuration that is based on a re(con)figuration (of the human), because:

> The 'longing for the human' as the driving force behind humanism's constant self-replication expresses itself through the variation produced by constant self-transformation. (105)

With the benefit of hindsight, this was also our first attempt at looking at the ways in which various posthumanisms were

appropriating figuration as a political, prospective or speculative mechanism to imagine, or, to use Manuela Rossini's term, to 'imagineer' alternative, often 'monstrous', figurations of the human as 'promises' of political change (cf. Rossini 2003).

Most prominently, this is what happens in Haraway's work, beginning with her "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985) and its seminal figure of the 'cyborg' designed to challenge and re(con)figure humanist technologies of gender. Haraway expresses herself on the practice of figuration more specifically in "Ecce Homo" (1992a):

> Figuration is about resetting the stage for possible pasts and futures. Figuration is the mode of theory when the more 'normal' rhetorics of systematic critical analysis seem only to repeat and sustain our entrapment in the stories of the established disorders. Humanity is a modernist figure; and this humanity has a generic face, a universal shape. Humanity's face has been the face of man. Feminist humanity must have another shape, other gestures; but, I believe, we must have feminist figures of humanity. They cannot be man or woman; they cannot be the human as historical narrative has staged that generic universal. Feminist figures cannot, finally, have a name; they cannot be native. Feminist humanity must, somehow, both resist representation, resist literal figuration, and still erupt in powerful new tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibility. (Haraway 1992a: 86)

Haraway's aim is, in short, figural or reconfigural, as she says: "I want to set aside … [m]an as we have come to know and love him in the death-of-the-subject critiques" (87). Instead of the figure of 'man' and the ongoing process of its deconstruction, she prefers to "construct possible postcolonial, nongeneric, and irredeemably specific figures of critical subjectivity, consciousness, and humanity" (87). And since "radical nominalism is the only route to a nongeneric humanity" (88) for Haraway, understood as a "radical dis-membering and dis-placing of our names and our bodies", the main questions that arise for her are: "how can humanity have a figure outside the narratives of humanism; what language would such a figure speak?" (88). In "The Promise of Monsters" (1992), Haraway emphasises that nature is mainly a 'topos': "it is figure, construction, artefact, movement, displacement" (Haraway 1992: 296), to which her "cyborg figures" (300) are so to speak, monstrous kin.

Figures or figurations, for Haraway, are "performative images that can be inhabited. Verbal or visual, figurations can be condensed maps of contestable worlds" (Haraway 1997: 11). In what she calls her own 'mimetic' critical method, Haraway claims she is "tracing some of the circulations of Christian realism in the flesh of technoscience" (1997: 179). In an extensive interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve (2000), Haraway describes the ontological impact of figuration and its politics on her own life and work in these terms: "I feel like I live with a menagerie of figurations. It's like I inhabit a critical-theoretical zoo and the cyborg just happens to be the most famous member of that zoo, although 'zoo' is not the right

word because all my inhabitants are not animals" (Haraway 2000: 135-136). However, she insists that "[a]ll of my entities – primate, cyborg, genetically patented animal – all of them are 'real' in the ordinary everyday sense of real, but they are also simultaneously figurations involved in a kind of narrative interpellation into ways of living in the world" (140). She traces her "fundamental sensibility about the literal nature of metaphor and the physical quality of symbolization" to her Catholicism. However, "the point is that this sensibility – the meaning of this menagerie I live with and in – gives me a menagerie where the literal and the figurative, the factual and the narrative, the scientific and the religious and the literary, are always imploded" (141).

It is in this sense that Haraway's metaphorical and nevertheless real figurations may constitute what Manuela Rossini called "Imagineering[s] of the future of the human species" (Rossini 2003), while for Lucy Suchman, in *Human-Machine Reconfigurations* (2007), Haraway's cyborg figures are "forms of *materialized figuration*, they bring together assemblages of stuff and meaning into more and less stable arrangements" (Suchman 2007: 227). The strategic dimension of what one might thus call a 'politics of re(con)figuration' lies in the "critical consideration of how humans and machines are currently figured in [current practices of technology development] and how they might be figured – and *configured* – differently" (*ibid*.). This is due to what Suchman calls the "world-making effects of figuration":

> The effects of figuration are political in the sense that the
> specific discourses, images, and normativities that inform

practices of figuration can work either to reinscribe existing social orderings or to challenge them. In the case of the human, the prevailing figuration in Euro-American imaginaries is one of autonomous, rational agency … (227-228)

In her later work, where Haraway moves towards companion species and 'critters' more generally as her guiding tropes, she comes up with the following 'confession' about her figurative practice:

Figures help me grapple inside the flesh of mortal world-making entanglements that I call contact zones. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the meaning of 'chimerical vision' for 'figuration' in an eighteenth-century source, and that meaning is still implicit in my sense of figure. Figures collect the people through their invitation to inhabit the corporeal story told in their lineaments. Figures are not representations or didactic illustrations, but rather material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another. For me, figures have always been where the biological and literary or artistic come together with all the force of lived reality. My body itself is just such a figure, literally. For many years I have written from the belly of powerful figures such as cyborgs, monkeys and apes, oncomice, and, more recently, dogs. In every case, the figures are at the same time creatures of imagined possibility and creatures of fierce and ordinary reality; the dimensions tangle and require response … All of these are figures, and all are mundanely here, on this earth, now,

asking who 'we' will become when species meet.
(Haraway 2008: 4-5)

The same connection between figures as material-semiotic tropes and a feminist politics of difference and change – the legacy of feminist poststructuralism – are at work in Rosi Braidotti's writings. Braidotti has been most explicit about the role of figuration for feminist (and other minoritarian) politics, as a "living map, a transformative account of the self" (Braidotti 2002: 3). The emphasis on cartography and figuration is a constant feature in Braidotti, from her early accounts of "new 'post-human' technoteratological" phenomena (2000: 157), to her most recent work on "posthuman knowledge" and the posthuman as a "theoretical figuration" and a "navigational tool" (2019: 2).

In "Teratologies", Braidotti speaks of "(Deleuzian) enfleshed complexities" (2000: 158) that may form a "post-human universe" with its "metamorphic dimension" (165) of "imaginary figurations" (168ff). More specifically, "the notion of 'figurations' – in contrast to the representational function of 'metaphors' – emerges as crucial to Deleuze's notion of a conceptually charged use of the imagination", according to Braidotti (2000: 170). These figurations of "multiple becomings [following and extending Deleuze's universe] are: the rhizome, the nomad, the bodies-without-organs, the cyborg, the onco-mouse and acoustic masks of all electronic kinds" (*ibid*.). For Braidotti and her political project of a feminist Deleuzian nomadology, "myths, metaphors, or alternative figurations have merged feminist theory with fictions" (171).

In *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002), Braidotti declares her aim to be radically "re(con)figurative":

> [My] aim is to provide illustrations for new figurations, for alternative representations and social locations for the kind of hybrid mix we are in the process of becoming. Figurations are not figurative ways of thinking, but rather more materialistic mappings of situated, or embedded and embodied, positions. A cartography is a theoretically-based and politically-informed reading of the present … By figuration I mean a politically informed map that outlines our own situated perspective. A figuration renders our image in terms of a decentred and multi-layered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity. The definition of a person's identity takes place in between nature-technology, male-female, black-white, in the spaces that flow and connect in between. We live in permanent processes of transition, hybridization and nomadization, and these in-between states and stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation. A figuration is a living map, a transformative account of the self – it is no metaphor. (Braidotti 2002: 2-3)

This quest for alternative figurations, according to Braidotti, "expresses creativity in representing the kind of nomadic subjects we have already become and the social and symbolic locations we inhabit. In a more theoretical vein, the quest for figurations attempts to recombine the propositional contents and the forms of thinking so as to attune them both to

nomadic complexities. It thus also challenges the separation of reason from the imagination" (3).

"Where 'figurations' of alternative feminist subjectivity, like the womanist, the lesbian, the cyborg, the inappropriate(d) other, the nomadic feminist, and so on, differ from classical 'metaphors'", Braidotti explains, "is precisely in calling into play a sense of accountability for one's location. They express materially embedded cartographies and as such are self-reflexive and not parasitic upon a process of metaphorization of 'others'" (2002: 13). Instead they are "new figurations of the subject (nomadic, cyborg, Black, etc.) [which] function like conceptual *personae*. As such, they are no metaphor, but rather on the critical level, materially embedded, embodying accounts of one's power-relations. On the creative level they express the rate of change, transformation or affirmative deconstruction of the power one inhabits. 'Figurations' materially embody stages of metamorphosis of a subject position towards all that the phallogocentric system does *not* want it to become" (*ibid*.).

