

### Chapter 3: The Rhetoric of the Posthuman

Thus the task that remains is to engage the question of language at a fundamental level – i.e., *where a question concerning the being of language opens to the possibility of rethinking notions such as experience, material being, or the ‘human’ itself*. We must restore to the question of language all its ontological weight.<sup>1</sup>

This is all very well but how exactly do we do that, “restore to the question of language all its ontological weight”? Is the current trend not rather to ‘forget’ language (again)? Undeniably, the question of language has, for decades of structuralism, poststructuralism and postmodernism, been dominating the humanities to an extent where exasperations of language’s ‘prisonhouse’, Derridean ‘sophistry’ and linguistic representationalism have led to, what might be called, a generalised anti- or even post-philological stance bent on reversing or repressing the effects of the ‘linguistic turn’. One prominent example in this context is Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s *Language Alone: The Critical Fetish of Modernity*, whose main argument against Saussurean and modern linguistics in general is that language simply cannot be an ‘object of knowledge’ for thought. The result of this ‘misconception’, as he explains is the following: “This is why all characterizations of the essence or true nature of language are tendentious, but it is also why thought of language has been able to serve so effectively as a proxy for other thoughts, a way of addressing recurrent questions about human life that have become difficult to address directly in a posthumanist and rationalist climate”.<sup>2</sup> What I find particularly interesting in this passage is the reference to “posthumanism” (in 2002!) in the context of a “rationalist climate”. It leads me to assume that the idea of addressing “directly” the questions of human “life” (that, apparently, have become difficult to tackle because of the ‘linguisticism’ (French) Theory, or poststructuralism and deconstruction) is what, in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is commonly thought of as posthumanism – namely, a return to questions of human (and nonhuman) life, however no longer only in the sense of what does it *mean* to be human (or inhuman), but even more so: what *is* it to be human in the face of accelerated technological change, the erosion of traditional (humanist) anthropological boundaries and deep ecology?

This means that, in fact, Harpham’s call to reason and Fynsk’s fundamental ontology of language are not so far apart, after all. Both present a scenario where the mist of language might dissipate to leave a clear view of experience, material being, the human or life itself. That seems to be what their hoping for at least. Harpham’s aim is to clear the air by curing the thought of language of the common obsession of both humanism and antihumanism, as he states: “And so it is that both humanism, centred on the figure of the speaking lord of creation, and antihumanism, which posits man as the slave of impersonal forces, emerge under the ambiguous sign of language”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Fynsk, *The Claim of Language: A Case for the Humanities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 60; italics in the original.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *Language Alone: The Critical Fetish of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. ix-x.

<sup>3</sup> Harpham, *Language Alone*, p. 14

Neither objectification of language, then, nor losing sight of language completely – which would spell the end of the humanities (at least as ‘we’ know them) – would be a solution. This also corresponds to Fynsk’s main political objective: “how to speak of the humanities today?” So, whatever you do, don’t insist too much on the linguisticity of language, seems to be the message, in the current ‘posthumanist’ and ‘(neo)rationalist’ climate. Posthumanists – i.e. those of ‘us’ who are addressing the ‘posthuman condition’ – should no longer “get bogged down in arguments about language”, as Robert Pepperell made clear.<sup>4</sup> But how indeed, then – to return once more to the epigraph taken from Fynsk – should we “restore to the question of language all its ontological weight”, if we are not really supposed to speak of it, or to take language too seriously? Or, in other words, how to avoid speaking?<sup>5</sup> This is the conundrum that introduces my topic in this chapter, namely rhetoric and the relationship between language and the (post)human.

### *Rhetoric and Philosophical Anthropology*

Rhetoric teaches the anthropological indispensability of appearance and form. And these are the common fundamental experiences of anthropology and rhetoric: truth is unobtainable and reality is unfriendly. Rhetoric is self-defence [*Rhetorik ist Notwehr*].<sup>6</sup>

The challenge of bringing logos and ethos into the right relationship was, and is, the challenge confronting anthropos.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between rhetoric, humanism, (philosophical) anthropology and philology was a topic considered worth readdressing in the last few decades, especially in Germany, as a number of essay collections with titles like *Die Aktualität der Rhetorik* (1996), *Rhetorische Anthropologie: Studien zum Homo rhetoricus* (2000), *Homo Inveniens: Heuristik und Anthropologie am Modell der Rhetorik* (2003), and

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Pepperell, *The Post-Human Condition* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 1995), p. 183.

<sup>5</sup> This conundrum recalls Jacques Derrida’s engagement with the question “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials”, in: Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds., *Derrida and Negative Theology* (New York: SUNY, 1992), pp. 73-142. The differentiation Derrida undertakes between deconstruction and negative theology in this essay is of course not unrelated to the problem of ‘how to speak of the posthuman?’ which concerns me here. The point that Derrida makes is that there is always “an obligation before the first word” (p. 73) that would turn the idea of “not speaking”, or the forgetting (repression?) of language, into a denial: “To speak for *nothing* is not: not to speak. Above all, it is not to speak to no one” (p. 76). The entire deconstructive logic of the trace, the event and of addressing the subject is thus again implicated in the problematic of the ‘posthuman’.

<sup>6</sup> Norbert Bolz, “Das Verschwinden der Rhetorik in ihrer Allgegenwart”, in: Heinrich F. Plett, ed., *Die Aktualität der Rhetorik* (Munich: Fink, 1996), p. 74 [all translations unless indicated otherwise are mine].

<sup>7</sup> Paul Rabinow, *Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 11.

