

**ROSI BRAIDOTTI (2013) *THE POSTHUMAN*.
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The Roar on the Other Side of Silence... or, What's Left of the Humanities?

'Life' ... is an acquired taste, an addiction like any other, an open-ended project. One has to work at it. Life is passing and we do not own it, we just inhabit it, not unlike a time-share location. (Braidotti, 2013: 133)

1. The Posthuman Predicament

For anyone who has followed Rosi Braidotti's impressive and powerful work – from *Patterns of Dissonance* (1991), to *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Thought* (1994; 2nd ed. 2011), to *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002), *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (2006) and *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (2011) – *The Posthuman* will come as no surprise but rather as the logical consequence of her trajectory. It is a tour de force, relentless in its precision and breathless in its verve, combining as it does her 'brand' of feminism based on vitalism, materialism (although she prefers the term 'matter-realism') and Deleuzian affirmation of difference with the new spectre that haunts the academy and increasingly, society at large, namely the posthuman.

It will be impossible to do justice to the posthuman, literally. It is impossible to review the possibilities that the ever more haunting 'figure' of the posthuman contains, and it is impossible to do justice to Braidotti's heroic attempt to harness the posthuman as a political and affirmative figure to reverse the fortune of the declining

humanities. Braidotti's programme and vision for the posthuman involves three elements: the development of new subjectivities, the embracing of a posthuman ethics, and the construction of an affirmative posthumanist politics – all three required for the construction of sustainable alternative futures, and for extending present 'horizons of hope'. Inevitably, Braidotti's project is, first and foremost, a commitment to theory. The necessity of reinvigorated theorizing in the face of new posthuman(ist) challenges – theory 'for life', so to speak – is one of the main tenets of this book and of Braidotti's approach in general. As part of her intellectual 'cartography' and thus her particular take on the posthuman, Braidotti points to the 'anti-humanism' of her 'poststructuralist' teachers and the marks left on her trajectory by 1968 and its aftermath, after the demise of existentialist and Marxist (universalist) humanism. However, she is also keen to show that the advent of the posthuman 'predicament' forces theory to go beyond its antihumanism and to look 'more affirmatively towards new alternatives' (36). And time is of the essence, it seems to her, since 'the advocates of advanced capitalism seem to be faster in grasping the creative potential of the posthuman, than some of the well-meaning and progressive neo-humanist opponents of this system' (45), which explains Braidotti's own breathless pace. Capitalism is very good at embracing both the 'cognitive' aspects of new media technology as well as the biological extension provided by biotechnology, the life sciences and bioinformatics, which means that 'contemporary bio-genetic capitalism generates a global form of reactive mutual inter-dependence of all living organisms, including non-humans' (49).

What Braidotti refers to as the posthuman predicament, or living in the times of the posthuman, requires humans to think beyond their traditional humanist limitations and embrace the risks that becoming-other-than-human brings. She steers a complex and sophisticated course between the antihumanism that has been the daily bread of the post-1968, poststructuralist generation, and the techno-utopian transhumanism prevalent in certain circles of science, economy and politics. In what she refers to as her 'cartography' – her theoretical trajectory and stance – she affirms both the critique of humanism and the human potential in 'becoming-other' in a Deleuzian sense. The decline of human(ist) exceptionalism, the crisis of 'anthropos', and thus the current challenges to traditional anthropocentric world views exacerbated by global issues like climate change or the return of the 'question of the animal', require, according to Braidotti, a renewed effort by the transformed and interdisciplinary

humanities to show that they 'are worthy of their time'. This is a welcome and overdue call for the renewed relevance of the humanities, even if these will have to abandon their traditional subject disciplines and embrace the route of the 'studies' agenda (women, gender, critical race, science, media, cultural, animal... studies; and, as an aside, it seems only a question of time until the first programmes in 'Posthuman Studies' should appear on the scene).

