
In *What Is Posthumanism?* Cary Wolfe pulls together writings from disparate disciplines, joining works on technological theory with material from animal studies, an emerging field in cultural studies. As with his 2003 book *Animal Rites*, Wolfe’s stated objective is to both criticize liberal humanism and find ways to push cultural analysis beyond its inherent anthropocentrism. He has argued, “debates in the humanities and social sciences between well-intentioned critics ... almost always remain locked within an unexamined framework of speciesism.” Reading *What Is Posthumanism?* thus jumps into the middle of an ongoing discussion that seeks to undermine the cultural apparatuses that uphold the notion that humans are superior to other life forms and intelligences. Wolfe’s conceptualization of posthumanism aims to:

> fully comprehend what amounts to a new reality: that the human occupies a new place in the universe, a universe now populated by what I am prepared to call nonhuman subjects. And this is why, to me, posthumanism means not the triumphal surpassing or unmasking of something but an increase in the vigilance, responsibility, and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited. (47)

Using systems theory to extend Jacques Derrida’s attempts to grapple with “the question of the animal” (115) and to destabilize the rhetorical structures that maintain the categorical separation between the human and the nonhuman, Wolfe reconfigures both, contending that there is no unified human subjectivity either on an individual level or within a larger cultural framework. He states that we are

> always radically other, already in- or ahuman in our very being—not just in the evolutionary, biological, and zoological fact of our physical vulnerability and mortality, our mammalian existence but also in our subjection to and constitution in the materiality and technicity of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a precondition of our subjectivity. (89)

Wolfe views the “unsettlement” (90) of our relationship to ourselves, to other humans, and to animals as an opportunity to undermine sedimeted and

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conventional conceptual boundaries.

To accomplish this, Wolfe divides his book along a theory/practice axis. Like Animal Rites, What Is Posthumanism? has two main sections. The first section covers “Theories, Disciplines, Ethics” and the second part concerns “Media, Culture Practices.” In order to demonstrate how a posthumanist analysis of culture and its artifacts would look, Wolfe begins by offering a detailed historical overview of the origins of posthumanist thought. He argues, “the term ‘posthumanism’ itself seems to have worked its way into contemporary critical discourse in the humanities and social sciences during the mid-1990s” (xii), though it can also be traced further back to the 1960s in Foucault’s work, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences. Wolfe points out that Foucault provocatively ends his archaeology by contending that the concept of “man” as “luminous consciousness” is a relatively recent invention, which, further, has reached the limits of its utility. In other words, the human ought not to be the yardstick by which all other creatures are measured.

In tandem with Foucault’s invitation to imagine a philosophical discourse in which the human is not privileged, current posthumanist thought, in Wolfe’s view, represents a confluence of other “genealogies” that may be traced to the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics (1946-1953). The conferences were significant, he argues, for having inspired the cybernetics-based systems theory of Gregory Bateson, Warren McCulloch, Norbert Wiener, and John von Neumann, among others, and the subsequent re-envisioning of their theories by Huberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, and Niklas Luhmann. Early cybernetic systems theory posited a closed-loop feedback system; that is, any action performed by the system resulting in a change in its environment is routed back into the system itself. The system must then adapt itself to the new conditions. Information systems theory, Wolfe writes,

converged on a new theoretical model for biological, mechanical, and communication processes that removed the human and Homo sapiens from any particularly privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information, and cognition. (xii)

