

Posthumanism's German Genealogies

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I'd like to start with an epigraph from a chapter called "Whereabouts of German Media Theory" in the volume *Zero Comments* by the media philosopher Geert Lovink:

In times of globalization, the isolation of cultures inside Europe has dramatically risen. (Lovink, 2007: 90)

In order to address this isolation in the context of posthumanism I will propose three moves, three sections, two short and one longer one:

First...

1. Towards a European Posthumanism

In many ways, this talk is a companion piece to a *Foreword* I recently completed for a volume on *Italian posthumanism* to appear in our Brill series *Critical Posthumanisms* later this year. It is of course not a defence of some narrow national posthumanist *Sonderweg*. It is more a gesturing towards what one might call a European posthumanism that in a sense lies before us. Before us in the double meaning of before: it is a European posthumanism that hopefully remains still to come despite many recent setbacks – immunitarian as well as autoimmunitarian reactions to challenges from both outside and inside. At the same time, a certain European posthumanism already has already happened. It lies before us, contemporaries, and can only be explained by a genealogical approach that tends to traditions, critiques, analyses, processes of self-reflection, remembering, workings-through of European identities as they've formed over two millennia of violence and strife but also of undeniable achievements. In the *Foreword to Italian Posthumanism*, I follow the outline of a European philosophy Roberto Esposito has

been developing since his *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Thought* (2012 [2010]) and *A Philosophy for Europe: From Outside* (2018 [2016]). Esposito's genealogical analysis of European philosophy in the late twentieth century focuses on three theoretical paradigms and their respective relationships with the "outside", or with the alterities involved in identity formation. These three paradigms are German critical theory, French poststructuralism and Italian biopolitical thought. While all three deal with the question of difference, alterity and identity differently they can all be said to take place within and deal with the fallout of the crisis of European humanism – a crisis that is both intrinsic to humanism and a reaction to external geopolitical and cultural events, changes, or conditions. Intrinsic, because humanism despite all its best intentions has failed to keep its moral promises. From outside, so to speak, since its anthropocentrism cannot provide any answers to the rising challenges posed by nonhuman alterities both old and new.

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

Before that, however, I think we need to establish what a European posthumanism would actually be the critique of... namely:

2. Posthumanism – The "Official" Version

In the scheme of the international, global, English-speaking and writing Theory industry driven by Anglo-American publishers and academies, posthumanism is the latest, maybe last, of a series of postisms – postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism,

postmarxism, postnationalism, postgender etc. Each of these posts harbours the deconstruction of its root concept. Posthumanism raises the stakes since it deconstructs humanism and its concept of the human. Like any discourse it derives legitimation from explanatory power linked to institutions, practices, ideologies, identities, strategies and political systems.

To simplify greatly, the “accepted” self-legitimatory narrative of posthumanism seems to discern three phases (which are not necessarily successive but overlapping): let’s call them cybernetic posthumanism, biopolitical posthumanism and geopoetical posthumanism. Usually, three female figures are said to somehow found the posthumanist dynamic: Donna Haraway, who never self-identified as posthumanist but nevertheless wrote posthumanism’s best-known manifesto, *The Manifesto for Cyborgs*, in 1985 (Haraway 1991). The central metaphor of the cyborg revives the question concerning technology raised by Heidegger for the so-called “information society”, the rise of cybernetics and the process of generalised digitalisation – a process commented on by Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), who links it to a critique of transhumanist phantasies of disembodiment and thus introduces the ambivalent figure of the posthuman. Ambivalent because, on the one hand, the posthuman is what transhumanists wish to achieve by surpassing, transcending the human and its limitations, either through enhancement or replacement by an AI successor species. On the other hand, the posthuman is used as a radical political figure, like Haraway’s cyborg before it, and is reclaimed by the third of the triumfeminate of posthumanism’s founding figures, Rosi Braidotti. For her, the posthuman becomes the political focus of an ongoing struggle for liberation and resistance in our current “posthuman” age (Braidotti 2013), situated between the fourth industrial revolution and the sixth mass extinction (Braidotti 2019: 2).

Haraway subsequently shifted her focus from the cyborg to other (biological) companion species, especially dogs and, most recently, “critters”, which parallels a shift towards an increasingly dominant bio- or even microbiopolitical paradigm within posthumanist thought. Braidotti’s work also belongs to the third wave of posthumanism prompted by the ever more prominent discussion of the so-called Anthropocene and the “nonhuman turn”. The realisation that human-induced climate change has turned (at least some parts of) humanity into the most important geological actor at a planetary level prompts the most radical phase of what, arguably, was a fundamentally postanthropocentric drive behind posthumanism from its beginnings.

