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Hayden White's Anthropocentric Posthumanism

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This article reflects on Hayden White's essay "Posthumanism and the Liberation of Humankind" (2000) and indicates its relevance for the current critique of anthropocentrism and ongoing discussions about human agency, the non-human condition and posthumanism. It revisits White's interest in antihumanism, existentialism, the work of "unbinding" humans from the burden of history and their humanity and the liberating potential of "deonerate art" (White's term). It problematizes Sartre's well-known statement and asks: "is man really nothing other than what he makes of himself?"

Keywords: Antihumanism; anthropocentrism; existentialism; human agency.

O Pós-Humanismo Antropocêntrico de Hayden White

Este artigo reflete sobre o ensaio de Hayden White "Posthumanism and the Liberation of Humankind" (2000), sugerindo que este é relevante para a crítica atual do antropocentrismo e para os debates correntes em torno da agência humana, a condição não-humana e o pós-humanismo. O texto revisita o interesse de White no anti-humanismo, no existencialismo e na tarefa de desvincular os humanos do fardo da história e da sua humanidade, assim como o potencial libertador de "*deonerate art*" (nas palavras de White). Neste sentido, problematiza a conhecida asserção de Sartre e questiona: "será que o homem não é mesmo nada mais do que aquilo que faz de si mesmo?"

Palavras-chave: Anti-humanismo; antropocentrismo; existencialismo; agência humana.

Hayden White's Anthropocentric Posthumanism

Ewa Domanska*

We posthumanists conceive
ourselves to live 'after metaphysics'

Hayden White¹

In 2000, the journal *Design Book Review* (California College of the Arts) published a theme issue entitled "Humanism and Posthumanism." A short and forgotten article by Hayden White entitled "Posthumanism and the Liberation of Humankind" appears in the table of contents directly after the introduction by the editors (Mitchell Schwarzer and William Littmann). I consider White's article to be important and worth recalling for current discussions on the human and non-human condition, the critique of anthropocentrism, antihumanism, posthumanism and the liberating role of art. I am particularly interested in White's move to associate posthumanism with "the liberation of humankind" and his comments on "unbinding" individuals from the burden of their 'humanity'.²

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¹ Hayden White, "Posthumanism and the Liberation of Humankind," *Design Book Review* 41/42 (Winter/Spring 2000): 12. I might add that living "after metaphysics" means "living in history," which, (as White put it) "quietly slipped into the place formerly occupied by religion and metaphysics." Hayden White, "The Practical Past," in *The Practical Past* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 2014), 20.

² When Hayden White and I discussed the content of the third collection of his essays that I edited in Polish, and I mentioned I wanted to include his essay on "Posthumanism and the Liberation of Humankind," White commented: "I no longer like the piece on posthumanism (...). [It] would have to be added to and brought up to date." I managed to convince White that the piece is important and it appeared in the collection. Email correspondence, 29.07.2013.

For White, humanism, antihumanism and posthumanism, as explained in the article in question, are specific worldviews. In humanism, humans are understood as existences that are different from divine or supernatural beings on the one hand, and from various forms of the material and/or natural on the other. Beings exist in continuity with one another rather than in isolation. What is distinctive about human beings is an essence that “manifests itself only in time and space – in other words *in history*,” and is related to “a specifically human mode or instance of human creativity” (10). White claims that even if manifestations of human creativity expressed in architecture/art and literature are related to a particular time and space, “humanism is more ‘translationist’ than transcendentalist,” since “it is this essence of the human that authorizes faith in the possibility of adequate *translatio* between different times and different cultures” (10). White concludes that such reasoning leads to the claim that in cultural creativity, there is no originality, but rather novelty (translations, new manifestations of previously existed forms).

White calls posthumanism a form of antihumanism that he finds in the legacy of “the unholy trinity of Nietzsche, Freud and Foucault” associated with nihilism, oneirism and antirepressivism (12, 13). It is characterized by the rejection of an essence (and essentialism) that enables a belief in the sameness of human nature. Following Jean-Paul Sartre, White would say that there is in fact nothing like (individual or collective) human nature (the Germans, the Jews, etc.), but only a (historical) human condition. Posthumanism is a deontological worldview, according to White. It aims to deontologize our thinking about aesthetics, metaphysics, morality, tradition, religion, etc. Deontology is understood here as a knowledge of unbinding humans (as White reminds us, the Greek *déon* means “that which is binding”) from any repressive techniques of self-binding, self-subjection and self-servitude. Indeed, for White, “existence precedes essence,” liberation means unbinding, and existentialism is a form of antihumanism (to paraphrase Sartre).

White introduces the concept of onerate and deonerate art (*deonerate* from Latin *onus* – burden) where the latter designates a kind of

art that “de-burdens” individuals. He also uses the term “oneration” as a synonym for repressive structures and procedures of “binding” (13). How (and what kind of) art/architecture, asks White, might “contribute to the project of ‘unbinding’ human beings from the condition of self-servitude”? (12). Could Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and Richard Meier’s Getty Center in Santa Monica serve this purpose?

