

Call for papers – Deconstructing Anthropocentrism: Humanities after Humans?

Day 1. Our Extended Bodies, Ourselves

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'Deconstructing Anthropocentrism: Humanities after Humans?' is a project in collaboration between Sarah Gould (INHA), Diane Leblond (Université de Lorraine) and Estelle Murail (Institut Catholique de Paris)

In our times of accelerated technological development and growing environmental awareness, we are constantly made to reassess the precedence of humanity and human affairs in our understanding of the world. With notions of 'transhumanism' and 'posthumanism' now making their way into public awareness, it looks as if the critical reappraisal of the tenets of liberal humanism has become rooted in the collective psyche, providing the basis for renewed, non-anthrocentric forms of thinking. Such an epistemic turn is of particular relevance to the realm of humanities and human sciences: these disciplines have played a crucial role in the critique of anthropocentrism since the middle of the 20th century. Yet their specific interest in the workings of societies and cultures binds their very existence to the definition and status of what 'human' might be. As the category finds itself pushed from a central to a marginal position, as the boundaries that separate it from its technological or natural counterparts become porous, the fields of study previously mapped onto that category must be reconfigured. In the age of the 'anthropocene', when one concept both acknowledges the major influence of humanity on its surroundings and identifies this influence as the main source of existential risk for our species, what can be the use for academic disciplines devoted to all things human?

This project proposes to answer such questions by facilitating conversations across the humanities and between human and exact and natural sciences. Three different avenues will be envisaged for their role in the deconstruction of anthropocentrism. For each angle of approach, a one-day conference will take place at one of the academic institutions involved in the project :

Day 1. 'Anthrodecentric Humanities. Our Extended Bodies, Ourselves'. University of Lorraine, Metz.

On March 27th, we will kick off by investigating changes in the definition of our human condition as our bodies become ever more entwined with the machines we build. That first day will explore the historical trajectory of our companionship with technology, and examine futuristic understandings of a condition 'beyond' our embodied existence as humans. It will also open up a dialogue with engineers, designers and scientists who assert the continued relevance of human values in our technological world, and call for renewed research on 'how to be human in the age of the machine' (Fry). This event will be supported by IDEA, the research team investigating Interdisciplinarity in Anglophone Studies at the University of Lorraine, as well as the Faculty of Arts and Humanities (UFR ALL) in Metz, and the École doctorale Humanités Nouvelles/Fernand Braudel.

Day 2. 'Anthrocentrism. Humans as Footnotes in Space and Time?' Institut Catholique de Paris.

The second phase of our work will consider changes in understanding of space and time that challenge traditional ways of situating ourselves as humans at the centre of our own world. Since the nineteenth century, scientific explorations have implied for us to envisage scales of space and time that do not cohere with our own embodied experience. Our inability to conceive of conditions of existence so remote from our own phenomenological makeup has called for creative strategies to reposition ourselves in a world that can no longer be intellectually encompassed. This study day will look at how writers, artists and scholars have worked with and around this incommensurability to rethink the place of the human within the cosmos.

Day 3. 'Anthrocentric Materialism and the Politics of Matter'. Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, Paris.

In the wake of what in the 1990s came to be known as the "the material turn," scholars have increasingly attended to physicality as a locus of theorization. Such studies of materiality—of objects, unbounded matter, paint, and so on—seem to herald the decentering of the human being. Yet the same movement toward matter that dethrones the human is too-often seen as a movement away from political questions. This one-day conference will draw on the recent tendency of material studies, such as feminist materialism and what art historian Jennifer Roberts has called "the ecological horizon" of material studies, to retheorize the politics of matter. It will explore how material studies can hold together the question of materiality with renewed attention to the questions of post-enlightenment human subjectivity. In doing so it will consider the politics inherent in the urgent reevaluation of our place as earthlings, in a continuum of organic life now globally threatened by destructive human practices of occupying space and consuming its resources. Drawing back from the aporetic potential of 'post'human thinking, we will investigate new ways for humans to be 'com-post' (Haraway): to exist *with* their organic counterparts, sharing distinctive but overlapping ecosystems. This conference will open its questions out of the field of art history with the aim of creating a relevant forum for scholars theorizing the issue of matter in adjacent disciplines.

Day 1. Our Extended Bodies, Ourselves – Metz, March 27th, 2020.

Whether they promise ever brighter tomorrows or warn against impending doom and collective extinction, contemporary representations of technology tend to look forward, asking or predicting what future it may bring. But our understanding of and relationship with technical objects has shaped our history as a species. For centuries, humanity's unique ability to build machines has informed its attempts at making sense of itself, whether through fictional or theoretical narratives.

In that respect, it seems apt that Mark O'Connell's *Being a Machine* (2017), an anthropological investigation into transhumanist projects for the enhancement of human beings and the final overcoming of death, should open with a reference to Prometheus's hubristic gift of fire to mankind. At the core of what seem like the most future-oriented ventures, the same age-old myths lie dormant. Epimetheus's original oversight in endowing men with natural skills or attributes, which precipitated his brother's decision to steal arts and crafts from the gods to correct his mistake, also provides a crucial basis for any philosophical understanding of our use of technology. This explains how Epimetheus became the anti-hero for Bernard Stiegler's analysis of the role that technics plays in the continuous process of anthropogenesis (*La Faute d'Epiméthée*, 1994).

