

An interview with Manuela Rossini

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On March 1, 2012, *Frame* and David de Kam, a young scholar who wrote his thesis on the Grand Narrative of posthumanism, met with dr. Manuela Rossini. Dr. Rossini shared her views on posthumanism, interaction with other life forms, and a global ethics of difference. This is *Frame*'s first interview in many years. Before the interview had properly commenced, dr. Rossini wanted to give a clear definition of the term 'posthumanism.'

*As a preliminary point, I would like to say a few words about my understanding of the terms 'posthumanism,' 'posthuman,' and 'posthumanist.' Very broadly speaking, 'posthumanism,' is a world-view as well as a paradigm, mode of interpretation or epistemological frame to reflect on humanism and its aftermath. It also refers, like any other '-ism,' to an ethical and political standpoint. Of course there is not only one posthumanism, like the other '-isms,' it has different forms and ideological colours. The 'posthuman' would relate more to the subject as figured in narratives and images in literature and culture at large. And, finally, we [Rossini speaks of herself and the general editors of the Rodopi monograph series "Critical Posthumanisms," red.] mainly use 'posthumanist' to denote a critical practice, a theoretical approach and attitude that is, arguably, next in line after poststructuralism and postmodernism. For the readers of *Frame* it is perhaps interesting to mention that posthumanism as a critical and cultural theory has mainly been developed by scholars of English and American Studies in the USA from the 1960's onwards.*

Now, with that distinction in mind, what are your views on a teleological posthumanism, one that has humans develop into their supposedly definitive form: machines? Is this a form of posthumanism that, as Jonathan Burt states in a 2009 article, carries the “possibility that posthuman propositions about transcending difference will realise themselves in (...) the posthuman *übermensch*”?

*Hm, it should really say “posthumanist propositions ... Anyway, the Nietzschean image of the *übermensch* is indeed the spectre that haunts posthumanism. This is mainly due to an overemphasis in ‘bad’ posthumanism on the cyborg as a man-machine hybrid and the technolust to transcend the limitations of the body—no body is perfect. Such visions are typical of the transhumanist movement promoted in the Extropy Institute, for example, and by a number of computer scientists in Artificial Intelligence and Artificial Life who work on uploading everything organic onto inorganic machines as the next big step in the evolution of humanity. In this sense, the posthuman is literally ‘after the human.’ But this discourse is what I call ‘popular posthumanism’. Critical posthumanism is diametrically opposed to such a vision; it does not see the posthuman as the ‘end of the human’ in this apocalyptic way. It is rather a*

reworking, or a working through of humanist thinking. Obviously, we critique Enlightenment humanism with its universal and essentialist categories and hierarchies, but there are other aspects of humanism that posthumanists need to nurture; i.e.; humanism must be revisited and the more positive sides of it need to find their way back into the discussion. In that sense our thought style is actually posthumanist, as it is a still committed to humanism—with a difference.

The representation of the posthuman figure as exactly this “man-machine hybrid” has been by far the most popular in many art forms, from literature to science-fiction films. Would these books and films, these representations of the posthuman, constitute your concept of “popular posthumanism”?

*Perhaps “popular” is not exactly the right term, as I do not want it to suggest a certain elitism that establishes a hierarchy between popular culture and high culture. I call it “popular posthumanism” because it is simply the form that most people are confronted with. That said, I am very critical of Hollywood blockbusters such as *Terminator* and *Alien* because most of them promote exactly the image of the posthuman as cyborg, as the ‘horrible Other’ that must be killed to save the human species.*

So, if “popular posthumanism” is informed by these types of

media, how do you see the role of literature in informing your particular strand of posthumanism, the “critical” variant?

