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Humanesis by David Cecchetto

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Sound Illuminations

Humanesis by DAVID CECCHETTO

University of Minnesota, 2012 \$21.95

Reviewed by MAX RITTS

There are many reasons why scholars of environmental studies and cognate fields should take the questions posed by technological post-humanism more seriously. National Parks have become saturated with locative media, 'sentient-cities' expand in complex and unseeable ways, and contemporary institutional pressures require that university departments either acclimate themselves with the fineries of 'digital humanities' or face obsolescence. Within this conjuncture, critical scholarship must respond with innovations of its own—exactly what David Cecchetto's engaging new book, *Humanesis*, strives for and largely achieves.

'Humanesis' is Cecchetto's neologism for a "putting into discourse of the human," both a state and a process he explores in a discourse analysis of three technological posthumanist thinkers—Ollivier Dyens, N. Katherine Hayles, and Mark N.B. Hansen. But the book is also an attempt to situate critique within the field of sound art, which is ultimately where its successes lie. Cecchetto's guiding assumption is that sound is an ideal basis for his interventions, given, paradoxically enough, how its slippages trouble the visualist bias of technological posthumanism: "Sound as *such* calls us to think of *it* as a particular *object* that has *no substance*, as a kind of ideal object that nonetheless has *real*

material effects" [emphasis mine]. This reading of sound belies Cecchetto's commitments to Derrida. His deconstructive move is to expose in technological posthumanist constructions a slate of humanist logics, problematizing attempts to forge new constructions of value and ethics while affirming their necessity.

Chapter 1 considers Dyens' *Metal and Flesh*, a work arguing that the contemporary ascendance of 'memes' represents a detaching of the biological basis of evolution (i.e. genes) and evolution's attendant move into culture. Cecchetto suggests that Dyens' denies the linguistic conditions of the materials he is working with: "It seems clear that the territory from which cultural bodies spring is not only the nexus of humans and machines (as machined) but also (and more fundamentally) a scene of language." Crucial is the question of science, which Dyens operates through the figure of gene-thinker Richard Dawkins. My problem isn't Dyens' formulation of science, however, but Cecchetto's. If Dyens' construction of the cultural body is predicated on a "slapdash science," Cecchetto gives us a little from which to evaluate his own reading, a point he tries to unsuccessfully evade in a footnote claiming to be limiting himself to the discursive field of his interlocutor (Dyens). In short, we have precious little with which to corroborate Cecchetto's account, since even Dawkins' own rendering of science is underspecified.

We are on firmer ground in Chapter 2, a critical analysis of two sound-art pieces by William Brent and Ellen Moffat collectively titled *Eidola*. Cecchetto suggests that *Eidola* succeeds

where Dyens' genes and memes work failed: by performing its contemporary parts (embodied experiences of sound and vision) into productive antagonism. Cecchetto's prose is richly attentive to the ghostly echoes, sonic traces, and spatial dislocations producing sensory discontinuity. "Ultimately," he writes, "every ghost is a sound too, a lingering heartbeat that came from somewhere and somehow strangely exists."

Chapter 3 moves us into a discussion of N. Katherine Hayles, a thinker to whom Cecchetto devotes a significant amount of time and care. Hayles' efforts to forge a posthuman ethics attentive to technological couplings remain caught in the coordinates of a liberal humanism, Cecchetto concludes. Notable in her account, distributed cognition is a summary attack on Derridian logics; as Cecchetto states, the arguments here are haunted by the precepts of a liberal human subject. Cecchetto's own reluctance to propose alternative posthuman ethics nevertheless strikes me as too evasive, given how it arrests Derrida's injunction to push for new formations.

Chapter 4 returns us to sound art, here given in *The Trace*, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's participatory installation-work. Cecchetto listens to *The Trace* as a critique of unilateral narratives of subject-formation, again, with the dislocations and fluxes of sound as central. Suggesting that "*The Trace* tests the experience of distributed agency in its social component," he gives us an idea of the field upon which Hayles' posthuman ethics might proceed. This is achieved by complicating Hayles with Butler's account of melancholic subjectivity, which points to the new

relations of vulnerability that announce themselves in conditions of distributed cognition.

Chapter 5 evaluates Hansen's "Organismic Posthumanism" and its attempt to move accounts of technology past the reductivisms of culturalist approaches. Again, Derrida is centrally implicated in the critique, a thinker Hansen accuses of subsuming technology (and materiality) to the logics of grammatology. Cecchetto's defense of Derrida stands out for its summary clarity: "Derrida's point is that 'what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence,' in the sense that language is a condition of legibility, even if it always renders its objects paradoxical and incomplete." Cecchetto argues that Hansen's representational logics remain rooted in humanist values. Hansen's attempt to leap beyond language fails, and his ambivalence regarding "mixed reality" is more compatible with Derrida than Hansen himself may realize.

We conclude in Chapter 6 with more sound art, and a piece, "Skewed Remote Musical Performance," that Cecchetto himself co-created. While the piece itself is brilliantly conceived, its theoretical value to the book is somewhat diminished, as, by this point, many of the central points have been made. Still, it gives useful summary for the role of sound in furthering (while also critiquing) technological posthumanism's avowed goal of decentering, given how it "prevents us from registering a human organism prior to its relational status."

Humanesis is a theoretically challenging book which could have been expanded in length, given its many

interests (subjectivity, sound, embodiment, technology etc.) There is a significant lack of attention to Hayles and Hansen in environmental studies, to which Cecchetto's readings offer valuable introduction. Most valuable of all, he offers through art a thoughtful and innovative means to ruminate over the complex issues at play in the posthumanist agenda. A salutary response to the disciplinary pressures exerted by the rapid and largely unreflexive institutionalization of digital culture is, indeed, a turn to one's own tool kit, a space from which new questions and ethical concerns might arise.

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