

Where is a future when you need one?

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A. *Où est passé l'avenir?*

The current moment seems to be characterized by a fundamentally contradictory impression – the accelerated speed of technological development in late technoscientific capitalist, increasingly globalized societies, on the one hand, and the constant feeling of déjà vu, the eternal return of the same in endless variations of fashions and waves of consumption, on the other hand. All of this happens on ubiquitous and global screens with, as a backdrop, wars, global catastrophes, ecocides and extinction threats. Amidst this bizarre breathless paralysis questions like “où est passé l'avenir?” are of the “ordre du jour”. “Où est passé l'avenir” – this is how the anthropologist Marc Augé expresses the paradox of the “current ideology of the present”. The phrase includes a pun on “passé” which is untranslatable. It means: where did the future go? However, “passé” on its own also means “past”, or “the past”, which creates an obvious asynchronicity (or a series of paradoxes, as Augé writes) with “avenir” in the sense of “past future” or “future past”:

First paradox: history understood as the source of new ideas for the management of human societies supposedly ends at the very moment when it explicitly concerns humanity as a whole. Second paradox: we apparently start to doubt our ability to influence our common destiny at the very moment when science progresses at a constantly accelerating speed. Third paradox: the unprecedented overabundance of our means seems to bar us from thinking finitude, as if political timidity was the price to pay for scientific and technological arrogance.¹

The condition of the “future of humanity” is thus inscribed within the paradoxical situation that precisely at the time when something like a global human consciousness might develop in reaction to global ecological threats, “we are losing our history”, “we are losing our ability to act and change our destiny”, “we are losing our grip on technological progress”.

Augé goes on to explain the connection between these paradoxes and the process of globalization:

We live in a world where at the extremes the gaps keep widening: the gap between the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor, the gap between the sum of our knowledge accumulated in the best equipped science labs of the planet, and the state of ignorance in which the majority of the world's population is held, in so-called underdeveloped countries, but also in the industrialized ones.²

Against the resulting “ideology of the present, which paralyses the effort to think the present as history because it strives to make obsolete both the lessons of the past and the desire to imagine the future”,³ Augé wishes to liberate the potential of a more radical imaginary based on a desire to wrest away the inevitability from technoscientific “progress” and to envisage constructions of an entirely different future:

¹ Marc Augé, *Où est passé l'avenir*, Paris : Panama, 2008, pp. 14-15. All translations unless indicated otherwise are mine.

² Augé, p. 117.

³ *Ibid.*

Never before in fact have humans been in a better position to think of themselves as humanity. Probably never before has the idea of a generic humanness been more present in the individual consciousness. But never before also have the tensions due to the unequal distribution of power and wealth and due to the prevalence of totalitarian cultural regimes been stronger.⁴

What Augé elsewhere refers to as a “technological cocooning, which protects us from the past and the future as if only the present existed”, is the effect of three phenomena: postmodernism, with its themes of the “end of history” and the “end of grand narratives”; the predominance of spatial over temporal metaphors (cf. globalization); and the proliferation of mediated images (cf. Baudrillard) with its “cosmotechnological” effects.⁵

Despite the hint of paranoia in this list, there are some important concerns raised here which deserve more attention. One is the legacy of postmodernism regarding the possibility of constructing the future – or the question of the current crisis in the radical imaginary (the future of politics or the politics of the future). The other is the question of technology (before and after Heidegger), related to the increasing “presence” of the (global, new and digital) media. The paradox of a vociferous and breathless futurism of the present moment (cf. Virilio) versus the absence of futurity (as alternative, or radical imaginary) is probably an accurate description of our “posthumanist” times – times of great promises and “future hypes” (cf. Seidensticker), as well as great threats and “ecocides” or extinction (cf. Colebrook).

