

Robert Geroux

Posthumanism: A Political Perspective

Cary Wolfe. *What is Posthumanism?* (Posthumanities.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 400 pp. \$75.00 hb; \$24.95 pb; \$14.97 kindle.

Cary Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism?* is a magnificently engaged and expansive book, a work of multiple and motile arguments. The sprawl of the work clearly comes from an origin in different and disparate essays, but a distinct order is discernible nevertheless. The first part approaches and interrogates theoretical and disciplinary questions; the second part turns to questions in the worlds of art and architecture. The practical inquiries arise out of the theoretical claims so that a comprehensive critical vision emerges. To paraphrase Whitman, however, that vision contains multitudes.

Wolfe begins with the straightforward contention that contemporary philosophical approaches — especially in the analytical tradition — do little more than occlude and defer the most important questions in the field of human/animal studies. Such questions require instead a comprehensive dismantling of the modern subject. Clearly, then, this will not be another book on “animal rights”! Wolfe’s proposed means for dismantling comes from two seemingly unrelated quarters: Derridean deconstruction on the one hand, and the second-order systems analysis of Niklas Luhmann on the other. This double-pincer attack of weaponized thought has as its aim the occupation of a highly particular position on posthumanism, one that problematizes not only the human/animal boundary, but the organic/machinic one as well.

Deferring the turn to Luhmann for a moment, the deployment of deconstruction is less conceptually forbidding than it might seem: readers familiar with Derrida’s later work will recognize the sense of compassion and care brought to bear on the human/animal relation in particular. Wolfe confronts contemporary visions of minds and persons in cognitive science (Chapter 2), and prioritizes instead the Derridean “non-power at the heart of power” (95). All living beings are limited and mortal; perhaps the only human “essence” is not essential at all, but a mere accretion of technics that obscures that limit and refuses Bentham’s basic question “Can they [animals] suffer?” The reality of such a question posed in the context of late-modern society (factory farms, animal experimentation, genetic manipulation, et cetera) calls for a response that is not ir-

rational, but has to come from a recognition that instrumental reason has subjected animal life to the most extreme sort of biopolitical control. In a moving reading of Coetzee's well-known book *The Lives of Animals* (1999) (Chapter 3), Wolfe goes on to show us that such an engagement addresses suffering and invokes suffering in response: the "unnerving weight and gravity of our moral responsibilities towards nonhuman animals" (69) properly places us in an "unspeakable" position. This is true not only in the straightforward sense of a deep awareness of our culpability in often abominable human practices, but in facing "the limits of our own thinking in confronting such a reality" (69). Theory's task turns out to be not the sterile and desiccated dissection of concepts in their assemblages, but in acknowledging and experiencing a kind of trauma. Wolfe, again:

Philosophy can hence no longer be seen as mastery, as a kind of clutching or grasping via analytical categories and concepts that seemed, for Heidegger, "a kind of sublimated violence" ... Rather, the duty of thinking is not to deflect but to suffer ... what Cavell calls our "exposure" to the world (71).

This Heideggerian emphasis on openness and exposure turns out to be the conduit that runs between and connects the two parts of the work: the second half represents a break, a departure and engagement with the worlds of contemporary art (Chapter 6), film (Chapter 7), architecture (Chapter 8), and music (Chapter 11), among even other topics. These are clearly meant to be the sites of "suffering-through" powerful questions posed (and poised) at the very point where philosophical "clutching" ends and unspeakability begins. It's also in the second part that we can start to uncover the influence of the second of Wolfe's pillars of conceptual influence: Niklas Luhmann. If Derrida's vision aids in the deconstruction of the human subject "from within" as it were, then Luhmann's approach instead focuses on the "without" of systems and their emergence under environmental pressures. Perhaps because of Wolfe's multiple engagements, the deployment of Luhmann's system analysis feels spread thin in some places. In other places, however, it works perfectly.

Chapter 8, for example, is appropriately titled "Lose the Building." In it we find an examination of contemporary architecture that is fascinating indeed. Here we examine architectural projects which are not, properly speaking, parks at all (Koolhaas and Mau's "Tree City" proposal for Toronto's Downsview Park), nor buildings (Diller and Scofidio's "Blur" building, an "inhabitable cloud" on the shores of Lake Neuchatel), but

events in which the mobile border between nature and culture is addressed, consciously confused, “deontologized” (206), and in some cases entirely effaced.

Here as elsewhere the operative term is autopoiesis: architecture becomes a site in which we might see – in a non-clutching, wondering way – the process by which form and order emerge over time. The structural and the spatial become temporalized. Such installations provide support for the principle that organic and machinic systems alike “attempt to adapt to ... (environmental) complexity by filtering it in terms of their own self-referential codes” (220). Here the decentering of the human in a vision like Luhmann’s is applied to a fascinating middle-space that stands between questions of the individual (animal vegetable or mineral) and society or species-being. The built environment itself – just like an organ or organism, just like a machine – represents an autonomous, open/closed (porous), fluid attempt at self-production and reproduction. Here, finally, we are in new territory, beyond the old iterations of liberal humanism and libertarian transhumanism. Here, with the surprising help of second order systems analysis, we are in the thick of a truly posthuman project.

Literary theorists and artists interested in contemporary developments will no doubt find much to love in this chapter, as well as in the work as a whole. There are some small caveats, however. Political activists might be lukewarm in their initial reception. Above and beyond the common critique of the political utility of deconstruction (how does one convert “unspeakability” into a program for action?), one has to ask about systems analysis and agency. It’s fine to “lose the building,” as Chapter 8 exhorts us to do, but one wonders whether we might not also be in danger of losing the actor. Luhmann’s systems analysis prioritizes in a fascinating way the means by which orders emerge, become concrete, and self-reproduce. But *who is acting?* What is the context and reception of that action? Where are the coalitions and alliances of actors together? Where is the micropolitical exercise of power (and its rebellious counterexpression)? Perhaps most importantly, how can one theorize in a radical or revolutionary manner the appetite to sabotage or *smash* systems, even (or especially) as those systems tend towards self-reproduction?

Does the deployment of systems analysis push us in an apolitical or even (gasp) a conservative direction? Thankfully, no. There’s a profound logic and compelling picture here that thankfully avoids the conceptual pitfalls of modern philosophizing after Descartes and Kant. Similarly, the deconstruction of the subject helps us avoid the

temptation to think in terms of the self-possessed liberal individual, part of whose labor power involves the mastery of language. But even so, second order systems analysis tends to prioritize the homeostatic, even as it adds the temporal dimension. Its priority on emergence needs a more robust understanding of agency. One need not be a liberal humanist in order to worry about the nature of freedom.