Posthumanism's German Genealogies

Stefan Herbrechter

In times of globalization, the isolation of cultures inside Europe has dramatically risen. (Loovink, "Whereabouts of German Media Theory", *Zero Comments*, 90)

In times when humanism and anthropocentrism are questioned, as Adorno, for example, was well aware, only a "negative" anthropology remained thinkable for a philosophy after Auschwitz – an insight that was felt particularly keenly in post WWII West-German thought.[1] This may therefore also be the starting point to think about the idea of a German posthumanism and its specificity.

1. Hannah Arendt and the (Post)Human Condition

It seems that the question or the spectre of the posthuman is already haunting Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, first published in 1958.[2] It starts with a reflection on the first satellite launch into Earth's orbit, a year before and the beginning of the "space age". Curiously, Arendt states, that event was not greeted with unmitigated joy or pride but with a kind of relief about the "first step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth" (1) and thus the prospect that "mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever" (1). This ambivalence leads Arendt to conclude that "[i]t is the same desire to escape from imprisonment to the earth that is manifest in the attempt to create life in the test tube, in the desire to mix 'frozen germ plasm from people of demonstrated ability under the microscope to produce superior human beings' and 'to alter [their] size, shape and function'; and the wish to escape the human condition… also underlies the hope to extend man's life-span far

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[1] Expand here and give more context on Adorno etc.

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958). Give more context.

beyond the hundred-year-limit" (2). Arendt thus already clearly sets up the very problematic that will pitch an emerging posthumanism against a transhumanism from the 1980s onwards and which are either abhorred or enthused by the increasing technological feasibility of biotechnology, eugenics, the search for exoplanets and indefinite life extension. In doing so, she also largely anticipates one of the key debates of the 1990s about "our posthuman future" as articulated by Francis Fukuyama and Jürgen Habermas.[3] The desire to produce "a new man" – or a "posthuman" in contemporary terms – on the back of the greatest humanitarian disaster and the breakdown of Western humanism, as well as the decoupling of social and moral from technological progress, is seen by Arendt as an essential aspect of the "rebellion against human existence". Arendt sees no reason to doubt our abilities to accomplish an exchange from a biologically or naturally given form of existence to something that humans have made themselves, since they have also developed the ability to destroy all organic life on earth. The question, for Arendt, is a political one, namely "whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this [let's call it "transhumanist"] direction, and this question cannot be decided by scientific means; it is a political question of the first order and therefore can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians" (3). One can hardly claim that "humanity" has progressed substantially in political terms since. The only major change for our time is the urgency with which the question has returned under the condition of the dramatic deterioration of the planet's health due largely to human-made climate change, unabated if not intensified violence of humans against both humans and nonhumans, mass migration and overpopulation, natural resource depletion, loss of biodiversity and so on. As Arendt already conjectured in 1958, it is as if "our brain, which constitutes the physical, material condition of our thoughts,

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[3] Give details and comment?

were unable to follow what we do, so that from now on we would indeed need artificial machines to do our thinking and speaking" (3).[4]

I think one can draw two conclusions from this brief return to a key moment in post WWII Western, in which, let's call it late humanism senses, an increased rebellion against the "human condition" and the "advent of a new and yet unknown age" (6). First, that it makes sense to see posthumanism as a discourse that is engaged in the ongoing deconstruction of humanism understood as anthropocentrism and its fallout; and, second, that the posthuman and its "condition" is best understood as a "figure", as a political projection or screen. I'm therefore sticking with this characterisation, differentiation and double pronged approached of discourse and figure, which I've been referring to as "critical posthumanism" for the last fifteen years or so.[5]

What Arendt's ambivalence shows – the idea, as Margaret Canovan writes in her 1998 "Introduction" the second edition of *The Human Condition*, that "human animals unconscious of their capacities and responsibilities are not well fitted to take charge of earth-threatening powers"[6] – is that, on the one hand, science's ability to transcend human and nonhuman "nature" increasingly produces an "alienation from the earth" and leaves the future "alarmingly" or radically open (x-xi). On the other hand, and this is negative anthropology's main insight, is the fact that human beings are inevitably underdetermined in their "nature", which leaves the human "animal" badly equipped for what Arendt calls the "alienation from the world" of "modern automated societies engrossed by ever more efficient production and consumption [that] encourage us to behave and think of ourselves simply as an animal species governed by natural laws" (xi). What

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[4] Arendt also foresaw the spectre of "automation" and the "end of work" (4). Link to Stiegler.

[5] Ref to my key texts here.

[6] Margaret Canovan, Introduction, p. xi.

Arendt thus also clearly foresaw was that the major faultline which would become the central argument between posthumanism and transhumanism as inheritors of very late modernity was not so much the question of technology – even though this cannot of course be ignored – but that of the animal, and of the desire of "de-animalisation" one might say.

