

## Research article

# Posthuman Aesthetics: A Postscript on Decadent Naturalism

Armando Perez Crespo

Associate Professor, Department of Art and Management, Universidad de Guanajuato, Mexico.

## Abstract

Posthumanism does not exist as a human reality at any tangible level whatsoever, except insofar as there are some very elementary robotic and self-regulatory applications of that technology in the real world, such as in interactive robotic scenarios of offices and restaurants or Robotic Cafes of Tokyo city. Thus, posthumanism remains an imagined terminology, based on cybernetic theorizing with no directly available experiences, nor repercussions, of that imagination in the technosphere. The originary meaning of a cultural posthumanism must be traced to Ihab Hassan's script for the University of Wisconsin skit, which was designed essentially as an explicatory, parodic drama on the figure of Prometheus as a symbol of 'humanism.' Unfortunately, the current literature on posthuman aesthetics has not denounced neoliberal variations of the concept of body and the Self. What are the prototypes on which posthumanism might evolve in the global South? If an erroneous version of posthumanism is discarded, other values of primitive human naturalism may be sought in the new art.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, posthuman aesthetics, technosphere, technology.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author/s declared no conflicts of interest.

**Funding:** No funding was received for this research.

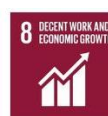
**Article History:** Received: 03 March 2025. Revised: 10 May 2025. Accepted: 12 May 2025. First published: 21 May 2025.

**Copyright:** © 2025 by the author/s.

**License:** License Aesthetix Media Services, India. Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Published by:** [Aesthetix Media Services, India](#) ↗

**Citation:** Crespo, A. P. (2025). Posthuman Aesthetics: A Postscript on Decadent Naturalism. *Rupkatha Journal*, 17(2). <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v17n2.01g>



## 1. The Posthumanism Illusion

I shall briefly discuss the epistemic origins of 'posthumanism' as a semantic concept, to begin with and consider how this concept evolves as a metaphorical polymorph rather than as an episteme, or indicator of functional process in the human social context. Indeed, my aim is to demonstrate that posthumanism does not exist as a tangible human reality, except insofar as it is reflected in certain robotic and self-regulatory applications of technology in the real world. Thus, posthumanism remains as an imagined terminology, based on cybernetic theorizing with no directly available experiences, nor repercussions, of that imagination in the aesthetic field or the technosphere. Despite the re-structured bodies that appear in the context of so-called 'posthuman society' the reflections of the new imagination in the technosphere are only faintly visible in the metrics of a disembodied patient in a hospital, or in those interactive robotic theaters in offices and restaurants, like the popular Robotic Cafes in Tokyo City, where a robot functions under limited commands. We might as well adopt a more sceptical attitude toward posthuman engineering, since any fundamental architecture in posthuman intelligence is already limited and underwritten by problems of hardware, as well as the limits set within the coding process. A matrix of the future may be only hypothetically constructed - its applications in narratives of literature will take -as we shall show, a polymorphic departure through the imagination.

