Chapter 4:   (Un)ravelling

This is an exercise in recollection, or rather in recollect*ing*, storying, carrying, staying with the trouble but also in worlding and mattering. "It matters", Donna Haraway writes, "which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts. Mathematically, visually, and narratively, it matters which figures figure figures, which systems systemize systems".[1]

Storying, or, why critical posthumanism, still

I do not know about you, but to me it seems that my world, the world I thought I knew, the world I thought I was promised to come, to be almost there, is unravelling: the dream of Europe and cosmopolitanism (undone by returns to nationalism and sovereignty like Brexit), liberal democracy (undermined by populism, Trump and post-truth politics), world peace and prosperity (shattered by a return of the cold war in Ukraine, climate change and refugee crisis). But then again, I am a white-European, middle-aged man, I have always had it coming for me, didn't I? Still, I would like to think "me-too", I have tried, as Rosi Braidotti rightly challenges everyone of us, to be worthy of "our time", worthy of "my time".

Contrary to what many people think, however, critical posthumanism (CPH) is not Braidotti's invention. While I will be very happy to concede the "posthuman" to her, the phrase 'critical posthumanism' originates elsewhere. That said, I am not claiming that the phrase is entirely "mine" either though I would want to insist on the fact that Ivan Callus, Manuela Rossini and I have been most consistent in using and developing it. To be precise, the phrase 'critical posthumanism' was first publically floated in its self-reflective sense, as opposed to 'uncritical posthumanism', in a special issue of *Cultural Critique* (number 53), in 2003, by a couple of its contributors. It is the issue in which Neil Badmington published "Theorizing Posthumanism", arguably the first exercise in taking stock of the then newly emerging theoretical paradigm, following on from Haraway and Hayles. In there, Badmington speaks of the opposition between what he calls Hayles's denouncement of "apocalyptic or complacent posthumanism" and its "counterpart (…) *critical posthumanism*".[2] He actually credits Jill Didur's article in the same issue of *Cultural Critique* with identifying critical posthumanism and its "terrible twin", apocalyptic, technoeuphoric or "uncritical", popular posthumanism or even transhumanism. In her article, "Re-embodying technoscientific fantasies: posthumanism, genetically modified foods, and the colonization of life", Didur proposes to co-opt what she calls "posthuman discourse" and "its critique of (…) universalizing, disembodied views" that she finds in Haraway and Hayles, to "foreground the relation between information and materiality that is obscured in conceptualizations of genetically modified foods produced by agribusinesses".[3] She goes on to explain that "critical posthuman thinkers" like Haraway or Hayles, and their "critical posthumanism" question the view that there was ever an originary divide between nature and culture.[4] For Didur "the task of critical posthumanism", following Hayles's ground-breaking

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[1] Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin", *Environmental Humanities* 6.1 (2015): 160.
[2] Neil Badmington, Neil, "Theorizing Posthumanism", *Cultural Critique* 53 (2003): 11, 23 n. 2.
[3] Jill Didur, "Re-embodying Technoscientific Fantasies: Posthumanism, Genetically Modified Foods, and the Colonization of Life", *Cultural Critique* 53 (2003): 100.
[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

work in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) "is to get at 'what has been elided, suppressed, and forgotten to make information lose its body'".[5] What Didur refers to as her "work on critical posthumanism" is probably the first occasion where someone self-identifies as a critical posthumanist and at the same time pushes a feminist new materialist agenda to the forefront of this new theoretical paradigm.

Things are a little more complicated, however. Neil Badmington could just as well have credited another article in the same issue with the birth of CPH, namely Laura Bartlett's and Thomas B. Byers's "Back to the Future: The Humanist Matrix", which focuses on the demise of the "liberal humanist subject" as the main task for CPH. They write that: "One strand of thought suggests that the posthuman constitutes a radical, subversive break from the Western tradition of liberal humanism, with its subject who has been historically interpellated by and for the forces of patriarchal capitalism. But another school of thought, a critical posthumanism, has come to question, as Hayles does, our open-armed embrace of the posthuman subject and has suggested that the posthuman may be an extension of liberal humanism rather than a break from it".[6] This is where you can clearly see a distinction that also guides my own approach, namely the one between posthumanism as a (either critical or uncritical, theoretical or social) discourse and the posthuman as a (rhetorical, ambivalent, political) figure or figuration that needs to be 'read' critically.

