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Conclusion

Towards a Post-Pandemic, (Post)Human World

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In the months that it has taken to put together this book, many things have happened that have made us wonder at times if we are not living in a dystopia produced by a pandemic (of COVID-19) that comes from the human and non-human animal interaction spreading rapidly through the world. As a result of this global sanitary crisis, the labor market has changed, and our everyday life has been greatly altered. Changes range from a boost in remote working, digitalization, credit card use, and private transportation, to temporary suspension of civic and commercial activity, international lockdowns, social distancing, support bubbles, and self-isolation if showing coronavirus symptoms. Hand sanitizer gel and face masks are the new compulsory prostheses.

Klaus Schwab and Thierry Malleret, in their timely study *COVID-19: The Great Reset* (2020) claim that the post-pandemic era will bring a societal reset that will lead to “massive wealth redistribution, from the rich to the poor and from capital to labour” and, given how badly neoliberal countries like the US and the UK have fared in the crisis, the possible abandonment of neoliberal policies which usually include “favouring competition over solidarity, creative destruction over government intervention and economic growth over social welfare” (78). Should their prediction come about, the world as we know it would be greatly transformed. Whatever the future might bring, it is undeniable that it has already changed as a result of the pandemic.

In the Introduction to this book we dealt with the fourth industrial revolution and its social, cultural, and economic consequences in the twenty-first century. The pandemic has accelerated some of its effects and boosted (bio)technological innovation. As a result of confinement, the digital world has expanded in a permanent manner, not only regarding the use of the Internet, social media, streaming, and digital content in general, but also in the way that companies operate, owing to the remote services necessary to maintain the required social distancing. There has been an impressive leap in digital activity and, as Schwab and Malleret claim, many companies “in terms of tech take-up fast-forwarded by several years” (2020, 153). Consumers are also now more willing to rely on digital platforms for personal contact, entertainment, education, exercising, and consumption, which have become safer, cheaper, and—at first sight—more eco-friendly options. Luciano Floridi’s concept of ‘onlife’ (2014, 43) is even

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more relevant now, as the infosphere has become our natural environment and as reality and the virtual seem to dissolve at times. According to Schwab and Malleret, regulations have also been relaxed, and the “contactless economy” has accelerated, as seen, for example, in the development of telemedicine, drone delivery, and mobile payments (155). Automation is also due to accelerate in order to reduce human contact, even if this means increasing unemployment, especially in service and entertainment industries. The introduction of Robotic Process Automation has also accelerated, reducing costs and facilitating the compilation and validation of data (159).

In this sense, the introduction of contact tracking and tracing apps to fight COVID-19 has also raised concern about surveillance practices. Digital surveillance is predicted to increase as new measures will be introduced by companies to control their workforce: “from measuring body temperatures with thermal cameras to monitoring via an app how employees comply with social distancing” (Schwab and Malleret, 2020, 165). Facial-recognition cameras, location-detecting smartphones, and the harvesting of biometric data are not unlike the techno-totalitarian corporate surveillance that we find in Dave Eggers’s *The Circle* as we saw in Chapter 5. Like U in Tom McCarthy’s *Satin Island*, we run the risk of turning into ‘dividuals,’ to use Massanet’s term in Chapter 6, relational beings with networked subjectivities who have carelessly embraced techno-scientific developments. We might also become ‘necronauts,’ as in Tom McCarthy’s *C*,

dehumanized by rapidly changing communication technologies. As Fernández-Santiago considers in Chapter 9, will those refusing to comply with these surveillance technologies be considered disabled humans that lack something that the prosthetic, transhuman, surveillance carriers have? Maybe we should rather accept illness and death as part of life and learn to enjoy the here and now, as the main character in DeLillo's *Zero K* learns the hard way.

