

Visions of Humanity between the Posthuman and the Non-Human

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Abstract

Humanity has long been envisioned as self-conflicted, fractured along the lines of mind and body, reason and emotion, conscious and unconscious. Friedrich Nietzsche has conceptualized this fragmentation as a disease, positing the non-human Judeo-Christian God as the origin of the sickness and the posthuman *übermensch* as its cure. Donna Haraway, in contrast, sees the discourse of human disease as a product of the human/non-human binary opposition. Haraway argues that the collapse of this binary shall engender posthuman "inappropriate/d others" whose "deconstructive relationality" constitutes a viable alternative to Western patriarchal power relations. The essay examines the intersection of the human, the non-human and the posthuman in Speculative Fiction (SF), which simultaneously builds upon and problematizes Nietzsche and Haraway's paradigms. The research discusses Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix*, Peter Watts' *Blindsight* and China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*.

Key Words

Humanity, Humanism, Posthumanism, Non-Human, Nietzsche, Haraway, Schismatrix, Blindsight, Perdido Street Station

Throughout the history of Western culture, humanity has often been envisioned as a house divided, the human as an entity ceaselessly at war with itself. This fractured condition has been conceptualized in various forms: Plato imagined a tripartite human soul composed of a charioteer pulled in opposite directions by two winged horses,¹ Rene Descartes formed the famous Cartesian duality of mind and body,² and Sigmund Freud revealed a human psyche bifurcated between the conscious and the unconscious.³ Friedrich Nietzsche overlays this view with a value judgment, by denouncing fragmentation as the sickness that defines humanity. Man is a disease, Nietzsche tells us, because to be human is to be fraught with contradiction: "an animal ego turned against itself, taking part against itself."⁴

For Nietzsche, this disease arises from man's insistence upon clinging to the corpse (and corpus) of his non-human Judeo-Christian God, thereby occluding the emergence of the *übermensch*, the posthuman cure to "the disease called man."⁵ The *übermensch* is everything man is not. As Gilles Deleuze points out, this posthuman figure is profoundly anti-dialectical, neutralizing internal forces of negative opposition.⁶ The *übermensch* heals all man's divisions, epitomizing the harmony of mind and body, emotion and reason, desire and action. Hence,

Nietzsche sees the non-human Judeo-Christian God and the posthuman *übermensch* as antithetical forces that demarcate the sickness that is man.

Donna Haraway echoes Nietzsche insofar as she asserts that the interplay between human and non-human plays a pivotal role in Western discourse of disease and medicine. According to Haraway, hegemonic medical institutions appropriate outer space into inner space, configuring biomedical images of our physical interiority according to the features of extraterrestrial *topos*: "The blasted scenes, sumptuous textures, evocative colors, and ET monsters of the immune landscape are simply *there*, inside *us*."⁷ The body's inner struggle against illness thus becomes a space opera where humanity defends itself against invading aliens.

This holds true as long as the vision of humanity rests on the binary opposition between human and non-human. Haraway remarks that Western patriarchy has engendered two such visions, or two "births," as she calls them. The first birth grounds humanity in "the physical body"⁸ that implicitly denotes the white Eurocentric body. The second birth equates humanity with the liberal humanist paradigm of the cohesive, teleological subject, which originated in the Enlightenment's "heliotropic"⁹ worship of science and technology as conduits for the production of sameness. In both births, humanity is defined against the non-human.

Haraway pins her hopes on a third birth that features in works of Speculative Fiction¹⁰ (SF) "generically concerned with the *interpenetration of boundaries* between problematic selves and unexpected others."¹¹ The collapse of the human/non-human dichotomy into bidirectional permeation gives rise to posthuman "inappropriate/d others,"¹² who reject both the corporeal and the humanist models of humanity. What defines these inappropriate/d others is "a critical, deconstructive relationality"¹³ that offers a viable alternative to Western patriarchal power relations. Not unlike Nietzsche's *übermensch*, the posthuman inappropriate/d others rewrite the discourse of disease into a discourse of life. Haraway offers the example of HIV positive individuals who maintain "that they are *living* with AIDS, rather than accepting the status of victims (or prisoners of war?)."¹⁴

The following essay strives to bring together Nietzsche's philosophy of the *übermensch* and Haraway's theorization of the births of (post)humanity, through a discussion of SF works that explore notions of humanity as a disease by showcasing the interrelationship between the human, the non-human and the posthuman. The research focuses on Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix*, Peter Watts' *Blindsight* and China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, which together form a composite of visions parallel to Haraway's three births. Whilst frequently resonating with Nietzsche and Haraway, these works adhere neither to the Nietzschean opposition between the non-human and the posthuman, nor to

Haraway's synergy between the human and the non-human that generates the posthuman. Rather, the works suggest the inexhaustible diversity of posthuman and non-human figures, thereby highlighting the limitations of Nietzsche and Haraway's modalities. At the same time, they chart the increasing propinquity between the posthuman and the non-human, as a canvas upon which the vision of humanity-as-sickness is thrown into relief.

Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix* describes a future world in which humanity is synonymous with death, "a world of losses, broken hopes, and original sin, a flawed world,"¹⁵ posthumanism with "life" and "the future."¹⁶ In keeping with Haraway's notion of the first birth of man as a biological creature, the novel indeed locates humanity in the physical body, but it is the sick, decaying and ultimately dead body. The novel thus opens with the successful suicide of Vera Kelland and the failed suicide of protagonist Abelard Lindsay "In the name of humanity! And the preservation of human values!"¹⁷ It comes full circle with the suicide of Vera and Lindsay's former co-conspirator Phillip Constantine. Likewise, Earth has been abandoned by all but the most retrogressive human communities, its landscape dominated by "the strangling monuments of the legions of the dead."¹⁸

Posthumanism, in contrast, has broken away from its human past and spread among the stars, devoting itself to the prolongation of life via manipulation of the physical body. Granted, in the first part of the novel, posthumanism is torn asunder by bloody conflict between the "Mechanists," who advocate technological enhancement through prosthetic implants, and the "Shapers," who practice genetic manipulation and rigorous mental discipline. This notwithstanding, the two factions share the premise that to be posthuman is to be "on the side of life."¹⁹

Further, the rift between the posthuman Mechanists and the posthuman Shapers is largely healed by the arrival of the non-human, extraterrestrial, Investors: "People began to speak, for the first time, of the Schismatrix – of a posthuman solar system, diverse yet unified, where tolerance would rule and every faction would have to share."²⁰ As a result of this first contact, the Mechanists and the Shapers establish détente that enables them to share their knowledge and expertise and thus enhance their techniques of longevity. Hence, the non-human encourages the posthuman desire for life, at the expense of the human death wish. Accordingly, the more posthumanism distances itself from its former humanity, the more it approaches extraterrestrial non-humanity. Posthumans begin to emulate the Investors: "Artificial Investor hide" and boots shaped as "miniature Investor feet, toes, claws, and all"²¹ become valuable commodities in posthuman communities.

This trajectory is illustrated by Lindsay's ideological development. Initially a fanatic believer in the preservation of humanity, Lindsay becomes posthuman by reluctantly accepting life-extension following his rescue at the hands of the Investors and consequent commission as an expert in Investor sociology. He

quickly adapts to his posthumanism, to the extent that when his wife Nora decides to sacrifice herself for the sake of her family, Lindsay chooses to escape in an Investor spaceship and live. Finally, Lindsay sheds his physical body completely, becoming a disembodied companion to "The Presence," an ethereal extraterrestrial life-form. Lindsay thus liberates himself of the corporeality that is the hallmark of human disease, fulfilling the posthuman dream of transcending humanity by transforming himself into a non-human.

If in *Schismatrix* humanity is a sickness of the body, in *Blindsight* it is a disease of the mind. Symbolically, *Blindsight* picks up where *Schismatrix* left off. Most human beings on Earth have abandoned their physical bodies, by uploading their consciousnesses into a virtual reality called Heaven. The novel therefore does not anchor humanity in corporeality, but rather in sentience: "You invest so much in it, don't you? It's what elevates you above the beasts of the field, it's what makes you *special*. Homo *sapiens*, you call yourself."²²

This equation of humanity with consciousness is in line with Haraway's second birth of man as a humanist subject, because a cohesive subjectivity relies on a core self around which all individual experience can be structured. *Blindsight*, however, postulates that sentience is a parasite impeding the unconscious workings of the mind: "Like the parasitic DNA that accretes in every natural genome, it persists and proliferates and produces nothing but itself. Metaprocesses bloom like cancer, and awaken, and call themselves *I*."²³