*Kulturtechnik Philologie* (2011) demonstrate.<sup>8</sup> In his introduction to *Rhetorische Anthropologie*, “Was weiß die Rhetorik vom Menschen?”, Josef Kopperschmidt speaks of the “implicit anthropology” of (classical) rhetoric in the context of the currency and the turn or return to rhetoric in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, one might ask, why rhetoric, still? Who or what continues to force humans to use rhetoric – this seems to be a question that becomes worth asking once anthropology has to deal with its own (ongoing) crisis of legitimation. The crisis, of course, does not come out of the blue, and the antihumanist intellectual climate of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century anticipates, prepares and continues to inform the current debate about the posthuman, posthumanism and the prospects of ‘postanthropocentrism’. So, if rhetoric is an anthropological necessity, what would a posthumanist, namely postanthropocentric, ‘rhetoric’ have to look like? Would it still be, recognisably, ‘rhetorical’, in the classical sense? Furthermore, if rhetoric is one of the fundamental strategies of survival for the human species, what is going to happen to rhetoric at the time of human extinction or, at least, its fundamental transformation, if one is to take seriously the current radical posthumanist scenarios? Do cyborgs dream of electric tropes?<sup>9</sup>

This ambient postanthropocentrism also raises the question or the possibility (maybe even the ‘spectre’) of a nonhuman rhetoric. So if humans need rhetoric for reasons of sociality, because of the lack of inherent truth in human affairs (because truth has to be rhetorically established) to compensate for “uncertainty” and metaphysical “anxieties” (cf. Bolz’s phrase “*Rhetorik ist Notwehr*” [rhetoric is self-defence] quoted above) then the current talk of extinction threats, deep ecology and the ‘Anthropocene’ should maybe become the focus of a (critically) posthumanist philology. Or, as Kopperschmidt argues, with reference to Hans Blumenberg: “rhetoric is (as a practice), and teaches (as a theory) the ‘art of survival’ under the conditions of

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<sup>8</sup> Heinrich F. Plett, ed., *Die Aktualität der Rhetorik* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1996), Josef Kopperschmidt, ed., *Rhetorische Anthropologie: Studien zum Homo rhetoricus* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2000), Stefan Metzger and Wolfgang Rapp, eds., *Homo Inveniens: Heuristik und Anthropologie am Modell der Rhetorik* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2003), and Pal Kelemen, Erno Kulcsar Szabo and Abel Tames, eds., *Kulturtechnik Philologie: Zur Theorie des Umgangs mit Texten* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> There have been a few attempts at addressing this kind of question in recent years. They tend to steer clear of the ‘ontological’ level of language as such, however, and instead seem to be preoccupied with aspects of ‘embodiment’, ‘materiality’, ‘technicity’, ‘globalisation’ and ‘migration’, as far as I can see. Cf. for example Amanda K. Booher and Julie Jung, eds., *Feminist Rhetorical Studies: Human Bodies, Posthumanist Worlds* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018); Casey Boyle, *Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018); Alastair Pennycook, *Posthumanist Applied Linguistics* (London: Routledge, 2018); and Lionel Wee, *Posthumanist World Englishes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Posthumanism as a challenge for linguistics, rhetoric, translation and discourse studies is also beginning to make its appearance in the form of entries in various handbooks, e.g. *The Routledge Handbook of Intercultural Communication*, ed. Jane Jackson (London: Routledge, 2020), or *The Cambridge Handbook of Discourse Studies*, eds., Anna De Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); and *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Ethics*, eds. Kaisa Koskinen and Nike K. Pokorn (London: Routledge, 2021).

an intrinsic lack of evidence and the socially required renouncing of violence”.<sup>10</sup> Peter L. Oesterreich’s “homo rhetoricus” also uses rhetorical persuasion and the social construction of reality as a fundamental ‘cultural technology’ (*Kulturtechnik*) and as a survival strategy – which means that in the face of human extinction or the suggested advent of a possible ‘successor species’ (e.g. AI) one would expect rhetoric to become *more* important, not less. The argument therefore might be, as for example in Oesterreich, that from the point of view of “fundamental rhetoric” (*Fundamentalarhetorik*), the current state of language use needs to be investigated in relation to human ‘survivability’ – hence Oesterreich’s follow-on (crisis) concept, namely the “homo rhetoricus corruptus”.<sup>11</sup> The corruption here perceived occurs through what Oesterreich calls the “widespread dogmatic forgetting of rhetoric”, and the “instrumentalisation” and “manipulation” of rhetoric by (mass) media”.<sup>12</sup> There is thus a fine line between ‘good’ rhetorical use as a necessary means of dealing with our environment in a “technical-formal” way,<sup>13</sup> and a purely ‘technical’ use of rhetoric as such.

As Norbert Bolz explains, however, the critique of rhetoric usually involves a distrust of technological media, since “rhetorical techniques are being replaced by media technologies in the process of coping with the improbabilities of communication, and this is being done through technicisation”.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the argument of language corruption through ‘technocratic’ and ‘manipulative’ use has a long history. A key moment of that history is Heidegger’s “Traditional Language and Technological Language”, a seminar given to future engineers in 1962.<sup>15</sup> Heidegger’s aim was to “rethink the current conception of modern technology” which has developed from predominantly manual to engine to cybernetic forms and is basically a “positioning that challenges forth (*herausforderndes Stellen*)” nature and humans. This demand or challenging forth, that characterises modern technology, raises the possibility that “modern technology could speak forth a demand (*einen Anspruch sprechen*) the realization of which humans would be unable to bring to a halt or even survey and control as a whole”, so that “humans see themselves banished into perplexity and helplessness in the face of technology’s claim of power”. What Heidegger adds to this view of technology (developed in earlier texts, especially in “The Question of Technology”) is the role of language when he asks: “However – what does this all have to do with language? In how far is it necessary to talk about the technological-language, i.e., about a language that is technologically determined by what is most peculiar to technology? What is language (*die Sprache*), which is precisely what in a special way remains exposed to technology’s dictate (*Herrschaftsanspruch*)?”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kopperschmidt, “Was weiß die Rhetorik vom Menschen?“, in: *Rhetorische Anthropologie*, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Peter L. Oesterreich, “Homo rhetoricus (corruptus)“, in: Kopperschmidt, ed., *Rhetorische Anthropologie*, pp. 353ff.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 364, 366.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Bolz, “Das Verschwinden der Rhetorik...“, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Traditional Language and Technological Language“, trans. Wanda Torres Gregory, *Journal of Philosophical Research* 23 (1998): 129-45.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134-138.

