Introduction: Critical Posthumanism and Literature

> In years to come, the novels that matter will, I believe, be those seen as having prepared us for an epistemic shift in how we imagine ourselves as human beings.[1]
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> The history of the human has led us to a situation in which the human itself can only be contemplated from elsewhere, from some posthuman perspective.[2]

There is no Posthumanist Literature

> After a 2015 conference speech entitled "Posthumanist Literature?" Stefan Herbrechter, author of several articles and monographs on posthumanism and the posthuman, was asked to name a novel that was, according to him, posthuman. He answered that he had not found any *posthumanist* literature yet, that "it would be literature written by stones […] or based on animal traces".[3]

Guilty as charged, but let me explain… and provide, first of all, some more context for this claim. Originally I raised this question – Is there something like 'posthumanist literature'? – in the context of a reading of Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* and *Zero K*.[4] The phrase, 'posthumanist literature', I proposed, might well turn out to be a contradiction in terms, if one starts by differentiating between posthumanism, the posthuman and posthumanisation, on the one hand, and literature, the literary and the post-literary (or the question of the 'survival' of literature), on the other hand. This conceptual framework leads to a further differentiation, namely between that of a 'literature of the posthuman' and 'posthumanist literature'. Looking at contemporary examples, one notices that literature engages with posthumanism (understood as a discourse) and the posthuman (understood as a figure) in a number of ways. Thematically, a literature of the posthuman is concerned with a variety of topics that are associated with figurations of the posthuman, for example, climate change, AI, androids and robots, the Anthropocene, enhancement, postanthropocentrism, the question of the 'animal', object ontology, cyborgisation, dis/embodiment, technological enhancement, non/human futures, to name just the most obvious. Conceptually, however, a posthumanist literature implies a level of postanthropocentric (self-)reflexion that necessarily problematises the very idea of the 'literary' as a practice and of 'literature' as one of the most central humanist institutions. Maybe the most obvious, pragmatic, question that arises from such a stylistic

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[1] Nancy Armstrong, "The Future of the Novel", *Novel* 44.1: 8.

[2] Peter Boxall, "Science, Technology, and the Posthuman", in: James, David, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 127.

[3] Carole Guesse, "On the Possibility of a Posthuman/ist Literature(s)", in: Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Essi Varis, eds., *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 23-40; original emphasis.

[4] Published as Stefan Herbrechter, "Posthuman/ist Literature? Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* and *Zero K*", *Open Library of the Humanities* 6.2 (2020): 1-25; available online at: https://olh.openlibhums.org/articles/10.16995/olh.592/ (accessed 18/12/2023), and reproduced in an updated version as chapter X of this volume.

challenge of posthumanist literature understood as no longer written by and addressed to humans would be: who might be the addressee of such 'nonhuman fiction'?

The *critical* posthumanist approach I outlined in my reading of DeLillo's late fiction(cf. below), and which I am advocating in all the readings collected in this volume, might serve as an example of reading contemporary literature through a 'diffraction' of the posthuman and posthumanism. Does that mean that Don DeLillo is a posthumanist writer? Probably not, but his work, especially his more recent novels (from *Underworld* onwards) have been reflecting themes that are often associated with posthumanism: digitalisation, embodiment, globalisation, terrorism, artificial intelligence and climate change. In *Zero K*, DeLillo specifically and critically engages with what *he* calls 'posthumanism'. However, the ideology that pushes Ross Lockhart, one of the main characters in *Zero K*, towards investing into future (cryogenic) technology sounds more like *trans*humanist extropianism: "We want to stretch the boundaries of what it means to be human – stretch and then surpass. We want to do whatever we are capable of doing in order to alter human thought and bend the energies of civilization".[5]

Critical posthumanism reading DeLillo (and other such writing) therefore needs to track the tension between this 'transhumanist' incarnation of the posthuman in DeLillo's novel and articulate its context, namely the underlying process of posthumanisation that may be seen at work in the changing role of media – or what one might call the 'digital turn' in DeLillo's media ontology – which, in turn, leads to the question of literature and its 'survival' under these conditions.

Paul Sheehan was right in responding to this tension that inhabits literature that engages with the posthuman by asking:

> Is [the posthuman] a utopian aspiration, a cautionary critique, an evolutionary end-point? Is the posthuman era upon us, or must it remain a permanent possibility, forever just out of reach?[6]

'Posthumanist literature' probably raises reader expectations of (science) fictional[7] accounts that deal with the proliferation of 'posthuman bodies' (from androids and cyborgs to clones and zombies) and literary reactions to "the specifically technological outcomes of thinking through and beyond the human" and "human perfectibility".[8] In fact, the 'posthumanisation' of the body (an idea closely connected to age-old myths of human-god, human-animal, human-plant, human-machine etc. hybridity), is only one interest, albeit an important one, in contemporary literature informed by "a posthuman becoming of unlimited desire".[9] There are other equally important questions explored by contemporary fiction than issues raised by

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[5] Don DeLillo, *Zero K* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), p. 71.