This is what is meant by CPH, at least in my view – namely a critique of the posthuman. And it is that which, after all, makes Neil Badmington's contribution to the issue and his entire work on posthumanism ever since his ground-breaking reader with that title, published in 2000, arguably the most important and also first candidate for a theoretical positioning of CPH. It is also the approach that sits most uneasily with the kind of humanism that posthumanism is supposed to leave behind, because of the dynamic of the 'post', of overcoming, transcending, surpassing, breaking with, which we should know so well from so-called 'postmoderists' or 'post-structuralists'. As Badmington explains in "Theorizing Posthumanism": "the 'post-' of posthumanism does not (and, moreover, cannot) mark or make an absolute break from the legacy of humanism. 'Post-'s speak (to) ghosts, and cultural criticism must not forget that it cannot simply forget the past".[7] And this is, precisely, where methodically, so to speak, CPH positions itself, away from earlier forms of antihumanism and contemporary forms of futuristic and technoeuphoric transhumanism. As Badmington puts it:

> The writing of the posthumanist (…) must (…) take the form of a critical practice that occurs *inside* humanism, consisting not of the wake but the working-through of humanist discourse. Humanism has happened and continues to happen to 'us' (it is the very 'Thing' that makes 'us' 'us,' in fact), and the experience—however traumatic, however unpleasant—cannot be erased without trace in an instant. The present moment may well be one in which the hegemony and heredity of humanism feel a little less certain, a little less inevitable, but there is, I think, a real sense in which the crisis, as Gramsci once put it, 'consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born' (…). The scene is changing but the guard is not. Not yet, not now. A

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[5] Didur, "Re-embodying Technoscientific Fantasies", p. 106, citing N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 13.

[6] Laura Bartlett and Thomas B. Byers, "Back to the Future: The Humanist Matrix", *Cultural Critique* 53 (2003): 29.

[7] Badmington, "Theorizing Posthumanism", pp. 21-22.

working through remains underway, and this coming to terms is, of course, a gradual and difficult process that lacks sudden breaks. An uneasy patience is called for.[8]

It is the patience of "critical practice", a reference to Badmington's mentor, Catherine Belsey, and the identity of the Cardiff Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory (CCCT), of which Neil, as well as me are 'products', so to speak: the centre of 'British post-structuralism' in the 1990s. So is the notion of "cultural criticism", also associated with the CCCT. In short, there is a formula that can be read between the lines: CPH is concerned with the ongoing deconstruction of humanism. This also explains more clearly what I wrote in a recent piece published in the first issue of *Interconnections*, Christine Daigle's new Canadian journal on posthumanism:

> Arguably, what has come to be known as 'critical posthumanism' took off from a specific place and intellectual climate in the 1990s and early 2000s. It arose out of the (...) Cardiff Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory, which, at the time, was one of the leading places for (British) poststructuralism and (French) Theory—a combination of Barthesian semiology, Foucauldian genealogy and biopolitics, Althusserian Marxism, Derridean deconstruction, cultural materialism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Lyotard's inhumanism, Cixous' *écriture féminine*, Said's orientalism, and Spivak's and Bhabha's postcolonialism.[9]

CPH is thus a continuation, an extension, and, in many respects, a radicalisation of poststructuralist critique and critical practice under new conditions. "Theory after theory",[10] so to speak, that is able to explain new forms of subjectivity, postanthropocentric notions of politics, ethics and justice, new ontologies and materialisms, the shift from 'sign to trace', the focus on and problematisation of the idea of taking postanthropocentrism 'literally', and of how to read from a 'posthumanist' point of view.[11]

In a nutshell, CPH is Neil Badmington's, but also Elaine Graham's take, in her undeservedly often neglected *Representations of the Post/Human* (2002) in which she discusses the obsessive "ontological hygiene" on which humanist notions of the human tend to rely. Apart from that it is of course also Donna Haraway's (who, however, never embraced the label), or Katherine Halyes's, Cary Wolfe's and many more. CPH was always a bit quieter, certainly not technophobic but technosceptical for sure – after all a posthumanism without technology is an important thought experiment that is still worth performing[12] – more 'literary' as well in its belief that literature, or fiction and speculation more generally are what, today, have the critical edge, in conjunction with certain science factional aspects of science and its dissemination.[13]

It is also a kind of attitude or inclination, namely one that is less confident that you can leave something so venerable, intuitive, or sticky as humanism behind and simply 'overcome' it,

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[8] Badmington, "Theorizing Posthumanism", p. 22.

[9] Stefan Herbrechter, "Critical Posthumanism, Again", *Interconnections* 1.1 (2021): 66. See also the Introduction to this volume.

[10] Cf. Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge, eds., *Theory after Theory* (London: Routledge, 2011).

