



THEORY

# Posthuman Glossary

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BLOOMSBURY

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Peter Sloterdijk's call for a 'new constitutional debate' involving a 'network of processes' to 'reconstitute the collective of Earth Citizens as a collective subjective in various arrangements'. Such a process, responding to the revival in the Anthropocene of a neo-Hobbesian State-of-Nature, would as he argues necessarily have to take into account 'the cohabitation of the citizens of the Earth in human and non-human forms' (Sloterdijk 2015: 337–9). Cosmopolitics shows the way beyond the business-as-usual consensus around the subject and boundaries of the domain of global politics to tackling the deep-rooted conflict of interest between globalized elites and the planetary poor, who are least well equipped to delay the impacts of climate change. It also reflects recognition of collective, political responsibility on the level of humankind for the transformation of the cosmos from a species-neutral backdrop to an unwitting extension of the human realm.

*See also* Anthropocene; Planetary; Ecosophy; Earth; Geopolitics; Non-Human Agency; Posthuman Rights.

*Maja and Reuben Fowkes*

## CRITICAL POSTHUMANISM

*Critical posthumanism* is a theoretical approach which maps and engages with the 'ongoing deconstruction of humanism' (cf. Badmington 2000). It differentiates between the *figure* of the 'posthuman' (and its present, past and projected avatars, like cyborgs, monsters, zombies, ghosts, angels, etc.) and 'posthumanism' as the contemporary social *discourse* (in the Foucauldian sense), which negotiates the pressing contemporary question of what it means to be human under the conditions of

globalization, technoscience, late capitalism and climate change (often, very problematically, by deliberately blurring the distinctions between science fiction and science fact; cf. 'science faction' in Herbrechter 2013: 107–34).

The prefix 'post-' (in analogy with the discussion of the postmodern and postmodernism following Lyotard 1992b) also has a double meaning: on the one hand, it signifies a desire or indeed a need to somehow go *beyond* humanism (or the human), while on the other hand, since the *post-* also necessarily repeats what it prefixes, it displays an awareness that neither humanism nor the human can in fact be overcome in any straightforward *dialectical* or historical fashion (for example, in the sense: after the human, the posthuman). The *critical* in the phrase 'critical posthumanism' gestures towards the more complicated and non-dialectical relationships between human and posthuman (as well as their respective dependence on the *nonhuman*). Posthumanism in this critical sense functions more like an anamnesis and a *rewriting* of the human and humanism (i.e. 'rewriting humanity', in analogy with Lyotard's notion of 'rewriting modernity': Lyotard 1991). *Critical posthumanism* asks a number of questions that address these complications: how did we come to think of ourselves as human? Or, what exactly does it mean to be human (especially at a time when *some* humans have apparently decided that they are becoming or have *already* become *posthuman*)? What are the motivations for this *posthumanizing* process and when did it start? What are its implications for nonhuman others (e.g. the 'environment', 'animals', 'machines', 'God', etc.)?

The adjective *critical* in the phrase 'critical posthumanism' thus signifies at least two things. It refers to the difference between a more or less uncritical or

*popular* (e.g. in many science fiction movies or popular science magazines) and a *philosophical* and reflective approach that investigates the current *postanthropocentric desire*. This desire articulates itself, on the one hand, in the form of an anticipated *transcendence* of the human condition (usually through various scenarios of disembodiment – an approach (and an entire movement that is best designated by the term ‘transhumanism’) and, on the other hand, through a (rather suspicious) attempt by humans to ‘argue themselves out of the picture’ precisely at a time when climate change caused by the impact of human civilization (cf. *Anthropocene*) calls for urgent and responsible, *human* action.

The other meaning of ‘critical’ is a defence and possibly a re-invention of some humanist *values* and *methodologies* which, in the face of a fundamental transformation provoked by digitalization and the advent of ubiquitous computing and social media, appear to have become obsolete, or to be in urgent need of revision (especially critical methodologies which are related to traditional forms of ‘literacy’, ‘reading’ and ‘thinking’). The question here is how to remain ‘critical’ in the sense of developing reading techniques, forms of conceptualizations and subjectivities that are both self-reflexive and aware of their own genealogies (i.e. able to stay ‘critically’ connected with humanist, and pre-humanist, traditions and especially ‘literal’, ‘literary’ and ‘textual’ approaches).<sup>1</sup>

Studies of literature’s twenty-first-century extensions<sup>2</sup> have questioned the broader resonances of the idea that the literary is currently being ‘overtaken’ by processes of digitalization, globalization and technoscientific change. In this current supposedly ‘post-literary’ moment, a critical posthumanist (and ‘countertextual’) approach is both aware and wary of the

contemporary desire to leave the humanist apparatus of literacy and its central institution of literature, with all its social, economic and cultural-political implications, its regimes of power and its aesthetics behind.