[6] Paul Sheehan, "Posthuman Bodies", in: David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 245.

[7] One characteristic of 'posthumanisation' is precisely that science fiction and science fact are no longer so easy to distinguish. Hence my suggestion to use the phrase 'science faction' to describe the erosion of this particular humanist and Enlightenment value in my *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), *passim*.

[8] Sheehan, "Posthuman Bodies", p. 245.

[9] *Ibid*.

'technological posthumanism', with its history and its future of mutant or mutating, cloned techno-bodies and their emergent informational 'dematerialisation' and mediatisation. That does not mean of course that Paul Sheehan is wrong in seeing a parallel between the novel with its contemporary 'post-generic' plasticity and the transformative potential of posthuman bodies (he identifies four current forms of posthuman bodies as "post-generic archetypes" appearing in contemporary fiction: the cybernetic body (e.g. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*), the cloned body (*Never Let Me Go*), the cannibal body (*The Road*) and the zombie body (*Zone One*)).

Peter Boxall arguably provides the most detailed, but also a much more ambivalent, engagement with the question of how contemporary literature engages with and is affected by issues related to posthumanism and posthumanisation. In his analysis of the role of science and technology in British fiction since 1945 he argues: "It is one of the peculiar contradictions of modernity that the technology that extends the reach of the human, that helps humans to master their environment, also works to weaken the human itself as a category".[10] This "peculiar dialectic" finds its "logical conclusion" in the "current environmental crisis that threatens our planet" as a sign that the "technology that has allowed humankind to control the planet has also made it inhospitable to humans, and to all other species", Boxall continues.[11] The double-edged sword of technological extension (and originary technicity) of humans is what Boxall traces as the fundamental built-in "posthuman logic" which means that "technology amplifies the human only to the extent that it dwarfs it";[12] this logic, as Boxall argues, testifies to the "emergence of a posthuman structure of feeling at work in the British fiction [one might extend this at least to 'Anglo-American' fiction and, arguably, beyond] of the postwar":

> The development of the novel in the period [since 1945] is arguably characterised by the lapsing of the human as the dominant figure for civilised life, and the emergence of a posthuman rhetoric and aesthetic, which shares much with the other postal compounds that shape cultural life in the later decades of the century – such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and so on.[13]

By entering a phase of accelerated technological transformation the choice the novel offers seems to lie between a resistance to or a defense of the natural body, as well as the embrace or even the acceleration of a "postnatural body" (i.e. a tension or "splitting between a residual, natural human and a technologically produced posthuman").[14] On the basis of this postwar aesthetics, Boxall develops what he calls a "posthuman wave" model for the contemporary novel. The postwar period of "mutedly experimental realism" (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*) sees the "emergence of a second wave (…) of the posthumanist postwar novel – a wave that begins

[10] Peter Boxall, "Science, Technology, and the Posthuman", p. 127.
[11] *Ibid*.
[12] Cf. also Günther Anders's notions of 'Promethean shame' and machine envy in his *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vols. 1 and 2 *(*München: C.H Beck, 1956 and 1980), and the partial translation and commentary by Christopher Müller in *Prometheanism: Technology, Digital Culture and Human Obsolescence* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).
[13] Peter Boxall, "Science, Technology, and the Posthuman", p. 130.
[14] *Ibid*., p. 131.

with the emergence of a new generation of writers in the early 1970s"[15] writing against the backdrop of a mediated and surveilled "global public sphere (…) in which the very possibility of interiority has given way before an administered and mechanised world state" (Beckett's *The Lost Ones*; Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*).[16] This global surveillance technology "turns the human inside out, ejecting us into a totalising space of automation".[17] According to Boxall, therefore:

> It is this assertion of a new reality – a new kind of posthuman accommodation of personal space and built space, framed by the speed and violence of the image – that opens onto a new wave in the production of the posthuman.[18]

The explosion of "a sense of interiority of the consciousness is what produces an entirely new aesthetics and politics"[19] and leads to a generation of writers who seek to dispense with the category of the human altogether (e.g. Carter, Winterson, Barnes, Rushdie, Ishiguro):

> If being is made out of its extensions as image, as electronic code, as machine or clone, then there is no longer any tension between some notion of proper natural being and such being as it is brought into the media sphere. By recognising that "people are made of image", we allow for a kind of free interchange between interior and exterior landscapes that has been denied us throughout our histories. Indeed, it is perhaps such denial – the policing and blocking of interchanges between the inside and outside of being – that has constituted the human; the sense of liberation that late-twentieth-century posthumanism brought with it arose from the perception that this denial was finally being overcome.[20]