Which, at last, brings me to my topic.

2. *The German Contribution to a European Posthumanism-to-Come*

If one were to seek an alternative origin, an alternative trajectory, an alternative idiom of posthumanism, a useful tradition *à la* T.S. Eliot in a German context, where would one look?

Bracketing the obvious fact that all European philosophy from the 18th-century onwards has been influenced by German idealism, from Kant to Hegel to its Nietzschean, Heideggerian and Frankfurt School critiques, two particularly valuable additions to a European posthumanism by a German or German-speaking trajectory are its elaborations on negative anthropology and recent media philosophy. Before we briefly look at each of these, one should, however, say a few words about European posthumanism's direct predecessor and its main source of inspiration, which one might refer to as European post/structuralism – post/structuralism with a slash between post and structuralism. One would, indeed, have to write a long supplement to François Dosse's monumental two-volume *Histoire du structuralisme* (originally published in 1991 and 1992; translated into English in 1998) and provide a much larger, European and Anglo-American, context for the further development and deflection of poststructuralism from the 1990s onwards to document the emergence of a critical posthumanism. What would further complicate this task is that the individual European (just like the Anglo-American and global) reception of poststructuralist thought,

and inevitable reactions against it, happened very differently, with individual translation effects depending on the specific grafting processes onto existing or competing traditions.

To a certain extent François Cusset achieved such a nuanced account for the Franco-American (re)translation of so-called "French Theory" in his *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux États-Unis* (French original published in 2003; (re)translated into English in 2008). Cusset goes beyond Dosse by covering the institutionalisation of cultural studies and also has a short chapter called "Machinations théoriques" which contains a reference to the cyborg and "les figures du posthumain" (268).

The "German" situation as far as its encounter with poststructuralism is concerned is complex and full of asynchronicities. Unfortunately, this cannot be the occasion for a detailed account of the rather unsuccessful early and the successive belated reception of the work of the French poststructuralists in Germany. One would have to set Manfred Frank's *Was ist Neostrukturalismus?* (1983; English translation 1989) against Jürgen Habermas's *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (1988; English translation 1987) and assess their respective takes and the "damage" they did.[7] Frank's much more detailed and sympathetic reading of the main French representatives – Derrida, Foucault, Lacan and Lyotard – was meant as a mediation between German and French contemporary thought, i.e. Critical Theory and Poststructuralism, with the aim of leading the European subject out of its ongoing crisis and its "decentring". In that sense Frank's aim is largely neohumanist.[8] Even more importantly, Frank's

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[7] Needs elaboration in longer version.

[8] It is guided by the double question:
Wie kann man einerseits der fundamentalen Tatsache gerecht werden, dass Sinn, Bedeutung und Intention – die semantischen Fundamente des Bewusstseins – sich nur in einer Sprache, einer sozialen, kulturellen und ökonomischen Ordnung, bilden können (in

fateful decision to call the dominant "postmetaphysical" and "post-Nietzschean" current of French contemporary thought not *post*structuralist but neostructuralist for precisely the wrong reasons, namely by taking the "neo" rather than the "post" to be the more critical term, and thus rather wilfully misreading Lyotard's use of the post as a mere "succession", not as a critical continuation, even less, as a deconstruction (32). This clearly plays into the hands of Habermas's damning characterisation of Foucault & Cie as "young" or one might also say "neo-conservatives", on the basis of their supposedly "postmodern" nihilistic, anti-Enlightenment and cultural-relativist stance. Poststructuralism was thus discredited from the beginning and only showed its influence in local, individual and often idiosyncratic early engagements, like for example in Friedrich Kittler's work in the 1980s, before a more general reception followed in the 1990s and 2000s, but then often via a translatory Anglo-American detour.[9]

However, it is to Kittler, one would definitely have to turn in order to find a specific German take on (critical) posthumanism. Again, I cannot here provide a detailed introduction to Kittler's work and the vast amount of commentary it has received. Kittler is certainly the German media philosopher – and this designation itself is of course highly problematic – who was most influenced by Lacan's and Foucault's antihumanism, as well as by McLuhan. He was the editor of a highly polemic volume entitled *Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften: Programme des Poststrukturalismus* (1980), containing essays by Derrida but also by Samuel Weber and Dietmar

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einer *Struktur*)? Wie kann man andererseits den fundamentalen Gedanken des neuzeitlichen Humanismus retten, der die Würde des Menschen an den Gebrauch seiner Freiheit bindet und nicht duldet, dass man der faktischen Bedrohung menschlicher Subjektivität durch den Totalitarismus der Regelsysteme und sozialen Codes moralisch Beifall spendet? (12)

[9] A lot more detail here.