2. Critical Posthumanism

What is striking, exciting, catching and invigorating in Braidotti's passionate plea for more, and more critical, theory is the appeal for 'conceptual creativity' at the same time. Only by meeting the posthuman challenge with critical creativity will the humanities have a future and be able to construct a future for humans and nonhumans. Let's call this programme 'critical posthumanism'. Braidotti is of course not alone in this venture – even *critical* as opposed to maybe ambient or popular posthumanism (which is still often confused with transhumanist fantasies of disembodiment or being able to upload your mind to a computer) knows a variety of stances. Usually it is Donna Haraway – although she disowns the label 'posthumanism' – with her 'Cyborg Manifesto' who is credited with critically embracing the ambiguous potential that 'becoming posthuman' might bring, both liberating and regressive. Posthumanism really takes off with N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), in which she attacks precisely these transhumanist fantasies underpinned by cybernetics that want to digitalise the body by merely repressing the old Christian and Cartesian mind-body dualism problem. In doing so, they continue a humanist, idealist and universalist tradition that has proven to be very oppressive towards material differences. Braidotti, and other materialist posthumanist feminists such as Karen Barad, or Vicki Kirby, for example, instead focus on the material effects of changes to human embodiment – maybe first articulated in Halberstam and Livingston's *Posthuman Bodies* (1995).

Other critical posthumanists include Cary Wolfe, whose *What is Posthumanism?* (2010) and innovative book series *Posthumanities* (Minnesota) has made the idea of 'postanthropocentrism' a key focus of posthumanist thinking – as rethinking the human 'with' its nonhuman others (animals, machines, objects, systems, environments, etc.). Both Bruce Clarke and Wolfe approach the posthuman from a system's theory background (particularly in the Luhmannian version), and in Wolfe's case, this is complemented with

poststructuralism/deconstruction and pragmatism. The first decade of the twenty-first century has also seen other ventures to extend the 'antihumanism' of 'poststructuralist' thinkers such as Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, Lyotard and Derrida, in particular towards a critical rereading of the post/human and post/humanism. This is a critical posthumanism that understands criticality as a continued investment in deconstructive reading techniques of posthuman 'discourse', or discourses about the 'posthuman'. In particular, there is Neil Badmington's work on the ongoing 'deconstruction of humanism' (2000) and Elaine L. Graham's focus on the politics of representation at work in discourses about the posthuman (2002). There is also my humble attempt at analyzing posthumanism as a discourse (2009; 2013) and Ivan Callus's and my work on 'posthumanist readings' and on a posthumanism 'without' technology, which understands the *critical* in critical posthumanism also as a critique and a resistance to the rampant technological determinism that is widespread in posthumanist discourse. Finally, to complete the picture of critical posthumanism, there are also many promising approaches that have developed out of the critical science studies corner and in recent philosophical work that rethinks the role of technology or technics, for example in Bruno Latour, Bernard Stiegler and David Wills (following Derrida) or Peter Sloterdijk (following Heidegger). All of these attempt to reinscribe the 'technical' within the very fabric of the human and understand the process of 'becoming human' as a kind of 'originary prosthesis' or (Derridean) 'supplement'.

Braidotti's book about the figure of the posthuman manages to integrate all or most of these positions, while giving them a new and 'affirmative' spin. True, there are some important but not irreconcilable differences between some of these critical posthumanisms (and the list is far from being complete). There is, for example, the long-standing dispute between the Deleuzian and the Derridean approach regarding affirmation and negativity, action and decision, which is rearticulated here by Braidotti: 'I have great respect for deconstruction, but also some impatience with the limitations of its linguistic frame of reference. I prefer to take a more materialist route to deal with the complexities of the posthuman as a key feature of our historicity' (30). This has consequences as to where and at what level the 'critical' would 'bite'. For 'us' Derrideans, for example, and for a certain, maybe more 'philologically' minded section of the humanities, this would at least also have to occur at the level of language (or discourse), which makes statements like the following one somewhat problematic:

The posthuman subject is not postmodern, because it does not rely on any anti-foundationalist premises. Nor is it poststructuralist, because it does not function within the linguistic turn or other forms of deconstruction. Not being framed by the ineluctable powers of signification, it is consequently not condemned to seek adequate representation of its existence within a system that is constitutionally incapable of granting due recognition. (188).

