

## Preamble

The starting point for what follows is quite straightforward. If we live in ‘posthuman’ times, as is often claimed – and posthumanism as a theoretical discourse is nothing but an investigation into what this might mean – all our energies must go into finding out where we are heading, or what lies before us, in the sense of what awaits us around the next corner of history or evolution. Who are these posthumans that we are supposedly becoming? Do we need to be afraid of our future? Or does the best still lie ahead? With its focus on technological change and human self-surpassing, posthumanism seems ‘naturally’ future-oriented. Often, it is virtually indistinguishable from science fiction with its scenarios of mind-uploading, enhancement, its fantasies of AI as successor species or the ultimate control of ‘spaceship Earth’ through dreams of geoengineering. Technoeuphoria as much as technodystopia seem essential aspects of these *transhumanist* desires that seem to be willing our transition into posthumans into existence. There is also a much quieter posthumanism, however, and a much more *critical* and slower one, much more far-reaching maybe in its challenging of what it means to be human and how we came to believe what we seemingly are and why we might have been wrong – why, to paraphrase Bruno Latour, we might never have been human in the sense that the main humanist narratives have been eager to explain to us. If this (humanist or anthropocentric) humanity is threatened with its end by a number of apocalypses (climate change, asteroids, AI etc.) and cannot envisage anything coming after it, a *critical* posthumanism must start by wondering what is going on here. So it is with the following statement in Bernard Stiegler’s *Technics and Time*, which investigates and indeed rewrites the origin of humanisation through the idea of an ‘originary technicity’ of the human species and its evolution, that I want to begin: “For the end of the human cannot be investigated without investigating its origin...”<sup>1</sup>.

In other words, I begin with opposing two usages of the word ‘before’. The first is by Alain Badiou and concerns one of philosophy’s deepest mysteries and desires, namely: “What was there *before* all situations?”<sup>2</sup> Object-oriented-ontologists and speculative realists, in particular,

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. George Collins, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 135. In many ways my argument in *Before Humanity* endorses Stiegler’s rewriting of natural biological evolution into a technical co-evolution of the human. There is, however, an important difference in my angle here: where Stiegler proposes an ‘originary technicity’ that produces “The Différance of the Human” (ie. Stiegler’s critical reading of Leroi-Gourhan’s *Gesture and Speech*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993); cf. *Technics and Time 1*, p. 134ff.), I am interested in the ‘pre-originary’ relationality or maybe even ‘mediacy’ (i.e. the always receding horizon of an origin *as such*, and thus not with the effects of its *différance* which constitute the human ‘techno-history’) and in the preposition *before* as such. Conceptually, the idea of *Before Humanity* also has close affinities with Vicki Kirby’s notion of ‘originary humanicity’ (cf. her *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1-21 and *passim*). Kirby’s aim is to reinscribe a materialist-vitalist notion of life into Stiegler’s ‘originary technicity’ in order to “concede its humanicity” (p. 20). Again, in a nutshell, and in the hope that the following will provide a much more detailed explanation: while I share Kirby’s strategy of reinscribing some form of humanicity within the biological, technological and cultural process of hominization I would like to propose that we do so in the form or the question of an ‘originary nonhumanity’ of the human. This will attempted in what follows by a re-reading of paleoanthropology and a critique of the notion of ancestrality. In fact, my approach is probably closer to what Christopher Peterson (in *Monkey Trouble: The Scandal of Posthumanism*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018)) calls ‘antehumanism’. However, while Peterson is sceptical of posthumanism’s attentional shift towards “nonhuman alterity” (p. 1) and argues that “all attempts to think what is other to [the human]” requires “an originary ‘detour’ through the human – an irreducible *antehumanism* [that] renders possible any ethical and political reorientation toward the nonhuman” (p. 4), in *Before Humanity* I am looking at divisions *within* the concept of humanity and the human and how they drive what Giorgio Agamben would probably call the ‘anthropological machine’ – or the metaphysical *dispositif* that “makes us human” (cf. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 33ff.).

