Preface: Critical Posthumanism, Now

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Posthumanism, in a nutshell, is a theoretical (or "philosophical") movement that plays with the idea of "postanthropocentrism" (i.e. a worldview according to which the human or humanity no longer occupy a central position).

It is in this sense that posthumanism has established itself as a new theoretical paradigm across large parts of the humanities and social sciences. However, there is also what one might call a "popular" or "ambient" posthumanism that circulates through images, news, speculative science and technologies, either dystopian or techno-euphoric scenarios, often deliberately mixing science fact and science fiction creating a new genre that one might call "science faction".[1] Altogether, these posthumanisms, like any "ism", are best understood as a (social) discourse. Anything that directly or indirectly says something about the central "figure" around which this discourse constructs itself, i.e. the "posthuman" (or the "no-longer-quite-human", the "more-than-human", the "transhuman" etc.) constitutes the contested object of knowledge of this discourse. This (scientific, technical, interpretational, mythological…) "knowledge" is circulated in texts (in the widest sense of the term: from written, to visual, informational, material…), practices (cultural, scientific, new media…), ordered into genres (like science fiction, popular science, documentaries, policy documents…) and supported and legitimated by institutions (science labs, universities, thinktanks…).

Like all social discourses, posthumanism is the sum of its own power struggles, including the subject positions it affords and the identities it promotes. In that sense, it encourages its addressees to engage with the (usually future) scenarios and choices it establishes. Posthumanist discourse is specific in that it mainly circulates contemporary technocultural aspects, even though it also connects back to preceding discourses (especially humanism) and interacts with other co-existing discourses (like feminism, environmentalism, capitalism…). And as for all discourses, there is no agreement on what its at once constitutive but ultimately indeterminable (or "transcendental") signifier, the "posthuman", actually means. Just like the discourse of humanism would never (be able to clearly) define what the human actually is or was – because it was basically in its interest to preserve its essential "openness" or "open-endedness" and its underdetermined "nature" – posthumanism sees its transcendental signifier and contested master trope, the posthuman, as either the best or the worst thing that could happen to the human, to humanity and the humanist tradition. There is therefore no consensus as to whether posthumanism is either "inevitable", whether it is already a "reality", or merely a phantasy of some technology nerds who have read too much science fiction; there is no agreement as to whether it is politically, culturally, socially "progressive" or, on the contrary, whether it actually represents a "regressive" step underpinned by technological determinism; or, in other words, whether it is the bearer of fundamental technological change or merely an ideology that is motivated by technocapitalist neoliberal interests (or, indeed, a combination of all of these).

There are also differing views on whether the focus of posthumanism should be on continuity or discontinuity with previous social formations. Is posthumanism a break or the logical consequence of modernity, for example? Due to the inherent ambiguity of the prefix "post" (which works exactly as in Jean-François Lyotard's analysis of "postmodernism" and the "postmodern"),[2] a simple detachment from and overcoming of humanism (or indeed the human) is impossible. Instead, posthumanism is

[1] Cf. Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) and chapter x on "Science Faction: Posthumanism and Science Fiction" in this volume.

[2] Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, "Rewriting Modernity", in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), pp. 24-35.

better understood as a "rereading" or an ongoing deconstruction of humanism, which undermines a straightforward causal and temporal relationship between humanism and posthumanism, between the human and the posthuman, or between humanity and posthumanity. It is also not clear whether the "post" is supposed to signal an eventual supersession of the human (post-*human*-ism) or of humanism (post-*humanism*). In other words: who or what is posthumanism's main "target", the human (as a figure, the representative of a species, a form of geological agency…) or "its" humanism (i.e. the discursive way or normative "worldview" that see humans as sharing a universal "nature", an exceptional status and value…).

