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Derrida and Luhmann in a Theatre of Posthumanism

What is Posthumanism? by Cary Wolfe. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (Posthumanities series), 2010 p/b 24.95.

Reviewed by David Cecchetto.

What is Posthumanism? begins from the observation, via Foucault, that “humanism is its own dogma” (xiv) in the sense that the term “human” always naturalizes the distinctions that constitute it. In this light, Cary Wolfe’s posthumanism intervenes both prior to and after humanism: on one hand, it is anterior in that “it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being” (xv) in biological and technical worlds; on the other hand, posthumanism also names a contemporary historical moment in which it is increasingly impossible to ignore the decentering that is worked on the human through “its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks” (xv). In this sense, then, the endeavour that Wolfe shoulders in *WIP* is not simply to contribute to a “thematics of the decentering of the human” (xvi), but—more importantly—to explore “what thought has to become in the face of” the challenges posed by that decentering (xvi).

Wolfe undertakes this task primarily through a theoretical perspective that conjoins Derridean deconstruction with the second order systems theory of Nicholas Luhmann, a combination that positions the two theorists as departing from a similar position, but moving in different directions. In short, Wolfe argues that “while Derrida emphasizes the *final* undecidability of any signifying instance, Luhmann stresses that even so, systems *must* decide” (23). As a result, Wolfe follows Luhmann in viewing systems theory as the reconstruction of deconstruction.

In many ways, this responds to a problematic raised in an earlier discussion between Wolfe, Luhmann, Hayles, Rasch, and Knodt.¹ In that debate, competing constructions of posthumanism variegated along the meaning/possibility of objectivity and the (human) ethical imperatives that this might entail. *WIP*, to my ears, resolves this debate in the only way possible: rather than seeking to eradicate anthropocentrism from the discourses that humanism produces, the text instead articulates the “necessity for any discourse or critical procedure to take account of the constitutive (*and* constitutively paradoxical) nature of its own distinctions, forms, and procedures [...] in ways that may be distinguished from the reflection and introspection associated with the critical subject of humanism”

¹ Luhmann, Niklas, N. Katherine Hayles, William Rasch, Eva M. Knodt, and Cary Wolfe. 2000. “Theory of a Different Order: A Conversation with Katherine Hayles and Niklas Luhmann.” In *Observing Complexity: Systems Theory and Postmodernity*, edited by C. Wolfe and W. Rasch. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

(122). In this, *WIP* not only answers the question of what posthumanism is—albeit with the full ambivalence that characterizes deconstruction—but also performs analyses that are fully posthumanist.

As a result, *WIP* exemplifies the “Posthumanist Posthumanism” section of a schema that Wolfe develops in order to differentiate between texts’ internal disciplinary operations and external relations. The work of Žižek, for example, demonstrates “Posthumanist Humanism” because it is internally posthumanist, but remains humanist in its “continued external insistence on the ethical and [...] ontological efficacy of the human/animal divide” (124). By contrast, Wolfe notes that the animal rights philosophy of Tom Regan exemplifies “Humanist Posthumanism,” in that it takes seriously the (posthumanist) compulsion to make its discipline “respond to the question of nonhuman animals foisted on it by changes in the discipline’s environment” (123-124), but its internal disciplinarity remains “humanist through and through.” (To be clear, Wolfe notes that the “desirability of a given position [in his schema] must be contextualized,” so that there is a time and place for each of the four possible designations that flow from [Post]Humanist [Post]Humanism.)

There are, I believe, two lines of criticism that this text will encounter. Firstly, some may find it “too theoretical,” and be disappointed that it does not prescribe explicit political action. Certainly, there is some ground for this, highlighted for example by the fact that Wolfe’s cogent analysis of Koolhaas and Mau’s winning *Tree City* plan for Toronto’s Downsview Park deals, materially, only with the plan itself (and the debates that surrounded it). Specifically, Wolfe recommends the plan’s “reduction of ‘hard’ commitments up front” (208) for its ability to “remain responsive over time to changing and unanticipated demands from its surrounding environment” (208). However, those familiar with how the project has unfolded since the plan was selected in 2000 know that its implementation has produced myriad economic, social, political, and material paroxysms that might be read as precisely the problem with this (Luhmannian) “temporalization of complexity”: if the park’s value lies in its being Canada’s first national urban park, surely this designation places a premium on whatever quality “park” is intended to convey, not least a certain notion of creating a space for “nature” in the city; otherwise, why the designation? Wolfe’s reading is sensitive to this differentiation—and, indeed, succeeds in articulating how the park is “quite literally a different entity depending on the observational schema we use” (210)—but one can’t help but wonder what is lost in this perspective’s seeming foreclosure of advocacy for a simple park, in the most conventional sense. In response to this criticism, though, it should be noted that this is precisely the problematic that Wolfe’s posthumanism intensifies, so that this line of critique does not so much undermine *WIP* as endorse the text’s necessity.

Secondly, there will be those who lament that *WIP* does not present a history of posthumanism as such, in the sense that it offers neither an account of particular contemporary technologies, nor a synthesizing narrative of the disciplines (namely, “Animal Studies” and “Science and Technology Studies”) that contextualize the position Wolfe is developing. Here again, though, this criticism misses the mark not because it isn’t reasonable, but because it falsely constrains the terms of engagement with the text: those familiar with Wolfe’s body of work will recognize in *WIP* his attunement to contextual differentiation, an approach that precludes in advance—in practice and in theory—any neat and tidy account of posthumanism as such.

Indeed, this commitment is perhaps the feature that most recommends *WIP*, and in this light I would be remiss if I didn’t note the tremendous intellectual, scholarly, and artistic breadth that the book demonstrates at every turn. If I have focused here on the flexible construction of posthumanism that Wolfe constatively advocates, then, this is not to neglect the performative dimension of the text: in some respects, it is precisely when the text is least focused on explaining, contextualizing, and refining what posthumanism “is” that the most life is breathed into posthumanism’s materiality/semiotics (to borrow Haraway’s conflation). To this end, the second half of the book—which features a huge range of artistic analyses that include startlingly original readings of Brian Eno and David Byrne’s *My Life as a Bush of Ghosts* and Lars von Trier’s *Dancer in the Dark*—performs instances of posthumanism that are all the more lively for the fact that they do not easily collect into a clear notion of posthumanism *per se*. That is, Wolfe resists the temptation to reify his variegated, localized, and always-already paradoxical posthumanist perspective into a theory of Posthumanism (uppercase P). As a result, the text relinquishes an authority that would make it more readily digestible, but in so doing takes on a parasitic quality that might—given the right hosting conditions—allow it to move in rhythms and patterns that its hosts’ (that is, its readers’) inherited humanist presumptions can neither anticipate nor contain.

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