PROMONTORY DIFFERENTIATIONS: PAINTING LIKE A POSTHUMAN

Abstract

This article aims to establish the conceptual contexts related to humanism and discuss a theoretical analysis of posthumanism in the field of arts, with a particular focus on 'Surrealism'. In surrealism/surreal art, the human is transfigured into the posthuman. To flesh out this schematic, I have examined how in surrealist artworks the posthuman emerges by radically reconfiguring human bodies/minds. The triumph of surface over depth is best embodied in both humanism and its modern antithesis, posthumanism. Rooted in Plato, Aristotle and the Old Testament, humanism depicted hierarchical structures of all matter and life, even God; and themes from Christianity were the central concept driving art in Renaissance Europe. Surrealist artists, including most notably Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy and Rene Magritte produced paintings that enmesh humans into integrated circuits, reflecting posthuman alienation of the earlier negentropic centers of art. The ontological dimension of visual art is a crucial issue, when it comes to a proper understanding of the posthuman agenda. Humans are information-processing machines while posthumanism is a non-normative critical stance that rests on a constructivist paradigm of cultural hegemony and postmodernism. This paper further investigates what posthumanism might be, given that it cannot be isolated from the dynamics of surrealism from which it is wrought.

Keywords—humanism, Renaissance, surrealism, posthuman

Author

Siddhartha Mukherjee
Department of Sociology
Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU)
siddharthamukherjee1996@outlook.com

The interpretation(s) of theory in terms of Humanism led us ultimately to the posthuman, to the narrative paradigm(s), and to the sedimentation of various generic discourses, the inventive automatization of information. The concept of Humanism is seen as a placeholder for various camps that singularly (re)presents the self, a perspectival submission of a way into thinking how identity/selfhood is constructed in relation to pre-existent forms. The gendered spiritual or inner core that is historically central to the construction of Humanism that developed into a civilizational model is seen to be shaped by self-reflexive reason or a cultural essence where structural analysis demands as its completion a kind of reconstruction, a postulation by presupposition and implication, of an absent or unrepresentable *infrastructual* limiting system. If Humanism as a civilizational model in European history provides a key theoretical resource for scholarly studies, some of the most important historical resources come from Paduan classicism and Italian Renaissance. The doctrines and moral demands of the times are well wrought in the sculptures of Nicola Pisano, the architecture designed by Arnolfo di Cambio or, say the paintings of Giotto; and after 1400 when the Renaissance began to spread throughout Italy, the revival of the ancient heritage then turned into something which, properly interpreted, is in astonishingly little conflict with the new fostering wisdom of the age, or indeed with anything. Biblical and mythological scenes take on the function of art forms in which the various impulses of artists—from Fra Angelico to Masaccio, to Gozzoli, to Ghirlandaio—emerge, differentiate, and recombine with subjects ranging from the Virgin and Child to groups of saints (among other themes from Christianity). With a certain spectacular solemnity Botticelli's paintings too imbued religious and mythological themes. But only certain moments of possibility have their own unique and characteristic structure, which history has itself determined, and the Church was no longer accepted as the sole arbiter of spiritual and intellectual values. There can be seen a totalizing historical dynamic, when High Renaissance artists sculpted a religious scene or painted Biblical paintings; exalting the ideals of classical aesthetics, the artists were very often not glorifying God but Man. Pramod K. Nayar proposes a framework that is much more suggestive for our present purposes:

> Michel Foucault traces the emergence of the human, as we know it now, to the set of ideas and concepts that evolved during the European Enlightenment. Toward the end of *The Order of Things,* Foucault would famously write: 'man is an invention of recent date' (1973: 387). What Foucault is referring to here is a way of perceiving the human cognitive processes, human behaviour and actions. The human was 'invented' when these ways of perceiving and talking about these processes, behaviour and actions became codified in the 'human sciences' (24).

Unrelated to any political self-fashioning, Leonardo Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* has long been held as the model of universal man (arguably the most famous representation of the 'human' body in Western art). The negative inversion of this position (along with the Eurocentric ideology that underpins Humanism studies) is brought about by Rosi Braidotti who states in the first chapter of her book *The Posthuman* that "[a]t the start of it all there is He: the classical ideal of 'Man', formulated first by Protagoras as 'the measure of all things', later renewed in the Italian Renaissance as a universal model and represented in Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man" (13). This then clearly involves an ideological repudiation of Humanism of a type which might conceivably range from Renaissance's

older forms as the replication of the reification of the posthuman to some of the more habitually repeating structures of critical theory. The position to denounce the complacencies of Humanism (that predate contemporary posthumanism) as some final symptom of discourse (or representational thought) seems more appropriate to the new theoretical position which postulates a post-dualistic viewpoint of a general modification of us/them and man/woman that have long been subjects of discriminatory productions of meaning, with the restructuring of Renaissance ideologies as a system. The new forms of posthumanism as actualization of a set of concrete possibilities of a new technocratic/technological utopia produce a dynamic vision of scholarly activity, a relationality, that is more relevant to our current moment since,

