The Posthuman Present: An Introduction

The last few years have seen renewed interest in the potentialities of science fiction. To some this development may appear puzzling. For years, science fiction seemed stuck in the commercial stranglehold of Hollywood cinema, the now dominant vehicle of a genre whose progressivist narratives and colonial Othering betrayed its historical origins in the *fin de siècle*. Little of that has changed as far as Hollywood is concerned. Yet, over the last few decades, science fiction has worked its way into the literary mainstream: Margaret Atwood, Roberto Bolaño, Chang-Rae Lee, Doris Lessing, and Abdourahman Waberi are just a few of the many authors who have integrated its conceptual and imaginary apparatus into their writing. Science fiction from the African continent is booming, and Afro-Futurism and the radical utopias of the 1970s have undergone a renaissance. In the final instance, the sources of this renewal are to be sought in social transformations. Like the late nineteenth, the early twenty-first century features an apocalyptic awareness of combined political crisis, environmental destruction and break-neck technological change. Faced with this unholy trinity, our present resembles nothing more than the future science fiction warned us of. Robots police our skies, take care of household chores, and replace us in our jobs. Ice caps are melting, crops failing, and millions flee war and destruction but unlike in Kim Stanley Robinson’s prescient *Mars Trilogy* we’re stuck on earth, at least for the time being.

If there is no escaping the dystopian nature of our world, the consequences go beyond doomsaying. The manifold relationships between humanity and its technologies develop all around and deep inside us and demand novel accounts and imaginations. What does it mean to be, or become human, in our posthuman present? How can we live with technology, as we so evidently can’t live without it? Do we need to rework the traditions of humanism, or strive to undo them? Is it an ethical *inhumanity* we seek in rejecting the humanitarian crises of late capitalism? Do we still believe in blissful mergers *with* technology after we’ve discarded the hope for purity *without* it? These questions indicate that our contemporary lives resist neat separation into utopia and dystopia. Yet science fiction may not only provide a canvas for thinking about some of the most pressing questions we face today. At its best, the genre always has been a conceptual undertaking: the attempt to think the present historically from the vantage point of the future, or through the prism of technical novelty. The motifs and techniques of science fiction may therefore contribute to the conceptual arsenal of the humanities. The android or

cyborg – threading a passage from Norbert Wiener’s work on weapons systems during World War II to Philip K. Dick, Blade Runner and Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” – provides one famous example. Time travel and alternative history are other science-fictional devices that may provide ammunition for thinking about a different future (Wittenberg 2013 & Jameson 2015). In the political imagination of our time, Robinson’s Mars novels stand as one of few serious attempts to reinvent cultural revolution.

A one-day workshop at Berlin’s Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICI) provided the impetus for the intellectual exchange that follows.¹ Short talks and a panel discussion focused on Dick and the posthuman, and the first two contributors to this debate – James Burton and Fabienne Collignon – featured as co-respondents alongside Laurence Rickels. The focus on a literary author, if we want to attribute this term to Dick’s popular fiction, should not hide the fact that the major contributions to Dick have come from scholars associated with cultural theory or cultural studies. I’ve mentioned Haraway, and we may add Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, and Katherine Hayles as scholars who have engaged with Dick. At the ICI, Rickels remarked in closing that his graduate studies had taught him to evaluate the literary qualities of Kafka or Rilke but that Dick’s puzzled him to this day. In contrast, Dick’s analysis of contemporary capitalism, his reimagining of object and subject, nature and technology have drawn cultural thinkers to his work for decades. His importance to discussions of posthumanism notwithstanding, the contributions to this debate do not privilege Dick, or, for that matter, any literary or cultural form. Having become our everyday reality, the posthuman is here to stay. What shapes it will take remains up to us.

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Works Cited


¹ A video documenting this event can be watched at: https://www.ici-berlin.org/event/683/