

Thus Spoke the Posthuman: New Trajectories for the Study of Literature and Culture

Stefano Rozzoni

University of Bergamo / Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen

stefano.rozzoni@unibg.it

Abstract:

Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture by Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis presents an array of theoretical and analytical approaches that encourage the reader to move beyond the traditional anthropocentric assumptions that still dominate literary and cultural studies. Five sections dedicated to different ways of understanding the nonhuman explore alternative models of the human/nonhuman relationship, while investigating contemporary cultural objects, including fiction, videogames, and experimental design.

Also sprach das Posthumane: Neue Perspektiven für die Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft

German Abstract:

Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture, herausgegeben von Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen und Essi Varis, liefert ein Bouquet theoretischer und analytischer Zugänge, die dazu ermutigen, sich über die traditionellen anthropozentrischen Annahmen, die die literatur- und kulturwissenschaftliche Forschung noch immer dominieren, hinwegzusetzen. In fünf Kapiteln werden anhand der Erforschung zeitgenössischer Kulturobjekte Alternativmodelle der menschlich-nichtmenschlichen Beziehungen aus der Perspektive des Posthumanismus aufgezeigt.

How to cite:

Rozzoni, Stefano: "Thus Spoke the Posthuman: New Trajectories for the Study of Literature and Culture [Review of: Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Essi Varis (ed.): *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2019.]." In: KULT_online 62 (2020).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2020.1049>



Thus Spoke the Posthuman: New Trajectories for the Study of Literature and Culture

Stefano Rozzoni

University of Bergamo / Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen

Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Essi Varis (eds.). *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2019. 386 pages, 96.00 GBP. ISBN: 978-0-367-19747-6.

In the last decade, posthumanism has become increasingly established as a relevant critical framework for re-thinking the traditional standpoints embedded in Western thought. Decentering the human, while engaging more effectively with the complexity of the usually disregarded notion of ‘nonhuman,’ represents the primary theme of the essays in Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis’s edited collection *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* (2019). By taking up the challenging task of applying posthuman theory to literary and cultural analysis, this collection examines a display of cultural objects, from fiction to design, as a way of reflecting on “a wide variety of possible and impossible nonhumans, and their various relations to humans” (p. 6). To achieve this goal, the extended transdisciplinary scope of this book creates a dialogue between different areas of study, such as narratology, children’s literature, videogame theory and semiotics, while investigating some of the (many) possible understandings of the nonhuman, including communication technological devices, aliens, and dogs.

The volume is divided into five parts, and it begins with a more theoretical section, which encourages the reader to consider key notions such as ‘literature’ and ‘reading’ through a posthuman lens. In her opening article on this topic, Carole Guesse clarifies the differences between ‘posthuman’ and ‘posthumanist,’ relying on an original interpretation of Roman Jakobson’s communicative model to determine if and how literature can, in fact, be posthuman. Guesse develops her argument by exploring how, in the case of Michel Houellebecq’s novel, *The Possibility of an Island* (1994), key fictional constituents, such as the authorial perspective and reading dynamics, should be regarded as more and more unstable and negotiable in light of the achievements of posthuman theory.

The second part of the volume focuses on representations of monsters and aliens, exploring different cases of how nonhuman characters offer alternative examples of experientiality beyond the limits of the human domain. Jonne Arjoranta's essay discusses this subject, elucidating how videogames favor a privileged encounter with the nonhuman, both in terms of imagery and in relation to sensuous experience and cognition. By focusing on the videogame *Aliens vs. Predator* (2010) Arjoranta illustrates the potentialities of 'synesthetic design' – that is, when one sense is expressed through another sense (p. 110) – which, by offering the game player the possibility of feeling what it is like to be an alien, challenges the boundaries of human cognition and allows humans to access nonhuman sensory experience(s).

Part three illustrates a more in-depth investigation of the notion of the nonhuman in the field of Animal Studies, while stressing a more ethical effort in regard to the subject of interspecies relationality. In his contribution on the peculiarities of narration performed by nonhuman characters, Mikko Keskinen draws from the literary tradition of talking dogs to reflect on Charles Sibert's novel *Angus* (2000), the first-person memoir of a dying Jack Russell terrier. Keskinen illustrates the implications of a "preposthumous" (p. 171) entity by taking into account the linguistic strategies adopted by the author to stress salient capacities possessed by nonhuman communication. Through a linguistic-semiotic analysis of the original canine-human hybrid language portrayed in the novel, Keskinen thus shows how the normative assumptions about animal representations should be re-discussed in parallel with a wider re-evaluation of the role of nonhuman (animal) narrators in literature.

The essay by Patricia Flanagan and Raune Frankjaer, which is dedicated to their experimental design wearables, closes the fourth section of the collection about the interaction between humans and technology. The authors explain the ways in which wearable technology can expand the understanding of what it means to be human by reflecting on notions such as 'perception' and 'sensuous capacity': this topic is discussed, among others, in the case of special headwear that make human-computer communication possible without conscious thought. By illustrating these captivating artifacts, Flanagan and Frankjaer reveal new, original modes of human-nonhuman communication, which "enable empathetic relationship with others, outside of what is generally constituted as part of the human experience" (p. 239).

The collection ends with an essay by Juha Raipola, presented in a separate section, on the theme of ‘unnarratable’ matter. Raipola explores the blurring boundaries between material ecocriticism and cognitive narratology by discussing the self-organizing capacity of the material world in storytelling. In response to the idea that “narratives are often antithetical to our aspiration to grasp the true complexity of material processes” (p. 265), Raipola explores how challenging well-established praxis in storytelling – like cause-effect patterns and building plausible stories – may contribute to better investigating the idea of the agential capacity of the nonhuman to narrate.

Overall, this volume represents a valid contribution to increasing scholarly interest in re-positioning the nonhuman as a relevant subject of study, which fosters alternative critical perspectives to Western anthropocentrism. One of the main virtues of this collection lies in its capacity of reflecting the pluralistic stance advocated by posthuman studies: due to its engagement with different approaches, methodologies and topics, this volume, in fact, acknowledges the complexity of notions such as human, nonhuman, and posthuman. While the fact that these essays mainly rely on the same cluster of seminal critical works may appear as a limitation of the volume’s theoretical perspective, such a compact textual constellation ensures internal coherence and cohesion and it contributes to better positioning this volume in the extended and variegated field of posthuman studies. There is no doubt that this book’s thought-provoking perspective will encourage readers to pursue a more accurate observation of the nonhuman when approaching the study of present-day culture. And as this collection suggests, this very capacity should be regarded with ever-increasing attention in light of the growing popularity of posthuman-oriented trajectories in the study of literary and cultural studies.