Hence, the novel's posthuman and non-human figures possess an evolutionary edge on humanity, by virtue of their respective diminished and absent sentience. Posthumanism is embodied in vampires. A long-extinct cannibalistic offshoot of the human race, vampires have been resurrected by humans to serve as slave labor. Stronger and more intelligent than human beings, vampires are also less sentient. In the novel's dénouement, they rebel against their human masters, presumably exterminating all human beings on Earth. This mass-killing is represented as the workings of natural selection, extirpating the ill:

We humans were never meant to inherit the Earth. Vampires were. They must have been sentient to some degree, but that semi-aware dreamstate would have been a rudimentary thing next to our own self-obsession. They were weeding it out. It was just a phase. They were on their way. [...] You can't blame predators for being predators. We were the ones that brought them back, after all. Why *wouldn't* they reclaim their birthright?²⁴

The non-human appears in the form of an alien artifact tellingly named *Rorschach* and in its starfish-like inhabitants, nicknamed "scramblers." *Rorschach* and the scrambles are variations on John Searle's hypothetical Chinese Room, a

system that enables communication and problem-solving without conscious understanding of the conveyed information. These non-humans are thus ultra-intelligent, non-sentient life forms: "They [Scramblers] turn your own cognition against itself. *They travel between the stars*. This is what intelligence can do, unhampered by self-awareness."²⁵ Consequently, the scramblers view human sentience, and the excess of self-reflexive language it produces, as "a virus,"²⁶ prompting *Rorschach* to register the human race as a threat and send out an array of probes to photograph Earth.

Like in *Schismatrix*, the encounter between the posthuman and the non-human results in the posthuman's further dehumanization. In response to *Rorschach's* probes, humanity's governing body launches a delegation led by the vampire Jukka Sarasti, with the purpose of initiating first contact and assessing the alien life-form's intentions. In the novel's climax, however, Sarasti is revealed to be a puppet whose cerebral functions are controlled by the delegation's artificially intelligent spaceship *Theseus*, in an effort to maintain crew morale through the illusion that a vampire is in command, rather than a machine. Hence, the posthuman vampire loses his modicum of human sentience in the exigencies of establishing contact with the non-human.

China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* unfurls a beautifully intricate fabric of interweaving relationships between the human, the non-human and the posthuman. Set in the fictional city of New Crobuzon, the novel uses condensed urban space as a catalyst for meshing together humans, xenian races, and biologically reshaped posthumans. Non-human species include the frog-like vodyanoi, the avian garuda, the intelligent cacti aptly named cactaceae, and the khepri who possess scarabs in place of heads. Although the ruling bodies of each of these species make an effort at self-segregation, the novel focuses on the rebellious elements who choose to trade, engage the services of, and even become romantically involved with, biological humans possessing a humanist subjectivity. Thus, for example, the khepri Lin has an ongoing love affair with the human protagonist Isaac, and the garuda Yagharek seeks Isaac's help in restoring his capacity to fly. In addition, the city is inhabited by an artificially intelligent hive-mind called the Construct Council and a semi-divine arachnid named the Weaver.

Posthumanism manifests itself in the Remade, residents of New Crobuzon who have been corporeally reconstructed by the authorities, most often as a form of punishment, usually with attendant utilitarian purposes. Hence, for instance, "miserable men and women" are reshaped as "both cabdriver and cab."²⁷ Xenians are occasionally subjected to such institutional cruelty, but the majority of the Remade are former human beings and therefore posthuman, insofar as corporeality is taken to be the measure of humanity. Further, a radical group emerges from within the Remade, poignantly named the fRemade, who forge a posthuman

subjectivity for themselves to accommodate their posthuman bodies. They break away from nostalgic pining for their lost humanity, opting instead for a celebration of their corporeality. The fReemade may thus be seen as the Remade's posthuman spearhead. Such for example is Jack Half-a-Prayer, a vigilante who uses his Remade praying mantis' arm as a deadly weapon against the authorities and their collaborators.

