

Section 1

Narrating the Edges of Humanity: Conceptions of Posthumanism in Anglophone Fiction

Jun.-Prof. Dr. Roman Bartosch (Köln), Dr. Julia Hoydis (Köln)

Programme Outline

Monday, 24 September 2018, 13:30-15:15

Stefan Herbrechter (Coventry/Heidelberg)

Posthuman/ist Literature?

Annika Elstermann (Heidelberg)

Computer Generated Literature as a Posthuman Mode of Text Production

Monday, 24 September 2018, 15:45-17:15

Judith Rahn (Düsseldorf)

(Re-)Negotiating Black Posthumanism – The Precarity of Race in Caryl Phillips' *The Lost Child*

Nicole Falkenhayner (Freiburg)

The Ship Who Sang: Thinking Feminism and the Posthuman Together?

Tuesday, 25 September 2018, 15:00-16:30

Anja Höing (Osnabrück)

Uncanny Pets: Posthuman Dimensions of the Depiction of Companion Animals in 21st Century British Literature

Dunja M. Mohr (Erfurt)

Chthulucene, Oddkin, Planetary Cognitive Ecology, New Materialisms: Re-Conceptualizing Posthumanism and the Anthropocene

Abstracts

Stefan Herbrechter (Coventry/Heidelberg)

Posthuman/ist Literature?

Posthumanist literature – question mark. The question mark in the title gestures towards the conundrum that something like posthumanist literature might well be a contradiction in terms. In this paper I will speak about my take on posthumanism, the posthuman, posthumanisation, on the one hand, and literature, the literary and post-literary (or the “survival” of literature), on the other hand. I will do so by differentiating between a “literature of the posthuman” and “posthumanist literature”. Through a close reading of some passages from contemporary examples I will try to show that literature can follow a number of paths to engage with posthumanism (as a discourse) and the posthuman (as a figure). Thematically, posthuman/ist literature is concerned with a variety of topics that are associated with figurations of the posthuman: climate change, AI, androids and robots, the Anthropocene, enhancement, postanthropocentrism, the question of the “animal”, object ontology, cyborgisation and dis/embodiment, non/human futures, to name just the most obvious. Stylistically, however, a posthumanist literature will have to be sought at a level of self-reflexion that problematizes the very idea of the “literary” as a practice and of “literature” (as an eminently humanist institution) as such. Whether examples of posthumanist literature – in this strong, “literal” or stylistic sense – can actually exist is the question I’d like to raise by pushing the above-mentioned close readings to their very limit.

Annika Elstermann (Heidelberg)

Computer Generated Literature as a Posthuman Mode of Text Production

One of the movies submitted to Sci-Fi London’s 48-Hour Film Challenge in 2016 was written not by a human screenwriter, but by an artificial intelligence (AI) – a long short-term memory recurrent neural network named Benjamin. While every word of the script to *Sunspring*, including formatting, was composed by the AI, the production process was a much closer collaboration between human and mechanical creativity. Ross Goodwin, a human, wrote the algorithms behind the AI and supplied it with scripts to dozens of science fiction movies – also written by humans – which the AI analysed for certain patterns and which formed the corpus for its own output. Once the script was printed, humans read and performed it (directed by Oscar Sharp), adding a layer of creative interpretation through set and costume design, tone of voice, nonverbal communication, casting, etc. A central idea of posthumanism and transhumanism in a technological society is the actual transition of humans towards a post-human entity, a cyborg that combines technological implements with their human body. This entanglement between humanity and technology can not only be found in – actual and fictional – cyborgs, but also in computer generated text production. With the advancement of artificial intelligence, more computer generated texts are being produced, the algorithms are getting more refined, and the stories are becoming less distinguishable from texts produced entirely by humans. Computer generated fictional texts have long since outgrown the state of

being a gimmick to show off the technological advancement of our AIs. Through the close collaboration between human creativity and artificial intelligence, computer generated literature is emerging as an art form that is proving promising for literary analysis in a posthuman, 21st century context.

