

The Party of the Anthropocene

Post-humanism, Environmentalism and the Post-anthropocentric Paradigm Shift¹

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ABSTRACT

This article accounts for an environmental standpoint to be part of the post-human approach by accessing the post-human as a post-humanism, a post-anthropocentrism and a post-dualism. The main goal of this paper is to call for a post-anthropocentric turn by emphasizing the fact that the Anthropocene and the actual ecological collapse are only the symptoms; it is time to address the causes, which have been detected in the anthropocentric worldview based on an autonomous conception of the human as a self-defying agent. An urgent answer to this scenario lays in philosophy, and specifically, in a theoretical and pragmatical post-anthropocentric shift in the current perception of the human. This article reflects on the ideal, but also uneasy, practices of letting go of anthropocentric privileges. Such changes can only result by fully acknowledging the human species in relation to the environment. The Anthropocene shall thus be addressed, together with sustainable forms of producing (less), recycling and co-existing with other species, with a socio-political and cultural shift: a passage from humanism to post-humanism, here underlined in its specific meaning of post-anthropocentrism. The methodology of this article develops as an assemblage of theoretical thinking, creative writing and artistic image analysis.

Keywords: post-humanism, Anthropocene, environment, evolution, new materialism, zero waste, ecology, anthropocentrism, human-centrism, art.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article wishes to highlight the urgency to develop the posthuman turn into a practice of existence which fully acknowledges post-anthropocen-

¹ My most sincere gratitude goes to Roberto Marchesini, Eleonora Adorni, Thomas Roy, and Abigail Orzolek.

trism as the necessary paradigm shift² in the manifestation of our futures, alongside with a post-humanistic perception of the human species in the broader frame of post-dualism. Its methodology develops as an assemblage of theoretical thinking, creative writing and artistic image analysis. Freely following the methodology set by Ihab Hassan in *Prometheus as a Performer: toward a Posthumanist Culture?* (1977)³, the literary use of multiple voices will allow for a symbiotic approach based on an expanded notion of subjectivity (Braidotti 2013), reflecting the ideal, but also uneasy, practices of letting go of anthropocentric privileges. If post-modernity can be seen as the pluralistic symphony of the human voices who had been silenced in the historical developments of the notion of “humanity”⁴, the post-human era adds to this concert the non-human voices, or better, their silencing in what is currently defined as the sixth mass extinction, which is caused, directly or indirectly, by human actions (Wake and Vredenburg 2008). This paper argues that an urgent answer to this scenario lays in philosophy, and specifically, in a theoretical and pragmatic post-anthropocentric shift in the current socio-cultural perception of the human. Such a shift can only result by fully acknowledging the actual state of things. Humans do not live in a vacuum; if we ignore what is happening to the environment and to the planet, we are compromising our own futures. For instance, the levels of pollution which have been raising dramatically in the last fifty years, are directly affecting human health as well: the human and the environment are in constant and constitutive “intra-changes”⁵. More specifically this article accounts for an environmental standpoint to be part of the post-human approach by accessing the post-human as a post-humanism, a post-anthropocentrism and a post-dualism.

² The term is used here as a socio-cultural adaptation of the scientific explanation proposed by Thomas Kuhn ([1962] 2012).

³ This article is the first written piece of literature where the term “post-humanist” can be found.

⁴ Not every human being has been considered as such and granted the same rights and privileges. Think for instance of the history of slavery, of sexism and colonialism, among other historical recurrent occurrences.

⁵ I have used this neologism instead of the term “exchange” under the influence of Karen Barad notion of “intra-action” (2007). I find the term “intra-change” more precise than “exchange”: “ex” comes from Latin, meaning “out”, while “intra” highlights how changes affect each term of reference, and the process of changing itself.

