THE FUTURE
OF THE HUMANITIES
IN POSTHUMAN TIMES__

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The Future of the Humanities in Posthuman Times
- Jan Miernowski

"After the death of God, the death of Man is being announced." These are the words that Sartre wrote in 1945, in the first issue of *Les Temps Modernes*. From then on, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, humanity was bound to live under the constant threat of self-annihilation. Nonetheless Sartre wanted existentialism to be considered the new humanism for the 20th century. Humanism? Yes, but the last one, as Foucault triumphantly proclaimed in mid-1960s. For Foucault, Sartre was the last humanist, because the notion of human being, invented by Kant, had outlived its time.

Now, at the beginning of the new millennium, we feel we live in posthuman times. The concept of Man seems philosophically not pertinent anymore, and given our role in starting the Anthropocene, it may not even be ethically justifiable. Intellectual and moral considerations aside, the mere reality of humans, lost amidst the cyborgs of AI and the chimeras of bioengineering seems subject to doubt. How are we then supposed to consider the study of human specificity, language, spirituality, self-consciousness, artistic representation, sense of community, norms of behavior, emotional feelings, etc.? What is the future of the humanities in posthuman times?

This last question is discussed by a panel composed of Yves Citton, from the University Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis, and three scholars from the University of Wisconsin-Madison: Ullrich Langer, Frédéric Neyrat, and Sara Guyer. The initial statements of the panelists were written and presented by their authors in the order that follows, taking into consideration the analyses and recommendations of their colleagues who preceded them in the panel. The debate was co-organized by the Department of French and Italian and by the Center for the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison on April 20, 2018.

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Errare Humanum Est
- Yves Citton

1. The major blindspots of the Humanities are their traditional Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism.

2. The power of the Humanities rests on their pluralistic approaching of *many mankinds* (Édouard Glissant's *les humanités*). It is this plurality of definitions of (so-called) "humanity" and of the (so-called) "human" which provides them with their most important epistemological and political strength. Can the humanities exist without the search for human specificity? Probably not, since 1° the humanities are performed mostly by humans, since 2° humans look for what is (directly or indirectly) relevant to them, since 3° searching for human specificity is fun, and since 4° it is a good way to approach the many differences that compose the non-human world.

3. The renewed virtue of the Humanities in (so-called) "Posthuman times" can be located in their questioning of the boundaries and distinctions traditionally operated between humans and (other) electronic apparatuses.

4. The machinic assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari's "*agencements machiniques*") populating our environments in rapidly increasing numbers are better approached within an encompassing (environmentalist, ecologist) view of the global circuitry of electrical impulses that animate our worlds. Our "human intelligence" is but a moment within *the metastable global circulation of electrical impulses* through our (individual and collective) nervous systems.

5. Traditionally, the Humanities have been focused on various modes of *hermeneutic* labor performed on already pre-existing works. By doing so, they have developed the richest and finest toolbox of media analysis and conceptual tinkering available to date (within our Western tradition). This conventional role of the Humanities within the social division of labor remains more important than ever and, after due corrections against their Eurocentric and anthropocentric biases, should be vehemently defended against the various forms of attacks carried against them. Is it more accurate, or more fruitful, to consider the humanities as an "attitude" (a "disposition") or as a "knowledge"? One cannot

interpret a signal or a trace without a complex mix of knowledge about signs (language) and facts (context, causal relations). Hence, the humanities consist in a variety of manners to weave knowledge into attitudes (approaches, sensibilities).

6. In order for the Humanities to have a future—in front of the direct and indirect attacks they are confronted with but also, and no less importantly, in front of the likely perspective of civilizational collapse caused by the current ecocidal and egocidal developments of globalized capitalism—they would be well-inspired to supplement this traditional hermeneutical labor with a different type of *performative* labor.