This paper will present not a posthumanist analysis of a traditional text, but look at computer generated fiction as a new, posthuman mode of text production and the implications that this mode holds regarding the role of the author(s) and that of literary critics and scholars when it comes to studying these texts.

Judith Rahn (Düsseldorf)

(Re-)Negotiating Black Posthumanism – The Precarity of Race in Caryl Phillips’ *The Lost Child*

As critical posthumanist thought is continually gaining momentum, it is often perceived as providing universally entangled networks of pluralities, which are by definition post-racial and post-gender. Operative notions of the ‘(hu)man’, however, which are essential in the term posthumanism itself, are firmly rooted in Western tradition and remain largely uncontested (Jackson 2013). As black literary voices are becoming ever more audible in popular culture and academic discourse, the conflicting realities of Western and non-Western formations of subjectivities manifest themselves in the materiality of the text.

Caryl Phillips’ most recent novel *The Lost Child* (2015) skilfully navigates the immanent plurality of subjectivities as it re-engages with the English North in an attempt to reconcile African narratives with Emily Brontë’s colonial landmark novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847). This inherently questions the conclusiveness of spatial and chronological experience, hinting at subjectivities that exist outside of and in-between clear-cut notions of space and time. The intricately layered narrative calls into question the validity of racial categories in canonical English literature, as it off-handedly resolves the entangled origin of Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff. Simultaneously, Phillips problematises this intertextual references through conflicting multiracial notions of Englishness. Yet, despite literary negotiations of non-white realities, black posthumanist research is only now beginning to emerge (eg. Lillis 2017, Jackson 2013). These new imaginaries require novel, critical engagements with the multiplicity of subjectivities they produce, but they simultaneously call for a re-evaluation of the surprisingly Western-centric genealogies in contemporary critical posthumanism. As early as 1950, non-Western critics (cf. Césaire 2001 [1950]; Fanon 1967; Wynter 2003) have asked for a reevaluation of those extra-European parallel ontologies in order to avoid binding binarisms of Western vs. non-Western thought. Césaire concludes that those colonial binaries only result in the “thingification” (Césaire 2001: 42) of the colonized subject. As Phillips illustrates the multidimensionality of overlapping realities in his novel, it becomes apparent that contemporary posthumanist thought needs to find ways to re-negotiate the universality of the term ‘human’ to include Western and non-Western ontologies.

This paper seeks to explore the need for a re-negotiation of categories of Western and non-Western subjectivities within a framework of critical posthumanist thought and aims to highlight the universality of (hu)man experience.

References

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Falkenhayner (Freiburg)

The Ship Who Sang: Thinking Feminism and the Posthuman Together?

Ever since Donna Haraway’s iconic “Manifesto for Cyborgs” (1985 / 1990) do aspects of feminism and posthumanism appear as connected in a more general aim: unsettling the patriarchal norm. Visions of the posthuman, both in imaginations of artists as well as in those of scientists, often mirror the deep significance of gender differences for conceptions of “the human. Figures and imaginations of posthuman or ‘AI’-lifefoms are also deeply connected to discussions of gender. But, as many of the posthuman imaginations in the popular culture of the 20th and 21st century show, imagining the posthuman does not equal the undoing of gender binaries as deep-set cultural conventions. A case in point is Anne McCaffrey’s 1969 science fiction novel *The Ship Who Sang*, which opens with the words: “She was born a thing”. The paper wishes to use the case-study of this novel – and the representation of its main protagonist, the ship, in its publication history – as a point of entry into questions of how we might think of feminist and posthumanist critique as theoretical movements with similar gestures that do not erase, but rather amplify, questions of the status of gender and identity. McCaffrey’s novel is a good example to unsettle what seem clear positions, and it is also an unusual example of an imaginary of heroic disability. This discussion can in turn be connected to a proposed paradigm of thinking in “similarities” (Bhatti & Kimmich 2015), rather than foregrounding differences, as a new filter of analysis concerning identity struggles.

