From Posthumanist *An*aesthetics to Promethean Dialectics: Further Considerations on the Category of the Hysterical Sublime

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This essay proposes a critique of posthumanist critical theory through the development of the category of the hysterical sublime, a concept first introduced by Fredric Jameson in his early writings on postmodernism. While some critical posthumanist theories equate representationalism with a transcendental humanism, representation is inherent to the kinds of abstractions required in theory as such. Taking up the posthumanist resistance to anthropocentrism or human exceptionalism, the concept of the hysterical sublime—as opposed to the category of the modern sublime, regarding nature—is used to convey the way that posthumanism undermines its own ethical injunctions by invoking fatalistic representations of human action. Instead, this essay defends the return to dialectical humanism as an appropriate framework for thinking the rational and material conditions required for ethical human action.

Key Words: Aesthetics, Dialectics, Humanism, Hysterical Sublime, Psychoanalysis

Posthumanist critical theory has become particularly prominent in the humanities in recent decades. In some of its incarnations it can be regarded as a post-HUMAN-ism, or a transhumanism, that reflects various kinds of technological "upgrades" or enhancements to the human body. This includes biotechnology, information technology, augmented reality technologies, the rise in digital automation, algorithmic media, artificial intelligence, and the prospects of a technological "singularity" (Kurzweil 2006) or "dataism" (Harari 2015) tethering humans to machines as a material assemblage of technological objects of different kinds (both organic and inorganic). Thus, the posthuman, as N. Katherine Hayles (1999, 287) has argued, "offers resources for rethinking the articulation of humans with intelligent machines." In some ways, this sense of the posthuman strikes us as an inevitable direction for capitalism as part of its ceaseless (yet contradictory) logic of endless accumulation. As Slavoj Žižek (2018, 46) puts it, "What we are witnessing today is nothing less than an

attempt to integrate the passage to posthumanity within capitalism." This, however, is an aspect of posthumanism that I do not intend to address here. Instead, my present focus concerns the way this concept can be understood as a post-HUMAN-ism, and in this sense it may be seen as a series of approaches aimed at *decentering* the human subject and secular humanisms more broadly.

Posthumanism can thus be seen as a set of critical theories seeking to escape the perceived deficiencies of various humanist philosophies, from premodern religious and Renaissance humanisms of the early pre-Enlightenment period to the modern liberal secular humanisms that followed (claiming some notion of the autonomous individual) up to and including the various socialist, Marxist, and even Stalinist humanisms of the twentieth century. We may grasp posthumanism in this sense not as the emancipation *of* humanity (an idea, I'd argue, that is contained in some notions of transhumanism) but rather as emancipation *from* humanity (Žižek 2016, 29). Examples of theories I categorize as posthumanist in this way include (but are not limited to): actor-network theory (Latour 2007); agential realism (Barad 2007); assemblage theory (DeLanda 2016); Chthulucene theory (Haraway 2016); object-oriented ontology (Bogost 2012; Bryant 2011, 2014; Harman 2018); pansychism (Shaviro 2014); speculative realism (Meillassoux 2008); and vitalist materialism (Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2013). While these theories vary and are often at odds with each other, for their philosophical inspiration they tend to draw on a range of antihumanist theorists from Spinoza and Heidegger to Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze; today, they tend to converge on concerns about climate change, digital automation, and artificial intelligence, corresponding to the so-called age of the Anthropocene (Crutzen 2002), or the "human age."

The Anthropocene denotes a newly acknowledged geological period in which, for the first time in Earth's long history, human activity is said to have produced its own lasting impact on its formation and development. The dating and periodization of the Anthropocene is still up for debate. Paul Crutzen (2002), the atmospheric chemist who first popularized the term, initially dated the Anthropocene to the Industrial Revolution. Others have proposed the postwar period and the "great acceleration" of the rising consumer culture (Lewis and Maslin 2015), while still others date the Anthropocene all the way back, some 70,000 years, to the rise of human civilization and the Neolithic revolution (Harari 2015). Regardless of how we date or periodize the rise of the Anthropocene, one thing is clear for its proponents: something on the order of an "Age of Humanity" exists, and it has had an impactful and harmful role to play in the development of the planet and its various nonhuman inhabitants.

Implicit in the Anthropocene narrative is the notion that today's crises result from misguided conceptions of human exceptionalism and humanistic hubris. Posthumanism, according to the editors of *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Posthumanism*, can thus be understood as an umbrella term pulling together various theories and philosophies exhibiting a shared *resistance to anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism* (Rosendahl Thomsen and Wamberg 2020, 1). However, as Kate Soper

(2020, 24) argues (and I agree), posthumanism "undoes itself if it attempts to dispense with human exceptionalism." Posthumanism, according to Soper, talks down humans while "talking up animals [and the nonhuman more generally] by anthropomorphising their attributes and behaviour" (21). By emphasizing the "relationality and continuity of all being, posthumanists call for a blurring or collapse of what they see as misguided or arrogantly humanist distinctions between ourselves and other animals" (20). In contrast, and paraphrasing one of Soper's (1986, 107) older claims in her writing on humanism and antihumanism, to convince human subjects of our impotence ahead of time (i.e., the critique of human exceptionalism) is hardly the best way of persuading us to participate in collective action. Rather, this way appears to offer *retreat*. Only humans, as Soper (2020, 25; emphasis added) notes, "are in a position to extend moral consideration to other animals," and "even when posthumanists argue that animals should be treated on par with human subjects, an appeal is being made to a capacity for moral discrimination that is *exclusive to human beings*." As Žižek (2021) puts it, "If we have to care about the life of water and air, it means that we are what Marx called 'universal beings,' as it were, able to step outside ourselves, stand on our own shoulders, and perceive ourselves as a minor moment of the natural totality."

