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The Posthumanism of Roberto Marchesini

Taken in the most literal way, the word "posthumanism" can have two alternative meanings: "after humanism" or "after human beings." Those who write about posthumanism as an intellectual movement often seem to conflate the two. The latter meaning is certainly more sensational, and pertains to a perceived collapse of boundaries between human beings and machines, brought about by recent technologies, or between humans and other animals, brought about by new research. Roberto Marchesini, however, uses the term in the former sense, referring to the end of humanism, considered as an intellectual movement that has dominated Western thought since the Renaissance, and even this repudiation of humanism is qualified.

The humanistic movement was in part a response to intensified religious conflicts, especially between Catholics and Protestants. Early humanists such as Pico della Mirandola and Erasmus of Rotterdam sought to defuse conflicts by appealing to our common humanity, as something that transcended religious, intellectual, and ethic divisions. While repudiating the anthropocentric bias of traditional humanism, Marchesini wishes to preserve many of its qualities such as tolerance and openness to new perspectives.

To summarize the posthumanism of Marchesini, machines and animals are the two major points of orientation in the construction of human identity. The impression of human domination has been, from the start, based on an exaggerated notion of human autonomy that is proving impossible to sustain. Technology is not so much a means to human dominance as the area of most intense integration between human activity and the physical world. New inventions may seem dramatically to expand human power, but they also undermine human autonomy, since we are able to do increasingly little without mechanical assistance. Computers, for example, are now so intimately involved in our most fundamental decisions that it is becoming very hard to pretend that they are simply slaves to human agendas.

According to Marchesini, our symbiosis with animals is now relatively psychological or spiritual, yet no less intimate, because animals have provided most of the images, models, analogies, concepts, intuitions, and metaphors that are the foundation of human culture. I had a small epiphany of this idea recently when I went to Hallmark to

buy a St. Valentine's Day card for my wife, and noticed that most of the cards featured animals such as birds, squirrels, or butterflies, while the rest showed closely related images such as flowers or trees. It is almost impossible to describe many basic emotions such as love without the mediation of theriomorphic images and associations. It may even be a bit imprecise to speak of these as "our" emotions, since they are ultimately a product of our interaction with other beings.

In other words, what we may conventionally think of as "human" culture and technology is actually the product of reciprocal relationships with a larger environment, what Marchesini calls "non-human alterity." But, given this interdependence of people with machines and animals, what does being "human" mean? Marchesini believes that answering this question is a great intellectual challenge of our era. Our answers may always be provisional, but they do not need to be equivocal or vague. We may define our humanity, as well as qualities such as ethnicity, by reference, rather than opposition, to other entities, particularly to animals and machines.

Poststructuralist theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari have rejected binary polarities, on the grounds that we cannot posit them without favoring one or the other side. But that is precisely what Marchesini attempts to do with his concept of non-human alterity. He does not see alterity as something to be denied, ignored, or overcome, but rather to be embraced. "Animal" may, then, perhaps still be an opposite of "human," but the polarity is a source of mutual dependence and creativity.

Deleuze and Guattari contrast what they call "rhizomatic" connections, which are horizontal and resemble roots, with "arborescent" ones, which are vertical and supposedly hierarchal. But this simply produces a one-dimensional analysis, which will not necessarily even be less judgmental than traditional investigations. (The polarity of "left" and "right" may, for example, take the place of "high" and "low" as an axis of discrimination.) I am unsure whether his arboreal imagery is intended as an implicit comment on Deleuze and Guattari, but Marchesini compares humanity to a tree in the field. The soil, nutrients, sunlight, water, and so on may all contribute to it, and the tree is inconceivable apart from them, but yet it has a very distinctive profile. By understanding humanity in this way, Marchesini allows for a sense of human solidarity without hostility towards either technology or the natural world.

The term "posthumanism" may be a bit deceptive here, since the prefix "post…" suggests, ironically, a definition by negation. The point, however, is not to reject

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humanism so much as to place that development in a larger context. Marchesini sees posthumanism less as a sharply delineated movement than as a trend pervading much of contemporary life.

In his book *Posthuman*, Marchesini explicates his case in a great deal of detail, drawing on such areas as history, philosophy, and artificial intelligence. Nevertheless, the trends he identifies are so broad that even his erudite treatise is hardly more than a beginning. The process of vetting all of his claims by academic argument would be too laborious, too contentious, and too slow for any response to the urgent practical and cultural crises of today. Finally, the major criterion of validation must be the intuition of his readers.

Marchesini is the major synthesizer of what the Italians call "zooanthropologia," a discipline that centers on roughly the same questions as anthrozoology or animal studies. And is "zooanthropologia" essentially a different word for an established discipline? On his web site at http://www.robertomarchesini.com/zoo_fr.htm is his "Manifesto teorico della Zooantropologia" (Theoretical Manifesto of Zooantropology) and you can click to see versions of it in Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and English (all spelled in Italian). If you click on the last of these, two words appear – "coming soon." The English version has been coming soon for about three or four years at least, and it is likely to be for some time to come. This suggests to me that reaching out to the English-speaking world is not the major priority for Marchesini or zooanthropologia.

We in the English-speaking world can hardly complain about the neglect. After all, Marchesini does cite dozens of thinkers who wrote in English in *Posthuman*. He remains, however, almost completely unknown in the English-speaking world, despite the fact that there is, so far as I know, no theoretical synthesis of recent scholarship on human-animal relations of comparable subtlety and thoroughness in English.

I suspect is that a cultural divide between the Mediterranean and Anglo-Saxon cultures in play here. Marchesini is writing in a country where pastoral tradition remains relatively strong, and factory farming has very seldom or never been carried to extremes approaching those in America. Animals in the Anglo-Saxon countries have at times been objectified to such an extent that many theorists react with an almost exclusive emphasis on kinship. In countries of the Mediterranean, where relations between animals and people have evolved slowly over centuries, an emphasis on alterity may come more easily.

But, if this is so, perhaps the time has come for one more boundary, that between Mediterranean and Anglo-Saxon culture, to be blurred. There are strong parallels between the zooanthopologia of Marchesini and recent writing in Animal Studies/Anthrozoology by Americans such as Donna Haraway and Glen A Mazis, who also emphasize that human identity is a product of our constantly-changing relationships with other creatures. All of these thinkers see meaning as created through the interaction of human beings, animals, and machines, not considered as discrete entities in perpetual competition for power but as fluid elements of a larger environment.

At the very least, Marchesini presents a theory that makes sense of many contemporary developments, without dogmatism, pedantry, or excessive rhetoric. Behind all his cultural and historical analysis is a surprisingly simple conception. I would characterize Marchesini's posthumanism as a form of neo-totemism. It is perhaps a variant of structural anthropology, in which the residual differences between modern and tribal cultures, as well as between anthropologist and natives, have been effaced. The model for non-human alterity might be a forest, a grassy meadow, or a coral reef on a summer day, filled with a virtually endless diversity of creatures.

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