What Braidotti refers to as Deleuze's "post-metaphysical figurations of the subject" (78) is based on a distinction between the 'figural', as opposed to the more conventional aesthetic category of the 'figurative', in the sense that "figurations such as rhizomes, becomings, lines of escape, flows, relays and bodies without organs release and express active states of being … break through the conventional schemes of theoretical representation" (78). More specifically, these 'alternative figurations of the subject' are based on Deleuze's central figuration, which is "a general

becoming-minority, or becoming-nomad, or becoming-molecular" (78), or, ultimately, "becoming-imperceptible" (81).

In chapter 4 of *Metamorphoses*, "Cyber-teratologies", which anticipates Braidotti's turn towards the posthuman as her main political figuration and clearly shows her affinity to Haraway, she confesses her "yearning and quest for new styles or figurations for the non-unitary or nomadic subject" (Braidotti 2002: 172). About figurations she further explains:

> they evoke the changes and transformations which are on-going in the 'g-local' context of advanced societies … Figurations are expressive of cartographic readings of the subject's own embedded and embodied position. As such, they are linked to the social imaginary by a complex web of relations, both of the repressive and the empowering kind. The idea of figurations therefore provides an answer not only to political, but also to both epistemological and aesthetic questions: how does one invent new structures of thought? Where does conceptual change start from? (173)

With regard to Haraway's figuration of the cyborg, Braidotti writes that "[t]ranslated into my own language, Haraway's figuration of the cyborg is a sort of feminist becoming-woman that merely by-passes the feminine in order to open up towards a broader and considerably less anthropocentric horizon" (2002: 216-217). Elsewhere, Braidotti also refers to Haraway as "non-nostalgic posthuman thinker" (2011: 65).

In *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (2006), Braidotti again stresses the centrality and multifunctionality of figuration: "Figurations are not metaphors, but rather markers of more concretely situated historical positions. A figuration is the expression of one's specific positioning in both space and time. It marks certain territorial or geopolitical coordinates, but it also points out one's sense of genealogy or historical inscription. Figurations deterritorialize and destabilize the certainties of the subject and allow for a proliferation of situated or 'micro' narratives of self and others" (Braidotti 2006: 90). Their political value precisely lies in their undecidability between 'literality' and 'figurality': "Figurations are forms of literal expression which represent that which the system has declared off-limits" (170). In this sense, "figurations are not figurative ways of thinking, but rather more materialistic mappings of situated, embedded, and embodied positions. They derive from the feminist method of the 'politics of location' and build it into a discursive strategy" (2011: 13).

While the posthuman figure makes its appearance in the early 2000s in Rosi Braidotti's work, it only becomes the main focus in her *The Posthuman* (2013), where she wrestles with the powerful ambiguity of the posthuman (as) trope. It is a powerful figure which helps evaluate, maybe even retain, 'our' humanness in a postanthropocentric context while at the same time it also promotes an affirmative politics of flexible, hybrid and multiple identity. In a by now increasingly 'post-theoretical' climate, Braidotti repeatedly and

strategically stresses "the importance of combining critique with creative figurations" (2013: 163):

> Critiques of power locations, however, are not enough. They work in tandem with the quest for alternative figurations or *conceptual personae* for these locations, in terms of power as restrictive (*potestas*) but also as empowering or affirmative (*potentia*). For example figurations such as the feminist/the woman/the queer/the cyborg/the diasporic, native nomadic subjects, as well as oncomouse and Dolly the sheep are no mere metaphors, but signposts for specific geopolitical and historical locations … (2013: 164)

For Braidotti, the posthuman epitomizes this logic of figuration, with its restrictive power *and* affirmative potential. The posthuman figure, if taken seriously, i.e. 'literally', is a 'conceptual persona', which stands in for a whole geopolitical and historical 'location'. It becomes clear, however, that this posthuman persona or figure/figuration, for Braidotti increasingly becomes the *necessary* rhetorical trope (i.e. its 'catachresis') that characterizes the situation of the human today.

Once more, Braidotti defines her use of figuration as "the expression of alternative representations of the subject as a dynamic non-unitary entity; it is the dramatization of processes of becoming" (2013: 164). Even though she does not herself use the phrase 'rhetoric of the posthuman' it could be argued that the way she emphasizes the transformative potential of the posthuman figure constitutes a 'politics' of the posthuman that is entirely reliant on the

ambiguity of the posthuman figure as conceptual persona, as mask, or *prosopopoeia* (of the contemporary human?). In the posthuman figure, she writes, "critique and creation strike a new deal in actualizing the practice of conceptual personae or figuration as the active pursuit of affirmative alternatives to the dominant vision" (2013: 164). The posthuman figure, for Braidotti, allows 'us' to be 'worthy of our times' in that "we need schemes of thought and figurations that enable us to account in empowering terms for the changes and transformations currently on the way" (2013: 184). What Braidotti's argument presupposes is first of all a certain discursivity of the 'location', or the idea of a 'posthuman condition', in which the actual figuration of the posthuman occurs. The 'rhetoric' of the posthuman, in fact, is everywhere at work in "the changes and transformations currently on the way".

The main difference between Haraway and Braidotti, as well as between Braidotti and N. Katherine Hayles, is that Braidotti *believes* in the posthuman as a transformative figure. There is an affective investment, even a desire to wrest the posthuman away from its more banal and dangerous usage – similar to Haraway's investment in the cyborg figure in the 1980s maybe – as a '*dispositif*' of identitarian (self)transformation:

> Becoming-posthuman … is a process of redefining one's sense of attachment and connection to a shared world, a territorial space: urban, social, psychic, ecological, planetary as it may be. It expresses multiple ecologies of belonging, while it enacts the transformation of one's

sensorial and perceptual co-ordinates, in order to acknowledge the collective nature and outward-bound direction of what we still call the self. This is in fact a moveable assemblage within a common life-space, which the subject never masters nor possesses, but merely inhabits, crosses, always in a community, a pack, a group or cluster. For posthuman theory, the subject is a transversal entity, fully immersed in and immanent to a network of non-human (animal, vegetable, viral) relations. The *zoe*-centred embodied subject is shot through with relational linkages of the contaminating / viral kind which inter-connect it to a variety of others, starting from the environmental or eco-others and include the technological apparatus. (2013: 193)

Most recently, in her *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019), Braidotti – whose theorizing is characterized by insistent self-summarizing that undoubtedly has a performative political value of discursively bringing about the posthuman, or one might say, in materializing the figurative – declares her interest in the posthuman thus: "As a theoretical figuration, the posthuman is a navigational tool that enables us to survey the material and the discursive manifestations that are engendered by advanced technological developments (am I a robot?), climate change (will I survive?), and capitalism (can I afford this?). The posthuman is a work in progress. It is a working hypothesis about the kind of subjects we are becoming" (Braidotti 2019: 2). Becoming what you (already) are, inhabiting the figure that announces itself – this is the basic (Nietzschean) dynamic and strategy of transformational

politics in general and of feminist 'new' materialist semiotics of the posthuman in particular. However, just like the cyborg, the posthuman has its dangerous or 'apocalyptic' side, which is why Braidotti also cautions:

> It is inappropriate to take the posthuman either as an apocalyptic or as an intrinsically subversive category, narrowing our options down to the binary extinction-versus-liberation (of the human). We need to check both emotional reactions and resist with equal lucidity this double fallacy. It is more adequate to approach the posthuman as an emotionally laden but normatively neutral position. It is a grounded and perspectival figuration that illuminates the complexity of on-going processes of subject formation. (2019: 85)

The posthuman is thus both already here, but not clearly defined in its 'becoming', clearly affectively apocalyptic while 'normatively' neutral (i.e. it could be the source of radical transformation for better or for worse), and still to achieve, to save it from itself. In fact, it is neither here nor there but a theoretical 'screen' – a figure – an object of desire, Braidotti's *objet petit a*.

Its dual ontology – material and semiotic, figural and figurative – turns the posthuman into a quasi-transcendental signifier (figure or trope) for posthumanist discourse, as Braidotti stops short of admitting herself:

> although the posthuman is empirically grounded, because it is embedded and embodied, it functions less as a substantive entity than as a figuration or conceptual

persona. It is a theoretically powered cartographic tool that aims at achieving adequate understanding of the present as both actual and virtual. In other words, cartographies are both the record of what we are ceasing to be – anthropocentric, humanistic – and the seed of what we are in the process of becoming – a multiplicity of posthuman subjects. (2019: 137)

Katherine Hayles's attitude towards the posthuman '(con)figuration' is much more ambivalent. As Manuela Rossini (2003) explains, there are "two conflicting imagineerings of a posthuman future" in Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman*:

> If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories …, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival. (Hayles 1999a: 5)

It is probably fair to say that Hayles is least invested in the notion of figuration out of the constitutive trio of feminist posthumanism (Haraway, Braidotti and Hayles). Instead, Hayles tends to stress the role of (alternative) *narratives* for political change in the face of the posthuman:

As the sense of its mortality grows, humankind looks for its successor and heir, harbouring the secret hope that the heir can somehow be enfolded back into the self. The narratives that count as stories for us speak to this hope, even as they reveal the gendered constructions that carry sexual politics into the realm of the posthuman. (Hayles 1999b: 172)

In what is arguably one of the most iconic and most frequently cited passages of posthumanism and its emergence, Hayles identifies the posthuman first and foremost as a 'point of view', so not exactly as a 'figure': "What is the posthuman? Think of it as a point of view characterized by the following assumptions …". Out of the assumptions, Hayles goes on to list, the fourth one is the most important, namely that "the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines" (1999a: 3).

