

Topics in Digital Culture: Locating the Human
LCST 4009A
Dominic Pettman

Course Description

This course explores definitions of the human in the context of a technological society. Humanism is a self-consciously emphatic discourse charged with the task of maintaining the boundaries between the human and the non-human. If a person who grows up in a library becomes both a human and a humanist, what is the fate of one who grows up within the electronic media? Analysts, forging links between different figures, have offered various suggestions, from Roland Barthes' jet-man to William Gibson's avatars, Stelarc's post-evolutionary voyager to Haraway's misunderstood cyborg. These terms lead to questions about our assumptions of the linear chronology of prehuman to human to posthuman.

For instance, what is human? What is *not* human? These questions have been asked, explicitly and surreptitiously, in different ways and in different epochs, usually by those who write and act in this subject's name. As with many slippery categories, we may have difficulty arriving at a solid definition, however we feel confident that we are in the presence of "humanity" when we see it, or interact with it. The human comes in many conceptual types: ontological, ethical, political, biological, cultural, and so on. It is thus a revealing task to "map" the human on to key texts and sites in contemporary society, in order to better understand the myriad assumptions "we" have inherited from the past.

Humanism, for instance, is only the most self-consciously emphatic discourse charged with the task of maintaining the boundaries between the human and the non-human. (A process and practice which Giorgio Agamben calls "the anthropological machine"). It has been noted that the person who grows up in a library becomes both a human and a humanist, whereas the person who grows up in front of a computer (or within the electronic media more generally), becomes a creature we don't yet have an adequate name for.

Locating the Human encourages a vigilant questioning of fixed modes of categorization; especially those subliminal binaries we take so much for granted. In an untimely nod to McLuhan, the syllabus reflects a belief that the *form, structure, deployment* and *presence* of media is as crucial to understanding and reconfiguring "culture" than distanced, hermeneutic readings of assumed *content*. Nevertheless, the content of humanity – "the species without qualities" – will be also at issue during our discussions.

Course Texts

Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2004)
William Gibson, *Idoru* (New York: Berkeley, 1996)
John Gray, *Straw Dogs* (London: Granta, 2002)
[all three available at Revolution Books, on 19th street, b/w Fifth and Sixth Ave]

Course Reader (available via electronic reserve)

<http://ereserves.newschool.edu/eres/coursepage.aspx?cid=64>
password: human

These e-reserves are also available via the "introduction" section of the portal.

Office Details

Room 054
Eugene Lang College
65 West 11th Street
New York, NY 10011

Phone: 212.229.5665

Email: pettmand@newschool.edu

Office hours: Mondays 2.30 – 4.30, or by appointment.

Assessment

20% attendance and participation

20% class presentations

20% mid-term assignment

40% final research paper

Attendance: You are expected to attend every class. More than three absences will be reflected in a lower overall grade.

Participation: You are expected to pose thoughtful questions on the readings and viewing materials. Students should be respectful of one another and allow all voices to be heard.

Meetings: Every student is required to meet with the instructor at least once during the semester.

Guidelines for Class Presentations

Students will be required to give one class presentation during the semester, analyzing two different articles or chapters at different stages of the syllabus, of approximately 20 minutes. Students are welcome to use Powerpoint to help prompt and illustrate their ideas, and they are also encouraged to strategically incorporate other media clips, etc. An ability to balance discussion with such supporting material is important. In other words, make sure the presentation doesn't become a loose example of "show-and-tell," but has a solid point, clear direction and coherent structure. Students are also encouraged to finish their talk with a problematic or open-ended question which can then inspire further discussion, and provide momentum for that given week's topic.

Texts

Week 1: The Species With or Without Qualities

- a) A brief history of Enlightenment “Man” (PPT)
- b) Dan Ross & David Barison, *The Ister* (film, 2003)

Week 2: The Moral Animal vs. The Plague Animal

- a) *The Ister* (discussion)
- b) John Gray, *Straw Dogs* (London: Granta, 2002)

Week 3: The Anthropological Machine

- a) Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2004)
- b) Todd Browning, *Freaks* (film, 1932)
- c) Werner Herzog, *Grizzly Man* (film, 2004)

Week 4: The Über-Mensch

- a) Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the First and Last Things,” *Human All Too Human* (Palo Alto: Stanford, 1995)
- b) Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview,” Paul Rabinow, ed. *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984)
- c) *Frankenstein / Metropolis / Blade Runner* (film clips)

