

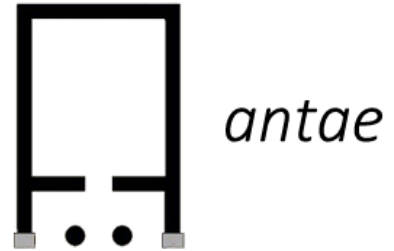
“On not writing ourselves out of the picture...”: An Interview with Stefan Herbrechter

The *antae* Editorial Board

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"On not writing ourselves out of the picture...":

An Interview with Stefan Herbrechter

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ANTAE: Do you think literature's transposition from its traditional and tangible abode—that of the printed page—to the digital domain is a transposition whose consequences have been exaggerated?

STEPHAN HERBRECHTER: There was huge debate and excitement about the question to what extent hypertext and electronic literature would determine the future of literature. It seems however that 'traditional' or 'analog' literature (i.e. books) will be here to stay for a while and continue to sell very well (even though more and more academic books and journals are moving towards a cheaper form of online distribution). Electronic reading devices like Kindle also have their place now but are unlikely to be able to replace the reading experience of a book. So, as a commodity, literature in the book format, or the book (whether in print or electronic form) as one 'media platform' of many others, will probably survive. The question is whether that's good or bad news...

Precisely, because this raises another and more important question, *outside* of what could be called the 'digital hype' around the marketing of electronic gadgets and ambient computerisation. And that, for me, is the question of the 'post-literary' on the one hand (which is also the angle that the journal *CounterText* takes, which is about to be launched by the English Department at Malta), and, even more far-reaching, the question of 'post-literacy' on the other hand. Literature has been declared dead so many times, both as a privileged form of humanist self-expression and as an 'institution' within (Western) modernity, to an extent that literature is now no longer used in the sense of 'letters' (as in 'a man of letters') but merely 'descriptively'—everything that is written. So one could say, literature has lost its 'aura' (as Benjamin argued with regard to the art work at the time of its mechanical, never mind its digital, reproduction). So, it's not so much that there is no literature (or even Literature) anymore, but we seem to be living in a time when literature itself has to deal, in form and in content, implicitly or explicitly, with its own demise and end. It is in that sense, probably, that literature, today, is post-literary. Combine that with a general sense of human transformation (climate change, species angst, body transformation, digitalisation, artificial intelligence—all aspects of a certain 'posthumanist' critique of 'humanist' anthropocentrism) and you get a very strange sensibility: between nostalgia, apocalypticism, nihilism and techno-euphoria.

As far as post-literacy is concerned, there might be a much more far-reaching transformation at work in the way we 'read' more generally. Maybe something like

‘computer-literacy’ is just the last attempt of a humanist paradigm based on a very specific notion of reading to harness the posthumanist potential of new decoding practices for its own purposes. Maybe the form of ‘literacy’ involved in new forms of meaning production in new computerised, networked, virtual environments is precisely no longer based on the idea of the ‘literate’. Greg Ulmer was the first to articulate this through the concept of ‘electracy’, which he understood as a new ‘dispositif’ (including, first and foremost, the pedagogical implications this might have).¹ So, yes, exaggeration on the one hand, but also, maybe, a lack of attention to the wider and deeper historical and cultural context, implications and transformations.

A: In your opinion, how does the digitisation of academic discourse affect the process of knowledge and thought, considering the overwhelming possibilities—in terms of accessibility and speed, for example—offered by the digital domain?

SH: It is true that reflection needs time—a point that Jean-François Lyotard makes in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*—a book I’ve been rereading recently.² It is probably also evident that the advent of social media together with a neoliberal regime that privileges ‘knowledge transfer’ over ‘learning’ and only sees knowledge as a form of ‘information’ or ‘data’, as well as thinking as a form of digitisable or computable ‘processing’, has profoundly changed the way academia works. However, it has also widened and possibly democratised access to archived information and the means of its public exchange. Having your own library available and searchable at a fingertip, not to mention all the resources of your university library, is certainly an advantage. However, it comes with all the well-known information ‘overload’ or ‘infobesity’ drawbacks as well. You ‘externalise’ your memory—a trend that, to refer to Bernard Stiegler’s work, has been ‘originary’ (a hominising technics, and an intensifying and accelerating process as old as our species)—with all the advantages and risks this implies.³ It saves time and delegates computational work to machines like search engines and electronic networks, but there’s also the risk of human ‘deskilling’.