Language for Heidegger thus is both “technological” itself and that which resists technology’s “dictate”. “Only language enables humans to be those living beings which they are as humans”.<sup>17</sup> But language is more than mere ‘communication’ or ‘information’ – an understanding that Heidegger sees (already in the 1960s) as undergoing a “revival, but also a consolidation and a unilateral ascent to extremes with the reign of modern technology. This is reflected in the sentence: Language is information”.<sup>18</sup> The implications for Heidegger lead him to ask a question that might be considered central to a posthumanist philology and to the role that a ‘rhetoric of the posthuman’ could play:

In how far does what is peculiar to modern technology, which challenges humans forth, i.e., sets them up, into making natural energy available and securing it, come into effect also and precisely in the transformation of language into mere information?<sup>19</sup>

The ‘technologisation’ or ‘informatisation’ of language, or its ‘depoeticisation’, is “the severest and most menacing attack on what is peculiar to language: *saying* as showing and as letting-appear of what is present and what is absent, of reality in the widest sense”, and it is at the same time “the threat to the human being’s ownmost essence”.<sup>20</sup> Hence the ideological ‘posthumanising’ claim, encapsulated for Heidegger in Norbert Wiener’s statement: “language is not an exclusive attribute to man, but is one he may share to a certain degree with the machines he has constructed [and one might indeed add, with many other nonhuman animals]”.<sup>21</sup> The poet’s task – but one might also add the task of the rhetorician, the philologist, or the critical posthumanist – would then be that of preserving “the new possibilities of the already spoken language... to say the world anew from the language that is preserved” and to safeguard the “world-relation” of human beings, of which Heidegger says that: “It is a world-living whose impact can barely be noticed by today’s humans because they are continually covered over with the newest information”. If the “saving power that conceals itself in the mystery of language, in as far as it always brings us into nearness of what is unspoken and what is inexpressible”<sup>22</sup> was already dwindling for Heidegger in the 1960s, what would he have to say about the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, with its ubiquitous smart phones, global real-time information exchange and the fact that probably most ‘acts of communication’ are no longer performed by humans but indeed by networked machines among themselves?<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141

<sup>21</sup> Norbert Wiener, *Mensch und Menschmaschine* (Frankfurt: Alfred Metzner, 1952), cited in Heidegger, “Traditional Language and Technological Language”, p. 141.

<sup>22</sup> Heidegger, “Traditional Language and Technological Language”, p. 142.

<sup>23</sup> This is one of N. Katherine Hayles’s main points in *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

This means that 'technical communication' is not only taking over an ever bigger part of communication but that the increasing interaction between humans and nonhumans and the interaction between nonhumans and other nonhumans is inevitably becoming a focus for rhetoric itself – *posthuman* rhetoric, as one might call it, literally or rather digitally. This, in any case, was the line taken by a special issue of *Technical Communication Quarterly*, edited by Andrew Mara and Bryon Hawk, on "Posthuman Rhetorics and Technical Communication". In their introduction, Mara and Hawk argue that posthuman rhetoric would be needed "for the complexities of living, writing, and working in a variety of biological and mechanical systems". It does not come as a big surprise that the kind of 'technical communication' that requires embracing a certain kind of posthumanism would be driven by corporate, or "organizational" interests: "As organizations become more complex, technologies more pervasive, and rhetorical intent more diverse, it is no longer tenable to divide the world into human choice and technological or environmental determinism". Posthuman rhetoric, one has to infer, would then be mainly concerned with the extension of agency to nonhuman actors and ('smart') environments. The role of new media – an interaction between humans (wetware), software and hardware – is central to this extension of the rhetorical realm: "software such as Bloglines, Technocrati, Flickr, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and even Amazon will function as actors to collate data in ways that enable human communication and choice". However, it is questionable to what extent the 'human' in this sentence still may be considered the subject of this 'enabling' process, based on "cognition... distributed throughout the system".<sup>24</sup>

Arndt Niebisch, goes even further by positing a "posthermeneutic philology" that is no longer based on the "letter" (or the 'lettered' as such) but on the "number" (operational structures of numeral systems, based on numbers as functional signs, not alphabetical letters),<sup>25</sup> which means that texts are only one of many possible forms of symbolic orders (others would be software, logical calculations, lists, data bases etc.). The key notion here is writing which, following Derrida, Kittler and Sybille Krämer, is extended to all forms of notation or inscription, and which does not necessarily require human agency, and, indeed, increasingly happens in and by 'posthuman systems' without any actual human involvement. In fact, the more posthuman or independent media become, by operating outside human meaning and perception, the more neutral and transparent or "dematerialized" they are and are thus enabled to carry any human content.<sup>26</sup> Which means that they are quickly turning into embodied, unconscious and 'automatic' cultural technologies (*Kulturtechniken*). The next logical step, at least according to Kittler, would be to bypass the hermeneutical question of meaning altogether and opt for a "posthuman philology" that would focus on purely semiotic inscription processes in and through media as such, or a truly postanthropocentric philology of pure data processing. Gadamer's

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew Mara and Bryon Hawk, "Introduction", *Technical Communications Quarterly* (special issue "Posthuman Rhetorics and Technical Communication") 19.1 (2010): 1-10 (here pp. 2, 3, 6).

<sup>25</sup> Arndt Liebsch, "Die Liebe zur Ziffer – Positionen einer posthumanen Philologie", in: Kelemen, Szabo and Tamas, eds., *Kulturtechnik Philologie*, pp. 165-83 (here p. 166).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

stance that “*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*”, from the point of view of such a posthuman rhetoric or philology, would have to be reevaluated from a postanthropocentric perspective, since we no longer know what *Sein* means or what understanding entails. This would also mean to completely bypass one of Heidegger’s fundamental aporias, namely that:

Language still denies us its essence: that it is the house of the truth of Being. Instead, language surrenders itself to our mere willing and trafficking as an instrument of domination over beings.<sup>27</sup>

However, before we might somewhat overenthusiastically go down this route and read the phrase ‘posthuman rhetoric’ in all its technical or purely semiotic glory, let us look once again at the bigger picture. Related to this problematic, at an institutional level, the question of the future of the humanities once again comes into view, this time however with renewed urgency.<sup>28</sup> For what would the humanities be without language?

### *The Rhetoric of the Posthuman – Disfigurations*

[I]t seems to me that the starting point of inquiry and reflection, the anthropological problem, lies in the apparently unavoidable fact that anthropos is that being who suffers from too many logoi.<sup>29</sup>

Will we one day speak of humans as a species that has disappeared?<sup>30</sup>

Let us now take up the original conundrum of the unspeakability of the posthuman once again, this time with feeling. Rhetoric would not be rhetoric and language would not be language if the phrase ‘the rhetoric of the posthuman’ could not be read in at least two ways. The provocative, dismissive reading of the phrase would be: the posthuman is just ‘talk’, cheap rhetoric, that is all. The posthuman merely exists as a rhetorical figure, in discourse. So, ‘what does it *mean* to be (post)human?’ would be the main question posthumanism as a discourse and the ‘posthumanities’ of the future academic institution might wish to pose. If ethos, pathos and logos seem to quite ‘naturally’ lead to anthropos, however, why is there so little interest in the *rhetoric* of the posthuman – the posthuman being both subject and object of this phrase? Probably, because, as Pepperell pointed out above, after decades of obsessive and oppressive ‘lingualism’ as a result of the linguistic turn, posthumans do

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<sup>27</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism”, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 223.

