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Introduction: Memory after Humanism

Susanne C. Knittel and Kári Driscoll

In 'The Preserving Machine', an early Philip K. Dick story published in 1953, an unnamed narrator pays a visit to his friend, the rather implausibly named Doctor Labyrinth, who, 'like most people who read a great deal and who have too much time on their hands, had become convinced that our civilization was going the way of Rome'.[1] At the dawn of the nuclear age, Labyrinth is concerned that the human race is about to annihilate itself, and that all the documents of civilization, the great works of art and literature, and especially music – 'the most perishable of things, fragile and delicate' – will be lost. If only there were some way to make music more resilient, better equipped to fend for itself. 'If music could be transformed into living creatures', Labyrinth says to himself, 'animals with claws and teeth, then music might survive. If only a Machine could be built, a Machine to process musical scores into living forms.' The only hope for the preservation of beauty and art after the collapse of Western civilization is to transform culture back into nature. Having at last found a laboratory willing to build his Preserving Machine – most are 'much too busy with war contracts, of course'[2] – Labyrinth proceeds to feed the works of the great classical composers into it, transforming them into a series of outlandish creatures: a graceful Mozart bird, a 'stern and dignified' Beethoven beetle, a flock of golden Bach bugs 'obtained for the Forty-Eight Preludes and Fugues', and several others, including the silly, sheep-like Schubert animal, which soon falls prey to the fearsome Wagner animal.[3] Evidently, not all of the animals are equipped to fend for themselves, and as Labyrinth quickly realizes, he has no control over the results: 'It was out of his hands, subject to some strong, invisible law that had subtly taken over, and this worried him greatly'.[4]

What's worse, when he releases these animals into the woods behind his house, they begin to grow and change, developing claws and scales to defend themselves. These mutations also affect the music stored in these animal archives. Labyrinth and the narrator manage to catch one of the Bach bugs, now covered in sharp, poisonous spines, and feed it back into the machine, in order to retrieve the sheet music. The results are not encouraging:

> I listened to the music. It was hideous. I have never heard anything like it. It was distorted, diabolical, without sense or meaning, except, perhaps, an alien, disconcerting meaning that should never have been there. I could believe only with the

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> greatest effort that it had once been a Bach Fugue, part of a most orderly and respected work.[5]

The experiment is deemed a failure, and the narrator drives home. As he is leaving, he passes the Beethoven insect, building a 'strange, awkward structure'. When it notices him, the beetle turns and 'enter[s] its building, snapping the door firmly shut behind it'.[6] The end.

This rather whimsical story brings together two distinct yet interrelated facets of what we would now call the posthuman(ist) turn: on the one hand, it lampoons the liberal humanist fantasy of technological mastery and domination of nature. Faced with the immanent self-inflicted extinction of the human species, Doc Labyrinth turns to nature to save culture. It is no doubt indicative of the decline of Western civilization that this latter-day Daedalus is 'no mechanic' and thus cannot build his machine himself, and when it arrives he has no real idea how it works or how to control its output, let alone what happens to the critters it produces once they are left to their own devices.[7] On the other hand, Labyrinth's preservation efforts are a reaction to the suddenly real possibility of a posthuman future and the question of what will remain of us when we are gone. These are the very concerns which animate the current discourse on the Anthropocene. In the 1950s, the existential threat was nuclear war; today it is climate change. Both evoke the image of a 'world without us', where life goes on in our absence. This is encapsulated in the enigmatic ending of the story where the Beethoven beetle effectively shuts the door on the human observer, entering a space of its own construction which we cannot access. At the same time, this beetle represents a further development of human art and technology. But, like with the Bach bugs, the work that it was created to embody has now mutated and become meaningless to us – but not necessarily meaningless *per se*.

The text is thus concerned not only with (post)humanism and the (post)human, but also, crucially with *memory*: the animals produced by the Preserving Machine are quite literally media of memory. To Doc Labyrinth, they are little more than storage units for cultural artefacts to be retrieved at a later date. It remains uncertain *for whom* he is hoping to preserve these ephemeral documents of human civilization – who or what will remember us when we're gone? – but the basic principle is one of permanence and homeostasis. In contrast to the traditionally passive and inert media of memory, however, these are 'living forms', and hence subject to change and random mutation over time.

In this regard, it would be quite easy to read 'The Preserving Machine' as an allegory of the development of cultural memory studies as a field. If Pierre Nora's monumental *lieux de mémoire* project was inscribed within a narrative of entropy and loss, in the face of which the cultural memory of the nation must be 'preserved', subsequent work has moved to a conception of memory as dynamic and mutable. In other words, the critical attention of the field has increasingly shifted towards observing and documenting the behaviour

and continuing evolution of these media of memory ‘in the wild’. Memory is now seen as forming part of larger networks and ‘media ecologies’ subject to boundless variations and remediations. On this reading, however, the musical animals produced by the Machine would simply be metaphors for cultural processes. But this would be to ignore the central tension of the narrative: ‘The Preserving Machine’ – which, as it happens, was published in the same year as James Watson and Francis Crick announced their discovery of the structure of DNA – is concerned not only with the preservation and dissemination of cultural memory in the shape of aesthetic objects but also with that of ‘biological memory’ in the form of genetic information, and it is the conflict between these two forms of memory that drives the story.