Week 5: Built-In Obsolescence

- a) Norbert Wiener, “Intro,” *The Human Use of Human Beings* (De Capo Press, 1988)
- b) N. Kathryn Hayles, “Prologue” + “Toward Embodied Virtuality,” *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1999)
- c) Anson Rabinbach, “From Idleness to Fatigue,” *The Human Motor* (University of California, 1992)

Week 6: Becoming-Machine

- a) Marshall McLuhan, “Section One: pp.1-66,” *War and Peace in the Global Village* (San Francisco: Hardwired, 1997)
- b) F. T. Marinetti, “The Futurist Manifesto”
<http://cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/T4PM/futurist-manifesto.html>
- c) Roland Barthes, “Jet-Man,” *Mythologies* (Jonathan Cape, 1972)
- d) Manuel De Landa, “Introduction,” *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (New York: Zone, 1998)
- e) Stelarc’s Website
<http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/>

Week 7: Becoming-Virtual

- a) William Gibson, *Idoru* (New York: Berkeley, 1996)
- b) Mark Neale, *No Maps* (film, 2001)

Week 8: Ontological Ego-Bruises

- a) Friedrich Kittler, "Introduction," *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1999)
- b) Bruce Mazlish, "Section One: pp.3-78," *The Fourth Discontinuity* (New Haven: Yale, 1993)
- c) *Cherry 2000 / Gattaca / Man Who Fell to Earth* (film clips)

****No Classes: Spring Recess – March 21, 23****

Week 9: Ontological Apartheid

- a) Steven Shaviro, "The Erotic Life of Machines," *Parallax* 25 (October-December 2002) 21-31
- b) Bjork, "All is Full of Love" (Dir: Chris Cunningham)
- c) Slavoj Žižek, "No Sex Please, We're Posthuman"
<http://lacan.com/nosex.htm>

Week 10: Becoming-Animal

- a) Alphonso Lingis, "Animal Body, Inhuman Face," Cary Wolfe, ed. *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2003)
- b) Steve Baker, "Leopards in the Temple," *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion, 2000).
- c) Gilles Deleuze, "Becoming Animal" and "What Children Say" in *Essays Critical and Clinical*
- d) *Animal Love* (film)

Week 11: Becoming-Woman

- a) Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"
<http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Haraway/CyborgManifesto.html>
- b) Sadie Plant, "The Future Loom: Weaving Women and Cybernetics," Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, eds. *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk*, 45-64. (UK: Sage, 1995)

Week 12: Becoming-Other

- a) Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, "The Modern Invention of Race" and "Achieving our Humanity," *Achieving our Humanity* (New York: Routledge, 2001)
- b) Steven Spielberg, *AI* (film, 2001)
(extra: Drehli's essay on Jumpcut)
- c) *Dark Star / 2001: A Space Odyssey* (film clips)

Week 13: Becoming-Molecular

- a) Scott Turner, "The Organisms Fuzzy Boundaries" + "Love Your Mother," *The Extended Organism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000)
- b) Kevin Kelley, *Out of Control* (extract)
<http://www.kk.org/outofcontrol/contents.php>
- c) Pierre Lévy, "Engineering the Social Bond," *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (Plenum, 1997)

Week 14: Dis-Locating the Human

- a) Eugene Thacker, "What is Biomedica?," *Biomedica* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2003)
- b) Kenneth J. Gergen, "The Truth in Trouble," *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2000)
- c) Errol Morris, *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* (film, 1997)
- d) Mamoru Oshii, *Ghost in the Shell* (film, 1995)

Week 15: Re-Vision

- a) Eric Pauser & Johan Soderberg, *Lucky People Center International* (film, 1998)

Mid-Term Assignment

You have been commissioned by NASA to be in charge of the "cultural content" of the new Wish-You-Were-Here probe, sent into deep-space to alert any sentient extra-terrestrials of our existence.

Please include the following sections in your funding proposal to the committee:

1. Introduction to the project (including hopes, mandates, obstacles, challenges, goals, and other considerations).
2. List of consultants you would like to involve in the process (presuming we now have the capacity to exhume all historical figures, and talk to them).
3. List of 5-10 elements which you wish to place inside the probe, including a short rationale for each one.
4. A list of Voight-Kampf Test questions which ETs may take in order to gauge their proximity to "humanness."

Research Paper

The research paper is based on your own question, for which I require a proposal and bibliography at least one month before the due date (i.e., the last day of class). Required length is 4000-words (approximately 10 page, excluding bibliography).