Posthumanism—and especially the variety of it that draws on references to the Anthropocene, congealing around the resistance to anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism—in fact proposes a *narrative* of human history that is nevertheless couched in rhetorics and representations of flatness, horizontalism, space, and territoriality. It is a narrative that makes human culture and society an antagonist in opposition to the pristineness of the nonhuman. Doing so, as Jason W. Moore (2015) notes, creates the appearance of a unified humanity, dismissing real and present inequities and political antagonisms tied to the historical form of the capitalist mode of production. Posthumanism and the Anthropocene narrative create an image of humanity as "an undifferentiated whole" (170).

Posthumanist ethics are thus tied to a particularly aesthetic and rhetorical narrative as a presupposition. Narratively, posthumanism constructs an aesthetic representation for mapping the position of the human, however negatively. This is perhaps a contentious claim since, in some ways, as I discuss below, posthumanist theorists tend to oppose representational paradigms. Much of contemporary posthumanist discourse seeks to distance itself from poststructuralist categories of social construction regarded as implicitly subjective and relative, preferring instead to base its claims in a *realist* ontology and in an *objectivist* approach. Nevertheless, posthumanism is in this way reminiscent of the anti-interpretivist perspectives of theorists such as Susan Sontag (1966) and Deleuze and Guattari (1983), for whom critical interpretations can be regarded as tyrannically constructivist. However, as Fredric Jameson (2008, 7) has argued, "Every individual interpretation," and even those that claim to be against interpretation, "must include an interpretation of its own existence ... every commentary must at the same time be a metacommentary." All forms of theory are thus, in some sense, involved in the

process of writing a commentary or a narrative construction—what Jameson (1984) calls "cognitive mapping"—that I claim is instructive, as well, for developing an ethics.[1] Every interpretation, in other words, relies upon a set of underlying actionable presuppositions.

By positing the presupposition that human exceptionalism or anthropocentrism must be resisted, posthumanist ethics are undermined by representations and aestheticizations of a flat, monistic ontology where no one part is more exclusive than another and where any call to action on the part of a collective human subject to *build*—rather than to withdraw from—structures of liberation is halted outright, in advance. Like the obsessional neurotic who always stops short from acting, out of fear that no action will ever be satisfactory, the posthumanist resistance to anthropocentrism remains idealistic and limited to a merely *contemplative* materialism, inimical to emancipatory action. To reverse this problem, we must instead revive a universalist and dialectical humanism. This requires building and renewing a narrative of what I call a Promethean dialectic. Such a humanism must therefore be regarded as a form of ultimate collective freedom (if not necessarily autonomy) *and responsibility*, giving humanity a particularly *exceptional* role: "What is required of us in this moment is, paradoxically, a super-anthropocentrism: we should control nature, control our environment; we should allow for a reciprocal relationship to exist between countryside and cities; we should use technology to stop desertification or the polluting of the seas. We are, once again, responsible for what is happening, and so we are also the solution" (Caffo and Žižek 2021).

Then how might we characterize the representational politics of posthumanism and the Anthropocene discourse and narrative? Or, to pose the question differently, what ideological function is served by the Anthropocene narrative and the posthumanist resistance to anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism? Perhaps, rather than proposing an aesthetic, the product of critical posthumanism and the Anthropocene discourse would be better framed as an *an*aestheticization of the political. It is this *an*aestheticization of the political—insofar as the posthumanist project of resistance to anthropocentrism appears to undermine the centrality of the collective human subject toward enacting an ethical agency—that takes responsibility for emancipatory action by building and designing a world of equitable living and sustainability. This formulation recalls Susan Buck-Morss's (1992) response to the closing lines of Walter Benjamin's (1986, 242; emphasis added) artwork essay, which famously concludes: "Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can *experience*

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1. Here, the Hegelian distinction between *Sittlichkeit* (ethics) and *Moralität* (morality) is noteworthy. With regards to the latter, we are referring to a variety of moral reflections; whereas, with the former, ethics, we are dealing with immediate action. It is in terms of *Sittlichkeit* that I am, here, referring to ethics. For more on this point see Badiou (2012).

its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art."

My claim regarding posthumanist representations and rhetorics and its consequent ethics here depends upon a certain libidinal attachment to the *end of the human*—that is, to an emancipation *from* the human. Here, the very concept of the Anthropocene in its posthumanist articulation—particularly in its preferred resistance to anthropocentrism, with its use of metaphors of flatness—*an*aestheticizes human ethical action in the very undermining of the category of the human *subject.* This is not to dismiss the presence of the human but goes by way of downgrading the human to its bare and immediate species being—what Alain Badiou (2007, 165–78) has referred to as "animal humanism"—on a horizontal plane with other species in what some posthumanist theorists refer to as a "flat ontology" (DeLanda 2005, 51; Bogost 2012, 17), or a "democracy of objects" (Bryant 2011), which makes no distinction between categories or types of being(s). However, in doing so, critical posthumanism, I claim, reduces the *exceptional* capacity for a collective human subject to act ethically. Instead, by decentering the human subject, a prohibition is put in place that limits our capacity to build for change. Or, put differently, posthumanism posits the presupposition of the human subject as *antagonist* and, in doing so, leads us down a road of undermining the centrality of human subjectivity in building emancipatory conditions, even if that action consists in a collective human resistance to the extractive practices of capitalism as, for instance, conceived by the degrowth movement.[2] *Human* responsibility (not merely as "culpability" or "guilt" but in the sense of "caring for") is still premised on *human* exceptionalism.

In part, the point Buck-Morss was making about modern *an*aestheticization is that *noncontemplation* of the kind Benjamin addressed when he spoke of the fascistic aestheticization of politics is the product of the total aestheticization of everyday life. The development of the modern phantasmagoria that has now come to encapsulate our general lifeworld as a whole—in everything from the consumerist design of urban space to the digital devices we carry around with us as physical and corporeal appendages—manages to *an*aestheticize our senses to the degree that sensory overstimulation and the effects of urban shock alienate us from the processes of contemplation traditionally associated with the philosophical trinity of Art, Beauty, and Truth.