Nor is there any consensus as to whether posthumanism (or the process of posthumanisation, i.e. of becoming post- or other-than-human) can actually be considered an adequate label or description of the current fundamental social, technological, ecological etc. changes that seem to be under way. The unstable meanings of posthumanism that constitute it as an academic theoretical discourse have already changed considerably since the beginning of the discussion around the posthuman that go back mainly to the 1980s and 1990s (following key interventions by Donna Haraway,[3] N. Katherine Hayles,[4] Cary Wolfe,[5] Rosi Braidotti,[6] and many others) before being taken up more widely from the 2000s onwards). One might indeed be tempted to speak of different phases or waves of posthumanism: the initial phase focusing on the subversive potential of the cyborg, the prosthesis and the contested issue of body-enhancement; followed by the phase coinciding with the "cognitive turn", the accelerated process of digitalisation, the advent of neuro-politics and the roll-out of increasingly autonomous and generative artificial intelligence; and perhaps its current phase, namely that of generalised "biopolitics", i.e. the properly "postanthropocentric" phase attributed to the cosmological, neo-materialist and ecological aspects of the so-called "nonhuman turn" (or, in other words, the shift towards human and nonhuman "entanglement" under a biotechnological regime).[7] The latter phase can also be seen as the context in which feminist new materialisms arguably have become the most influential "strand" of posthumanism.[8]

Within this brief outline of posthumanism's coordinate system and mapping of posthumanist discourse, a number of more or less distinct thematic positions become perceptible. These concern the continued relevance of "theory", without a consensus, however, as to the relationship to previously dominant versions like poststructuralism, deconstruction or postmodernism more generally; the return to the question of technology, without agreement on the extent to which techn(olog)ical development and hominisation may be coterminous, co-implicated or "co-evolutionary"; the demand for a posthuman or posthumanist politics, without consensus about the necessity or indeed nature of its future-orientedness; the idea of a "postanthropocentric" or "inhuman" turn, without any agreement on what the future role of the human might be in this emerging new worldview and human self-understanding; and finally a reminder of the ambiguous role humanism has been playing in the process of posthumanisation, with no consensus about its "legacy",

[3] Cf. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto [1985]", in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149-182.

[4] Cf. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[5] Cf. Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

[6] Cf. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

[7] Cf. the "Afterword: Postbiopolitics? Against Artificial Life and for a Strategic Biocentrism" in this volume.

[8] See for example Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

esp. its notion of individual freedom and its connection to liberal democracy and other core "Western" values.[9]

From the point of view of the "theoretical humanities" – i.e. those humanities that differ from the traditional national-humanistic disciplines through their engagement with inter- and transdisciplinary practices and methodologies, their international and global reach, and their embrace and radicalisation of theory (or in short, their "transversality")[10] – posthumanism is inevitably both a continuation and a radicalisation of humanism. As already mentioned, similar to postmodernism, posthumanism is best understood as a critique, not of modernity as such (as was the case with postmodernism), but of humanism and its concept of humanity. In fact, the theoretical programme and the critical analyses that the question of the posthuman and posthumanism help implement could basically be understood as being underpinned by a new aesthetic, namely that of a radical "rewriting of humanity" (in analogy to Lyotard's demand for the postmodern to "rewrite modernity").[11]

At an institutional level, posthumanism emerges out of a situation in which the humanities within the university have lost their central position in recent decades. As the result of a by now well-documented process of corporatisation and an intensified neoliberal managerialism of the university, the humanities, which were the centre-piece of the humanist (or Humboldtian) "idea of the university", now find themselves increasingly marginalised. This is most evident in the decline of their funding, but also in the fall of its student and staff recruitment, accompanied by a reduction in research funding in recent decades. The pressure of this economisation and internationalisation, however, coincides with an enormous expansion of the humanities' research areas beyond traditional humanist subjects. In this context, posthumanism refers specifically to new alliances with hitherto separate fields of knowledge, especially the sciences, and to the engagement with new technologies and media and wider social and environmental issues that all require a transdisciplinary methodology and conceptualisation.

New objects of research that can only be done justice to through cooperation between the humanities, social sciences and a new generation of earth and life sciences (e.g. via the common denominator of the idea of science as social practice, informed by the so-called "critical science studies" or actor-network-theory)[12] and the shared process of digitalisation and computerisation, as well as the role of new media for knowledge production and dissemination. All these developments are beginning to be captured by the term "posthumanities" (cf. the title and programme of the influential Minnesota book series directed by Cary Wolfe). The new institutional forms and practices of these posthumanities have initiated theoretical discussions of transdisciplinary problems such as climate change in the so-called "Anthropocene" era, resulting accelerated flows of globalisation and migration, and new risks caused by terrorism, biotechnology and biopolitics, or most recently global pandemics, to name just the most obvious.