> The very notion of modernity—from its beginnings in the Renaissance's image of itself as a new age, a historical break from the "Dark Ages"—has been defined in terms of an instrumental conception of technology, an instrumental or technological rationality that allows modern "humanity" to know and control the world. In these terms, that which is "nontechnological" cannot be modern (Rutsky 2).

Ideas that are deeply challenging to many of our indefinitely extendable series of contextualities about human superiority and uniqueness felt particularly material during the 2020-2021 pandemic; the co-evolved affirmation of the living (and the non-human), the relationship of humans and technology, of pure potentiality and futurity has perhaps never been so apparent as during the long stretches of lockdown time. It is also during this time that the Human's understanding of the technological and *technologization* became more universal. As a posthuman subject, the human unsettled in its belief in transcendence, furnishes the graphic embodiment of an ideological closure as such, its unbalanced binary of human/non-human (allowing us to map out the inner limits of an existential plurality—a fragmentation of identity—) and to construct the basic terms of the humanist understanding of a unified posthuman self. The posthuman turn realizes a self-critical reluctance and has aggressively positioned the theory itself within a self-reflection that additionally presupposes a degree of subjective consciousness, because "[h]umanists might regard humans as distinct beings, in an antagonistic relationship with their surroundings. Posthumanists, on the other hand, regard humans as embodied in an extended technological world" (Pepperell).

Even if the concept of Humanism is to be considered a synchronic one, at the level of social scientific methods, the structural limits consistent with the posthuman becomes an over-regulated, indefinable transgression. Renaissance studies (and posthuman theory) project a long view of literary science which is sometimes inconsistent with history. For example, Medieval artists used monsters to a great extent. The monsters represent aspects of the "non-human, abhuman and inhuman" (Nayar 110) that seems to threaten humanity's control, if not be beyond human control. And,

> Humanism, when it appeared in Renaissance Europe, was, paradoxically, very attentive to biological mutants and medical anomalies – deemed to be 'monsters', about which more in a later chapter – because these seemed to not fit into the category 'human': they were formed differently, they behaved differently. 'Universal' humanism was ironically, therefore, a system of

> *differentiation* in which some forms of the body were treated as 'human' and others as 'not-human' (Nayar 23).

In this sense, the 'post' of posthumanism need not imply the absence of cybernetic mechanism. Resonating with dominant forms of theoretical asymmetry, dualisms ascribed to 'post' are a consistent feature of cultural studies—reinforcing it as a praxis. Humans are information-processing machines. In contrast to images of cybernetic posthuman as 'trans-' or 'super-' human, surrealism re-asserts the importance of posthumanism in cultural studies. Pioneered by André Breton in *Manifeste du surréalisme* in 1924, Surrealism was thus born, and the Surrealist movement demonstrated much the influence of the Dada movement that preceded it. With Breton being unequivocally at the helm, Surrealism saw writers and artists experiment by a radical historicizing of their mental operations, such that not only the content of their art, but the very method itself, along with the artist, comes to be reckoned into the "text" of the posthuman. A history of Surrealism (and theories thus propagated) provided a vital instrument, a methodological lens for studying the discourses exploring the semantic and ideological intricacies of the unbridled imagination, the collective unconscious of much that happened between the two great wars. As in Freud's own work, surreal art yields the objective possibilities according to which the posthuman landscape and the physical elements, say, must necessarily be perceived. The artworks of surrealists mark the conceptual points where a visual paradigm of the posthuman thought started to improvise and after which it is condemned to oscillate.

So, how may we interpret the contemporary practice of posthumanism, as inflected by the surrealist tradition?

