

Posthuman Rhetorics: “It’s the Future, Pikul”

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David Cronenberg’s film *eXistenZ* bears the title of the film’s central focus: a virtual-reality game played through “prototype meta-flesh game pods.” These pods—an amalgam of amphibian neural webbing and synthetic DNA—are connected directly to the players’ bodies through what are called “bioports,” which are jacks installed at the base of players’ spines. As the game’s creator explains, the apparatus was designed to fully integrate the human nervous system and the game architecture. Inside the game itself, players are thrust into an entirely realistic world that, in classic metafictional style, perfectly mirrors the reality outside the game: game players become characters who are testing out a new virtual-reality game named “eXistenZ” that involves the same fleshy game pods and the same spinal cord bioports. As the game proceeds, these layers of virtual reality proliferate so that it quickly becomes impossible to tell where the game ends and reality begins. Thus, by design, *eXistenZ* (the film and the game) links humans, animals, and machines so intimately that it makes very little sense to attempt to distinguish among these three categories. Instead, these biologic-machinic complexes become webs of neurons and software engaged in specific exchanges of information and energy.

Of course, this boundary confusion is by no means simply a pleasant experience for the players precisely because the very distinctiveness of the player is at stake. While there is clearly an erotic edge to the game’s minglings, the players also frequently panic or experience “penetration phobia” (as well as the constant fear of biological and software infection) when their bodies are transformed from self-contained entities into distributed processes.

We begin with *eXistenZ* because it is a rather explicit attempt to engage a series of problems we would like to address through the figure of the “posthuman.” The most obvious concern of the film is the convergence of virtuality/actuality and human/machine, the effects of which are to produce an entirely different manner of existence—hence, the film’s title. Because of its conjunction of human and machine, the film

seems to call for a discussion of the figure of the cyborg, a figure that is not new to rhetorical studies. In *eXistenZ*, however, the characters are not all cyborg-style hybrids, wherein the category of the human must first be imagined as relatively discrete in order for it to be connected to (and potentially troubled by) its Others (human plus machine). Many of the human characters in this film exist simply as sites of information exchange—material entities produced by and teeming with swarms of others (codes, identities, technologies, knowledges, and so forth). **In short, *eXistenZ* does not render the human as an object that connects to other objects, but as an effect or moment of multiple “inhuman” connections—connections that are always on their way elsewhere.**

The machine-beings that emerge from these couplings thus demonstrate a different form of identity, one that not only complicates our notions of identity but also may require a different kind of response. In contemporary culture, one need only listen to weekly news reports on computer viruses to see that the justice system—the most humanistic of enterprises given its emphasis on causality, guilt, and motive—is ill-equipped to deal with such fast-moving, highly distributed machine-beings (and here we mean both the viruses themselves and the hackers who, as part of the techno-scientific system, help produce them). Thus, we begin by considering posthumanism as an attempt to engage humans as distributed processes rather than as discrete entities. In doing so, we follow Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, who write that posthumanism “emerge[s] at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context” (2).

As a result of challenging the distinctiveness of some of these key concepts, posthumanism poses intriguing questions to many longstanding, “self-evident” assumptions about rhetoric and communication, broadly conceived. Indeed, one need not have a fictional computer game plugged into one’s spine to recognize that, for example, a human body is already highly distributed (biologically, ecologically, and socially). If even our bodies are so intimately involved with nonhuman realms, it may be the case that the way we think about some very common scholarly categories might not be as rigorous as we once thought. **Is it really so easy, for example, to distinguish between a speaker, an audience, a message, and a context?** Most readers will undoubtedly acknowledge that these concepts are quite slippery in practice, but that one tries to do the best one can in each situation—assuming, of course, that a “situation” can be circumscribed. Instead of attempting to reduce the complexity of actual events,

might there be a way of rethinking rhetoric that would encourage us to engage this complexity and to respond to it? Wouldn’t this engagement be necessary if, as is often claimed, rhetoric truly wants to become a practical art? In short, it may very well be the case that the rhetorical triangle is about as useful as a joystick in *eXistenZ*—in other words, it may offer us the sense that we are in control of the game, but we will miss out on all the action as a result.

The category of the posthuman, however, brings with it a host of problems—not the least of which is its very engagement with the “human.” None of this emphasis on distributed bodies should indicate that humanism is somehow defunct. While posthuman reinscriptions of the body and subjectivity do not return us to the category of the human, they do not function as a refusal of that category either. That is to say, humanism is not an ideological chimera that we have somehow intellectually surpassed; to tell such a story would be a key strategy of humanism. **There is an enormous difference, for example, between the postmodern claim that we have moved from the regime of the real into that of the simulacrum and the posthuman claim that the real is structured by simulacra.** The first claim is the story of a fundamental epochal or conceptual change, and even the most sophisticated responses tend toward a bittersweet nostalgia over what has been lost (à la Fredric Jameson) or simply the insistent demonstration of this change (à la Jean Baudrillard). The second claim, however, offers no such progressive story: **the real does not disappear or become more readily malleable (or hyperreal) simply because it is structured by simulacra.** As Halberstam and Livingston write, “The posthuman does not necessitate the obsolescence of the **human; it does not represent an evolution or devolution of the human.** Rather it participates in re-distributions of difference and identity” (10). As a result, there is no cause for either celebration or sadness, just a sense of the exigency to develop tools that can respond in a different fashion. In Gilles Deleuze’s words, “It’s not a question of worrying or of hoping for the best, but of finding new weapons” (178). Each of the articles in this special cluster on posthuman rhetorics thus seeks to invent such weapons and to do so from the perspective of rhetorical studies. But, as you will find, the rhetorical perspective is also in the process of connecting elsewhere.