Hayden White is known as “one of the great humanist minds of our time,”³ but as Herman Paul stresses, he is a liberal humanist, existential humanist,⁴ and decisionist thinker of choices. (Classical) humanism therefore appears in White’s writing in a critical/ironic mode. He reflects on how Western humanism has been deconstructed and writes about “the dreams and illusions of a bankrupt humanism” in Europe and its “good old values” of the community, church, nation and state that have been exposed (and found their fulfillment) in Nazism and concentration/death camps.⁵ So, indeed, White is a (postmodern) antihumanist in the mode of “the unholy trinity” (I would add here Althusser, Sartre and Derrida), but the most accurate identification of this position was proposed by Dominick LaCapra, who called it “anthropocentric posthumanism.”⁶

Despite the current tendency to criticize the human-centered position, it would be pointless to accuse Hayden White of anthropocentrism. Like Sartre’s, White’s humanism is strictly tied to an anthropo-

3 Amy J. Elias, “The Voices of Hayden White,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 22, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-voices-of-hayden-white/#!>

4 Herman Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (London: Polity Press, 2011), 51ff. Willson H. Coates and Hayden V. White, *The Ordeal of Liberal Humanism: An Intellectual History of Western Europe*, vol. 1 and 2 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966 and 1970). Cf. Hans Kellner, “Bedrock of Order: Hayden White’s Linguistic Humanism,” *History and Theory* 19 (1980): 1-29.

5 White, *The Practical Past*, 4, 44, 48. Commenting on Foucault’s antihumanism, White writes: “[T]he whole of culture, far from being that exercise of endless sublimation that humanism conceives to be the essence of our humanity, is revealed as nothing but repression. More or less killing, to be sure, but in the end nothing but destructive.” Hayden White, “Foucault’s Discourse: The Historiography of Anti-Humanism,” in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987), 134.

6 Dominick LaCapra, “History Beyond the Pleasure Principle?,” in *Re-Figuring Hayden White*, eds. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domańska, and Hans Kellner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 246. It is interesting that the term “anthropocentrism” does not appear in White’s books.

centric perspective as it is understood in Marxist anthropocentrism and existentialist anthropocentrism with their fixations on human agency and freedom and their obsession with existential situations of choice and individual responsibility. As a scholar and teacher, White fought all his life for liberating people (including historians) from “the burden of history” (and any other constraints).⁷ While this position is associated with post-1968 leftist approaches, postmodernism and emancipatory humanities and is therefore considered by some to be *passé* and/or in support of “species chauvinism” on the one hand, and undesirable by those welcoming a “conservative turn” on the other, it should not be dismissed too quickly in our world constantly troubled by conflict, new forms of slavery, terrorism, forced migrations and mass killings.

What is needed at present is in fact a certain “new humanism” that would rethink the role of humanism in the contemporary world and (following antihumanist thinkers) celebrate “radical alterity,” the non-human condition, humans understood not only as *homo humanus* but also as *homo sapiens*, collectives rather than narcissistic individuals, and the co-dependency of human and non-human beings (both material and spiritual). As such, this position would distance itself from anthropocentrism and secularism. Current discussions on the Anthropocene, climate change, ecocides and species extinction as well as postsecularism, new forms of religion and new animism shed new light on the problem of human agency and freedom. I might then ask (paraphrasing Sartre): “is man really nothing other than what he makes of himself?” To arrive at answers relevant for our current condition, as indeed Daniel Chernilo claims, “humanism and anthropocentrism need to be clearly distinguished.”⁸ Contemporary (critical) posthumanists (Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Cary Wolfe, to name only a few)⁹ of-

7 Cf. Ewa Domanska, “Hayden White and Liberation Historiography,” *Rethinking History* 19, no. 4 (2015): 640-50, DOI: 10.1080/13642529.2014.959361.

8 Cf. Daniel Chernilo, “The Humanism Debate Revisited. Sartre, Heidegger, Derrida,” in *Debating Humanity. Towards a Philosophical Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 34ff, DOI: 10.1017/9781316416303.

9 Rosi Braidotti, “Posthuman Critical Theory,” in *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures*, eds. Debashish Banerji, Makarand R. Paranjape (New Delhi: Springer, 2016). DOI: 10.1007/978-81-322-3637-5_2.

fer an important contribution for discussing this issue. Posthumanism, with its interest in animal, plant and things studies, non-human agency and multispecies collectives creates a new context for the following questions: how might White's ideas help to build deonerate approaches to the past? How might they support attempts to build alterative scenarios of the future (alternative visions of humanity), and how in this context could artists contribute to the "unbinding' of individuals from the 'burden' of their 'humanity'" (13)?

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