The human brain was reconceptualized as an information-processing system akin to a computer, making humans analogous to intelligent machines. This shift was significant because it wedged open a space in which subjectivity was deprioritized and the focus shifted to an examination of how human beings function within a system. In this formulation, what humans think is not as important as how the brain works.
In Wolfe’s view, the second-order systems theory of Maturana, Varela, and Luhmann takes advantage of that opened space to doubly de-privilege the human. Luhmann in particular extended systems theory beyond computational linguistics into the cultural sphere, characterizing social systems made and populated by humans as autopoietic, in that they are self-generating and self-correcting. More simply, the system filters information to determine its boundaries from its environment in order to distinguish what is meaningful communication and what is irrelevant. In this configuration, humans are not subjects, but “autopoietic life-forms” that contribute data (xxiii). This distinction between subjectivity and consciousness subverts the implicit ordering that places the human at the top of a hierarchy of living beings and replaces it with a web of relationships and feedback loops. By viewing animal studies through the lens of systems theory, Wolfe is able to reposition questions of identity and representation so as to de-ontologize binary oppositions such as human/animal or nature/culture and convert them into a less culturally-loaded system/environment.

In the penultimate essay in the theory section, “‘Animal Studies,’ Disciplinarity, and the (Post)Humanities,” Wolfe takes animal studies for continuing to maintain both the binary opposition between humans and nonhumans and the hierarchy that places humans at the pinnacle. He views the discipline as experiencing a “crisis of coherence” (101), arguing that scholars interested in historical approaches or animal rights have little in common with scholars more interested in animal theories of representation, such as Deleuze and Guattari or Agamben. Wolfe demonstrates that writings on animals are found in many different disciplines, all of which tend to uphold an anthropocentric position. It is not enough to direct scholarly attention to animals, he asserts. Even “with the aim of exposing how much they have been misunderstood and exploited, that does not mean we are not continuing to be humanist—and therefore, by definition, anthropocentric” (99). He finds that interdisciplinarity is not enough; to be truly posthumanist, the concept of subjectivity itself needs to be undermined and transformed in a way that does not privilege the human. It is only by giving up notions of personhood that speciesism can be destabilized, he argues, so that we can become posthumanists, and participate in any true form of interdisciplinarity.

Wolfe’s conception of a truly posthumanist cultural analysis informs his next section, which examines conventional media like poetry, visual art, film and music, and architecture. In “Lose the Building: Form and System in Contemporary Architecture,” Wolfe compares the *Tree City* project, which proposes a redesign of Toronto’s Downsview Park, with the *Blur* project, a manufactured cloud encompassing a viewing deck in Switzerland. Wolfe
asserts that viewing the history of the phases of development for each project through the lens of systems theory will “displace” the nature/culture distinction inherent in what he calls “the ideology of the park” in order to forward a system/environment interpretation of being in a lived environment (211). According to Wolfe,

the park may be viewed as a functional component of the larger urban space for which and in which it provides certain services, in which case the question is not its autonomy but precisely the opposite, how it functions as an element within a larger matrix of social systems of which it is a part. On the other hand, it may be viewed as a part of the social system of art, in which case the question is precisely its autonomy and how that autonomy communicates the larger problem of the autopoiesis of art as a social system in a functionally differentiated society. (210)

In other words, by presenting real-world objects or phenomena as representations of an imaginary world, art and architecture both become enclosed systems and an expression of communication from that system into the larger framework of society. Wolfe’s posthumanist analysis of real spaces works towards a conception of the viewing subject not as a singular human individual, but as a system-within-a-system experiencing its environment. By presenting the city park as form of autopoiesis—in that the art itself changes according to the viewing body, which then becomes changed by experiencing the art—he attempts to bypass the customary vision of the viewing subject. His attempt to challenge established models may not be comprehensive enough to undercut a long tradition of placing human beings at the apex of the great chain of being. Still, his version of a posthumanist experience of art holds value for offering one possible way we might move through and past anthropocentrism.

As a blueprint for where a posthumanist approach could take cultural theory, his book is conceptually invaluable. Wolfe excels at bringing together writings from across disciplines, ably pointing to the junctures where technology, bodies, and cultural theory intersect. By linking animal studies to systems theory, and proposing art as a way to change traditional conceptions, he paves the way to reimagining subjectivity as something not exclusively human. Wolfe ultimately answers “what is posthumanism?” not by looking back at what it has been historically, but at what it could be if cultural artifacts were produced by those no longer invested in maintaining human superiority.

Amy Ratelle