7. The most commonly-heard current projections on "posthuman times" depict a future dominated by the ubiquitous and largely self-driven agency of algorithmic devices, more or less directly connected to (and through) our skins and synapses. While titillating for a highly respectable sci-fi imagination, such projections of so-called "Artificial Intelligence" tend to underestimate the continuing and problematic specificity of *hardware* (against the infinite possibilities of software) and, more particularly, of hardware-*as-bound-to-fuck-up* (due to trivial natural phenomena like rust & dust).

8. So-called "human performances" present a number of properties that the Humanities are best positioned not only to study, but also to enact. The *performative (and reflexive) enactment of the bodily and mental gestures* made possible under the umbrella of the Humanities offers a first area of activities to be explored in priority in "posthuman times". The circulation of electrical impulses through the hardware of our "human bodies and minds" present a number of specificities (like "improvisation") that the performative Humanities are best positioned to explore and exploit. Let's call this first domain *the performative gestures of the Humanities*.

9. One neighboring domain of research and activity can be found in the *study and arts of attention*. In their hermeneutical tradition as well as in their performative re-invention, the Humanities provide us with the most useful and exciting tools to better understand and reconfigure our individual, organizational and collective attentionscapes. The Humanities are well-equipped to reframe such issues in terms of *traction*, more interestingly than in by-now overexploited terms

of "attention". Mechanical devices can be made to perform automated attentional tasks, as illustrated by airplane automated pilots, self-driving cars, facial recognition devices and other search engines. While attention is the latest of the so-called "human faculty" to be externalized in mechanical devices, it is less clear whether such mechanical devices can display forms of *distraction*. As it refocuses our work on issues and practices of attraction and distraction, this second domain could pertain to *the tractional reflexivity of the Humanities*.

10. The circulation of electrical impulses through our digitally-medialized attentionscapes is bound to face and challenge the tragically reductive vocabulary currently used to address issues of attention, knowledge and embodied action. The Humanities can investigate the numerous blind spots of the lexicon of "information" (to which "meaning" and "signification" cannot be reduced), as well as the lure of "*data*" (which ought to be addressed more accurately in terms of Whitehead's "prehensions" (*capta*) than in terms of mere "givens"). Our social conversations about digitality could gain a lot in accuracy and political traction if we managed to reframe such issues in the vocabulary of *curiosity*. With its etymological proximity to *care*, its obvious filiation with the activity of *curation* and its pivotal address to objects (a *curious* phenomenon) as well as to subjects (*curious* George)—the dynamic relation established between *curiosa* and *curiosi/curiosae*, which has played a major role in the tradition of the Humanities, can be revitalized to animate a third domain of operations, within universities and art centers reconceived as *Laboratories of curiosities*.

11. At our current techno-bureaucratico-scientific juncture, we may want to reverse the traditional meaning of the famous phrase *Errare humanum est*. It used to be understood as an apology: we, humans, are fallible creatures, we tend to mess up, let's forgive each other for our imperfections. This phrase should rather be heard as a claim: humans should be proud to err, for only they can do it gracefully and productively. Machines tend to repeat the same operations in a fully programmable, predictable and reliable manner—that is, until they fuck up, which, with time, will never fail. When they break down, freeze, glitch, however, the technical environment within which they operate is threatened in it very essence. It takes a human to find value in glitch. It takes artists to wander off the beaten track. It takes the Humanities to lift an unexpected outcome into an opportunity for grace. This is precisely what improvisation, performance, reflection and curiosity are all about: augmenting the programmed, predictable

and reliable working of (human and non-human) machines with the capacity to provide errings with meanings.