*Literature, to me, is the genre par excellence to imagine or to imagineer (my term) the future. Literature always offers encounters with different worlds, different possibilities of being in the world and relating to others. That is where Derrida comes in, as critical posthumanism is very much influenced by deconstruction and Derrida’s notion of the “différance” of language and writing in general. Language is always referring to something else as part of its meaning, it is marked and in-formed by what it is not, by the outside if you like. Take for example the Greek word *pharmakon*, which can mean ‘remedy’ as well as ‘poison.’ Literature can be both: it can be reactionary as well as progressive, and both at the same time, deconstructing itself. Even without the intention of the author, it is the language itself that does that. It is usually quite rare, though, I must admit, to find expressions of the critical-posthumanist kind that we have in mind in dominant science fiction. It is not the genre where you would find the most thoughtful and serious reflections on what I believe is happening today, as I said before, but I have hopefully given a good example in my analysis (2009) of the ribofunk novel *A Mouthful of**

Tongues by Paul di Filippo. And, more importantly, I would also consider the more political strand of postmodern literature as critical posthumanist. It needn’t be science fiction per se.

Bruce Clarke is quoted in Jonathan Burt’s article as saying that, although there are many posthumanisms, the common effect of its several definitions is to relativize the human by coupling it to some other order of being. We have already spoken of the strand of posthumanism that couples the human with the machine, you have proposed a coupling of the human with the animal. Do you believe this coupling is more productive?

I have asked Donna Haraway the very same question, as she has also shifted her critical attention from human-machine couplings to human-animal entanglements even though she continues to enlist the cyborg as a powerful material-semiotic figure. The simple answer would be that, as a human being, I can relate more to animals because we are both organic beings. As a critical posthumanist, I would like to criticise the image of the cyborg also because it presupposes the coming-together of two separate and self-bound entities. Haraway’s alternative term ‘companion species’, by contrast, offers a more appropriate expression for system-environment interaction and co-evolutions. Animals, machines, and

humans are companion species of and to each other. In other words, I am not technophobic, I realize we are relying on machines and computers more and more, but I breathe the same air as an animal and this air is full of nonhuman others on which I depend for survival. The response to animals is also more immediate, I find. An animal can be a significant other, whereas a machine is easier to instrumentalise. We have to engage with an animal, we have to learn to respond to it, which also teaches us a lot about human interaction. So, although this form of communication is not interhuman and cannot rely on the use of human language, one learns about shaping a relationship to any other being in a response-ible way. A relationship which is, we do not have to romanticise that, still very asymmetrical. A pet, for example, depends on you feeding it but I believe we learn more about difference and how to deal with difference in co-habitation with animals. By playing with dogs for instance, this is something I have learned from spending some time with Haraway and Cayenne, one can learn a lot about expectations, about being clear about rules and sticking to agreements. This is something human sociality can benefit from.

Interaction with dogs is very hierarchical, though, as you point out yourself. And interaction

among dogs themselves is no different. There is one leader of the pack, and the others have to follow that leader. This leadership is asserted quite brutally as well. That is probably not something you envision for society at large.

I understand the problematics you are hinting at. But to me there is an important sincerity to this relationship, even to its violence. I am not arguing for ‘survival of the fittest’, but animals do not kill other animals for fun or profit. The situation is also one of mutual profit, the leader has a responsibility to the others, and there is no gain in abusing the hierarchy.

Still, if critical posthumanism is to constitute a new ethics of difference, subverting humanist ethics, would you agree that the persistence of hierarchical structures is contradictory to that effort?

That depends on what we do with that hierarchy. Some dogs in the pack are quite happy in a passive position. Every being has the potential to be happy. This is the Deleuzian notion of potential according to which everyone should be able to live a good life. You should form structures in such a way that you can contribute even if you are in an inferior position to the overall project. I noticed that in my team at work. I focus on their strong points and not their weaknesses, because it takes too much energy to

say: “you’ll have to learn how to do that.” I rather form a team in which everyone has a place and meaning in the system, and where the system has more agency than its individual parts. This understanding fosters an ethics that is mutually sustaining: we should sustain the potential—what a body can do—of everyone. Globally, we should recognize that we depend on one another, depend on other countries. Countries like Switzerland, my home country, should be aware that the privileges currently enjoyed by its natives are sooner (rather than later) over—what with the economic and ecological crises also effecting our way of life. Hence, we should move towards a global ethics and global justice—now! I agree with you, however, that the current hierarchical structures impede the realisation of such a posthumanist ethics of difference.