2. THE PARTY OF THE ANTHROPOCENE – ACT I

Welcome to the glamorous Party of the Anthropocene,
organized by humans for humans.
We are going to celebrate the supremacy of the human,
achieved after centuries of poverty, disease and labour. We made it.
After the death of God (Nietzsche [1883-1885] 2006)
and the death of Man (Foucault [1966] 1970),
whoever is left, can dance wildly on their ashes.
This is going to be once in a lifetime. Excess will rule.
We are going to drink all the bottles of alcoholic
and non-alcoholic beverages ever produced;
we are going to eat all the lobsters, cows and chickens left on Earth.

Everything will be provided: oak tables sustained on elephant tusks legs to
dine under the stars, plastic flower seats
designed by the most famous brands,
personalized polystyrene plates to eat as much as you wish.
And ... guess what? We are going to live forever!

Alive non-human animals are not allowed.
Robots are allowed, if accompanied by humans – they need tickets too.

3. BEHIND THE SCENES – ACT I

*If posthumanist culture is the matrix
of contemporary performance, there is
a matrix larger still: the universe itself,
everything that was, is and will become.*

Hassan 1977, 831

This article focusses on the *conditio sine qua non* of our futures. We are talking about the macroscopic aspect of the human condition, that is, the material grounding for our embodied experience, the place which has granted humans the possibility to adapt and evolve: Earth, our planet, the macro body where our actions and enactments integrate. The ground producing the food sustaining our metabolism; the atmosphere containing oxygen, without which humans would not breathe nor survive. Humans, like any other organism, have evolved and adapted in accord to their environments; such a relation has been mutually transformative and can be

defined as an “intra-action” (Barad 2007). On one side, natural selection has been favoring those traits which would improve adaptability to surrounding environments (Darwin 1859); on the other side, with their actions and manipulations of their habitats, humans have had a pronounced impact on the environment. Such an impact has become so massive as to give rise to the informal geological era of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is a term coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (2000) to refer to the informal geological time that marks the extent of the impact of human activities on a planetary level. It stresses the urgency for humans to become aware of pertaining to an ecosystem which, when damaged, negatively affects the human condition as well. An example can be seen in the alarming rise of cancer rates. According to the National Cancer Institute: “Cancer is among the leading causes of death worldwide. In 2012, there were 14 million new cases and 8.2 million cancer-related deaths worldwide. The number of new cancer cases will rise to 22 million within the next two decades” (National Cancer Institute 2016).

From a historical perspective, Crutzen and Stoermer locate the Anthropocene in the latter part of the eighteenth century, clarifying: “To assign a more specific date to the onset of the ‘anthropocene’ seems somewhat arbitrary, but [...] we choose this date because, during the past two centuries, the global effects of human activities have become clearly noticeable” (2000, 17). Ever since, the majority of human societies have been currently performing their material interactions in ways that are leading to a point of non-return in ecological and sustainable terms. In his article, *The Climate of History: Four Theses*, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty explains: “In no discussion of freedom in the period since the Enlightenment was there ever any awareness of the geological agency that human beings were acquiring at the same time as and through processes closely linked to their acquisition of freedom. [...] Geological time and the chronology of human histories remained unrelated” (2009, 208). This species-driven emphasis on the human as an autonomous entity stands on the psychotic perception of the human body as separated from planet Earth. Let’s delve into this aspect more thoroughly. From a macro perspective based on scale, human bodies live on the cosmic body of planet Earth, as much as, from a micro perspective, bacteria live on, or inside, human bodies. Humans are in an essential relation to the planet: without it, humans would not be able to survive. Let’s notice that the term “ecology” derives from Greek *oikos*, meaning “home”, that is, the discourse on the place we inhabit. And still, in the Anthropocene, a specific type of relationship is prioritized and taken for granted; specifically, the majority of human societies are in a relation of non-mutual symbiosis with planet Earth: in biology, such a relationship is

defined as parasitic. Parasitism takes place when one species benefits at the expenses of another (the host), although this view has recently been challenged (Goater, Goater, and Esch 2001). In this case, the question is: can planet Earth be considered an organism? In order to answer this question, the Gaia approach may come to mind, with its emphasis on the Earth as a self-regulating complex system (Lovelock 1995; Margulis 1998); and still, although offering an important contribution to the reflection, from a post-human standpoint, its perspective is not exhaustive. As Rosi Braidotti notices, the Gaia hypothesis is “geo-centered”, proposing “a return to holism and to the notion of the whole as a single, sacred organism” (2013, 84). Braidotti further explains:

