

Synopsis of Lectures for Have We Ever Been Posthuman

SPARC

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Geophilosophy I, Earth as Artisan, Framing the Human

In this lecture, I ask the questions, “what conditions the human?” and “what role does the earth have in guiding cultural, social, and economic production?” To think about the cosmic and the earth as that which frames the human, I introduced the example of the Vredefort meteor impact, the oldest and largest meteor impact on the planet located just outside of Johannesburg South Africa. The first section of the presentation was an analysis and explication of the fundamental principles of geophilosophy as a methodology that is both cartographic, a matter of tracing the relations out of which we are composed to understand the set of potentialities available to us, and diagrammatic, a matter of discerning the unrealized potentials of different milieus to create new assemblages that cede some space for those artisanal events that exceed our anthropocentric machinations. The second section of the presentation was the application of geophilosophy to Vredefort, in order to understand how to connect the rise of empires, economies, and human histories to the contingencies of the cosmic and the movements of the earth. By using geophilosophy as a methodology, we were able to see the way that different levels of stratification, from geological events, to economic systems and social concepts of race and power, lead to the intersection of the gold mining industries of South Africa with apartheid and various political upheavals.

Geophilosophy II, Cosmic Consciousness, Reframing the Human

The second lecture shifts focus to the question of how to create a new image of thought that remains true to the earth. This lecture focused on several conceptual personas given through the work of Deleuze and Guattari, to tease out a new image of thought that remains open to the vacillations of the earth. The first is that of the itinerate wanderer, a way of being that translates to thinking as a kind of following and nuanced observation of the flows and disruptions of earth and territories. The second is that of the metallurgist and miners, who learn the inner workings of

rock and earth, drill and bore into the earth as a profession and also deal with the societal demands for ore and mineral deposits. Deleuze and Guattari use these figures as examples of a way of thinking that are rooted in the materiality of the earth *and* sensitive to the political and economic conditions of human power structures. The miners' way of engaging the strata, following the flows of the earth, is a model for the transitional beings that we must become - beings who discover a new way to be intimate with the earth and our material surroundings. Likewise, the subterraneanism of the miner must inspire us to the subterraneanness of thought – to constantly move beyond thought's stagnation, towards the virtual unthought. The last section derives an affective comportment towards the earth which can be taken up to enhance our ethico-political engagements. It is an affective attunement that enhances and perpetuates our engagement with our own limits, joyously, while, at the same time, identifying and exposing the exploitation upon which our empires have been formed, the allegiances, the compromises, and the way that capitalism and state render many invisible or unworthy.

Lecture 1:

Posthuman Bodies and Gender

In this lecture, I will look at the evolving concept of the posthuman body, focusing on how technological, biological, and cultural transformations challenge traditional boundaries of the human form and how they are represented in contemporary British literature. As advancements in biotechnology, cybernetics, and artificial intelligence blur the distinctions between human, machine, and non-human entities, the posthuman body emerges as a dynamic site for reimagining identity, gender, agency, and embodiment. How do these developments reshape our understanding of what it means to be human, with particular attention to the ethical, philosophical, and social implications of augmenting or transcending the biological body? And how do fictional texts imagine the posthuman body and to what end? And lastly, is the category of gender still a valid and epistemologically important one when conceptualising the posthuman body? Drawing on the work of scholars such as Katherine Hayles, Giorgio Agamben, and Rosi Braidotti, I will ask how these transformations disrupt conventional understandings of the human subject. Ultimately, I will consider the ways in which literary and filmic representations of the gendered posthuman body challenge and redefine our notions of vulnerability, freedom, and existence in a rapidly changing world.

Texts: Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, London 2005; Ian McEwan, *Machines Like Me*, London 2019;

Film: *Ex Machina* (Dir. Alex Garland), 2015.

Lecture 2:

Posthuman / More-than-Human Kinship

In the 21st century traditional concepts of kinship based on genealogy, blood and gender have been contested and problematised in the light of biotechnological developments, reformed marriage laws, mass migration and transcultural alliances. A growing awareness of the interconnection of all organisms, human and non-human on an endangered planet helped to formulate kinship concepts that were disjoined from biological ties.

