

SAGE Colloquium 2012
De/Centering the Human Subject: A Graduate Conference
on Posthumanism and the Humanities

FRIDAY, MAY 18th, 2012

5 p.m. – Keynote Address by Professor Cary Wolfe

HH 1102

This lecture will draw from Professor Wolfe's new book *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago, November 2012) to address the problem of neo-vitalism in current biopolitical thought. Examining the work of Roberto Esposito, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and others, we will explore the challenges involved in framing what Esposito calls an "affirmative" biopolitics, and how different forms of life may be taken account of in relation to juridico-political norms without falling back on an undifferentiated biopolitics of "life."

Professor Cary Wolfe is the Bruce and Elizabeth Dunlevie Professor and Department Chair at Rice University. He received a BA and MA from the University of North Carolina and a PhD from Duke University. Professor Wolfe has published widely on animal studies, biopolitics, critical theory, and American culture and literature. Among these publications are several highly acclaimed books, including *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and the Posthumanist Theory* (2003) and *What is Posthumanism?* (2010). His forthcoming book is entitled *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (2012).

7:30 p.m. – Colloquium Reception and affinity Exhibition

Critical Media Lab, 158 King St. W., Kitchener

Please join us for drinks, appetizers, and a chance to mingle with fellow colloquium attendees. The affinity exhibition will feature applied media theory projects by graduate students in the Department of English Language and Literature that interrogate posthumanist questions of embodiment, finitude, and technicity.

"Roach Lab"

Jessica Antontio Lomanowska (University of Waterloo)

"Roach Lab" combines theory and praxis in a creative work that attempts to emphasize insect phenomenology as a productive "contact zone." The project consists of a video installation and vital diorama in which live cockroaches are juxtaposed with their animatronic doppelgangers. In "Roach Lab", the cockroach subjects and their battery-powered cousins open anew the possibility of cross-species identification and multiplicity precisely because of their position as organism, technological object, and media recording. By crossing the boundaries of animality and digitality, "Roach Lab" proposes that modes of "becoming-with" in posthumanist thought offer the most productive engagement with "pluralism's call for attention to embodiment" (Cary Wolfe, *Zoontologies* xiii), where the metamorphosis of the human is contiguous with nonhuman animal modes of communication and embodiment. This project proceeds in collaboration with the Critical Media Lab.

Necromedia Projects

ENGL 794 Graduate Students

Also on exhibit during the reception will be digital media projects created by University of Waterloo graduate students from Professor Marcel O'Gorman's "Necromedia" class. At the reception, attendees will

have the opportunity to interact with the students' creations, which vary from traditional board games to biofeedback interaction and augmented reality games. The projects were created as objects-to-think-with that embody and critically investigate theory pertaining to technology and the finitude of the body.

SATURDAY, MAY 19th, 2012

8:30 a.m. – 9:45 a.m.

Panel 1: Disability, Animality, and Posthumanism

AL 208

“Posthumanism and the Cultural Turn in Disability Studies”

Allison Cattell (University of Waterloo)

The recent cultural turn in Disability Studies is far from univocal. While some scholars evaluate literary representations of disability in terms of how they contribute to positive or negative perceptions of disability in society, others like Joshua and Schillmeier (2010) recognize the potential of the discourse on disability “to change the way the human condition is discussed” (4). Drawing on Cary Wolfe’s (2009) discussion of posthumanism in contrast to the notion of transhumanism, I will argue that the integration of posthumanist thought constitutes an essential step towards “setting aside the division between ‘able’ and ‘disabled’ bodies” (Joshua & Schillmeier 5). To illustrate this, I will draw on examples from my own research, focusing on two plays by Ernst Toller that highlight the intersectional complexities of disability, class, and gender to show how these works negotiate discourses on ‘the human’ in a critical way. Because these texts reveal the dangers of transhumanism and the possibilities of posthumanism, they contribute to the cultural turn in Disability Studies by “generat[ing] new models and regimes that are hypothetical and realistic at the same time” (Joshua & Schillmeier 7). A consideration of these representations of disability can provide us with some fresh insights into the posthuman condition.