So just like above, with the case of literacy, ‘deskilling’ is the pessimistic view, whereas ‘reskilling’ (i.e. let machines and networks do the kind of data processing and searching they can do much better and faster, while humans use their freed-up time and capacity for other, more complex tasks) is the optimistic one. This, however, doesn’t seem to be reflected in the way we train the next generation... So, yes, enormous changes in academic practice, exacerbated of course, or better, driven by a ‘neoliberalisation’ of the university as an institution: universities competing for money, being managed through industry models according to the profitability principle, students having to pay for their education and becoming ‘customers’, ambient utilitarianism (the focus on the economic surplus value of higher education et cetera), and so on. So there have been profound changes in the

¹ Gregory Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology: Post(e)-Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984); and Ulmer, *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy* (New York: Longman, 2002).

² Jean-François Lyotard *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

³ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 3 vols (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998ff).

everyday practices of an academic, those of students, as well those of the institution of a university and its place within society and increasingly global networking more generally. One could summarise this by saying that the 'humanist' (for example, Humboldtian) idea of the university has given way to the 'posthumanist' university, which is now increasingly becoming an instrument for preparing a 'posthuman' future.

A: Together with Ivan Callus, you have edited a book with the title, *Cy-Borges: Memories of the Posthuman in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges*. It seems that the two of you are also trying to explore 'the punceptual possibilities' of another author in the canon, as your call for contributions for a book called *Joyce-Stick: Gaming with James Joyce* demonstrates.⁴ You state that you are interested in 'what the relationship between Joyce, digitality and "post/homo ludens" might be'. Can you talk us through your own take on this possible relationship, and define what you mean by 'punceptual possibilities'?

SH: I think I need to explain in a few words how Ivan Callus and I have been trying to position ourselves vis-à-vis the emerging paradigm of 'posthumanism'. I guess the figure of the 'posthuman' (cf. Rosi Braidotti's recent book with that title) has been haunting contemporary Western globalised technoculture (and technoscientific capitalism) throughout the twentieth century, especially in the form of cyborgs and artificial intelligence (even though both have a much longer history of course).⁵ But especially since WWII, there has been an ever closer connection between a cultural imaginary and scientific practice and technology, so much so that, today, science fiction is almost indistinguishable from science fact. We are unable to imagine our present, never mind our future, without technology and scientific innovation. While earlier phases within the co-emergence of humans and technology could be seen as a process of 'prosthesisation' (a constant renegotiation of the limits between 'nature' and 'culture'), the invasive nature of contemporary technology, scientific practices and 'biopolitics' threatens to transform human subjectivity and marginalise human agency by treating human beings as 'matter' or 'material'. You could call this the ongoing process of 'posthumanisation'—'we', humans, are in the process of becoming 'other'. Posthumanism is the discourse (linguistic but also material, social, historical—et cetera—in the Foucauldian sense) that thematises, reinforces, or negotiates this transformation.

Our specific claim in putting forward what we call 'critical posthumanism' lies in the emphasis on genealogy and refiguration. In relation to the projects you mentioned, *Cy-Borges* and *Joyce-Stick*, we coined these titles with Greg Ulmer's notion of a 'puncept' in mind.⁶ Ulmer derives his notion from Derrida's reading of Joyce's inter- and multilingual puns (for example, the famous "He war") and which he compares to 'a scattering, a

⁴ Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, *Cy-Borges: Memories of the Posthuman in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges* (Cranbury NJ: Lewisburg Bucknell University Press, 2009), p.9; See Herbrechter, 'Joyce-Stick: Call for Contributions', *Stefan Herbrechter* (2012) <http://stefanherbrechter.com/?page_id=155> [accessed 20 November 2014]

⁵ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

⁶ For example, his "The Puncept in Grammatology", in Jonathan Culler, ed., *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), pp.164-189.

dissemination, a throwing of the dice'.⁷ They constitute “research-puns”, so to speak. Puncptual formations like Cy-Borges or Joyce-Stick, which of course made many people wince (as many puns do because they’re regarded as frivolous or low-level humour), we think can perform some seriously playful work...