12. Improvisational gestures, performance, tractional sensitivity, curiosity, as well as the urge not so much to "fail better", as Beckett wrote, but rather to *err better*—all can be conceived as and within force fields that deeply question and disqualify the individualistic approach that has dominated the conception of the "human" since the Humanities have been identified as such. In their hardware reality as much as in their intellectual dynamics, the Humanities are strategically placed to display and promote *the centrality of the commons* in the many processes of becoming-human. I would therefore push ahead the political goal of developing *a Post-Competitive Paradigm*, which would help debunk the ideology of competitiveness which has been such a core driver in the development and acceptation of neoliberal capitalism over the past decades. Neither the circulation of electrical impulses through our digitally-medialized attentionscapes, nor the coming-together of our many forms of human and non-human forms of life can be satisfactorily explained by the competitive paradigm. Documenting and analyzing the many processes of non-competitive commoning within the Humanities, as well as in societies and ecosystems at large, with the tools crafted by the Humanities, may very well be a pre-condition, I would argue to conclude, for the Humanities to *have* a future in posthuman times—i.e. for us to be able to prevent the metastable global circulation of electrical impulses from collapsing into the current downward spiral of "creative self-destruction".

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Potential Humanity and Posthumanity: Should We Feel Compassion for Alexa When She Breaks Down?
- Ullrich Langer

These thoughts are less sanguine about the future of humanist hermeneutics in a posthuman world, particularly since hermeneutics, as the search for meaning in representations, is historically connected to a teleological view of nature that we have come to reject.

Classical and Early Modern humanism assumed that nature possessed an intention, or a teleology. Nature intends to produce a set of distinct species endowed with certain qualities. In addition, nature intends to bring forth the most

perfected individuals within each species, that is, if all circumstances are favorable, nature will produce the most perfected human being (e.g. a well-functioning male), the most perfected ant, the most perfected dog, and so forth. Less perfected individuals or deficient individuals are a result of circumstances intervening in nature's intention. These individuals are no less members of their species than perfected individuals since, as members of the species, they have or had the *potential* of being perfected. Nature's intention cannot be actualized in most cases, but this intention determines our consideration of all members of a particular species. We extend help or pity or good will to all human beings, for example. Deficient individuals merit our pity and help, as potentially perfected human beings. Their deficiency does not exclude them from the species of human beings, as they are a product of nature's intention.

Under a posthuman view, nature possesses no intention or finality, and human beings are defined functionally, as there is no other criterion to determine the distinctness of their species. Human beings present certain functions (attributes, capacities, etc.). Those functions are not necessarily unique to human beings. A machine that functions as a human being functions cannot be distinguished justifiably from a human being. Similarly, a dog that functions like a human being should be considered a human being. Obversely, a human being with deficiencies that result in a functioning that resembles that of a dog or of some other being cannot be distinguished justifiably from that other being and should be considered equally to that being. Hence any preference of a deficient human being over any other being with the same functions should be understood as arbitrary, that is, deriving from a specific judgment [*arbitrium*] that is independent of any general natural intention. There is no accessible, universalizable reason for human beings to prefer a deficient human being to an animal which presents the same set of functions.

More generally, a deficient being cannot really be said to be deficient, under a posthuman view. If we remove the measure of the perfected member of the species that the notion of nature's intention provided humanism, then a deficiency is simply a variation of functions, not a deficiency. A deficiency is no longer a mark of potentiality, but a mere difference. Similarly, a perfected member of the species is a variation itself, not the intended form of nature. In our consideration of human beings, then, we extend good will, help, pity to a set of beings all of whom are variations. The limits of this extension are set arbitrarily,

that is, they depend on our decision to include some variations but exclude others. The criteria upon which our decision is based cannot rely on a natural intention, and they need to involve functions: we prefer some functions of beings over others, for example, and these functions may well not be particular to human beings (indeed, they probably are not).