Some of the tools will likely sound familiar to an audience of rhetorical theorists: the concepts of memory, moral judgment, and invention figure prominently in the articles that follow. But given the distributed character of the posthuman, a rhetorical perspective cannot be

confined to a single disciplinary emphasis, and thus even familiar tools might sound strange when they are hooked up to other technologies. Indeed, through posthumanism, rhetoric becomes an art of connectivity and thereby asks for new considerations from multiple angles—those that engage literature, science, critical theory, argumentation, cultural studies, et cetera (with emphasis on the “et cetera”). **The posthuman thus offers a style of theorizing or weapon invention in which disciplinary boundaries become sites of connection rather than enclosures of autonomous interiorities.**

Still, inventing weapons is a serious business and thus in addition to the conceptual implications we have mentioned, posthumanism also has an important political tenor. The concept of the posthuman points to the dangers of a humanist, Enlightenment-style politics, one that strives for increased recognition through various collective formations (for example, more rights for more people). In order to function at all, these representative collectives must enforce some kind of coherence among their constituents. And, as Michel Foucault points out in *The History of Sexuality*, the founding movement of such “liberating” politics is effectively to eliminate the possibility of some versions of freedom. Instead, a posthuman politics finds its strategies in transient, emergent coalitions and in diagramming networks of power—much like the computer hackers that David Gunkel discusses in “Hacking Cyberspace.” In short, just as is the case on the conceptual front, a posthuman politics can neither accept nor refuse humanism, for a refusal would effectively be a continuation of a humanist dialectic. **Instead, it attempts to redirect the trajectory of humanism, to work within this tradition in order to transform it into something different. In the words of the trout-farm cum game-pod worker in *eXistenZ*, “It seems like everything used to be something else, yes?”**

But what specific implications does this “something else” hold for rhetorical studies and for pedagogy? With the emergence of posthumanism—which challenges distinctions between subjectivities and consequently renders the notion of persuasion rather unclear—what becomes of rhetoric? Or, better, how might rhetorical scholars, teachers, and students encounter distributed identities and morphing ontologies as well as portable consciousness? The articles in this cluster follow similar lines of questioning by working at the seemingly disparate nodes of capital, bodies, life, memory, and time. Each article therefore offers and deploys a series of tools for encountering and producing posthuman rhetorics.

To this end, Collin Gifford Brooke begins with the broad double

question that spawned this cluster of articles: how does posthumanism reconfigure the concepts and practices of discourse production, and what does rhetoric have to contribute to the articulation of the posthuman? Deploying the typical Burkean question, “Where are we now?”—a question that often sets Burke on a new path—Brooke considers the posthuman in the context of today’s “post-ist” academic world, specifically distinguishing posthumanism from postmodernism. Drawing on work by Katherine Hayles and Bruno Latour, **Brooke suggests that what is at stake in posthumanism is a refiguring of relations between nature, culture, and subjectivity.** Brooke suggests that from a rhetorical perspective posthumanism means the contemporary outsourcing of memory, one of the five canons of ancient rhetoric. This movement of memory from the brain to giant servers and microchips forces a consideration of “the body problem”—the loss of the body occasioned by the age of information technologies. Brooke suggests “a return to embodied information,” a solution that, with its attention to *kairos* (or timing) begins to elaborate a posthuman rhetoric, the features of which might be traced through each of the articles in this special cluster—specifically, through the distributions of identity and subjectivity that occur in various economies of exchange.

One such economy belongs to the computer hacker, who, as defined by Emmanuel Goldstein, editor of *2600: The Hacker Quarterly*, “is anyone who asks a lot of questions, refuses to accept simplistic dead-end answers, is willing to bend rules to attain knowledge, and has a real sense of adventure” (qtd. in Hale 71). David Gunkel’s “Hacking Cyberspace” offers a mode of analysis based on strategies gleaned from this conception of the computer hacker and from Jacques Derrida. According to Gunkel, the parasitic hacker functions as a kind of training through following: the hacker moves *through* in order to both *do* and *undo*. Hackers model deconstructive strategies for responsive intervention. Gunkel delineates “hacking logic” and the way it inhabits and disrupts the site of “consensual hallucination” known as cyberspace. As a parasitic inhabitation of deconstructive discourse, his article performs the mode of intervention it details by hacking humanism and offering tools for reprogramming rhetoric. As such, Gunkel’s version of hacking also offers useful ways to approach teaching. As both a familiar activity and a responsive hermeneutic, hacking will resonate with our students as a mode of engaging and producing discourse, of inhabiting a system in order to respond and transform it. In other words, composition and hacking are already close allies.