A: Returning to *Cy-Borges*, could you perhaps comment further on your interesting suggestion that a work that chronologically pre-dates posthumanist discourse may host ‘memories’ of it? Moreover, you write that Borges’s anachronistic memory of posthumanism suggests that ‘humans have “always already” been cyborgs, contaminated with their own “posthumanity”’.⁸ Why so? And why is the posthumanist element considered a contamination?

SH: In order to understand the quite complex temporality involved in the prefix ‘post-’, it would be necessary to briefly return again to Lyotard and the postmodern. For Lyotard, the postmodern doesn’t simply come after the modern but is contained in the modern as its own unconscious or repressed desire—it mainly functions according to the psychoanalytic logic of a trauma. Whatever had to be repressed in the advent of the modern forces it to constantly repeat itself, more and more frantically. The postmodern instead would be an ‘anamnetic’ process of rewriting (cf. Lyotard’s short essay on “Rewriting Modernity” in *The Inhuman*), an unwinding, a deconstruction if you like. This is the curious temporality of the premodifier ‘post-’, a kind of remembering forwards. We’re claiming the same temporality for the idea of the ‘posthuman’. Whatever the form of repression that was necessary for us to become ‘human’ in the way that we currently understand this term it will have left traces and an ongoing series of ‘hauntings’ (and we would therefore argue also prefigurations) of its repressed others. And similar to Lyotard, who suggests that the only way to deal with modern repression is not by overcoming but by rewriting, or deconstructing it, we would also argue for an understanding of posthumanism as the ‘ongoing deconstruction’ of humanism, rather than its simple overcoming or supersession. In that sense, looking for prefigurations of the posthuman, for example in Borges, but also maybe more significantly in Shakespeare,⁹ is part of this process—a critique that is aimed both backwards, through a rereading of the humanist tradition, and forwards, namely at an ambient techno-utopianism and ideologies of ‘dematerialisation’ within certain strands of posthumanism, or maybe rather, transhumanism. Shakespeare is particularly relevant here because of his central position in the Western canon (cf. Harold Bloom’s idea that Shakespeare “made us human” through the invention of modern “characters” like Falstaff and Hamlet basically) on the one hand, and his curious position on the threshold of modernity.¹⁰ If there is a specific mirror function between (Shakespeare’s) early modernity and (our) late modernity there might also be a possibility to see this reflection at work between early and late (or indeed post-)humanity. In this sense, Shakespeare might just as well be said to have invented the posthuman as much as the human and it might be possible to show the process of repression needed to ‘become’ human at work in

⁷ Culler, p.188.

⁸ *Cy-Borges*, p.19.

⁹ See Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, eds., *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2012).

¹⁰ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Fourth Estate, 2002).

Shakespeare and early modernity more widely. At least that is what we claim in *Posthumanist Shakespeares*.

A: Before contending further with the posthuman, let's first speak a bit about the human. In Lydia Davis's short story, 'Kafka Cooks Dinner', the narrator asks, 'Why am I a human being?'¹¹ He refers to the human state as 'an extremely vague condition' which he would gladly do away with. Would you agree with his description? Might part of posthumanist discourse betray the same frustration present in the narrator's question above?

SH: It's an interesting and very depressing short story. It reminds me of a whole range of texts that try to 'dehumanise' the human as much as possible, aiming for complete disenchantment, the degree zero of the absurdity of human existence, existentialism basically. We tried to capture this 'mood' and a critique of it in an essay on Musil's *Man (or Human?) Without Qualities*.¹² What I find very interesting in Davis's short story—and this relates to the Kafka reference I suppose—is the ubiquitous appearance of animals, and insects in particular. The 'self-annihilation' of the narrator or his 'zombification' ("perhaps I am actually dead after all"; "I would like to disappear into the earth like that mole"; "see if I have suffocated yet"), and objectification ("why can't I be the happy wardrobe in her room") of the narrator—his 'becoming animal', 'object' or simply 'other', is indeed somewhat Kafkaesque (Kafka is another of these authors that would warrant a thorough posthumanist reading based on the principle of prefiguration I mentioned above). So many things would have to be said about the self-effacement and (Jewish) self-hatred at work here that ultimately also produces the distrust of language ("Our words are so often those of some unknown, alien being. I don't believe any speeches anymore. Even the most beautiful speech contains a worm.").¹³