Kamper amongst others, who themselves would have to be considered more closely for any genealogical approach to a German posthumanism via poststructuralism.[10] The expulsion of the "*Geist*", the Hegelian spirit that determines history, understood as *Geistesgeschichte*, and so-called "man", its bearer, from the humanistic sciences, for Kittler opens the way to a history of technics, communication and media – media, which – and this is Kittler's most famous saying – determine our situation.[11][12]

For Kittler, a focus on communication and media materialities rather than subjectivities and textualities opens up the possibility for the analysis of what he calls "cultural techniques" [*Kulturtechniken*], to

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[10] More detail here.

[11] as he says in probably his most influential work available in English translation: Gramophone, Film, Typewriter (xxxix).

[12] The editors of the volume Kittler Now (2015) provide a succinct characterisation:

Kittler was a technological determinist who argued that although technical media are decisive in shaping cultural production, they have been largely ignored by the humanities, which continues in its solipsistic interpretation of the content of communications. Kittler, however, celebrates those concrete technologies that, unbeknownst to us 'end-users', provide the very possibility for our thoughts. Following the material, technical forms of media rather than the texts they produce, Kittler's work ranges across traditional disciplinary boundaries, deftly melding poststructuralism (particularly Foucault and Lacan) with McLuhan and the Toronto School, while always following a path set down by his beloved Germans: Heidegger, Hegel and Nietzsche. (n.p.)

If you want a more nuanced account, especially as regards Kittler's antihumanismm and his technological determinism, I recommend, on the German side, Sybille Krämer's and Bernard Siegert's takes on "Kittlerism", and, on the Anglo-American side, the work of Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, who is probably the most trustworthy and knowledgeable commentator of German media philosophy.

be read as "operative chains composed of actors and technological objects that produce cultural orders and constructs which are subsequently installed as the basis of these operations" (Winthrop-Young, 2015: 458). Neither media nor humans, seen through the lens of cultural techniques, exist as such without the operations and co-emergence of hominization and mediation that cultural techniques provide. In this shift away from (human) subjectivity towards the cultural-technological operations and their historical materialities lies the possibility, according to Winthrop-Young, for a "posthuman cultural studies" (2006, cited in *TCS*, 14), or a "*post-human* sociology*", according to Nicholas Gane (2005: 40), who was one of the first to see a "radical post-humanism" at work in Kittler, where "human subjectivity is disappearing into the machinery of communication" (28).

Bernhard Siegert probably provides the best explanation of the German trajectory towards posthumanism via (German) media theory. In a short piece on "The Map Is the Territory" in *Radical Philosophy*, he writes: "When the concept of cultural techniques re-emerged in the context of Media Studies and German *Kulturwissenschaft* [as opposed to British cultural studies] shortly before the turn of the new century it was based on a post-humanistic understanding of culture".[13] The philosophical specificity of German media analysis, Siegert goes on to say, "was that it took up Michel Foucault's concept of the historical *a priori* and turned it into a 'technical *a priori*' by referring the Foucauldian 'archive' to media technologies" (14). In the special issue of *Theory, Culture and Society* (30.6 (2013)) on "Cultural Techniques", which introduced a number of German media theorists and their commentators to the Anglosphere, Siegert provides a very neat summary of the difference between Anglo-American and European posthumanism which is worth quoting at some length:

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[13] Ref. 14.

Within the US, the notion of the 'posthuman' emerged from a framework defined by the blurring of boundaries between man and machine… By contrast, French (and German) posthumanism signalled that the humanities had awakened from their 'anthropological slumber'. This awakening, in turn, called for an anti-hermeneutic posthumanism able to deconstruct humanism as an occidental transcendental system of meaning production. For the Germans, the means to achieve this goal were 'media'. The guiding question for German media theory, therefore, was not How did we become posthuman? but How was the human always already historically mixed with the non-human? But it was not until the new understanding of media led to the focus on cultural techniques that this variant of posthumanism was able to discern affinities with the actor-network ideas of Bruno Latour and others. Now German observers were able to discern that something similar had happened in the early 2000s in the United States, when the advent and merging of Critical Animal Studies and post-cybernetic studies brought about a new understanding of media as well as a reconceptualization of the posthuman as always already intertwined between human and non-human. (Siegert, TCS: 53)

What therefore makes the German discussion on cultural techniques or technologies so important, now, is that it hints at a convergence or a reconvergence with posthumanism more generally while providing a genealogical inflection which makes it *critical*, and, as I would argue, more European.