In posthumanism the landscape tends to grow denser and more participatory; while 'post' is often apparent on the level that seeks to capture how human (and the nonhuman) subjects are entwined along a plane, 'human(ism)' mark the perspectival interplay of the self/selfhood that are gaining greater access to information, hierarchical levels of communication, correlations, and specific historicity. Intellectually capacious and polymorphous mid-century Renaissance scholars found their lineage and rationale in the Humanism and classical Antiquity, but one only needs to trawl the university M.F.A. exhibitions, contemporary art museums and art galleries to understand that the concerns of the humanists and the Surrealists are still with us today—much relevant, only transposed in twenty-first century contexts. Sculptures and architectures have always played a fundamental role in connecting human and nonhuman spheres, and the use of art as a posthuman space has a strong tradition within the recent past—be it Anish Kapoor's *Leviathan* or Anthony Gormley's *Another Place* (sculpture) or Rachel Whiteread's *Embankment* and there are "many other figures from a range of fields who converged on a new theoretical model for biological, mechanical, and communicational processes that removed the human and Homo sapiens from any particularly privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information, and cognition" (Wolfe xii). The posthuman has increasingly come to be conceived as an offspring of technoculture, highlighting constitutive paradox(es) of phenomenal reality, historical emergence of modernism and future studies; tending to avoid transhumanist speculation—and all essentially cultural or superstructural phenomena— posthumanism studies, often, unsettle critical staples. Cary Wolfe reifies an interpretation, a comparable model of posthumanist thought where he contends that "far from surpassing or rejecting the human" (xxv)—as posthumanism sometimes seeks to do,

particularly in the case of transhumanism—the question of posthumanism should in fact,

> [force] us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of Homo sapiens itself, by recontextualising them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own autopoietic ways of "bringing forth a world"—ways that are, since we ourselves are human animals, part of the evolutionary history and behavioral and psychological repertoire of the human itself" (xxv).

Developed by Salvador Dalí in the early 1930s, Dalí's paranoiac-critical method explored the realm(s) of the unconscious mind where the human as a dynamic hybrid was simultaneously enclosed by and enclosed others. There is neither linearity nor chronology, but always an undecidable relativity inside a state of self-induced hallucination. Dali's surreal(ism) paintings questioned not only the practicability but also the fundamental transformations of the real world. There exists a contradictory relationship to heterogeneity and alterity, on conduits and pathways. A doctrinal vacuity always exists because the human is there—a human that exists because of a non-human and vice versa. Considered to be one of the famous artworks of Surrealism movement, *The Great Masturbator* by Salvador Dalí was produced in 1929. The arrangement is somewhat multi-layered and associative; a man's face looking downwards is a self-portrait of Dalí and the emerging woman's head leaning towards the male crotch is Dalí's wife, Gala. There is a gigantic grasshopper, below which a couple can be seen hugging/making-out; a white lily is painted right below the female body and adjacent to the white lily is a lion's head with its tongue sticking out. The glut of such (and various other) images/symbols are often signifiers of the artist's fears, his subconscious and his (sexual?) frustrations. Much like Hieronymus Bosch, Salvador Dalí attempts to (re)assemble the fragmentary elements of the unconscious into a socio-historical totality that is linked to the posthuman condition. The rhetorical strength of photography too naturalizes the image for the observer, and the unequivocal character of the camera comes the closest to having an unrelentingly posthuman relation with surrealism. For example, artist Gillian Wearing takes an interesting approach devoted to masturbation. The representation of masturbation in art around the globe and through the ages (be it the modern era with Egon Schiele and Marcel Duchamp to the late twentieth century or, from prehistoric art to antiquity or, from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance) has always depicted the erotic—the pornified. Wearing's *Masturbation* generates a 'surreal' effect, the photographic art shows a picture within a picture within a picture within a picture; there are two photographs—one of a man, another a woman—masturbating to a photograph. But the effect is that of an infinite visual regress taking place when one holds two mirrors up to one another since it is not clear what the humans in the images are masturbating to; their own self-image placed *en abfme* ('in an abyss' in French) inextricably intertwine a posthuman illusion of a victimless existence as well as a reflection on the narcissistic pastimes of all self-lovers. The very banality of Wearing's art, the awkwardness, the transgression, is emotionally open to experience—not letting the seductions of cognition emblematic of nothing. In the words of Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, "[t]he posthuman body is a technology, a screen, a projected image" (3).