Ingrained in the story of Epimetheus and Prometheus's interventions into human destinies is the sense that arts and craftsmanship work as compensation for an unacceptably limited condition – that of an animal not naturally equipped to survive. For contemporary researchers in humanities and human sciences, this paradox still provides a crucial angle under which to apprehend our relationship with technology: the machines we build both define the singularity of our condition as technological beings, and point to our resolve in overcoming the need and vulnerability inherent in that condition.

While technological advances consistently aim to make the limitations of embodiment problems of the past, how do we redefine what it is to be human? Such questions play a structural role in the fast expanding fields of transhumanist or posthumanist thinking. But they are also commonly presented to general audiences via literature and the arts. Such is the case, for instance, when culture explores the role that technology plays as our 'black mirror.' The title of Charlie Brooker's running series suggests that within the digital turn our screens have become a new locus of unwitting, paradoxically un-self-aware self-fashioning. Our 'black' reflection, a distorted negative of the images we capture daily in mirrors and through our digital cameras, haunts the moments that we spend distractedly gazing at our devices. In its alienating quality, this new mirror stage points to some of the inner contradictions of our condition, which our interactions with machines help conceptualise.

One such tension lies in our quality as practitioners of mimesis. The centrality of imitation in processes of human onto- and phylogenesis (Susan Hurley and Nick Chater, *Perspectives on Imitation*, 2005) partly explains the extent to which the issue of mimesis has shaped our relationship with machines, as we try to define ourselves with and as opposed to them. Trajectories of affect can be traced here, in the history of fictional depictions of our technological doubles. Since its inception for instance, sci-fi has paid particular attention to the fascination and fear elicited by uncanny encounters with machines that are all-too-human in their appearance and behaviour. In the recent context of increasing interest in artificial intelligence, the sense of unnerving proximity seems compounded by a new understanding of our own compulsion to anthropomorphise and project human qualities onto machines, thereby missing their absolute difference. In series such as *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS* (2019) or *Westworld* (2016-), the anxiety of being made redundant or marginalised by our own creations taps into narratives that no longer

showcase robots or androids as aspiring humans, but rather point to humans themselves as deludedly and unsuccessfully working to turn themselves into what they are not.

In the worlds haunted by the impossibility to distinguish between human beings and their perfect copies, from Asimov and Philip K. Dick's works to the multiple fictions and adaptations they inspired, bodies of laws could be produced that would preserve social order and guarantee the exclusivity of human rights. The most famous, influential and enduring of those might be identified as Asimov's laws of robotics. In a context where humans no longer hold any real interest for independent machines both superior in intelligence and strength, fiction is not so much troubled by the best laws to give to robots, as by the very possibility of enforcing any laws at all.

Though the perspective of artificial intelligence taking over is, as yet, the stuff of fiction, the concerns that it raises sheds light on very real developments in the way we conceive of the ethics and politics inherent in the production of machines. Technologies do not emerge in a realm of existence detached from laws and moral laws, self-reflection and self-doubt. In our daily lives we find them at every turn – at the core of our medicine, our politics, our justice system and our policing strategies, but also behind our consumption habits and our ability to move around and to communicate with others, including friends and lovers. Day after day, technologies cause upheavals in our world, test our physical and cognitive limits, and call into question the very boundaries of our humanity.

In thinking of our technological others, we constantly redefine who and what we are as a species, and who and what we might become. Our ability to devise and build machines, in other words, must hinge on our ability to analyse and interpret the impact that those machines will have on human lives – an impact that takes on a specific shape in the information age (Citton, *L'Avenir des humanités*, 2010). This implies a form of collaboration between the work of scientists and engineers and the reflection led by scholars in humanities and human sciences. This is never clearer than when engineers such as Tristan Harris and Aza Raskin, or mathematicians such as Hannah Fry, call for 'Hippocratic oaths' to be taken by tech designers and mathematicians in the process of devising the algorithms and new technologies that shape our daily lives. In the name of Harris's and Raskin's Centre for Humane Technology, as well as Fry's insistence on building a technological future that is economically and politically fair, democratic, and cares for the most vulnerable among us, we find confirmation that any reflection on our machines implies a renewed understanding of 'who we are [as humans], where we're going, what's important to us and how that is changing with technology' (*Hello World*, 2018).

This one-day conference aims to show the willingness of researchers in humanities and human sciences to answer these calls for collective, inter-disciplinary explorations of a rapidly evolving technological world. As Epimetheus's legacy, technology is at the core of our paradoxical human ambition to transcend ourselves. Its ambiguous role, in both defining us and threatening our own annihilation, is paramount in the cultural productions and social dynamics that we are trying to shed light on. And its impact on who we are and where we are going delineates the trajectories along which we must redefine our work as explorers of the human condition.

This conference will be convened by Diane Leblond, a member of University of Lorraine's IDEA (Interdisciplinarité dans les Études Anglophones), with the support of IDEA, the Faculty of Arts and Humanities (UFR ALL) in Metz, and the École doctorale Humanités Nouvelles/Fernand Braudel.

It will be held at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities on the University of Lorraine's campus in Metz, on March 27th, 2020.

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