Where Haraway and Braidotti rely on a politics of figuration, Hayles, one might say, is looking at con-figurations, or ways in which elements work together to form a whole; or, in other words, the 'workings' or a figure. 'Configuration', as the *OED* explains, is an "arrangement of parts or elements in a particular form or figure; the form, shape, figure, resulting from such arrangement; conformation; outline, contour (of geographical features, etc.); [or an] arrangement of elements; physical composition or constitution …; [as well as] a representation by a figure, an image". Most relevant, however, given the posthuman context, is the significance of configuration in computing, namely "[t]he way the

constituent parts of a computer system are chosen or interconnected in order to suit it for a particular task or use; the units or devices required for this".

Correspondingly, the verb, 'to configure', the *OED* says, signifies "to fashion according to something else as a model; to conform in figure or fashion (to); to represent by a figure or image, to figure; to fashion by combination and arrangement; to give an astrological configuration to; to put together in a certain form or figure; [or] figurative[ly]: to give a figure to; to shape". In computing, more specifically, it means "to choose or design a configuration for; to combine (a program or device) with other elements to perform a certain task or provide a certain capability". So, it is not that Hayles is not invested in figuration: on the contrary. But given her background, she seems to come to the politics of figuration from a (technical) 'design' angle, when she writes: "'human' and 'posthuman' coexist in shifting configurations that vary with historically specific contexts" (1999a: 6).

The outcome of the re-configuration that Hayles sees at work in contemporary digitalization is therefore a profound conceptual shift:

> But the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice. What is lethal is not the

posthuman as such but the grafting of the posthuman onto a liberal humanist view of the self. (1999a: 286-287)

The curious thing is, however, that this re-con-figuration is not 'new', it has always been on the cards, which allows Hayles to claim, in what one might call a rejoinder to Bruno Latour's stand regarding 'our' modernity, namely that "we have always been posthuman" (1999a: 291).

More specifically, Hayles's analysis of human reconfiguration is concerned with "the contemporary transformation from 'biomorphism' to 'technomorphism' (reconstituting the body as a technical object under human control)", as she writes in "Seductions of Cyberspace" (2001b: 305), or as one might say, in bio-reconfiguration as opposed to techno-reconfiguration. Even more concretely, Hayles's aim is to explore "how metaphor and constraint work to reconfigure agency in this posthuman era" (2001a: 146), to arrive at "a configuration of the human so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines" (*ibid*.), or, as Hayles formulates it in a short review entitled "Refiguring the Posthuman" (2004): "performativities that re-define the human through mimetic imitation of intelligent machines" (316).

As these passages, these examples, central to three key figures in the establishing of posthumanism as a theoretical paradigm, clearly show: posthumanism and its politics is figurative, or reconfigurative. However, what does that mean and is that a problem? It may be a problem in the sense that figuring or reconfiguring as political strategy, as the most obvious and most widely used political strategy one should

add, does not escape the paradox of representation, or 'representationalism'. Investing in a figure that will always remain profoundly ambiguous (the posthuman could turn 'nasty' at any moment, but is nevertheless figured as our only hope) and in a figure that has been announcing itself from the very beginning even while it has always already been here, is ultimately an eschatological device. It is and remains fundamentally 'modern'; in fact, it is a return of the modern. All these figurations and reconfigurations are indeed governed by a dialectic of *pre*figuration and *dis*figuration or defacement, as detractors of an underlying process one might refer to as 'posthumanization'.

To prefigure means: "to be an early indication or version of, foreshadow, represent beforehand by a figure or type" and has a strong theological connotation, according to the *OED*. It also signifies "to shape or form at the front; and to imagine beforehand". In this sense, a prefiguration, apart from designating "the action of prefiguring or foreshadowing a person or thing, representation beforehand by a figure or type", also refers to "a person, thing or event which prefigures or foreshadows another; a prototype, a precursor". The figure thus always announces itself as a prefiguration. In replacing, in succeeding, it evokes and repeats its predecessor. It literally re-con-figures, imitates, repeats, is compelled to repeat with all of the eventualities, the best or the worst, repetition might entail. This is the crux of the 'figurative' compulsion, the compulsion to repeat – in a very psychoanalytic and metaphysical sense.

Hand Blumenberg, in *Präfiguration: Arbeit am politischen Mythos* (2014), analyses the strategy of prefiguration in terms of a political programme critically, both as a way of reducing complexity and thus an anthropological necessity, and a highly risky and dangerous "scheme of interpretation" [*Deutungsschema*], or a means to bestow legitimation:

> At first, prefiguration is merely a means to assist with decision-taking – what has already been done once does not sanction, assuming the conditions remain the same, any new deliberation process, disturbance or puzzlement. It is already established as a paradigm. (Blumenberg 2014: 9)

This means that "prefiguration invests a decision with legitimacy that might be of utmost contingency and which might thus be entirely unfounded" (10). Prefiguration therefore represents a kind of analogy or 'metaphor' on which actions are based:

> If the meaningful prerequisite, the 'pregnate' [*Prägnat*] is not given, but fashioned, so that should become true what was written …, then that which is being repeated merely becomes a mythical programme through its repetition, through this contingent act of selection whose contingency has to be repressed. (2014: 11)

The posthumanst politics of 're-con-figuration', even though it identifies as radically transformative in the face of an apocalyptic future functions according to the same 'mythical' principles that Blumenberg describes in his critique of

prefiguration, and it all has to do with the blindness at the centre of representation.

B. Disfiguration, or what does representation hide?

Rest assured, there are no posthumans. There are humans, nonhumans but there are no posthumans, or transhumans for that matter. The latter are 'empty' figures, the objects of desire or anxiety. They are also 'defaced' figures, prosopopoeiae, masks or 'disfigures'. Both the politics of posthumansim and transhumanism are vying about giving this figure a face, a shape. In doing so, they are hoping to re-con-figure, or, in the case of transhumanism, to trans-figure, the human (and thus, by implication, also the nonhuman, against whom the human is defined). This is transparent, maybe too transparent. In a time where figuration is ubiquitous and 'we' are saturated in ambient speculation, maybe it would be preferable to resist figuration, if that were possible, or at least to defer it, to emphasise its *différance* – the figure, the human, the posthuman, always differing from themselves, always already here and always deferred – a Derridean classic. This is what would be at stake in a posthuman politics of mimesis.

Paul de Man was most trenchant on the figure of prosopopeia, which for him was the trope of autobiography. And what else is posthumanism if not the human worrying about its autobiography: "Prosopopeia [*prosopon poien*, to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*)] is the trope of autobiography, by which one's name is made as intelligible

and memorable as a face. Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, figure, figuration and disfiguration" (De Man 1984: 76). To disfigure, the *OED* says, is "to mar the figure or appearance of, destroy the beauty of; to deform, deface; to mar or destroy the beauty or natural form of (something immaterial); to misrepresent injuriously; to alter the figure or appearance of; to disguise; to lose its figure, become misshapen". Disfiguration is the source of great suffering and loss, loss of identity, and shame. And it is related to a fear of being 'mimed' by an other, or 'mimetophobia', of being disfigured by an other. In the context of a radical politics of re-con-figuration this can flip over into its opposite: 'mimetophilia' – the desire to become (like) an other. These form the two sides of a politics of mimesis.

The fundamental and necessary ambiguity of mimesis (fear and desire of the other) has been evident in the discussion of the mimetic 'ever since Plato', as Derrida writes in a fascinating long footnote to "The Double Session" (1981: 186-187, footnote 14), that compares the 'logic of mimesis', as that which both promises and hinders the revelation of truth, to a 'machine'. According to Derrida this logic, or politics, is structured like:

> a schema (two propositions and six possible consequences) = a logical machine): 1. Mimesis produces a thing's double (faithful copy); consequences: a. double/imitator is nothing worth in itself; b. imitator's value comes from its model – imitation good if model good, bad if model bad; c. mimesis is nothing, has no

intrinsic value, it is purely negative and therefore evil. 2. Mimesis and imitator are something since likeness exists, therefore nonbeing somehow 'exists', hence: a. in adding to the model the imitator becomes a supplement to the model; b. in adding to an existing model the imitator cannot be absolutely the same thing, and is therefore never absolutely true; as a supplement that can take the model's place but never be its equal, the imitator is in essence inferior even if it manages to take the place of the model.