So who is to blame? Augé’s starting point is quite representative in this respect: at an intellectual level, usually the main culprit is postmodernism. Postmodernism, as the time that lost the future, the anti-utopian moment, resisting the idea of future as progress, problematizing the very representation of the future, emphasizing contingency and particularity, etc. But as Jeffrey T. Nealon rightly cautions, in *Post-Postmodernism* (2012), the current moment, far from being the “end” of postmodernism, could also, or maybe even should rather, be understood as “an intensification and mutation within postmodernism”.⁶ Nealon, following Fredric Jameson’s original definition of postmodernism as the logic of late capitalism, sees the development at work in post-postmodernism mainly as the effect of an intensification within neoliberal capitalism. But maybe there is no need for an opposition between the idea of a drifting away from postmodernism and the process of evaluating and managing its legacies (and also its future) and a renewed need for a reengagement with the idea of the postmodern, especially since the economic base has transformed itself into what Gilles Lipovetsky calls “hypermodernity” with its “multiplied divergent temporalities”. “To the deregulations of neocapitalism there corresponds an immense deregulation and individualization of time”.⁷ “The politics of a radiant future have been replaced by consumption as the promise of a euphoric present” and have led to a “gadgetization of an aimless and meaningless life”, as Lipovetsky maintains.⁸ Presentism and acceleration, ephemerality and insecurity have been the result. It would be important, however, one might argue, *not* to identify postmodernism (as Lipovetsky and so many other detractors of postmodernism do) with its usual travesty of “coolness” and “anything goes”, in order to understand what the serious philosophical challenges posed by the postmodern were and continue to be. If anything, in “hypermodern” (or maybe, increasingly also, “posthumanist”) times, the postmodernist emphasis on the ambiguity of its prefix has become *more* relevant

⁴ Augé, *Où est passé l’avenir ?*, p. 147.

⁵ Marc Augé, En panne d’avenir“ *Le Nouvel Observateur*, hors série 59, July/August 2005, p. 10.

⁶ Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, p. Ix.

⁷ Gilles Lipovetsky (with Sébastien Charles), *Hypermodern Times*, trans. Andrew Brown, Cambridge: Polity, 2005, p. 35.

⁸ Lipovetsky, p. 37

and urgent. Lipovetsky, again, is representative in his desire to shift the idea of a postmodernist “crisis of the future” towards the notion of a “hypermodern future”:

While the mythology of continual and inevitable progress has become obsolete, we have nevertheless not ceased to expect and believe in the “miracles of science”: the idea of an improvement in the human condition by the applications of scientific knowledge is still meaningful. It is just that the relation to progress has become uncertain and ambivalent... The power of the future has not been destroyed: it is simply no longer ideological and political, but borne by the dynamic of technology and science.⁹

However, it is precisely this supposedly “postideological” technological determinism Lipovetsky reevaluates as “neo-futurism”,¹⁰ which should be, from a post-postmodernist, and also a *critically* posthumanist point of view, highly suspicious. There is an undeniably refreshing but also worryingly naïve liberalism at work in Lipovetsky’s notion that within hypermodernity lies the chance for “a *pure future*, one that needs to be constructed without any guarantees, without any preordained path, or any implacable law of change”.¹¹

Nevertheless, constructing futures “we” must: this much technological, scientific but also cultural change demands of “us”. So we’re in a time that is looking for a future “after” the post, but which, nevertheless, needs to bear the ambiguity of any post, or positioning ‘after’, in mind. So, where is a future when you need one?

B. *The Future Is Back – Back to the Future*

In writing a new preface for the future we are actually in good company. David Wood ends his own preface “Editing the Future” to the collection *Writing the Future* (London: Routledge, 1990) by saying: “If the secret of postmodernism lies in rethinking its *post-* within a non-progressivist, non-*modern*, frame, it is time and the future that continue to require our urgent attention”.¹² Many essays in this arguably most important and most representative collection, as far as the nexus between postmodernism, a deconstructive notion of writing and the futurity of the future is concerned, begin with the classic distinction between the “non-modern” future, or the future proper (*avenir*, or the pure and simple and unknowable alterity of the “to-come”) and the “modern” or humanist future perfect, as that which has always already been contained in the past, awaiting its materialization in the form of an extrapolation process. It is of course not as if this distinction had disappeared (again) or as if it might ever be able to disappear, or, even worse, be “overcome”. However, the ambient exasperation with the postmodern lies precisely in the perceived paralysis of the waiting process, the resistance to anticipation, the respect for the temporal alterity of the future,¹³ at a time when

⁹ Lipovetsky, pp. 42-43.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹² David Wood, “Introduction: Editing the Future”, *Writing the Future*, ed. David Wood, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 9.