Thus, far from postmodernism ushering into an all too hastily declared "post-theoretical" period, theory has developed, expanded and diversified considerably and seems to be thriving. This is precisely the context in which the current discourse of posthumanism finds itself and it is precisely this circumstance that also calls for a critical assessment, in the form of what has been called a "critical

[9] Cf. the "Introduction: The Future of Democracy: Populism, Transhumanism and Post-Truth" in this volume.

[10] See Rosi Braidotti et al., eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to New European Humanities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024), pp. 23-46.

[11] Lyotard, "Rewriting Modernity", 24-35.

[12] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

posthumanism".[13] Critical posthumansim represents the attempt to work both forwards and backwards, on the one hand, to ensure the ongoing deconstruction of but also the ongoing connectedness to the humanist tradition and worldview, while at the same time and on the other hand, to resist ambient technological determinism especially rampant in transhumanist circles. It thus aims to create an awareness of the different positions that by now exist within theoretical posthumanism: from a continued engagement with and a radicalisation of poststructuralism and deconstruction, to actor-network theory and its calls for a "post-critique", to new systems theory or second-order cybernetics,[14] to object-oriented ontology,[15] to the various denominations of (feminist) new materialisms and new realisms, to bio- and cybersemiotics, zooanthropology, or decolonial and post-Anthropocene ecocriticism.

"We" (i.e. humans) should indeed include the innovative potential of all these new attempts at explanation in order to come to terms with "our" role in the current planetary situation of human-induced climate change, the accelerated loss of biodiversity, the depletion of "natural" resources, and (human) overpopulation (in addition to the "established" and continued threats of thermo-nuclear catastrophes and wars, pandemics, asteroid impacts, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes etc.). The "critical" in critical posthumanism, however, also signals that humanism apart from a "Eurocentric" and "imperialist" worldview also refers to a set of valuable practices, cultural, social and political achievements that it would be short-sighted to reject or abandon, including the aspects that used to form the core of the humanities, namely the humanistic study of language and symbolic forms, expressions of creativity, central cultural technologies like reading and writing, or in other words, practices engaging in what used to be called "philology". The simple reason is that it is precisely this critical and cultural competence that will be needed most in our current uncertain and "hyper-political" times characterised by so-called "post-truth":[16] namely to pursue a radical critique of obfuscating language, politics and science practices through the kind of careful reading that has been undertaken by humanities scholars at their best.

In short, in order to be able to *critically* evaluate and further develop posthumanism (as a discourse), one must examine exactly what it says (about itself, the posthuman, the future and the past). The adjective "critical" (in critical posthumanism) thus also refers back to the problem of theory fashions, of "turns" and "wars". To understand theory in this way, namely as a "fashion" or a succession of newly formed "concepts", with an emphasis on factions, turf wars, supersession and one-up(hu)manship, is itself not very sustainable or indeed ecological. The actual stakes that posthumanism raises are much more difficult to ignore, to deny or to outdo. The questions raised by it cannot be overlooked and will undoubtedly preoccupy "us" for the foreseeable future, if not as "humanity", then at least as "humans" (individuals, communities and species), insofar as humans might continue to exist. In fact, the ultimate of these questions might well turn out to be: how can "we" survive "ourselves", if indeed "we" should.[17]

This is a question that returns us to the age-old conundrum of what a life worth living might be, or how one might square individual freedom with social (and even planetary) responsibility? What kind of responsibility does indeed exist for humans at the scale of planetarity (i.e. for nonhumans, the

[13] For an overview see Stefan Herbrechter et al., eds. *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, 2 vols. (Cham: Springer, 2022).
[14] Cf. Bruce Clarke, *Neocybernetics and Narrative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
[15] Cf. Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented-Ontology. A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican, 2018).
[16] See also the "Introduction: The Future of Democracy: Populism, Transhumanism and Post-Truth" in this volume.
[17] Cf. the chapter on "Futurecide, or, (De)Constructions of the Future" in this volume.