To address, or at least to critique, if not deconstruct this logic, "representation and mimesis must be rethought: not in terms of adequation or imitation, but in terms of translation and displacement", or one might say, in miming 'otherness' (van der Sijde 1998: 193ff). "From an 'anthropological' point of view", as Gebauer and Wulf (1998) explain in their classic study, "mimesis is a central 'ability' of humans (exceptionalism) to 'appropriate' the world/to 'internalise' an exterior 'other', to 'identify with' an other and thus to 'leave' a purely human perspective behind" (Gebauer & Wulf 1998: 11). This mimetic ability is part of the *conditio humana* and ultimately arises out of human neoteny. It is central to the learning of social action, according to Wulf (2017: 17). It proceeds by 'performative staging and acting', learning from examples, by making oneself similar to, internalising or embodying pre-existing social knowledge or norms (without necessarily purely reproducing them). It is mainly practical or 'aisthetic', as can be seen in the functioning of mirror neurons which are designed to produce what Wulf calls a 'mimetic

Anähnlichung' [making (oneself) similar] to the world and other humans (and, arguably, even if Wulf does not say this, to nonhumans) (Wulf, 2017: 20). However, he does admit that cultural learning as a predominantly embodied mimetic process also exists ("albeit with great differences") in many other animals (21) – a comment to which I shall return below.

This fundamentally 'creative' process (I would prefer to call it 'figuration', for obvious reasons) is not without its own power and violence, however. This is the famous or infamous 'ideological function' of mimesis where mimesis becomes pure 'mimicry' – or an adaptation to something that is given and remains unquestioned – which again explains the ambiguity of any politics of mimesis: imitation can be both 'inspirational' and creatively liberating, or 'oppressive' and stiflingly repetitive.

In the case of a post- and transhumanist politics of figuration, which are by necessity speculative, prefigurative, one might speak, following Metscher (2004: 15), of "anticipatory mimesis" – a combination of mimesis and utopian reason – with all the logical contortions this inevitably entails: how does one 'imitate' the future? How does one anticipate the '*à-venir*' without pre-empting it and stopping it from happening – again we are deep in Derridean territory.

C. From anthropomimesis to zoomimesis:

From where does the future arrive, so that we might be able to at least to be receptive and 'orient' our politics of figuration towards it? Maybe we have been looking for the

future in the entirely wrong place. If the posthuman is a figure of alterity it also escapes temporality – cf. Katherine Hayles's 'we have always been posthuman'. In fact, the nonhuman or posthuman other is always (already) 'before' humanity, in both senses of 'before': spatially and temporally, as a (moral and political) task and a repressed and haunting *revenant*. And so is mimesis – a task to find better ways of dealing with the other, and a haunting, a haunting insistence to remember. This is where anthropomimesis meets zoomimesis, one might say, or where they become utterly 'entangled'.

This is Roberto Marchesini's approach and his 'theory of zootropia'. As Boria Sax points out: "Marchesini's theory holds that animals embody the alterity, with respect to which human beings define themselves, on both collective and individual levels" (Sax 2016: 7). Or, as Marchesini puts it himself: "zoopoanthropology starts from the presupposition that relationships with animals have had a fundamental role in the process of hominization and cultural development" (qtd. in Bussolini 2016: 27). Central concepts of a 'zooanthropological' analysis are 'theriomorphism', understood as "the flow of ideas and influences from animals to humans", and 'zoomimesis', or "how humans observe and imitate nonhuman animals in ways that are formative for human identity and culture", which entails animals as 'knowledge-partners', or animals as 'epiphanies' in the process of 'zoopoiesis' (Bussolini 2016: 28-29).

As opposed to the idea of 'originary technology', which is often seen as one of the founding moves of posthumanism

and seen as the motivation for the general (if not uncritical) technophilia it stands for, Marchesini stresses 'our' 'originary animality', or indeed 'zoomimesis' as 'pre-originary technology': "before humans developed their technology, animals were their only source of knowledge, because observing the behaviour of other species meant having at one's disposal a real knowledge base with which to understand the world and consequently to modify the probability of survival" (Marchesini 2016a: 120).

The originary animal, the animal 'before' us and who, according to Derrida, we both *follow* and *are* (*l'animal que donc je suis*) is the one to whom we owe who and what we have become, thanks to our capacity or tendency "to enter into accord with external reality, [which] seems to be a foundational characteristic of human beings that incorporates alterity into identity, *refiguring* it through a representation centred on one's own body" (2016b: 185; my emphasis). Among many other things this recalls Agamben's (or Rilke's, or Pico della Mirandola's) "man has no specific identity other than the *ability* to recognize himself … *man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human*" (Agamben 2004: 26).

The (animal) encounter, the encounter with animals, on the other hand, according to Marchesini's zoomimetic scheme:

> adds two new mediating entities: (a) the introjection of the other as new structural dimension of internal predicates; (b) the excentric position of the other and its transmutation from simple phenomenon to epiphany that is the annunciation of a possible dimension, [which

means that] the subject in *mimesis* is swept away by alterity that no longer presents itself as phenomenon – or as being-event that even if relevant remains external to the subject – but as epiphany, that is as apparition of the subject itself irremediably changed in the hybridization with alterity. In *mimesis* the subject discovers a new existential dimension, capable of undergoing an irreversible conversion in itself. (2016b: 188)

There is a curious anthropocentrism-in-reverse, maybe even a kind of 'Socratic' move, at work in Marchesini, when he says that (2017: 93):

The human being must counterfeit itself in order to feel its humanity: it has to modify its skin, change some of its anatomic details, gain a kinaesthetic sense that does not belong to it, *transfiguring* survival strategies and altering the way it uses its voice. Anthropopoiesis, as a kind of metamorphosis that takes the human being outside its species-specific shell, is an act of denial of our biological condition rather than an attempt at compensation … Being human means dreaming to be elsewhere, distancing ourselves from our nature. (Marchesini 2017: 93; my emphasis)

Zoomimesis, it appears, ironically, is what makes us human. We need the 'animal epiphany' as an originary appropriation of our humanity, since an "animal epiphany is a recursive process of assimilation of difference … seeing oneself in the non-human animal through a metapredication of commonality that brackets the predicates of difference" (2017: 94).

The whole process starts through a fundamentally empathic move based on the recognition of shared 'animality': "Animal-being implies some very strong sharing meta-predicates, such as the experience of suffering, moving in search for something, interpreting the here-and-now, self-expression, vulnerability to the world, reproduction – just to mention some" (2017: 96). Contrary to what is often argued by proponents of animal studies, the anthropomorphism that is at work in (human) zoomimesis should be seen as a valuable ally rather than rejected as a misrepresentation, as Marchesini explains:

> the identification with animal otherness is not attributable to anthropomorphic projection – as is usually maintained – but rather to an effective meta-predicative sharing that the human being feels immediately, as indeed do other animals (although, perhaps, our species' great capacity for empathy strengthens this identification) … Animal-being means grounding our existence on openness, in the awareness of heterotrophy that makes us inevitably dependent on external biological mechanisms … recognizing each other is consubstantial to animal-being. (2017: 97)

Marchesini, one could thus say, is also engaged in a kind of politics of figuration based on mimesis, a politics that is also based on pre- and re-configuration: the human is both prefigured and (re)configured in an 'animal encounter' that leads to an 'epiphany' or a recognition of who 'we' are – namely 'hybrids':

If epiphany is the act of imagining [a] new shape, zoomimesis is the act of taking on a new hybrid form: that is, the representation of the epiphany in our own body. Therefore, mimesis is not the duplication or the passive translation of nonhuman predicates into the liquefied flesh of man, or the transformation of the Epimethean predicate into a tool – copying nature through *techne*. Rather, it is an initiatory act requiring a long process of assimilation, but mostly adaptation … The encounter with the non-human animal is a slow and painful metamorphosis, one that excites us but also exposes us to vertigo, broadening our horizon but also increasing our vulnerability since it moves us away from our species-specific gravitational centre. (2017: 100)

In sum, Marchesini's ethico-political programme finds its formula in a movement from an 'other-than-myself' to an 'other-with-myself', or a process of "initiation through (animal) epiphany)" (2017: 105). As a road map for a 'successful' instance of zoomimesis, one might say, the following components are required: there needs to be (a) an animal encounter; (b) a dialogue; (c) a partnership; (d) a hybridization as outcome (Marchesini, 2016a: 123).