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2. On the whole, though, I believe it is preferrable to conceive emancipatory politics in terms of equitable growth models that aid in developing, for instance, renewable and sustainable energy infrastructures. As Leigh Phillips (2015, 61) notes, "The problem with capitalism is not economic growth but lack of planning, and so our target should be the mode of production (capitalism), not growth itself. Our goal is a *democratically planned economy.*" A detailed discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this essay, but for more on this point, see Benanav (2020), Huber (2021), Phillips (2015), Phillips and Rozworski (2019), and Bratton (2019).

Buck-Morss points to how a *total* aestheticization creates the conditions in which *noncontemplation* becomes the norm, a fact we might even wish to grapple with in critical theories chiding metanarrative. Similarly, we should come to recognize the antirepresentationalism of critical posthumanism as comingling with a view toward a total (re)integration with the sensory aesthetics of the pure immanence of immediate reality. Here, to get at the real reality beneath the surface level of illusion and appearance, which is the by-product of an apparently humanistic hubris, it appears necessary to come back down to Earth. Posthumanists who aspire toward the direct immediacy of pure immanence are, I claim, truly transcendentalist in making the claim that an essential reality is discoverable once we rid ourselves of representation.

Some posthumanist thinkers might expect and welcome such a situation of total aestheticization in a society overwhelmed by constant mediation and overstimulation, where the sensory may be reinscribed back into alignment with the supposed flatness of the immediate and natural world, not unlike Marshall McLuhan's (1964) vision of an autoamputated cybernetic environment; or like the kinds of cyberpunk flatline constructs theorized by the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), Nick Land (2017), and the early writings of Mark Fisher ([1999] 2018) at the University of Warwick in the late 1990s. Here, machinic unconscious and desire may yet divorce us from self-contemplation and the centered ego since, as Land (2014, 257) puts it, "There is no dialectic between social and technical relations, but only a machinism that dissolves society into the machines whilst deterritorializing the machines across the ruins of society." For some critical posthumanist theorists, we are all, after all—human and nonhuman alike—machines of different kinds; and it therefore only makes sense to build a democracy of objects upon this very fact (see Bryant 2014). As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 456–8) explain, each of us is a unit of input/output in a network of machinic enslavement, and it is only as a by-product of ideology that we imagine ourselves as subjects. But, in another register, we can see here just how much the posthumanist rendering comes off as a result of the populist antiaesthetics of the postmodern, in which the beautiful is given priority over the sublime and where all experience, as aestheticized experience, downgrades the need for metacontemplative theory.[3] In fact, as I will argue, the very ridding of the sublime in posthumanist aesthetics transforms it into an *an*aestheticization of the political.

My argument about the performative contradictions of posthumanism nevertheless rests on its underlying aesthetics and its own inherent narrative representations, the limits of which I now wish to develop by elaborating upon the

3. Similar perspectives are proposed in contemporary literary studies, in the so-called postcritical turn, where surface level description is favored over deep theoretical analysis and critique (see Felski 2015). Antitheory movements have emerged in other disciplines, such as film studies, where the post-theory project of David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (1996) challenged primarily Marxist, structuralist, and psychoanalytic approaches. On the latter, see Flisfeder (2012).

category of the *hysterical sublime*, a concept first used by Jameson (1984) in his early writing on postmodernism. Jameson introduced the concept by explaining the category of the sublime as it has been read in the aesthetic philosophies of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. He showed that, for these thinkers, the sublime pertains to awe, fear, and fascination with the irrationality of *nature*. For Jameson, the hysterical sublime refers to similar impacts derived from the awe and fear felt from new technologies emerging out of advanced capitalism, from the computer to automation to artificial intelligence. The fear of technology becomes for Jameson a substitute for the fears of the capitalist system.

For me, however, the Anthropocene narrative and posthumanist critical theory displace such fears onto the figure of the human subject. In the remainder of this essay, I aim to further develop the aesthetic category of the hysterical sublime, through the lens of what I will refer to in my conclusion as a Promethean and dialectical humanism, demonstrating the underlying yet disavowed humanist dimensions of Anthropocene theory and posthumanism, which displace the contradictions of *capitalism* onto *humanism* and the figure of the human subject. It will become clear that what I describe as the hysterical sublime is a foundational presupposition of posthumanist representation, which I believe undermines universal emancipatory possibilities.

The Three Sublimes: Nature, Technology, Human

While the beautiful, according to Burke and Kant, can be understood formally—perhaps, even objectively—through criteria developed by human systems of taste and judgement, the sublime exists beyond these criteria yet remains as that which pierces our corporeal or embodied sense perceptions. For Burke ([1759] 1998), the sublime procures pleasure for us when we can enjoy the dangers of nature from a safe and secure distance. It is given aesthetic expression in the way that forms of art (for Burke, primarily poetry) can represent the power of the natural world. In contrast, for Kant ([1793] 2000), the sublime is a sign of the power of the human subject who can surpass the dangers of the real world, beyond human sense perception. But for him the sublime also exists, heuristically, as a point of departure for theoretical reasoning. It is by *positing the sublime*, external to human subjectivity, that our reasoning begins to think the sublime through the form of the Idea as the heuristic limit against which judgments are produced. The sublime is thus the way in which the human subject *includes itself* in the framework of this judgment.

Hegel ([1835] 1975, 30–1), in his lectures on aesthetics, went further than Kant in noting that the universal need for art—as *representational* of aesthetics—springs from the fact that the human subject is a *thinking consciousness* and that, in art, in representation, humanity places before itself, in various ways, that which pertains to itself, if not necessarily in direct form. In aesthetic representation, humanity places before itself objects of its own contemplation that are ultimately objects

for humanity's contemplation of itself. As Hegel put it, in art the human subject sees itself, represents itself to itself, in order to think and understand itself. The consciousness acquired in the form of the representation, according to Hegel, combines the *theoretical* and the *practical*: theoretically, representations help to bring the subject to consciousness of itself; practically, the subject acquires the sense of seeing how its own actions (particularly in the form of art itself, in the representation) make capable the altering of its external environment, which is re-doubled in the altering of itself. Thus, we can see how the sublime, as a heuristic, provides the point of positing, in the form of the representation, the very founda-tions for reasoning in both its *theoretical* and *practical* forms. Put differently, we see how the positing of the sublime makes possible our theoretical reasoning, allow-ing us to critically assess our ethical or practical reasoning.

