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## Meaning after Humanism? On Reading in Ruins

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An introduction to the special collection 'Reading in Ruins: Exploring Posthumanist Narrative Studies'

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In their introduction to 'Mapping Posthumanism. An Exchange', Noel Castree and Catherine Nash (2004) remind us of Jorge Luis Borges' famous short story 'On Rigor in Science', which, in just one short paragraph, critiques cartography by narrating the tale of an empire that produced such an increasingly complex and comprehensive map of its territory that the representations eventually equalled the thing itself. Having thus robbed it of its orienting function, the empire's cartographic endeavour caused future generations to consider 'mapping' an altogether futile activity. The final sentence reads: 'In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are *Tattered Ruins* of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography' (Borges, 2004: 90; emphasis added).

This special collection is neither concerned with cartography proper, nor with the discipline of geography, but with the relics of the humanities, specifically literary and cultural studies, and with the 'tattered ruins' of what used to be – and still remains – at the centre of their map: humanist reading practices and conceptions of the human. Posthumanism is commonly understood as one powerful attempt at decentring the 'humanist conception of the human', as Stefan Herbrechter (2013: 3) says. Discarding such a 'humanist' conception, however, has implications for research in the humanities because it challenges conventions about the practice and importance of reading and meaning. Replacing or at least revising these key concepts is no small matter, which is why the critical field of posthumanism turns into an increasingly 'unmappable' territory (and future generations might well discard it). Still, there is no escaping it at present, because, as Sherryl Vint argues, 'the twenty-first century can be described as *the critical moment after the human*' (2020: 1; emphasis added). What Vint calls the 'perceived limitations of humanist tradition – intellectual, political, practical' (2020: 5), we suggest conceiving of as the *ruins* of its building blocks, its inherent inequalities, misnomers, and values.

### **Ruins and Afterlives**

Ruins unsettle and attract. They represent, in the words of Robert Pogue Harrison, 'the dissolution of meaning into matter' (2003: 3). This special collection on the meaning (sic) of posthumanist theoretical inquiry for narrative studies from a variety of disciplinary angles pays tribute to the growing recognition and rediscovery, in literary and cultural studies and elsewhere, of both the significance of matter and material entanglements (in ecocriticism, new materialism, or studies of what many call the Anthropocene) and of the concern with ruination and declension of old-age philological tenets concerning the value, meaning, and ways of approaching the literary (in postcolonial and gender studies, as well as more recent advances informed by

science and technology or extinction studies). It developed out of a number of previous projects we conducted in Anglophone literary studies (Bartosch and Hoydis, 2019a, Hoydis, 2021) and literary education (Bartosch and Hoydis, 2019b, Bartosch, 2021), and continues these explorations by way of this collection of essays. The essays have been solicited with the intention of bringing to the fore potential overlaps as much as points of conflict and controversy arising from the confluence of posthumanist thinking and specific branches of literary inquiry and their respective interests in basic categories (such as ‘text’, ‘reader’ or ‘meaning’) and analytical protocols (close reading, say, in light of computer-generated or ergodic literature). The overall project moreover cannot help but be heavily influenced by the global pandemic situation and its very material and ruinous implications for the academy and societies more generally, to which we will return at the end of this introduction.

Thinking about current developments and speculating about their future impact by way of ruins is not germane to posthumanist inquiry of recent vintage. Already in the 1950s, the German philosopher of science, Günther Anders, discussed technosocial and existential questions and what he called the ‘obsolescence’ or ‘outdatedness of mankind’ in his two-volume book of the same name and expressed his pessimism and dread vis-à-vis nuclear weaponry and the ‘second industrial revolution’ by referring to ruins of humanism and the end of futurity (Anders, 2018: 313). Rereading Anders and his work on ‘Promethean Shame’ today is therefore a strange experience of encountering and rediscovering lines of reasoning with new and greater urgency in times of climate catastrophe and biodiversity loss, transhumanist and biopolitical advances and, of course, the new weird of a pandemic present. This is especially true for his central claim that we all have encountered a change of key (or fail to perceive it because of ‘apocalypse blindness’): ‘The proposition “all humans are mortal” has been replaced by the proposition “Humanity as such can be exterminated”’ (Anders, 2018: 269, our translation). The first proposition links with key humanist Giambattista Vico’s observation that ‘humanitas’ derives from *humando* (burying), of which Harrison speaks and contends that ‘the human is bound up with the humus’ (2003: xi). Some versions of humanism – in its own practice as well as in representations of its despisers – seems to have neglected or ignored this very mundane and material dimension of what it means to be a human(ist). It is the second proposition – concerning not the mortality of humans but the possibility and likelihood of large-scale extinction – that adds new urgency and new perspectives to the task of thinking about the ruins of humanism.