D. After mimesis: postfiguration?

Regardless of what they claim, posthumanist politics of figuration are all based on some kind of 'advocacy' – all are laying claim to radical politics and transformation. How could they not? They all rely on a move that presupposes an alterity

which calls for a response. In order that this response may not confounded with a simple act of appropriation – i.e. to insure that it the response 'ethical' – justice needs to be rendered to the other in the form of 'primacy' – this is Levinas. The other was there 'before' me and remains 'before' the possibility of any 'me'. However, the other 'affects' me, the other 'becomes' me as I become (the) other – a hybridization that in theory should work both ways, but is usually a preserve of the (modern) successor who, after the successful hybridization process, the appropriation of the prefiguration that has allowed me to become what I (now) am, triggers a purification process regarding the other, who is put back in its place (this is definitely not Levinas). After any re-con-figuration one is thus presented with that which was originally called for and whose calling was heard, and one 'becomes' the newly (re)configured other-than-or-with-myself who is the product of one's zoo-techno-hetero-auto-mimetic desire. You can easily see how close, despite all the echoes of a postmodern ethics of alterity, this (still) is to a standard Hegelian dialectic. The pre-re-con-dis-figured nonhuman alterities in this mimetic process are entirely exchangeable, whether they are nonhuman animals, as in Marchesini, or technologies, as for example in Bernard Stiegler or Mark Hansen's notion of *technesis* based on "the *presocial* role of technology as agent of material, complexification", and for whom "technology embodies the very contact between humankind and the world on which societal forms are themselves constructed. It thus conditions the movement of desire itself" (Hansen 2000: 234-5). Or indeed, whether it is any form of 'originary' hybridity or

entanglement of nature-cultures, monsters or cyborgs – they are all symptoms of our posthumanist desire, figurations of more or less speculative politics.

So what, you might ask, would be the alternative? I take the beginning of an answer to this from Catherine Malabou's comment on Derrida's "The Ends of Man" (1982), where she wonders whether "we still have something to say about repetition and the human, about repeating the human?" (Malabou 2015: 67), for it is with repetition that we really deal when we investigate mimesis and figuration. As Malabou continues:

> every critique of the concept of the human seems to be oriented toward a better approach to the essence of humanity … Does this mean that all discourses on the human, albeit metaphysical or deconstructionist, political or juridical, anthropological or psychoanalytic, would share the same impossibility: that of overcoming the thinking of man as a moving limit – this old limit, which Aristotle described as the medium between God and the animal? This moving or flickering in-between point, always tending to its end? ... When we claim that the human is now behind us, that we are entering the posthuman age, that we are opening the 'interspecies dialogue', or that we cannot believe in cosmopolitanism for want of a universal concept of humanity, are we doing something other than trying to reconstitute, purify, re-elaborate a new essence of man? (Malabou 2015: 65)

Why, in short, this continued, insistent desire of and for figuration, this mimetic desire, even in the politics of the

most radical imagineerings of posthumanist re-con-figurations? Malabou suggests that: "We humans are seeking revenge from being human. From being humans", and therefore asks: "will we ever be able to be redeemed from the spirit of revenge and thus from our humanity?" (2015: 69). The urgency of the question she finds in the current context of 'biomimicry', or "the use and imitation of natural processes in technology … as if nature repeated herself through techné …":

> This repetition of the 'natural' is just another example of the fact that we are not only asking the question of repetition; repetition has become the question, what questions us … are we able to deal with this new urgency of repetition without seeking revenge toward it? Are we able to repeat without seeking revenge? Without trying to crucify time and transiency, without trying to invent new forms of cruelty? In the trembling opening of this question appears the possibility of sculpting the nonhuman, or the nonhumanist human. (70-71)

In my view, Malabou is here speaking about 'postfiguration', of resisting re-con-figuration, in a critique of plasticity, the very concept that made Malabou's name, as she herself admits: "All I have tried to describe, thanks to the concept of plasticity, every act of shaping, reshaping, repairing, remodelling, might be developed here to illustrate the *return of repetition*" (71). Repetition, as Malabou explains, increasingly is no longer initiated or controlled by 'us' (if it ever was, one might add). So, once the sea has, again, and maybe this time for the last time (as every repetition

promises to be), erased the figure of 'man', will we be able to resist both the desire *for* and the desire *of* the posthuman – whatever shape, form or figuration he-she-it should take – namely, of becoming-other, of becoming entirely 'imperceptible' (Braidotti) or 'indistinct' (Calarco), indifferent? Or as Malabou promises, without prefiguration, however, "if we can one day get free from the spirit of revenge, we will become great human beings" (2015: 71) – this much of humanism's innermost desire may be (and maybe should remain) unsurpassable even though it can and should never be trusted.

E. Postfigurative readings – examples:

Artists such as Orlan, Daniel Lee, and Matthew Barney [or Stelarc, Patricia Piccinini, Karin Andersen, photographers like Tim Flach and, one might add, much earlier: Charles Le Brun] bring to light the apparent paradox of making the human by means of zoomimesis, showing us morphopoietic outcomes that make explicit vulnerability, transitivity, non-equilibrium, opening, being 'work in progress', and the lack of a prefixed ontological direction, which is to say the most authentic predicates of the human condition. (Marchesini 2016c: 193)

1. Camilla Adami – *'Primati'* / Jacques Derrida – *'Tête-à-tête'*:

… the animal comes before and after. (Milesi 2007: 68)

Matita su carta, cm 56,5x38, 2011.

As Ginette Michaud comments, in "Tête-à-tête" (2001), Derrida "confronts or faces head-on [*il affronte … en pleine figure, ou en personne*] the very subject of mimesis when he finds himself in Camilla Adami's atelier, alone, face-to-face with these great apes of or in painting [*de peinture ou en peinture*]" (Michaud 127):

> In Camilla Adami's (C.A.) atelier, I thought I was seeing her, looking at me looking at these figures or faces who wouldn't stop looking at me, especially the figures/faces of these huge apes to whom I seemed to expose myself,

me, naked, for the first time … These exposed or exhibited bodies were looking at me/concerned me [*me regardaient*] … Mostly but not exclusively, they are figures, in the sense of 'faces', and therefore portraits, but these figures/faces aren't figural. They're neither fictions, nor tropes, nor metaphors, nor metonymies. Rarely has painting better escaped [*se soustraire à*] rhetoric. Speech inaudible, unheard-of sobriety. Absolute economy of painting. These are literally literal figures, unique, without any possible substitution, wordless or almost [*sans phrase ou presque*]: this woman, that man, this ape, at this moment, at this age" (Derrida 2001: 6).

In his 'head-to-head' encounter Derrida describes an experience of time "without common measure": "*une heure incalculable et sans synchronie possible avec aucune autre* [an incalculable hour, in no possible synchrony with any other]". 'Before' these portraits of (fellow) primates by Adami Derrida finds time to be upset or disturbed by apes: "*Singes s'ingéniant à déranger le temps, ils le détraquent, dans la même exposition, ils ne laissent pas l'histoire en paix de votre côté, ni du nôtre, ni au-dedans d'aucun autre tableau*. [Apes striving to disturb time, they derail it, in this same exhibition/exposure, they do not leave history in peace on your side, neither ours, nor in any other painting/chart]" (5). The encounter with these giant portraits of primates evokes, for Derrida, the "*au-delà de l'humain … l'humain emporté, transi, par tout autre Chose, en soi hors de soi, tellement plus grand que moi* [a beyond the human ... the human carried away, numbed, by an entirely other Thing, in itself out of

oneself, so much bigger than me]" (6). This 'beyond' the human is not a kind of transcendence, however, it is more akin to what I see in the ambiguity of the 'before'. The encounter with the primate-human-other – timeless in Adami's portraits as well as in terms of evolutionary ancestrality – produces an uncanniness that explodes anthropocentrism even though (or maybe because) it necessarily passes through anthropomorphism (Derrida is thrown back to his sense of 'humanness' by the portraits but this sense no longer seems to fit – "*en soi hors de soi, tellement plus grand que moi*"). Further on, Derrida also speaks of a sense of exposure as well as an 'abyssal spirituality' which goes beyond the usual form of interpellation in the sense of "*ça me regarde* [this looks at me/this concerns me]". In fact, Derrida discovers an "*indifférence déchirante, un être-ailleurs, une impassibilité, un silence qui littéralement me renvoie: rejet, exclusion, expulsion, naissance aussi, non pas l'appel 'viens' mais l'ordre 'va'* [a heartrending indifference, a being-elsewhere, an impassibility, a silence that literally sends me back/dismisses me: rejection, exclusion, expulsion, birth also, not the call 'come' but the order 'go']" (7). A proximity which is at the same time a rejection due to the unbridgeable gap of fundamental 'asynchronicity':

> 'Va, je te laisse, je te renvoie à toi-même, je te laisse, je te laisse seul(e) avec toi, comme moi, en somme, dans les lointains d'un lieu infiniment inaccessible. Au fond, ce qui te regarde ne te regarde pas, et même, patience, *ça* ne t'aura jamais regardé, n'aura jamais eu un regard pour

toi, vraiment, proprement pour toi … C'est à partir; oui, à *partir* de là, en partant de là, en t'en allant, que tu as encore quelque chance de voir et de savoir comment accéder à ce qui ne te regarde pas …'. (7-8)

['Go, I leave you, I send you back to yourself, I leave you, I leave you alone with yourself, like me, in fact, in the distance of an infinitely inaccessible place. Basically, what looks at you does not look at you/does not concern you, and even, patience, it will never have looked at you, will never have had a look for you/will never have cared about you, really, properly for/about you ... It is to leave; yes, from here, starting/leaving from here, leaving from here, in leaving that you still have some chance to see and know how to access what does not look at you/concern you ...']