What is problematic about it is less the holistic part than the fact that it is based on a social constructivist dualistic method. This means that it opposes the earth to industrialization, nature to culture, the environment to society and comes down firmly on the side of the natural order. (2013, 84)

Here, I would also like to take distance from a vitalist approach, which would grant an intrinsic value to planet Earth by perceiving it as alive, as in the case of the vital materialism proposed by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things* (2010). Bennett’s proposal of a strategic anthropomorphization and a recognition of vitality to nonhuman agents runs the risk of turning their existence into a humanistic assimilation, which dissolves the original encounter with alterity, in a homogenization and reduction of the difference to the same. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the fact that the notion of vitalism is necessarily related to the notion of life (“vita” in Latin), which should not be taken for granted. First of all, the current understanding of life is merely descriptive, not definitive. Viruses, for example, exhibit some of the characteristics common to organic life, while missing others⁶, challenging the biological concept of life itself⁷. As Michel Foucault noted in *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences*: “Life does not constitute an obvious threshold beyond which entirely new forms of knowledge are required. It is a category of classification, relative, like all the other categories, to the criteria one adopts” ([1966] 1970, 161). Within the Western scientific context, for instance, the discipline specifically devolved to the study of life is biology. The recurrence of the prefix *bio* in Western disciplines, further emphasized by the development of contemporary *biotechnologies* and *bioethics*, within

⁶ For instance, metabolism, which is the reason why they depend on their host cell. On the exchange between the virus and their host cells, see Villarreal 2004a.

⁷ In his article *Are Viruses Alive?*, Villarreal has stated: “Viruses today are thought of as being in a gray area between living and nonliving” (2004b, 97).

the frame of *biopolitics*⁸, needs a closer inspection from a post-humanist perspective, since it stands on a hierarchical dualism. As Giorgio Agamben reminds us in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, *bios*, in its Greek etymology, is ontologically posed through its opposition with *zoē*: “The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word ‘life’. They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct” ([1995] 1998, 1). *Zoē*, which is common to all living beings, “animals, men, or gods” (Agamben [1995] 1998, 1), can be defined as “bare life”; *bios*, on the other end, is particular to the human because is related to *logos*, is the life that gives life meaning, that recognizes humans as “human”. As Agamben notices:

The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zoē/bios*, exclusion/inclusion. There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to the bare life in an inclusive exclusion. ([1995] 1998, 8)

If, on one side, the notion of “life” exceeds the notion of the “human” (humans are included in it, but do not extinguish it), on the other, the notion of the human precedes the notion of life: “life” is a human notion, created by humans for the purpose of self-locating themselves in the larger picture; it is based on human canons, and thus such a concept radically varies in different cultures and epochs. Rosi Braidotti underlines the political and social implications of the *zoē/bios* dualism, echoing the hierarchies enacted by other structural pairs, such as female/male, nature/culture, black/white. As she notes in *Transpositions: on Nomadic Ethics*: “Life is half-animal, nonhuman (*zoē*) and half political and discursive (*bios*). *Zoē* is the poor half of a couple that foregrounds *bios* as the intelligent half” (2006, 37). It is important to contextualize the notion of “life” and the privilege given to *bios*, instead of *zoē*, to deconstruct the socio-cultural onto-epistemological assumptions which gave rise to the era of the Anthropocene. Such a deconstruction highlights the inextricable connection between the Anthropocene and Anthropocentrism. Let’s then focus on anthropocentrism, a philosophical viewpoint a philosophical viewpoint according to which human beings are the central or most significant entities; an episteme which invites to see the human species as unique, superior, in an ontological void, above all the other species; a somehow reductionist mindset which allows humans to view the world merely as a “standing reserve” (Heidegger [1953] 1977,

⁸ For a contemporary reflection on the origins and meanings of biopolitical discourse, see Esposito 2008.