“Stopping the Anthropological Machine: German Literature and the Discourse of Species after WWII”

Belinda Kleinhans (University of Waterloo)

German literary texts of the 40s, 50s and 60s demonstrate a great critical awareness of the discourse of species and the anthropocentric worldviews that dominated the late 19th and early 20th century. Thus far, postwar German literature has only been acknowledged as dealing with human-centered questions such as guilt or mechanisms for coping with the past, although there are clearly post-anthropocentric aspects to this literature. By creating animal texts and textual animals, many authors such as Wolfdietrich Schnurre and Günter Eich engage these discourses and especially the power structures inherent in the human-animal binary. By using a poststructuralist approach that focuses especially on the workings of language and on the “classical” boundaries used to distinguish humans and animals (such as language ability, agency, and suffering), I propose a long overdue reading of these authors as precursors of a (literary) Posthumanism. Central to this endeavour is the gaze of the animal in literature, which evaluates human actions and questions human supremacy. It thus challenges us to re-conceptualize the concept of an Other (with all ethical implications) as well as the human-centered concept of life.

“Body Out of Tune: Disabling the Deaf in *After Hamelin* by Bill Richardson”

Jordan Turner (University of Windsor)

In literature, disability has traditionally been portrayed as an outright burden. Narratives emphasize absolute cure or death, rather than rehabilitation, improved functioning, or integration, while often the

disability turns invisible, glossed over by way of minor afflictions and characters. In narratives that feature deaf characters, texts often only allow the reader access to deaf individuals through a hearing narrator. Bill Richardson's *After Hamelin*, a reimagining of the classic *Pied Piper of Hamelin* fairy tale, focuses on a child spared of the Piper's spell by way of her differently abled circumstance. The story's heroine, Penelope, mysteriously loses her hearing and in turn, the Piper's musical hypnosis fails. At the outset, this story promises much by turning convention on its head, avoiding traditional literary practices, and casts characters with a disability in principal roles and permits these individuals agency to show potential positive abilities inherent in the disabled other. However, since Penelope regains her hearing during her dream-state adventure narrative, the reader is left questioning—and, worse, the young deaf reader must also question—whether any given heroine needs to possess “normal” traits in order to achieve her goals in a fantasy world, or real one.

The reader quickly learns that during her entire “Dreaming” adventure, the central focus and action of the novel, she regains her hearing for this dream-like state in order to save the missing children; and, perhaps more troubling, the child reader must wonder if the ability to hear normally is a necessity to play the part of the heroine. By regaining her hearing in order to achieve her goals, one must ask if Penelope's story relates the experience of deafness at all.

9:45 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.

BREAK

AL 208

10:00 a.m. – 11:15 a.m.

Panel 2: Posthumanist Subjectivities

AL 208

“Conceiving a Fractal Subject: Cotard avec Lacan”

Sean Braune (York University)

Jules Cotard, a French psychiatrist (1840 to 1889) and student of Charcot, is most famous for the “discovery” of Cotard's Syndrome or Cotard's Delusion. Cotard's Syndrome is notable because it is a “delusion” in which the sufferer believes that s/he is dead, does not have any internal organs, or does not exist. Cotard has recently come to the attention of neurophenomenologists (such as Thomas Metzinger) who suggest that the syndrome may be caused by a glitch in a neural subroutine that is “in charge of” a sense of existence and subjectivity. I am interested in applying a three-tiered approach of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Deleuzian philosophy, and fractal geometry/chaos theory to case studies of Cotardian delusion. By looking at the very few case studies on record I hope to show how the Cotardian “delusion” can be considered a rational or logical conclusion of existing within a posthuman dynamic and how Cotard's suggests a self-model that is either “transparent” or “coherent.” I contend that Cotard's case studies have been predominantly approached through neuroscientific means, whereas my paper considers Cotard's as offering a posthuman and materialist model of subjectivity – this is where I incorporate the dissipative structures of chaos theory and fractal geometry in my analysis – that is not reliant on a “linguistic turn” and its emphasis on linguistic mediation and abstraction, but rather on a corporeal and embodied subject conceived as either a multiplicity of fragmented selves or as an empty set.