¹³ The programmatic and symptomatic example is Derrida’s statement in *Of Grammatology* that: “The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity. For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue” (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G.C. Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1967], p. 5). The future is an “invention of the other” (cf. Derrida, “Psyche: The Invention of the Other”, trans. Catherine Porter, in *Reading de Man Reading*, eds. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. 25-65.), which leads Derrida to reject the

humanity cannot wait: an endless series of time-consuming pressures are beleaguering “us”, from all forms of technology-induced apocalypse (nuclear to biogenetics) to manifold ecological extinction scenarios. So much so, that Bill Joy’s half panicking half “joyful” exclamation “Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us” now sounds like the referee blowing their whistle to resume play after half-time.¹⁴

When “our most powerful 21st-century technologies – robotics, genetic engineering, and nanotech – are threatening to make humans an endangered species”,¹⁵ accidents are waiting to happen. Which is why theory seems to have shifted its attention on to the accidental and the “plasticity” of the future. Waiting to happen is one possible, if incomplete, translation of the French “*voir venir*”, which Jacques Derrida in his preface to Catherine Malabou’s *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* (2005) takes as an encapsulation of the timeliness of Malabou’s project on futurity, plasticity and Hegel:

‘To see (what is) coming’ means *at the same time* to anticipate and let oneself be surprised, to bear *and, at the same time*, I mean precisely *at the same time*, *not* to bear the unexpected. In other words, the surprise *in* what is coming, the event *of* what is coming: the future.¹⁶

If, today, the future doesn’t need us it is because we can see (it) coming, the future “without” us. The current understanding of futurity – between the accident and the plasticity of speculation – plays itself out in the final stages of Hegelian (i.e. modern, humanist) subjectivity:

What must be thought here is the very subjectivity of the subject and what happens to the subject, that is, the experience which exposes the subject to what comes to it, to what happens to it, to what it ‘sees coming’, in the double sense of what can be anticipated and what remains impossible to anticipate. And what happens to the subject who ‘sees coming’ will be for it as essential as accidental, as essential as the necessity of its *telos*, as accidental as an unanticipated accident.¹⁷

Voir venir – giving oneself to receive – positioning oneself both before and after the accidental, anticipating the monstrosity of the future – is the very process of plasticity, as Derrida explains. At the time of possible “extinction” – let us call this posthumanism – the future is no longer foreseeable, maximum plasticity is no longer enough, the future without us is no future any more – it is no longer the unimaginable for any *voir venir*, the “excess of the future over the future” as plasticity, as Catherine Malabou explains.¹⁸

The above, I believe, makes it quite clear that there is not so much a break with postmodernist thinking about the future, or a return to or of the future, at work in contemporary thinking but rather a strange continuity, if in the form of a raising of the stakes,

postmodern, and every “post-” in fact, in favour of a radical futurity understood as a “monstrous monstrosity” (cf. Derrida, “Some Statements and Truisms about Neo-logisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms”, *The States of ‘Theory’: History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, ed. David Carroll, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990, pp. 63-94).

¹⁴ Bill Joy “Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us (2000)”, *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Chichester: Summersdale, 2003, pp. 235-275

¹⁵ Joy, p. 135.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, “A Time for Farewells: Heidegger (Read by) Hegel (Read by) Malabou”, in Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During, London: Routledge, 2005, p. ix.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

¹⁸ Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, p. 6.

or an acknowledgment of the “plasticity” of the future of the future. In other words, one could speak of a “remediation” or a “(re)translation” of futurity. In fact, to simplify grossly, if postmodernism with its critique of modern notions of futurity translated into the idea of asynchronicity – a proliferation of alternative histories and a “rewriting of modernity”¹⁹ –, the current moment, for which the term “posthumanism” seems to have found some acceptance,²⁰ could be said to reveal the plurality (or plasticity) of the future. The connection between postmodernism and posthumanism, between past and future, to follow a famous formulation by Reinhart Koselleck, is that with each future emerges a new past.²¹ The search for alternative histories is thus closely tied to the imagining of alternative futures. The critical dimension of both postmodernism and posthumanism lies in the idea that both alternative pasts and other futures (i.e. others than the current ones “we” are “seeing coming”) imply the deconstructive practice of “rewriting”, or “working through” in order to “let arrive” – which has very little to do with modern and humanist notions of “progress”, utopia and even less with dystopia, programming or “futureshock”.²²

C. *Futurities – Le futur a-t-il un avenir?*

The future as a separate (and empty, or not-yet-existing) “time-space” (*Zeitraum*) within history and the cultural imaginary is a modern invention.²³ It is closely connected to the legacy of the Enlightenment, colonialism and humanism. This means that thinking about the future is contextually, historically and culturally specific, or, in other words, futures are constructs based on changing notions of futurity. It is closely connected to socially perceived “horizons of expectation” (*Erwartungshorizonte*).