<sup>2</sup> Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy*, (London: Continuum, 2004), 13.

have cast doubt on whether traditional post-Kantian thinking is capable of addressing this idea of 'ancestrality'. The other usage is much more pedestrian, one might think. It concerns a linguistic investigation of a particular language use – as the term 'usage' already implies:

When used spatially the English preposition *before* refers to anteriority, to objects located in front of something; when used temporally it may refer to events to come, anteriority (the future) as well as to something that has already happened, posteriority (the past).<sup>3</sup>

What I take from these two statements on 'before' is that the word is utterly intriguing. Before is one of those magic words, which contain an intrinsic almost oxymoronic or aporetic opposition. Grammatically speaking, before is an adverb, preposition and conjunction that expresses sequence in space and time. Spatially, it serves for example as the opposite of 'behind' with its meaning of "in front, in or on the anterior side; in a forward direction" (*OED*). It also implies, ironically, maybe, a certain 'futura' in the sense of "ahead, in advance, in front". Temporally, this also seems to translate into 'previous', however, "in the time preceding that in question, previously to that or this, earlier, sooner". One could therefore say that *before* renders ambiguous the notions of futurity, presence and pastness. 'Humanity stands here *before* you' is a performative statement signifying presence. 'Humans were here *before* humanity', claims humans' right towards precedence over humanity. 'She has her whole life *before* her', affirms someone's future. Often, the last kind of statement occurs in a 'tragic' context and in the past tense when somebody dies *before* their time: 'she was taken out of our midst while she had her whole life still before her'.

The phrase and title, *before humanity*, point towards all these meanings of 'before' – pastness, presence and futurity – and they do so with the intensified awareness of our current posthuman or maybe rather posthumanist climate, i.e. when the question of what it means to be human is once again being asked with great urgency, in the face of new and not so new threats and new and also not so new 'opportunities'. Posthumanism's current main symptoms are, on the one hand, the rush for ever smarter gadgets that increasingly think for or at least with humans, and, on the other hand, the ever more urgent discussion about climate change, extinction angst, exoplanets, biopolitics and speciesism. In short, posthumanism labels the 'mess' that has arisen once the former apparent certainty provided by traditional answers to the question of what it means to be human has given way to the uncertainty about what 'humanity' should do next. In other words, it is a critique of the most fundamental anthropocentric values, assumptions and reflexes that have been underpinning modernity. Today, the question of what it means to be human thus returns with increased urgency. Technological and global economic challenges, looming environmental disaster and the erosion of traditional demarcations between human and nonhuman have been producing new and alternative ways of thinking about humanity (and its others). The ongoing critique or deconstruction of humanism that the label posthumanism points towards increasingly affects our human self-understanding in terms of ethics (a critique of anthropocentrism, speciesism, evolution), politics (a critique of biopolitics, cyborgisation, neoliberalism), aesthetics (bioart, new media art, games and the 'post-literary'), institutions (life sciences, posthumanities, converging media and computerisation) and life style (prosthesis, enhancement, virtual reality, online communities).

The proliferating ideas and visions of our emerging 'posthumanity' are reaching a wider public and are circulating in the traditional mass media and increasingly of course in the so-called new, digital and social media. The transformative potential of posthumanism has become undeniable – for better or for worse. In this context, what I have called 'critical posthumanism'<sup>4</sup> is aimed at evaluating, contextualising and historicising the truly innovative potential of posthumanism. It welcomes for example the new and extensive possibilities for co-operations between the humanities, the social

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<sup>3</sup> Ruta Nagucka, "The spatial and temporal meanings of *before* in Middle English", In *Placing Middle English in Context*, eds. Irma Taavitsainen et al. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000), 329.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism – A Critical Analysis*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

sciences and the sciences (and the new bio- or life and geo-sciences in particular). On the other hand, critical also means appreciating the resistance to the ideas relating to the posthuman, posthumanisation, posthumanism or posthumanity. The aim is to read the anxieties and desires at work when dealing with concepts of the human, posthuman and nonhuman and to look at prefigurations, genealogies, disavowals and alternative futures.

*Before Humanity* is part of the drive to challenge posthumanist futurists and techno-utopians by recalling prefigurations, genealogies and disavowals of the posthuman – and thus to remind ourselves of the essential openness and unknowability of the future – human or otherwise. This is why I focus on the ambiguity of *before*, which implies a kind of reverse thinking and an imagining of a time before origins, before there was such a ‘thing’ called ‘humanity’. This goes against the predominant strain of posthumanism that tends to focus on (and maybe even hasten) what comes *after* humanity. Aiming for the time *before* time instead – the past before human ‘emergence’, a situation ‘without’ narrative – does not only help us understand our stories or our ends better. Through the analogies and contrasts discoverable there, my attempt may also help clarify whether our presents and futures could well have been (p)re-figured in the *prehuman*.<sup>5</sup> So, by conjecture, placing oneself *before* humanity one is asked to think one’s most basic affiliation: the one owed most naturally of all, to the idea of a humanity that embraces oneself. The notion of a community embracing all humans due to some human ‘nature’ – what might be, in fact, ‘natural’ about this? Situating oneself *before* humanity, what remains of that ‘nature’ one already is supposed to have? How could any thinking ‘outside’ of that presupposition not be *unnatural*? What might this community of humanity, seemingly immemorial but nonetheless with traceable beginnings, actually be? It is absolutely inclusive in that it excludes none of us, ever – I am human, nothing human is alien to me – it is absolutely exclusive with regard to our supposedly nonhuman ancestors. How might we thus be and behave *before* humanity, both in time and space, at a time when we are running out of both time and space, and when our history might be running humanity down? Where, before humanity, do we stand, and what is it that is stood before us, thinking us back?