<sup>28</sup> As Christopher Fynsk’s subtitle to *The Claim of Language* also makes clear: *A Case for the Humanities*.

<sup>29</sup> Rabinow, *Anthropos Today*, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Jean-Michel Besnier, *Demain les posthumains. Le futur a-t-il encore besoin de nous?* (Paris: Fayard, 2010), p. 10.

not 'wish' to get bogged down in debates about the role of language.<sup>31</sup> And yet, a skeptical note might be in order.

What else, one might ask, could the posthuman be today than a (rhetorical) 'figure'? When talking about the posthuman we are firmly on rhetorical territory right from the start – involving both a 'posting' gesture and a metaphorisation. Haraway's cyborg – one of the progenitors of today's notion of the posthuman – was a powerful trope or figure, which she decided to embrace for strategic reasons, namely to wrest away the future from a technocentred neoliberal masculinist or patriarchal order. Similarly, the posthuman is a figure or trope that is used to challenge the authority of the humanist value system. However, just like the cyborg figure constantly flirts with the neoliberal economics of domination, the posthuman may also be seen as the ultimate fulfillment of humanism.<sup>32</sup>

A further case in point is Rosi Braidotti's recent attempt to wrestle with this powerful ambiguity, or this "tropic swerve"<sup>33</sup> of the posthuman figure.<sup>34</sup> For Braidotti, the posthuman is indeed a very powerful figure (or, as she prefers, a "figuration") which helps evaluate 'our' humanness in a postanthropocentric context and promotes an affirmative politics of flexible, hybrid and multiple identity.<sup>35</sup> Figuration is in fact a key word in Braidotti's Deleuzian "affirmative" feminist and materialist approach in general, and, especially as far as the posthuman is concerned.<sup>36</sup> She repeatedly stresses "the importance of combining critique with creative figurations".<sup>37</sup>

Critiques of power locations, however, are not enough. They work in tandem with the quest for alternative figurations or *conceptual personae* for these

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<sup>31</sup> The full quote is: "Post-Humans never get bogged down in arguments about language. The scholars and humanists will always try to restrict debate to the battleground of language because they know no one can win" (Pepperell, *The Post-Human Condition*, p. 183). Harpham, in *Language Alone*, also seems to endorse this idea when he says that "the displacement of the undiscussable onto the empty signifier language constitutes the central intellectual project of the past century" (*Language Alone*, p. 236); or also: "In the post-Heideggerian, poststructuralist, postmodernist ethos of the past half-century, a superhuman language has taken on an inhuman and somewhat sinister life of its own, becoming, in some accounts, a shadowy, potentially malignant form of agency with the power to cloud men's minds, to think their thoughts for them..." (p. 222). See also Crispin Sartwell, *End of Story: Toward an Annihilation of Language and History* (New York: SUNY, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century [1985]", *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149-82.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Thierry Hocquet's reference to Haraway's use of "tropical swerving" in his *Cyborg Philosophy: Penser contre les dualismes* (Paris: Seuil, 2011), p. 100.

<sup>34</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. my review of Braidotti, "The Roar on the Other Side of Silence... or, What Is Left of the Humanities?", *Culture Machine Reviews* (April 2013): <https://culturemachine.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/495-1102-1-PB.pdf> (accessed 06/11/2023).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Chapter 10 on the "politics of figuration" in new feminist materialist and posthumanist discourse.

<sup>37</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 163.



locations, in terms of power as restrictive (*potestas*) but also as empowering or affirmative (*potentia*). For example figurations such as the feminist/the woman/the queer/the cyborg/the diasporic, native nomadic subjects, as well as oncomouse and Dolly the sheep are no mere metaphors, but signposts for specific geopolitical and historical locations...<sup>38</sup>

For Braidotti, the posthuman also follows this logic of figuration, with its restrictive power *and* affirmative potential. The posthuman “metaphor”, if taken seriously, i.e. ‘literally’, is thus a “conceptual persona”, which stands in for a whole geopolitical and historical “location”. It becomes clear, however, that this posthuman persona or figure/figuration is in fact the *necessary* rhetorical trope for Braidotti to characterise the situation of the human today.

Braidotti further defines her use of figuration as: “the expression of alternative representations of the subject as a dynamic non-unitary entity; it is the dramatization of processes of becoming”.<sup>39</sup> Even though she does not herself use the phrase ‘rhetoric of the posthuman’ it could be argued that the way she emphasises the transformative potential of the posthuman figure constitutes a *politics* of the posthuman that is entirely reliant on the ambiguity of the posthuman *figure* as conceptual *persona*, as mask, or a prosopopoeia (of the human). In the posthuman figure, she writes, “critique and creation strike a new deal in actualizing the practice of conceptual personae or figuration as the active pursuit of affirmative alternatives to the dominant vision”.<sup>40</sup> The posthuman figure, for Braidotti, allows ‘us’ to be “worthy of our times”: “we need schemes of thought and figurations that enable us to account in empowering terms for the changes and transformations currently on the way”.<sup>41</sup>

What Braidotti’s argument presupposes is first of all a certain discursivity of the ‘location’, or the idea of a ‘posthuman condition’, in which the figuration of the posthuman occurs. The ‘rhetoric of the posthuman’, in fact, is everywhere at work in “the changes and transformations currently on the way”. This was, indeed, also the main argument in my *Posthumanismus – Eine kritische Einführung*,<sup>42</sup> namely that posthumanism is first of all a discourse. The posthuman (figure) is subject, object and transcendental signifier of this discourse that can be seen at work in popular science magazines, television documentaries (‘docufiction’), Youtube videos, popularised science fiction scenarios, politically or economically motivated science reports, etc., but also in cultural theory books like Braidotti’s, or indeed this very chapter on ‘posthuman rhetoric’ or ‘the rhetoric of the posthuman’. All, by virtue of using and speaking about the figure of the posthuman, contribute to its readability and ‘reality’, and are thus working towards its ‘realisability’:

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>42</sup> Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanismus – Eine kritische Einführung* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2009), translated as *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