The difference between Kant and Hegel therefore involves the redoubling of the positing in the subject itself—in the case of Hegel, toward the position of the *presupposing* of the subject who posits the sublime in the first place. In other words, while for Kant the sublime is a heuristic for thinking teleologically—that is, for thinking purposively—for Hegel, the sublime helps us to return to our own subjective position (the negation of the negation) in order to grasp and reason *theoretical limitations*, which then make it possible to think our own *practical limitations* and ultimately the kind of freedom required for the subject to act eth-ically. Representations, in other words, are the necessary medium of thinking, without which reasoning is left without a space to structure and resolve demands for ethical action. Through the form of the representation and the con-templation required of it, we come to grasp the way that we impose limits to thought and action *ourselves*—this is the point Hegel makes against Kant regard-ing the development of a priori categories—and we recognize, therefore, that such limits, although often historically necessary, are nevertheless contingent and transformable. This, after all, is the point of dialectical reasoning: to grasp how historical necessity arises out of contingency.

Jameson's category of the hysterical sublime, I propose, helps us to accomplish and build an understanding in both the ethical freedom and agency of the human subject and also the limits placed upon it in the context of the Anthropocene nar-rative and posthumanist critical theory. Whereas an external nature is posited as the sublime alterity of the subject of modernity, in the context of posthumanist critical theory and the Anthropocene narrative, the hysterical sublime posits the human subject, along with its abstractions and transcendental representa-tions, as the other that is opposed to their conception of a flat ontology and the pure immanence of reality.

Jameson in fact distinguishes what he calls the hysterical sublime as a product of the postmodern. In contrast to the modern and romantic sublime and its focus on external nature and modernist aspirations for reaching the Absolute, the post-modern hysterical sublime sets itself up, not against nature, but *against technology*. It refers, in other words, to the impacts derived from the awe, fear, and fascination

felt from new technologies emerging out of advanced capitalism, from the computer to automation to artificial intelligence. The fear of technology becomes, for Jameson, a substitute for the fears of the capitalist system.

The hysterical sublime is graspable in much of contemporary and twentieth-century popular culture, especially in cinema and television programs that deal with concerns over automation and artificial intelligence, in everything from HAL 9000 in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* to the Wachowskis' *The Matrix*; in the replicants of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049*; and in Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* television series. Whereas the sublime was previously expressed in connection to early Romanticism, the hysterical sublime often coincides with gothic depictions of technology and the body, creating dark fascinations with the corporeality of human flesh, departing from transcendentalist categorizations of the human mind. However, while Jameson's postmodern sublime displaces the logic of the global networks of capital onto the logic of technology, for me there is something far more disconcerting in the way that the hysterical sublime becomes the center of Anthropocene and posthumanist theory. It gives expression not merely to the technological sublime but also to the figure of the human—human culture, that is, seen universally as the creator of technology—as the sublime other of our present moment. The sublime in the context of posthumanist theory is thus, as I grasp it, neither nature nor technology but the figure of the human subject itself.

The growth of technology—which now encompasses the entire planet, from our digital devices to biotechnologies, industrial farming, agricultural science, data centers for our cloud technologies, petrocultures, fossil-fuel energy infrastructures, and the growth of new smart cities—shows that no part of the planet remains untouched by human technological development. Thus, the human subject is for posthumanism the object to be feared, and the human subject gets posited in posthumanist aesthetics as the heuristic limit against which its objectives are articulated. The critique of technology is even folded back into the representation of the human insofar as culture is the context for advanced technology. Further, the human subject as the hysterical sublime in posthumanist theory displaces the broader context of capitalism as a world system and a world ecology fissured with political antagonism.

As an aesthetic category, the hysterical sublime provides a framework for thinking critically about the contradictions of human culture and society and the way that our collective impact upon the nonhuman has resulted in a crisis of our own self-preservation. But this, I claim, is rather the product of political conflict and the implementation of systems of production, such as global capitalism, benefitting the few over the many. The hysterical sublime is thus a concept that could be used to evaluate the view of humanity, in our current historical context, not as *an-thro*pocentric but as *capitalo*centric. The hysterical sublime could be used to uncover the cultural contradictions of capitalism rather than of the human and of humanisms more simplistically and of capitalism's technological impact

upon both nature and ourselves, as central to our present historical and existential dilemmas.

In fact, it is precisely its context within the political antagonisms of global capitalism that establishes the posthumanist desire for the generalized equality of objects and species, but its own subjective position and its own historicity within political antagonisms—such as the class struggle or even the struggle between capitalism and its exploited masses—is avoided or dismissed since, on one hand, posthumanism's goal is to decenter and talk down the human subject in the first place. On the other hand, its rhetoric and its aesthetics involve a kind of flattening—through various strategies such as neovitalism (Bennett 2010), monism (Braidotti 2013), panpsychism and eliminativism (Shaviro 2014), and so forth—so that in some ways posthumanism has the potential to essentialize and naturalize its own position as objective in and of itself.