What seems characteristic of the current situation of futurity is a profound ambiguity about the directionality of time, but also an almost neo-futuristic obsession with technoscientific change. In fact, the situation that “late modernity” found itself in, as Peter Sloterdijk, in 1989, described it, namely as “the time of the epilogue”, seems not to have fundamentally changed at all. Merely the stakes have risen ever further, namely to ecological extinction levels. The impatience and late modern frustration with the interminability of the “project” of modernity might even have grown. So the question is still not about the end of history, but about what can be done for history so that the future can begin at last. In Peter Sloterdijk's words, late modernity, as the “time of the epilogue” has been struggling with a fundamental aporia:

On the one hand, modernity can perceive only the worst after itself; on the other hand, the worst lies precisely in its own course, which it prevents itself from leaving, because it holds no alternative to itself as thinkable.²⁴

To be postmodern therefore has been the sentiment of living somehow after the end, after surviving the last and living on, before the next apocalypse, or *survivance*.²⁵ This survival, or

¹⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, “Rewriting Modernity”, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Cambridge: Polity, 1991 [1988], pp. 24-35.

²⁰ Cf. Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

²¹ Cf. Reinhart Koselleck, *Future's Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* [1979], trans. Keith Tribe, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

²² Cf. Alvin Toffler's influential *Future Shock*, London: Pan Books, 1979 [1970].

²³ Cf. Lucian Hölscher, *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft*, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1999, p. 9.

²⁴ Peter Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus : Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik*, Frankfurt : Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 292.

²⁵ See Jacques Derrida, “Survivre” *Parages*, Paris: Galilée, 1989, pp. 117-218. Translation as “Living On — Border Lines”, trans. James Hulbert, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al., New York: Seabury Press, 1979, pp. 75-176.

in Sloterdijk's terms, mean-time [*Zwischenzeit*], could be described as the time of the event, the birth of (the other) history ("Die Geburt der Geschichte aus dem Geist des Aufschubs" — the birth of history from the spirit of deferral²⁶). Postmodernism, in fact, has always been concerned with time's alterity, both in history and the future, only that the focus on the "end of history" seems to have slightly shifted, in posthumanist times, namely towards the "end of the future".

Nevertheless, everything that was said about the post in connection with the postmodern, postmodernism and postmodernity applies, in principle, to all postisms, the latest ones, posthuman, posthumanism and posthumanisation, included. Obviously, the notion of "post-human-ism" conveys an even greater sense of urgency of an ending. Which means that in engaging with the posthuman we tend to have even less time for the quite intricate logical and conceptual "side-effects" the posting process brings with it. Instead, there is often exasperation with the postmodern or the impression of being stuck in a time-loop, something we can ill afford in a time when "we" are increasingly overtaken by "events". These events and their eventness – already one of the main issues for postmodern theory – are usually associated, on the one hand, with technology (digitalization, virtualization, prosthesization, medicalization...), and, on the other hand, with extinction scenarios and thus with ecologies.²⁷ Rosi Braidotti's book on the posthuman captures this moment well and can be seen as representative of it:

While conservative, religious social forces today often labour to re-inscribe the human within a paradigm of natural law, the concept of the human has exploded under the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns. After the postmodern, the post-colonial, the post-industrial, the post-communist and even the much contested post-feminist, we seem to have entered the post-human predicament. Far from being the nth version in a sequence of prefixes that may appear both endless and arbitrary, the posthuman condition introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet.²⁸

Talk of the posthuman, or the *discourse* one might call posthumanism,²⁹ is in many ways much "older" than postmodernism and encompasses many of its aspects and falls within the problematic history of humanism (whose ultimate untraceable origin would lie in some moment of "recognition" of the first humans, let's say, that would have constituted an awareness of representing a distinct form of being, group or species, and hence the beginning of the idea of a community (of humans) or humanity). But at the same time, of course, posthumanism claims to be postmodernism's successor. In fact, posthumanism is all about succession in the sense that it asks the anxious question: "what comes after the human?" (Whereas postmodernism (or poststructuralism) "merely" asked: "what comes after the subject?").³⁰ The "ends of man"³¹ – that peculiar endism that folded back onto the idea of teleology and finality is the very thing that still exercises posthumanism, but now much more

²⁶Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus* 277.

