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Art & Culture

Posthumanism is arguably brasher about its connections with futurity than other concepts explored in this Companion. The term's morphological partitivity into post-humanism and post-human-ism bears this out. It handily foregrounds the paradigm's readiness to contemplate rupture with the complex and diverse traditions of humanism and also the supersedence and/or obsolescence of the human itself. Consequently posthumanism can come across as distinctly attitudinizing in its outlooks. This is particularly so when it is characterized by a radical futurology that celebrates the provisionality of the human in the seemingly steady and irreversible tending towards evolved and enhanced versions of humanity.

The term transhumanism, which suggests a going beyond and exceeding of the human, is sometimes used to refer to such positions and outlooks. They are exemplified, for instance, in the work of Ray Kurzweil, notably in The Singularity Is Near. Reserving the term singularity for that point in the future when humanity will recognise itself as anachronistic and out of step with selfreplicating and self-optimizing technologies of Artificial Intelligence and Artificial Life, Kurzweil argues that humanity's centrality is only a function of " our ability to create models—virtual realities … to usher in another form of evolution: technology" (2005: 487). Joel Garreau, in Radical Evolution, further explains: ' Transhumanists are keen on the enhancement of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capabilities, the elimination of disease and unnecessary suffering, and the dramatic extension of life span' (2005: 231-2). Additionally, Hans Moravec's speculation that it will become possible to

download human consciousness into a computer is emblematic and is quoted towards the beginning of N.

Katherine Hayles's How We Became Posthuman, which remains one of the most influential introductions to posthumanist thought (Moravec 1988: 9-10; Hayles 1999: 1). Hayles's work (about which more will be said below) tends to be appreciably more nuanced and measured than many transhumanist statements, which are probably best approached as manifesto-like declarations. Transhumanist expression, through its extravagance and politics of shock, is intent on securing notice and discussion of ideas and possibilities which cannot be comfortably dismissed or derided even if they seem overstated or outré. In this respect, transhumanist manifestoes recall the strategies and tactics of the great declarati ons of the twentieth-century avant-garde emerging from movements like Dada, Surrealism or Situationism. The equivalent position, here, is the idea that technology and ' the prosthetic impulse' (see Smith and Morra) will be naturalized rather than supplementary to, or facilitative of, human life and action.

After all, it is hardly seismic to think of a different operationality of the human or of exceeding humanity's reach and transgressing the circumstancing of its thrownness Geworfenheit, as Heidegger would have it, after Nietzsche announced (for all the problematising of this statement that subsequently occurred), that ' God is dead'. Transhumanism, whose closest 20th-century analogue is perhaps Futurism and its rhapsodies about ' the internal glow of electric hearts', about ' eternal,

omnipresent speed' and about ' our insolent challenge to the stars', is encouraged in such thoughts through the pervasiveness of bioengineering and of the technocultural lifescapes of the 21st-century, when what might previously have seemed science-fictional is immediate and has in fact become all too mundane and mondaine. The world no longer marvels but grows increasingly blasé about hi-tech devices and solutions, or about technoscientific breakthroughs which in one year—take 2012, for instance, when we are writing this—can bring about some telling corroboration of the probable existence of the Higgs boson particle, or the landing of the Curiosity rover on Mars, or extend mapping of the human genome, or provide further confirmation that the Denisovians, an obscure group of ancient humans, were genetically different from both Neanderthals and modern humans, thereby further countering presuppositions about human exceptionalism.

It is not too fanciful to speculate that all that might be needed to render a posthumanist paradigm orthodox and indeed itself passé is the discovery of extraterrestrial life: possibly the only event that could focus minds on what would then be an all too post-humanist circumstancing. In the midst of all the above, resistance to posthumanist culture, tropes and ideas is not surprising. Posthumanism is perceivable to some observers as a rather jejune futurology that recharges a residual Luddism and technophobia in the most hyperconnected individuals. It canprompt fear that the authenticity and integrity of human experience and interaction are distanced in a world of relays and avatars. Posthumanism's momentum can seem driven towards a contracting of individual autonomy in favour of overarching,

all -embracing systems that are panopticon-like in their omnipresence. Through their autopoietic potentialities such systems decentre the self further in an age of network cultures, where it can become more apt to speak of posthumanist nodality rather than posthumanist subjectivity.