Where then does *posthumanism* originate, and how are the bases of a posthumanist phenomenology to be interpreted and accepted, or adapted for a changing world? Again, a textual approach to this question is warranted by a simple reference to the epigraph of the first chapter of Katherine Hayles' book, Hayles, N. Katherine. "How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics." (Hayles, 2000) - there is at least no gainsaying, that following Hayles, as well as negotiating with her at the same time (Hassan, 1997), we could say that we became 'posthuman' through language and its ability to interplay ideas across cultures - and we believe across the creolization and extended creolized cultural landscapes that have transmitted the posthuman vision from its first world *technospheres* to the present, city of the global south, and beyond it to the remnant of that jewel in the crown - the whole superstructure of imperial economies, with its industry, technological advancements, its political impunity, and the cyclop-like media, reviews, essays, books, publishers and the academy in conjunction with it - like an ornamental appendage of a transcultural creole - Anglophone and Spanish castellanos as the case or place may be. Any methodological clarification of natural language systemics must be given at the outset: though I am not a linguist, but prefer to consider myself as a cognitive transcendentalist, I shall confine the research on origins here to a strictly *scriptible* text, or scripted references arising out of the tools available in that kit. Hayles starts with an epigraph to Ihab Hassan in the first chapter assessment titled 'Toward Embodied Virtuality.' Posthumanism was probably coined by Katherine Hayles in the process of this reference to Ihab Hassan's theater script, "Prometheus as Performer: Towards a Posthumanist Culture" (Hassan, 1997)? Thus, the originary meaning of a cultural posthumanism has to be traced to Ihab Hassan's script for the University of Wisconsin skit - which was designed essentially an explicatory parodic drama on the figure of Prometheus as a symbol of 'humanism' - the half-divine and half-human, from the Hesiodic myth of Prometheus, a son of the Titan and of a mother (either Asia or Clymene) who is shrouded in mystery. But Ihab Hassan's Prometheus was meant to be performed: "This essay was originally delivered as the keynote address for the International Symposium on Postmodern

Performance, held at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies, the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, 17-20 November 1976. The prologue said, "It will appear in Performance: Presence and Play in Post-modern Culture, edited by Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello, Coda Press (Madison, Wisconsin). We thank Professor Benamou and the Center for allowing it to appear in The Georgia Review (Hassan, 1997).

## 2. The Prometheus of Posthumanism

Now, this prologue creates problems of interpretation. First, Hassan's position has to be located, and then we could understand what exactly 'posthumanism' implies, despite the claims it makes for its celebrated 'arrival' into the landscape of academic discourse. Neither Prometheus nor the Performer has anything to do with *Posthumanism*, but nonetheless Hassan's representation of Prometheus as a Performer establishes the intertextual context for Posthumanism and invites us to consider the crisis that lurks within the technological referents to which the term is already applied in the following years. Hassan calls Prometheus, the discoverer of fire, a humanist but also an unconscious performer in a theater of actions or a matrix, which causes a systemic feedback for individual subjectivity. The subject's performative role functions as both a part of a constituent matrix and a retrieving machine. In terms of the postmodern machine that Hassan conceives as a ground state of Prometheus' actions, the narrative becomes played out in terms of games which have no direct bearing on technology at all. For Hassan, Prometheus is merely a performer without doctrine or even ideology, as a possibility of attitudes and attributes that follow upon the freedom to imagine within the limits of any doctrine. Prometheus is a posthumanist in this sense of being imaginative, limitless, and unbound by the soteriology of death, and the commitment of the body to eternal fire, which extinguishes and recreates like a phoenix. Hence, theoretically, posthumanism does not wait for social norms to be fulfilled - neither, importantly, does it wait for technology to fructify. Let alone replicable thinking machines that start to occupy center stage in Hayles' theater of actions, or even a scenario involving the virtual bodies, any kind of human performance, especially a performance of knowledge or forethought, would only lend fire to the Promethean aspiration. In this sense alone is Prometheus a posthumanist -in the recognition of this limitlessness of freedom, and not essentially being technologically determined or undetermined as a character of freedom.

Let us emphasize this typically Promethean factor as Hassan defines it - Prometheus as a classical remnant of Hassan's posthumanist training, but it also functions as a *postmodern* concept. Posthumanism, at least till the late seventies, was loaded with postmodernism. The relationship between Hassan and Lyotard shows how the Prometheus of posthumanism gets diverted in postmodernism and is then forgotten. We know from his interviews that Lyotard acknowledged his debt to Hassan, and created a two-way passage, like Phaedrus' dream, one Lyotardian, essentially existentialist, and the other like Hassan's - more creative, performative, and gamish like Prometheus. In Hassan, a posthumanist culture is conceived as merely being a metaphor, and in totality, it could resemble the choices on a cosmic theater. In its essential vision, the posthuman subject is part of a cosmic theater, just as perhaps any human subject ever was in the theater of the Universe, although at this point in time, machines might have become intelligent enough to

participate in the same game in a more involved manner, but no more. According to Hassan therefore:

If posthumanist culture is the matrix of contemporary performance, there is a matrix larger still: the universe itself, everything that was, is, and will become. What a performance! But who can speak for the universe? No one- no, not even the Titan Prometheus. Still, linking Cosmos and Culture, Divine Space and Human Time, Sky and Earth, the Universal and the Concrete, Prometheus may prove himself to be a figure of flawed and evolving consciousness, an emblem of human destiny (Hayles 2000).

The posthuman Titan, Prometheus is not incapable of articulating the idea of a Self, but in this it is unrestricted. This metaphor actually serves well to support the 'liberal' (capitalist) version of the self and its politics - which means that it still accepts the 'Self' - in whatever manner it manifests, technological, cybernetic or otherwise more simply as an individual consciousness of the 'Self' which is still the Self of liberal, as much as neoliberal humanism. Lyotard, however, captures this Promethean metaphor only to let the Self get absorbed in the metanarrative, and hence decouples it from the liberal choices that would have been possible for Hassan to uphold.

Posthumanism (in its initial forms at least) does not free itself from the determinations which make the 'Self' a real entity and hence cannot escape the humanist paradigm. Unfortunately, posthumanism's leap to postmodernism could not sustain the claims that it had made on the 'performance,' but it does preclude the crisis of the 'Self' in the latter. Indeed, the trajectory of the origin and development of posthumanism suggests that all along posthumanism has only struggled to identify its appropriate 'Self,' and give it total freedom. In Hassan, it is theoretically aligned to the knowledge of the self in liberal humanist studies.

### **3. The Old Liberal Self of Posthumanism**

This posthuman Self has always been abiding - unlike Lyotard's deconstructed Self - including, paradoxically, in the kind of Self that Hayles suggests Norbert Wiener was trying to articulate as a breakthrough in the idea of cybernetic systems. Hayles identifies this dead-end in the thinking of Norbert Wiener, who made the decisive leap to cybernetics and the posthuman vision of self-regulating machines as partners in a human ecosystem. The semantics also expose the fact that cybernetics was not able to achieve a breakthrough, and despite the claims made by Turing and Norbert Wiener, the posthuman algorithm remains no more than a reified textual possibility, a metaphorical extension without substance—a nominalist statement without real values or objectivity in the world. There is no posthuman world except as a figment of the imagination.

Since there is no real posthuman world, the moral order of posthumanism is the same as that of the real world. Says Hayles again:

If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material

world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival. (Hayles, 2000).

Katherine Hayles does not escape the moral choices of humanism - these are the choices that Neoplatonic Christianity had written out as a paradigm or landscape in which the human condition is understood and played out. Semantically, there are only metaphorical substitutions in this entire process of the evolution of a neonarrative of posthumanism. If Hayles' position, like Hassan's, is meant to diverge from the moral choices at the core of Neoplatonism, then there is actually no such route of escape available in the technosphere. The anthropocene itself has faltered in its inability to break away from the metaphorical incarceration that has been created out of Europe's incessant fall back on the Judaeo-Christian and Neoplatonic syncretism: of the emergent vision of a hierarchical structure of the cosmos, the position of spiritual entities and agencies, the possibility of Fall from Grace, and the already outlined - hardcore - moral realities of the system. God's Self is the self of man. Even though human intervention has been able to figure out the cyborg's character there is no semantic independence in the project of posthumanism. It effectively reinstates and circulates humanism in a technological world where technology has advanced far beyond human expectations, particularly in areas where machines have begun to mimic human actions. This mimicry should be taken with a grain of salt. It is a mimicry, a fantasy, a comic impersonation of humanity as it appears and gets reabsorbed in the prison of moral humanism. Indeed, what we see in the emerging discourse of posthumanism is the inability of discourse to free itself from its predecessors. And as far as it is expressed in Katherine Hayles' first major contribution to that discourse, the technological future (of the robot) is merely a mimicry of the human past.