[11] Herbrechter, "Critical Posthumanism, Again", p. 67.

[12] Cf. Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, "Critical Posthumanism or, the *inventio* of a posthumanism without technology", *Subject Matters* 3.2/4.1 (2007): 15-30.

[13] On the notion of "science faction" see my *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 114ff.

rather than something that, patiently, has to be 'worked through'. Hence the continued need for and recourse to psychoanalysis, a psychoanalysis of the human, humanity and humanism in the face of its crumbling, its ongoing deconstruction, its threating return, in other words, its uncanny haunting. In short, critical posthumanism has embraced the deconstruction of humanism to face the critical challenges that continue to be posed to humanism, humanity and the human. In the process of its emergence it has been provoking, disrupting, *unravelling*, that is, deconstructing (at least) 500 years of humanism, as Ihab Hassan famously proposed. Hassan's proclamation, however, is certainly not without a profound sense of unease, when he speaks of the advent of a "posthumanist culture", a process "which depends mainly on the growing intrusion of the human mind into nature and history, on the dematerialization of life and the conceptualization of existence".[14] It is a process "begun by the firelight in the caves of Lascaux" and steering towards the "expansion of human consciousness into the cosmos" ending in a "transhumanization of the human".[15]

CPH has been shadowing this process of posthumanisation. It has been doing so by looking into the prospects of prefixing, of beginning and ending, of overcoming and transcending, of perfecting as well as regressing. In doing so, it has been stressing political moves and ethical stances invoking entanglement, relationality, intersection, enmeshment and the like. One thing, however, even though it was always hidden in plain sight, has taken critical posthumanists, but certainly not just them, by surprise, namely that the process of posthumanisation or of 'unbecoming human' (or 'unlearning to be human') in a humanist sense, was co-occurring with what one might call the *raveling* of the planet – the end(s) of man and the end(s) of the world rolled into one big post-Anthropo-scene.

Unlearning, or the linguistic return

Freud said, "The prefix 'un'(…) is the token of repression".[16] I do not know about you but when I embark on a writing and thinking project it usually starts with a word, or rather with something that is not quite a word. These (not quite) words and the concepts they somehow envelop, the realities they try to represent, the discursive-material-semiotic nodes they constitute, if you wish, somehow 'arrive' out of who knows where. In this case this *arrivant* was the verb 'to unravel'. However, before I tell you more about this curious word-concept-reality of *unravelling* – and the impression I mentioned above, that the world, 'my' world, is unravelling – I think I need to pre-empt some objections. As you know, some strands of posthumanism seem averse to what has become known as the 'linguistic turn' that dominated theory or philosophy almost throughout the entire 20th century. Its basic and in my view inescapable insight, however, is that there is no straightforward relationship between language and reality, or, in other words, that any claim towards linguistic transparency, as a mere and faithful reference to and representation of some prior and external reality – the 'classic realist' claim – is a misconception of how language works. Language is not a reflection of reality, it has its own ability and drive to construct, shape, transform as well as hide reality.

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[14] Ihab Hassan, "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanst Culture? A University Masque in Five Scenes", *The Georgia Review* 31.4 (1977): 835.

[15] *Ibid*., pp. 836, 843, 849.

[16] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny [1919]", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vo. XVII (1917-1919), ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 245.

In fact, language in its wider, more general sense of a symbolic system of meaning-making signs and of material-discursive inscription of marks is, one might say, properly entangled with not only social, human reality but with any reality perceived, lived, enacted by some form of agency whether human or nonhuman.

Thus, when Karen Barad began her "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter" by saying "language has been granted too much power",[17] she was being somewhat disingenuous, polemical, or strategic about intervening in a theoretical climate that maybe had taken the linguistic turn towards an excessive and hermetic 'linguisticism'. As Barad says: "The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every 'thing' – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation".[18] Her outrage leads her to ask: "How did language come to be more trustworthy than matter?"[19] However, given that poststructuralism never thought language to by trustworthy, nor dematerialised for that matter, Barad's statement seems somewhat misleading, especially since she is herself exploiting the fundamental ambivalence of language in her own title – which is of course so much more than a title, but rather a programme: how matter comes to matter, and all the subsequent plays and puns on mattering and matter-reality taken up by new feminist matter-realism. Indeed, discursive practice and discursive formation – in short, discourse in a Foucauldian sense – are not the same as language, or are not *only* language, but they are constituted and circulated, established and perpetuated, materialised through linguistic or symbolic *material*. In this sense, despite of or actually in line with any form of "agential realism", "intra-action" and "entanglement", one should insist on the fact that language *matters*. And this is one of the most important messages and practices that CPH in my view is here to remind us of. This is all the more important since the *figure* of the posthuman – language in its 'pure' rhetorical form, one might say – was embraced eagerly by early posthumanists precisely as a welcome escape from arguments about language. Why indeed would cyborgs or AI need language, surely they will be able to 'communicate' telepathically, or at least by 'code', will they not?