The move towards *before* humanity takes us one remove further within the history of humanism – which I understand as the ongoing discourse on human self-reflexivity, identity and soul searching. A previous turning point can be located at the beginning of the Renaissance, in the analogy between early and late (or post-)modernity, and early and late (or post-)humanism. In *Posthumanist Shakespeares*,<sup>6</sup> Ivan Callus and I started from the assumption that if Shakespeare’s work coincides with the ‘invention of the human’ (as Harold Bloom famously argued),<sup>7</sup> it surely must also contain an important understanding of the inhuman, the nonhuman, the more-than-human, the less-than-human, and hence it became possible to explore the idea that the posthuman also finds itself there already. Is the posthuman prefigured, represented, contested in Shakespeare? Some questions the various contributors to the volume addressed were: if the posthuman is prefigured in Shakespeare, is it possible to come up with a posthumanist approach to Shakespeare that would be able to respond to his work in the light of critical perspectives that retain the memory of humanism but which also seek to exemplify what posthumanist interpretation might entail?

In a similar move the editors of the first double issue of the journal *Postmedieval* asked “when did we become post/human?”<sup>8</sup> And I would therefore certainly agree with the editors of *Postmedieval* that:

there is room for premodernist interventions into contemporary post/humanist discourses in order to draw critical attention to the *historicity* (the ‘when’) of certain issues that pace and

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<sup>5</sup> Claire Colebrook makes a similar argument about the prehuman coming ‘after’ the posthuman in “Who Comes after the Post-Human?”, In Jon Roffe and Hannah Stark, eds., *Deleuze and the Non/Human*, (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2015), 217-233.

<sup>6</sup> Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, eds., *Posthumanist Shakespeares*, (Houndmills, Palgrave, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, (London: Fourth Estate, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Eileen A. Joy and Craig Dionne, “Before the trains of thought have been laid down so firmly: The premodern post/human”, *Postmedieval* 1-2 (2010): 1-9.

fret around the turn to the post/human in contemporary life and thought, as well as to better describe, from the longest possible historical perspectives, the ways in which bodies (human and non-human) and the world have always been emerging together out of various dynamic material processes and fields of interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

My approach here, nevertheless is slightly different: in looking at the inconceivable origin implied in the phrase *before humanity*, the historicity that opens up is that of repetitions, prefigurations and alternatives. Since human nature is essentially open it is also subject to constant rewriting, which also challenges the irreversibility of historical teleology. Rewriting, following Lyotard's notion in connection with the need for "Rewriting Modernity", is a process that works in two directions. Its logic is that of 'anamnesis', re-memembering and perlaboration.<sup>10</sup> Rewriting in this sense also implies new or different ways of reading. In "What is a posthumanist reading?" Ivan Callus and I asked: "how is it possible to read as if one were not human, or at least from a position of analytical detachment in relation to the humanity – whether 'essential' or 'constructed' – that informs and determines the very position from which it is read?"<sup>11</sup> Consequently, in *Before Humanity* I propose precisely such readings, not literally, of course, but by conjecture, which is the only possible way of reading from a postanthropocentric (if not postanthromorphic) point of view:

To read in a posthuman way is to read against one's self, against one's own deep-seated self-understanding as a member or even representative of a certain 'species'. It is already to project an otherness to the human, to sympathise and empathise with a position that troubles and undoes identity while struggling to reassert what is familiar and defining.<sup>12</sup>

*Before Humanity* pushes this empathy with the nonhuman to its 'ancestral' limits, i.e. from the time before the human to the time of human emergence, and the traces of this anteriority which inhere in materiality throughout time right up to our own time. Whether this presentism of the paleontological or the (neo)lithic is constituted by "wormholes", as Linda Charnes suggests,<sup>13</sup> or whether we are here dealing with what Eileen Joy calls "weird reading",<sup>14</sup> this reading needs to "unground texts from their conventional, human-centred contexts, just as we would unground ourselves, getting lost in order to flee what is (at times) the deadening status quo of literary-historical studies at present..."<sup>15</sup> Whether one looks at the asynchronicity prompted and exploited by rewriting or at the 'ancestrality' of object-oriented ontology and speculative realism, the 'before' in *Before Humanity* opens up a possible juncture (or, figuratively, a wormhole) between prehuman and posthuman times.