As a sketch, this will have to suffice. Of course, within this discourse of posthumanism there is significant conflict and disagreement about political priorities, strategies, constituencies, allies and enemies, methodologies, styles and so on. As with any discourse, there is an intersection with other competing or complementary discourses like critical animal studies, decolonialism, ecocriticism. However, there are also common enemies: transhumanism in particular, with its technoeuphoria over the future achievements of strong AI, bio- or geoengineering. While technology remains of course an important concern for posthumanism, there is considerable disagreement, however, about its centrality, its “autonomy” and its “originary”. Just as important, especially for a *critical* posthumanism is the question of the “animal”, of animality and “life” in general. The great political confrontation here concerns what one might call the “construction of the future”, connected to the question of the role of science and technology in society, the search for a different form of governmentality, and the extension of agency and subjectivity in the context of a postanthropocentric understanding of social justice.

It is here that the need for a “European posthumanism” *without* technology arises, in the form of a challenge to the dominant Anglo-American version of the discourse, with its politics of translation and

its collusion with neoliberalism. It is a posthumanism “without” technology, obviously, *not* in a literal sense, but in offering a critique and an alternative to the largely techno-euphoric or techno-salvific discourse that dominates the nexus of neoliberal economic globalisation and transhumanist ideology.

And, equally obviously, it cannot be European in the sense that the European Union operates today, namely as a mainly regulatory and economic body without a proper political project and without a people. It is a Europe that remains to come, in Derrida’s and also Esposito’s sense, one that needs to renegotiate its “inside”, its “outside” and its borders especially given recent geopolitical developments. It is European, finally, not in the classic Kantian cosmopolitan sense, nor in its post-imperialist, post-colonial, post-universalist “provincialized” one, but a Europe that re-members, literally, its national and regional multiplicity and its different but converging traditions and values.

Which, at last, brings me to the main part of my topic:

3. The German Contribution to a European Posthumanism-to-Come

If one were to seek an alternative origin, an alternative trajectory, an alternative idiom of posthumanism, in a German context, where would one look?

Bracketing the obvious fact that all European philosophy from the 18th-century onwards has been influenced by German idealism, from Kant to Hegel to its Nietzschean, Heideggerian and Frankfurt School critiques, two particularly valuable additions to a European posthumanism by a German or German-speaking approach are its 20th-century tradition of negative anthropology and its recent media philosophy. Let’s start with the latter, German media philosophy.

Here it is to Friedrich Kittler, one would definitely have to turn in order to find a specific German take on (critical) posthumanism. I cannot, of course, provide a detailed introduction to his work and the vast amount of commentary it has received. Kittler is certainly the German media philosopher – and this designation itself is highly problematic – who was most influenced by Lacan’s and Foucault’s antihumanism, as well as by McLuhan. He was the editor of an iconoclastic volume entitled *Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften: Programme des Poststrukturalismus* (1980), containing essays by Derrida but also by Samuel Weber and Dietmar Kamper amongst others, who themselves would have to be considered more closely for any genealogical approach to a German posthumanism via poststructuralism. The expulsion of the “*Geist*”, the Hegelian spirit that gives its meaning to history, understood as *Geistesgeschichte*, and so-called “man”, its bearer, from the humanistic sciences, opens for Kittler the way to a history of technics, communication and media – media, which – and this is Kittler’s most famous saying – determine our situation (Kittler 1999: xxxix).

For Kittler, a focus on communication and media materialities rather than subjectivities and textualities opens up the possibility for the analysis of what he calls:

“cultural techniques” [*Kulturtechniken*], to be read as “operative chains composed of actors and technological objects that produce cultural orders and constructs” (Winthrop-Young 2015: 458).

Neither media nor humans, seen through the lens of cultural techniques, exist as such without the operations and co-emergence of hominization and mediation that cultural techniques provide. In this shift away from (human) subjectivity towards the cultural-technological operations and their historical materialities lies the possibility, according to Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, for a “posthuman cultural studies” (2006: 93), or a “*post-human sociology*”, according to Nicholas Gane (2005: 40), who was one of the first to see a “radical

post-humanism” at work in Kittler, where “human subjectivity is disappearing into the machinery of communication” (28).

Bernhard Siegert, in my view, provides the best explanation of the trajectory towards a German posthumanism via media theory. In a short piece on “The Map Is the Territory” in *Radical Philosophy*, he writes:

“When the concept of cultural techniques re-emerged in the context of Media Studies and German *Kulturwissenschaft* [as opposed to British cultural studies] shortly before the turn of the new century it was based on a post-humanistic understanding of culture” (Siegert 2011: 14).