Hayles dedicates at least two chapters to interpreting this notion of the 'Self' as it appears in Norbert Wiener's formulation of the 'Self,' in the cybernetic context:

For Wiener, cybernetics was a means to extend liberal humanism, not subvert it. The point was less to show that man was a machine than to demonstrate that a machine could function like a man. (Hayles, 2000).

Hayles amply demonstrates this recursive humanism in Wiener's cybernetics: that meant no more than to "extend liberal humanism, not subvert it." If a machine could function like a man then there would indeed be no problem of absorbing and reintegrating with aliens in a posthuman post-technological world. Hayles is critical of Wiener's humanist 'prejudice' as she says that the fear of losing control over the mechanism of a Self leads Wiener to be circumspect and even subvert the Self for the subaltern or the Savage. The accusation is that Wiener does not want to lose self-control and ensure a control or paradigmatic containment of the Self, so that it remains a kind of self-adjusting homeostatic mechanism rather than a complete descent into chaos. Hayles is also very critical of Wiener's cautious metaphors of sexual interrelationships with other machines and humans. How would a liberal Self not manage to be suspicious of the free play and chaos that the freedom of coupling can bring into play once the Self starts to interact with other embodied entities? Hayles is suspicious of and censures Wiener's references to the cybernetic vision for the future of the technosphere.

How do we describe this Eurocentric root of posthumanism? It is probably true that neither Wiener nor Hayles is able to come out of the cusps of the controlled liberal humanism that has always

been a prerogative of the West and its technological imperialism in an age of rapid industrial development, especially the one which witnessed the construction of partially thinking machines. The last chapter of Hayles book *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics* represents a Faustian plunge into the petty technological intellectualism on the concept. Lamentably, Hayles has not been able to detect a path out of the labyrinth of liberal humanism; perhaps this was not feasible because the first human-like machine is also one deeply embedded in the discourse of liberalism. Neither had it been possible for her to extend the posthuman machine successfully out of the posthuman pluralism that Ihab Hassan advocated. The examples of the claim that posthumanism also implicates itself in a Faustian dysfunctionality and an irrevocable fall are all evident in this concluding section of Hayles's concluding essay titled *What it means to be posthuman?* An ideal way in which posthumanism can function is by reorienting itself and positioning itself in relation to other entities or agencies, including humans, but also machines, in a network

the answers will be the mutual creation of a planet full of humans struggling to bring into existence a future in which we can continue to survive, continue to find meaning for ourselves and our children, and continue to ponder our kinship with and differences from the intelligent machines with which our destinies are increasingly entwined. (Hayles, 2000).

Posthumanism is finally ensconced within this neoliberal discourse as a more advanced form of technological society, where machines can "sort out unnecessary emails" (Hayles, 2000) or become an integral part of our lives of intercommunication, facilitated by machines or robots.

#### **4. Aesthetics in Posthuman Discourse**

The aesthetics of posthuman discourse, especially in the Anglophone, as much as in its variance like Spanish Castellano, which is intertwined with the lives of people in a postcolonial scenario, is obviously inseparably connected to the kind of posthumanism that Hayles' book has popularized. I shall start with a definition of aesthetics in this context. *How can we define aesthetics in a posthuman context?* The answer here is, of course, simple and unilateral: posthuman aesthetics will refer to those configurations that are binaries in programming and are such that would attribute beauty or aesthetic sensibility to manufactured objects or products in this typically transformed and transformative world. In the posthuman technosphere, computation also presumably determines the evolution of subjective entities. Hence, the question of aesthetics is related to how intelligence, or computational processes, are likewise executed in that module of things. Indeed, two categories are already implicated in the definition of posthuman aesthetics: (A) computational modules, embodied or otherwise, like cyborgs for example are the kind of intelligent entities that would either bear beauty and aesthetic sensibilities in the interconnected world (B) the aesthetics is peripheral to metaphysical beauty - and are ones that prop up in the context of hard mathematical realities. But in a way, they are also rooted in humans asking of beauty. Aesthetic competition or aesthetically self-replicating machines are capable of being conceived or programmed in the real world. In the world of Digital Arts, whose most recent models are experimentally conceived or demonstrated in such academic and collaborative platforms like the Leonardo or the ISEA, stand at the avant-garde of artificial-intelligence and art-making.