Posthumanism, environmental humanities research, and new materialism alike are therefore developing new understandings of the condition of finitude in the context of more-than-human realities encompassing other animals or machines (see Wolfe, 2010)

that have led scholars to ponder and probe into the declensionist as well as potentially liberating dimensions of such severance from humanist comfort zones. In the words of Claire Colebrook: ‘no longer do we enslave ourselves to the notion of the autonomous, disembodied, affectless and world-divorced subject’ (2014: 20). And yet, the question who this ‘we’ is has become even more important when it comes to speculating about the liberating potential of any move beyond humanism. A posthumanist first-person plural unites just as much as it excludes, and Lori Gruen, amongst others in global and environmental justice research, for instance, rightfully reminds us that ‘[f]or many whose subjectivity, agency, and experiences have been undermined, questioned, or denied, the maintenance of a self-identity is an achievement and not one they are willing to give up so readily’ (Gruen, 2015: 62).

We therefore recognise the need to think beyond humanism as a cerebral homogenising gesture blind to its own historicity and enmeshment in questions of power and oppression while at the same time paying heed to the dangers of welcoming just another such gesture when claiming that humanism is or ought to be ‘over’ for good and for all. While posthumanism has become one of the most productive concepts in current literary and cultural research when it comes to mapping the uneven ground of the ends of uncertainty in this regard, we also acknowledge that it leaves unanswered key questions concerning the implications for the study of narrative, undermining categories such as authorial or readerly agency, meaning, ‘literature’, or even the humanities as a theoretical and epistemic reference point. The collection therefore sets out to explore modes of post-humanist reading, writing and analysis, in conflict or productive tension with theoretical paradigms such as postcolonial and gender studies, studies of the production and reception of literature and contexts of analytical application in pedagogical and philological contexts with different, or differently calibrated, political ends.

Another fertile ground for such ruminations has been explored by cultural anthropology and work concerned with ruination and the material ruins of modernity (e.g., Stoler 2008). Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing has made a prominent case for envisioning ‘life in capitalist ruins’ by looking at human-environment relationality from the worm’s eye-view (if this metaphor is not too awkward) of the forest floor (Tsing, 2015). And Eduardo Kohn has engaged field work and acquaintances with the Runa of the Upper Amazon to ponder ‘how forests think’, demanding, like Tsing, an anthropology beyond the human (Kohn, 2013). We believe that fiction remains a central site for training and testing the imagination when it comes to such re-envisioning challenges but at the same time understand that any enduring belief in such ‘animate literacies’ (Snaza, 2019) requires a thorough stocktaking of remnants of humanism as well as its still generative

and generous seeds. In Harrison's exploration of civilisatory debris, ruins 'throw the imagination back upon its source in human finitude' (2003: 15). And he concludes, '[t]he spectacle of ruins reveals the fact of destruction, yet at the same time it also reveals the fact of survival' (15). The present collection is testimony to our attempts at taking first and cautious steps in the direction of a productive re-assessment of the ruins and resilience of reading practices in contemporary narrative studies.

### **(Post)Humanism and Narrative Studies**

As argued thus far, among the core ideas that have crystallized over the past two decades of posthumanist theory, and which are undeniably shaping interpretative practices in the humanities today, are 1) the deconstruction of a monolithic idea of Western 'humanism' as a hegemonic paradigm that discriminates against large parts of the world's population by refusing to acknowledge their status as fully human, be it on grounds of sexism, racism, or ableism; 2) the recognition of the entanglements and interdependencies between the human and more-than-human world; and, directly related to this, 3) the awareness of the risks of extinction and environmental catastrophe; 4) the concern with the evolution of technology, human-machine interactions, digitalization; and, 5) the pressing need for ongoing negotiations of the 'human' and our 'posthuman condition'.