Hearing you talk of the need to recognise everyone’s worth and to construct structures that attempt to facilitate the potential to live a good life for all people, this global ethics of difference sounds like a very idealistic, almost romantic notion.

I believe that as a general attitude one should always try to be a ‘good’ host, unconditionally welcoming the other/Other. But in this sense, critical posthumanism is an ideal, a utopia in which we do not accept the world as it is today.

We need to strive for a sustaining ethics of difference, an ethics more related to caring, empathy and solidarity on the grounds of our shared mortality.

Are you hopeful that we are currently moving towards a posthuman ethics of difference?

Yes, I think we are forced somehow. Recent global ecological disasters attest to an entanglement of humanity and the material world. Such disasters will automatically force us to find solutions and cooperate more. We have to determine, as a society, where we want to go in the recognition that there are no islands. Because of the fact that the actions of one country will affect other countries, one cannot distance oneself from these other countries. Critical posthumanism is aware of the agency of matter; it takes into account the posthuman condition of entanglement. We should not have the illusion we humans are in control. These global crises, say pandemics, will, sadly, bring the necessity of a global ethics of difference to the fore.

When the validity for a global ethics of difference is based on the fact that we are threatened by the same things, does that not render this ethics fragile? Are we really embracing difference or do we, rather, recognize that one’s survival is aided by this cooperation in which one postpones difference, if you will?

Perhaps that is the compromise? Fragility is indeed a good term: these relationships are very precarious and we will need to work continuously at engaging in relationships beyond difference as hierarchy and the legitimisation of oppression and murder. As Donna Haraway also points out: we cannot completely refrain from instrumentalising each other or machines and animals. Haraway insists that relationships are, to different degrees, always instrumental and asymmetrical, but we should be closely aware of this and think about ways to improve the situation. I should be constantly aware of how I exclude others, how I suppress others, how I use others, but using each other is part of being in the world. Again, it is quite idealistic, but I believe that we should all reflect upon our own behaviour and act upon it in the interest of sustaining all that matters.

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Call for Papers: EUROPEAN POSTHUMANISM (Vol. 18, issue x)

Guest Editors: Stefan Herbrechter, Ivan Callus and Manuela Rossini

In English Departments and beyond, 'theory' and its aftermaths have arguably been overinfluenced by US- and UK-based institutions, publishers, journals and academics. Yet the influence of theory in its Anglo-American forms has remained reliant on Continental European ideas. Similar patterns can be discerned within the latest theoretical paradigm, posthumanism.

Posthumanism challenges established understandings of humanism, anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism, and is characterised by the increased urgency and proliferation of questions such as 'What does it mean to be human?' and 'What is the relationship between humans and their non-human others (animals, plants, the inorganic, machines, gods, systems, and various figures of liminality, from ghosts to angels, from cyborgs to zombies)?' Theorists such as Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe and Bruce Clarke have developed their thinking through prolonged engagement with Continental European philosophical traditions.

This issue of *EJES* proposes to examine the histories and geographies of posthumanism. It invites contributions that look at the genealogies, practices of appropriation, and politics of translation which have been at work in the rise of posthumanism. It also asks whether posthumanism, as the latest stage in the long history of (critiques of) humanism, might even be seen as in some ways anticipating or challenging theory. The aim is to encourage alternative histories, policies and thematisation of what it means to be (post)human in a post-anthropocentric world. The extent to which posthumanism itself undoes modes of inquiry inscribed by questions concerning originarity, genealogy, translation, successiveness, identity and metamorphosis will also be explored. 'Readings' of posthumanist issues that demonstrate how alternative conceptions of the posthuman might be applied are also welcomed.

Detailed proposals (500-1,000 words) for articles of c. 5-6,000 words, as well as all inquiries regarding this issue, should be sent to all three guest editors:

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Please note that the deadline for proposals for all three issues of Vol.18 is 31 October 2012, with delivery of completed essays by 31 March 2013. Volume 18 will appear in 2014.