Posthuman aesthetics is valorized and disseminated by academic and civil institutions which are responding to Industrial evolution and digital transformations in contemporary societies.

Unfortunately, in the current literature on posthuman aesthetics, at the mostly initiative level, writing on posthuman aesthetics has not been able to overcome the old liberal and now neoliberal variations of the concept of body and the Self. Indeed, several critics like Adorno (2021), Herbrechter (2023) and Weiss (2003) have only approached this question of a cybernetic body as the center of reference for aesthetics of posthuman entities or culture (Sheehan, 2015). Even though the body alone defines posthuman computational applications, it is only true that the body has hardly anything to do with the aesthetic question. As we just said and now repeat, the culture of posthumanism will have to depend on an unmitigated operation of a mathematical module - a programming or algorithm at the core of the intelligence that needs aesthetic objectification at this stage of culture. It is the algorithm, and its efficacy, which will generate a posthuman landscape and will essentially continue to sustain that scenario. Without the algorithm, there can be no embodiment. Even disembodied virtual landscapes and culturonomies will stand to be populated by the successful algorithmic variation and self-cloning that will determine the posthuman interface. There is a series of inputs for the operations of the algorithm - in the nature of sensor-reflexes, data, actuator modeling, and so on, which will have to remain at the core of this process. If we imagine a completely well-formed cyborg-like Haraway's or Moravec's, we have to fall back on the biological information, the evacuation and teleported information reality onto the algorithmic functions of an energy or battery-dependent machine. These are the hard realities of the cyborg, which we cannot bypass or supersede before we begin to understand the precise nature of a modular media that will finally determine the products and the behaviors of the machines or cyborg-like entities in the posthuman landscape. Hence, to return to our initial problem of disentangling semantics - we have to acknowledge once and for all that 'body' cyborg', 'virtual bodies', 'disembodied agencies' or 'algorithms' - the artificially proto-manipulated or artificially inseminated transhuman - are semantic categories that can be interchanged for each other in the dialogue on posthuman aesthetics without any substantial difference in their import. This makes much of the efforts of pseudoscience in posthuman aesthetics an unnecessary baggage that is carried over and regurgitated in the academy without any social consequence whatsoever. Haraway's feminist cyborg remains a massive example of considering a fictitious posthuman object as a site of socially discriminatory contestations. The cyborg has the same conscious objectivity of an immigrant alien - or an entity which is at once a slave or a threat to a community, and a reminder of historical displacements and xenophobia. Only because a cyborg is semantically diminishing in its comparison to the other does it become the exploited and victimized female of human society in its primitive and natural dichotomy.

In any attempt to create an alternative aesthetics or aesthetics of the global South, we have to contend with the aesthetics of the global North that has been bombarding the network of the technosphere, with the political alliances and patronages, business chains, and media and electronic networking. The hegemonic aesthetics is best understood as the acceptance of the terms and lines of aesthetic appropriation as is dictated by the North and its industries. In a different location I have tried to show that the aesthetics of the global South is often very distinctive because it does not - and also often so because it fails to do so - participate in the artificial industrialism of the North, the values of owning cars and burning petroleum, emission