The phrase '*ça me regarde*' can mean both 'it/this looks at me' and 'it/this concerns me'. Derrida plays on this point to express the intimacy *and* anonymity that the encounter with primates produces *at the same time*. In contrast with the maybe expected sense of evolutionary ancestrality (of human and ape), however, Derrida insists on the paradoxical contemporaneity (of their 'a-synchronicity'):

Ces singes, par exemple, n'annoncent rien, sauf peut-être le mauvais rôle qu'on leur a fait jouer dans le grand discours, humain trop humain, sur la mimesis, ils ne rappellent, malgré toutes vos tentations, ils ne singent aucun être humain. Fin de l'anthropocentrisme. Ils n'ont même aucun lien de parenté entre eux. Plus de filiation. Aucune espèce, aucun cas d'espèce. Ce ne sont pas nos

ancêtres. Ça ne va ni ne vient entre nous sur quelque échelle phylogénétique. Ce sont nos contemporains même si toute synchronie reste impensable – avec eux comme avec tout autre, au fait. (11)

[These apes, for example, announce nothing, except perhaps the bad part that we made them play in the great discourse, human, all too human, on mimesis, they do not recall, despite all your attempts, they do not ape any human being. End of anthropocentrism. They are not even related to each other. No filiation. No species, no kind. They are not our ancestors. It does not come or go between us on any phylogenetic scale. They are our contemporaries even if all synchrony remains unthinkable – with them, as with any other, by the way.]

Avant/devant l'humanité – *before* humanity – this might be the sentiment that Derrida captures here and which, in his case, leads to a rejection of what he calls the '*bêtise* [stupidity; *bête* = animal] of speaking of 'the animal' (or 'the human', for that matter) instead of respecting the irreducible plurality of *les vivants* [the living]:

Chaque 'singe' vous regarde, unique, tout seul, mortel, depuis sa place singulière, chacun d'eux vous prend à part, il ne veut pas de son nom, il ne singe rien, il vous signifie, dans son idiome absolu, il vous signifie indéniablement, vous apostrophant sans se taire mais sans rien dire: n'essayez pas de m'assimiler, je suis une autre, je reste une tout autre origine du monde, car contrairement à ce que dit, parmi vous les hommes, tel grand penseur du siècle, j'ai, moi, un monde, je forme et

me figure un monde, je suis aussi *weltbildend*, et ce monde est 'riche', je ne suis ni *weltlos*, ni même *weltarm*, je suis, point, j'existe, avant tout et après tout, ni libre ni captive, ou l'un et l'autre, comme vous que je vois venir, ne tenez donc pas de me rendre, par compassion, ce que vous appelez la subjectivité d'un sujet, la dignité d'une personne humaine. Je ne suis ni une bête ni personne, je suis quelqu'un mais personne: ni une personne, ni un sujet ni le sujet d'un portrait. (14-15)

[Each 'ape' looks at you/concerns you, unique, all alone, mortal, from its singular place, each of them takes you to one side, it does not want its name, it does not ape anything, it signifies to you, in its absolute idiom, it undeniably signifies to you, addressing itself to you not in silence but without saying anything: do not try to assimilate me, I am another, I remain an entirely different origin of the world, because contrary to what one of your great thinkers of the past century said, I do have a world, I form and figure myself a world, I am also *weltbildend*, and this world is 'rich', I am neither *weltlos*, nor even *weltarm*, I am, full stop, I exist, before all and after all, neither free nor captive, or both, like you whom I see coming, so do not insist, out of compassion, to return to me what you call the subjectivity of a subject, the dignity of a human person. I am neither a beast nor a person/nobody, I am someone but nobody: neither a person, nor a subject nor the subject of a portrait.]

Derrida here refers to Heidegger's (in)famous claim that only humans are 'world-forming', while animals are 'poor in world'

and stones are 'worldless' – a starting point for Derrida's critique in "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" (2002), and *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2009/2011; see also Calarco, 2008). Instead, Derrida here evokes an altogether other origin of the world – there is hardly any better way to name the abyssal structure of the kind of ancestrality that goes beyond or rather comes *before* any teleological notion of evolution.

Derrida identifies with the ape, who regards and concerns him (and us):

> Votre parole ne m'aura pas manqué, je ne l'ai pas mais je vous la donne, et je vous touche, et ceci, croyez-moi, qui vous parle en langues, ce n'est pas une de ces *figures* (l'absent, le mort, le revenant, la chose personnifiée, l'homme ou l''animal'), le totem qu'un marionnettiste ferait déclamer dans ce que vous, les hommes, vous les rhéteurs, appelleriez bêtement une prosopopée. (15)

> [Your word/speech will not have failed me, I do not have it but I give it to you, and I touch you, and this, believe me, who speaks to you in languages, it is not one of these *figures* (absent, dead, ghost, personified thing, human or the 'animal'), the totem that a puppeteer would declaim in what you, humans, you rhetoricians, stupidly call a prosopopoeia.]

However, he also denounces any form of appropriation at work in this mimetic representation. In this animal encounter (with the human) there are no predecessors or

descendants. For Derrida, these painted primates just don't belong (to anyone) (13). As Michaud comments these primates in their non-mimetic, or maybe post-mimetic representation neither become 'some one' nor 'some thing'; they are neither subjectified nor objectified, strictly speaking, but "expose 'painting itself'" (Michaud 2006: 131-132). There is no 'aping' mimeticism [*singerie*], no realism at work here, no imitation; the ape doesn't ape man, doesn't 'signify' [*signifier/singifier*]: "for the event that is at work in this painting has an entirely other transfiguration in view … nothing less than a transfiguration in which something becomes someone or someone becomes something" (132).

"The impact such a philosophical repositioning has on the conception of mimesis, reflection and being within deconstruction as a critique of onto(theo)logical specularity", Laurent Milesi points out, cannot be underestimated (Milesi 2007: 56):

> Derrida's *tête-à-tête* with the primates invitingly calls for a parallel with Levinas's face to face with the other who can only be a human, and brings out the dissymetry between the animal as object seen by man, and not as subject endowed with a gaze …, and the human gaze, as well as the issue of anthropo-morphic or -centric concern – both being understood in the French *ça me regarde* … (66)

"The scene of the philosopher [or any human viewer in fact] looking at the primates is reversed into that of his seeing himself being seen, as the philosophical mirror

stage of mimesis, reflection, and therefore signification, is broken", Milesi concludes (67).

The implications of this rupture are what concerns posthumanist animal studies, as Kelly Oliver explains:

> Humans are not the ascent or descent of apes or other animal beings in the sense of a hierarchy of being. Instead, we are kin through lateral relation of shared embodiment and the structures of perception and behaviour accompanying it. (Oliver 2009: 242)

I will track and investigate three more examples of what one might call 'critical anthropomorphic primate reflection'.

2. Tim Flach – 'More than Human':

https://timflach.com/work/more-than-human/slideshow/#33

As Tim Flach, the celebrated animal photographer and portraitist, writes (in Flach & Mische 2011): "Part of my challenge is to defamiliarize the subject. I need to make us see the world a little bit strange again, with fresh eyes and new insight" (10). "Over and over [Flach] uses the stylistic device of ambiguity to break through our viewing patterns", Mische comments (Flach & Mische 2011: 21). About the specific image of the Macaque, Mische writes:

> The small ape is only eighteen inches high. When Flach raises the ape we see him face-to-face – it is an encounter, in the truest sense of the word, at eye level – even if it is only on the below photo frame. The relationship to animals reaches a new dimension. (12)

Another interviewer describes Flach's "power of photographic storytelling" in the following terms:

> Tim Flach is a photographer intent on shifting the public and scientific perceptions of the natural world. With a recognisable – often very conceptual – style, he borrows elements of human portraiture to focus on animals' personalities and provoke emotional responses in the viewer. (Flach & Bailey 2019: 132)

What he is really interested in, however, as Flach admits, "is this idea of a sentient being which already has a certain divide because it's not human" (138).

Flach participated in a social science study on the impact of animal portraiture – often accused of anthropomorphism and the commodification of animals – designed around the notion of 'critical anthropomorphism':

critical anthropomorphism … is an essential tool to encourage conservation efforts and that animal portraiture may be an ideal 'attention grabber', after which wildlife images can serve as 'educators' … With growing concern for biodiversity loss, conservationists are faced with increased pressure to depict animals in ways that evoke empathy and lead to conservation. In recent years, conservation photographers have called on scientists to assist them in identifying the best ways to depict animals to elicit an emotional response … (Whiteley, Kalof & Flach 2010: 1)

As Whitely, Kalof and Flach report: "Those [viewers] who were exposed to animal portraits reported increased empathy and decreased positive and relaxed emotions" (ibid.).