The philosophical specificity of German media analysis, Siegert goes on to say, “was that it took up Michel Foucault’s concept of the historical *a priori* and turned it into a ‘technical *a priori*’ by referring the Foucauldian ‘archive’ to media technologies” (14). In a special issue of *Theory, Culture and Society* (30.6 (2013)) on “Cultural Techniques”, which introduced a number of German media theorists and their commentators to the Anglosphere, Siegert also provides a very neat summary of the difference between Anglo-American and European posthumanism which is worth quoting at some length:

Within the US, the notion of the ‘posthuman’ emerged from a framework defined by the blurring of boundaries between man and machine... By contrast, French (and German) posthumanism signalled that the humanities had awakened from their ‘anthropological slumber’. This awakening, in turn, called for an anti-hermeneutic posthumanism able to deconstruct humanism as an occidental transcendental system of meaning production. For the Germans, the means to achieve this goal were ‘media’. The guiding question for German media theory, therefore, was not How did we become posthuman? but How was the human always already historically mixed with the non-human? But it was not until the new understanding of media led to the focus

on cultural techniques that this variant of posthumanism was able to discern affinities with the actor-network ideas of Bruno Latour and others. Now German observers were able to discern that something similar had happened in the early 2000s in the United States, when the advent and merging of Critical Animal Studies and post-cybernetic studies brought about a new understanding of media as well as a reconceptualization of the posthuman as always already intertwined between human and non-human. (Siegert 2013: 53)

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

As I can only skim over the surface of the intercontinental translations and returns that are shaping the theoretical paradigm called posthumanism, I have to leave out important aspects like for example the role of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and its reception in the USA, especially for theorists like Bruce Clarke and Cary Wolfe, but also for Katherine Hayles and Mark Hansen.

Instead, I want to at least briefly introduce the other aspect that might justify talking of a German posthumanism. That these two aspects are connected – cultural techniques and negative anthropology – is again hinted at by Siegert, when he says that “the study of cultural techniques aims at revealing the operative basis” on which ontological philosophical terms like “man”, or the “human”, are based. Instead, one might argue, “[t]here is no ‘man’ independent from cultural techniques of hominization, or anthropotechnics” (Siegert 2011: 15).

If cultural techniques deconstruct the anthropocentric idea of “man” and “his” Promethean nature, negative anthropology denies the possibility of an affirmative, systematic or positive definition of the

human. It thus echoes Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* as the only philosophy remaining after the humanitarian catastrophe of Auschwitz, and as the end of the idea of (a) humanity, but it also goes back to the very beginnings of anthropology as the investigation into the question "What is man? What is (the) human? What does it mean to be human?" – a question maybe as old as humans themselves – and on which one might say all "Western metaphysics" is based. The underdetermined, open, protean nature of the human species that neo-Kantian philosophical anthropology, from Scheler to Cassirer, Plessner and Gehlen, takes as its starting point to understand the human "*Mängelwesen*", or the human as "*nichtfestgestelltes Wesen*" (after Nietzsche), leads in the latter half of the 20th century to radically nihilistic and increasingly post-anthropological as well as postanthropocentric positions in, for example, Günther Anders's *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (1956), or Ulrich Sonnemann's *Negative Anthropologie: Vorstudien zur Sabotage des Schicksals* (1969). It maybe finds its darkest expression in Ulrich Horstmann's *Das Untier: Konturen einer Philosophie der Menschenflucht* (1983) which elaborates on the "anthropofugal perception" of the human "*Untier*", the non-animal, but also the monster, from a post-apocalyptic perspective, after its demise and disappearance.

If thus the interest in anthropology and its crisis returns in the 20th and intensifies at the beginning of the 21st century, this, however, does not happen in a humanist sense, but in a new, purely "anthropolitical" one (cf. Steffens 1999). What does it mean to be human? thus becomes the central question of a posthumanism that is postanthropocentric but not entirely postanthropological. And this predominantly German or German-speaking variant of Kantian philosophical anthropology which, as the catastrophes of modernity keep accumulating, turns into its opposite, is largely absent from the official (Anglo-American) account of posthumanism. Which also makes it difficult to situate and to receive many of negative anthropology's important contemporary representatives, for

example a Norbert Bolz or even a Peter Sloterdijk, especially his most recent work on “anthropotechnics”.

Where does this leave us?

4. *Summary and Outlook:*

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

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

In the German context it is usually a sure sign that a theoretical paradigm in its self-reflexive form has “arrived” when a *Junius Einführung* to it is published. This was the case in 2018, when Janina Loh’s introduction to *Trans- und Posthumanismus* appeared. In the opposition between post- and transhumanism we have the “post-anthropological” dynamic that is at stake in the so-called Anthropocene – the world, in the words of a popular TV house-improvement programme, should we “love it or list it”? We are thus arguably still caught in what Hannah Arendt in her *The Human Condition* (1958) called:

“our modern world alienation”, which articulates itself in a “twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self, to its origins, in order to arrive at an understanding of the nature of society as it had developed and presented itself at the very moment when it was overcome by the advent of a new and yet unknown age” (Arendt 1958: 6).

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