I don't wish to engage in the debate of utilitarian anti-speciesism and disability studies. Instead, I would like to point out the analogy between this set of questions and the issue of literary interpretation. When we analyze a story, a poem, or any other coherent set of linguistic communication, we assume authorial intention, whether or not we subsequently dismiss this intention as not important to the meaning and effectiveness of the text. It is rare that we as interpreters of texts will determine deficiencies of the text that prevent it from actualizing the author's intention, but we almost always reflect on the elements of the text that produce meaning or meanings. These meanings are inseparable from intentions, located within the author or the readers. That is, words and syntagms are meaningful because we can sense that they are there *in order for* something to happen, to be represented, to be expressed, to be reflected upon, etc. Similarly, our basic question, when analyzing a story or a poem is "*why* this word rather than another" or "*why* this means of expression rather than another" or "*why* this arrangement of words or sounds rather than another", and so forth. All of these questions and their answers model a type of intention. Literary interpretation is not, then, an arbitrary listing of variations, but a directed understanding of human communication. In this sense it is analogous to the natural intention that allowed classical and early modern humanism to distinguish humanity and to apply the criterion of potentiality and actualization within the distinct species.

I am not bothered by the humanities' anthropocentrism, indeed I can't conceive of the humanities in any other way. Even our thoughts about the posthuman take as a point of departure a human point of view, that is, Yves, Frédéric, Sara, Jan, myself. I am bothered by a perception of the humanities as a Eurocentric enterprise, but not convinced that this needs to be nor really is the case.

The main struggle for the humanities is not against anthropocentrism nor against Eurocentrism, but against machines, technology, computer engineering and artificial intelligence. Two important things are necessary: to define

something within the humanities that is not already subsumed under a sophisticated computer program that can operate without human influence. The second thing is to define something within the humanities that *cannot* be subsumed under a sophisticated computer program in the future. The first is a given, the second is not: it is hard to argue a negative, in the face of technologists' supreme self-confidence that it is only a matter of time for all human capacities to be reproduced without remnant by a machine.

One remnant might be the capacity for human beings to ask the question WHY?. That question can be understood in many ways (see the classical varieties of causes), and some of those ways, one can argue, can be reproduced by a machine (e.g., why is this thing not working, what about this mechanism is failing to work). But other ways cannot be reproduced by a machine: why is there something rather than nothing, why are you here, why am I here, etc. It is not that humanities have found answers to those questions, it is that only human beings *understand* those questions. Our *understanding* of that question is something that is beyond the functioning of a machine. I can ask most human beings that question, and know that it is understood, but I fail to see how a machine can ever deliver a proof of the fact that it *understands* that question. Machines can deliver answers that have been programmed, but do they *understand*?

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What Can We Do With the Inhuman?
- Frédéric Neyrat

"The Future of the Humanities in Posthuman Times": the more I have thought about this title, the weirder it has become, the more I have become lost in the temporality at stake in it. To find my way out, I have decided to make it weirder.

So, let's play with the title. First, the title asks to consider ourselves in a posthuman age, *after* human times, *after* the supremacy of humankind as the source of the representations on which the world was built. But at the same time, we need to think about the future, and that's a first problem because, if we already are *after*, then we need to think further: *after after* in a way. The second problem is that we need to think *humanities* after the human, being given that the

human is supposed to come before the posthuman. Thus, in a way, from the perspective of the posthuman, thinking about humanities is not thinking about the future, but about the past. Or it turns out to be thinking about a past in the future, a future past that would not necessarily look like what the past used to be...

Do I just want to joke around? Not at all. I think that the paradoxes at play in the title must be taken very seriously because they adequately describe reality and addressing them might offer us some possible interesting ideas about the humanities. My idea is that, in posthuman times, the humanities could help us to politically rethink temporality. This idea leans on a hypothesis that I will – I apologize for that - elliptically explain: *in posthuman times, the human stands for the inhuman*. This hypothesis means at least two things that seem, at first sight, oppositional:

-First, it means that human beings are more and more a problem for the capitalist megamachine: now, with the Internet of Things, cyber-physical systems like smart homes and smart cities, human interventions, communications and actions appear as very superfluous. Besides, the best way to solve economic problems would be, no doubt, to get rid of those human beings who, god knows why, reject fracking, the Keystone pipeline, and everything that destroys their environment. To sum up, human beings are more and more what prevent machines to do their job correctly, human beings are more and more an inhuman factor that should be eliminated to save human beings...