However, this second 'triumphalist' wave of posthumanism in the postwar novel is currently, "in the first decades of the twenty-first century", being superseded by a third wave, which is concerned with the realisation that "environmental disaster is the greatest threat facing our planet, and the connected realisation that the political sphere, in which human and posthuman interaction takes place, has a connection to a material environment, one which cannot be simply dissolved, which cannot be reduced to the condition of specularity, or to an effect of discourse".[21] Boxall's prime example of such a "new (material) realism" beyond the representationalism and constructivism is Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2006), which Boxall sees as emblematic of the "remainder that is not captured in language, in the image".[22] The greatest challenge for the novel is thus to find "a new accommodation with matter" through "a new kind of writing that might give expression to a kind of posthuman materialism, a kind of writing that might be equal to the challenge of describing our transformed relations with the world, without reverting to exploded conceptions of the sovereign human".[23]

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[15] *Ibid*., p. 134.
[16] *Ibid*., pp. 134-135.
[17] *Ibid*., p. 136.
[18] *Ibid*., p. 138.
[19] *Ibid*.
[20] *Ibid*., p. 139.
[21] *Ibid*., pp. 139-140.
[22] *Ibid*., p. 141.
[23] *Ibid*., p. 140.

Interestingly, in his *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, Boxall had developed a slightly different approach, privileging the "shift from the kinetic speed of the motor vehicle to the electronic speed of digital information exchange" and the idea of a "world community of writers", which, in "the novel today" expresses its contemporaneity with this transformed world. Among the usual suspects of Anglophone and 'world' fiction we also find, of course, Don DeLillo.[24] Globalisation and digitalisation could thus be said to form the 'base' to the posthuman(ist) 'superstructure' which the contemporary 'international' novel reflects "in the wake of the decline of national sovereignty, and with the development of a new set of cultural and technological protocols for the organisation of space and time" and which reflects a "new sense of the intractable contradictions between the local and the international, and the stubborn persistence of the forms of locally embedded material being, that refuse to be eroded by the arrival of a liquid capitalism".[25] What Boxall therefore traces in the sensibility of contemporary novelists is a "profound disjunction between our real, material environments and the new technological, political and aesthetic forms in which our global relations are being conducted",[26] which in fact turns posthumanism (as a discourse) into the ideological battleground of an underlying political, economic, technological etc. process (posthumanisation), as I have been arguing. It is the nature of the (critical) relationship between posthumanism and posthumanisation that provokes the ambient return of realism and the desire to "grasp the texture of the contemporary real", according to Boxall:

> There is, in the fiction of the new century, as well as in the very wide range of other disciplines and intellectual networks, a strikingly new attention to the nature of our reality – its materiality, its relation to touch, to narrative and to visuality (…) one can see the emergence of new kinds of realism, a new set of formal mechanisms with which to capture the real, as it offers itself as the material substrate of our being in the world.[27]

Closely related to this turn towards a new 'speculative' realism is the realisation of a "deep and far-reaching crisis in our understanding of the limits of the human" and a "fascination with the shifting boundary between the human and the nonhuman, and with the ethical, political and cultural challenges that such transformations represent".[28] In this context, "the contemporary novel offers a striking picture of the estranged material conditions of posthuman embodiment in the new century, while also reaching for new ways of encoding such being, new ways of thinking the ethics and poetics of species being, after the breaching of the limits of the human".[29]

Despite this detailed focus on the role posthumanism and the posthuman play in the contemporary novel, Boxall is wise not to commit to a label like 'posthumanist literature' as such, for the reasons I pointed out at the beginning. To illustrate this further, let me return once more to Carole Guesse's implied criticism cited in the epigraph above, where she takes

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[24] Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First –Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 4-6.
[25] *Ibid*., p. 8.
[26] *Ibid*:, p. 9.
[27] *Ibid*., p. 10.
[28] *Ibid*., pp. 12-13.
[29] *Ibid*., p. 13.

issue with my claim that not only is there no *posthuman* literature (what would that be? Literature written by and, even more absurdly, *for* posthumans?), but also, arguably, no *posthumanist* literature (given that literature is such a fundamentally humanist institution). She writes:

> While Herbrechter (…) considers posthuman literature as purely thematic – the posthuman only being able to influence (…) the factor of the *story* – he apprehends posthumanist literature according to several factors – *language*, *context*, and *book* – but eventually acknowledges the impossibility for the concept to exist. His understanding of posthumanism implies that the human cannot play any part in the process of creating posthumanist literature, which turns this concept into a theoretical dead-end based on an apparently unsolvable contradiction.[30]