One problem of contemporary academic theories (especially leftist theories) is a resentment toward and anxiety about capital. In “Nietzsche’s Money!” Jeffrey Nealon takes on what he calls “consumption anxiety,” the undeniable yet much-loathed capitalist urge to consume. Nealon turns to the seemingly unlikely figure of Nietzsche in order to articulate a posthuman ethic for encountering third-wave capital. Such an ethic is critical for rhetoricians and teachers in the “dot com” era in which money might be dubbed the foremost rhetorical proof. In regard to capital’s movement, Nietzsche enables a shift away from the question of truth and representation (What is money and what does it mean?) to questions of force and power (What can it do?). Capital thus provides a useful example of a nonsignifying symbolic economy that simultaneously turns on and produces logics of desire. In short, money doesn’t mean; it moves. Rather than judging this movement by condemning capital, Nealon attempts to sketch some tools that might enable us to respond to it more productively. The result is his five “Most Will-to-Powerful Laws of Nietzschean Personal and Financial Growth,” a ride through the conjunction of Nietzsche and capital that demonstrates how capital trumps consciousness and demands response on the spot—just in time.

As Nealon suggests, resentment toward capital won’t get us very far, but experiment and improvisation might. Such a speculative study holds important implications for rhetorical practice and pedagogy. As we’ve already suggested, capital offers a model of persuasion as movement or force that troubles the Aristotelian model that emphasizes human reason. Furthermore, in a culture of increasingly “sponsored” universities, the five “Laws” offer a posthuman ethic that can enable more productive encounters with the capital surge and helps us analyze capital’s movement and relationship to discourse in our classrooms. Nealon thus offers key insights into how one mode of identity production and distribution works (namely, that which occurs through capital’s movement) and, more importantly, how we, as inexorable components of its workings, might respond in ways other than simple rejection or celebration.

In “Uploading Anticipation, Becoming-Silicon,” Richard Doyle explores emerging technologies of the self in the tangle of contemporary science and science fiction. Specifically, Doyle’s article examines the intersection with which we began: between organism and machine, the ways that machines have helped produce a rhetorical map of what an organism “is,” and thereby have become the loci for a “redistribution of vitality.” To mark this redistribution, Doyle invokes the notion of “uploading,” the now commonplace term for file distribution—that is,

transferring information from a personal computer to a server or onto the Internet. File distribution is the point of juncture between organism and machine and marks a technology of the self that does not begin with the individual interior subject but rather with what Doyle calls “inhuman exteriority”—a (quite literal) movement outside of a singular biological entity. In other words, the logic of the self in science and science fiction offers a useful example of the posthuman insofar as it depends on networked identities that are distributed in time and space and that share an expectant attitude toward the future.

Doyle’s analysis of posthuman identity is vital to a consideration of posthuman rhetorics. Because “Uploading” delineates ever-emerging modes of identity formation, it enables an engagement with memory and writing as exterior activities that are not localized in the brain or the body but emerge at a conjunction of machine and organism. As such, uploading parses out a posthuman subjectivity and simultaneously articulates a posthuman rhetoric imbued with anticipation and mobility. Thus, both Nealon and Doyle, like Gunkel, experiment with a discourse of hacking and attempt to intervene in and redirect an existing system (capital and lack, respectively).

All this consideration of capital and cyberspace brings us back to the problem of the body that we mentioned earlier. Christine Harold’s “The Rhetorical Function of the Abject Body: Transgressive Corporeality in *Trainspotting*” shows how the posthuman and all its corporeal materiality can be narrated through and in a cinematic text. Specifically, Harold demonstrates the way in which *Trainspotting*—through its in-your-face portrayal of bodily **abjection—hacks notions of identity and normativity by narrating, over and over again, the capacity for bodies to transform when connected to particular cultures, practices, and chemicals.** Along the way, Harold’s reading demonstrates how feminist notions of corporeality and abjection can effectively hack rhetorical studies. That is, Harold defers the typical moralizing move of judging the film or the issues it portrays and instead uses the film to diagram what forces such as drugs and abjection do.

In this regard, the articles in this special cluster offer an occasion for rethinking pedagogy within such a distributed and distributing economy. We and our students are continually “jacked in”—to computers, to culture, to capital, to chemicals. As Hayles reminds us, we have likely been posthuman all along. It is our hope that these articles will help to develop explicit strategies for teaching and doing posthuman rhetorics.

But lest readers look for a “how-to” manual for doing rhetoric in a

posthuman age, we should be very clear: the movements of uploading, consuming, hacking (all movements of becoming) are designed to forestall the production of such programs—that is, of course, unless the program is figured as a “user’s manual” listing only one order: “Use!”

Cronenberg’s *eXistenZ* approximates such a posthuman logic. Ted Pikul is a skeptical marketing representative who has never played “eXistenZ.” When he finally acquiesces, he poses the quivering telos-driven question when he enters the game-world, “What, precisely, is the goal of the game that we’re playing now?” In response, the game’s designer whips her head around and, with eyes gleaming, supplies the game’s only directive, “You have to *play* the game to find out why you’re playing the game. It’s the future, Pikul.”

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