However, the sentence you refer to ("Why am I a human being?... what an extremely vague condition!") is worth pondering on for a little. There is indeed an aspect in posthumanism (although I always try to distinguish here between posthumanism and transhumanism, precisely for this reason) that betrays a kind of (human) self-hatred: let's call it the long-standing frustration with the 'human condition'. This frustration relates on the one hand to the 'natural' biological decay of our bodies and on the other hand to our chronic under-determination ("what piece of work is man?", as Hamlet says), which is the result of defining ourselves against 'significant others'. Not only do we not know *why* we are human, but also what it actually means to *be* human. To draw the conclusion, like extropians and other transhumanists seem to do, that we need to get rid of our bodies and find a way to download our minds into computers, or to create a form of artificial intelligence that somehow 'helps' us to become better or 'more (than)' human, in my view

¹¹ The quotations are taken from 'Kafka Cooks Dinner', *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), pp.509-519 (p.512).

¹² Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, 'Humanity Without Itself: Robert Musil, Giorgio Agamben and Posthumanism', in Andy Mousley, ed., *Towards a New Literary Humanism* (Houndmills: Palgrave 2011), pp.143-158.

¹³ Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990).

is the ultimate human (and in fact humanist) delusion. Posthumanism (and that's one of the reasons we always try to use a qualifier like *critical* posthumanism) for me is not about self-hatred, enhancement or annihilation—it isn't nihilistic in any sense—but it asks, maybe more urgently than before, what this special responsibility (not a human exceptionalism based on some kind of unique and elusive 'ability') that we seem to have vis-à-vis our environment, fellow humans and nonhumans is. It is, dare I say, affirmative somehow...

A: Posthumanism is burdened with the problem of definition and essentialism on the one hand, and the persistent question, 'what does it mean to be human?' on the other. How does posthumanism cope with these contradictory burdens? And in so doing, how far can posthumanism be considered as an elaboration of an almost primordial concern with the impulse towards definition, even when this definition remains essentially aporetic? Could we venture to say that the human is the final aporia?

SH: To turn your question round: if we take posthumanism seriously, that is literally, then you could just as well say that the 'posthuman condition' is precisely that condition in which the human is no longer the final or ultimate aporia. Let me try and elaborate on that: earlier I referred to the notorious under-determination of the human. This is the result of the exceptionalism associated with the human that runs throughout Western (but not exclusively) metaphysics: humans as 'animal rationale', as shepherds of the house of being (Heidegger), as the animal that can lie (Lacan) and so on. If one works by negative definitions and exclusions one necessarily 'mystifies' (or even 'mythefies' in Roland Barthes's sense) the essence or truth of a category. So for the power of exceptionalism you pay the price of mystification (a similar thing happens to masculinity 'after' feminism). Once the exceptionalism crumbles and the frantic shoring up process begins the void at the centre becomes ever more clear. It seems that the current trend towards 'deanthropocentrising' the human and 'its(!)' environment (global threats, extinction scenarios, artificial intelligence, new (deep) ecologies, neoliberal governmentality and biopolitics, which all seem to imply a devaluing of human agency) which informs or even motivates posthumanism, has less and less time for the kind of human self-indulgence, the slightly nostalgic and tragic note in the 'heroism' of the human ("humans are capable of the worst but also of the best" and the like) captured by the words 'humane' and 'humanity'. You can almost see the caricature of a future patronising AI calling out to the last human bemoaning their fate: 'just get over it!' In that sense the human 'aporia' might be in the process of being side-stepped ("nobody got time for this...").

However, the inevitability of this seems questionable to say the least. This is why *critical* posthumanism is trying to do justice to both claims: we have never been and also will never be human (in the humanist sense)—for all sorts of reasons, an important one being that the universal 'human' underlying humanism has never been as universal as it made itself out to be (ask any feminist, critical race studies person or colonial subject)—but we also cannot shirk our specific responsibility as members of a species that has affected the planet more than anybody else and is probably the only force that could (not save it—that's pretentious) achieve some kind of equilibrium or multi-species flourishing (as

Donna Haraway calls it), if that's what is wanted. So the aporia today, I'd say, lies elsewhere: being human (an accident of history, or the result of evolution, which, ironically, boils down to the same thing)—what should we do? So, it's not about definition (to come back to your question) but about politics, basically. If this sounds like the Kantian questions of philosophical anthropology that's probably not a coincidence...