I would like to reiterate and insist on the claims at issue here by adding that even though the inherent contradiction within the phrase 'posthumanist literature' might indeed be unsolvable, this is in no way a "dead end". It is a dead end only if looked at purely from the point of view of the institution of literature. In fact, from the point of view of literary criticism and literary theory, both discourses that are not literature themselves but 'parasitical' (in the positive, Derridean sense) of it, the apparent dead end becomes an interesting feature. What underlies my original claim was almost too obvious, I expect: as long as literature is produced by human authors (even if these authors are increasingly 'simulated' and 'replaced' by AI), and moreover is evidently produced for human readers, it remains an anthropocentric institution even if it increasingly explores the limits of both the human and its own implication in a humanist drive to re-anthropo-centre the human. The simple fact that a novel might be written by a posthuman AI will not make it posthuman as such regardless whether its human readers know or do not know that they are reading a piece of literature or fiction that has not been produced by a human (but a 'posthuman' who, nevertheless, still 'impersonates' a human form of writing agency, produces human language and speaks to human concerns). It is also not an example of posthumanist literature, as long as it uses and, in doing so, reconfirms the established channels, reflexes, expectations and models of distribution of literature's humanist 'protocols' (characters, narrative, genre, books, ebooks, serials and so on). If one took the idea of a 'posthumanist literature' seriously, or literally, on the other hand, it would be something unrecognisable, even more unrecognisable than Roland Barthes's idea of a "*texte recevable*" (as opposed to a "*texte scritpible*" and a "*texte lisible*"), to return to a widely discussed poststructuralist challenge to the institution of literature and its humanism from a 1970s 'anti-humanist' perspective.[31] What separates our moment from that of the poststructuralist discussion of the 'end of literature' is precisely that literature even in its most imaginable experimentalist and intermedial forms does not make any sense without human readers and their humanist reading habits, expectations and embodied reflexes. How else explain the mostly underwhelming reading experiences of 'electronic literature' unless these are ultimately remapped onto the very idea of and challenge to the question of 'what it means

[30] Guesse, "On the Possibility of Posthuman/ist Literature(s)", p. 27.

[31] For the distinction between 'receivable', 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts see Roland Barthes, *S/Z* [1973] (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) and my discussion in *Lawrence Durrell, Postmodernism and the Ethics of Alterity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 16-57 (chapter 2).

to be human'? This is still the case, even if, "meaning production can be co-dependent on the reader and the machine, a nonhuman entity",[32] simply because reading is always based on a co-dependence of a human and a technological element, whether that element be machine-produced or not.

Let me therefore shift the discussion towards a different discursive level: one that focuses on the aspect of the *critical* in 'critical posthumanism'. The 'critical' in this phrase signals a critique of posthumanism (a discourse that is itself critical of another discourse, namely 'humanism', but which of course also harbours many 'internal' contradictions and limitations) and at the same time evokes the idea of a posthumanist criticism – which seems much less contradictory than the idea of a 'posthumanist literature'. Even though posthumanist criticism, or posthumanist (critical) theory more generally, is equally addressed to human reading subjects of course, its aim is to 'assist' humans and their literature (or cultural production more generally) in making visible their humanist preconceptions and closures through what Ivan Callus and myself have called 'posthumanist readings'.[33] Before I return to the notion of what such a posthumanst reading entails let me so to speak clear the air a little and rearticulate my idea of the (problematic) relationship between literature and posthumanism.

There is currently only one introductory study on posthumanism that is specifically written from the point of view of literary studies[34] (although others are undoubtedly being written). I do not think that this is either a coincidence or due to some neglect or conservativism on behalf of literary scholars. It rather has something to do with the distinction between 'posthuman' and 'posthumanist', or 'the posthuman' (basically a (rhetorical) figure) and 'posthumanism' (a discourse or 'style').[35] Defining the posthuman seems relatively straightforward: it is a matter of 'our' (cultural-technological) imaginary. Posthumanist, however, refers to a much more radical question: what to do with our innermost meaning-making (not to say hermeneutic, rhetorical and discursive) reflexes that direct our 'symbolic minds' towards a world that is seemingly 'ours' to make sense of (and the responsibility this implies – a responsibility that it would be more than hazardous to relinquish, at a time of ambient 'species angst' due to global terror, the persistence of wars and nuclear threats, climate change, resource depletion, biotechnology, a radical decline in biodiversity and radical technological change – all human-induced). *Critical* posthumanism is the attempt to think through various 'ends' of the human and its humanisms without shirking any of the persisting responsibilities, and to do so without techno-utopianism, but also without giving in to the ambient catastrophism.

In that context, the designation of 'posthumanist' implies a doubt whether literature, fiction, writing etc., as human and humanist practices, are fundamentally changing or already have changed. Or, in other words, the question critical posthumanism is putting to literature as the practice and institution concerned with fictional scenarios (and no longer quite preeminently

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[32] Guesse, "On the Possibility of Posthuman/ist Literature(s)", p. 32.