There is yet another reason for reading this aesthetic as one of the *hysterical* sublime, and this involves thinking about Lacan's (2007, 35) claim that Hegel was the most sublime hysteric. We may grasp this in terms of Slavoj Žižek's critique of the Althusserian theory of ideological interpellation. For Žižek, the problem in Althusser's thought concerns the missing theory of *failed* interpellation; or, as Mladen Dolar (1993) puts it, for Althusser the subject is a function of ideology, whereas for Lacan the subject is an indication of ideological failure. Thus, as Žižek (2000, 115) explains, "Far from emerging as the outcome of interpellation, the subject emerges only when and in so far as interpellation liminally fails. Not only does the subject never fully recognize itself in the interpellative call: its resistance to interpellation ... *is* the subject. In psychoanalytic terms, this failure of interpellation is what *hysteria* is about; for this reason, the subject *as such* is, in a way, hysterical." The claim that the subject emerges from failed interpellation, and that the subject as such is in this way hysterical, helps us to see the accuracy of Lacan's claim that Hegel is the most sublime hysteric. And it helps us even further if we return to Hegel's dialectical conception of aesthetics.

In the Hegelian dialectic, we move from the position of positing, then to that of external, and then to determinate reflection; or, using Hegel's schema of judgment, we pass from positive to negative to infinite judgment. We begin by grasping a problem or a contradiction, which we then posit in the form of some heuristic or limit, which in this case I am referring to as the sublime. To better understand the problem, it's then necessary in a second movement to approach it from an external position: that is, from an objective point of view outside of the subject's first grasping of the appearance of the problem. Another way to conceive this second position in the dialectical reflection might be to place the teleological judgment *here*, at this point, *rather than at the end of the process* as it is commonly assumed.

Importantly, teleology or purposiveness helps us to grasp speculations about the potential outcomes of our logic. If we do take our logic all the way to the end, what, then, are the potential outcomes of our current actions? We should

read the genre of dystopia in film and literature in this way. Unlike utopia, which imagines a more ideal and perfect world, dystopia is a genre that helps us to grasp in negative terms (as in a negative judgment) the contradictions of the present. Dystopia as a mode of critique allows us to see in what way our present course of action can potentially lead to disaster. Thereby, retroactively (here is a dimension of the Freudian form of *Nachträglichkeit*, of retroactivity), from the position of the dystopian future, we can return to the present in order to choose the best course of action given our particular situation. My claim is that posthumanism and Anthropocene theory are caught—that they are stuck—at the moment of external reflection and negative judgment, which has the potential to transform into a kind of fatalism.

As Hegel (2010, 664, §12.167) puts it, of this teleological activity we can say that "in it the end is the beginning, the consequence the ground, the effect the cause; that it is a becoming of what has [already] become; that in it only that which already concretely exists comes into existence." In the perception of purposiveness—of teleology—"an *intelligence* is assumed as its author" (651, §12.154), and thus the dialectic of fatalism—or of determinism—and freedom is ascertained. In positing a resistance to anthropocentrism, the form of the hysterical sublime already places a self-limitation on the human capacity to act. It does this by siding—however unconsciously and if in a cynical way—with a deterministic and fatalistic perspective precisely *in its negation of the centrality of the human freedom to act*, which is where we encounter the third (required) movement in dialectical reasoning.

The third movement is the one of returning to the starting point (the point of the negation of the negation): returning to the beginning to acknowledge that, precisely, it is the *subject itself* that posits the heuristic limit, the foundational point of departure from which all actual thinking and reasoning takes place. This infinite judgment and point of determinate reflection helps us to see that the thinking subject was there from the very beginning and that by positing the problem, grasping it in the first place, we as thinking subjects also are capable of changing or impacting the material conditions of the problem by building the necessary conditions for improving our circumstances.

Two points follow from this conception of the dialectical analysis of the hysterical sublime: First is that the Anthropocene narrative and posthumanist theory are self-undermining in disavowing their own historicization and their subjective positions of enunciation, seeing the human subject and anthropocentrism as the cause of our current crises—how, in other words, do they account for the context of their own reasoning? Second is that, since the subject is who grasps and thinks the problem in the first place, only a collective and humanist subject can solve the problem of the Capitalocene, as opposed to the Anthropocene, pace Moore (2015). When we start accounting for the historicization and subjectivization of the problematic, we start to see, not that a harmonized human subject is responsible for our crisis—we

are split by antagonisms. Instead, we see that it will take a universalizing sub-
jective position to deal with our crises, out of sheer material necessity. It is not
by benevolent decree but by *material* necessity that we are required to interpel-
late a universal and humanist subject as opposed to the posthumanist gesture
of resisting anthropocentrism.

Against Representation?

Posthumanism, as I've tried to argue so far, has created a metanarrative about hu-
manity built upon its presupposition of a necessary resistance to anthropocen-
trism. The latter, I claim, overlaps with the hysterical sublime. Not that there is
no posthumanist sublime; rather, the human, itself, is posthumanism's sublime
object. In its resistance to anthropocentrism, the posthumanist narrative, as an
*an*aestheticization of the political, leads toward a *counter*ethics. However, it may
seem counterintuitive to claim that posthumanism creates a narrative in this
way since it appears on one hand to dismiss the role of the sublime—a perspective
that grows logically out of its own attempts to deconstruct the binarizing dichot-
omies of the human and nonhuman, subject and object, culture and nature—and,
on the other hand, it likewise dismisses the very mechanism of representation. On
this latter point, it is worth revisiting, briefly, Althusser's conception of ideology
since it bears somewhat upon the problematic of representation being dealt
with here.

   The problem here, I claim, is that too many theorists have read Althusser's
(2001) thesis that ideology is an imaginary *representation* of the subject to its real
conditions of existence as a reason to reject the very *form* of representation. On
the contrary, the path to truth leads, precisely, *through* representation. By dismiss-
ing representation, we prevent ourselves from the kind of *reasoning* required for
ethical action. It's not that truth (or the real reality) is behind or underneath rep-
resentation but that we discover the truth *only at the end*, through reasoning, and
representation is the *medium* through which we do this. Parallels in poststructur-
alism argue that *all* we can know is the representation, the rhetoric and discourse
(it's been claimed, after all, that there is no metalanguage). They are thus, I claim,
Kantian formalists at best. Even posthumanists critique poststructuralist antihu-
manists for their anthropocentrism—that is, for sticking to the transcendental il-
lusion of the representation—while posthumanists themselves believe we can get
at the immediacy of reality directly. However, what we must recognize is that it's
neither enough to say we can *bypass* the representation nor to say the representa-
tion is all we can get. Representation is, in fact, the key to thinking and critical rea-
soning, and it is by grasping the contradiction at the heart of the representation
that we arrive at the truth.