In many ways, Cary Wolfe's description of posthumanism as a concern with 'finitude and dependency' (Wolfe, 2010: xxv, xxvi) thus still goes a long way in linking many of the ideas on this list. Another focal point is the goal to challenge anthropocentrism as a practice of thought and reading. But the list also points towards the central issues that haunt the field of posthumanism and that risk compromising its usefulness and clarity as a conceptual map. More often than not, studies tend to conflate posthumanism, the posthuman, and the posthumanities. Disentangling them with a keen eye on the specific context and object of critique is surely no easy task. And yet, the continued striving for clarity remains necessary, especially in transdisciplinary or transhistorical analyses. Perhaps unsurprisingly, historical scholarship comes to the rescue of posthumanist theory here. In books dedicated to Early Modern Literary Studies and Posthumanism (see Herbrechter and Callus, 2012; Campana and Maisano, 2016; Raber, 2018), we find increased awareness of this conundrum and suggestions of 'how to do' posthumanist narrative studies which are valuable far beyond readings of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The editors of *Renaissance Posthumanism*, Campana and Maisano (2016: 4), emphasise that Renaissance humanism should neither be equated with Enlightenment thought, nor with a singular conception of 'modernity'. Indeed, only in reductive *master narratives*, as we might call them, does humanism

appear as a coherent worldview in which ‘man’ is firmly positioned as the centre of everything. Campana’s and Maisano’s argument that all too often ‘what we thought was “humanism” or “modernity” turns out to be just a case of highly selective reading (or, more provocatively, a failure to close read)’ (Campana and Maisano, 2016: 5), does not just hold for early modern texts and their afterlives in contemporary culture (see, e.g. Swarbrick and Raber, 2020). It moreover proves helpful for any critical analysis of contemporary forays beyond humanist ruins or posthumanist eldorado.

Apart from the need to pluralize conceptions of ‘modernity’ and ‘humanism’, a second issue haunts critical posthumanism: questioning, deconstructing, or even supposedly rejecting humanism does not discard it. Rather, the examples of ecocriticism and animal studies, fields which subscribe to challenging anthropocentrism as an unquestioned core value, clearly ‘demonstrate *the stickiness of humanism* when they fail to fully move away from either thematic or human exceptionalist frameworks’ (Raber, 2018: 9; emphasis added). It is a persistent conundrum that critical readings tend to produce the very thing they set out to critique or are sceptical of. Even if critical post-anthropocentric readings do not produce fully fledged, but still essentially *humanist* readings of fictional texts and other art works, they are for better or worse haunted by humanism’s ruins. Far from perceiving the ‘post’ or the ‘after’ as the eradication or end of either ways of thinking or ways of being, we support the call made by Campana and Maisano that what is needed are renewed transhistorical and transcultural conversations about literature and posthumanist theory (see Campana and Maisano, 2016: 33). In this way, we offer the articles in this collection as dialogic contributions. But we also believe in what Karen Raber and others call a ‘slow’ critical posthumanism (Raber, 2018: 160). This means that it might not be a bad idea to try to fight anthropocentrism ‘one close reading at a time’ (159). There is no fast fix that might resolve the contradictions and tensions inherent in what Hassan first said ‘we must helplessly call posthumanism’ (Hassan, 1977: 843). We rather need to continue to apply and test the usefulness of posthumanist theory for past, current, and future critical reading practices.

### Overview of Contributions

While published independently in order of their submission, the seven articles in the collection can be divided into two theoretical-thematic clusters. The first explores what we for lack of a better term call posthumanist narratology and its implication for interpreting fictional texts: **Stefan Herbrechter** argues that the conception of ‘posthumanist literature’ might well be a contradiction in terms and that it needs differentiation from a ‘literature of the posthuman’; that is, between literary engagements with posthumanism (as a discourse) and the posthuman (as a figure), as

well as its response to (technological, socio-cultural) processes of posthumanisation. Through close readings of Don DeLillo's novels *Point Omega* and *Zero K*, Herbrechter probes the notion of posthumanist literature in a primarily stylistic sense, which displays a level of self-reflection that problematizes the very idea of the literary as a practice and of literature as an (eminently humanist) institution. The contributions by **Annika Elstermann** and **Julia Hoydis** explore the significance of human-machine interactions for the production and reception of narratives, focussing on examples of contemporary digital literature and film. Both articles show how developments in interactive filmmaking, neurocinema, game studies and computer-generated writing present increasingly transhumanist, cyborgian entanglements of humans, algorithms, and machines, which fundamentally reframe conceptions of embodiment, identity, and meaning. They also challenge established concepts of literary criticism such as author, reader, critic, and text, as well as narrative reliability and responsibility – yet without rendering them obsolete. Turning from literary analysis to educational theory and practice, **Roman Bartosch's** article challenges another pervasive, yet increasingly fuzzy conceptual distinction, that between posthumanism and transhumanism. It utilises the notion of the 'creep phenomenon' to describe how these seemingly opposite concepts and ways of thinking can become uncomfortably entangled in everyday practices of teaching literature and of marketing posthumanism.