17), to quote Heidegger and his critical view of modern technology. As a post-anthropocentric approach, post-humanism stresses the urgency for humans to become aware of pertaining to *zoē* and being part of an ecosystem which, when damaged, negatively affects the human condition as well. A point which is of crucial importance and that shall be highly remarked in this context is: there is no Anthropocene without anthropocentrism. The Anthropocene per se is not the problem, but it is one of the consequences of an anthropocentric *Weltanschauung*, based on an autonomous view of the human as a self-defying agent.

For the large majority of the human population worldwide, anthropocentrism is taken for granted, undiscussed, a moral imperative. “Humans, the most intelligent ones”. “Humans, the most evolved ones”. “Humans, created in the image of God”. How many times have you heard these phrases? How many movies? How many documentaries? “Humans, the most evolved beings”. Masters of the environment, self-sustaining creatures in an existential monologue ... And still, who are those humans? It is a fact that not every human being has been invited to the exclusive Party of the Anthropocene. It is a fact that some parts of the world are contributing less to this ecological collapse, and that areas with less economic resources are more vulnerable to its consequences. Think, for instance, of the environmental justice movement in the United States which, at the historical People Climate March 9 was mostly represented by “African American, indigenous and Latino people who have fought against toxic waste dumps, mining, incinerators and coal-fired plants that are overwhelmingly in their communities”, as Dianne Feeley notes (2014, 28). Think of the toxic waste disposal in the so-called “triangle of death”, located in the eastern area of the Campania Region in Southern Italy, where massive illegal dumping have been operated by *camorra*¹⁰ and where the adverse effect on human health in this area have caused a high increase of liver and lung cancer mortality and congenital malformation (Triassi et al. 2015). Think of food distribution: on Planet Earth, some people suffer from malnutrition; other people eat processed food, causing problems both to their health and to the environment (Alsaffar 2016); some other people waste gourmet food, which comes in unsustainable containers ...

⁹ Held on September 21, 2014, this is considered the largest climate change march in history, with an estimated number of participants on the order of 400.000. See Feeley 2014.

¹⁰ A type of *mafia* originated in the region of Campania and characterized by illegal activities.

4. THE PARTY OF THE ANTHROPOCENE – ACT II

The dancing is getting wild; the guests are already wasted, so wasted.

Those humans are loosing their minds ...

Robots do not drink. Do not eat. Do not hassle. They observe,
digitally devoted to their mindfulness; an electric charge,
and they are satisfied.

They observe humans, at the dawn of the Anthropocene,
smashing the head of the last lobster on Earth, sucking one of its claws
and throwing away the whole body:

“hey, rob [that’s how they call their robots,
when they want to be friendly] ... it was not warm enough”.

They see one older man cutting down the last cherry tree:
its pits truly annoyed him.

Each time he walked to his SUV to check his phone
(his favorite football team was playing),
they would stick under his shoes. So he cut the tree down
and threw away his Nike sneakers.

Now he can walk barefoot and engage in sexy dances.

They notice one bored young lady stealing a hand soap container,
made of bright red plastic in the shape of a juicy strawberry.

She knows, her grandmother will surely love it:

“How cute ... this strawberry looks just real!”.

She quickly empties it in the vase hosting the last plant of basil,
and walks away so happy that she does not notice
the sharp green quickly perishing under the silky foam.

The robots observe, practicing non-judgment, non-attachment.

One man engages with them; he is intoxicated
and start to verbally abuse them:

“You, stupid bots [that’s how they call their robots,
when they want to be nasty]! You are always gonna be our slaves!”.

His face is swollen.

He suddenly burps and starts vomiting:
too much alcohol, too much food, too much ego,
at the Party of the Anthropocene ...

5. BEHIND THE SCENES – ACT II



Figure 1. – Picture by Jayaprakash R “Plastic Floats” (2010) CC 2010.