A discourse is in fact the entirety of the statements and practices that relate to an 'object', which in this case would be the 'posthuman', 'posthumanity' and 'posthumanization', etc. – objects which are constituted 'discursively'. Whether the discourse is describing a reality or not and whether it does so 'realistically', is of course of great importance but it is not the only aspect. Since a discourse can weave itself around a real or fictive discursive object over a long period of time, by insisting, repeating and emphasizing information, this object might eventually become the centre of cultural politics, fascination and power within people's imagination and in a sense ends up 'constructing' its own 'reality'. On the other hand, a discourse usually also describes something that 'actually' exists, but which only now can be described discursively, for the first time so to speak. Whether the posthuman actually exists, or whether it only exists in the imagination of some cultural critics, popular scientists, prophets of technological change or marketing managers, becomes more or less irrelevant as soon as a broad public opinion starts embracing it as plausible and *believes* that something like the posthuman either already exists, that it might be in the process of emerging, or that it might have become somehow 'inevitable'. In a similar move, all the statements about posthumanist practices whether positive or negative contribute in some form to the emergence and existence of the posthuman and posthumanity.<sup>43</sup>

The central paradox expressed in and through the figure or figuration of the posthuman, however, lies in its ambiguous finality, a point well expressed by Besnier: "Why would this perspective of an end of man seem so terrifying? Did we not we desire it? Did we not we grow up in the hope that science and technology would help us emancipate from the servitude of the human condition?"<sup>44</sup>

Since we have no idea of what constitutes the 'essence' of the human, there can be even less surety about what it means to be posthuman, or what a 'posthuman condition' might actually be. The figure of the posthuman, the rhetoric of the posthuman, is first of all this: a discourse whose arch-metaphor and transcendental signifier, the posthuman, necessarily has no ultimate referent. The transcendental signified of the signifier 'posthuman' which both constitutes and 'limits' or regulates the discourse of posthumanism, by definition needs to be deferred in its fullness or truth. It thus remains a figure and exists only as absence, as defacement, as '*homme sans*' [the human without]. *L'homme sans*... might actually be, following Martin Crowley, the best description of our human' (not: posthuman) condition, namely a "constitutively human incompleteness [*inachèvement constitutivement humain*]":

For the human to be human a part of his proper substance has to be subtracted... it is indeed a question of species. The human proper would thus maybe consist in his being exposed to the subtraction of that which was meant to have been properly his own... The human *without*: that is to say, this operation according

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<sup>43</sup> Herbrechter, *Posthumanism : A Critical Analysis*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>44</sup> Besnier, *Demain les posthumains*, p. 14.

to which the exposing which characterizes the human subtracts him from himself.<sup>45</sup>

The 'human without', an 'empty' figure by any account, can only give birth to an even less determined 'posthuman without'. If the posthuman is therefore a sign of humanity or the human transforming into something else, or if the dominant value system is really moving from five hundred or more years of humanism towards a 'postanthropocentric' context, the figure of the posthuman must be (the final) part of one might call the 'autobiography' of the human.<sup>46</sup>

The question of 'how to write the autobiography of the human?' and 'who would write it?', informs the notion of 'auto-bio-hetero-thanato-(anthropo)-graphy' I proposed in my "Posthumanism, Subjectivity, Autobiography", which considers the posthuman as a figure of postanthropocentric prosopopoeia.<sup>47</sup> The argument uses Paul de Man's notion of autobiography as based on the trope of disfiguration and asks 'who, in any narrative of the posthuman, posthumanity and posthumanisation, would be the narrator?' and 'from which (temporal and spatial) location would the story of the posthuman, literally, be tellable?' The implied 'death of the (human) subject' would either have to lead to new 'posthuman' subjectivities or would remain entirely figurative and therefore purely ideological.

In "Autobiography as De-Facement",<sup>48</sup> Paul de Man argued that:

autobiography is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. The structure implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject. This specular structure is interiorized in a text in which the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding, but this merely makes explicit the wider claim to authorship that takes place whenever a text is stated to be *by* someone and assumed to be understandable to the extent that this is the case. Which amounts to saying that any book with a readable title page is, to some extent, autobiographical.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Martin Crowley, *L'Homme sans: Politiques de la finitude* (Paris: Lignes, 2009), pp. 15-17, 25. Some parts of this book have been translated as Martin Crowley, "The Human Without", *Oxford Literary Review* 27 (2005): 67-81.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Ihab Hassan, "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?", *The Georgia Review* 31.4 (1977): 830-850.

<sup>47</sup> Stefan Herbrechter, "Posthumanism, subjectivity, autobiography", *Subjectivity* 5.3 (2012): 327-47. **An updated version appears in this volume as Chapter 4.**

<sup>48</sup> Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement", *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 67-82.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

This means that every text articulated by some *one* (i.e. a singular or plural subject) has the autoaffective characteristics de Man describes and is at least at one level autobiographical. However, as de Man continues:

The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge – it does not – but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions.<sup>50</sup>

Paul de Man's understanding of prosopopeia as the central autobiographical trope is crucial for an analysis of the posthumanisation of the autobiographical:

Prosopopeia [*prosopon poiēn*, to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*)] is the trope of autobiography, by which one's name... is made as intelligible and memorable as a face. Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration.<sup>51</sup>

Giving a face to, or the opposite, taking a face away from, a narrated experience constitutes the fundamental rhetorical device of figuring or disfiguring autobiographical subjectivity as mask. If the posthuman is therefore another mask that hides the emptiness of the 'human without', if it is (merely) a device of autobiographical defacement, then from a rhetorical and discursive point of view, the focus of a *critical* posthumanism (CPH) – one that takes the proposed posthuman scenarios seriously, even literally, nevertheless without *believing* in their transparency or indeed inevitability – becomes the strange political and moral desire that fires up the posthuman or posthumanist imagination: "The strange thing is that certain [posthuman utopias] do not hesitate to use the paradox which consists in associating the future well-being with the disappearance of humans as such".<sup>52</sup>

In order to critically evaluate this strange paradox, however, close attention to posthuman rhetoric – i.e. rhetorical or tropological usages of the posthuman figure – seems vital. What is happening to language under posthumanist conditions in this context is therefore just as important as the question of what is happening through language and the linguistic trope of the posthuman in particular. Hence the, in my view, felicitous ambiguity of the phrase 'the rhetoric of the posthuman'.