So, I do not know about you but I still think language matters, quite literally. Having followed the *discourse* of posthumanism and commented on its use of *figures* and *figurations* of the posthuman (critically but also productively, I hope) for the last 20 years or so, maybe this is a good time to take stock before it might all start to *unravel* … again. *Ravelling* or *unravelling*? As already mentioned, the word 'to unravel' arrived on my desk, in my in-tray, so to speak. Maybe I should say that, at heart and by training, I am a linguist, even 'worse', a philologist, as they were called when I did my studies of English and French in Heidelberg in the late 80s and early 90s. *Un*-ravel, the prefix has got history, of course and I will return to that, but first of all let me tell you how I got stuck on the root of 'ravel'. Ravel, the *OED* tells me, refers to a process of "fraying, disintegrating", but the verb 'to ravel' is curious in that it can actually refer to processes that are *both* of an "entangling and disentangling" nature. It is therefore almost as if the idea of un/raveling was following the same logic as the famous Freudian '*unheimlich*' – the canniness of the uncanny, based on the ambiguity of the German *heimlich* (at home *and* in secret), which much exercised poststructuralists and postmodernists throughout the last

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[17] Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter", *Signs* 28.3 (2003): 801.
[18] Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity", p. 801.
[19] *Ibid*.

decades of the 20th century. By negating the canny, or that which one apparently knows, one does not necessarily get any closer to the unknown but instead risks (re)producing *un*canniness – that which has existed from the beginning and which might have given rise to a specific trouble of reality in the first place. In short, it signals the return of the repressed, its haunting (re)appearance.

It is in fact not quite clear whether ravelling, or indeed unravelling for that matter, is a positive or a negative thing. Since ravelling can mean both entangle and disentangle – and both entangling and disentangling can also have positive and negative connotations – both can be associated with confusion, a rendering incoherent or muddled, a fraying (of fabric, clothes etc.), an unwinding, destroying or regressing. At the same time it is precisely this process (just like disentangling, of course) that can be associated with examining, considering, dismantling in a rational, positive, analytical sense, depending on whether reduction and investigation are desirable or not. So just like ravelling, unravelling is about disentangling, undoing, reversing, *as well as* about making plain, disclosing or revealing, solving a mystery, working out a conundrum. Why, you will ask, is this relevant to our so-called 'posthuman times', or any inquiries into entanglements and intersections in a posthuman world? In other words, in a world where it seems important and pressing to act, change, get stuck, by emphasising our entangled nature? Simply because, in my view, the *critical* in CPH is of an unravelling, or disentangling, nature. It requires (at least also) that we distance ourselves from matters of reality, matter-reality, including in the sense of so-called new materialism. In other words, CPH can only call itself *critical* if it is also critical of *itself* – as long as it continues to perform its own (psycho)analysis so to speak. And psychoanalysis, I hardly need to remind you, is the discourse of unravelling *par excellence*. Therefore, allow me a brief return to Freud and the *unheimlich*, his "unconcept", as Anneleen Masschelein calls it.[20]

It is an "unconcept" in that it is a concept that auto-deconstructs – a concept that shows the limit of conceptualisation in action so to speak. In this sense it is also a synecdoche of psychoanalysis as a whole, namely as that analytical undertaking that is concerned with the limits of consciousness, (self)knowability and negation. The prefix un-, as in the *un*conscious, or the *un*canny, is first of all a negation of a concept – consciousness and canniness. Psychoanalysis, as Elissa Marder writes in her contribution to a special issue of the OLR (*Oxford Literary Review*) simply called "Un": "Psychoanalysis is unthinkable without 'Un'. 'Un' links the unconscious (*Das Unbewusste*) to the Uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*)".[21] Freud himself, in his famous essay on the uncanny, makes this move when he says that psychoanalysis as a practice or discourse might seem uncanny to many people.[22] The science of the uncanny or uncanny science starts with the assumption that – Freud quoting Schelling – "everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light".[23] We will recall that Freud in his comment on Jentsch and his reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale *The Sandman* first considers the idea of the automaton and the uncertainty whether the human protagonist of the tale, Nathaniel, is dealing with and falling in love with a fellow organic human being or a doll, Olympia – an early version of the Masahiro Mori's passage through the so-called

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[20] Anneleen Masschelein, *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory* (New York: SUNY, 2011).
[21] Elissa Marder, "Un", *Oxford Literary Review* 42.2 (2020): 233.
[22] Freud, "The Uncanny", p. 243.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 225.