-The second way to understand the inhuman is nothing but the other side of the first one: that the human stands for the inhuman means that humanity, in posthuman times, could be considered as a force of resistance against what tries to reduce it to a function. Here I will define the term inhuman with the help of philosopher Jean-François Lyotard for whom the inhuman was a force of indetermination at the core of the human. Against what tends to determine and control our existence, there is, in us, a force of resistance that refuses to adapt to anything. This force can be dangerous; that's why we need, collectively, to symbolize it, to metabolize it in political discourses that would not misuse it.

The misuse of the inhuman force consists, for example, in using it as a pure nihilist force, a reactionary force – in this respect, we should consider seriously Michael Moore's claim that the vote for Trump was a "legal terrorist" act. To

prevent this possibility from happening again, I think that humanities have a lot to do. What they have to do is to think about what *preceded* the institution of the human, what is *ante*-human right in the middle of the *posthuman* moment. But what does mean to take care of the inhuman in posthuman times?

I think it means identifying the *reserve of indeterminacy* that connects the human to its immemorial past, this past that is never dead because it is not even past, to refer to Faulkner. By reserve of indeterminacy, I mean the uncivilized, unconstructed, "wild" dimension that enables us to become other. Borrowing from quantum physics, I could also say that this reserve is in state of ontological superposition, in which a thing can be itself and its opposite. The problem is that the reserve of indeterminacy is endangered by neo-liberal imperatives and nanospeed communications: there is a high predilection toward suicidal tendencies in what north-American psychologist Jean Twenge calls the iGen, the first generation spending their entire adolescence in the age of the smartphone. The question is: is it possible heal the iGen? Is it possible to reconstitute the reserve of indeterminacy without fueling the racist, nationalist force of resentment? I think that the only way to do this is to leave a place to the promises of justice of the past, not to what was realized in the past, but to what was unfulfilled. Maybe the human is the name of an unfulfilled promise and the posthuman a direct effect of a failure, I mean a too hasty response. Thus, I'd argue that the future of the humanities, I mean the possibility for humanities to persist, lies in its capacity to recall the pre-human in the posthuman.

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The Humanities as Anthropomorphities
- Sara Guyer

I'd like to suggest that the question implicit in the title of this panel is whether there is a possibility of the humanities that does not rely upon a set of old assumptions about the human. And I'd like to push further to ask whether the posthuman still holds onto this same set of assumptions.

These are assumptions about the priority of the human in relation to other living or nonliving entities; assumptions about intelligence, agency, rights, language, sentience; assumptions whose historical contingency is evident within

the histories of racism and violence that have relied upon the differentiation between those whose lives are recognized and protected, rather than expendable and whose murders are punishable and deaths grievable.

On the one hand, the gesture that differentiates between the human and the nonhuman, with its historical errors – evident in multiple forms of genocide, slavery, and violence (mass and individual) – seems naive at best. And this seems reason enough to abandon it, even before we turn to the technological human and the rise of artificial intelligence.

Yet, I'd like to suggest that there is another way of perceiving the gesture through which the human is recognized, one that sets out from the *figure* or the *fiction* of the human. This is not the human of meaningful, unequivocal or even defensible content, the gesture that allows some forms of life to be understood as essentially human while others are dismissed as nonhuman (unprotected, expendable, without a right to live or flourish). Rather, if we set out from rethinking the human figure *as figure* we open up a possibility of recognition and flourishing that neither holds tight to the naïve sense of the human (that of anthropocentric humanism) nor does it place faith in the apparently liberatory possibilities of the posthuman. What I am proposing, instead, is that in starting from the *figure of the human*, we can think outside of the logics of the human and the posthuman. And it is from within this shifted logic that I would like to invite a rethinking of the humanities, one that privileges not the human (or posthuman), but *anthropomorphism* – it becomes the *anthropomorphities*.

