BOOK REVIEW

Baelo-Allué, S. and Calvo-Pascual, M. (Eds.) (2021). Transhumanism and posthumanism in twenty-first century narrative. Routledge. 236 pp. ISBN 78-0-367-65513-6
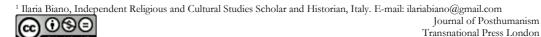
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Sonia Baelo-Allué and Mónica Calvo-Pascual frame their edited collection based on the conviction that the world emerged from four consecutive and relatively quick industrial revolutions that were profoundly shaped by technological development and characterized by exponential growth determined by those processes. And the way that shaping has acted on culture, society, and people can be—and has been—understood both "as marks of progress or as processes of dehumanization" depending on how we conceive "progress and being human" (1). The perspective we adopt to read the world and its processes determines the valuation of those processes. As basic and obvious as this consideration may seem, it actually has a lot of value when touching the subjects this edited collection aims at analyzing through contemporary fiction.

As the Introduction clearly and rightly puts out, the differences in understanding and approaching these issues reside in the antithetical premises on which two strands of thought relevant when talking about "The Posthuman" depart. Transhumanism and Posthumanism in fact, while sharing an interest in "human coevolution with technology" (Ranisch and Sorgner, 2014, 8) and "a common perception of the human as a nonfixed and mutable condition" (Ferrando, 2013, 27), build upon completely different approaches to humanism and the concept of Human, and thus elaborate two very different perspectives on the future of humanity and its environments. This maybe obvious consideration in a context such as this journal, must be nevertheless the premise of any work on issues of the posthuman condition; Baelo-Allué and Calvo-Pascual's book clearly identifies these differences, not the same can always be said.

This point of departure is crucial because the book posits itself explicitly as an analysis of works that deconstruct and critique transhumanist vision of the future via a critical posthumanist approach.

The Introduction and the first three chapters (section *Theoretical Approaches: Looking Back, Looking Ahead*) set the theoretical background for the rest of the essays. The two editors realize a work of concept clarification for terms such as the posthuman, transhumanism, posthumanism, and the Anthropocene; they also identify speculative fiction as an ideal place for exploring these opposite approaches and position the collection in the landscape of contemporary literature about these issues. The other three chapters by Herbrechter, Escudero-Alías, and Glavanakova focus on the past, present, and future of humanity; the inherent contradictions of transhumanist discourses; and

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the impact of digital literature. *Critical Posthumanism Network*'s director and general editor of the "Genealogy of the Posthuman" project Stefan Herbrechter, in particular, explores one of the most fascinating subjects to which he has devoted much work in the last years, that is the idea of ancestrality as a way of thinking about 'humanity before humanity' and whether we have ever been human (see Herbrechter, 2021).

The three subsequent sections analyze different works of speculative fiction, mainly novels and one movie. The works analyzed in the nine chapters all belong to the second decade of the 21st century: Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013); Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* (2015) and *C* (2010); Don DeLillo's *Zero K*; (2016) M. Night Shyamalan's *Split* (2016); Jeff VanderMeer's 'Southern Reach' trilogy (2014) and *Borne* (2017); Cixin Liu's transhuman trilogy (2017-2018); Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* (2013); Helen Marshall's *The Migration* (2019); a chapter is devoted to transhumanist narratives in TED talks. While sections two and three (*Transhumanism: The Uneasiness of Human Enhancement*—chapters 4 to 6—and *Transhumanism: Trauma and (Bio)Technology*—chapters 7 to 9) are devoted to works that denounce the risks of transhumanist approaches, the book closes on a constructive note with a section on *Posthumanity: Post-Anthropocentric Scenarios*—chapters 10 to 13—focusing on narratives highlighting the potentialities of a more posthumanist oriented mindset.

The second section deals with "the contradictions and dark side of transhumanism and the dangers that it can bring" (14). It is quite an eclectic section and the one most invested in the critique of transhumanism. This is explicit in Flip's chapter analyzing TED talks given by transhumanist thinkers such as Nick Bostrom, but it emerges as well in the study of fictional works such as *The Circle* and *Satin Island*, with their narratives revolving around the inequalities and injustices related to extreme technoscientific developments and the concept itself of human enhancement, as the two authors, Collado-Rodriguez and Massanet, highlight.

The texts analyzed in the third section scrutinize the traumatic element proper to the "excesses of transhuman discourse" (15) in relation to disembodiment, dehumanization, and the relationship with death in novels such as McCarthy's *C*, DeLillo's *Zero K*, and Night Shyamalan's film *Split*. While the first two chapters by Onega and Laguarta-Bueno analyze traumas related to altered relations with human physical limits determined by transhumanist evolution, Fernandez-Santiago's chapter on *Split* proposes a reflection on the (dystopian) impact of transhumanist evolutionary logic on the issue of mental health and disability.

Finally, essays in the last section, while analyzing novels confronting "the (post)human in a variety of dystopian futures marked by the planetary influence of human action" (16), all emphasize the potentialities of a posthumanist approach in dealing with the Anthropocene and its challenges through a radical rethinking of the kind of relationship between humanity and the planet. Authors such as Jeff VanderMeer and Cixin Liu, suggests for example Poetzsch in his chapter, take on posthuman futures— in a transhuman and posthuman way, respectively—in order to redefine humanity's place and relevance in an increasingly techno-ecological mutated world. Sousa too considers VanderMeer's work focusing on the novel *Borne* as an example of a text in which ethical responsibility toward not only nature and animals but also toward techno-created living-beings is explored, considering the possibility of posthumanist empathy. Posthuman subjectivity is explored in Munoz-Gonzalez and Vint's chapters too, focusing on the one hand on posthuman motherhood as narrated in Atwood's *MaddAddam* and on the other hand on human evolutionary mutations as a response to climate transformation at the center of Marshall's *The Migration*.

The two editors conclude the book by noting how the Covid-19 outbreak, which happened at the time the book was put together, revealed at times a dystopian setting not so different from those at the center of the speculative narratives' object of study in the collection. Vertigo acceleration in the human-machine interaction as well as the tangible effects of an increasingly shared human-nonhuman-inhuman environment have changed everyday life as well as the prospect for the future of a great share of the world population, probably for good. As it served as a tool for investigating brilliant contemporary narratives, critical posthumanism emerges as instrumental in "navigat[ing] this changing world that can bring out the best and the worst in us" (227). If "[t]echnology is putting into question how we define ourselves and what our role is in this changing environment" (4), critically engaging it, be it through fiction, theory, or activism, suggests the book, is the only way to govern, and not be governed by, these complex processes.

The book is thus a brilliantly assembled and articulated look at both the literature of the last decade reflecting on some of the most pressing issues of our time and the theoretical and practical implications of those same issues.

References

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