The second thematic cluster is concerned with 'slow' critical posthumanist readings of non-ergodic literature and also opens historical trajectories. Collectively, the three articles in this cluster testify to the overlap, continuities, tensions, and blind spots that exist between posthumanism and the fields of gender and postcolonial studies, and new materialism. **Nicole Falkenhayner** discusses Anne McCaffrey's science fiction novel *The Ship Who Sang* in the context of other popular cultural representations of posthumans. She proposes that the conceptual use of the notion of similarity in cultural analysis, as introduced by Bhatti and Kimmich (2017), can be productively employed to reframe the critical assessment of gender as deeply involved in representations and imaginaries of the posthuman in literary and cultural analysis. Turning from gender to critical race and postcolonial studies, **Caroline Koegler** analyses depictions of life beyond and across the edges of humanity, a literary practice that she refers to as 'posthumanisation', in selected 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels by Mary Shelley, Charlotte Brontë, Joseph Conrad and the anonymously published *The Woman of Colour*. Her article examines how these texts engage either in critiquing the perfidious overlaps between posthumanisation and colonial discourse or blur Cartesian binaries between humans and animals to reinforce colonialism's narcissistic politics of non-relation. **Kylie Crane** offers a materialist reading that brings John Berger's *King* together with Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* in

order to think through displacements with/in ruins. To this end, her interpretation focuses on the settings of the novels, the narrative voices used to articulate the stories, and the contexts provided by various paratextual devices. Ultimately, Crane argues, the lives depicted in both texts are precarious, disenfranchised, exposed to (toxic) waste, and structured by, through, and with, ruin. Collectively, the seven articles seek to continue the conversation between critical approaches and individual mapping of the ever-expanding terrain that is critical posthumanism – one close reading at a time.

### **Coda: On Reading in Catastrophic Times, or, the Virus' *Kairos***

The conversations that precede this publication go back in time and to various research and conference contexts in which posthumanist theories, politics, and the potential allies for narrative studies beyond anthropocentrism (see, e.g. Herman, 2018) had been discussed. When we began work on this collection, we were just glimpsing an uncertain future of unprecedented calamity as first news of a new coronavirus and its spread across the planet became matter of speculation and dreaded anticipation. Fast forward 18 months and it seems apt to reflect at least briefly on the questions addressed in this collection, and the forms and functions of posthumanism post-Covid. Over a year of on-and-off lockdowns, more than five million human deaths, celebrations over scientific ingenuity in vaccine development and heated discussions over the biopolitical implications of data-based tracing schemes and society-wide discussions over the meanings of life, death, health and solidarity later, we feel it is appropriate to acknowledge that the Covid-19 pandemic marks the historical point of intrusion in which humanist speculations on posthumanism, for better or worse, constitute the reality of an uncertain and precarious 'now'.

Therefore we understand better than at the onset of our project that the 'shattering of foundations' posthumanism seeks to instigate, and the 'reading in ruins' we were after, must engender new forms of 'piecing together' what it means to read literature, and to construct meaning, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Covid-19 provides the background, or rather, the condition of possibility through which we understand the present moment as a 'catastrophe' in the original sense of the term, as discussed by Kate Rigby: 'a sudden overturning [...] that produces the final outcome in a work of tragic drama' (read here: the end of humanity and civilisation as we know it, terrifyingly) but also a 'terrible event that is not only of great magnitude but brings about a change of direction or perception' (Rigby, 2015: 18) (read here: the end of humanity and civilisation as we know it, hopefully). In *Dancing with Disaster*, Rigby reminds us that the recognition of and, indeed, dancing with the dangers and potentials inherent to any notion of catastrophe requires the acknowledgment and subsequent endorsement of a critical

*kairos*, an ‘opportune moment for the kind of necessary action that breaks with existing trends and tendencies’ (19). What, then and if at all, is the *kairos* of the virus? Just as the ongoing mapping of posthumanism, answering this question will be a task for future research. This collection is an invitation for the kind of transhistorical and transcultural conversations needed for this task. We thank all contributors for their willingness to have one of the first such conversations and their engaged participation, and we hope it is as inspiring for readers of this collection as it has been for us.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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