Not only does Braidotti here somewhat betray her own intellectual 'cartography' but she is also arguably ridding the future humanities of their most important methodology on which, precisely, the critical potential of posthumanism will depend: namely making sure everyone remembers that the argument about the posthuman is fought precisely at the level of representation, symbolic meaning and thus (amongst other 'media') in language. All this notwithstanding, however, the force of Braidotti's argument lies in extending enough connection points for all critical posthumanist constituencies to develop a collective working programme.

3. Life

This working programme, as no doubt many would agree, requires a move 'beyond biopolitics' as the fundamental engine of the advanced capitalist 'difference machine': the biopower, which in times of a global war on terror, the commodification of human and other genomes, virtual 'social' media and so on, increasingly turns into a dehumanizing force (a discussion that has been sparked by Agamben's recent work on 'bare life' and the 'homo sacer'); the precarity of life under the conditions of a global war on terror and the generalized notion of the 'camp' with its dehumanizing effects 'outside' jurisdiction. Biopolitics under the conditions of advanced and global neoliberal capitalism turns increasingly 'deadly' and drifts towards thanatopolitics – the sovereignty over life and death – or even 'necropolitics' (Mbembe). Witness, for example, the return of the question of euthanasia and the institutionalization of 'death studies' and 'extinction studies'. Against this trend, Braidotti's Deleuzian and Spinozist affirmative politics based on a feminist version of vitalism promotes the revaluation of 'bare life' (*zoe*, as opposed to *bios*, according to Agamben) as a positive life force that needs to be embraced and on which new forms of planetary politics

and ethics may be founded. This she calls 'life beyond death' but in a strictly secular, materialist or matter-realist sense. She wants us to focus on the 'productive aspect of the life-death continuum' (132), or 'zoe-life beyond the ego-bound human' (133). Her 'vitalist' notion of death is 'that it is the inhuman within us, which frees us into life' (134), and her advice is to embrace as *amor fati* 'the pragmatic acknowledgement that the posthuman subject is the expression of successive waves of becoming, fuelled by zoe as the ontological motor' (136). How to do justice to this 'roar of cosmic energy' (86), which provokes Braidotti's combination of secular ecosophy and posthuman politics beyond the bio-thanato-necro-political tendencies of our times? This question constitutes, precisely, the 'posthuman predicament', the challenge of 'our' time, which asks for critical posthumanism.

4. Postanthropocentrism

Both as a woman and a feminist, Braidotti's allegiance to 'man' (humanism's notion of what it means to be human) has always been 'negotiable', as she says. This means that the demise of the figure of the human and the advent and insistence of the figure of the posthuman can be welcomed as a chance. The posthuman reminds 'us' that we have never been as human as humanism tried to make us believe. The myth of one humanity, based on universal values, an essential human 'nature' and human exceptionalism with regard to nonhuman others, has always worked to exclude *some* humans that didn't correspond to the ideal which tacitly underlies the apparent universalism: there have always been fine gradations within the category of the human, according to gender, race, class, culture, nation, etc. This is why the feminist Braidotti begins her book by saying that 'not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that' (1). What her brand of posthumanism – the discourse that both constructs and analyses things 'posthuman' – is not ready to jettison, however, and for good reasons, is the possibility of a 'we' when facing the ongoing deconstruction of humanism and its underlying notion of the human. Braidotti's is an eminently political project – it is an affirmative politics, which according to her, 'entails the creation of sustainable alternatives geared to the construction of social horizons of hope, while at the same time doing critical theory, which implies resistance to the present' (cf. 'Powers of Affirmation', in Braidotti 2011: 267). It is also a feminist posthumanist politics because it is grounded in lived experience, and the experience of difference in particular, with a