A: Might we reconfigure the question, 'what does it mean to be human', to, 'what does it mean to be human in the digital age?' How does the digital contribute to the redefinition of the human? Can we speak of 'the digital condition'?

SH: I understand that you keep coming back to the digital, but let me return again to the phrase 'digital hype' I referred to earlier. The reason why the digital is probably not a particularly good term to designate our current 'condition', or at least not encompassing enough, is that it seems to 'freeze' a process that has been ongoing and fetishizes one aspect of that change within the entire process of hominization, which, as I argued (by stretching Stiegler's notion of technics a little), is in fact a 'posthominising' process from the very beginning—'we' were always in the process of becoming other. There is no 'essential' humanity. The 'digital condition' you're referring to is certainly an important change within the history of media and technology, maybe even a turning point, but I don't think it is our *condition*. First of all we tend to forget that digitalisation, digital connectivity, archiving and information transfer is not very evenly distributed across the planet. It's a mainly urban phenomenon, dominated by Western, even Anglo-American cultures and economies and it is the main vehicle for multinational corporate neoliberal capitalism. I don't think the 'digital' conditions us in any way—this would be a return to a quite unreflected technological determinism that serves the interest of powerful media-industrial, economic and governmental complexes.

In fact, we've been witnessing a global power struggle over digital (copy) rights, information control in the age of terror and security, ownership disputes over the digitalisation and use of biological 'information' (for example, DNA)—another definition of biopolitics. No, I can't really accept the phrase 'digital condition': it expresses a kind of inevitability that isn't there. Nothing is inevitable about digitalisation. And it's certainly not on a par with the notion of 'human condition' used by existentialism, for example.

A: Together with Callus, you have explored the notion of 'critical posthumanism' and proposed the idea of a 'posthumanism without technology'. You say that speaking of a posthumanism without technology 'is tantamount to speaking of humanism without humanity'.¹⁴ Compounding matters is, as you say, the 'tendency in posthumanism to 'shy away from any 'linguistic turn' or philosophical speculation and to constrict the scope for rhetoric and abstraction', which is exactly what the idea of a posthumanism without technology entails. Your response to this is that paradoxically, 'however, posthumanism is a discourse which in envisaging the beyond of the human opens onto openness itself. It is the unknowable itself, the

¹⁴ Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, 'Critical posthumanism or, the *inventio* of a posthumanism without technology', in *Subject Matters*, Vol. 3, No.2/Vol. 4, No. 1, p.16

unthinkable itself'.¹⁵ Is this merely conceptual re-manoeuvring, or is there something to be said in visceral, practical terms even, for a posthumanism without technology?

SH: The argument, mainly by Stiegler (derived from Leroi-Gourhan), that technology is what makes us human, or that we have an originary relationship with the technical and technics, is of course very compelling, but ultimately I don't think it places enough emphasis on the relational and essentially 'mediatic' or transformational aspect in this process. More recently I've been trying to articulate this by claiming that one would need to supplement any primal scene of some kind of originary technicity (as for example in the famous scene from *2001 Space Odyssey*, when one of our forebears picks up a club and beats his rival to death with it) with a just as originary idea of mediation (let's call this 'originary mediality'). It is in fact impossible to discern what ultimately provoked this rather cruel and extreme act of mediation: the club or the human or the 'inventive' use of an existing 'object', as newly perceived. I guess this is what we meant by the phrase 'philosophical speculation' that you quote in your question. Speculation is necessary not only to imagine (techno)science fictional scenarios in the 'not so distant future' but also to arrive at a level that Ivan Callus and I have called 'before humanity'—our 'paleofuture' so to speak (again this is connected to what I said about prefiguration earlier). This is one aspect of a posthumanism 'without' technology (it's not about technophobia but it aims to show that there is an interesting form of posthumanist speculation for which the technological scenario is merely one of many—there are others: ecological, mediatic, paleontological et cetera).