This lecture will explore the transformative concepts of posthumanist and more-than-human kinship, drawing on the theoretical frameworks established by Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Anna Tsing, and others. I will discuss the implications of redefining kinship beyond traditional human-centered paradigms, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings and the entangled relationships that shape our existence. This inquiry invites participants to reflect on the ethical and political dimensions of our relationships with the

more-than-human world, encouraging a reimagining of kinship that fosters solidarity and responsibility across species.

By examining Haraway's and Braidotti's notion of the posthuman, and by comparing three contemporary literary examples of narratives taking a more-than-human perspective, I will ask how they transcend anthropocentrism and advocate for a more inclusive understanding of kinship that embraces non-human entities as integral to our ecological and social fabric. At the same time, these texts call for a critical analysis of the literary formats of more-than-human-kinship narratives and their literary strategies such as narrative perspectives and voice. Whose voice is it anyway that is speaking in these narratives?

Texts: Sara Baume, *A Line Made by Walking*, London 2017; Amitav Gosh, *The Living Mountain* (2022); Kapka Kassabova, *Elixir: In the Valley at the End of Time* (2023).

The Ways of Becoming

The Deleuzian notion of becoming is something that ‘resists’ its subjection to a particular ‘fixed’ identity. The difficulty of thinking, let alone writing about, becoming, as we stated, lies in the fact that once we ask the question ‘what is a becoming?’ we automatically lose its core sense and most likely all we can then do is turn to just another way of defining a subject (though this time as the being of a becoming); and this in a way whereby its identity still takes precedent from its experience, and thus acts as yet another concrete ‘ground.’

On the other hand, an examination of the notion of becoming remains paramount and it has to be *thought* as, in our view, it is a way of, potentially, suspending or disorienting this primacy of the unified subject and, to that extent, of the human rights framework and their western mode of thought, in general. The question of becoming is from the start *ethical* and *political* in its nature. The ethical plane corresponds to the question, ‘how may we (re)shape our modes of existing differently on the condition that we start ‘taking becoming(s) seriously?’ In other words, how can our starting point be the living experience of the subject rather than a preconceived universal subjectivity that only acts at best as an aspiration for the vast majority of the planetary population? The political place which is of course closely interconnected to the ethical, asks ‘how may these new ways of existing lead to a formation of ‘a new politics?’

The Posthuman algorithm

The algorithm is of interest because the body without organs is its practical object. In this respect, it offers a living example of how schizoanalysis works in a practical sense. The analytic questions are essentially the same for both the development of algorithms and schizoanalysis. "What is your body without organs? What are your lines? What map are you in the process of making or rearranging? [...] Schizoanalysis does not pertain to elements or aggregates, nor to subjects, relations, or structures." It pertains only to lines and it is the task of the algorithm to identify these lines, follow their course, and see where and how they interact with other lines. Lines here are flows of desire, they are like the 'feelers' ('probe-heads') our affect puts out into the world in order to figure out how it is going to meet the day. This proposal that we treat the algorithm as a schizoanalytic apparatus should not be read as a blanket endorsement of all the uses algorithms are put to these days, but it is to suggest that we can derive useful insights into a possible schizoanalytic methodology by their study. There are, of course, a great many different varieties of algorithm, many of them highly beneficial to humanity, such as the AI systems used in radiology to aid the detection of cancer. Some are utterly pernicious. My focus is going to be on that class of algorithm related to what's known as recommendation services. These types of algorithm offer a much better model than capital for understanding the body without organs because selection, resonance, and composition, are all essential to its operation. They are something of a dark art because their actual mechanisms of action are typically a closely guarded (usually proprietary) secret, but we can nevertheless grasp in a general way what they are trying to achieve by looking at examples of online recommendation services, which practically every website offers these days.