Anthropomorphism inhabits a strange space, neither posthuman or antihumanist; it maintains and reinvents the human figure. It becomes a vehicle for bearing witness to a new human condition, between life and abandonment, neither lost nor losable. There are many examples here – from Michael Pollan's attempt to account for the *Botany of Desire* to Tom Mitchell's account of paintings to Robert Antelme's account of Buchenwald in *The Human Race*, to Paul Crutzen's notion of the anthropocene -- all of which rely upon the projection of the human in order to tell a story of human limitation, weakness, passivity, or non-agency. These inversions, which I understand not as reappropriations, but as efforts to bear witness to a limit – the limit that we call the human – are examples of a project of the humanities that will allow us to reframe scenes of knowledge, dissociating recognition and responsibility from power.

12/23/2019

In order to flag this project as different from the array of humanist, antihumanist, andposthumanist projects that have defined the humanities – at least since the Enlightenment – I call this mode the anthropomorphities, wherein the act of figuration is foundational to the humanist project, whether understood as an object (literature, culture) or a method of analysis.

Anthropomorphism's history is tied from the outset to errancy. Whether the naïve projection of human form on to the gods or the assumption of animals as humans in a gesture that refuses to see nonhuman specificity but recognizes no world apart from the world of human perception, anthropomorphism, is usually perceived as a mistake. The theorists of anthropomorphism – John Ruskin, Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul de Man – support this understanding, with de Man, suggesting that even Nietzsche's identification of truth as a human construct (his notion of an anthropomorphism) is insufficiently radical and enduringly anthropocentric. But I don't think that de Man fully captured the potential of anthropomorphism for rethinking the human and the humanities. I think that he remained so powerfully tied to the idea that this figure assumed knowledge of the shape of the human – tied to its recognizability as voice, intelligence body – rather than see how the vast proliferations of the human, the acts of projection and figuration about which I am interested might undo the anthropocentrism, the fixity of knowledge, the assumptions of priority – about which he worried. How they might allow for forms of life and flourishing that remain urgent.

And this is where we return to the question of the humanities: we remain in need of tools for counting and witnessing our limit, whether as arbiters of our own extinction (the Anthropocene) or as part of the project of recognition beyond the already known or recognizable. We remain in need of the humanities and can't figure out what to do with the human in them. Close reading and critique are exemplary practices here, as are the expansive data sets across many fields in the humanities that have emerged as efforts to reframe knowledge and recognition – the digital humanities. We also are in need of a renewed understanding of the humanities that does not leave us stumbling over questions about whether there can be an antihumanist humanist or posthumanist humanities. These questions bog us down. But we live with them as we look outward, beyond our divisions in order to collaborate between the sciences or the professions and the humanities or in order to advocate for better funding and recognition. I don't see this going

away, but we need ways to live with the discomfort that attends a nonidentity between our claims and our beliefs.

One way to do this, I want to suggest, is to hear in the "humanities" the "anthropomorphities," to understand the humanities as an act of anthropomorphism and to continue to invent new forms and hybrid methods better attuned to this redescription. These methods and practices can be found, for example, in the work of Jane Taylor and William Kentridge, in concert with the Handspring Puppet Company, in which puppetry and performance – the throwing of voices, the manipulation of figures – become part of the practice of the humanities. While these projects involve old technologies and the human hand (mani-pulation), they reveal at the same time a new practice of the thought and scholarship. If we hear in the humanities the anthropomorphities – and all that attunement entails, and if we recognize that the humanities – that which we practice and defend – are a vast project of figuration and refiguration (anthropomorphism), we might begin to find new ways of inhabiting the discomfort that comes with a humanities that is neither resoundingly humanist nor decidedly posthumanist, a humanities for which the human figure persists and proliferates in order to witness its limit – and in doing so, to continue to trouble it.