“Exploring Kenneth Burke's Posthuman Potential”

Sarah Whyte (University of Waterloo)

Kenneth Burke draws a firm distinction between motion and action, often proclaiming the axiom, “Things move. People act!” This distinction becomes a generative principle from which Burke derives his entire dramatic theory of motives. On the surface, Burke's axiom sounds outmoded by posthuman theories,

which trouble distinctions between people and things, and which foreground the active nature of technologies. This superficial contrast has sat uneasily with me for some time. It seems to belie Burke's deep engagement with the complicated interactions of material and human forces. I will use this presentation as an opportunity to develop this hunch into an argument. That is: By drawing a distinction *in principle* between motion and action, Burke is able to interrogate how distinctions *in practice* remain thoroughly ambiguous (and therefore potentially transformative). Things act, but insofar as they act they are human; people move, but insofar as they move they are machines. My argument will draw its substance primarily from Burke's theoretical texts. It will draw animating examples from medical research, education, and practice. Placed within this colloquium, I hope that this presentation will discern the relevance of Burke's theories to current theoretical conversations concerning the nature of human action and subjectivity.

"The Figure of the Same and the Dissolution of the Subject: An Interpretation of Foucault's Essays on Literature"

Ryan Devitt (University of Waterloo)

"Is it not possible," asks Foucault, "to conceive of a critique of finitude which would be as liberating with regard to man as it would be with regard to the infinite, and which would show that finitude is not an end, but rather that camber and knot in time when the end is in fact a beginning?" *Les Mots et les Choses* famously responds to this question. But the critique of finitude also makes possible a rich, complex understanding of literature. At the heart of Foucault's little-studied essays on the avant-garde lies the figure of the Same, not as the repetition of the positive within the fundamental that would grant the subject its founding function, but as an Eternal Return: an endless repetition that establishes the subject's essential finitude through an experience that absolutely overflows it. This figure of the Same can be found, Foucault tells us, in the impossible machines for duplication in Roussel, the monotonous streaming of language in Blanchot, and the endless simulacra in Klossowski. These repetitions reveal not only the mechanisms proper to the avant-garde, nor only the sovereignty of a language that precedes the speaking subject, but also the possibility of an ontology of literature.

11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Panel 3a: Posthumanist Societies and Spaces

AL 208

"Luhmann's Social Systems and Posthuman Politics"

Mark Carter (University of Waterloo)

Drawing from the work of German philosopher Niklas Luhmann, this paper will advocate for a re-conception of society as distinctly post-human. First, it will review Luhmann's radical social systems theory and introduce the concept of a society that is too complex to be simply made up of individuals as conventional wisdom suggests. Next, using Luhmann's theory, it will move to a post-human conception of two key forces: incentive and risk. A post-human conception of risk implies significant necessary shifts in public policymaking. Finally, it will present as a case study for post-human incentive David Barstow's Message Machine (New York Times, April 20, 2008) revelation of a secretive Pentagon propaganda operation that shaped public perception of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the detention centre at Guantánamo Bay, and other late Bush administration policies.

“Natural Resource, Urban Space”

Scott Kobewka (University of Waterloo)

Cities, unfolding their chiaroscuro streets across vast landscapes, are becoming the primary form of human habitation on earth. The urbanization of the world’s population has concretized the bifurcation of human society and nature. This paper will explore the commodification of nature and urban space in capitalist forms of urbanism. Following David Harvey’s *Social Justice and the City*, and “The Right to the City,” I will interrogate neoliberal urbanism to understand how created space supplants effective space and displaces the social and environmental detriments of consumer urbanism. In light of Margaret Fitzsimmons’ “Mater of Nature,” Mick Smith’s *Against Ecological Sovereignty*, and William Cronon’s “The Trouble with Wilderness” I will argue that through capitalist urbanism, environmental destruction has been justified by formulating nature as a resource to exploit and the city as a space inhabit. Without a sense of form, nature is viewed as an unbounded resource valued only for the capital it can produce, whereas urban space is given form in order to foster social reproduction. This work deals with the commodification of the abstract and is related to my greater interest in the urbanization of nature and naturalization of urbanism.