"As a photographic technique, animal portraiture is an approach that frames animals in ways that *mimic* the human studio portrait and has been established as influential in invoking feelings of kinship with animals"(Whitely, Kalof & Flach 2010: 4). The resulting claim with regard to the impact of animal photography is that "[v]isual representations of animals are not only particularly salient cultural tracers …, but they can also be used to bring about a change in the position of animals in human culture because the animal as a visual object structures human emotional response" (4-5). And more generally: "Visual representations of animals trigger the built-in attractions humans have for animals and the natural world" (5). Animal portraiture, they conclude:

is a representational approach used in conservation photography that is designed to highlight animal personality and character and evoke emotion from the viewer. Although traditional wildlife photography produces a romanticized view of animals, but in a distant world, the aim of animal portraiture is to bring humans closer to understanding other animals, thus fostering an emotional connection … Animal portraiture is anthropomorphic—it emphasizes the animal's human characteristics, bridging animal 'otherness' with 'sameness'. There is evidence that animal portraiture increases viewers' feelings of kinship or perception of sameness with animals. (6)

Similar, or at least complementary to, Marchesini's notion of zoomimesis, critical anthropomorphism in environmental conservation thus "promotes the attribution of human characteristics to animals to galvanize public attention and concern for conservation or protection" (19).

But how does this change when the animal is literally escaping the representative logic of 'becoming some one' and 'becoming some thing' outlined by Derrida above and reinterpreted by Flach (and Marchesini)? This is maybe what is at stake in the next example.

3. 'Monkey selfie':

To summarize the issue of what has come to be known as the 'Monkey Selfie' as briefly as possible I cite the account given by Hutton (2017: 99):

> In 2011 a six-year old macaque named Naruto, resident of Sulawesi, Indonesia, picked up a camera belonging to photographer David Slater and took multiple photographs of himself. These photographs became known as the 'Monkey Selfies', and two pictures in particular, one showing Naruto grinning at the camera, and another 'full-body' selfie, became popular on the web and were later

uploaded to Wikimedia Commons as being the public domain. Slater threatened legal action on the grounds that he held copyright in the image. Counter-arguments included the claim that there was no copyright in the image at all, as the creator was not a legal person, or that Naruto himself, as the creator of the image, was entitled to all profits from the dissemination of the image. In the United States, the animal rights organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) filed a lawsuit on behalf of Naruto, claiming that his copyright had been violated. In their brief, PETA argued that the Monkey Selfies 'resulted from a series of purposeful and voluntary actions' which resulted in 'original works of authorship not by Slater, but by Naruto' (para. 2). It quoted from Slater's own book where he talked of the need for the recognition that animals such as macaques have 'personality' and 'rights to dignity and property' (para. 6), their 'self-awareness' and enjoyment of their own images with 'some sort of fun and artistic experiment' (para. 34). On behalf of Naruto, PETA claimed Slater's profits, to be used 'solely for the benefit of Naruto, his family and his community, including the preservation of their habitat (para. 7). In the decision, the judge dismissed the claim, noting that the US Copyright Office specifically restricted authorship in copyright to works created by a human being fixed in a tangible medium of expression. There was in effect no copyright protection for the image, since policy dictated that works produced by 'nature, animals, or plants', including 'a photograph taken by a monkey' (para. 6), could not be registered. PETA in effect argued

that Naruto had an intentional, second-order understanding of what he was doing, even if it was not fully comparable to that of a human being. However, the court did not render its opinion in these terms, since Naruto was not recognized a legal person. Recognition of authorship in law is restricted to natural persons, though of course ownership of copyright can be assigned to corporations. Posthumanism however imagines further categories of socially recognized beings, including cyborgs, robots, and AI systems …

There is a possibility that under UK or EU law, the photographer may have the copyright attributed to them even if they did not actually take them themselves. This is based on precedents where photographs have been deemed 'original' if they are the author's own intellectual creation and reflect his or her personality with regard to free and creative choices, angle of shot, filter effects, creation of the scene, selecting background or pose, lighting, being in the right place at the right time etc., which in the end are considered to be more important than pressing the actual button. One way of 'verifying' would be to ask: what would the picture have looked like without the photographer's (i.e. human) intervention?

David Slater during the US court case indirectly claims to have played to the primate's 'narcissism': "seeing her reflection [Slater claims 'Naruto' was wrongly identified by PETA as male, or indeed wrongly identified, full stop] in the camera lens … she stared at herself with a new found appreciation, and made funny faces – in silence – just as we do when

looking in a mirror. She also, importantly, made relaxed eye contact with herself, even smiling ... She was certainly excited at her own appearance and seemed to know it was herself (USA district court 2015: 7).

PETA, on the other hand, insisted on the aspect of 'appropriation':

> Naruto – who has been accustomed to cameras throughout his life – saw himself in the reflection of the lens, drew the connection between pressing the shutter release and the change in his reflection, and made different facial expressions while pressing the shutter release ...If successful, this will be the first time that an animal is declared the owner of property, instead of being declared a piece of property himself ... Crested macaques like Naruto are highly intelligent and ... their numbers have decreased by approximately by 90 percent over the last 25 years because of human encroachment. In an out-of-court settlement with Slater he agreed to donate 25 percent of any future gross revenue from the picture.

The US appeal court rejected this settlement, however, with the aim of preventing people (or organizations, like PETA) from using animals to advance their (human) agendas.

The outcome of the entire episode, ironically, is that the photograph may have saved the crested black macaque from extinction – Slater's and PETA's original intention – after all, because the locals now cherish the monkeys as touristic 'income source'.

The dynamic changes, however, if one looks at these photographs not as (involuntary) 'monkey selfies' but as (intentional) 'self-portraits'. In fact, from a techno-aesthetic point of view, Slater acted more like a 'curator' rather than an author/artist of the selfie or self-portrait, which is indeed more of an 'auto-hetero-portrait'. The actual photograph is the product of several 'actors': the body of the monkey, the automatic settings of the camera pre-selected by Slater and the actual operation of the 'exposure' by the embodied monkey mind. What happened in the human world of combined copyright and techno-aesthetics is that the 'image-work' was created by Slater, who has given it 'meaning' and thus succeeded in appropriating it by 'resemanticising' it, which is taken by Fontcubera as the standard procedure of what she calls the 'post-photographic condition' (Fontcuberta 2015: 14).

Looking at the 'Monkey Selfie' as a selfie, one understands it as a 'gestural image' based on 'kinaesthetic sociability', following Paul Frosh (2016), for whom "selfies … integrate still images into a techno-cultural circuit of corporeal social energy (kinaesthetic sociability)" (Frosh 2016: 253).

> The selfie is a form of relational positioning between the bodies of viewed and viewers in a culture of individualized mobility, where one's 'here' and another's 'there' are mutually connected but perpetually shifting … [it] foregrounds the relationship between the image and its producer, since its producer and referent are identical. It says not only 'see this, here, now', but 'see me showing you me'. It points to the performance of communicative

action rather than to an object, and is a trace of that performance … and the culmination and incarnation of a *gesture* of mediation. (254-255)

The selfie thus becomes "a figure of mediation itself: it is simultaneously *mediating* (the outstretched arm executes the taking of the selfie) and *mediated* (the outstretched arm becomes a legible and iterable sign within selfies – of, among other things, the 'selfieness' of the image)" (255). However, "the outstretched arm (or prosthetic stick mount) doesn't just show the photographer depicting himself. It also draws the viewer in as a gesture of inclusion, inviting you to look, be-with, and act" (258), which means that "the selfie is self-referential *as an image*. It makes visible its own construction as an act and a product of mediation" (259). Selfies are thus, for Frosh, "a genre of *personal* reflexivity … they show a self, enacting itself" (259), just like in the case of the 'narcissistic' monkey (at least according to Slater). If selfies therefore display, as Frosh concludes, the "centrality of imitation and mirroring to human cognition, emotion and communication … [including] make-believe as the basis for mimesis", as 'gestural image', the selfie also "inscribes one's own body into new forms of mediated, expressive sociability with distant others: these are incarnated in a gestural economy of affection as the reflex bodily responses by which we interact with our devices and their interfaces, through the routinely dexterous movements of our hands and eyes" (Frosh 2016: 260). What thus happens, in selfies whether taken by humans or nonhumans, is "the production of the *mediated phatic body* as a visible vehicle for sociable communication with

distant others, who are expected to respond". They are therefore "a sign of the further transformations of everyday figural representation as an instrument of mediated, embodied sociability" (262).

A happy new media posthuman politics of figuration where humans, nonhumans, machines and algorithms interact figurally to create new posthuman forms of assemblages and 'socialities' might thus ensue … except, as I pointed out, we look at the photograph not as a 'selfie' but as an 'animal portrait', an animal 'self portrait', to be more precise. Should we go down this route, what exactly would constitute the difference between what Naruto managed to do and Tim Flach's orchestrated animal portrait of the macaque and its critical anthropomorphic intention? To further investigate this I propose to look at a fourth example.