   We might then think of the relation between the sublime and the representation
as two points in the production of narrative. In Lacanian terms, the sublime can be

seen as an imaginary object that works as a heuristic.[4] It is against the sublime as heuristic that we're able to posit the Symbolic order as a representational system —that is, the field of meaning, communication, and representation. It is only at the *limit* points of this system that we are able to discover the Real, not as an impossible Thing but as an indication of the fact that reality is not-all—that is, reality is incomplete. An *incomplete* reality suggests that we are free to act, that our actions are not predetermined by a *closed* system, and therefore we can posit differently the presuppositions guiding our relation to the Symbolic order. Such presuppositions are objectively historical while at the same time subjective. That is, they are historically and objectively *necessary* yet *contingent*. We are given objective conditions in which we relate to reality, but our relation to reality is nevertheless subjective insofar as we are able to contemplate and reflect upon it and grasp what is true in this way. This, after all, is what is meant by Hegel's (1977, 10, §17) statement that we grasp the True not only as substance but also as subject. We cannot do this without making an initial *choice* (however unconscious) of positing, which is one reason why access to *objective* truth must pass through a *subjective* choice and why claims regarding all-sidedness devise a false universality (Comay and Ruda 2018, 15–16). The path to universality begins by choosing sides, and this is what the posthumanist narrative represses: on one hand in devising a flat ontology and on the other through the hysterical sublime and its positing of resistance to anthropocentrism. It is paradoxically through its dismissal of the sublime that posthumanist perspectives raise the hysterical sublime as its own initial point of positing.

This is, in fact, the implication of Graham Harman's assertion that his own object-oriented ontology (OOO) does not distinguish between the sublime and the beautiful. Any alluring object, according to Harman (2020, 47), has features of both, and OOO thus denies "that there are two different *kinds* of experience, one of the beautiful and the other of the sublime. From the object-oriented standpoint, aesthetics must treat the apples of a still life and the awesome power of a tsunami in precisely the same way." This of course makes sense from a posthumanist perspective seeking to break down the subject-object binary and the human/nonhuman dichotomy, since it is precisely the positing of the sublime that, in Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment, the human subject is provided the capacity to judge. This is accomplished by placing the subject in the frame of reality through the form of the sublime, which sets the subject relative to the world external to itself, upon which it reflects.

Not unlike Harman, Steven Shaviro (2014), in his writing on speculative aesthetics, focuses on Kant's analytic of the beautiful while dismissing the moment of the sublime. Kant's aesthetics, according to Shaviro, although not departing from the "correlationist circle," nevertheless "occupies a moment that *precedes* the very construction of this circle"—a moment that precedes, according to Shaviro, the

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4. The sublime, as Lyotard (1994) puts it, *as* a heuristic, invents its own principles and lets itself be guided by these principles in deciphering judgements about the aesthetic.

correlation between subject and object (148). For Shaviro this concerns the fact that, in Kantian aesthetics, the beautiful is a subjective category, thus making it impossible to create a hierarchy of aesthetic classifications. Aesthetic judgments, unlike moral ones, cannot "command assent but only request it or demand it" (153). Therefore, the universality of aesthetic judgments, as Shaviro understands it, is "not established in advance but needs to be *produced* through an ongoing process of solicitation and communication" (153). For Shaviro, "Beauty involves an *immediate* excess of sensation: something that stimulates thinking but that cannot be contained in, or expressed by, any particular thought" (154; emphasis added). It is because the universal validity of aesthetic judgment is not determined in advance that, for Shaviro, "aesthetics [as immediate sensation] marks the place where cognition and correlationism get left behind" (155).

For Shaviro (2014), the twenty-first century has witnessed the emergence of a reevaluation of aesthetics. We now live in a world, he writes,

> where all manners of cultural expression are digitally transcoded and elec-
> tronically disseminated, where genetic material is freely recombined, and
> where matter is becoming open to direct manipulation on the atomic and
> subatomic scales. Nothing is hidden; there are no more concealed depths.
> The universe of things is not just available to us but increasingly unavoidable
> ... Our predominant aesthetic procedures involve sampling, synthesizing, re-
> mixing, and cutting and pasting. In such a world, the aesthetic problem we
> face is ... a question of beauty and patterned contrasts *rather than one of sub-
> limity and allure*." (43–4; emphasis added)

For both Harman and Shaviro, the dismissal of the sublime appears relative to their claims regarding the flat equality of all objects and aesthetic sensations— of networks, horizontality, difference, and immediacy as opposed to the hierarchy and verticality of human subjective taste and judgment. A similar perspective is addressed in Karen Barad's (2007) conception of "agential realism."

Barad (2007, 133) argues that representationalism "positions us above or outside the world" we reflect on. As a result, representationalist philosophy, she contends, remains condemned to anthropocentrism (133). Representationalism, as Barad puts it, "is the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent" (46). Barad's agential realism thus posits a *performative* network of actors (not unlike Latour's actor-network model) in which agents are all equally implicated in the production of reality, yet *without* purpose or goal. The ethical posthumanist subject, according to Barad, thus opposes the traditional notion of a rational subject of ethics and instead "responds to its proximal relationship to the other through a mode of *wonderment* that is an-tecedent to consciousness" (391; emphasis added). Barad defends an ethics of ac-countability and responsibility toward the other, but merely in terms of contemplating "what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (394).