Panel 3b: Animal Looks

AL 209

“Where is the animal after posthumanism?”

Dr. Alice Kuzniar (University of Waterloo)

Criticizing the graphic artist Sue Coe in *What is Posthumanism?* Cary Wolfe asks: “How can the looking back of the animal—and the ethical call harbored by that look—be disengaged from the humanism for which the face (and faciality generally) is perhaps the fundamental figure?” By returning to Coe’s depictions of the slaughterhouse in *Dead Meat*, and taking up the gauntlet Wolfe throws down, I wish to argue that posthumanist discourse has insufficiently responded to the vast suffering of animal life today, shying away from the mourning and testimony needed to cope with this trauma. The question dare no longer be “What is posthumanism?” but, more importantly, “Where is the animal after posthumanism?” Taking up Wolfe’s focus on the gaze, I shall argue that Coe not only shatters the viewer’s sovereign gaze but reflects on the impossibility of witnessing in the slaughterhouse. She reopens the question of the potential agency of the animal’s gaze, all while avoiding the resonances of autonomy, emancipation, and rationality that these terms carry. I shall try to work through and past the charges laid by Wolfe and others against her work of anthropomorphism and humanism by examining how Coe rethinks what Kelly Oliver calls our “relationality” with animals, all while depicting the abyssal gulf between human and nonhuman species.

“The Biopolitical Animal: The Possibility of Posthumanist Ethics in Grant Morrison’s *We3*”

Philip Miletic (Brock University)

This paper will consider the implications biopolitics and biopower has on Heidegger’s two theses, “the animal is poor in world” and “man is world-forming,” which implications reconfigure the relationship between animal and human when, as Foucault writes, the human is now “man-as-species.” Using *We3* by Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely as the site of investigation, this paper will argue that the biotechnological animal experimentation of *We3* extends Foucault’s racism in *Society Must Be Defended* to speciesism, wherein the animals are used as instruments of war to form a “world of tomorrow” that, Foucault argues, will make “[human] life in general healthier: healthier and purer.” Morrison’s depiction of the animals’ language, and Quitely’s fluid, molecular artwork to capture the multiple perceptions of humans and animals, challenges Heidegger, such that both human and animal are perhaps not world-forming, but form a becoming-world. That is, *We3*, as Sherryl Vint argues, “explores the potential for sf to

query the ethics of using animals within military applications” such that it enables “animal agency to become part of the quotidian world...to grasp animals as beings in their own right.” Aside from the texts mentioned, I will be drawing from Cary Wolfe’s *Animal Rites* and Derrida’s *The Animal that Therefore I Am* to argue that *We3* explores the possibility of posthumanist ethics within a biopolitical world.

12:30 p.m. – 1:30 p.m.

LUNCH

AL 208

1:30 p.m. – 2:45 p.m.

Panel 4: Posthumanist Media and Media Practices

AL 208

“Camcorder, You Complete Me: Posterity, Ancestry, and Video: Identities in the films *2001*, *A.I.*, and *Minority Report*”

Jay Rawding (University of Waterloo)

My paper considers how the advent of video recording has initiated an unprecedented potential for humans to attain a kind of immortality. Long after people have died, their voices, mannerisms, and physical appearances can be saved and stored; in theory, the descendants of our descendants will have access – albeit *selective* access - to some of the ways we lived as individuals. If indeed “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism” (“Cyborg Manifesto” 150), then the conversion of parts of our existence into digitized bits of information seems to be a logical extension of Donna Haraway’s influential 1991 essay. With these ideas in mind, I will build on the theoretical framework established by posthumanist scholar Scott Loren, and consider how the Stanley Kubrick / Steven Spielberg films *2001*, *A.I.*, and *Minority Report* connect video technologies to new ways of (re)conceiving humanism. Although Loren focuses on the Darwinian aspects of the HAL 9000 computer and on the Freudian themes concerning the android boy David, these films also emphasize the potentially fulfilling, self-identifying ways that video posterity and ancestry may intersect. While artificial life forms “threaten” human and non-human boundaries, video technologies seemingly broach human and formerly-human thresholds.