²⁷ For a good summary of the implications of this argument and its relation to the notion of the "anthropocene" see Claire Colebrook's "Introduction: Framing the End of the Species", in her edited *Extinction, Living Books about Life*: <http://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Extinction?>

²⁸ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Polity, 2013, pp. 1-2.

²⁹ Cf. Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

³⁰ Cf. Cadava, ed. *Who Comes after the Subject?*

³¹ Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, eds., *Les Fins de l'homme : A partir du travail de Jacques Derrida*, Paris : Galilée, 1981.

“literally”, rather than mainly “metaphorically”, as in Foucault’s famous passage towards the end of *Les Mots et les choses*.³²

What concerns me first and foremost, however, is the idea of the “qualitative shift” that Braidotti evokes in the passage quoted above, the qualitative shift from a “human” to what has been called a “posthuman condition” (cf. Pepperell).³³ It certainly *seems* that there is a future-oriented urgency about the posthuman and its discourse. So it may appear that after almost half a century of epistemological skepticism about the future, its knowability, its heterology, its ineffability and radical openness as “to-come”, as ethical source of our “responsibility”, which all characterized the “postmodern” attitude, the posthuman condition can’t wait any longer, in the face of the urgencies of our own demise, and that of the planet. It is thus as if “ecology” has become the master-signifier of this supposedly new paradigm. But what does this mean? Is this really a shift towards something else, something new, for example, a shift from “post” to...

D. Proto-, or Alternative Futures?

The problem with a current return to the future (or: neo-futurism) is that some forms of posthumanism are in danger of returning to a much less self-reflexive stage in what might be called the problematic history of “constructions of the future”. And in this context I would like to briefly compare and contrast two moves: Mikhail Epstein’s characterization of the present as “proto”, in *The Transformative Humanities – A Manifesto* (Bloomsbury, 2012),³⁴ and Lyotard’s “post-postmodern” approach in the various pieces collected in the volume *The Inhuman*. In his chapter, “From post- to proto-: Toward a new prefix in cultural vocabulary”, Epstein points towards what he calls the current “transition from finalizing to initiating approaches in the humanities”. Epstein’s approach more or less deliberately – mainly due to its manifesto style – seems to cut through the ambiguities of the post mentioned above, to promote instead the apparent transparency and dynamic of his suggested successor prefix: “proto”. The particular mode of the proto, as Epstein points out, is the “what may be”, not the predictive or promissary “what will be”.³⁵ The proto hence describes *possible* futures, not *necessary* ones; it is all about potentiality and becoming, fired by the desire to escape the stagnation of the various “endisms” of the era of the posts and the shift in attitude “from retrospectivism to prospectivism”.³⁶ Negativity is thus ascribed to the “post” and positivity and progressiveness to the “proto”. Inevitably, the driving force behind the “proteism” is technological and scientific development: the prospect of artificial computer intelligence makes our time “proto-intelligent”, the prospect of artificial genetically engineered life makes our time “proto-life”, new media and electronic networks characterize our moment as “proto-global” and the emerging collectivity of the networked community invoke our current state as

³² Here is Foucault’s (in)famous passage in its original (Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966, p. 571-2):

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

³³ Cf. Robert Pepperell, *The Posthuman Condition*, Bristol: Intellect, 2003; see also Ollivier Dyens, *La condition inhumaine: essai sur l’effroi technologique*, Paris: Flammarion, 2008.

³⁴ Mikhail Epstein, *The Transformative Humanities: A Manifesto*, trans. Igor Klyukanov, New York: Bloomsbury, 2012.

³⁵ Epstein, p. 23.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

“proto-mind”, etc. Epstein, in a somewhat shameless twist, then moves on to appropriate N. Katherine Hayles’s notion of the posthuman³⁷ and aligns it with Hans Moravec’s idea of downloading human consciousness into a computer³⁸ – an idea that Hayles’s entire volume, *How We Became Posthuman*, actually sets out to critique. Epstein, however, designates *both*, the posthuman and the “transhuman”, as “proto-human” – the human as having the potential to become other: “the so-called ‘posthuman’ does not involve any elimination of the human, but rather the expansion, even the extension of embodied awareness through a system of electronic implants and digital enhancements”.³⁹ This largely revisionist argument in terms of materialism and embodiment leads to a rather cynical emphasis on “the humanistic potential of new technologies”.⁴⁰ This shift in perspective is in fact what seems to justify the liberating and almost triumphalist experience and tone in Epstein’s account:

A ‘post-post-postmodern’ culture suddenly views itself as a proto-global, proto-virtual, proto-biotechnic, proto-synthetic one. Everything that the previous generation perceived under the sign of the ‘post-’, this generation views as ‘proto-’; not as a completion, but rather as a first draft of new cultural forms.⁴¹

There is undeniably something intriguing about the shift from post- to proto- in this passage. As Epstein explains, the proto- is different from the idea of the pre-, as for example in prehistory. The idea of proto- in this sense is in fact not so different from Lyotard’s notion of rewriting (cf. “rewriting modernity”), which he prefers to the “deplorable” transformative use of the postmodern, as an attempt to unhinge the modern dialectic between a pre- and a post-, or predetermination and postdetermination, and, instead argues for a Freudian *Durcharbeitung* or a Heideggerian *Verwindung*:

The ‘re-’ in no way signifies a return to the beginning but rather what Freud called ‘working through’, *Durcharbeitung*, i.e. a working attached to a thought of what is constitutively hidden from us in the event and the meaning of the event, hidden not merely by past prejudice, but also by those dimensions of the future marked by the project, the programmed, pro-spectives, and even by the pro-position and the pro-posal to psychoanalyze.⁴²

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

It being admitted that working through is above all the business of free imagination and that it demands the deployment of time between ‘not yet’, ‘no longer’ and ‘now’, what can the use of the new technologies preserve or conserve of that?⁴³

³⁷ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1999.

³⁸ Hans Moravec, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990.

³⁹ Epstein, p. 27.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴² Lyotard, “Rewriting Modernity”, p. 26.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

There, is in fact, a section, towards the end of Epstein's chapter on the shift from post to proto where the proto is itself problematized and contextualized and where the idea of its implication in the "construction of the future" is directly addressed:

Proteism... already possesses sufficient historical experience in order to claim its place not in the distant future, but in the distant past of the future that it anticipates. It positions itself not as an avant-garde, but as an arrièrè-garde of those trends that will soon turn it into an archeological layer of our rapidly changing society.⁴⁴

And, in the end, the temporal logic of the proto becomes indeed thoroughly implicated within the temporal logic of the post as outlined above:

In the twenty-first century, the pace of innovations has accelerated to such an extent that our generation can already foresee its own decline in a future that views us at its distant past. This double, forward-and-back vision is our distinctive feature. Proteism sees itself as if it were looking through the other end of binoculars; as a result, the contemporary world appears small and recedes into the historical past.⁴⁵

Epstein even in the end refers to a certain "humility" of proteism ("a propensity towards litotes, or understatements").⁴⁶

The crux, however, comes in the final section called "the paradoxes of the 'proto-'"'. This is, in fact, almost identical to Lyotard's reference to the *husteron proteron* logic of hindsight in "Rewriting Modernity":⁴⁷ "it is possible to judge anything as 'proto-' only once its mature stage and completion have already been reached".⁴⁸ What exactly is it, then, one might ask, that Epstein adds to the idea of the post when he describes the "projected belatedness" of the proto in these terms:

The uniqueness of our contemporary situation is that we can define something as "proto-" in advance, not with hindsight, but rather with foresight... By forecasting the future, we position ourselves in its distant past. Thus, futurology becomes inseparable from the projective archaeology of our own time.⁴⁹

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

Culturally, we rejuvenate at the same time as we grow old. We are super-modern and super-ancient; we are neo-archaics. The rapid renewal that we project for the future determines the speed of our own recession into the past.⁵⁰

It seems that, the post- here might have given birth to something paradoxically "new", after all – let's say the future that postmodernism forbade itself from having (disavowal) and which it so much desired as a "to-come". This also shifts the idea of prolepsis, encapsulated in the tense of the future anterior, which projects a pastness into the future (this will have happened) and relocates it within the past itself. One could also speak of a "future posterior" at work in Epstein's logic of the arrièrè-garde or the neo-archaic. It is important, however, at the same

⁴⁴ Epstein, p. 40.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Lyotard, "Rewriting Modernity", pp. 24-25.

⁴⁸ Epstein, p. 41.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

time to resist the technological determinism that is put forward as the reason and driving force behind the perceived “acceleration” of this shift – a shift, which Paul Virilio, in his typically hyperbolic and alarmist fashion describes as “*intemporanéité*”, in “Le futurisme de l’instant” (2009). Virilio seems to be referring to the same “anachronic acceleration of the present reality”⁵¹ that underlies Epstein’s proteism, and which Virilio sees as “the sign of the approaching extinction, not of the human species, but rather of the CHRONO-DIVERSITY of tangible life”.⁵² It seems thus that the current moment within the history of the “construction of the future” condemns an absent “humanity” to perform the task of thinking by addressing what lies between the accident and plasticity.