4. Daniel Lee – 'Self-Portraits' (1997)

http://www.daniellee.com/projects/self-portrait
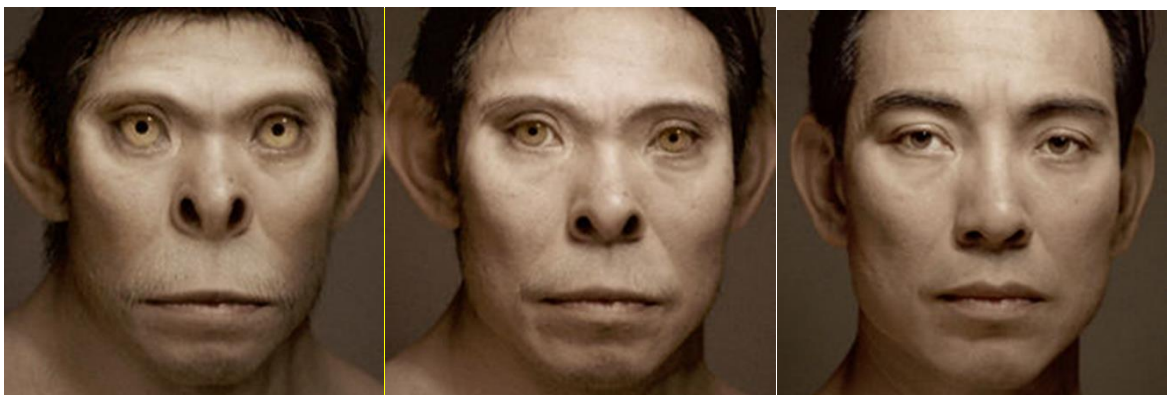
As Ming Turner writes:

> China-born and Taiwan-educated artist Daniel Lee has been based in New York since the early 1990s. He became

internationally well-known for his 1993 series *Manimals*, which comprised hybridized forms of humans and the signs of the twelve animals in the Chinese Zodiac … Lee believes that people's personalities and physical characteristics can be linked to the animals of the Chinese Zodiac, including the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, cock, dog and boar. (Turner 2014: 202, 206)

Karin Andersen – long-term artist collaborator of Roberto Marchesini and co-author of *Animal Appeal* – writes the following about Lee:

The particularity of Lee's beings is based on a teriomorphism without any connotation of value in anthropomorphic terms: they are no evil monsters or freaks (in the sense of aberrations or *caprices* of nature), but neither are they angels, their teriomorphia is simply a given, a phenotype like any other. (Anderson 2003: 394; my translation)

They are singularities, like Camilla Adami's primates according to Derrida in his face-to-face encounter. The difference is that Lees 'manimals' are the product of a techno-morphosis enabled by a digital fusion of human and nonhuman primates, or chimera, in Marchesini's sense – part of the new posthuman 'zoo', Haraway writes about. The question, however, remains: are they still *figures* and if so, in what sense? Or are they 'signs' that the process and thus also the politics of figuration is breaking down, has already broken down? Signs or symptoms of postfiguration or of a postfigurative desire?

This is maybe the point at which to wheel out what has been lurking behind this entire (m)animal charade – Agamben's 'anthropological machine'. As a brief reminder: Agamben bases his explanation of the anthropological machine on a reading of Ernst Häckel's conception of the 'ape-man' as the 'missing link' to explain the origin and difference of the human. As Agamben writes:

> the passage from animal to man, despite the emphasis placed on comparative anatomy and paleontological findings, was produced by subtracting an element that had nothing to do with either one, and that instead was presupposed as the intensifying characteristic of the human: language. In identifying himself with language, the speaking man places his muteness outside of himself, as already and not yet human. (Agamben 2004: 34-35)

This particular strategy of a combination of inclusion (which is always already an exclusion) and exclusion (which is always already a capturing) is what Agamben identifies as the "modern anthropological machine" (35), one of two variants (the other, consequently, being the "ancient anthropological machine"). The machine exists or functions on 'aporias' like the one concerning language, which is both necessary and strictly speaking impossible to use as a differentiation from the 'speechless' missing link that forms both the connection but also the radical difference between man and animal. Language plays both the part of that which identifies the difference and that which needs explanation most. Its presupposed existence is necessary for its own explanation, so to speak. Imagining man without language merely leaves

him with his animality. This is the point of 'fracture' where only two options arise: the animalization of man (ape-man) or the humanization of the animal (man-ape):

> Precisely because the human [or language] is already presupposed every time, the machine actually produces a kind of state of exception, a zone of indeterminacy in which the outside is nothing but the exclusion of an inside and the inside is in turn only the inclusion of an outside. (Agamben 2004: 37)

While the 'modern' anthropological machine functions by "excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human: *Homo alalus* [speechless human], or the ape-man" (37), the 'ancient' version of the machine works by obtaining the inside "through the inclusion of an outside", and thus produces the "non-man … by the humanization of an animal: the man-ape, the *enfant sauvage* or *Homo ferus*, but also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form" (37).

As the example of Daniel Lee shows, both versions of the machine remain available for use in an anthropocentric or humanist environment or 'contemporary culture'. Both strategies are being used more or less ironically in the visual representation of the man-ape, ape-man or hybrid. However, the photographs too in combination with our viewing function according to the same logic – an ironic reference to the anthropological machine. In fact, one could say that these visual examples function by 'aping', mimicking or parodying

the anthropological machine, with the aim of 'jamming' or at least 'reconfiguring' it.

The workings of this machine of figuration is that it establishes, according to Agamben, "a zone of indifference at [its] centre, within which – like a 'missing link' which is always lacking because it is already virtually present – the articulations between human and animal, man and non-man, speaking being and living being, must take place. Like every place of exception, this zone is, in truth, perfectly empty, and the truly human being who should occur there is only the place of a ceaselessly updated decision in which the cesurae and their rearticulation are always dislocated and displaced anew" (Agamben 2004: 37-38). This space or zone of exception rather than producing either human or animal life, in fact, only produces "life that is separated and excluded from itself – only a *bare life*" (38), as an "extreme *figure* of the human and the inhuman" (38; my emphasis). We know that Braidotti would claim this bare life, or *zoe*, as the basis of zoopolitics and new forms of solidarity as well as the playground of the posthuman.

We also know, that Agamben does not. In his version of 'anthropogenesis', "man suspends his animality and, in this way, opens a 'free and empty' zone in which life is captured and a-bandoned … in a zone of exception" (Agamben 2004: 79). Anthropogenesis, for Agamben, is thus what "results from the caesura and articulation between human and animal" which "passes first of all *within* man" (79, my emphasis), while ontology (or Western metaphysics) is the "operation in which anthropogenesis, the becoming human

of the living being, is realized" through the "overcoming of animal *physis* in the direction of human history" (79). Therefore, as Agamben explains, following and adapting Foucault: "In our culture, the decisive political conflict, which governs every other conflict, is that between the animality and the humanity of man. That is to say, in its origin Western politics is also biopolitics" (80).

What characterizes the contemporary (post)historical moment in Agamben's view in which he sees the anthropological machine as 'idling' (80), is that "man no longer preserves his own animality as undisclosable, but rather seeks to take it on and govern it by means of technology" [one only need to think of transhumanism, again, here]. "Man … appropriates his own concealedness, his own animality, which neither remains hidden nor is made an object of mastery, but is thought as such, as pure abandonment" (*ibid*.).

Faced with this abandonment or 'eclipse' (77), the 'total management' of biological life, or the very animality of man in the form of biotechnology becomes 'our' political burden or challenge. However, as Agamben concludes:

> It is not easy to say whether the humanity that has taken upon itself the mandate of the total management of its own animality is still human, in the sense that *humanitas* which the anthropological machine produced by de-ciding every time between man and animal; nor is it clear whether the well-being of a life that can no longer be recognized as either human or animal can be felt as fulfilling. (77)

This is Agamben's challenge launched to animal studies, zoomimesis or posthumanist postanthropocentrism: would the political desire of 'indistinction' not lead to a state where "the total humanization of the animal coincides with the total animalization of man" (Agamben 2004: 77)?

Indistinction, in this context, is of course Matthew Calarco's term. In 2007, Calarco wrote:

> Inasmuch as humanism is founded on a separation of the *humanitas* and *animalitas* within the human, no genuinely post-humanist politics can emerge without grappling with the logic and consequences of this division … addressing the question … of how the human/animal distinction functions in determining what it means to be human … alone will not suffice to call anthropocentrism into question … If one is to address the philosophical and political question of the animal in any meaningful way, it will be necessary at the very least to work through both (a) the ontology of animal life *on its own terms*, and (b) the ethico-political relations that obtain between those beings called 'human' and 'animal'. (Calarco 2007: 166)

More recently, Callarco has been promoting a 'politics of *indistinction'* beyond anthropological difference (Callarco 2020): a desire that also seems to be in tune with Braidotti's (Deleuzian) ethical ideal of 'becoming-imperceptible' (Braidotti 2006: 173).

As you will have figured out by now, I have no conclusion to offer that would in some way outdo, explode or surpass this compulsion to re-con-figure to a point where figuration wears

so thin that any distinction (between human and nonhuman animals, for example) becomes imperceptible or indistinct.

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