“The Fate of the Subject in Cinema: A Posthumanist Genealogy”

Anders Bergstrom (Wilfrid Laurier University)

The proposed paper investigates some preliminary questions in relation to a larger project reassessing cinema’s role in poststructuralist and anti-humanist critiques of the subject; to what extent do art cinema narratives problematize the concept of an authentic self, and therefore contribute to the “posthumanist” rethinking of the Enlightenment project? The critical foundation for this larger project is the corpus of post-Nietzschean philosophy that questions the notion of the subject, asking how an understanding of the conditions of being human might emerge cinematically in the very deconstruction of the philosophical subject. This paper investigates the various subjectivit(y)ies in the works of Foucault, Derrida, Levinas, and Ricoeur, finding them instructive for developing a genealogy of films that “do” philosophy and express conceptions of the human subject cinematically. In upsetting the received notion of the human being, such posthumanist theories furnish narrative film with a great deal of power to re-think what it means to be human. This paper resists making projections, asking, rather, how cinematic narrative, as a key structuring principle of human identity, has engaged with the history of the subject in critical theory and philosophy.

“Autopoesis and Antienvironments: How Posthumanism Informs Media Theory”

Stephen Wilcox (University of Waterloo)

In *What is Posthumanism?*, Cary Wolfe dissolves the privileged position of the human subject through Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory. Wolfe’s argument proceeds from Luhmann’s claim that reality is infinitely complex, such that a precondition of observation is the creation of a subset of reality, called an environment. Each environment, according to the theory, is the sum of an observer’s capacity to perceive that space. It follows that human and non-human organisms each exist with a limited or filtered exposure to reality, and as such, no one position can be said to be more ‘real’ than any other. However, organisms can reorganize how they conceive of the environment. In this respect media play a crucial role as they are explicitly designed to interface with humans *but*, like all non-human systems, they nevertheless possess a distinct relation to reality that is incommensurable with human perception. Here, Marshall McLuhan’s notion of an *antienvironment*, as an artwork that exposes a previously imperceptible aspect of the environment, will be used to demonstrate that the relationship between humans and media is fundamentally *autopoietic*. In short, McLuhan’s claim that ‘our tools shape us as we shape our tools’ will be revisited from a posthumanist perspective on media themselves.

3:00 p.m. – 4:15 p.m.

Roundtables

Roundtable 1: “The Variontology of the Media”

Moderator: Dr. Andrew McMurry (University of Waterloo)

AL 209

In *Deep Time of the Media* Ziegfried Zielinski writes: “The best, fully functioning technology can be created only in opposition to the tradition image of what is human and living, seldom as its extension or expansion” (6). Zielinski notes that biological and geological evolution are processes of deep time, relatively static compared to changes in civilization and technology; despite this fundamental difference, however, the language of evolution has been applied to technology to suggest an inevitable narrative of progress. By examining divergent technologies (applied and conceptual) Zilienski suggests that we can slow the narrative of progress, and reveal other avenues of possibility that have been elided. I would like to suggest an informal roundtable to discuss Zielinski’s ideas about “the variontology of the media,” and to consider the ways that technology is used as a medium for sustaining a particular narrative about what it means to be human.

Galen Fogarty (University of Waterloo)

Galen is interested in the way that imaginary technology in Canadian science fiction perpetuates and mediates against fears of applied, “Real-world” technologies. Technology is invested with attaining human desires, but it can also be a source of great anxiety—the imaginary devices of science fiction are media that participate in a discourse of technological speculation about the imagined possibilities of technology.