### *Postanthropocentric Rhetoric*

On the one hand, I would think that we should not neglect the importance of rhetoric, as if it were simply a formal superstructure or technique exterior to the essential activity. On the other hand, I would be very suspicious of what I would call 'rhetoricism' – a way of giving rhetoric all the power, thinking that everything depends on rhetoric as simply a technique of speech. Certainly, there

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>52</sup> Besnier, *Demain les posthumains?*, p. 23.

are no politics, there is no society without rhetoric, without the force of rhetoric... Now this doesn't mean that everything depends on verbal statements or formal technique of speech acts. There are speech acts everywhere, but the possibility of speech acts, or performative speech acts, depends on conditions and conventions which are not simply verbal... rhetoric as such depends on conditions that are not rhetorical... They depend on certain situations: political situations, economical situations – the libidinal situation, also.<sup>53</sup>

So what do posthumanists imagine is going to be the future role of rhetoric? What is the 'location' of ethos, pathos and logos in a 'post-anthropocentric' world? Is there another, more *critically* posthumanist scenario than either Pepperell's forgetting/repression of language or Heidegger's notion of a technocratic decline of language into mere communication, information, or data? What, in other words, is the role of technology) within the discourse of posthumanism (technology, presumably, being the focus of this 'new' posthumanist theory that wishes to displace 'language')?

In our article on posthumanism 'without' technology, Ivan Callus and I proposed a 'thought experiment' to address precisely this question: "A posthumanism without technology is configurable in grammar and conceivable as a thought-experiment, but its absoluteness cannot be instantiated. We shall therefore come across as mounting something of an apophantic performance, so that all of this might sound like so much rhetoric".<sup>54</sup> The thought-experiment we believe is worth pursuing, precisely, because "contexts discussing the posthuman typically shun rhetoric. Posthumanism, it would appear, must do away with the play and ploys of a certain kind of language".<sup>55</sup> This is no coincidence, as argued above, because the posthuman is a deliberate turn away from the perceived dead-end of the linguistic turn. It is instead about "the doable (not to say about the done)": "The posthuman sees things to their end – seeing things to their end being, incidentally, itself as ready a definition of posthumanism as any".<sup>56</sup> One could, instead, propose that posthumanism might shun rhetoric and foreground the doability and performativity of 'technology' precisely because it needs to detract from the fact that it is the most speculative discourse of all thinkable. In envisaging the 'beyond' of the human it, in fact, "opens onto openness itself. It is the unknowable itself, the unthinkable itself".<sup>57</sup> And maybe posthumanism is also developing something of an autoimmunity against language (and rhetoric) because technology and rhetoric are ultimately, in their 'essence' so to speak, indistinguishable. Both rely in fact on the notion of 'invention' for example,<sup>58</sup> and both are ultimately 'poietic'.

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<sup>53</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Jacques Derrida on Rhetoric and Composition: A Conversation (with Gary A. Olson)", *Journal of Advanced Composition* 10.1 (1990): 15-16.

<sup>54</sup> Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, "Critical Posthumanism or, the *inventio* of a posthumanism without technology", *Subject Matters* 3.2-4.1 (2007): 15.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> On this notion of invention cf. Jacques Derrida, "Psyché: the Invention of the Other", in: Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich, eds., *Reading de Man Reading* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 18 and *passim*.

This particular notion of technology goes of course back to Heidegger's "question concerning technology",<sup>59</sup> where he claims that "the essence of technology is by no means anything technological (...) technology is a way of revealing (...). *Technē* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiesis*; it is something poetic".<sup>60</sup> Heidegger's 'poietic' notion of technology goes against the predominantly 'instrumental' idea of technology – an idea, which in its radicalised form has gone so far as to reverse the human-technology relation. It increasingly seems, in posthumanist discourse, that technology has developed agency and instrumentalised the human. This is already one of Haraway's starting points, when she remarks that "our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert"<sup>61</sup>. And this is currently generalised under the notion of "originary technicity"<sup>62</sup>, or the "technicity of the trace".<sup>63</sup> If it is technology which might makes us human – with technology as the grammatical subject of this sentence – the input of invention is reversed (or at least reversible) and rhetoric, ironically, would now become technology's domain. The phrase 'rhetoric of the posthuman', indeed, does also express this eventuality, namely that rhetoric is no longer human, it is no longer 'done' by humans, if it ever was. A posthumanism without technology, if unthinkable, is precisely that which calls for thinking, because it begs the question – through a Heideggerian deliberate and rhetorical confusion between *technē* and *poiesis* – of "an infernal posthuman without possibility",<sup>64</sup> without invention or *poiesis*, without any possibility for articulation or (con)figuration. The posthuman figure in this sense, ironically, might spell out the end of figuration. The important thing however is that it still spells out an end at all, i.e. that it cannot help but 'figure' in the multiplicity of its prosthetic forms.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", *Basic Writings*, pp. 307-342.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 311 and 318.

<sup>61</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", p. 152.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 82ff and *passim*.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Laurent Milesi, "Almost Nothing at the Beginning: The Technicity of the Trace in Deconstruction", in: Louis Armand and Pavel Cernovsky, eds., *Language Systems: After Prague Structuralism* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2007), pp. 22-41.

<sup>64</sup> Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, "Critical Posthumanism or, the *inventio* of a posthumanism without technology", p. 22.

<sup>65</sup> What David Wills says about the subject's techno-tropological turn (in his rereading of Althusser's notion of interpellation) seems particularly relevant in this context:

[T]he enunciative or discursive apparatus in general seems to possess such a shadow in the form of what is called rhetoric. By means of it, language turns its back on any presumption of a homogeneous communicability, turning to and into tropological indirection and artifice. Yet the rhetorical space that opens behind language, as its immanent density and unsoundable reserve of complexity and power, is coextensive with what, on the one hand, constitutes the ethical and political subject, the subject of discourse that we are used to calling an "agent," and, on the other hand, allows for that agent to participate in any transformation of the real world (...). By turning to become political, the subject is necessarily turning into a form of figuration, accepting a role. Not least because what calls and so constitutes the political subject (...) is a form of technological surprise. In reacting or responding to that call, one turns into tropological

A critical posthumanism, a thinking of the posthuman that would take the complicity of technology and rhetoric seriously (or even literally) would be precisely a posthumanism that does wish to get “bogged down” in discussions about language, because its antihumanist predecessors were already advocating a form of human instrumentalisation quite similar to contemporary posthumanisms ‘with’ technology. In attributing agency to language, as most poststructuralists following Heidegger have been doing, have they not committed the same category error as the posthumanist technological determinists? What is the difference between a statement like “Man acts as though *he* were the shaper and master of language, while in fact *language* remains the master of man”,<sup>66</sup> and a statement like ‘It is technology that makes us human’, which seems to be one of the standard reversals that posthumanism, after Haraway, has been using to ‘reontologise’ our relationship with the ‘environment’.