The reference to the linguistic turn is related but has another dimension to it. While theory in recent years seems to have shown more and more exasperation with this 'prisonhouse of language' thing that poststructuralism and deconstruction have often been (wrongly in my view) accused of, our brand of critical posthumanism—precisely by putting renewed emphasis on the *critical*—stresses the continuity between the question of subjectivity, representation and textuality with the kind of challenges that the posthuman and posthumanism pose. A similar point of view can also be found in Elaine Graham's and Neil Badmington's work. There are a number of critical posthumanists who try to think the challenge of the posthuman through a continued engagement with poststructuralist theory and Derridean deconstruction (both wrongly labelled as merely 'antihumanist'). So, 'divesting' the question of the posthuman from the question of language, is a very high price of divestiture to pay indeed—that's the gist of the argument in our essay on 'posthumanism without technology'.

A: In the same article, you also make reference to Heidegger's seminal essay 'The question concerning technology', and his famous statement that 'the essence of technology is by no means anything technological'¹⁶ and relate it your interest in a posthumanism that focuses 'on how to think through the posthuman condition if it were to be considered for a moment that the posthuman might not be inescapably

¹⁵ Herbrechter and Callus, 'Critical posthumanism or, the *inventio* of a posthumanism without technology', p. 16.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.18.

grounded in “the union of the human with the intelligent machine”. Elsewhere, in ‘Discourse on Thinking’, Heidegger also warns that ‘calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking’.¹⁷ Is there then, in writing about such a posthumanism, something that you are trying to preserve or enshrine of the human part in the posthuman construct?

SH: It is true that Heidegger’s statement that the essence of technology is itself nothing technological but rather something ‘poetic’ is very powerful and intriguing. This sounds very far from our current technoscientific and technocultural everyday reality, counterintuitive in fact. We nevertheless think that, precisely today, Heidegger’s ‘question’ needs revisiting. It is not the instrumental aspect of technology (the gadgets, if you want) but the transformational and mediating power that Heidegger is concerned about and which he already articulates as a profound ambiguity (that Stiegler also understands in this way), namely that ‘harnessing’ technology’s power (Heidegger calls it the ‘Gestell’—which is usually translated as ‘enframing’) allows us to investigate and maybe get closer to or even seize the truth of our ‘Being’ (this is the history of metaphysics), but at the same time it is a ‘challenging forth’ that increasingly puts us under pressure. Or you could argue our ongoing ‘exteriorisation’ through technology increasingly looks more like an ‘expropriation’ (of something, of course that was never ours in the first place). For Heidegger, of course, ‘only a god can save us’, whereas for techno-utopians and transhumanists, the future is either bright, or, in any case, the ‘singularity’ inevitable. There must be a way to navigate between these extremes... But that should not be misunderstood as a kind of nostalgic return to some human ‘essence’ that needs preserving, maybe a kind of critical rereading of the humanist tradition—because it would be stupid to deny its achievements. Yes, as I said before: critical posthumanism is the ongoing deconstruction, rereading and rewriting of humanism and a fearless look into the abyss of the ‘inhuman’ (in Lyotard’s sense).

By the way, you also mention Heidegger’s critique of the ‘technicisation’ of language: “Language is not a mere means for exchange and understanding. Yet precisely this current conception of language undergoes not only a revival, but also a consolidation and a unilateral ascent to extremes with the reign of modern technology. This is reflected in the sentence: Language is information.”¹⁸ Even though one needn’t share Heidegger’s exceptionalism as far as human language is concerned, the point he raises here in my view is another important reason why a critical posthumanism shouldn’t disregard the critique of language that has become associated with poststructuralism and deconstruction. In my *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*¹⁹ I tried to show how the discourse of the posthuman helps bring about a social ‘(techno)reality’ by presenting it as ‘inevitable’—so much of all the ‘technobabble’ is pure ideology.²⁰ Literary and cultural criticism is very well placed to

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, ‘Discourse on Thinking’, trans. by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund, in *Philosophical and Political Writings*, ed. by Manfred Stassen (New York: Continuum, 2003), pp.94-95.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, ‘Traditional Language and Technological Language’, *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 23 (1998), p.139.