Everything flows, but this river does not flow anymore. Too much waste, too much plastic silencing the voice of the water (*fig. 1*). The connection has been lost, all the fish have perished, their dead bodies are invisibly deteriorating under the garbage, but their smell impregnates the air: there is no going back ... In the era of the Anthropocene, under the reign of anthropocentrism, the emphasis on the autonomy of the human does not take into account all the necessary relations and intrachanges that occur between the organism and the environment (for instance, in the processes of self-maintenance, such as food providing¹¹ and waste releasing). The centrality of the human implies a sense of separation and individuation of the human from the rest of beings. A radical response to such an approach is post-humanism which, as Braidotti remarks, brings to the discourse “the idea of subjectivity as an assemblage that includes non-human agents

¹¹ As cognitive scientist Marvin Minsky recalls in *The Society of Mind*: “Each of the cells of which we’re made, including those inside the brain, requires some chemical energy in the form of food or oxygen” (1985, 283).

[...]: we need to visualize the subject as a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbours the animals and the earth as a whole” (2013, 82). Humanism, with its emphasis on human exceptionalism, may not be of help in changing direction. Post-humanism, on the other hand, can be the turning point, by addressing the question “who am I?” in conjunction with other related questions, such as: “what am I?” and “where and when are we?” (Ferrando 2014). This shift in the social and individual perception of the human is one of the most important challenges we are currently facing as a species, as individuals, as moral, ethical and social beings. As individuals who care about the future, because we know that the future is already present. It is here now, in our acts, in our visions, in our behaviors. In our words, in our dreams. In what we eat and what we drink. In what we produce and in what we buy. In what we recycle, and in what we do not recycle. Our Bright Future, which is melting in our lovely hands ... (fig. 2 and 3).



Figure 2. – Picture by Ligorano / Reese Art Work
“Dawn of the Anthropocene” (2014) CC BY.

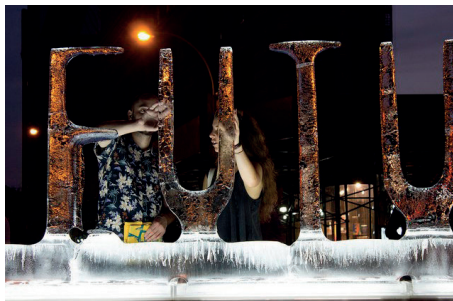


Figure 3. – Picture by Ligorano / Reese Art Work
“Dawn of the Anthropocene” (2014) CC BY.

Dawn of the Anthropocene is an ice sculpture by US-based artists Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese; it was installed in New York City on September 21, 2014 coinciding with the U.N. Climate Summit (September 23, 2014) and the People Climate March¹². Ligorano and Reese's public art work wishes to "underscore the necessity for immediate action to confront global warming. We plan for *The Future*, measuring 21 feet wide and 5 feet tall, to melt away" (2014). When I saw *The Future* and I touched the cold, melting sculpture, I got chills ... are *my* hands contributing to the melting of *our* futures? I am trying to live a sustainable life, I rarely buy prepared food and I use reusable shopping bags. And still, at the end of the week I have two big bags full of plastic garbage. My organic salad, fancily packaged by the brand "Organic Girl", comes in plastic. My 100% grass-fed happy cows' yogurt by "Maple Hill" comes in plastic. My local raspberries, which, according to the seller, are grown "with love and care", come in plastic. My natural sea salt comes in hard plastic. Even my recycling bags come in plastic. I know this has to change, but what can I do?

On Earth Day 2015, NYC Mayor De Blasio publicly announced a promising environmental plan: *New York City Aims to Cut Waste 90 Percent* (NBC News 2015). Since I live in New York City, I was literally thrilled by the news ... until I read the deadline: 2030, which meant 15 more years from the time of the announcement. I still want to thank the Mayor for addressing such a crucial point, I know that changes can be slow, but do we need all these years to make this change? More than anything, do we have 15 more years? Can the earth sustain 15, 12 or even 10 more years of this type of economy? If you have diabetes, can you eat sweets for 15 more years? If you have skin cancer, can you sun bathe for 15 more years? My dermatologist, who is in her fifties, recently told me that she is seeing, on very young children, specific types of skin cancer which, until 15 years ago, she would only see on her senior patients. The cause? The ozone hole and the exposure to ultra violet radiation on the skin. This is the type of change she has witnessed in 15 years. 15 years were crucial in the worsening of a non reversible condition ... Unfortunately, we may not have 15 more years of such habits. This is vital. This is our legacy to the future. To the planet. To history. To herstory¹³. To the non human species. To our progenies. To us. To our health. To our survival.

