

Whatâ??s wrong with posthumanism

Description

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One of the benefits of strange encounters is that they cause us to reflect, to see the familiar as peculiar. When Iâ??m in reflective mode, films about parasitic alien life forms and rogue humanoid robots help me ponder the human condition: my frailty and finitude, or that my life is much better than it could have been.



s the prosaic themes of motherhood and onstrous way. Though the lead antagonists s to the fantasy are very human.

Successful entertainment brings enjoyment, shock, learning, and aversion as a bundle. Like a good metaphor, literary propositions work best when tuned to the readerâ??s situation, triggering just the right sensitivities, provoking outrage, laughter or

catharsis, and the situation depends on our very human condition in the here and now.

By most readings this is one of the functions of art. For want of a word we call this an ***ironic*** function. Irony is described by the OED as â??A state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what was or might be expected; an outcome cruelly, humorously, or strangely at odds with assumptions or expectations.â?•

I donâ??t think that Posthumanism quite gets this. It treats scifi as actual prognosis, blueprint, prescription or description of what the world is, will be, or could be. It treats our experiences of prosthetics, implants, body monitoring apparatuses and information technologies as other than grounded, embodied, practical and everyday.

Whereas the Posthumanist literature attends to the depletion of species, the eventual extinguishing of the sunâ??s energy, and cosmic catastrophe, it also promotes â??sheer delightâ?• at the prospect of our transformation â??into a new digital species with fantastic new potentialâ?• (Herbrechter).

I think Posthumanism valorises science and the Enlightenment project in ways that *postmodernism* tried to arrest. It also shifts the shock of the carnivalesque, the surreal, of obscene hybridity into a universalizing transformative project. To my way of thinking, Posthumanism of the literal variety is a kind of unregenerate *technoromanticism*.

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Cyborgs

Posthumanismâ??s central emblem is the cyborg: the **cyb**ernetic **org**anism. The idea of the â??cyborgâ?• was invented and reinvented both by NASA scientists and by science fiction writers to describe a hybrid human-machine. Many people depend on synthetic body parts, prosthetics, life support systems, mechanical aids, and of course their smartphones. According to Donna Haraway, the cyborg is a new subjective entity emerging from the electronic age. The cyborg is apparently the product of three rifts.

1. Evolutionary biology. The distinction between human and animal was breached with Darwinian evolution and its variants. We are animals after all, and non-human animals deserve our compassion and respect.
2. Human-machine hybrids. The second breach is of the boundary between organism and machine, where advanced prosthetics, and computers â??have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machinesâ?• (152). In fact for Haraway machines often appear to be more alive than we are: â??Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inertâ?• (152).
3. Immateriality. The third rift is of the boundary between the physical and non-physical. Our machines now are computer programs and intangible data systems â??made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum, and these machines are eminently portable, mobile.â?• (153). But whereas information and the cyborg entities constituted by it are fluid, people are not, â??being both material and opaqueâ?• (153). In contrast to people, cyborgs are â??etherâ?• and â??quintessenceâ?• (153).

Haraway speculates that perhaps â??paraplegics and other severely handicapped people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization with other communication devicesâ?• (178).

But Haraway declares that there is a sense in which we are now all cyborgs: â??we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformationâ?• (150).



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Posthumanism and irony

I think Haraway uses the term â??cyborgâ?• as an ironic provocation, a cultural probe to test and explore contemporary social conditions, and in particular the place of women. Cyborgs are â??the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism,â?• but she adds: â??illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessentialâ?• (151). Haraway approves of the cyborg and the challenge she/it poses to the male order and rationalism.

Iâ??ll go along with that. I think Donna Haraway was being ironic when she put forward the idea of the cyborg. Plausibility gives way to eventual absurdity. I think the idea of the Posthuman is the most effective when at its most outrageous.



Notes

- I picked up on these themes without recourse to the â??Posthumanism labelâ?• in *Technoromanticism* (1999).
- As an area of academic study, Posthumanism is of course ambiguous in its motivations and methods. On the one hand it is an ideology; on the other hand Posthumanism at best is a discursive framework, involving critique of its own central tenets. This fine line between advocacy and critique makes the literature provocative but a little confusing.

- Posthumanist academic literature draws on Nietzsche, Foucault and Lyotard. In a way Posthumanism literalises postmodernityâ??s tropes and metaphors: Nietzscheâ??s joke about human kindâ??s self importance as comparable to that of the mosquito; Foucaultâ??s references to biopower, etc.
- Also see blog posts in the body category and blog posts tagged with brain.

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1. Body

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2. cyborg
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4. technoromanticism

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