Michael Hancock (University of Waterloo)

Michael’s research focuses on the way that the videogame industry, and to a lesser extent, videogame scholarship, is often focused almost exclusively on the future: the next big game, the new piece of hardware, and the next-generation console. The past, if it is referred to at all, tends to be presented as a progressivist narrative where game design is driven by increasingly sophisticated graphics and technology. This narrative is inaccurate, and runs the risk of obscuring the full depth of which games are capable of conveying. Following the variontological method, the history of videogames appears not as

something driven purely by technology, but also culturally situated. Using this approach, instruction manuals, long considered an a superfluous material antiquated by online forums and in-game tutorials, are actually content-rich artifacts seeking to add cultural capital to the player's experience.

Roundtable 2: Necromedia

Moderators: Dr. Cary Wolfe (Rice University)

AL 208

The students from Professor Marcel O’Gorman’s Winter 2012 “Necromedia” graduate class discuss the design, creation, and theoretical underpinnings of their applied media theory projects, detailed below.

Infinitude’s Despair

Kent Aardse and Scott Kobewka (University of Waterloo)

Consumer capitalism's lust for brighter, sleeker, thinner products drives the global economic system in ignorance of the social, environmental, and ecological systems it creates, relies on, and expends. *Infinitude's Despair* is a board game that encourages players to contemplate the complexity and fragility of the everyday world they inhabit; it holds technological consumerism’s fantastic possibility at bay and calls players to attend to their immediate environment. By creating a table-top, non-digital board game, we allow the player to step away from the constant inundation of the digital screen, providing time to pause and reflect on humanity’s relationship with nature. In light of Wolfe's discussion of autopoietic systems and Becker's concept of cultural hero systems, we problematize the place of the human in technical, informatic, and economic systems. Following Heidegger, *Infinitude's Despair* questions the role of technology in mediating human interaction with nature, for it is through technology that humans place nature on standing-reserve, on call for the will of the human, while at the same time placing on call our own humanity. Thus, *Infinitude's Despair* interrogates the technological apparatuses through which the human apprehends self and environment.

Post-human: a geo-locative, augmented-reality game

Nathan Hagenah, Rob Parker, and James Saliba (University of Waterloo)

Post-Human is a geolocative, augmented-reality game developed for Dr. Marcel O’Gorman’s Necromedia course. In it, players explore a dystopian future in which humanity has become an irradiated shadow of its former self and must rely on implanted biocapsules called “nodes” to survive. As such, society has fallen into three economic groups: an upper class that can afford to upgrade to the newest and greatest nodes; a middle class that must make do with slightly-outmoded tech; and a small, non-augmented populace that does what it can to eke out a difficult and isolated existence. *Post-Human* incorporates many posthumanist concerns and concepts proposed by Cary Wolfe, N. Katherine Hayles, David Wills and Bernard Stiegler, among others. The point of the game is to foster a sense of human agency in response to the seemingly inexorable march of technological progress that underscores contemporary technoculture. After an introduction to the game world, players are given a 3G-enabled iPad that will track their progress across the University of Waterloo campus as they discover points of interest and interact with one of three narratives based on the aforementioned economic groups.

Cytopath

Natalee Blagden, Lauren Burr, Heidi Ebert, and Sarah Gibbons (University of Waterloo)

Cytopath is a location-based augmented reality game played in downtown Kitchener using mobile devices. Set in the near future, the game presents a world in which food has become so nutrient-poor that the

majority of humans are malnourished. The wealthy, however, can purchase commercial biotechnological upgrades that restore their health and productivity. When the game begins, the player is presented with a quest: to gather the materials needed to build an illegal version of one such upgrade by visiting and engaging with a series of real-world locations. As an object-to-think-with, *Cytopath* takes a critical approach to mortality, biotechnology and posthumanism. The narrative and gameplay draw on a collection of texts Marcel O’Gorman calls necromedia theory, including writings by Eugene Thacker, Cary Wolfe, and N. Katherine Hayles. Driven by Bernard Stiegler’s notion of technics and Martin Heidegger’s understanding of modern technology (as the human impulse to place nature on standing reserve), the game illustrates the relationship between the human body and the technologies on which it has come to rely.