¹⁹ Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

²⁰ John A. Barry, *Technobabble* (Minneapolis: MIT Press, 1993).

resist this kind of language precisely by foregrounding its reliance on and abuse of language. ‘Forgetting’ language, or not remembering that every ‘truth’ (including scientific truth claims) is first of all precisely that, ‘mere’ language, is a lesson that is worth administering again and again, to each generation...

A: Near the end of your article, one of your main contentions is that ‘[a] critical posthumanism would be mindful of how the posthuman is always, by definition, in a critical condition, but [...] also work to critique constructions of the posthuman that depend on unproblematised conceptions of, for instance, the human, the body, language, science, progress, time, space, information, consciousness, et cetera’²¹ Is then the project of a critical posthumanism envisaged as a largely ‘corrective’ work, re-working certain misconceptions and assumptions in posthumanism, or is there a programmatic element that is already present or that may yet emerge?

SH: So you’re asking whether there is a specific politics at work in what we’re calling critical posthumanism... This reminds me a little of all the criticisms levelled at deconstruction or Derrida as not being ‘political’ (enough). I think a deconstructive approach like the one we’re embracing for critical posthumanism is eminently political (and also ‘ethical’ although Derrida didn’t like the idea of ethics, precisely because of its reliance on some normativity; cf. his careful but also challenging reading of Levinas and what he says about Levinasian ethics being an ‘ethics of ethics’, in a typical deconstructive move of raising the stakes).²² The posthuman, however, raises both ethical and political questions and of course these must be addressed under the headings of biopolitics and bioethics, but this is not the whole story. If you take the idea of the posthuman *literally*, to the *letter*, or ‘letterally’, so to speak, it goes to the very core not only of what it means to be human but also what a posthumanist politics and a posthumanist ethics might be. Is there a politics or an ethics ‘without’ humans, for example? What if ‘we’ (and who exactly would be this ‘we’?) took the idea of postanthropocentrism seriously? Is there a legitimation for what we are doing? Do we need one? What to do with ‘our’ responsibility that makes itself felt precisely at the time when we start ‘arguing ourselves out of the picture’?

This is what we hope to signal by this rather desperate but also ‘aporetic’ clinging on to the notion of ‘critique’ and the ‘critical’. Now an interesting but also devastating move would be to start criticising the essence of the critical (as deconstruction for example has already begun) and attack it as the ultimate ‘humanist’ reflex that would have to be somehow ‘overcome’. What happens (to thought) ‘after critique’, so to speak?²³

To return to your question, there is no political *programme* for a critical posthumanism apart from the questions listed above. Philosophy is notoriously bad at doing ‘policy’, although it’s probably a good idea to have a philosopher alongside a policy maker—not

²¹ Herbrechter and Callus, ‘Critical posthumanism or, the *inventio* of a posthumanism without technology’, p.26.

²² See his comments in ‘Alterities’, *Parallax* 33 (2004), trans. and ed. by Stefan Herbrechter, 61-63.

²³ ‘After critique’ is the title of a recent issue of *English Language Notes*, 51.2 (2013).

just to give a specific policy an 'ethical' rubber stamp, as is so often the case in 'ethics committees' these days. But philosophy is reflective and needs to be, hence the impossibility of letting go of critique (or even the 'critique of critique'). Apart from that, let me assure you, that Ivan and I are planning a (philosophical or critical) investigation into 'posthuman(ist) politics'—an opening towards a 'politics of the posthuman' has recently been made by Rosi Braidotti's book about *The Posthuman*.

A: Would you say that life can still be divided into its organic and anorganic categories? What role, if any, does the digital play in this division between the organic and the anorganic?