[33] Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, "What is a posthumanist reading?", *Angelaki* 13.1 (2008): 95-111.

[34] See Pramod Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

[35] For more detail on this distinction between figure and discourse see my *Posthumanism – A Critical Analysis*.

so, in the so-called golden age of television, or in the context of digital games) is whether, today, in writing differently or otherwise 'we' are (or indeed should be) bringing about something like the 'posthuman'? What would really constitute 'posthuman' forms of writing? Forms of writing that either take place without humans, or writing that changes what it means to be human, or redefine what the human *is*? Is it enough to engage with rewritings of the human-animal boundary, the human-machine and subject-object distinction, the question of non/human agency and embodiment, as well as forms of human-environment entanglement to be able to claim that there is (or there promises to be an emerging) posthumanist literature?

Another way to approach this is by focusing on narrative and its futures – both the future of and as narrative. Maybe the ultimate dream of a posthumanist literature or a literature that fully engages with the posthuman condition lies in the "emergence of a posthuman narrative – a narrative that does not (…) feel a blurring of the self's boundaries as an existential crisis? A narrative that is at home with the larger-than-human scale? That doesn't embody the viewpoint of a human character", as Steve Tomasula suggested.[36] The 'ecological' benefits of such a 'posthumanist' narrative seem obvious. According to Dana Phillips the benefit for ecocriticism lies in its production of "narratives of collapse", as she explains:

> The chief advantage of posthumanism is that it enables us to put the onus of environmental caretaking where it belongs: squarely on the shoulders of those creatures that have managed, by sheer weight of numbers, and thanks both to their aggressive colonization of all but one of the continents and to their habitual clumsiness when they wield the tools that seem to set them apart from other animals, to make a fine mess of the planet where they dwell (…). Posthumanism may give us the distance from 'normality' that we need if we are to understand how we came to be in this awkward circumstance of creeping down the back stairs, and to figure out that and how much to make of those embarrassing, possibly lethal 'side-effects'.[37]

In this sense, the recent 'geological turn' with its concern of thinking and writing about, or narrating the Anthropocene, both retro- and prospectively, is caught between what Pieter Vermeulen identifies as two different narrative sensibilities. On the one hand, narrative can be seen as "fatally anthropocentric and out of sync with the nonhuman rhythms of the Anthropocene".[38] On the other hand, narrative continues to play an important role in "safeguarding human life and an awareness of a distinctive human agency and responsibility".[39] As a result, what one might call 'Anthropocene narratives' maybe all too temptingly, become acts of narration that involve "an imagined future memory",[40] or "the

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[36] Steve Tomasula."Visualization, Scale, and the Emergence of Posthuman Narrative", *Sillages Critiques* 17 (2014): 13-14; available online at: http://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/3562 (accessed 19/01/2024).

[37] Dana Phillips, "Posthumanism, Environmental History, and Narratives of Collapse", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 22.1 (2015): 66-67.

[38] Pieter Vermeulen, "Future Readers: Narrating the Human in the Anthropocene", *Textual Practice*, 31.5 (2017): 868.

[39] *Ibid*., p. 869.

[40] *Ibid*., p. 874.

present that will become the past of a future [narrative] cannot prevent.[41] Vermeulen sees the figure and narrative of the "future geologist" as an "affective, even therapeutic reckoning with species finitude".[42] As a result, Anthropocene narratives are about "training us" in a different apprehension of human life.[43] The process of "depresentification" – which sees the present as primarily the object of a future memory – makes it possible to think and perceive as if our world would be readable in the absence of what we now take to be readers. It thus constitutes an exercise in abandoning human life to a geological gaze that is rigorously uninterested in understanding human exceptionality.[44] As tempting as it may be to seek some kind of consolation in the preservation of a proleptic memory of the fossilised, geologised human of the future, this affectivity of future-oriented melancholy is a sign of the 'vanishing human', i.e. the ideological self-effacement of humans that characterises 'our' late humanist obsession with 'our' own extinction. In that nihilistic and ultimately cynical sense the human threatens to remain 'exceptional' even in the apparent absence of exceptionalism. It seems that the human cannot imagine anything either before or after itself – which is exactly what the geological turn, and arguably the 'nonhuman turn' more generally, in posthumanism has helped to articulate and has begun to address.[45]

Posthumanist Readings

> 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. It recalls Nietzsche's most humanist expression in anti-humanist disguise: become who you (already) are![46]