environment, the "world" in its irreducible plurality)?[18] These are questions reminiscent of an almost Kantian philosophical anthropology reposed with renewed urgency at the time of extinction threats and species angst. One possible starting point in this context could be a critical return to the question concerning technology, as formulated by Martin Heidegger, in what one might call a thought experiment of a "posthumanism without technology".[19] This is not to ignore or underestimate the undeniable transformative potential (for better or for worse) of new and increasingly converging technologies. However, what would happen to such a techno-intensive discourse as posthumanism, if one were to take Heidegger's provocative statement, namely that the "essence of technology is by no means something technical, but something po(i)etic" that "enframes" us, seriously.[20] Under the current conditions, in which neoliberal populism and libertarian techno-enthusiasm are governing a superpower struggling to retain its global dominance, it seems more important than ever to engage with such a thought experiment in order to distinguish between beneficial technological change and a technocratic ideology of science, economics, politics and war that threatens to become the incontestable norm of Western, and, increasingly, global and globalised societies. In this context, posthumanism means adhering to a certain historical, genealogical, or simply critical, approach, and to advocate an "untimely" posthumanism, which draws attention to prefigurations of the posthuman, antihumanist resistance within various humanisms, and alternatives to the process of posthumanisation dominated by (bio)technoscientific capitalism.

Reengaging with our "proto-human" past, for example, might in fact challenge the grand narratives of evolution and hominisation and provide alternative accounts of how "we" became who "we" (think "we") are.[21] The inherent ambiguity of the prefix "post", which does not (or at least not only) mean a chronological suspension, but also requires anamnesis, a working through and paraphrasing, problematises both the concept of origin and that of the future including the idea and the relationship between pre-, proto- and posthumanity. In addition to transition and change, there is always a suppression of many other possibilities – i.e. paths that philosophy, culture, science and social development have not taken – and these unfulfilled promises are precisely what might allow for alternative futures. In view of current extinction threats, these paths that have not been taken could suddenly turn into vital escape routes and thus require reassessment. In keeping these options open, critical posthumanism also has another important task. It tries to emphasise the fundamentally political character of any discourse – an aspect that is especially indispensable for the discourse about the human and humanity (i.e. human nature, the essence of truth, existence itself, etc.). It is precisely in this context that a critical examination of the ubiquity and inevitability of contemporary "biopolitics" and the ethical demand for a "postanthropocentrism" is crucial.

All contemporary politics can indeed be understood as biopolitics because liberal democracies exist exclusively in a form of governmentality that is based on the disciplining of the (human and nonhuman) body. In fact, the structuring metaphor and analogy of this form of governmentality is already a physical one – with the state understood as a "body politic" which can be afflicted by various diseases and is therefore in need of protection, policing and healing. As contemporary nation-states begin to exhibit more and more symptoms of autoimmune responses to real and imagined threats (migration, terrorism, pandemics, etc.), the traditional boundaries between what constitutes human and

[18] Cf. the chapter on "The End of the World and Post-Anthropocene Cosmopolitanism" in this volume.
[19] Cf. Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, "Criticial Posthumanism or, the *inventio* of a posthumanism without technology", *Subject Matters* 3.2/4.1 (2007): 15-29; and the chapter on "Technogenesis, Objects and the Deconstruction of Technology" in this volume.
[20] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology [1954]", in *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 307-342.
[21] Cf. Stefan Herbrechter, *Before Humanity: Posthumanism and Ancestrality* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

'inhuman' behaviour also become increasingly unstable. This produces a political and ethical vacuum that carries the potential for both regression and social progress, or the best and worst possible future scenarios. This vacuum, therefore, calls for heightened vigilance and critique, even though critique – also a humanist "invention", of course – itself has to be continually tested for its own autoimmune reflexes.

Critique, however, remains a precondition for any "radical imaginary" that seeks posthumanist alternatives. A posthumanist politics worthy of the name, must be a departure from any predetermined consensus on what, today, it means to be human (or indeed inhuman). On the contrary, what has so far been considered humanity is precisely what needs to be reviewed in terms of its existing patterns of exclusion and inclusion and the idea of human exceptionalism on which it is traditionally based, without, however, disregarding the historical responsibility and the specific forms of agency that humans are capable of. And this is precisely where the connection between posthumanism and postanthropocentrism becomes most obvious. The gradual global recognition that there is such a thing as anthropogenic climate change and that it has ecological effects on the entire human species (despite the fact, that only a minority of humans might be historically responsible for it) requires new social, political, ethical and ecological ways of thinking that are crucial for the survival not only of the human species, but also – and this is the special responsibility that "we" humans bear – that of other species, ecosystems and ultimately life as such. This requires a way of thinking that does justice to the scale and complexity of the challenges of the *present* (i.e. the depletion of natural resources, population growth, the widening gap between rich and poor, global warming, automation, virtualisation and autonomous artificial intelligence, civilisation collapse and the proliferation of traditional and new forms of military conflict and violence).