As I can only skim over the surface of these intercontinental translations and returns that are shaping this theoretical paradigm called posthumanism, I have leave out important aspects like for example the role of Luhmann and systems theory and their reception in the USA, especially for theorists like Bruce Clarke and Cary Wolfe,

but also Hayles and Mark Hansen, who are maybe more recognizable for a media theory constituency.[14]

Instead, I want to at least briefly mention the other aspect that might justify talking of a German posthumanism. That these two aspects are connected – cultural techniques and negative anthropology – is again hinted at by Siegert, when he says that "the study of cultural techniques aims at revealing the operative basis" on which ontological philosophical terms like "man", or the "human", are based. Instead, one might argue, "[t]here is no 'man' independent from cultural techniques of hominization, or anthropotechnics" (15).

If cultural techniques deconstruct the anthropocentric idea of "man" and "his" Promethean nature, negative anthropology denies the possibility of an affirmative, systematic or positive definition of the human. It follows in many ways Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* as the only philosophy after the humanitarian catastrophe of Auschwitz, and as the end of the idea of (a) humanity, but it also goes back to the beginnings of anthropology as the investigation into the question "What is man? What is (the) human? What does it mean to be human?" – a question maybe as old as humans themselves – and on which so-called "Western metaphysics" is based, from Pico della Mirandola to Kant and after. The underdetermined, open, protean nature of the human species that neo-Kantian philosophical anthropology, from Scheler to Cassirer, Plessner and Gehlen, takes as its starting point to understand the human "*Mängelwesen*", or the human as "*nichtfestgestelltes Wesen*", leads in the latter half of the 20th century to radically nihilistic and increasingly post-anthropological and postanthropocentric positions in, for example, Günther Anders's *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (1956), or Ulrich Sonnemann's *Negative Anthropologie: Vorstudien zur Sabotage des Schicksals* (1981), and maybe finds its darkest expression in Ulrich Horstmann's *Das Untier: Konturen einer Philosophie der*

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[14] Lot more detail here.

Menschenflucht (1983) which speaks about the "anthropofugal perception" of the human non-animal but also the monster [*Untier*] from a post-apocalyptic perspective after its demise.[15] If the interest in anthropology and its crisis returns in the 20th and intensifies at the beginning of the 21st century, it is not in a humanist sense, but in an new, "anthropolitical" one.[16] What does it mean to be human becomes, if you want, the central question of posthumanism in its various denominations. And the undoubtedly German or German-speaking variant of Kantian philosophical anthropology that, as the catastrophes of modernity keep accumulating, turns into its opposite, is largely absent, so far at least, from the official (Anglo-American) account of posthumanism. This also makes it difficult to situate and to receive many of negative anthropology's recent representatives, for example Norbert Bolz or even Peter Sloterdijk, especially his most recent work on "anthropotechnics".[17]

3. Summary and Outlook:

This had to remain a very superficial and broad survey on what I consider the two main ways in which a German posthumanism might supplement the international or global theoretical formation called posthumanism, and which seeks answers to the challenges that the so-called Anthropocene poses. By emphasising or returning to a number of national intellectual specificities or traditions and reconstructing their specific, idiomatic, engagements with these global challenges, my aim was also to give posthumanism a more "European" outlook, in the best sense of a Europe-to-come. In the German context, this could be achieved, I argued through a focus on the notion of cultural techniques and their role in the process of

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[15] Explanation to all of these Anders, Sonnemann, Horstmann.
[16] Cf. Steffens
[17] Details about Bolz and Sloterdijk here.

hominization, framed by a post-or negative anthropological understanding of the human.

In doing so, I haven't even had time to mention the growing number of critical commentators on all things posthuman that like in every national academic or intellectual sphere critique and mediate the posthumanist discourse. This is probably where I'd also locate my own work, but maybe also that of Karin Harrasser, as well as a number of earlier interventions like Raimar Zons's *Die Zeit des Menschen: Zur Kritik des Posthumanismus* (2001) or Bernhard Irrgang's *Posthumanes Menschsein? Künstliche Intelligenz, Cyberspace, Roboter, Cyborgs und Designer-Menschen – Anthropologie des künstlichen Menschen im 21. Jahrhundert* (2005), to name but these two more prominent ones.

In the German context it is usually a sure sign that a theoretical paradigm in its self-reflexive form has "arrived" when a *Junius Einführung* to it is published. This was the case in 2018, when Janina Loh's introduction to *Trans- und Posthumanismus* appeared. In returning to the opposition between post- and transhumanism we also return to Arendt and the time of the dramatic changes that only recently have received their geological name, that of Anthropocene. What was an "anthropolitics" in Arendt's time, now no longer only affects the "Anthropos", or even the "bios", but the entire "geos". However, we arguably still coming to terms with, as Arendt put it, our "modern world alienation" and "its twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self, to its origins, in order to arrive at an understanding of the nature of society as it had developed and presented itself at the very moment when it was overcome by the advent of a new and yet unknown age" (Arendt, 6).