The extremes of this unease could suggest that Terence's " Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto" I am a human being, I consider nothing that is human alien to me risks being overridden by the consideration that what is nonhuman or less or more than human is less extraneous to posthumanism than humanity and the human. The work of Hayles calibrates itself more sensitively to the fear and dismay that can arise in response to that. It approaches posthumanism—which can be thought of here as the cultural condition occasioned by 21st-century biopolitics, technoculture, lifescapes and all the desires and anxieties arising therein, as well as the discourse that studies all that—with some of the circumspection that might be expected from someone who followed up formal training in chemistry with formal training in literary studies. Even so, however, the sense of revised urgency in response to what is already imminent and immanent is distinctive. In an article called ' Traumas of Code', for instance, Hayles suggests that the pre-eminence of conceptualizations of language in late 20th-century thought might give way to the more cogent priority of investigating the intrinsicality of code within contemporaneity: In computer-mediated communication, including cell phone conversations, email, chat room dialogues, blogs, and all documents written on a computer, the language we learned at mother's knee is generated by computer code.

Though computer-mediatedlanguage may appear to flow as effortlessly as speaking face-to-face or scribbling wordson paper, complicated processes of encoding and decoding race up and down the computer's tower of languages as letters are coupled with programming commands, commands are compiled or interpreted, and source code is correlated with the object code of binary symbols, transformed in turn into voltage differences. Most of this code is inaccessible to most people.

At the level of binary code, few are equipped to understand it with fluency, and even fewer can reverse engineer object code to arrive at the higherlevel languages with which it correlates. As a result, contemporary computer-mediated communication consists of two categories of dynamically interacting languages: socalled natural language, which is addressed to humans (and which I will accordingly call human-only language); and computer codes, which (although readable by some humans)can be executed only by intelligent machines. (2008: 136)This long quotation is included here because it demonstrates how homely or familiar tropes (' mother's knee'; ' tower of languages') can be deployed in posthumanist writing to demonstrate the insidious naturalization of posthumanist operationality. Posthumanist retooling of human thought and action is facilitated by that naturalization. In the process, assumptions about what is integral to the human are transformed, even if the sense of alterity cannot be dispelled: No longer natural, human-only language increasingly finds itself in a position analogous to the conscious mind that, faced with disturbing dreams, is forced to acknowledge

it is not the whole of mind. Code, performing as the interface between humans and programmable media, functions in the contemporary cultural Imaginary as the shadowy double of the human-only language inflected and infected by its hidden presence. (2008: 157)This is a more nuanced restatement, then, of the four shaping tenets that were foundational in How We Became Posthuman and in posthumanism itself: First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the postuman considers consciousness ... as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow.

Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures the human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals. (1999: 2-3)Key to this form of posthumanism, therefore, is the idea of dynamic emergence, of the ‘ complex mutuality of the interactions’ between ‘ the embodied human subject’ and ‘ intelligent machines’, so that ‘” what we make’ and “ what (we think) we are” coevolve together’, such that ’emergence can operate as an ethical dynamic as well as a technological one’ (Hayles 2005:

243). But is this all there is to posthumanism, then: a technoutopic will impelled toward ‘ homo technologicus, a symbiotic creature in which biology and technology intimately interact’, leading to ‘ homo sapiens transformed by technology’ into ‘ a new evolutionary unit, undergoing a new kind of evolution in a new environment’ (Longo 2002: 23)? Not at all. There are other forms of posthumanism which are reviewed briefly below. Some look at posthumanism’s genealogies and alternative histories, as well as posthumanism’s interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary temptations and affiliations.

Some are more contained and others more political. There are also, then, dissident positions which, without denying the importance of posthumanism as a cultural moment and as a field of discourse, pursue its conflicted relationship with paradigms that preceded it, like postmodernism or poststructuralism, and critique its technological overdeterminism. But in all this, what remains consistent across thesedifferent posthumanisms is the view—and its critique—that humanity’s centrality in the horizons of time and space are anything but self-evident. Added to that are the idea that contemporary epistemology must renew itself and respond to diminished attunement to humanism’s orientations, among them entrenchments in the studia humanitatis and their legacies, and to uncritical acceptance of the values of humanitas, which are not above being totalizing.

There is, additionally, the reluctance to accept that there must be limits to human reach and self-(re)design, and the conceit that humanity can

be re-engineered beyond the constrictions of biology. Some aspects of these points, all of which turn on the idea that ‘ human technologies have produced a hypercomplex environment for which humanist distinctions between the natural, the human, and the technological are increasingly non-functional’, as Bruce Clarke puts it (2008: 195), are considered below.