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## Marchesini, R. (2023). *Posthumanist Manifesto*. Lexington.

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Although it is often frustrating, Roberto Marchesini's *Posthumanist Manifesto* makes a number of valuable contributions to Critical Posthumanist discourse. The extent to which it questions many of the accepted principles in the discipline renders it a challenging read, but one which should be rewarding for those scholars who take the time to parse its depths. The verbosity of the whole is incipiently apparent in its opening, whereupon Marchesini proposes that 'Hybridization is the moment of the Appollonian becoming while staying within a Dionysian flow of possibilities and transitions' (2). As here, the *Manifesto* dispels copious amounts of intelligent reflection across its thirty constituent theses. It rarely takes the time for definition, operating on the assumption that its readers will be familiar with a broad range of highly technical vocabulary and concepts. Although the *Manifesto* is didactic in tone, its sophisticated philosophical address marks this as a book for scholars who are already well-versed in the discipline. It is denser to my mind than the scholarship of Marchesini's contemporaries (including Rosi Braidotti, N. Katherine Hayles, Pramod K. Nayar, and David Roden), yet the bite-sized-chunks approach to its argument makes the book tenable. Of its thirty theses, some are necessarily more strongly argued and convincing than others.

The *Manifesto's* Seventeenth Thesis is perhaps one of the most strikingly original, in its proposal of a need for a specifically posthumanist approach to education, in order to bring about a paradigmatic shift towards posthuman modes of perception and culture. Whereas humanist education 'leads the child to withdraw progressively into itself, to take arms against the outside world and to structure in conflictual terms even its most intimate relationships' (88), Marchesini proposes 'a *new sentimental education* that may foster the bonding between the individual and the universe of animal and vegetable otherness' (89) via a curriculum that presses students to connect with the world they live within both physically and emotionally. Frustratingly, even at such moments of correlative insight the *Manifesto* tends to skive any recourse to application of its principles; it exerts a firm tendency towards overview, and thus remains scant on specifics. Also notable is the powerful expression in the Fifteenth Thesis of the immense sociological value of posthumanism, whereby Marchesini carefully outlines the non-teleological paradigm shift that the philosophy aims to materialise for human consciousness on aggregate. Indeed, the closest summary of the book's positionality and its underlying thesis statement is its assertion that the 'posthumanist proposal moves in two directions... it is an interpretative model that does not introduce a new phenomenon but changes our way of reading an event; and... is a project that imagines and defines the possibility of a different humanity, one that lives in harmony with the world and enjoys a greater inner balance' (106-107).

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*Posthumanist Manifesto* aims towards comprehensiveness, seeking to provide an overview of every relevant aspect of contemporary debates in posthumanism. Although I had follow-on questions whilst reading, I found the overall argument well-structured to the extent that any noted points of omission were generally addressed, typically by the following chapter. Nevertheless, the aspects of the discipline which it failed to engage with altogether betray a scientific agenda; Marchesini's main thrust is definitional and anthropological. Important adjacent critical theories are notably absent, such as postphenomenology — and along with it any recourse to subjectivity, besides a cursory glance in the concluding Thirtieth Thesis. Discussions of the relevance of race, disability, and gender in posthumanist conceptions are also absent, perhaps due to their representational (as opposed to scientific) import. Discussion of posthuman art is likewise circumscribed to part of a short chapter. Taken together, these elements prevent the *Manifesto* from fully theorizing a new model of society, although its assertion of posthumanism as an observational apparatus towards paradigmatic change remains convincing; for Marchesini, posthumanism is 'a philosophy of relationships' (145), which 'tends to reconnect what, for the sake of its anthropocentric program, humanism has separated' (147).

Marchesini dates posthumanist thought back to the advent of Darwinism, 'when, at the end of the nineteenth century, next to the unquestionable historical merits of humanism, we also began to see its limits' (128). On these grounds, our relational situatedness is not novel, and our posthuman character is not any distinct phenomenon, only it is more patent now, with the onset of digitality. In this light, technology advances the revelation of our posthuman condition, but is not its point of origin. *Posthumanist Manifesto* relatedly provides a strong discourse on anthropocentrism, outlining human-centric thought as a cognitive bias which we can overcome, a category error based on a false dichotomy. Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, alongside Martin Heidegger provide the argument with useful reference points in this respect. However, it bears noting that the book's unspecific referencing style (no page numbers or chapters are given for citations) leads to it relying on readers' prior knowledge of the panoply of critical and philosophical texts cited. I recognised some of the arguments being drawn upon myself, but where I didn't, the barrier to comprehension was raised due to the lack of cross-referencing. This choice makes the *Manifesto* significantly more useful to those with either very broad knowledge of contemporary philosophy, or those who have time to undertake the reading of its bibliography in its totality.