As Guesse correctly points out, in our "What is a posthumanist reading?" we argued that "works that do not necessarily feature posthuman characters or issues might still provoke posthumanist readings".[47] This has both synchronic and diachronic implications for literary production and its critical reception.[48] It is true that in "What is a posthumanist reading?" we focus on the non-literary genre which is (Hollywood or blockbuster) science fiction movies – *Blade Runner*, *Terminator*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *X-Men*, *Minority Report*, *Gattaca*, *Planet of the Apes* and *The Matrix* – and not their literary originals. However, I would contend, the argument is transferable, namely that "it is possible to read 'texts', in the widest sense attributed to this word by poststructuralism, through the way they set up a catalogue of assumptions and values about 'what it means to be human'".[49] Guesse is also right to point

[41] *Ibid*., p. 875.
[42] *Ibid*., p. 877.
[43] *Ibid*., p. 879.
[44] Cf. *Ibid*., p. 880.
[45] Cf. my *Before Humanity: Popsthumanism and Ancestrality* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), which takes this argument as its starting point.
[46] Herbrechter and Callus, "What is a posthumanist reading?", p. 105.
[47] Guesse, "On the Possibilty of Posthuman/ist Literature(s)", p. 28.
[48] As we have demonstrated in various volumes including *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (Houndmills, Palgrave, 2012) and *Cy-Borges: Memories of the Posthuman in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2009).
[49] Herbrechter and Callus, "What is a posthumanist reading?", p. 95.

out, that in our focus on *readings* (i.e. we do not ask whether a certain text is or is not 'posthumanist' but whether one can read it from an angle that is 'posthumanist' in the sense that this reading forces a given text to face its own humanist presuppositions). We place the posthumanist emphasis on the context and role of the reader, because we feel – taking our cue from a combination of deconstruction and psychoanalysis – that the importance of a text lies in its facilitation of specific forms of reception and their potential for political change and transformation of (human) readers. We do not, however, speculate about a "posthuman reader" as Guesse seems to misread us, in the sense of a "reader who should be able to pretend that it is not human".[50] We, in fact, do not 'care' much for such 'readers' if they existed (i.e. if they be 'readers' at all, in this strong, admittedly residual humanist and anthropocentric, sense of the term), if they were to be posthuman, i.e. no longer human. However, a (bio)technologically enhanced human or clone, I would argue, is still (in terms of category) human, which is why Guesse's reading of Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* on which she bases her argument is flawed. The important differentiation here is that we suggest that one may read *as if* from a posthuman point of view – which is necessarily a move of what one might call 'strategic anthropomorphism' – to gain some (if unreliable) detachment from what seems 'natural' about the human. It is a classic Barthesian move of 'demythologisation':

> 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.[51]

Obviously, the motivation behind this posthumanist form of reader empathy is precisely the kind of 'solidarity with the non/human' (i.e. with both humans and nonhumans and their mutual rearticulations) that unites the individual chapters and readings in this volume. As we go on to point out, the motivation behind such a posthumanist reading is inevitably informed by 'care' – namely care for the human (and the nonhuman, very much less: the posthuman) – in the sense that the "deconstruction of the integrity of the human and the [nonhuman] other, of the natural and the inalienable (…) cannot fail to be empathetic to the degree that it is, self-evidently, human, and thereby invested in what it divests".[52] However, in thus unlearning to be humanist (and in doing so, hopefully relearning to be human, differently or otherwise), in (temporarily) divesting or 'inhumansing' (not: 'dehumanising') one's self, the human demonstrates 'care', but this care is no longer the anthropocentric care of traditional humanism but, through its necessary detour via nonhuman otherness, it is a practice of care that is no longer exclusionary.[53]

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[50] Guesse, "On the Possibilty of Posthuman/ist Literature(s)", p. 29.

[51] Herbrechter and Callus, "What is a posthumanist reading?", p. 95.

[52] *Ibid*., p. 96.

[53] In that sense, caring for the posthuman – understood in the transhumanist sense of a kind of technologically enhanced species that in evolutionary terms promises to eventually supplant the human – seems like a contradiction in terms, except if one agreed to take responsibility for an either suicidal or cynical current tendency of humans "to argue themselves out of the picture".

While Guesse suggests, "even if a posthumanist reading does not necessarily require a posthuman character, the presence of a posthuman character in the novel is very likely to engender a posthumanist reading of the novel", I would contend that this depends on what one is reading *for* in such a performance. Reading is never a disinterested practice because it is always based on contexts, selection and experience (a classical hermeneutic insight). There is always a politics at work (a classical poststructuralist insight) and a posthumanist reading is ultimately motivated by its discursive situation. In other words, it is seeking to make a statement about posthumanism, about what it is, what it is not, and about what it should be. This is precisely what we understand by 'critical posthumanism', i.e. a posthumanism that is critical in the sense that may still be recognisable by (literary or cultural) criticism, but which is also governed by a critical, or indeed metacritical, detachment from posthumanism (in all its variants) as such. This also explains why the simple fact that there are 'posthuman' characters in a novel (or any text) in no way guarantees a posthumanist reading unless that reading also investigates what the presence of that character *does* (i.e. the way it resists, negotiates or reinscribes humanist values), or, in other words, to what extend it actually 'de-anthropocentres' the human. And since (especially mainstream) texts want to engage their human readers (even if by challenging some of their expectations), they are inevitably also governed by generic conventions and the learned (usually very humanist) conscious or unconscious desires of these readers, the most unsurmountable and inexhaustible of which is the desire for closure (again, a classical poststructuralist point).