As we're becoming increasingly aware today thanks to technologies and media platforms and practices that erase this distinction, the organic and anorganic were never that stable an opposition. This has serious implications for the ongoing transformation of our understanding of 'life' and what our ethical and political attitude towards the living (and non-living) should be. Our oldest classifications like animal, plant, mineral and so on turn out to be more or less arbitrary or purely heuristic distinctions. It's true that computerisation (which, as I explained before, I prefer to 'the digital' as a separate 'state') plays an important part in showing the constructedness and also the limitations of these categorisations, but again I think the focus on new 'technical' or 'digital' life forms is only one, and as far as I'm concerned maybe the less interesting, part of the story. Again this dynamic works both forwards and backwards at the same time. As we discover 'biomedia' futures, it becomes equally apparent that all life has always been reliant on forms of mediation—and that's of course not only complex, never mind mammal or human life forms.²⁴ So fundamental 'deep' or long term ecological (eco-ethical and eco-political) aspects arise from this—some of these new questions are underpinning so-called 'new materialisms'²⁵ and recent developments in systems theory working at the interface of science studies and the (post)humanities.²⁶ New ontologies (human and nonhuman) are one major aspect of what one could call the 'life wars', as the most recent phase in the history of theory. Biopolitics, bioart, biomedica—bio (usually distinguished from *zoe* in Agamben's terms)—is 'all the rage' because it captures the current phase of technoscientific, biopolitical global capitalism, which has discovered and appropriated the very notion of 'life' as maybe the ultimate 'market'. If one can commodify life (or any aspect of it) a new economic dimension opens up—and this is where the 'digital' comes back in. Digitalisation (or computerisation, informatisation) provides the necessary translation or mediation of life into 'infocapital'. Everything from Reality TV to MRI

²⁴ Eugene Thacker, *Biomedica* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

²⁵ The rise of new materialist thinking (from a feminist critical science, but also speculative realist and object-oriented ontological point of view) has probably been prompted by the question of 'embodiment' as the idea of 'bodily experience' we mentioned earlier. This bodily experience today is of course increasingly 'mediated' through more and more invasive technologies and forms of prosthesis and virtualisation or spectralisation. So it becomes more and more important from an ontological point of view to rethink embodiment as a distributed agential process. The question here is to what extent this development can and should be resisted and what form this resistance might take... in any case, all of these attempts could maybe grouped under the need for rethinking a metaphysics of matter or to invent a 'new materialism'.

²⁶ Bruce Clarke and Mark Hansen, eds., *Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays on Second-Order Systems Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

scanning is implicated in this. So, it's not so much the critique of the idea of 'digital flesh' of the 1990s anymore,²⁷ or the problem of finding the interface between human and machine (the central theme of *The Matrix*, for example), but maybe more the very specific phase within the semiotisation of capital.²⁸ By the way, the French word 'numérique' or 'numérisation' seems to capture better what is actually at work in digitalisation.

A: How central is death to and how does it figure in critical posthumanism? Would critical posthumanist discourse survive without death? And finally, what is the place of affirmation in critical posthumanism?

SH: Very nice pun—would critical posthumanism survive without death! Well it's only *without* being dead that you can survive in a sense, if you take surviving in the Derridean sense, but it's also the case that you have to, in effect, die in order to be able to claim that you somehow survived. It's the undead and the spectres who 'survive', we others just live and die. Ironically, aporetically, you can only survive if you've died first. So I guess it's the fight against the progressing spectralisation that is at stake in something like critical posthumanism. Spectres need to be 'laid to rest', traumata need to be 'worked through', modernity and humanism need to be 'rewritten'—this goes back to Lyotard's anamnestic approach. In a sense, the future—the *real* one, not the one that is constantly pre-empted, based on extrapolation of the present and the past—needs to be *prepared* in a patient and careful process of deconstruction (which involves a kind of 'messianism without messiah', in Derrida's words).²⁹ Now if that is not affirmative I don't know...whereas all these proliferating 'the-world-without-us-scenarios' are in fact a shirking of responsibility, an ongoing process of repression, even pre-emptive repression. Ultimately you could call it something like 'extinction envy' on our part, or, as Claire Colebrook claims with regard to posthumanism as such (although, in my view wrongly, because it would be better to distinguish between different posthumanisms), a 'reaction formation'.³⁰ Arguing ourselves out of the picture, whether 'joyfully' (nihilistically, in an almost Nietzschean sense) or 'ultra-ethically' (out of maybe an all too eager ecological sense) in this respect, seems to me like the opposite of affirmation.

²⁷ Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, *Hacking the Future: Stories for the Flesh-Eating 90s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

²⁸ Cf. the notions of semiocapital and cognitive capitalism in recent Italian and French radical political thought, see Bifo, Lazzarato, Boltanski and Moulier-Boutang.

²⁹ See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

³⁰ Cf. Claire Colebrook (2012) *Extinction*, <<http://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Extinction>>

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