It is in this sense that we here stand *before* the human, in the same way as we are *before* the law, in the sense that Cary Wolfe uses this phrase (following Derrida's reading of Kafka's parable),<sup>16</sup> namely

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<sup>9</sup> Joy and Dionne, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, "Rewriting Modernity", *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 24-35.

<sup>11</sup> Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, "What is a posthumanist reading?" *Angelaki* 13.1 (2008): 95.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Linda Charnes, "Reading for the Wormholes: Micro-periods from the Future", *Early Modern Culture: An Electronic Seminar* 4 (2007).

<sup>14</sup> Eileen A. Joy, "Weird Reading", *Speculations* 4 (2013): 28-34.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> See Jacques Derrida, "Before the Law", In *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 182-220. Derrida reads Kafka's parable in an entirely different context of course (i.e. the relation between literature and the law) but there are a number of observations that will also be useful for understanding the complex meaning of the phrase *before humanity*: for example that the preposition *before* allows for a positioning in front of something either facing it or turning one's back on it (like the man who seeks entrance and the doorkeeper in Kafka's text). And just like Kafka's man seeking entrance to the law without ever actually confronting it, one could be *before* humanity without ever finding it. Humanity, just like the law (in its 'presence') would thus remain forever deferred, in *différance*. The analogy could be made to go even further: just like the man who spends his life waiting for access to the law, and who is (a subject) *before* the law without

to refer to contemporary posthuman biopolitics and its effects on both human and nonhuman animals:

‘before’ in the sense of that which is ontologically and/or logically antecedent to the law, which exists prior to the moment when the law, in all its contingency and immanence, enacts its originary violence, installs its frame for who’s in and who’s out... ‘before’ in another sense as well, in the sense of standing before the judgment of a law that is inscrutable not just because it establishes by fiat who falls inside and outside the frame, but also because it disavows its own contingency through violence: namely, the violence of sacrifice for which the distinction between human and animal has historically been bedrock, providing for the law the ‘foundation’ for its exclusions that the law cannot provide for itself.<sup>17</sup>

In the case of *before humanity*, the ‘violence of the framing’ engulfs the human itself and instead throws us back to a situation in which the distinctions between human and nonhuman animal make no sense and in which the very notion of ‘life’ shows itself “in all its contingency and immanence” as it “enacts its originary violence” – to follow Wolfe’s analogy. *Before Humanity* gestures towards a biopolitics *before* the human, even though it is of course prompted by the looming contemporary scenario of a time *after* the human.

As we might be, in all this frenzy of posthuman times, about to forget the human, we are also thrown back to its very beginnings. *Before Humanity* sets up two alternative scenarios: what happened just before we apparently became human (which involves a critique of paleontology, evolution and hominisation narratives)? And, witnessing the end of (at least a certain notion of) humanity, or what task lies before the human (now)? In other words, while others might rush ahead into techno-utopias of artificial intelligence and embrace the apparent inevitability of our evolution into augmented posthumans, I am interested in the proto-, paleo-, ante- ... conceptualisations on which these ‘science fictional’ scenarios rely.<sup>18</sup> The suspicion that here arises might be articulated in the question whether we have ever been human (in a humanist sense) and if not, what could we have been? What could we still be?

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ever confronting it in its presence, until the doorkeeper closes his particular access to the law upon death, every particular human might find itself before humanity in a similar way, without ever acceding to its full ‘presence’. Every singular human finds itself before (the law of) humanity by interpellation, waiting its entire life to enter only to find out that at the end (the ‘end of man’) some mediating doorkeeper closes this singular access since it is no longer needed (and will have to be opened up elsewhere to some other human presumably). There is no better way of describing the peculiar ‘performativity’ that is at work in humanism and its promissive structure: you will (have to) become the human who you already supposedly are.

<sup>17</sup> Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 9.

<sup>18</sup> On the notion of ‘science fiction’ see Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, pp. 107-134.