

Historicising and De-Historicising the Human : Human Enhancement Scenarios across Discourses and Media

1.

Some forms of historicising the human in the discourse of modern 'theory' have yet to be taken in, and taken seriously, by the wider community of scholars and intellectuals. Among these is Michel Foucault's claim, proposed in 1966 in a book subtitled 'An archaeology of the human sciences,' that the human - "l'homme" – emerged around 1800, as a correlative of co-emerging 'human sciences' which were themselves made possible by an epistemic shift; and that therefore, in consequence of some other future epistemic shift, the human might "be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (Foucault 1966: 422). Foucault has been hugely influential in connection with the cultural turn in literary studies, but his work has been selectively read and engaged with in the humanities, and this particular book has not been widely received. More recently, in a series of works that is still ongoing, Gesa Lindemann has worked out the social and historical dimensions of the human, defining the human as a central normative-cognitive institution in modern societies (2011). One of the parameters in the historical formation of this human, as identified by Lindemann, is the emergence of the *embodied individual*: the conception of the human being as a being which is individualised by virtue of possessing a solid three-dimensional living body (which also serves as the material basis for all affective and cognitive dimensions of the human), and which took shape, very roughly, in and around the 18th century. These attempts to historicize the human – as a recent configuration, as the correlative of particular knowledge formations and epistemes, as an institution of modern society – have not been widely taken up, and no doubt they appear highly counterintuitive.

[The history of knowledge, however, offers various instances – *eppur si muove!* may or may not be one of them -- where the intuitive account has turned out to be inferior to the counterintuitive explanation, so it may perhaps be wise to reserve judgment.]

Without pursuing the intricate question of the wider re-historization of the human within which these accounts could find their place, I have referred to them here because I believe they allow us to approach the discussions around 'human enhancement' in a different and more appropriate light. If the empiricities of 'Life, Labour, Language' and the embodied human individual, endowed with inalienable human rights, are modern phenomena (which have emerged and shaped the ways we live and produce knowledge as societies over the past two to three hundred years), this implies, for example, that the history of the evolution of humans, as established in the course of the past 150 to 200 years, would also need to be seen as a modern phenomenon. So would the foundational opposition of nature vs. culture, which we (embodied, evolved) humans invariably straddle, and which is the principle along which – very roughly – we structure and organise our institutions of knowledge production (This provides the epistemological framework for what we refer to, with a sigh, as the Two Cultures Problem, as well as for our theoretical engagement with *natureculture*. It is also co-emergent with what Foucault has described as *biopower*, a now pervasive form of power that 'takes charge of life, in order to promote it and make it flourish' and that, in doing so, operates with concepts of embodied human individuals, conceptualised as parts of populations (cf. Foucault, *Hist. Sex.* 1, part 5).

2.

I have felt it useful to prefix these reflections, in order to point out that "human enhancement" debates share these premises, but do not as a rule reflect on them. In fact, at first sight it may seem that debates about human enhancement have a tendency to treat the concept of the *human* as a known entity, taking it for granted. The question they address, and which they seek to resolve, is whether this or that form of *enhancement* is possible and above all ethically desirable.

The *transhumanist* participants in this debate about human enhancement have made up their minds. They favour mostly optimistic versions and visions of human enhancement: "We believe that humanity's potential is still mostly unrealized," the *Transhumanist Declaration* states. "There are possible scenarios that lead to wonderful and exceedingly worthwhile *enhanced* human conditions." They also concede, that there are risks. But they call for research as well as careful deliberation in order to find out "how best to reduce risks and expedite beneficial applications." Above all, they argue for the individual's right to choose:

"We favor morphological freedom - the right to modify and enhance one's body, cognition, and emotions. This freedom includes the right to use or not to use techniques and technologies to extend life, preserve the self through cryonics, uploading, and other means, and to choose further modifications and enhancements."

[At this point, I would be appropriate refer to the wider and far more complex discussion around the concept of the posthuman, which is frequently connected to the challenging of anthropocentrism, speciesism, and all forms of 'human exceptionalism' vis-a-vis other sentient beings and other forms of matter – in order to emphasise that both the trans- and the posthuman invoke a fairly simple two step model of the historicity of the human: Step 1 – the 'natural human' we have known so far, and about whom we are accustomed to discuss which of its features are 'anthropological invariants' and which are culturally specific, which are the result of nature and which of nurture, and so on; Step 2: the post-natural human, emerging in consequence of technoscientific progress.]

In order to illustrate how this conception of human enhancement is aligned with a particular form of historicising the human, I may draw on Sherryl Vint's *Bodies of Tomorrow* (2007), who states that "technology is rapidly making the concept of the 'natural' human obsolete. We have now entered the realm of the posthuman, the debate over the identities and values of what will come after the human"¹ The historical sequence posited here involves a 'natural' human, which has evolved over several million years (depending where you draw the line), but which is now obsolescent, and a new, 'posthuman' human, differentiated from the natural human through the effects of technology, and specifically of "technologies of body modification" (Vint 7), which are putting "into crisis the boundaries among human, animal, and machine" (8). That this historical process should take place is, apparently, *inevitable*. "It is inevitable that technoscience will continue to enact changes on the current state of human embodied existence." (26).