of greenhouse gases, the culture of media entertainment, video and comedic resolutions which anesthetize the mind to the realities of the simple life. The real values of human labor and industry are identifiable in products which exist in proximity to Nature, in the subtle aroma of locally available cuisine, the comforts of a homely bed and natural outdoor, the scarcity of things, and the recognition of the inconsequential, expensive toys on which wars are perpetrated. Digital technology and art, the new electronic media arts which are celebrated in ostentatious displays of screens, monitors, high resolution imagery, billboards, and very stupid and limited robotic interventions - much of it for the fulfillment of erotic or sensuous desires and fetishes. Sophistication in electronic art continues to devalue human life and the most eternal values of renunciation and simplicity, which Asiatic religions in the Far East have taught humanity. The gift of Tibet to the world stands in stark contrast to the fantasy of electronic art in the new directionless biennale of Europe and Asia.

The realistic outlines of posthumanism in the context of the global South will not even begin to exist if we visit the slums and *barrios* of the Southern Metropolis or the quiet marketplaces and caring agricultural producers of desert Rajasthan or the Majestic tribalism of the distant Savannahs. They may begin to exist if those faintest signifiers of the new Global culture are identified for a moment. Now, in the far reaches of Vietnam or Cambodia or the natural social life of the Pacific Islands, we begin to find those handheld mobile phones and the technologies of the new millennium. It may be true that these technologies will become more and more affordable with the progress of industrial Networks and that, in this rudimentary state, they may be amenable to the formation of art objects that are typically also qualifiable as new media art. However, globalization has already severed humanity's natural and organic connections to the world; whatever remains in a vestigial form may be linked to algorithms that possess a certain independent character. We must not, therefore, forget the experiments with algorithmic functions and musical modes that were generated in the depths of nature from a time when humans lived in close communion with one another and with the organic and sensible moments of their own being, in a history that is both violent and affectionate for the individual. I can, of course, return to the concrete examples that illustrate this kind of art generated by self-replicating algorithmic functions, combined with limited human inputs and automatic self-feedback variations, to create music that is both natural and artificial, human and posthuman. But the point is not just to think of these examples—examples are of interest for the artist as well as the theoretician. They are the prototypes on which posthumanism might evolve in the global South. But it is perhaps more important to ask, not just what these examples are<sup>1</sup> - but now that the denunciation of an erroneous version of posthumanism is complete, the other values of primitive human naturalism are sought in the new art.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mukhopadhyay, Tirtha Prasad, and Reynaldo Thompson. "Techflaneurs and Fakirs: Art on the Other Side of the Digital Innovation Divide." *International Journal for Digital Art History* 7 (2021): 3-40.



## References

- Adorno, F. P. (2010). Against posthuman ideology: Aesthetics and finitude of the individual. *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 57(1), 344–354.
- Halberstam, J. M., & Livingston, I. (Eds.). (1995). *Posthuman bodies*. Indiana University Press.
- Hassan, I. (1977). Prometheus as performer: Toward a posthumanist culture? *The Georgia Review*, 31(4), 830–850.
- Hayles, N. K. (2000). *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. University of Chicago Press.
- Herbrechter, S. (2023). Posthumanism and aesthetics. *Critical Posthumanism—Stefan Herbrechter*.
- Moravec, L. (2025). *Dressaged animality: Human and animal actors in contemporary performance*. Taylor & Francis.
- Mukhopadhyay, T. P., & Thompson, R. (2021). Techflaneurs and fakirs: Art on the other side of the digital innovation divide. *International Journal for Digital Art History*, 7, 3–40.
- Sheehan, P. (2015). Posthuman bodies. In *The Cambridge companion to the body in literature* (pp. 245–260). Cambridge University Press.
- Weiss, G. (2003). The body as a narrative horizon. In *Thinking the limits of the body* (pp. 25–35). SUNY Press.
- Wiener, N. (1950). Cybernetics. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 3(7), 2–4.
-