¹² See note 8.

¹³ I am referring to the feminist use of this neologism, coined as a critique of conventional historiography. In fact, although the term "history" comes from ancient Greek and is not related to the masculine pronoun, its development have focused uniquely on preserving male lineages and *his*-stories.

We need to switch episteme right now. Because we can. Because we want. Because there is no tomorrow. We are talking about one of the most important challenges we are currently facing as a species, as individuals, as moral beings who care about the future, as selfish beings who are worried about their own survival. Because we know that the future is already present. It is here now, in our acts, in our visions, in our behaviors. In what we eat and what we drink. In our words, in our dreams. In our actions, in our thoughts. Our post-human futures ... I saw changes happening faster than I could have ever dreamt of. I saw the people in Turin, the Italian city I grew up in, learning very quickly how to bring their own plastic bags, once the supermarkets started to charge for them. Partial solutions are there, if we want to find them. For instance, according to the Encyclopedia of Consumption and Waste: "The Scandinavian countries have the highest beverage container recycling rates in the world, with 98 percent of glass bottles, 92 percent of aluminum cans, and 90 percent of PET plastic bottles recycled in Norway in 2009" (Jørgensen 2012). And still, we cannot only take care of the symptoms, we also need to take care of the cause. We need to be aware of our anthropocentric biases in the way we look at the world, in the way we teach at school, at university, at religious centers, in the sports, in the media, in the streets, at work. In the way we talk to our children, to our parents, to our friends and to our families. Let's kindly, but firmly, explain to them why we need a post-anthropocentric paradigm shift; let's practice post-anthropocentric behaviours in our daily practices of existence; let's celebrate together the Party of the post-Anthropocene ...

6. CONCLUSIONS

There's a party goin' on right here.

A celebration which will last a thousand years ...

Celebration by Kool and The Gang

The main goal of this paper is to call for a post-anthropocentric turn by emphasizing the fact that the Anthropocene and the actual ecological collapse are only the symptoms; we need to address the causes, which have been detected in an anthropocentric Weltanschauung. The notion of ecology, in this paper, has been underlined in its Greek etymology of *oikos*, that is, home. The Anthropocene shall thus be addressed, together with sustainable forms of producing (less), recycling and co-existing with other species, with a socio-political and cultural shift: a passage from humanism to post-humanism, here underlined in its specific meaning of post-

anthropocentrism. At this stage of things, even the most anthropocentric of the humans shall realize that the survival of the human species is related to the well-being of their environment, and that existence evolves in relational, symbiotic, entangled intra-acting processes. Post-humanism must happen now and it is already happening. Each of our action resonates in the dynamic texture of spacetime. We are making the change right now, and its wave is going to reach the future. 15 years from now we will meet again at the Party of the post-Anthropocene, a celebration which will last a thousand years ... And now the future is not melting in our hands any more. Because we are enacting this paradigm shift. Because we are now envisioning, realizing, acting. Because we are now creating our personal, social and existential changes. Right now. The future is here, in our hands. In our words, because we know that words are not innocent. Words constitute our social narratives: actually, words create worlds. We are making a change right now, in the way we speak, by bringing post-humanism into the discussion. In our visions, by perceiving the non-dual fluidity of natureculture 14. In our actions and reactions, by engaging in post-anthropocentric ways of existing. This is the now, and nothing will ever be the same.

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¹⁴ Here, I am using the neologism "natureculture" (without the hyphen) as specifically developed by Donna Haraway (2003), to express that nature is already cultural, and *vice versa*, thus avoiding the simplification or essentialization of each term.

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