"uncanny valley"[24] and arguably one of the central tropes of our 'posthuman times', namely how to deal with our anthropomorphic relation to everything, from machines, to animals, to things, to nature, in other words, the issue of Haraway's cyborg and the breakdown of the boundaries between human/animal, organism/machine and physical/nonphysical.[25]

However, we should also recall that this uncertainty is in the end rejected or at least put to one side by Freud as the source of uncanniness, both in Hoffmann's fictional as well in the general psychic context. It is rather Nathaniel's repressed fear of the Sandman, a figure that is a mixture of dreams, fantasies or fairy-tales who puts out children's eyes, which Freud interprets as a symptom of the Oedipus or castration complex, i.e. as a threat to primary narcissism. Freud rather sides with Otto Rank in taking his notion of the double as the main source and motivation for uncanniness. "[D]oubling, dividing and interchanging of the self"[26] is a "preservation against extinction" and it is through doubling, splitting and repeating that the human ego overcomes its primary narcissism, Freud explains. However, the price is a repression of the "bad self", and the double remains a threat, a reminder, a haunt of primitive stages thought to have been tamed and surmounted, a reminder and harbinger of mortality and death. And this, according to Freud, is the uncanny proper, the return of the repressed as the price to pay for the human capability (or consciousness, if you prefer) of "self-observation". "[T]he quality of uncanniness", Freud explains, "can only come from the fact of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted".[27] It is a reminder, or a "harking back to particular phases in the evolution of the self-regarding feeling, a regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people".[28] Little wonder, one might say, that identity is always unravelling. In short, it is "whatever reminds us of this inner 'compulsion to repeat' [that] is perceived as uncanny",[29] which means that "[o]ur analysis of instances of the uncanny", as Freud says, "has led us back to the old, animistic conception of the universe".[30]

We can maybe begin to see what is going on here, what kind of unravelling is awaiting us here – nothing less than the unravelling of the notion of consciousness, critique and analysis itself. And we can also hear the level of Freud's prejudice against so-called "primitive" thought, and "animism" in particular, in his defence of psychoanalysis as a rational Enlightenment undertaking, characteristic of a certain Western metaphysics and eurocentrism – *wo Es war soll Ich werden* (where It was I shall be) – and the violent reaction against all this in some more recent strands of CPH, critical especially of its Western, European, colonial legacies, in other words, an increasingly vocal decolonial CPH.[31]

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[24] Cf. Laurent Milesi, "Freud's Uncanny in the Posthuman Valley", *Oxford Literary Review* 42.2 (2020): 247-251.

[25] 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. 149-182.

[26] Freud, "The Uncanny", p. 234.

[27] *Ibid*., p. 236.

[28] *Ibid*.

[29] *Ibid*., p. 238.

[30] *Ibid*., p. 240.

[31] I have tried to address the posthumanist return of and to animism in my recent volume on *Before Humanity*, in a reading of William Golding's *The Inheritors* and a chapter called "Animism without

Freud, the rationalist, concludes that "animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thought, man's attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex comprise practically all the factors which turn something frightening into something uncanny".[32] Ultimately, the uncanny is an effect produced "when the distinction between imaginations and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on"[33] – which throws us right back to the previous discussion of the role of language in the constitution of reality, right back to Jacques Lacan's critical return to Freud and the proposal attributed to Lacan that it is not I who speak (a) language but language that speaks me. It is also the reason why Freud writes that "there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life".[34] This is, then, how consciousness constantly unravels by what one might call the ravelling and revisiting of its 'home'.

I am of course not the only one to notice the curious matter of what is going on with ravelling and unravelling. Jordynn Jack, in *Raveling the Brain: Toward a Transdiciplinary Neurorhetoric* (2019) resists the scientific urge to 'unravel' the brain's secrets by the phantasm of a scientific gaze that purports to dissect and penetrate the brain – something that Jack refers to as a complex of "neurorealism, neuroessentialism and neuropolicy",[35] a "rhetorical-material meshwork" similar to the semiotic-material-discursive practice referred to earlier. Jack rather wishes to apply a rhetorical model used in the analysis of poetry: "we do not simply unravel poems, teasing out meanings that move from complex to simple; *we ravel them*, tying images and ideas together, generating multiple interpretations, puzzling them out".[36] Jack's claim is that "[we] can understand this meshwork better not by unravelling it, but by ravelling – by following threads of discourse across time and through different movements: we will imagine ourselves, so to speak, as the weaver's shuttle moving in and out of these threads",[37] a methodology obviously inspired by Barad's notion of entanglement, agential realism and the role of apparatuses. Jack characterises her methodology as "ravelling out" (or puzzling out a problem through multiple perspectives), "ravelling back" (seeing how discursive-material strands were previously knotted and entangled, working backwards as in a rhetorical genealogy), and "ravelling together" (in her specific case, emphasising the intertwining of humanistic research and neuroscientific concepts).