To counter the trend of seeing posthumanism merely as the ‘next theory fashion’, my *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (Herbrechter 2013) takes as its starting point the question as to what extent poststructuralism and deconstruction have anticipated current posthumanist formulations and critiques of subjectivity. This aspect is particularly important with regard to the current discussion about the importance and future role of the humanities. The first academic publications that systematically engage with the idea of the posthuman and posthumanism appeared in the late 1990s and early 2000s (in books and articles by Neil Badmington, Rosi Braidotti, Elaine L. Graham, N. Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe and others), all of which approach posthumanism through a more or less poststructuralist or deconstructive lens. They do so, however, by embracing two new aspects: a return to or of the question of technology (as it had been provocatively formulated by Heidegger (1977)) and the question of the future of the humanities.

An increasing part of the academy and the (theoretical) humanities in particular have been embracing this new context to form new, interdisciplinary alliances with the sciences and critical science studies (e.g. with Bruno Latour’s actor–network theory, speculative realism or new feminist materialism). One major aspect concerns the redefinition of the relationship between humans and technology – or the role of the history of ‘technics’ for human (and non-human) evolution. Donna Haraway’s early work on the cyborg (in the 1980s) received the widespread discussion it deserved.

Attempts to rethink the ontological aspect of technology and the political role of technological determinism, however, also look at previous philosophies of technology (especially in Heidegger, Ellul and Simondon), most prominently in Bernard Stiegler's work. In the aftermath of the so-called 'science wars', which highlighted at once the necessity of cultural recuperations of scientific practice and the call for a new dialogue between the sciences and the humanities, the new or 'posthumanities' (cf. the title of Cary Wolfe's influential series with University of Minnesota Press) are set to overcome the traditional 'two cultures' divide at last. This is, however, happening under extremely adverse conditions, namely the material base of an increasingly globalized advanced and neoliberal capitalism, and the transition from 'analogue' (humanist, 'lettered', book or text-based) to 'digital' (posthumanist, 'code', data or information-based) societies, cultures and economies.

The currently emerging 'posthumanities' therefore have to engage with the positive but also the problematic aspects of the transformative potential that a new dialogue or alliance between the humanities and the sciences contains. The focus on the posthuman as a discursive object, on posthumanism as a social discourse and on posthumanization as an ongoing historical and ontological process allows both communities – the humanities and sciences – to create new encounters and test new hypotheses that may lead to greater political and ethical awareness of the place of the human, the nonhuman and their environments (especially in connection with pressing issues like climate change, depletion of natural resources, the destruction of biodiversity, global migration flows, terrorism and insecurity, biopolitics etc.). Basically,

what is at stake is a rethinking of the relationship between human agency, the role of technology and environmental and cultural factors from a post- or non-anthropocentric perspective (Braidotti 2013). Postanthropocentric posthumanities are still about humans and humanities but only in so far as these are placed within a larger, ecological, picture (cf. for example the institutionalization of 'medical humanities', 'environmental humanities' and 'digital humanities'). The latter, in particular, will have to address the role of new and converging media and their social and cultural implications, as well as the proliferation of digital and virtual realities and their biopolitical dimensions (e.g. new forms of surveillance and commodification, new subjectivities and 'biomedia'; cf. Thacker 2004).

Critical posthumanism thus draws together a number of aspects that constitute 'our' early twenty-first-century reality and cosmology and links these back genealogically to their beginnings and pre-figurations within humanism itself (cf. Herbrechter and Callus 2005, 2012).

**See also** Anthropism/Immanent Humanism; Posthumanism; Decolonial Critique; Posthuman (Critical Theory; Speculative Posthumanism).

### Note

1. This is one of the main concerns of the Critical Posthumanism Network, which I co-direct with Ivan Callus and Manuela Rossini; (see <http://criticalposthumanism.net>).
2. See for instance the journal *CounterText* (<http://www.euppublishing.com/loi/count>).

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