

The Emergence of the Posthuman Subject

2 July 2010 - 3 July 2010

Conference Report

The two-day international conference on The Emergence of the Posthuman Subject was organised by Dr David Ashford of the University of Surrey and Dr James Riley of the University of Cambridge. The event took place on 2nd and 3rd of July 2010, and was hosted by the English Department under the auspices of the Institute of Advanced Studies at the University of Surrey. Below is a brief summary of the object of the conference, details on some of the events that took place, and our next steps.

The Object of the Event

The conference engaged with the posthumanist shift that has taken place over the past two decades in fields as diverse as literature, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, film, palaeontology, zoology, theatre and physics. The aim of the conference was to define the nature of this shift, and to trace the history of this development, as manifested in science, literature and art.

In keeping with the spirit and subject of the conference the event took place at the University of Surrey, the institution at the forefront of space exploration technology in the UK, and situated right in the centre of the territory west of London, criss-crossed by flight-paths and motorways, that has been celebrated as a source of endless fascination in key novels by JG Ballard.

Summary of Presentations

The conference brought together writers, artists, theorists and critics from four continents. There were speakers from the US, Australia, Europe and the Middle-East, as well as UK universities.

Our keynote and plenary speakers were: Prof. Robert Pepperell, Reader in Fine Art at the Cardiff School of Art and Design Author of *The Posthuman Condition*. Dr Andy Mousley, Senior Lecturer in English at the University of De Montfort Editor of the forthcoming Palgrave collection *Literature, Humanism and Posthumanism*, Prof. Steve Dixon, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Development at the University of Brunel Director of multimedia performance research company The Chameleons Group.

Prof. Robert Pepperell's keynote address evaluated the progress that had been made on the Posthuman Condition since the publication of his seminal book on the subject, and the challenges that research in this field must seek to engage with in the future. The posthuman conception of reality continues to present us with profound challenges, the importance of which contemporary theorists have yet to grasp. Pepperell asserted the need to incorporate new knowledge arising from the quest to understand consciousness, which in the last fifteen years has moved from the margins of psychology to the forefront of science and philosophy. Many recent discoveries in consciousness studies were shown to be deeply perplexing and counter-intuitive, forcing us to rethink cherished beliefs about human nature.

Dr. Andy Mousley presented a combative keynote address that set out potential rear-guard action for the embattled humanist paradigm. He noted that the humanism that has come under attack in recent years is not representative of the entire humanist tradition. His address attempted to salvage resources within the humanist tradition beyond those usually cited. Looking beyond the species-narcissism, the over-investment in rationality, naïve belief in progress and faith in the autonomy and sovereignty of the individual, that are often depicted as synonymous with humanism, Andy Mousley engaged with components in the humanist tradition that remain resilient and might prove useful.

In addition to these key-note addresses the conference included two remarkable multi-media events - by Prof. Steve Dixon and by writer Jason Lee.

Prof. Steve Dixon's multimedia paper, synchronised with performance video footage, focussed on cyborg and robot performance art and explored a number of conflicting and paradoxical themes that pervade posthuman performance, with references to artists and groups including Stelarc, Louis-Philippe Demers, Marcel-li Anthunez Roca, Toni Dove, Amorphic Robot Works, and The Chameleons Group (directed by the speaker). Images and metaphors of "mechanized" humans were shown to evoke, on the one hand, representations of powerful and enhanced evolutionary beings, but, on the other hand, dehumanized beings at the mercy of technology. The paper considered how performing posthumanism becomes a potent expression of "cybernetic existentialism" where the natural, the spiritual, the political and the technological can both cohere and malfunction spectacularly.

Jason Lee introduced a recorded story that presented a metaphysical morality tale. Structured around the protagonist's movement into a series of enclosed spaces that

are at once beautiful and menacing, this story set to music explored the relationships between desire, technology and religion.

Two parallel sessions ran across the two days. The subjects of some of these panels included: Cloning, Housing, Embodying, Addressing, Culture, Media and the Monstrous Arrivant.

Next steps

The conference proved to be an invaluable stimulus to the research currently being conducted at the University of Surrey into the Emergence of the Posthuman Subject. Dr David Ashford has since secured a contract with Zero Publishing for a book about the attempt on the part of Modernists to shore up the collapsing paradigm of the Cartesian Ego, working title: GORILLAS IN THE HOUSE OF LIGHT, and plans to create a book in collaboration with co-organiser Dr James Riley of Cambridge University on the Posthuman Subject in the Post War Period.

Acknowledgements

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anks go to everyone at the Centre for Continuing Education, and to Mirela Dumic at the Institute for her hands on support in the run up to the event.

Finally, a heartfelt thanks to all our presenters who all played their part in making this such a stimulating and refreshing coming together.

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