Jack's approach and insights are fascinating and illustrate what can be achieved in applying Baradian posthumanist performativity. However, I am specifically interested in it here because it stresses the problematic nature of the 'un' in unravelling I pointed out above, namely that we are dealing here with a repression and the return of some of the most fundamental aspects of human self-understanding, of what 'makes and unmakes us human', so to speak. As posthumanists, but also as humanists, transhumanists, or even antihumanists, we think we can unravel what it means to be human, but in the very same process we ourselves, of course, become unravelled. We think that by ravelling the human, i.e. by entangling or re-entangling

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Humans, or Belief without Belief"; cf. Stefan Herbrechter, *Before Humanity: Posthumanism and Ancestrality* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 9-63 and 81-111.

[32] Freud, "The Uncanny", p. 243.

[33] *Ibid*., p. 244.

[34] *Ibid*., p. 249-250.

[35] Jordynn Jack, *Raveling the Brain: Toward a Transdisciplinary Neurorhetoric* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2019), p. 2.

[36] *Ibid*., p. 2.

[37] *Ibid*., p. 5.

him, her or it, with whatever the human had to disentangle itself from to become human in the first place we perform some idea of justice, we work through the repressed of humanism or anthropocentrism. And in so doing, we become either more or less human, or both, or even better, namely human otherwise, as if that which can make us human is to be found, precisely, in what we had to repress in the first place – the inhuman. This mess or meshwork, this entangled logic might be what we can call the '(un)ravelling of the human' – and we all engage in this process, as critical posthumanists, because we find the human uncanny, our threatening double, our bad 'primitive' self.

This is precisely what we will have to unlearn, however. 'Unlearning to be human' is a phrase I proposed in a couple of articles on posthumanist education inspired by Jean-François Lyotard's (1991) notion of the 'inhuman'.[38] The 'un' in unlearning is similar to the 'un' in unravelling in that it is not a simple negation, not a negation of learning, as if that was something desirable. For education to cease to be a form of humanisation (in the sense of humanism's anthropogenetic machine), it is necessary to understand how learning to be a human is supposed to work and then, through a patient and thorough working-through and rewriting process, to 'un-learn' that process or to 'rewrite' it. The 'un' in unlearning therefore is also a form of deconstruction. Like the 'un' in Freud's *unheimlich*,[39] it at once makes strange and familiar; it is a sign of the return of the repressed and a symptom of repetition-compulsion. A posthumanist education worthy of its name and time would primarily have to unlearn the aspects, mechanisms or apparatuses, of the humanist forms of interpellation and subjectification that fuel what Giorgio Agamben calls the "anthropological machine",[40] bearing in mind however that there is no simple escape to subjectification as such, neither through decentring the subject, nor through its repositioning, nor through its proliferation, i.e. by attributing subjectivities to nonhuman forms of agency, even though this of course is a step in the right direction. Especially if that happens in conjunction with what one might call 'reworlding'.

Reworlding, or carrying the other

I do not know about you but unravelling and unlearning are both promising and at the same time un-nerving processes for CPH. The distinct feeling that 'my' world, the only one I have, is unravelling and has been doing so for a while, that it is '*fort*', as in Paul Celan's famous line that ends his short poem "*Große glühende Wölbung*" in the collection *Atemwende*[41] – "*Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen*" (the world is gone, I must carry you), which Jacques Derrida commented on so insistently in his Seminar on *The Beast and the Sovereign*[42] – is of course not without a certain tragic, nostalgic or melancholy undertone. It speaks of the traumatic

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[38] The latest of which is my "Unlearning to Be Human? The Pedagogical Implications of 21st-Century Postanthropocentrism", in: Christine Daigle and Matthew Hayler, eds., *Posthumanism in Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), pp. 213-226. This aspect is taken up and developed in Chapters 7 and 8 in this volume.