special focus on embodiment and materiality. And it is ethical because it argues for a recognition of these material lived embodied differences in the face of a new 'postanthropocentrism' and a new global 'ecology': the end of human exceptionalism returns the question of how to live together with nonhuman others with a vengeance. New ethical and political challenges and the extension of the demand for social justice to include all humans and nonhumans calls for new 'ecologies' of how these increasingly complex environments may be shared 'sustainably' in the face of disappearing natural resources and the increasing demand for them, and in the face of global migration flows, threats to the environment and biodiversity, and a globalized capitalist system that seems to be destined to pursue its path of destruction until everything is consumed. The key to Braidotti's politics of the posthuman and to working towards alternative futures is through embracing new possibilities for posthuman subjectivities that will resist the 'inhuman(e) aspects of our era' (3). She is aware that the posthuman figure is deeply ambiguous and mired in projections of desires or fantasies of domination and disembodiment, as well as anxieties concerning apocalypse and extinction. But just like Haraway in her embracing of the cyborg, Braidotti believes that the posthuman can be used as a liberating force that addresses and overcomes the negativity and thanatopolitical dimension of contemporary biopolitical practices (which include intensive farming, animal mass slaughter, biocapital, data-mining, drone-led wars, hypersurveillance etc.). These are symptoms of our 'manic depressive condition' (10), in which 'new necro-technologies operate in a social climate dominated by a political economy of nostalgia and paranoia on the one hand, and euphoria and exaltation on the other' (9). Braidotti's ultimate desire is to rehumanise, re-member and reinvent the human at the penultimate moment – in extremis – between the familiar humanist 'yearning' for human potentiality, and the 'frustration' about human reality: 'my interest in the posthuman is directly proportional to the sense of frustration I feel about the human, all too human, resources and limitations that frame our collective and personal levels of intensity and creativity' (12).

This is a contradiction Braidotti is well aware of, but which, however, should not lead to immobilism but rather to affirmation and activism – 'the posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming' (12). Braidotti's answer lies in a reinforced posthumanist secular cosmopolitanism à la '(post)humains de tous les pays, encore un effort!'

5. European Posthumanism

An extremely refreshing aspect of Braidotti's wide-ranging mapping of the contemporary scene is her positive approach to Europe, including a defense of Europe's main strength: its constitutional multilingualism, which she sees as both a chance and a special responsibility for the humanities in Europe, because 'it opens up new challenges in terms of both post-secular and post-nationalist perspectives, including a new European dimension marked by multilingualism and cultural diversity' (144). She writes:

Posthuman Humanities, marked by a new alliance between the arts and the sciences and enriched by the ancient European academic and civic tradition, can sponsor multiple allegiances and new ecologies of belonging. They can redefine cosmopolitanism, fulfilling the posthumanist definition of Europe as the place that is historically and morally bound to the critical re-elaboration of its own history. (183)

Braidotti is aware that the demise of humanism in the face of posthumanisation processes driven by new technologies, scientific development and economic change also poses a fundamental challenge to 'Europe', since 'humanism historically developed into a civilizational model, which shaped a certain idea of Europe as coinciding with the universalizing powers of self-reflexive reason' (13). In this sense, Braidotti's argument contains the prospect of a post-eurocentric and posthumanist Europe: 'the posthuman condition can facilitate the task of redefining a new role for Europe in an age where global capitalism is both triumphant and clearly deficient in terms of sustainability and social justice' (52). This is an important spin-off of Braidotti's take on the posthuman and one that will have to be followed up under the policy heading 'Europe as a site of transformation' (52). It also evokes the possibility of a specifically 'European' form of posthumanism. It is clear, however, that this cannot be the kind of Europe that we are seeing today – struggling with its own version of neoliberalism, protectionism and draconian migration policies, all of which have earned it the nickname 'Fortress Europe'.

6. Humanities

Braidotti's main focus, however, is on the future of the university and, in particular, the humanities. What might this future of the humanities look like? Against what Braidotti calls the 'joyful anthropocentrism of the life sciences', the humanities will have to seize the potential for new forms of interdisciplinarity that lies in posthumanism's postanthropocentrism. Only new alliances between natural, life, social and human sciences will stand a chance of finding solutions for the irreducible complexity of problems like climate change, extinction threats, the depletion of natural resources, global migration and global social justice. The future of the humanities lies in ecology, sustainability, or in what Braidotti calls, in a Deleuzian vein, 'becoming-Earth'. The environmental humanities tackle the speciesism of their own humanistic baggage, the digital humanities rethink our technological condition, etc.