This is why we base our argument not on the perceived quality of either a posthumanist text or its reading but instead propose that many, if not most, texts contain what we call "posthumanist moments", i.e. "moments in which humanism is threatened and the posthumanist other is unleashed [and which] need to be taken seriously (maybe even 'literally') and forced back onto the texts".[54] A focus on these moments of possible 'disruption' (of reversal and the strategies of containment it might provoke) is what makes a critically posthumanist stance possible – the readings in this volume, I would claim, all engage with specific instances of this; all focus on these, admittedly, fascinating moments when a text that itself challenges humanist expectations, and opens up possibilities that produce both anxieties and desires, and then feels compelled to resolve or foreclose (in closing) the very ambiguities it itself discovered. These readings (in their classic deconstructive moves) are "expressions of care" (for the human and its literature): "In reading the humanism inscribed within texts that at the same time explore humanism's limits, a critical posthumanist approach aims to open up possibilities for alternatives to the constraints of humanism as a system of values".[55]

To summarise one more time before I let the readings in the following chapters speak for themselves: the underlying topology of my argument for 'solidarities with the non/human' in this volume and my understanding of critical posthumanism in relation to literature more generally depends on the distinction between posthumanism as a discourse and the posthuman as a figure. Posthumanism is that discourse that takes the posthuman as its 'object', i.e. posthumanism is about the posthuman and its meanings. The post- in posthumanism and in the posthuman, however, cannot be an absolute break with or

[54] *Ibid*., p. 100.
[55] *Ibid*., p. 107.

transcendence of what it qualifies. Posthumanism is in that sense not straightforwardly 'after' or 'beyond' humanism, but qualifies it and in doing so can be understood as a critique of what it 'posts'. Hence the phrase 'critical posthumanism' which highlights that we are tracking and aiming for a 'deconstruction of humanism', which understands humanism not as finished or complete but as in 'crisis' – one could call that 'late humanism', humanism confronting its own end(s), and in doing so seeking rearticulation, renewal or indeed gesturing towards something entirely other (hence also sometimes the strategic use of 'inhumanism' and the 'inhuman'). Similarly, the posthuman cannot be (despite the way it is used by some transhumanists) some form, being or species that comes after or has moved beyond the human. The post, just like in posthumanism, here merely qualifies rather than negates or transcends (the human). It merely signals that we are dealing with a human that understands itself as no longer (quite) human. In doing so, it gestures either to a 'new human', an 'other human' or something radically other that cannot (yet) be named as such. Posthumanist is the adjectival form of posthumanism, in this sense. It can strictly speaking only be used to designate something that implies a critique of humanism and its main characteristic or its central value, namely, its anthropocentrism – the idea that humans are exceptional, and that they share something that is both unique and universal, usually an essential 'human nature'. A whole string of other values and binary oppositions build on this to constitute what one might call a 'worldview' or a 'metaphysics', i.e. a way of making sense of the world. Given that humanism is a worldview that has dominated the 'West' for more than five hundred years and arguably even longer,[56] it is not surprising that prefigurations of contemporary posthumanist critique of humanism exist *alongside* humanism. Humanism has indeed been haunted by its posthumanisms from the very beginning. This is the reason why the posthumanist readings in this volume span 'across the ages' (from Shakespeare to contemporary literature, or from early to late humanism, one might say).

In terms of literature this leads to the following classification: literature is a humanist institution whose main purpose either explicitly or implicitly has always been to show a human reader what it is to be human. It is an essential part of what Giorgio Agamben calls the 'anthropological machine'.[57] Its aim is 'anthropogenic' – it 'produces' and confirms readers in their humanity. In this strong sense, there cannot be anything like 'posthumanist literature' in the strict, most literal sense (which is an interesting sense to consider, as it happens, and key to this debate) because literature that would stop implying its human addressee would no longer be literature. It would be something else. Even when literature depicts posthumans it can only do so within an anthropomorphic (but not necessarily anthropocentric) framework. A literature in which the posthuman figure proliferates might be called, more promisingly, a 'literature of the posthuman'. However, this would still not be 'posthumanist literature'. That does not mean that literature cannot engage with posthumanism or negotiate posthumanist ideas. Some literature is (undeniably, also) critical (in the same sense critical posthumanism is critical). That is also one reason why literature endures or 'survives'. It challenges traditional notions of humanity, surprises by extremes that humans have to negotiate, it extends what it

[56] The question to what extent the non-Western world is also characterised by some form of humanism-anthropocentrism is something that will have to be left to anthropologists, or maybe even better to the postanthropologists to come.