Nevertheless, it is hard to see how posthumanism could be critical without close attention to its rhetoric and its discursivity. However, while De Man’s prediction about the future of theory might help remind posthumanism of its rhetorical nature, there is a danger for theory to develop a blindness (an autoimmunity) or complacency towards the self-effacing tropological aspect of posthuman rhetoric/the rhetoric of the posthuman.<sup>67</sup> Or, in other words, behind the rhetoric of the posthuman there certainly is a ‘real’ desire, just like behind the currently proliferating extinction threats.

And this is where theory’s (or critical posthumanism ‘without’ technology’s) and de Man’s ‘textual’ or ‘linguacentric’ approach maybe become more relevant than ever, as Claire Colebrook also seems to argue. She sees De Man’s apparent “textual nihilism” as a deliberately “disfigured” or “inhuman” (one could almost say rhetorically ‘anthropodecentred’) and dislocated voice “without persona, as though it came from an inhuman future”. And in a highly significant rhetorical thought-experiment-like move of her own she provokingly and speculatively asks:

What if thinking could occur as though, let us imagine, humans did not exist, as though this world of ours with our future were not a self-evident value? This

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space and into a cog within that discursive machinery. As my analyses attempt to explain, the friend, the lover, and the ethical subject are produced out of such an asymmetrical surprise; they mobilize the tropological dorsal force of such a surprise to have language function as rhetoric – a dramatic flourish in excess of the message, designed to catch off guard and off balance – as it were *before* it functions as communication. (David Wills, *Dorsality: Thinking Back through Technology and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp. 17-18).

<sup>66</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”, *Basic Writings*, p. 348.

<sup>67</sup> In “The Resistance to Theory”, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), Paul de Man famously wrote: “The resistance to theory is a resistance to the use of language about language” (p. 12), or one might indeed say “a resistance to the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language” (p. 17). However, de Man also says that since “Nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory *is* itself this resistance” (p. 19). Theory, due to its ‘self-resistance’, thus cannot but continue to flourish: “What remains impossible to decide is whether this flourishing is a triumph or a fall” (p. 20).

may seem insanely abstract but nothing could be more pertinent for the present. ‘We’ are, after all, living in a present that is at once intensely self-destructive (terrorism, climate change, resource depletion, economic pillage) and intensely self-loving (for our overwhelming question appears to be how ‘we’ might survive or adapt, as though ‘we’ need not question who ‘we’ are and our worth).<sup>68</sup>

This leads Colebrook to reject most of the discourse that runs under the name of posthumanism as a “reaction formation”:<sup>69</sup> “What if thoughts of responsibility, of what we owe to the earth, of our deep connectedness, of our inescapably ecological existence or our participation in one unified network of immaterial labour were a reaction formation, a repression of the fragmented, dispersed, disarticulated and punctuated problem of existence?”<sup>70</sup> The “theocratic” model of an earth, a nature or some “great organism that might offer ‘us’ a foundation or future”<sup>71</sup> that underlies so much current (posthumanist, postanthropocentric) ecological or ecocritical thinking, ultimately deprives ‘us’ from human agency precisely at the moment when we most need it, namely to change the present, to create and imagine alternative futures. And in this, one form in which the rhetoric of the posthuman plays a central role, as Colebrook summarises:

Although the word post-human, like humanism, has an unmanageable range it has tended to refer recently to the overcoming of man’s self-enclosure within the bounds of his own supreme and world-constituting rationality in favour of the thought of an ecology of all bodies that interface with living systems, animality, technology and what is left of nature and history (...). This ‘posthuman’ liberation from cognitive or linguistic models – the liberation, more generally from the human notions of ‘mind’ as some thinking machine – precludes a consideration of what de Man referred to as rhetoric and figure.<sup>72</sup>

Close attention to figuration and disfiguration is the domain of theory (de Man’s and like-minded). It is the only way to critically evaluate the distance between rhetoric and desire, between politics and ideology, between the posthuman and posthumanism. I am more hopeful than Colebrook that CPH – in the shape of a posthumanism ‘without’ technology, for example – might help ‘us’ to take the posthuman desire seriously while

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<sup>68</sup> Claire Colebrook, “Introduction”, in: Tom Cohen, Claire Colebrook and J. Hillis Miller, eds., *Theory and the Disappearing Future: On de Man, On Benjamin* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 6.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Colebrook’s introduction to *Extinction* (Living Books about Life, Open Humanities Press), <http://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Extinction> (accessed 6/11/2023):

Nowhere is this symptom of reaction formation more evident than in the discourse of post-humanism: precisely when man ought to be a formidable presence, precisely when we should be confronting the fact that the human species is exceptional in its distinguishing power, we affirm that there is one single, interconnected, life-affirming ecological totality... (n.p.).

<sup>70</sup> Colebrook, “Introduction”, *Theory and the Disappearing Future*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.



disarticulating or disfiguring the rhetoric of the posthuman and to critically accompany the figure of the posthuman on its way towards “producing stability and fixing referents”, a process “that de Man refers to as ‘grammar’”.<sup>73</sup>

*PS: A Note on Posthumanist Rhetoric and New Media*

To what heights do we need to ascend to see man freely in his *distress* of being [Wesensnot]?<sup>74</sup>

Even though I will not be able to do justice to this aspect, one further meaning of ‘the rhetoric of the posthuman’ remains to be explored. If we accept that posthumans will not be able to do without rhetoric, we can nevertheless no longer be sure that this rhetoric will be recognisably human, and even less so, humanist. But what might (a) posthuman(ist) rhetoric understood in this sense actually be? What might be its promises, inventions, techniques and figures? Classical rhetoric was certainly an important if not central part of humanism’s “anthropotechnics”.<sup>75</sup> If these “taming devices”, according to Peter Sloterdijk, are now in transition, and on their way towards a new (media) future, creating a situation ‘after’ lettered and literate humanism, what might a truly posthumanist if not posthuman rhetoric actually mean or do?