In an interesting, albeit not unparalleled, move within the broader field Marchesini firmly rejects the term Anthropocene, in preference for ecological crisis. Similar moves have always seemed like playing semantics to my mind; when the flames are already raging, why focus on attempting to unfurl the fire hose in a precise choreography? Particularly, the *Manifesto* makes a related assumption that, given the increased appetite for a green transition, the 'devastating impact of these measures will most likely encourage [the posthuman] paradigm shift' (62). For me, this position disregards some important political context; inaction on ecological principles since the 1970s has stemmed not from public apathy, but rather from the vested interests of the wealthy, including rampant gaslighting of campaign groups, and greenwashing.<sup>2</sup> Awareness of the value of relationality is already widespread, rather, it is political unwillingness that prevents transitional societal change. Furthermore, there is no clear alternative to extant environmentalism proposed, making this intervention purely critical, not actionable. This lacuna is mitigated somewhat by Marchesini's refutation of Garrett Hardin's 'emergency lifeboat' (65) framework of environmental ethics.

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<sup>2</sup> See the BBC documentary series 'Big Oil v the World' (2022), for instance.



Some aspects grated for me. *Posthumanist Manifesto* argues that ‘the real challenge of the posthuman era is not how we will succeed in floating in the technological ether; it is how we will survive the looming ecological storm of which we will be the first sacrificial victims’ (63). The condemnation of transhumanism here is well-placed, but the unexamined ‘we’ is problematic, especially given the book’s (i) earlier engagement with Elizabeth Kolbert’s *The Sixth Extinction* and (ii) its lack of acknowledgement that millions of people in the global south are already facing the maelstrom of climate chaos. For many, the ‘ecological storm’ is no future potentiality to be debated, but rather, a condition of present mortality.

I found the weakest quality of the *Manifesto* to be its repeated and firm rejection of technological speculation within the posthumanist imaginary (cf. 6-7, 9, 42, 79, etc.) Marchesini denigrates science fiction as ‘sci-fi ramblings’ (168) both implicitly and explicitly,<sup>3</sup> and ungenerously conflates the form with the transhuman speciousness towards futurism. This is throwing the baby out with the bathwater, and problematically corresponds with deeply humanistic positions that have been implicit in excluding SF from the academy for the last three-quarters-of-a-century. In positioning science fiction as ‘a narrative fantasy whose predictions may sometimes be anticipations, but also clamorous mistakes’ (140), Marchesini egregiously assumes that SF is intended as a means of prediction. This is flawed and outdated scholarship, which betrays a lack of reading in the field criticised. A more rounded outline of the intersection of posthumanism, transhumanism, and SF is available elsewhere (Thomas 2024, Hay 2024). As Jay Clayton summarises, posthumanist scholars who outright reject science fiction have usually read very few SF texts, and appreciated little to no filmic SF, aside from perhaps *Blade Runner* (Clayton 2013).<sup>4</sup> In particular, the emergence of the subgenre of Climate Fiction or cli-fi, following novels such as J.G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962) and Ian Weekley’s *The Moving Snow* (1974), staged a firm rejection of technopoeisis. The cyberpunk which Marchesini critiques cannot accurately be taken as representative of the whole form.

As the prognostic tone of many of its lines suggests, *Posthumanist Manifesto* is itself set on prediction of what ‘[t]he posthuman epoch will be’ (87), and yet, often feels more deterministic than science fiction itself. The *Manifesto* stakes its critical territory entirely on the assumption of an inbound posthuman era, and its strong theorization often stands in contradistinction to the weak emerging notion of the posthuman as the term becomes mainstream; comparisons with the album artwork of Bring Me the Horizon’s album *POST HUMAN: NeX Gen*, for instance, are stark. Marchesini’s discourse constructively combats such mainstream conceptions, whilst inching towards a post-Cartesian sensibility defined by hybridity, in opposition to transhumanist figurations of the body as ‘an obsolete entity, the anachronistic legacy of an animal condition’ (26). Mutant identity is theorized as an alternative conception to transhumanism’s morphological freedom, entailing ‘a dialogical becoming that enables the body to continuously go beyond itself’ (109), a bold reappropriation of a contested concept. Similarly, a productive definitional distinction is carved out between humanistic conceits of anthropoplasty and the hybridity-centric discourses common to posthumanism, starkly underscoring their diametrically opposed capacities for understanding and recognising worldly value. *Posthumanist Manifesto* shines at moments such as these, as brief lapses in its generalist purpose give way to bold new theorizations.

The *Manifesto* is most novel and convincing when it rethinks that which has otherwise been taken for granted within the field, such as its convincing retheorization of desire through a posthumanist

<sup>3</sup> This telling positionality is short-handed ‘skiffy’ by scholars of science fiction.

<sup>4</sup> The title of its source novel is a solid litmus test of rudimentary knowledge.

lens (43-45), a move which should have significant currency in subsequent discourse. For Marchesini, 'posthumanism is a philosophical revolution' above all else (70). If this is indeed the case, the current endangered status of higher education in the UK and other countries is anathema to bringing much of the world's human population along with us. As posthumanist scholars, we need to find ways of circumventing the ivory tower now more than ever, if posthumanism is to achieve any degree of extra-academic currency. If we agree that humanism 'is what we should worry about and what should urge us to take action' (76), can academic varieties of revolution ever suffice?

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