[39] Éamonn Dunne, "Learning to Unlearn", in: Aidan Seery and Éamonn Dunne, eds., *The Pedagogics of Unlearning* (London: Punctum, 2016), pp. 13-24.

[40] Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

[41] Paul Celan, *Atemwende* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967).

[42] Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 2 vols. (The Seminars of Jacques Derrida), trans. Geoff Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

experience of losing one's bearings, of death, annihilation, extinction both at a personal, a social, as well as at a species and planetary level. It is connected to what has been called "geotrauma"[43] in the age of the 'Anthropocene'. However, first of all, it should prompt the renewed questioning of what a world actually is.

In her *Earth and World: Philosophy After the Apollo Missions*, Kelly Oliver asks a number of powerful questions: "How can we share the earth with those with whom we do not even share a world? (…) [I]s there any chance for cosmopolitan peace through, rather than against, both cultural diversity and biodiversity of the planet? Can we imagine an ethics and politics of the earth that is not totalizing and homogenizing? (…) How can we avoid the dangers of globalization while continuing to value cosmopolitanism?"[44] She notes that the Apollo missions and seeing 'our' planet from outer space (i.e. the famous *Earthrise* (1968) and the *Blue Marble* (1972) photographs) led to a kind of split consciousness which can also be seen at work in the rift between trans- and posthumanism: "While seeing Earth from space caused some to wax poetic about Earth as our only home, it led others to imagine life off-world on other planets".[45] While the world as a kind of immanent experience and reality thus gave way to the idea of the planetary and the global it also gave rise to the ecological movement of Whole Earth (i.e. the "image of the entire planet interconnected organically through the uniqueness of Earth's fragile atmosphere"). At the same time, however, it also led to the emergence of geo-engineering and One World ("the image of the entire planet connected through technology").[46] One might also add the search for exoplanets and the dream of space colonisation, the desire of leaving the spent planet Earth behind and press re-start to this. As Kelly writes: "The reactions to seeing the Earth from space make manifest tensions between nationalism and cosmopolitanism and between humanism, in the sense that we are the center of the universe, and posthumanism, in the sense that we are insignificant in the universe. In these reactions to seeing the Earth, there are contradictory urges to both love it and leave it".[47]

Kelly goes on to discuss Kant, Arendt, Heidegger and Derrida in detail before outlining her own vision of "terraphilia" or "Earth ethics". It would be impossible to do justice to her *tour-de-force* argument here but I want to pick out what arguably is the crux of world-thinking in our posthuman times that some call the Anthropocene or at least the curious realisation that this term stands for, namely the idea that humans have become so powerful that they are the main geological force on the planet just at a time when through various extinction, geo-engineering and world-without-us scenarios, humans seem ready to argue themselves out of the (world) picture. The human seems to be bent on extracting itself, making itself uncanny in the process, ironically, or maybe cynically, precisely at the time when human responsibility is greatest.[48]

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[43] Cf. e.g. Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

[44] Kelly Oliver, *Earth & World: Philosophy After the Apollo Missions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 4.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 3. Hannah Arendt famously begins her *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 1-6, with the same observation.

[46] Oliver, *Earth & World*, p. 15.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[48] Cf. my "'On not writing ourselves out of the picture…': An Interview with Stefan Herbrechter", *Antae* 1.3 (2014): 131-144; available online at:

This uncanniness of the human and its world is captured in Derrida's reading of Celan's *Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen*. "On the one hand", as Kelly explains, "Derrida insists that we do not share the world and that each singular being is a world unto itself, not just a world, but *the* world. On the other hand, and at the same time, we are radically dependent on others for our sense of ourselves as autonomous and self-sufficient, illusions that come to us through worldly apparatuses. We both do and do not share the world (…). Even when the world is gone, the earth remains. Even if we do not share a world, we do share the earth",[49] which in typically Derridean fashion raises the ethical stakes into almost hyperbolic proportions of an impossible but absolutely necessary and inescapable imperative – the world is gone, I must carry you. I must carry you because the world is gone, but also because I have to carry you, the world is gone – it works both ways, language again plays its tricks, one might say. What Kelly Oliver identifies as an instance of Derridean autoimmunitarian logic lies in the fact that "in order to take the world as a whole, we imagine it gone. In order to see the whole earth, we fantasize its obliteration" and "what is supposed to save us, the image of the whole earth, at the same time signals its self-destruction".[50] This uncanny ambivalence constitutes the haunting quality of our desire for a world and its 'wholeness'. We thus, again, both ravel and unravel the world, we have to both entangle and disentangle it from us, us from it. What to do in such an aporetic situation?