Levi R. Bryant (2011, 14–15) also argues that representationalist perspectives are indeed limited in merely thinking a reflection of the world, a perspective that he refers to as *epistemological* realism, which is responsible for carving up the world into the difference between the observing subject and the observed object. For him, the problem is that the represented object never really grasps ontological truth since it is limited to the domain of the subject and of culture, and therefore "we are unable to determine whether representations are merely our constructions, such that they do not reflect reality as it is at all, or whether these representations are true representations of reality as it is and would be regardless of whether it is represented" (15). Thus, for Bryant, even the antihumanisms of Foucault, Derrida, and other poststructuralists is nevertheless inherently anthropocentric insofar as they still claim that the representation is but a mere social construction beneath which we can never reach. For him, the aim of OOO as a posthumanism is "to think a *subjectless* object" (19).

Although we have not here exhausted the wider range of approaches, what we find in posthumanist perspectives of this kind—very much in their attempts to flatten the relationship between human and nonhuman, between subject and object—is a general disdain toward the differentiation between the sublime and the beautiful—not unlike the anticorrelationist critique of the Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal—as well as that between the representing subject and the represented object. They are driven by an apparent *realism* that seeks to bypass the representation in order to arrive at direct immediacy *without* mediation. Oddly then, for them, the representation still appears to count as something like a distortion or mystification of the Real, and it is telling that there is even a shift among proponents of posthumanism to move from representation to surficial description (i.e., "surface reading"). Lists, for instance, as Ian Bogost (2012, 40) proposes, "are perfect tools to free us from the prison of representation precisely *because* they are so inexpressive."

In opposition to the antirepresentationalism of posthumanism, beginning with its presupposition of resistance to anthropocentrism, we should recognize the impossibility of grasping the immediacy of the Real without first passing through the form of the mediation contained in the representation. For me this recalls the difference between the concepts of *Vorstellung* (representation) and *Darstellung* (presentation or immediacy), which we see in older forms of symptomal critique. In its dismissal of the sublime and its critique of representationalism, posthumanist aesthetic theory seems to aspire toward getting directly at the *Darstellung*, bypassing the *Vorstellung* completely. However, we must grasp that we can never come to know immediate reality without first passing through the representation: in fact, I maintain that this is still what occurs in the production of the posthumanist metanarrative. Our knowledge of immediacy is, in other words, always a knowledge of a *lost* immediacy, as Gregor Moder (2017, 76) puts it. This is not unlike the relationship between the Lacanian Symbolic and Real: the Real is not an impossible thing-in-itself; rather, we are able to grasp it as the very limit point in the Symbolic order, at the points

where we encounter contradiction, which far from being evidence of the finitude of our knowledge should rather be conceived "as an internal condition of every identity" (Žižek 1989, 6). What we thus perceive as an *epistemological* obstacle must be redoubled into an *ontological* fact that reality is incomplete or not-all. But rather than seeing this as a limitation on our knowledge, it should instead be grasped as the very condition of possibility for our freedom—that is, for the fact that our existence is not predetermined ahead of time—and it is for this reason that our ethical action (*Sittlichkeit*) in the immediate makes a difference. It is furthermore the case that the form of the representation makes a difference by establishing the coordinates through which we make our actions possible—that is, by constructing the narrative of its efficacy. We must *give to ourselves* the narrative, structural, and material conditions in which our actions are made possible and effective. It is in this way that the Symbolic can have an effect in the Real; or, as Jameson (1981) puts it in the subtitle to his book, *The Political Unconscious*, narrative is a socially symbolic *act*.

Prometheanism and the Renewal of Dialectical Materialism

Recalling the fact that for Buck-Morss, *an*aesthetics is treated as a numbing of the sensory that leads us toward noncontemplation, and given the fact that posthumanism represents a general gesture of resisting anthropocentrism, alongside its rejection of the categories of the sublime and of representation, I have proposed that the hysterical sublime be conceived as an *an*aestheticization of the political in the manner originally conceived by Benjamin, insofar as it implicitly rests on the secondary moment of external reflection, the moment of primary negation (as opposed to the negation of the negation) that always stops short, ahead of time, the capacity for ethical action on the part of the subject. Thus, the hysterical sublime's narrative, I claim, rests in a kind of *implicit* fatalism. On one hand, I believe this to be the case because the consequence of resisting anthropocentrism emerges as the undermining of the human subject—even the collective human subject—capable of ethical action. However, on the other hand, when posthumanist perspectives do espouse human ethical action, it is very difficult to see how this in any way corresponds to their resistance to anthropocentrism. As Andreas Malm (2018, 116) puts it, for instance, "*Any* call for a more environmentally beneficial practice by necessity puts humans front and centre." Citing Soper, Malm writes that "we need to get 'human beings to recognize their unique responsibilities for creating and correcting environmental devastation, both for themselves and for other species'—to become *humanists*, in other words" (117). The posthumanist perspective, I claim, therefore either succumbs to a fatalist position or else it can and should be rethought on more solid humanist grounds.

If the sublime, as I am arguing, is that which in fact places the human subject in the frame of reality—to conceive of human freedom in the constitution of an ethical act—then fatalism may be seen as a *teleology without the sublime*, or else

it is a hysterical sublime as I've described above. This, I fear, is the product of post-humanist resistance to anthropocentrism: its fatalism is the product of imposing a predetermined limit upon the exceptionalism of human ethical action. What I will now refer to as a Prometheanism, however, proposes *the rejection of predetermined limits on action and self-transformation*. Prometheanism, as Ray Brassier (2014, 470) puts it, "is simply the claim that there is no reason to assume a predetermined limit to what we can achieve or to the ways in which we can transform ourselves and our world." Such a limit, I claim, is due to a *theoretical* constraint on action. But to be able to grasp this, we require reasoning, through the form of the representation, as *the rejection of predetermined limits on thought and understanding* based on our existing *material* conditions. For me, conceiving Prometheanism as a mediation of rationalism and ethical action recalls Jameson's comparison between the Hegelian and the Marxist dialectic, and it also offers a methodological distinction between Marxian dialectical materialism and the flat (contemplative) materialism of a posthumanist theory resistant to anthropocentrism.

