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Trans- and Post-Humanities: Is the Future of Mankind Becoming a New Academic



In cultural studies, the fields that reflect upon the modification and the eventual aftermath of humanity are called, respectively, 'transhumanism' and 'the posthuman'. Contrary to what readers unfamiliar with this topic might think – maybe because of their futuristic connotations–, these concepts have existed for several decades.

Transhuman writings began to flourish as early as in the 1960s. The post-war scientific and technical revolution indeed prompted many thinkers to contemplate the possible applications of technology to the human body. The "futurist" philosopher F.M. Esfandiary, who renamed himself "FM-2030", wrote the first *manifesto* for the concept in 1973. Ray Kurzweil dedicated most of his writings to predicting the life improvements technology would bring; Hans Moravec investigated the similarities between computers and the human brain; and Max More stabilised the concept and, most importantly, gave it an institutional dimension in the early 1990s in the form of the *Extropy Institute*. The concept of the posthuman – which is broadly interchangeable with "cyborg"– was, for its part, born in the late 1980s and so heterogeneous that summarising its initial stakes has been a challenge ever since. Indeed, the first intellectuals who alluded to the posthuman – like Steve Nichols, Donna J. Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles or Ed Regis – made it take various and sometimes conflicting directions.

Strangely, passed the 1990s wave of curiosity and enthusiasm, these two concepts remained relatively under the radar for many years, only prompting few theoretical works here and there. However, these occurrences have become more and more frequent in very recent times, leading to an unprecedented peak of interest last year, when no less than four books about transhumanism and the posthuman were published: *L'Humain augmenté* (2013) directed by Édouard Kleinpeter, *Transhumanism and Society: The Social Debate over Human Enhancement* (2013) by Stephen Lilley, *The Posthuman* (2013) by Rosi Braidotti and *Philosophie de la machine: Néo-mécanisme et*

post-humanisme (2013) by Gérard Chazal. I therefore had no idea of how close I was to the current literary scene when I decided, in 2012, to carry out a study of the figure of the clone in Kasuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Michel Houellebecq's *La Possibilité d'une île*.



The dry period between the 1990s and 2010s peaks of publications about transhumanism and the posthuman was not without consequence: while the older texts functioned as *manifestos* by trying to convince readers of the validity of their concepts and ideas, the recent texts rather aimed to question and clarify all of the 1990s and provide a more objective description of these concepts. It seems that transhumanism and the posthuman are already undergoing a sort of embalming process as the latest books might have been turning them, somewhat artificially, into fully coherent objects ready to be studied by future generations. Next to these publications there are now

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conferences entirely dedicated to these themes such as “The Posthuman: Difference, Embodiments, Performativity” (Roma, Italy, September 2013) or “Approaching Posthumanism and the Posthuman” (St-Maurice, Switzerland, June 2015).

However, besides the descriptive trend, a group of scholars seems to be trying to perpetuate the old tradition by producing more innovative and committed writings about transhumanism and the posthuman. Pioneers such as Haraway, Kurzweil or More are parts of this group, which also features newcomers such as Francesca Ferrando, who is very much dedicated to spreading the posthuman thought across the globe by participating in many conferences and creating the *New York Posthuman Research Group*, whose past meetings have been filmed and uploaded on *Youtube*. Her input to the trans- and posthuman fields comes from her efforts to clarify, update and popularise them while staying true to the pioneers’ original ideologies such as: “We are already posthuman”.

Considering the abundance of literature about these concepts, some argue that transhumanism and the posthuman are becoming academic disciplines in their own rights and that they may be in the process of paving the way for the advent of ‘Trans-’ and ‘Post-Humanities’. Not only has transhumanism had its own institute since 1992, but the posthuman has also become an official academic field, as suggested by the recent creation of an interdisciplinary research unit at The University of New-England (Australia).

Originally, transhuman and posthuman figures were invented by science-fiction novelists, but philosophers, sociologists and scientists quickly appropriated them and turned them into objects and tools for further thought. Coming investigations on these concepts might benefit from a return to the literary field that gave birth to them. It might be timely to scrutinise the literary production of these past years to see if this boom in trans- and posthuman theoretical writing has a fictional counterpart. The novels of Greg Bear, Iain M. Banks, Maurice G. Dantec or Robert J. Sawyer come to mind alongside the more familiar names of Michel Houellebecq, Kazuo Ishiguro or Margaret Atwood. Finally, one might also keep an eye on the upcoming years’ science fiction and watch out for any influence of this boom.



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