References

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Dr. Anja Höing (Osnabrück)

Uncanny Pets: Posthuman Dimensions of the Depiction of Companion Animals in 21st Century British Literature

Stories of humans and their companion animals have fascinated the reading public for centuries. While in the 20th century most such stories implicitly served to reinforce anthropocentric structures and humanist philosophies, this paper argues that British companion animal stories of the 21st century often narrate distinctively different stories that set out a posthuman, rather than a humanist agenda. Instead of ever-loyal dogs and plucky cats, the animal protagonists the reader encounters frequently are uncanny ones: secretly talking genetically modified creatures, family pets with (often distinctively dark) agendas of their own, cats with transformative powers or dogs whose apparently innocent actions turn out to be inspired by ideologies the human characters cannot fathom. Uncanny companion animal characters such as Prince, the dog hero of Matt Haig's *The Last Family in England* (2004), or Roger, the supernatural cat of Lynn Truss's horror satire *Cat out of Hell* (2014) are precariously posed on the boundaries between human and non-human, nature and culture, and often – through the intervention of genetic engineering and bio-technology – nature and technology as well. Such companion animal stories frequently transgress boundaries: not only do the pets forcefully undermine the animal-human border and negate any form of dualist self/other or nature/culture distinction; companion animal narratives also blur genre distinctions. The intellect, and often language, of the uncanny pet introduces fantastic elements into what at a first glance appear to be realistic worlds, and as talking animals in particular most commonly inhabit children's literature, but in 21st century stories frequently appear in adult fiction as well, target groups too remain tantalizingly undefined. In its literary conspecies and other pets, Derrida's cat has been joined by a multitude of other voices of the non-human that, as I will argue, inhabit a posthuman narrative spaces and urge for a redefinition not only of the human / companion animal relationship, but of the very idea of 'humanness'.

Dr. Dunja M. Mohr (Erfurt)

Chthulucene, Oddkin, Planetary Cognitive Ecology, New Materialisms: Re-Conceptualizing Posthumanism and the Anthropocene

Both posthumanism and the Anthropocene problematize the relationality between human and the nonhuman, inhuman, and animal other, human and machine and other life forms. Yet despite their cogent criticism of humans as pivotal point of reference, both terms visibly retain the category of the human, *Anthropos*, in a central organizing position. This paper seeks to explore the current ontological debate that breaks away from 'older' posthumanist views in an attempt to offer new ways of relating and positioning the human as no longer different from matter(s) and bring them into or highlight their conversation with New Materialisms (Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 2007; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 2010). Posthumanist (and Critical Animal Studies) notions of dynamic relationality tie in with Barad's agential realist take on matter as "an active participant in the world's becoming" (Barad 2003, 803) through a "posthumanist notion of [intra-active] performativity" (2003,

808) that refracts (species) determinant boundaries. If nature and culture are fluxes, if “we are part of that nature we seek to understand” (2003, 828), mind is body and words and things are not disjoint (cf. Barad 2003, 811ff). While Rosi Braidotti recognizes “a global form of reactive mutual inter-dependence of all living organisms, including non-humans” (2013, 49), in *Staying With the Trouble* (2016) Donna Haraway moves beyond ‘natureculture’ and (inter)speciesism (cf. *Companion Species* 2003, *When Species Meet* 2007) towards the “oddkin”, an interwoven, symbiotic “living across species”, “tentacular thinking” and “sympoetic systems”—intersecting with ecohumanities, e.g. Ursula Heise’s “multispecies justice” (*Imagining Extinction* 2016)—and proposes a turn to what she calls the “Chthulucene” as a problematization of the Anthropocene/Capitolocene. In *Unthought* (2017) N. Katherine Hayles turns to a “planetary cognitive ecology”, examining the interplays of “cognitive assemblage”, and explores how the “cognitive nonconscious” framework can break new ground for New Materialisms. The paper seeks to interrogate the critical potential of these approaches that offer (postanthropocentric) ways of going beyond posthumanism and trace elements thereof in Anglophone fiction. How do texts narrate such ‘entanglements’, the agency of matter, a vital materiality, sympoetic systems, cognitive assemblage, and oddkin? The texts I want to turn to include Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* (1995), Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), Ahmed Saadawi’s internationally acclaimed transcultural (sur)realist adaptation *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013; engl. trans. 2018), and Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013).