THE 'ENCOUNTER' BETWEEN POSTHUMANISM, TECHNOLOGY AND EDUCATION

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Abstract

The starting point is a definition of posthumanism as a critical theory in humanities that deals with the question is what it means to be a human in the present conditions of globalization, technoscience, and climate change. There is the prospect of opening up new possibilities of how to be a human and what kind of a human. This does not mean that the end of humanity is near, but rather the end of a certain conception, a conception which at best was considered to refer to "a fraction of humanity that had wealth, power, and enough leisure to conceptualize itself as autonomous beings fulfilling their will through individual action and choice" (Hayles, 1999). The prefix "post-" in posthumanism, therefore, does not mean a complete break with that main part of the term, but rather is a sign of the ongoing deconstruction of what it "prefixes". It is a kind of "conceptual parasite that inhabits humanism itself and tries to get it to address its own contradictions" (Herbrechter, 2018b). Through this conceptualization of posthumanism, the author reflects on the relation between technology and education, and the understanding of the influence and use of digital technology in school. Does the latter enable education to be "better" (more effective, more available to everyone)? Following will be the reflection on the relationship between the conceptualizations of new technologies within a given theory of education and the kind of subject that is envisaged as the outcome of such education. Is technology purely a tool or perhaps it changes the outcomes and conceptualization of education? What kinds of changes are happening in schools in this regard? The changes, as it seems, are not (only) educationally-based, but are economically induced too.

Keywords: Posthumanism, education, knowledge, technology, digitalization.

1. Introduction: Prefix

I would like to start by paying some attention to N. Katharine Hayles' book *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999), which is certainly a reference work for the field of cybernetics (as discourse and technology) and the posthuman as a phenomenon that brings both horror and pleasure. Horror, says N. K. Hayles, is relatively easy to understand, since the "post-" suggests that man's days are numbered (I will return to this prefix immediately). Many authors believe that what is at stake here is not only the intellectual replacement of the definition of one kind of human being by another, but also, in a quite literal sense, the replacement of human beings as the dominant form of life on the planet by intelligent machines – which would mean, that "humans can step meekly into that good night and join the dinosaurs as a species that once ruled the earth but is now obsolete, or they can stay a little longer by turning themselves into machines" (Hayles, 1999) (The poetic expression must be explained a bit. It is the rephrasing of the line "Do not go gentle into that good night" by Dylan Thomas from the poem of the same title (night as a metaphor for death). However, N. K. Hayles does not mention Thomas).

There is the prospect of breaking out of old frameworks and opening up new possibilities of how to be human and what kind of human. This does not mean the end of humanity, but the end of a particular conception of humanity. This conception is at best applied to "the fraction of humanity that had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualise themselves as autonomous beings who fulfill their will through individual agency and choice" (Hayles, 1999).

As Stefan Herbrechter (2017) puts it – this is more of a conceptual remark, but it is also partly terminological – in this ongoing "deconstruction" of humanism, it is necessary to distinguish between the figure of the "'posthuman' (and its present, past and foreseen avatars, such as cyborgs, monsters, zombies, ghosts, angels, etc.) and 'posthumanism' as a social discourse", which tackles "the pressing question of what it means to be human under conditions of globalisation, technoscience, late capitalism, and climate change".

The prefix "post-" therefore does not mean a complete break with the main part of the expression, but rather a sign of the ongoing deconstruction of what it "prefixes". It is a kind of "conceptual parasite that inhabits humanism itself and attempts to get it to address its own contradictions" (Herbrechter, 2018b).

Rosi Braidotti defines the posthuman as a convergent phenomenon between posthumanism and postanthropocentrism, which, on the one hand, implies a critique of "the universal ideal of the thinking Man and, on the other, a rejection of the multivalence of the species" (Braidotti, 2019). (This refers to a biological species.) "The political implications of this shift are significant. If the revision of humanism enacted by feminist, queer, anti-racist, ecological and postcolonial critiques has empowered sexualised and racialised – but still human – 'others', the crisis of Anthropos supports naturalised others" (which means non-human entities – animals, plants, cells, etc. – as a sort of conceptual personae) (ibid.)

As to the methodology of this short contribution: I use an interpretative approach and am interested in concepts, and in examining some fundamental questions regarding human and education. I find Donna Haraway's idea of scientific practice as a story-telling practice extremely compelling (Lykke, Markussen, & Olesen, 2000). This means that theoretical content, methodology, style, and epistemology are interconnected (ibid.). So, I do not offer an evidence-based approach, my main objective is to reflect on the issue in question.

2. Conceptual work: Posthumanism

I take posthumanism as a critical theory that thematises a series of ruptures with the traditional assumptions of Western culture, in particular a different (perhaps new?) understanding of the human subject in relation to the world. This brings with it a new epistemology that is no longer based on dualisms and that undermines/attempts to undermine the traditionally set boundaries between human, animal, and machine (actors in the so-called cybernetic triangle). Posthumanism could therefore be a discourse on what it means to no longer be human, at least not in the (traditional) humanistic sense (Herbrechter, 2018b).