From this position Vint derives the need for an ethics of human enhancement:

"While many visions of the posthuman desire to transcend the limitations of the human body through technology or genetic redesign, I argue that it is important to return to a notion of embodied subjectivity in order to articulate the ethical implications of technologies of bodily modification" (Vint 8)

¹ Sherryl Vint. *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction*. Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 2007. 7.

Vint develops this argument across a sequence of readings of science fiction novels, concluding that: "It is imperative that we develop an ethically responsible model of embodied posthuman subjectivity which enlarges rather than decreases the range of bodies and subjects that matter. Such representations are the path to an ethical, accountable, embodied posthumanism, to being more rather than less human in our next iteration." (Vint 190)

I have great sympathy for Vint's position and I share its essential commitments. I will nevertheless proceed to point out where this argument might leave room for additional and more productive perspectives even though I will hardly be able to realise these in the current format of a draft paper.

3.

I have quoted extensively from Vint's argument because it affords a clear perception of the outlines of the state and the stakes of the argument around 'human enhancement' – of its potential as well as of its limitations:

1. By taking a position in the human/posthuman discussion which appears to come with the theme of human enhancement, Vint shares the same discursive universe with the fictional narratives she analyses.

2. Unlike some, but not all, of the fictional narratives around human enhancement, there is little in the way of an explicit role for science or scientist participants, and little in the way of an explicit interest in what science and scientists might contribute to the discussions of human enhancement, the human and the posthuman. Science figures here not as a possible partner in a dialogue, but as 'technoscience' and 'technology' – ultimately as a tool that "is neither emancipatory nor oppressive in itself" (Vint 190).

3. By embracing the problem of the human/posthuman in the form in which it presents itself, Vint's argument illustrates how the human/posthuman debate around human enhancement actively and effectively contributes to maintaining of the notion of the 'natural' human from which it claims to distance itself (because it is too exclusive and exclusionary) but which it simultaneously claims is under threat of obsolescence (though worth preserving, and in fact extending beyond those too exclusive, exclusionary and restrictive manifestations in which it has hitherto been available). By suggesting that this problem arises only now (or that it is soon to arise), in consequence of the latest technologies or of future technologies, it obscures the fact that these problems have been around for quite a while – in fact, they have been around in some form for at least two or three hundred years. [for examples see the longer version of this draft paper]

Against this background I propose that in the form in which it presents itself to us (which is also the form in which Vint, for instance, engages with it), the human/posthuman problem linked to the theme of human enhancement is troubled by a serious misrecognition. It proposes a way of historicising the human which effectively de-historicises it. It tends to obscure the history of the emergence of the modern human and its ethically relevant embodied subjectivity and to conflate it with the 'natural human' supposed to have existed for a few hundred thousand years (or a few million years, depending where you draw the line). We will do better critical and analytical work, I argue, if we do it against the background of an awareness of the discursive history (and the discursive dynamics) of the 'natural human' whose potential end the technologies of human enhancement, and the conceptual framework of the posthuman, appear to confront us with.

4.

On the basis of the points made in the previous section, I suggest three goals for further work on issues of human enhancement:

1. What angles of analysis, and what prospects are there for the involvement of scientific and scientists' perspectives in this debate? To what extent and in what ways do scientists take part in these debates around human enhancement already?
2. How do fictional representations of posthuman scenarios and of technologies of human enhancement and their effects construct the concept of the human (which is about to be enhanced)?
3. And how do these constructions of the human and the posthuman relate and compare to the more traditional forms of negotiating the human?

I will not be able to devote any space to the first of these questions here, although it may be the more productive and relevant one in terms of FMS interest.

I will draw briefly on the 2018 TV serial *Altered Carbon*, as well as on Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, in order to offer some suggestions on points 2 and 3.

5.

[For a reading of *Altered Carbon*, in relation to the points just made perhaps consult the longer version of this draft paper]

My reading of *Altered Carbon* seeks to illustrate that much of the discussion around the 'posthuman' ultimately reverts to and reiterates features of the discussion we have been having – not forever, but for a few hundred years now – about 'the human'. And it implies that in order to make sense of the discussion around the posthuman (triggered, among other things, by scenarios of human enhancement), a recognition of the significant structural continuities that exist between the two debates is a much better starting point for any analysis, than the assumption that something new and unprecedented is going on in the case of the posthuman, while the 'human' can be left unexamined, simultaneously taken for granted rather than mapped according to its discursive history and to its specific constructions and corresponding functions within this history.

6.

[This is where I was planning to turn to *Oryx and Crake* as an instance of how literary fiction engages with future scenarios of human enhancement and posthuman societies. Given the fact that I am already inexcusably late with this draft paper, and that it is already overrunning the prescribed length for draft papers in an inexcusable way, I beg to be allowed to postpone this discussion, along with the discussion of many other materials that I may not know and that you may draw my attention to, to the question and discussion time allocated for this paper.

Thank you for reading, I look forward to your comments, questions and responses.]