In the end, in reevaluating the postmodern critique of the “construction of the future” (which is (still) an integral part of humanism and “Western metaphysics”) in the face of the impatience of the posthuman, critical posthumanism’s task – “rewriting humanity” – is to be aware of the complex temporalities opened up by the “time of the posts” and remember that we haven’t quite finished with the human yet, and that we’re not really ready to “move on”. So, once again, it is quite ironic that in the time of the greatest need for an alternative future, a radical imaginary becomes less and less available, and our lives become more and more “cluttered” with technologies:

When the spatial and temporal location of an event merely designates an accidental demarcation which no longer bears any essential meaning for its current effect, as for example with computer storage...; when today or in the near future entire lives will take place in the virtual worlds of media; when living beings might be duplicated through genetic engineering or when they might be manipulated to such an extent that they will no longer be exposed to singular destinies, but rather follow prepared careers, then talk of their future will obviously lose its current meaning. Because in such cases there will only be a mediated, technically produced future, which will no longer form a universal horizon usable for the attribution and interpretation of the meaning of such processes.⁵³

And in losing this social ability to construct believable and universalizable horizons of expectation, between pasts and futures, we are in danger of losing our ability, precisely, for *Zukunftsgestaltung*, the construction of the future because “representations of the future [*Zukunftsvorstellungen*] structure the horizon of expectation of a society”.⁵⁴ There is thus a common interest amongst historians and theorists of the future in the narrative constructions of futures and futurity needed to perform a “re-politicisation” of the future.⁵⁵ One might therefore conclude that we somehow need both, postmodernism and posthumanism, to achieve this. Postmodernism, in rewriting modernity, in working through modernity, reconnects late with early modernity and thus opens up possibilities for alternatives, i.e. other modernities, or maybe even non-modernities. Posthumanism, amongst other things, returns us to a time when “we” were not “human”, it reconnects our late humanity (in all meanings of the word “late” – coming late, belated but maybe also already too late, after) with something like “before” or “early” humanity; and it thus raises the question of the nonhuman, the pre-human, but also, literally, the posthuman, in the form of human legacies, alternatives and

⁵¹ Paul Virilio, *Le Futurisme de l’instant: Stop-Eject*, Paris: Galilée, 2009, p. 69.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵³ Hölscher, *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft*, 229.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵⁵ Cf. Johannes Rohbeck, *Zukunft der Geschichte: Geschichtsphilosophie und Zukunftsethik*, Berlin: Akademie, 2013.

ecologies. The question of sustainability in the face of extinction (human and nonhuman) is quickly turning into the ultimate challenge of “our” time.

Thinking the unthinkable of one’s time has always been, according to Heidegger, the very “task of thinking”.⁵⁶ In our case (as to a great extent already for Heidegger) the unthinkable has something to do with humans (and nonhumans, and the “environment”), technology (or media) and futurity (or historicity). It is high time to face this “ultimate task”, so that “we” may no longer resemble these soldiers on the train to the frontline at the end of Zola’s *La bête humaine*, that neither humans nor nonhumans may no longer serve as the cannon fodder for the war machine of the future:

Qu’importaient les victimes que la machine écrasait en chemin! N’allait-elle pas quand même à l’avenir, insoucieuse du sang répandu? Sans conducteur, au milieu des ténèbres, en bête aveugle et sourde qu’on aurait lachée parmi la mort, elle roulait, elle roulait, chargée de cette chair à canon, de ces soldats, déjà hébétés de fatigue, et ivres, qui chantaient.⁵⁷

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⁵⁶ Cf. Martin Heidegger, “What Calls for Thinking”, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, pp. 365-89.

⁵⁷ Emile Zola, *La Bête humaine* (1888-9), Paris: Flammarion, 1972, p. 38.

“The victims the machine crushed on its journey mattered little. After all, didn’t it keep on advancing towards the future, careless of the bloodshed? Without a driver, surrounded by darkness, like a blind and dumb beast let loose amongst death, it rolled on, fuelled with this cannon fodder, with these drunk and singing soldiers, already stupefied with tiredness.”

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