Heidegger's notion of (human) *Dasein* as "Being-in-the-World" is haunted by the anxiety of "homelessness", of becoming as apparently "*weltarm*" (poor in world) or "*weltlos*" as the animal or the stone – a claim that has been the focus of much critical posthumanist contestation, of course. Dwelling in a world that always withdraws like truth is the human condition that requires "world building" and the "unhomelike being at home of man on earth" (*das unheimische Heimischsein des Menschen auf der Erde*).[51] One could just as well have linked this to the uncanny – the *unheimisch* to the *unheimlich* – and to the task of "becoming at home in not being home" (*das Heimischwerden im Unheimischsein*) as the true meaning of humanity's worldly and impossible, aporetic, dwelling, or as Leslie Paul Thiele puts it: "The ongoing search for a home in our earthly homelessness defines human life. Engaging this search authentically in thought defines the philosophic life".[52]

Human ontological uncanniness is thus 'productive', if one follows *Heidegger on Being Uncanny* – the title of Katherine Withy's excellent study that starts with the words: "There are moments when we are struck by a feeling of strangeness, as if there is something wrong with being human (…). We feel that there is a dimension of human existence out of step with itself – unstable, out of joint, *unheimlich*".[53] That is, as long as 'man' does not consider 'himself' the lord of beings but only the shepherd of Being, and as long as technology is not laying waste to the earth or the balance of the original fourfold. As Heidegger says: "To preserve the fourfold, to save the earth, to receive the sky, to await the divinities, to escort mortals – this fourfold

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https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/12513/1/1-3-2014.1.pdf (accessed 31/10/2023).

[49] Oliver, *Earth & World*, p. 8.

[50] *Ibid*., p. 12.

[51] Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymne „Der Ister", Gesamtausgabe*, Band 53, Abteilung 2: *Vorlesungen 1919-1944* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1984), pp. 150-51; cited in Leslie Paul Thiele, *Timely Meditations: Martin Heidegger and Postmodern Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 178

[52] Thiele, *Timely Meditations*, p. 178.

[53] Katherine Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 1.

preserving is the simple nature, the presencing, of dwelling".[54] One can sense why Heidegger's fundamental ontology despite its darker sides of upholding human exceptionalism and his antimodernism that drove him into the arms of national socialism, continue to have a certain appeal to deep ecological movements.

However, watching the world unravel one can also not ignore that regardless of all that, Heidegger may well have a point. The problem is that "the world in the phenomenological sense as shared horizon of intelligibility", as Marie-Eve Morin explains,[55] the world "as a meaningful totality of involvement, is a projection or a phantasm, the function of which is to cover over the abyssal gap between". It is in this sense that the world is always already 'gone', is always already imagined as spent, repressed, inaccessible. If there is an ecology of the future in all of this it inevitably has to go through this 'end of the world' scenario. It has to undergo the experience of the *unheimliche Heimischkeit,* of loss and geotrauma, that demands us to carry the other. And the other here, is of course no longer exclusively a human other. As Nancy would say, in the absence of either a religious or humanist sense bestowed on the world from outside in the form of a cosmos or the unity of a cosmic order, the world itself becomes (the) sense. Or, in other words, the end of the world is the beginning of ethics, as Kelly Oliver explains.[56] In the beginning, there is no world, there are only islands, glossing Derrida, reading John Donne, and each human or nonhuman death is the end of the world. This constant loss of world, a geotrauma that goes well beyond the so-called Anthropocene, is what reminds us that we are earthlings with bodies that can die, and which calls for an ethical response in the first place. It is also why CPH is so radically opposed to and different from any transhumanist phantasm of disembodied space-colonising AI-enhanced post-linguistic and posthuman intelligence.

What we need, therefore, especially in these world-changing times, is what you might call 'reworlding' – an ethico-political process that works through this uncanny unhomeliness of being human and its curious unravelling – not in order to 'rehome' the human, or any nonhumans for that matter, but as a kind of response and responsibility to the other, to the world as other that is always gone and which allows us to be here, 'in the first place', while calling for human 'carrying'. Reworlding the human – that might thus be another definitional phrase or programme for CPH. Reworlding the human while rewriting humanity, both go hand in hand. They are what drive the patient unravelling and disentangling of our surviving here on Earth.

[54] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, and Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 149-51, 158-59; cited in Thiele, 181.

[55] Marie-Eve Morin, "Worlds Apart: Conversations between Jacques Derrida & Jean-Luc Nancy", *Derrida Today* 9.2 (2016): 169.

[56] Kelly Oliver, "The Poetic Axis of Ethics", *Derrida Today* 7.2 (2014): 122.