The Post-human Social Media: the flow

In Deleuze and Guattari's conception of it, flow has three defining characteristics: it is *ideal*, continuous, and inexhaustible. Deleuze and Guattari sometimes use the term *hylè* in place of flow, which as they define it "designates the pure continuity that any one sort of matter ideally possesses." Flow takes the form of what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as a connective synthesis – 'and', 'and', 'and' as they often put it – and can be said to exist wherever this pattern of continuous connection can be found in its ideal, continuous form. However, despite appearances, 'and, and, and' is not additive, because the product, namely the flow, functions very differently to its component parts. Think of the difference between the still image and the moving image: even if the latter is ultimately composed of the former it is nevertheless different in kind because it cannot be constituted solely in spatial terms. Deleuze and Guattari's answer to the obvious question (problem) of how do flows of materials and signs become ideal, continuous, and inexhaustible and thereby become 'flows' is paradoxical: a flow becomes ideal, continuous, and inexhaustible precisely at the moment it is interrupted. "Far from being the opposite of continuity, the break or interruption conditions this continuity: it presupposes or defines what it cuts into as an ideal continuity [...] The machine produces an interruption of the flow only insofar as it is connected to another machine that supposedly produces this flow." It is subtraction not addition that generates the flow, that opens up the world of a pure possibility that is machinic, rather than mechanical, which is to say self-

propelling. Flows do not come from nowhere and they cannot sustain themselves, but insofar as they flow they have their own momentum.

LETTER ON HUMUS-NISM

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Day one:

I begin with a critical discussion of Heidegger's famous 1947 *Letter on Humanism*. I defend Heidegger's concerns that the classical tradition of humanism is too rooted in the Roman *humanitas* in its opposition to the inhumanity of the *homo barbarous*. Such conceptions of humanity elevated themselves over rival conceptions, but in so doing, they were no longer rooted so that in the failure of traditional European thinking, "homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world." However, Heidegger's ontological sense of being rooted, for all its virtues, is too abstract and anthropocentric. As counter examples, I turn to the Cascadian poets Tom Jay and Robert Bringhurst. *Humanus*, after all, has its etymological and ontological roots in *humus*, in the ground and soil of the earth, rather than in the heavens among the gods. Our language still bears witness to a place-based sense of ourselves and our human nonhuman kin that is antithetical to our reigning global sensibility. What is strange, given the unfolding ecological catastrophe of our global political economy, is that such words still sound strange. How do we retrieve a sense of place when our species has tried to convince itself that it is at home everywhere when it is increasingly at home nowhere? I turn to recent works by Mark C. Taylor, Bruno Latour, and the Cherokee philosopher Brian Burkhart to reground humanity in its web of interrelated lifeforms ('all my relatives') in a local place. In a sense, this is to rethink global modernity in terms of a political ecology that recuperates the humility of our humanity. *Humilitas* spoke of the 'lowness and baseness of beings, and in Church Latin of meekness (as in the Sermon on the Mount). The latter stems from *humilis*, lowly, but literally 'on the ground,' that is, rooted in *humus*, earth.

Day two:

I rethink the problematic of the day one lecture within the ecological catastrophe of our current global political economy. I first turn to Bruno Latour's recent analysis in *Down to Earth*, in which he tries to rethink the relationship between the local and the global. In the rush to modernize, everything local was rejected as backwards and in the way of economic progress. The global dimension of the latter, however, disguised narrow local interests as universal human economic and political interests. Now that it is becoming increasingly clear that the benefits of globalization will not be widely distributed, and, in their stead, ecological catastrophe will be universally shared, the global is now in crisis, but we do not know how to recover what we have lost as the local. By the latter we do not mean to celebrate narrow and parochial interests. And despite the gradually unraveling failure of the global, the latter is still defensible as fostering genuine cultural diversity. "Shifting from a local to a global viewpoint ought to mean multiplying viewpoints, registering a greater number of varieties, taking into account a larger number of beings, cultures, phenomena, organisms, and people." How do we come back down to earth with a positive sense of the local thought on a global level? That is, how do we rethink political economy (failed global modernity) as political ecology (a terrestrial or humus-based rethinking of global community)? This is the art of thinking from the "ground up." I conclude with an example of how we might

begin doing this, namely, Burkhart's image of Mother Corn: "the symbolizing of the people as an ear of corn is a way of seeing the community as like a single Organism made-up of the people who are mere pieces of that Organism. The people are not parts that can function on their own, but are pieces of the whole parentheses the community parentheses and need it to live . . . The singularity of community in the sense of the people as an ear of corn functions through a multiplicity of individuals and individual variation within the always already being in motion of being-in-locality. In the Cherokee locality, the people are also like an ear of corn, as conceptualized by Selu, the Corn Mother."