Technology enters posthumanist debates through the mediation of feminism or feminist theory, in particular Donna Haraway as one of the most important authors in this field, and the figure of the cyborg (Ferrando, 2013; see also Haraway, 1991). This figuration is perhaps the most familiar in her work, on the one hand as a synthesis of man and machine, which is mainly a figure from science fiction films and literature (and, with some minor extrapolation, also contemporary medicine), which is perhaps less interesting here.

Donna Haraway, through the character of the cyborg, shows that the old established dualities can no longer hold. In short, she is not concerned with synthesising man and machine into one, but with the view that the binary oppositions of humanism must be overcome if unjust privileges are to be overcome. These stem from an understanding of difference as inequality, opposition, and a hierarchical relationship between the two.

It is now clear that posthumanism is not an entirely new "discourse", but (perhaps more accurately) a way of recognising and incorporating a wide range of different critical approaches (feminism, anti-colonialism, technology studies, even ecology ...) that are "directly based on contesting how humanism has constrained politics and education" (Snaza et al., 2014). And it is precisely the process of "humanisation" – leading students towards humanity – that is one of the central foundations underpinning the whole concept of education in Western culture or society.

3. On education

Formal education in the West, as Helena Pedersen (2010) argues, is firmly rooted in humanist ideals. "'Becoming human' through the cultivation of certain cognitive, social and moral capacities has even come to symbolise the idea of education as such in Enlightenment philosophical traditions" (ibid). William Spanos (1993) explains the traditional view of education as leading away from something (say, the darkness of ignorance) towards a universal light (knowledge or knowing), while at the same time leading towards humanity.

The question is then how the "encounter" between posthumanism and education can work, how posthumanism can help to change educational theory and practice, how to "enrich", "change", and "improve" knowledge-acquisition practices, etc.

Another point to pay attention to is the issue arising from the emerging (in fact, largely already emerged) global information society and the establishment of distance learning environments, which is taking place in the form of a "repackaging of the (humanistic) notion of education as 'knowledge transfer'" (Herbrechter, 2018c). This means that the previous humanist consensus that another important task of education – i.e., to develop an idea of "personality" – has almost completely disappeared (ibid.).

One of the current views on education and technology is that the latter makes education "better", i.e., more efficient, more available, etc. – which, incidentally, is proving to be highly problematic. So, all the implications of the digital aspects of contemporary education need to be weighed up: the assumption that the value of digital technology is largely or purely instrumental cannot stand (Bayne, 2018).

Moreover, technology does not stand in a vacuum, of course, but reflects, and often exacerbates, social problems that already exist. Communication via the computer network is far from blurring social divisions because the markers of these divisions or unprivileged placements are inscribed in various ways in the act of digital communication. A utilitarian understanding of technology, in the sense that it is better to learn something or even better to connect with children or teenagers who are more tech-savvy than teachers, by their very nature, etc., is therefore not enough (Herbrechter, 2018a); nor, of course, is the path that would lead us to technophobia (ibid). The task of critical posthumanism is precisely to navigate between the mirrored antitheses of discomfort and euphoria (Zefelius Igrek, 2015). The simplification does not benefit either the research field or the field of practice. It loses complexity and reduces our understanding of the phenomena with great social significance, which is not, as Bruno Latour has said (cited in Bayne, 2018), about instrumental thought, but about the substance of our societies. That is to say, the idea of a "post-humanist" education must at least be placed in a historical and broader social context, and "models of emancipation" must be re-established that would apply to a growing number of actors.

4. Conclusion: Coordinates for navigation

We have touched on the relation between human and technology with a focus on education in several places. As far as education is concerned, it is true that the "threat" to education today lies primarily in the combination of the neoliberal economy and the rationalising processes of learning/teaching made possible by new media/technology (Herbrechter, 2018c). Thus, changes are taking place in educational institutions, which are supported in different ways: economically, technologically, through the media, etc. The leap in reflection (which in some contexts has yet to be made) goes from the "false opposition" mentioned above to understanding the human being not as a tool user, but perhaps as a being that exists precisely because of its relationship to technology and that is continuously transformed by this relationship (Müller, 2016).

In this paper, I have therefore tried to identify "posthumanism" as a valuable and theoretically grounded notion that is a starting point for reflection, on the one hand, on the relationship between the human being (the traditional liberal subject) and technology, and, on the other hand, on the role of technology in the school and the changes it brings about. Besides, the not-so-far-away moment of health crisis linked to COVID-19 exposed crisis at various levels of society, in which existing inequalities (such as poverty or the deterioration of living conditions linked to the climate crisis) are being exacerbated and new ones are emerging, including in relation to technology or the "digitalisation" of everyday life.

Acknowledgments

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