To be sure rhetoric – what is deemed effective and aesthetic speaking (effective because somehow aesthetic, aesthetic because somehow effective) – has always been changing over time, and there is no reason to believe that the very ‘essence’ of rhetoric should not be affected by the current change from humanist to no-longer-quite-humanist or almost-already-posthumanist reading and writing habits (or, to speak with Gregory Ulmer, a shift in “apparatus” from literacy to “electracy”).<sup>76</sup>

Let me very briefly sketch two possible starting points for a such a posthumanist rhetoric in the making and the angle from which CPH might approach them: the first concerns the rhetorical move to deliberately (con)fuse media-technological and

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>74</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Der Mensch”, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (vom Ereignis)* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1994), p. 491.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Peter Sloterdijk, “Rules for the Human Zoo: A Response to the *Letter on Humanism*”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27 (2009): “The latent message of humanism, then, is the taming of men. And its hidden thesis is: reading the right books calms the inner beast” (p. 15). In the age of (new) media the ‘posthumanist’ question therefore becomes: “What can tame man, when the role of humanism as the school for humanity has collapsed? What can tame men, when their previous attempts at self-taming have led primarily to power struggles? What can tame men, when, after all previous experiments to grow the species up, it remains unclear what it is to be a grown-up? Or is it simply no longer possible to pose the question of the constraint and formation of mankind by theories of civilizing and upbringing?” (p. 20).

<sup>76</sup> See Gregory Ulmer’s important and early argument for a transition from a literacy-based to (for want of a better term, I suppose) “electracy” based “apparatus”; cf. for example Gregory Ulmer, *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy* (New York: Longman, 2003).

biological 'figures' (which, in fact, within the remit of the phrase 'rhetoric of the posthuman', would mean turning rhetoric into a kind of 'media-bio-politics'). This is something Derrida hints at in a long and fascinating footnote at the end of "The Rhetoric of Drugs".<sup>77</sup> He calls this phenomenon, whose beginnings he identified in 1989, hence the focus on the use of 'virus' in both computer and biological discourse, "telerhetoric or metatelerhetoric":

In the case of computers, is the use of the word 'virus' simply a metaphor? And we might pose the same question for the use of the word 'parasite'. The *prerequisite* to this sort of problematic would have to concern rhetoric itself, as a parasitic or viral structure: originally and in general. Whether viewed from up close or from far away, does not everything that comes to affect the proper or the literal have the form of a virus (neither alive nor dead, neither human nor "reappropriable by the proper of man", nor generally subjectivable)? And doesn't rhetoric always obey a logic of parasitism? Or rather, doesn't the parasite logically and normally disrupt logic? If rhetoric is viral or parasitic (without being the AIDS of language it at least opens up the possibility of such an affection) how could we wonder about the rhetorical drift of words like "virus", "parasite", and so forth?<sup>78</sup>

In terms of a media-bio-rhetoric to come, or maybe already emerging, the bio-science fiction scenario Derrida evokes at the end of "The Rhetoric of Drugs" certainly no longer satisfies a humanistic rhetorical logic: "If now the AIDS virus were spliced onto a computer virus, you can imagine what might happen tomorrow to Interpol's computers and the geopolitical unconscious. What then would become of the diplomatic corps? What would become of spies? And let's not even talk about soldiers – we can no more distinguish between military and civilian than we can between public and private".<sup>79</sup> It does not therefore seem very likely that any posthuman rhetoric, even less any rhetoric of the posthuman, might get away without close attention to this kind of life-transforming rhetoric that plays itself out between language and life, humans and nonhumans, *bios* and media.<sup>80</sup>

The other, closely related, starting point concerns the question whether the intensified co-implication (interfacing, networking, etc.) of humans and digital (new) media can still be captured ("tamed", as Sloterdijk would say) by using the (humanistic) figure or *dispositif* (apparatus) of 'literacy', at all. For sure, most computer mediated communication (whether mobile, visual, oral...) still uses language and hence rhetorical means. It is certainly not the case that reading and writing have somehow become less important. And surely, 'machines' or digital devices 'communicate' more and more amongst themselves by using code (and code might increasingly be seen as 'unrhetorical' or 'de-rhetoricised' language). But is it not

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<sup>77</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs", trans. Michael Israel, *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 228-54, and 471-3.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 472.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>80</sup> This is of course very much related to the phenomena Eugene Thacker, about a decade later, describes in his *Biomedica* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

rational to believe that eventually the trope of literacy will no longer be able to do its job, namely to describe the ability for symbolic creativity and critical reflection with and through new digital media.<sup>81</sup> Apart from Greg Ulmer's early inroads in the late 1980s and 1990s, who, following Derrida "applied grammatology" to all kinds of writing, under the name of "electracy", there have been few attempts to move away from the notion of literacy altogether. Instead, the notion of 'new literacies' has been proliferating.<sup>82</sup> An approach like the one represented by Bryon Hawk, following Ulmer, however, seems more promising and might be able to do justice to the potential contained in this elusive phrase, 'rhetoric of the posthuman': "Like language, new media make new affections and new relations possible (...). If rhetoric and composition is to move forward and adapt to the coming networked cultures, it can no longer settle, much less strive for, the production of overly simple systems to account for the complexity of writing (...) in the coming global media culture".<sup>83</sup> The rhetoric of the posthuman remains a major ideological battleground.

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<sup>81</sup> A skill-set or 'apparatus' I would like to call 'mediacy' (as a complement to literacy and numeracy) and which would have to be a central concern for any posthumanist idea of education (see Chapters 7, 8 and 9 in this volume for further explorations of 'posthumanist education' and 'mediacy', or 'originary mediality').

<sup>82</sup> Cf. for example Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel, *New Literacies: Changing Knowledge and Classroom Learning* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2003), who comment on the fact that during the 1980s and 1990s the term 'literacy' was applied to an "ever increasing variety of practices, to the point where it now seems that practically any knowledge and learning deemed educationally valuable can somehow or other be conceived as literacy" (p. 14). However, when literacy practically becomes a dead metaphor for any kind of 'reading skill' not only is the specificity of the various skills involved eroded but also the ideological baggage of humanist "taming devices" is merely extended to arguably no longer entirely humanist or even human practices of knowledge production.

<sup>83</sup> Bryon Hawk, "Toward a Rhetoric of Network (Media) Culture: Notes on Polarities and Potentiality", in: Lynn Worsham and Gary A. Olson, eds., *Plugged In: Technology, Rhetoric, and Culture in a Posthuman Age* (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2008), pp. 156, 158.