Perdido Street Station may be read as a critique of the Nietzschean paradigm. The novel recounts the efforts of a coalition of humans, posthumans, and non-humans to battle the slake-moths, monstrous creatures that constitute a living "Sleeping Sickness"²⁸ that spreads nightmares and consumes sentience. Contrary to *Blindsight*, then, the novel does not represent sentience as a disease, but as a vulnerable treasure that must be safeguarded from the disease. Nor does *Perdido Street Station* call for a return to the humanist paradigm by privileging sentience as the kernel of the unified subject. Instead, the novel foregrounds the irresolvable paradox that attends the human psyche, as an organism simultaneously equal to and more than the sum of conscious and unconscious: "two simultaneous conclusions: $x=y+z$; and $x\neq y+z$."²⁹

Moreover, as Joan Gordon astutely observes, the novel's alliance of humans, posthumans and non-humans operates according to the same oxymoronic logic.³⁰ Much like Haraway's inappropriate/d others, this alliance is defined by mutual support that neither erases nor demonizes difference. Isaac fights alongside Yagharek, the Weaver, and the vodyanoi Pengefinchess, without humanizing them. The alliance finally vanquishes the slake-moths through *crisis energy*, energy that is released in moments of tension between *what-is* and *what-is-not*. Thus, indeterminacy becomes the novel's most potent cure to the sickness of the slake-moths.

The slake-moths, on their part, recall Nietzsche's *übermensch*. Beautifully formed with symmetrical wings and two sets of reproductive organs that allow maximum versatility, the slake-moths act out of pure physical desire, without hesitation or compunction. Like the *übermensch*, they are the panacea to human fragmentation, reducing the unique inconsistency of the multilayered psyche into a component of their perfectly consistent bodies.

One may surmise, therefore, that *Perdido Street Station* inverts Nietzsche's value system. True to the anti-authoritarianism underpinning Miéville's entire oeuvre, the novel asserts that if self-contradiction is a sickness and purity the cure, then let us all be sick. Accordingly, it is precisely the inconsistency that Nietzsche diagnoses as the disease called man that forms the source of Miéville's posthuman power. The slake-moths' perfection and obliteration of incongruity render them the true disease that is arrested by that power.

Contemporary history has been plagued by attempts to cure humanity of its schisms. The Third Reich, the Soviet Union and the Cultural Revolution in China were all ideological projects devoted to abolishing contradiction from the human subject and thus reconstituting him as the harmonious posthuman. Whether or not these projects were faithful to Nietzsche's original vision remains a matter of debate, but clearly they drew upon his tropes of human disease and posthuman salvation. A growing awareness of the cost of such radical treatment may be seen in the conceptual shift from *Shismatrix's* celebratory dénouement to *Blindisght's* bleak conclusion. Haraway's endeavor to imagine a new kind of relational posthumanism, whilst laudable, overlooks the bloody history of these alternative posthuman forms. Hence, it is in *Perdido Street Station* that we may find the successful answer to both Nietzsche and Haraway. The novel envisions a posthumanism that integrates both the human and the non-human as an act of resistance to the putative redemption offered by the perfect posthuman. In so doing, it opens a horizon where humanity may be enriched, rather than erased, by posthuman and non-human alterity.

¹ Plato, *The Phaedrus of Plato* (New York: Arno Press, 1973).

² Rene Descartes, *A Discourse on Method* (London: Dent, 1969).

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1915).

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Dover, 2003), 57.

⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 57.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁷ Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 320.

⁸ Haraway, "Promises of Monsters," 300.

⁹ Haraway, "Promises of Monsters," 300.

¹⁰ Although initially referring to Science Fiction as the locus of her vision, Haraway soon expands her definition to include various forms of Speculative Fiction.

¹¹ Haraway, "Promises of Monsters," 300.

¹² Haraway, "Promises of Monsters," 300.

¹³ Haraway, "Promises of Monsters," 299.

¹⁴ Haraway, "Promises of Monsters," 322.

- ¹⁵ Bruce Sterling, *Schismatrix Plus* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 38.
- ¹⁶ Sterling, *Schismatrix*, 170.
- ¹⁷ Sterling, *Schismatrix*, 5.
- ¹⁸ Sterling, *Schismatrix*, 224.
- ¹⁹ Sterling, *Schismatrix*, 170.
- ²⁰ Sterling, *Schismatrix*, 109.
- ²¹ Sterling, *Schismatrix*, 197.
- ²² Peter Watts, *Blindsight* (New York: Tor, 2006), 301.
- ²³ Watts, *Blindsight*, 303.
- ²⁴ Watts, *Blindsight*, 362.
- ²⁵ Watts, *Blindsight*, 304.
- ²⁶ Watts, *Blindsight*, 324.
- ²⁷ China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 21.
- ²⁸ Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*, 827.
- ²⁹ Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*, 773.
- ³⁰ Joan Gordon, "Hybridity, Heterotopia, and Mateship in China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*," *Science Fiction Studies* 30 (2003): 456-76.