This conflict is neatly summed up by Vilém Flusser in his no less whimsical and resolutely posthumanist treatise on the *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* (1987):

> The central problem of historical evolution is that of memory. Animals perpetuate transmitted information in gametes. The latter are practically eternal memories: they will persevere as long as there is life on earth. To transmit their acquired information, however, humans make use of artificial memories such as books, buildings, and images. Because these are far less permanent than eggs or sperm, humans are therefore always in pursuit of more durable memories: *aere perennius* (more everlasting than bronze).[8]

Even when all our artificial memories have ‘faded into oblivion, [our] genetic information, preserved in gametes and perhaps mutated by chance, will still remain’.[9] This, Flusser writes, is hard for humans to accept, because it is not as animals but as *humans* that we ‘want to achieve “immortality”’.[10] Indeed, the formation of the Western human(ist) subject has been predicated on the transcendence of ‘mere’ animality. Thus, the notion that that which is ‘more everlasting than bronze’ is in fact the material, animal body, and not the products of our superior craft and ingenuity – that it is *phúsis* and not *tekhnē* – must appear as a scandal. The humanist impulse in the face of such a scandal is to extend our technological control to ever more micrological levels, resulting in genetic engineering and other biopolitical interventions. As modern history has demonstrated, however, such interventions have tended to be violent, exclusionary, and even genocidal. What is more, these historical atrocities have been part and parcel of humanism. There is a straight line running from the humanist commitment to the principle of human perfectibility and progress to the eugenics movement, the Nazi euthanasia program and right up to contemporary techno-utopian fantasies of genetic engineering and prosthetic enhancement. A central task of memory studies has always been to remember the victims of precisely these forms of violence and exclusion, also in order to prevent them from happening again. But this goal may be at odds with the humanist foundation of the field, which has, until now, gone almost unquestioned.

Emerging as it did in response to the dehumanizing experience of the Second World War and the Holocaust, it is perhaps not surprising that Primo Levi's question 'if this is a man' should have been a crucial concern for the field, and that it was important and indisputable that this question should be answered in the affirmative. But this also meant that the identity and constitution of the human could not at the same time be called into question. In light of poststructuralist and posthumanist critiques of the subject, however, it has become clear that the answer to this question is much more radically indeterminable. In short, it is no longer quite so certain what we mean by 'man'. How can this indeterminability be made productive for a critical re-evaluation of the field of memory studies? What would a posthumanist memory studies look like?

The essays collected in this special issue offer a range of possible responses to this question, bringing memory studies into conversation with neighbouring fields such as disability studies, animal studies, ecocriticism, new materialism, and critical race studies. The issue features seven full-length essays, each followed by short responses. In putting together this issue, a guiding principle was to combine perspectives from scholars whose work is not (or not primarily) affiliated with cultural memory with contributions from prominent and emerging scholars within memory studies. Key issues addressed are: the creaturely (Vermeulen/Weil), decolonial critique (Kaiser and Thiele/Colebrook), disability and eugenics (Mitchell and Snyder/Thomsen), prosthesis and amnesia (Murray/Kennedy), objects and agency (Zirra/Rigney), the Anthropocene (Craps/Plate), and posthumanist education (Snaza/Rothberg). As these contributions demonstrate, there are many ways to approach the resonances between memory studies and posthumanist theory: in some cases, posthumanism can reveal problems or questions that memory studies has not or not adequately thought about; in other cases, specifically with regard to memory objects and the agency of things, it becomes clear that memory studies has often come very close to the new materialist and object-oriented facets of the posthumanist turn without, however, having fully embraced the theoretical tools and methods that these theories provide.

Posthumanism, as we conceive of it, has little to do with transcending or leaving 'the human' behind – it is not something that comes 'after the human' but rather 'after humanism'. Nor is it a matter of rejecting humanism *as such* and replacing it with something else. Rather, 'posthumanism' concerns the critical engagement with the limitations, blind spots, and unacknowledged exclusions at the heart of humanism. In this regard, it would be more apt to think of it as analogous to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, with the understanding that this is an ongoing and potentially endless, but also for that very reason necessary, process. Posthumanism, then, is essentially *Humanismusbewältigung*. By the same token, this special issue should not be seen as the 'final word' on the subject of memory and posthumanism, but rather as an opening, an invitation, even a provocation, to further dialogue.

Notes

[1] Dick, "Preserving Machine," 149.
[2] Ibid., 150.
[3] Ibid., 151–152.
[4] Ibid., 152.
[5] Ibid., 155.
[6] Ibid., 156.
[7] Ibid., 150.
[8] Flusser and Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 61.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

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