Necrogenesis

Morteza Dehghani, Jonathan Doering, Stephen Fernandez, and Farah Yusuf (University of Waterloo)

NecroGenesis aims to examine “human finitude” through the interface between biofeedback technology (EEG) and the human being (through the electromagnetic power of the player’s brain as biological matter and the movement of her fingers on the computer touchpad that helps to control the cursor). In essence, our game interrogates the limitations of the human brain to control by way of a technological prosthesis any entity – whether physical or virtual – that is external to the body. Through the symbiosis between the specific parts of the human body and the technological prosthesis, the player is able to reveal within a given timeframe of 63 seconds a series of macabre images that serve to foreground the technocultural implications of privileging the instrumentality of technology rather than taking care to consider its impact on the human condition. Thus, amid the jarring presence of visual and audial stimuli, the principal objective of *NecroGenesis* is to allow her to condition her ability to pay attention in order to reveal the macabre objects that have been concealed by the lush ‘Edenic’ landscape of the game world. In turn, we hope that players of the game would be compelled to reconsider – and possibly redefine – the way in which humans relate to technology.

Roundtable 3: Abjectability

Moderator: Dr. Jay Dolmage (University of Waterloo)

AL 210

“Que(e)rying Posthumanism: The Question of the Parasite in Shelley Jackson’s *Half-Life* and Candace J. Dorsey’s *A Paradigm of Earth*”

Shannon Maguire (Brock University)

My research focuses on posthuman politics of intersectionality. In liberal humanism, the queer is interchangeable with the parasite. Existing in the third position— as abject—the queer, like Michel Serres’s parasite, nevertheless occupies a dynamic place of resistance. This is a costly whereabouts: bodies marked queer are always already non-human, occupying a precarious (sub)legal and social status that varies in distribution of harms by geopolitical location and performance. I argue that Jackson and Dorsey thematize and worry parasitic modes of encounter in their science fiction in order to highlight zones of interpenetration among layers of social and corporeal organization. While Dorsey invokes the alien encounter as a way to reconceptualize social systems, Jackson emphasizes shared embodiment in order to trouble the assumed auto-poiesis in normative formulations of consciousness. Queering the signal through erotic noise, the parasite-as-queer-reveler offers a provocative way to reconceive social relations. Where the dominant imagination fails, the parasite radically questions the relation. Thus, reading the question of the parasite in this work offers a way to make our social failures visible, and perhaps to retie our bioethical knots.

“Bending Blindness: Toward a Posthumanist Body in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*”
Braydon Beaulieu (University of Windsor)

Toph Bei Fong, a blind earthbender in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, interfaces with the earth element differently than other benders: she perceives her world through vibrations in the earth. Her blindness offers her a nonvisual approach to earthbending, and earthbending offers her a unique way of perceiving the world. Blindness in the show is celebrated, in the words of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, as “a tenable and valued way of being in the world.” My paper explores the connections between Toph’s body and her world, and examines the breakdown of the boundary between the two. It rejects Tamara Sue Scholl’s claim that Toph’s earthbending “somewhat lessens the accuracy of the depiction of blindness and harkens back to the myths of persons who are blind developing special abilities or heightened senses to compensate for their lack of sight.” I argue, instead, that Toph’s physical difference and her ability to interface with her environment allow her to enter posthumanist space – space that does not necessarily privilege the normative human body, space that allows the human body to integrate with the nonhuman in productive ways. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* presents the possibility of an intrinsic value to blindness within the show’s posthumanist breakdown of bodily hierarchies; Toph is a character who, because of her disability rather than in spite of her disability, self-actualises, self-affirms, and self-represents.

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