Yves Tanguy in his artworks examine the circulation of biomorphic forms, amoeba like organisms that cross the space(s) of the immutable human being. Tanguy's use of

illusionistic images opened ways for artists such as Dalí and Magritte. It may be noted that the fluid like figures that occur regularly in Yves Tanguy's works are a curious hybrid of anxiety and reality, where the distance is reinforced by the signifying richness of symbols as well as the referential associations. In *Large Painting Representing a Landscape*, the dark sea- floor (or desert) dotted with occasional weeds are marked by long shadows and on top of a steep rock a fluid figure rests in a nest while other such figures squirm below; the art provides an almost intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity reflecting the artist's own anxiety and insecurity. Works such as *At 4 O'Clock In The Summer, Hope* suggests a weightless space, like the tranquillity and silence of the bottom of the sea, while in *Construct and Destroy* the horizon line is lost, the distinction between ground, plane, sky has been blurred. Tanguy's *From Green to White* is crucial for posthumanist thought; the brightly glowing forms that float in the sky are reminiscent of Matta and below the active and swirling sky is set an unearthly city, the architectural ruins of a lost civilization. The totemic objects, the expansive sky, Tanguy's sense of the deep misty spaces and loneliness of the open sea were perhaps the signs of his initial training as an officer in the merchant navy.

Unlike Tanguy, Max Ernst finds it necessary to invoke contradictory moments, without reference to undifferentiated experience, to re-secure absurdity by using reality as a human instrument. The collage novel and artist's book *A Week of Kindness* has established many key deconstructive issues—unrelated within themselves, and undivided with posthuman theories. Ernst's *The Eye of Silence* engulf the viewers with indescribable vividness; the overall effect, too inflexible to account for, is one of paranoia. *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale* inscribe a logical continuity—the death of his sister, a fevered hallucination—moments that can be isolated from their place in time. The influence upon the development of 'dream painting(s)' of the surrealists was through the work of Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico. In his *Pietà or Revolution by Night*, Ernst reconstructs a vision in a dream, in which the artist appears as a Christ-like figure in the arms of his own father. His well-dressed bourgeoise father, wearing a bowler hat, replaces Virgin Mary. Ernst was particularly fascinated by Freud's analysis of dreams and is known to have read several of his texts, including *The Interpretation of Dreams*, when in Germany. Some of the more important radical "posthuman performances" of sexual, racial, national, and other boundaries are lofted by the painting *The Teetering Woman* where the subject is left to balance between two sturdy classical columns in a *zoomed* landscape. The figure destabilises the hegemonic. The polycentrism and complexity found in *Solitary and Conjugal Trees* or *Euclide* are equally dystopian, uncanny and posthumanist.

Belgian artist René Magritte also produced works that alluded strongly to dreams. Magritte's *The Lost Jockey* and *The Annunciation* attempt to maintain suggestive associations where spindle like shapes (phallic as well as evocative of chess pieces) coalesce into a flow of motion, that slows down and examine the chains of desires and history. Dreamscapes are fruitful portals into the subconscious—the interpretative milieu of interpretations, the conscientious suspension of possibilities are endless. In Ernst's *The Reckless Sleeper*, human subjectivity is fractured by a sleeping human, a hat, a handle-mirror, a candle and an apple; this can be appropriated as a stance that is firmly based in a narrative simultaneously inhabiting the past, future, and present in a sleeping brain—a preoccupation that is also reflected in *Spanish Night* by Francis Picabia. Based on an active distinction of human subjects from a dream world, be it the fragmentary collage of

Perturbation my sister or the productive utopianism of *The Human Condition* paintings, a posthumanist interpretation of Magritte's works will be often characterised by a polymorphic unfixity of nonconscious cognition, a methodological space for the inclusion of dreams and rejections. Posthuman studies scholar Francesca Ferrando, writing on surrealism, noted:

> Surrealism, though, did not aim to express a transcendence of the real; its intent was to deepen the understandings of the world perceived by the senses, extending its foundations over what had been historically confined to "the reign of logic" (Breton, [1924]1972: 9), as Breton defined it in the "First Surrealist Manifesto" (1924). In his words: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states—dream and reality—which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality" (Ibid.: 14). In its attempts of avoiding dualisms, Posthumanism owes to Surrealism the retrieving of such aspects of life: the dream world can offer a unique space of visualization; the possibilities opened by the future are already embedded in the mystery of the present; the conscious becomes the unconscious, in a fluid view from which the field of posthuman psychology is currently emerging (4).