[57] Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

means to be human, but ultimately, if it wants to be read, it must also reconfirm the (re- or deconstructed) human as its intended reader. It can also challenge and extend what is meant by literature, but ultimately, since it wants to be read as fiction – this is its source of power, namely that it is free to imagine anything – it must also reconfirm the existence of the institution (and the 'time' or context) it belongs to and by which it will be judged.

Criticism is a commentary on literature (and culture, society and 'the world' more generally) which goes beyond purely aesthetic judgements or pedagogical values or messages to some 'non-expert' reader. It is itself informed by political (and ethical) presuppositions. One always reads to find something – one's expectations can be either confirmed, rejected or changed. In the case of a posthumanist reading, one obviously reads *for* posthumanism. One tries to identify, analyse and emphasise those 'moments' in texts that challenge and/or (re)confirm humanist assumptions. But in the name of what? This depends on what aspect of a posthumanist critique of humanist anthropocentrism one foregrounds.

There is a growing body of critical work that reads literature in terms of the ways in which it engages with 'nonhuman' forms of agency – narratives by or about nonhuman characters.[58] Some of the readings in this volume that wish to be understood as 'solidary' of nonhuman animals, the environment, or indeed machines, play with the notion of 'animal writing', 'life-writing', or 'ecography'. Animal writing could be understood as writing about animals, by using animal characters, e.g. fables, however; but it could also be understood literally, as (nonhuman) animals, writing, traces and tracks, spider webs and elephant cemeteries and so on. Posthuman literature might be precisely that: literature 'written' not by humans, although 'nonhuman literature' would then be the more exact term. This 'literature' if it was read as literature by humans would still be unlikely to be posthuman*ist*, however, as long as these reading protocols are not also changed. Life-writing – hyphenated – could be understood, more than an extended notion of the biographical, namely as a 'vitalist' notion of life being both the object and the subject of writing. Again, the question arises, who would life-writing be written *for*, who is its addressee? Generalising the notion of writing – as has been happening, following Derrida's move,[59] since the 'geological turn' and the idea of the 'Anthropocene' – as something that all material changes constitute a form of 'writing', most of which happens in the absence of any human reader, or, even before or outside life, and thus of any reader, full stop. The realisation and depiction of the fact that human agency is only one (often insignificant) source of writing and that it is entangled with a myriad of

[58] Cf. Sanna Karkuletho, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Essi Varis, eds., *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2020); and Matthias Stephan and Sune Borkfelt, eds., *Interrogating Boundaries of the Nonhuman: Literature, Climate Change, and Environmental Crises* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022). There are two recent overview chapters on literature and posthumanism that also deal with this angle, cf. Ivan Callus, "Literature and Posthumanism", and Sherryl Vint, "Posthumanism and Speculative Fiction", both in Stefan Herbrechter et al., eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism* (Cham: Springer, 2022), pp. 673-701 and pp. 225-246 respectively. Also relevant here is Pieter Vermeulen's work, cf. apart from the already cited "Future Readers: Narrating the Human in the Anthropocene", his *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and "The End of the Novel", in: Sibylle Baumbach and Birgit Neumann, eds., *New Approaches to the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 317-336.

[59] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

nonhuman actors and factors certainly has entered literature in the time of the 'Anthropocene'. It leads to a heightened ecological consciousness in both literature and criticism – what I would like to call 'ecography' – but again, ultimately, the question of the addressee needs to be posed. I assume, even the most radical uptake of posthumanist ideas in literature ultimately happens for humanist reasons; it is supposed to make us 'better' readers, 'better' humans. I do not think that this is problematic at all. Who else would care about 'solidarities with the non/human' than humans, after all?

This is also why the conclusion turns to tragedy, precisely so that everything does not end in it. Ending in tragedy – this is what critical posthumanism suspects will happen should one let humanism run its course. Tragedy is the ultimate test of humanity. The human always has to go through a process of catharsis, of purifying, of taking the right decision, of manifesting its freedom. Ending in tragedy – that is what lies on the trajectory of humanism both in the form of environmental catastrophe and technoutopian euphoria. Posthumanist readings will have to continue to expose these suicidal dynamics inherent in humanist anthropocentrism and its further extrapolations into the future. They need to open up possibilities for alternatives, for nonhumans, for life, for other futures, for the not-yet-quite-imaginable, and thus for the literatures of tomorrow.