Bradotti's provocation goes out towards the traditional humanities, which she wants to spur into action: 'How could the Humanities fail to be affected by the posthuman condition?' (143). As a value system and ideology humanism has 'exploded' due to the fact that its traditional anthropocentrism has 'imploded' in the face of a political and ethical haunting return of all sorts of nonhuman others. Braidotti believes that the kind of interdisciplinary work that is increasingly done in all kinds of 'studies' formations (from animal to critical science to, as mentioned, death and extinction studies), new global network connectedness and new political subjectivities and forms of agency spell out a future for the embattled humanities: 'technologically mediated post-anthropocentrism can enlist the resources of biogenetic codes, as well as telecommunication, new media and information technologies to the task of renewing the Humanities' (145). The 'environmental, evolutionary, cognitive, biogenetic and digital trans-disciplinary discursive fronts' (146) emerging at the edges of today's humanities, social sciences and sciences 'rest on post-anthropocentric premises and technologically mediated emphasis on Life as a *zoe*-centered system of species egalitarianism' (146). This is therefore not a time for nostalgia or meekness for humanities scholars, instead it is a time for reaching out and embracing (as well as affirming) the alternative futures and the extended scope of humanities' work. Who else should develop both the critique and creativity necessary to address posthuman ethics and new political forms of subjectivity and agency if not the humanities (with their new interdisciplinary alliances)? The 'proper subject' for the humanities is no longer 'man' but the various aspects and

transformations focalized in the figure of the 'posthuman' or in tendencies that could be described as 'posthumanizing'. This requires 'strong' humanities that are allowed to set their own agendas and that, in return, have to improve their 'outreach' to become 'worthy of their time' (178).

7. The Other Side of Silence

Finally, what about the 'roar'? Braidotti cites Eliot's *Middlemarch* as her favourite novel – Eliot, the translator of Spinoza – and in particular: 'If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity'.

What this roar on the other side of silence is, is of course a question of interpretation: is it life's pure force/*zoe* (Braidotti's preferred reading) or something altogether more destructive? J. Hillis Miller sees the roar as a 'catachresis' of the 'inaccessible X' hidden by our human 'wall of error' that 'hides us from the annihilating roar, the chaos that is 'really there', imperceptible to our coarse feeling and to our coarse vision' (1997: 143). If it is the 'force' that 'sustains the self and its fictions' (142), then, according to Braidotti (and Eliot) it must be affirmed as a means of overcoming our solitude in the face of 'that obscure suffering that is the intervention or irruption by the wholly other, the "others"' (Hillis Miller, 1997: 146). The roar is the call for justice, a demand that has become more urgent than ever in our 'posthuman' times – a rallying cry that needs to be heard by what is left of 'us' humans, and by what is left of the humanities.

Braidotti is aware that she cannot leave a certain humanism entirely behind: 'my relation to Humanism remains unresolved...' (25), she says. It is the motivation behind the transformational affirmative thinking she proposes so refreshingly and engagingly: why should 'we' do it? Because we have to? Because we are human, or even 'posthuman, all too human'? Yes, but mainly, I suppose, because we 'care' – about many 'things', including humans, and because we yearn – in particular, 'for sustainable futures [that] can construct a livable present' (192).

The reason, however, why it will be ultimately impossible, even though it remains absolutely necessary that we should try, to do

justice to the posthuman is given by Braidotti herself, in probably the most important question this volume poses: 'What if consciousness were ultimately incapable of finding a remedy to its obscure disease, this life, this *zoe*, an impersonal force that moves us without asking for our permission to do so? *Zoe* is an inhuman force that stretches beyond life, to new, vitalist ways of approaching death as an impersonal event' (194).

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