For Jameson (1971, 340), "Dialectical thought is in its very structure self-consciousness and may be described as the attempt ... to reckon the position of the observer into the experiment itself." The dialectical movement from positing, to external, and then to determinate reflection, or from positive, to negative, to infinite judgment, involves precisely a transformation from the position where the subject unconsciously posits its own presuppositions only to arrive in the end at the position of presupposing the positing on the part of itself (see also Žižek 1989). This doesn't mean that the problem is solipsistic but that thinking only begins from an initial, foundational gesture of positing a *limit* against which thought proceeds only to come back full circle to the realization that the subject can act ethically in the practice of positing new limits and, thus, of overcoming the old ones—that is, by building the conditions required for our freedom. We give *to ourselves* the necessary (yet historically contingent) structures for our freedom. For Hegel, the subject in the process of the dialectic comes to see "the way in which [the thinker's] own determinate thought processes ... limit the results of his thinking"; for Marx, however, "The self-consciousness aimed at is the awareness of the thinker's position in society and in history, itself, and of the limits imposed on this awareness by his class position" (Jameson 1971, 340). Thus, the Hegelian dialectic allows us to grasp theoretical and conceptual limits while the Marxist dialectic allows us to grasp the material limits to practical action.

For dialectical materialism, however, the point is not simply to separate the theoretical and the practical, the Hegelian from the Marxist, but to show that the only way to grasp the practical, material limits *to action* is by going through the theoretical reasoning needed to grasp the conceptual limits *to thinking*. The former sees in the subject of reason merely the germ of bourgeois idealism; the latter, by objectifying and naturalizing its own knowledge, dismisses its own subjective position *within existing political antagonisms* while also failing to historicize its position of enunciation. This connection is important and demonstrates precisely where

Stalinist, DiaMat, and posthumanist new materialism all take a wrong turn through the gesture of eliminating the free, excessive subject of dialectical reasoning. It's on this point, I claim, that even posthumanist perspectives demanding human ethical action must be rethought on much more concrete *humanist* grounds. As Jameson (2019, 348) has put it, the glory of the Anthropocene has been to show us that humanity truly can change the world; now it would be wise to terraform it.

The Politicizing Representation of Dialectical Humanism

If the problem with *an*aesthetics as identified by Buck-Morss is—in Benjamin's terms—the aestheticization of politics, then to return to its original formulation, we might think of a Promethean dialectical humanism as the *politicization of the aesthetic*. Does the posthumanist discourse resistant to anthropocentrism politicize the aesthetic landscape of the present, or is it rather a version of the aestheticization of the political?

The dilemma I have proposed is that, by reducing the significance of the human subject, posthumanist *ethics* becomes difficult to fathom since the resistance to anthropocentrism—its practices of decentering the human subject, which in fact centers its narrative—undermines the possibility of enabling human collective action in any way other than through forms of collective *in*action: through acts of mere contemplation, bearing witness to suffering, and so forth. Proposing to explore networks and systems without subjects (or, at least, without a human subject as exceptional) appears to undermine the very possibility of positive political action and change. Even though posthumanist theorists advocate collective agency—collectivizations that include the nonhuman—the kinds of ethics they propose remain unclear. At their best, posthumanist theorists help us in thinking the contexts of our environments and our actions, beyond the confines of ourselves; by thinking the radical alterity of the nonhuman other, they allow us to conceive the broader contexts of our actions.

At its best, then, posthumanism is something like the moment of external reflection in the dialectic, which I maintain rests on a merely transcendentalist and idealist—or, at best, *contemplative* materialist—plane. It remains limited both theoretically and practically insofar as its resistance to anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism is anathema to emancipatory reasoning. In positing the annihilation of the human subject as its own fundamental fantasy, it merely gives expression to the side of the negative judgment in our thinking the problem of the Anthropocene. It displays, precisely, the way that Benjamin foreshadowed contemporary aesthetic and narcissistic pleasures in the witnessing of our own self-destruction and annihilation. Posthumanism therefore misconstrues the point of the dialectic: it's not that only a subject can produce the world, or that its existence depends on the presence of the subject, or even that everything boils down to opposition and negativity, but that *we are the ones who are capable*

of changing it—changing the structures in which we live—to meet the changing conditions of our existence.

Human freedom is less about the domination of nature than it is about our ability, as Marx (1991, 959) put it in a well-known passage, to "govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way." To wrest the realm of freedom through our rational understanding of natural necessity. Or, as Engels (1987, 105) put it, human freedom consists in "the knowledge of these laws [i.e., of nature], and in the possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards definite ends ... the capacity to make decisions with the knowledge of the subject." Posthumanism, in contrast, stops short, only at the level of the first negation in the dialectic. It avoids the negation of the negation or, rather, the subsequent emergence of the kind of subjectivity required to build a sustainable, free, and equitable world, the product of which is not mere contingency but the material necessity of a freedom that cannot but be universal.

There is, as I argue through the category of the hysterical sublime, an aesthetic dimension to this. If, as Adorno (2007, 160) claims, art is "the negative knowledge of the actual world," then perhaps this circle cannot be adequately completed unless we follow through an emancipatory criticism that politicizes aesthetics. For this, we require not only theory but also the presence of an ethical subjectivity. For me, at least, theory and critique inform the humanist and realist basis of politicization. Art, representation, and aesthetics aid in this venture but require grounding in practices of interpretation and narrativization that result in building and creating as an ethical gesture. It's on this point that I find value in some of the projects, mislabeled as "accelerationist," that instead adopt the Promethean call to build up the world rationally, through planning, to meet the changing material conditions of our existence. This, I believe, is how we may politicize the fatalist and idealist *an*aesthetics and counterethics implicit in the posthumanist narrative and its positing of the hysterical sublime. Posthumanism remains limited by its capacity to merely reflect upon the world; to gaze and grieve it in many ways, with compassion; to withdraw from other objects in the world and to bear witness to the tragedies of humanity. But the point—the Promethean and dialectical-humanist point—in fact, is to change it!

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