After all—within the complex space–time axis of critical theory—representations, transgressions and influences can yield sometimes startling mutations and postmodern interpretations. To connect these moments with other complex and conflicted accounts of surrealism is to fashion a kind of literary theory that's neither so reliable nor so natural as to occur spontaneously. Interestingly, the influence of Surrealism as elicited in the works of novelist J. G. Ballard may in fact be accentuated which represents, in the context of posthumanism, much transgressions; we notice that,

> with the exception of *The Wind From Nowhere*, all of Ballard's climate novels come with pictorial avatars. In *The Drowned World*, the protagonist Kerans finds himself intrigued by the "self-devouring phantasmagoric jungles" of Max Ernst, the "spectral bonelike landscape" in a painting by Paul Delvaux (p. 29), and a "Dalinian landscape" with "immense sundials [stuck] like daggers in the fused sand" (p. 63). The final chapter of *The Drought* takes its title from Yves Tanguy's painting "Jours de Lenteur," whose "smooth pebble-like objects, drained of all associations, suspended on a washed tidal floor" foreshadow the characters' increasing social isolation (p. 11). The first hardback edition of *The Crystal World* is adorned with Max Ernst's decalcomania print "*The Eye of Silence*" and the "heavy and penumbral" light in the vicinity of the crystallizing forest at the novel's center motivates a comparison to Arnold Böcklin's "*Isle of Dead*" (p. 13). Recalling that Ballard points to the landscapes of Dalí, Ernst, and others as "reflections of some interior reality within our minds" (Ballard [1963] 1997c, p. 200), one is inclined to infer from the artworks referenced in his novels that this interior reality is of an elemental, inhuman order (7).

Thus writes Moritz Ingwersen in his extraordinary article on J. G. Ballard. Building on theorizing based on Anthropocene, entropy, complexity theory, ecocriticism,

thermodynamics Ingwersen argues the emergent nature of posthuman concerns; his reading and analysis of Ballard's works result in the opening up of negotiating with complexly triangulated relations of visual arts and *writing* with the multimodal nature of texts. Ingwersen's archaeological eye shows how Ballard presents an increasingly digitized, connected modern world with references that take in all forms of meaning-making. Wrought through sci-fi (and sometimes cli-fi) themes and dark humour, Ballard's characters are often inundated within a hybrid ecology of objects and they endlessly circulate within the dereliction(s) of an identificatory crisis. Moritz Ingwersen further states that,

> Embedded within the lineage of landscape painting, the surrealist tradition portrays an estranged environment no longer framed as the externalization of a rationalistic human gaze or a world- for-us. Just as the ego in the age of psychoanalysis is no longer the master of its own house, Earth becomes an alien planet. It may be obvious to point out that what the above paintings by Ernst, Delvaux, Tanguy, Böcklin, and Dalí have in common is their evocation of entropy and the virtual absence of human animation. Especially Tanguy depicts a world whose energy seems exhausted: Whitewashed dunes and a murky sky blend into one; grotesque abstract shapes half-submerged in what looks like dust are vaguely reminiscent of metallic consumer objects whose edges have been worn smooth and round by exposure to friction and heat (7).

Surrealism artworks showcase the inherent complexity of the issues that Humanism/science has condemned as uncanny, atrocious or exceptional. It seeks to emancipate the disempowered while hermetically sealing from outside the viewers' eyes of familiarity; being explicitly predicated on normative values, it is certain to be contentious. In posthuman studies, such issues are often discussed among theorists by placing an overt emphasis on multiplicity; new frameworks are created from within the texts of surrealism and although the conflicts of interest among man, environment, economy and society become increasingly apparent in the artworks, the habitually repeating structures evoke both Marxist ideologies and Freudian reproducibility—a double strategy, both scientific and posthuman. An analytical framework in a Marxist perspective might result in a postmodernist breakdown. In this sense, within the disruptive, uncontainable randomness of the images can be seen a kind of dreamscape that fragments the totalizing visions of the both the postmodern and posthuman condition(s). Surrealism and Surrealism art contributed to create a posthuman canon. Posthuman concerns permeate the poetics of surrealism. The uninterrupted repetitions of symbols of metamorphoses, non-humans, man–machine linkage, organic-inorganic hybrids, trans-species bodies within the cultural imaginary in tune with the landscape of dreams and nightmares than with everyday life, establish in turn, an authoritative system of address—a structure that is external to critical theory and interactionist and interpretive approaches. As already noted, surrealism artworks explore the systems of the posthuman concerns as built upon discursive transparency, rhetorical obfuscation and modern technological reproducibility; entailing a view of what art in a social democracy should entail, surrealism often turns the rigidity of poststructuralist rhetoric against the seemingly transparent moves of posthuman studies to unsettle critical theories. Art encourages us to follow the established practice of looking back and revisiting known/unknown truths, and to become attuned to the hidden, subversive, transversal and interdisciplinary development of culture and theories. (And rather, notwithstanding the

evasiveness of any rhetoric/theoretical lens, surrealism as an art movement sets its own text—as a seeming symbol of authority—as a voice of its own.)

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