At the same time, the radical alteration of everyday life in Western countries, especially the unusual sight of literally empty cities, roads, and international airports, resulting in an unprecedented decrease in carbon dioxide emissions, especially during the lockdown in early 2020, has provided the grounds for much discussion about the global need to rethink contemporary human exploitation of the environment. The unexpected and undesired circumstances have forced us to face the reality of the Anthropocene and to what an extent our accelerated, consumerist (Capitalocenic) way of life is to blame. Already in 1798, in the initial steps of the first industrial revolution, Thomas Malthus warned against the risks of the overexploitation of natural resources, owing to the geometric nature of population growth and the Earth's self-regulatory mechanisms, like the "premature death" that "must in some shape or other visit the human race," including "sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague [which] advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and tens of thousands" (1999, 61). Now, in the middle of the fourth revolution, the pandemic that has brought the whole world to a halt and killed people by the hundreds of

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thousands has also demonstrated that we can live on less and promote the sustainability of the planet. In this sense, it is significant to notice that in 2020 the Earth Overshoot Day, which signals "the date when humanity's demand for ecological resources and services in a given year exceeds what Earth can regenerate in that year," according to the data gathered by the Global Footprint Network (Earth Overshoot Day, 2020a), has been significantly delayed for the first time in the past forty years. In other words, the planet's resources for 2020 were consumed by August 22, whereas in 2019 the date was July 29 (Earth Overshoot Day, 2020b).

Regarding the origin of the pandemic, some people and media have spread conspiracy theories of varied types and with different social/political agendas: is COVID-19 a

laboratory-created virus designed to decimate the Earth's population, much like the Waterless Flood in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam*, or to impose a world-wide surveillance system that deprives us of any privacy whatsoever? Others might take a cue from Patricia MacCormack's views on human extinction as the cure for an illtreated planet and take up a more environmentally radical stance: is COVID-19 the Earth's revenge, or its self-defense mechanism against an abusive anthropocentric humanity gone wild, along the lines of Malthusian catastrophe? What seems to be undeniable is the inevitable interconnection between the human and the animal, and the human and the natural, as suggested in the works by Jeff VanderMeer analyzed in Chapters 10 and 11. Perhaps in a clearer way than ever, we need to acknowledge the relevance of humanimal transcorporeality, as a coronavirus of animal origin is causing havoc in human bodies that scientists and physicians can barely understand. As Sherryl Vint points out in the chapter that closes our volume, the zoonotic quality of COVID-19 exposes not only the reality of human entanglement with nonhuman species, but also the effects of anthropocentric intervention in nature, as the spread of coronaviruses seem to stem from using animals as sources of food. Furthermore, as she states:

the very uneven impact of the virus on different communities, around the world and within nation states, points to differences linked to socioeconomic status, often mapped to ethnicity, age and geography, and frequently along lines of exclusion that mirror the racialized politics of the Western liberal 'human' as political category. (2021, 220)

In this line of thought, and from a positive angle, it is useful to recall what Rosi Braidotti asserts while discussing the role of the humanities and its crisis:

As far as the posthuman debate is concerned, there are no grounds for plunging into melancholy metaphysical ruminations about the end of the world. We need energizing projects that express generative narratives and do not wallow in the rhetoric of crisis. Especially when the crisis in

question is to a certain extent the lament of white European cultures feeling vulnerable after they have become aware of how anthropogenic global risks are likely to affect them. (2019, 69)

To conclude, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified many of the trends that were described in the Introduction to this book. As Marguerite Koole claims, the pandemic:

raises awareness, in a startling fashion, of the complexities and inter-dependence of humans and non-humans not to mention the interplay of power, politics, and capitalism. A posthumanist affirmative ethics might help us to reconceptualize a more just post-pandemic world. (2020)

Critical posthumanism might give us the tools to navigate this changing world that can bring out the best and the worst in us. Literary fiction can help us to understand the sudden changes taking place as a consequence of the fourth industrial revolution and the post-pandemic, (post)human world that emerges. Whether this world will be closer to the transhuman utopia that many envision or the dystopian society that critical posthumanism warns against remains to be seen.

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