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DRONES, CLONES AND ALPHA BABES: RETROFITTING *STAR TREK'S* HUMANISM, POST- 9/11
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Đrones, Clones, AND Starship Captains:

Encounters with the Posthuman

6: Humanism/Transhumanism

What is lethal is not the posthuman as such but the grafting of the posthuman onto a liberal humanist view of the self. – Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 286–87.

Postmodern cultural criticism is ingenious (and very usefully so) in exposing the political and hegemonic interests behind any point of view or line of inquiry.… But can this mode of criticism also serve as a positive point of reference? – Jon Wagner and Jan Lundeen, *Deep Space and Sacred Time*, 212.

THE OPENING SCENE of the *Star Trek Voyager* episode "Scorpion" introduces viewers to Captain Kathryn Janeway's new interactive holodeck novel. It is set in the fifteenth-century workshop of Leonardo da Vinci. As the holographic Leonardo (played to perfection by John Rhys-Davies) tests a robotic arm constructed of wood to resemble a human arm and mimic a blacksmith's motions, the Captain – "Katarina," as Leonardo calls her – negotiates with him for space in his workshop where she can work on her sculptures and paintings. As the Maestro sets his contraption in motion, Katarina looks on in admiration. "Someone once said that 'all invention is but an extension of the body of man,'" she enthuses. As she moves about the workshop, her admiring gaze takes in Leonardo's sketches of flying machines and a model of one suspended from the ceiling. By agreeing to help him build another machine – one that will actually fly – she convinces him to rent her a workbench and take her on as apprentice. Thus begins a charming relationship to which *Voyager* will return in later episodes.

For those critics whose approach to *Star Trek* is grounded in the modern/postmodern opposition, this scene would be yet more evidence of *Star Trek*'s unwavering commitment to creator Gene Roddenberry's Humanist vision. And they would be right. After all, Leonardo da Vinci,

an iconic figure in the history of Renaissance Humanism, is here depicted as an appropriate role model for Captain Janeway, *Voyager*'s inheritor of the liberal humanism of *The Next Generation*'s Captain Jean-Luc Picard. But for me, Leonardo's robotic arm and Katarina's comment on it recall a passage from Katherine N. Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* in which she quotes and interprets a statement from Kenneth P. Oakley's 1949 book, *Man the Tool-Maker*:

> "Employment of tools appears to be [man's] chief biological characteristic, for considered functionally they are detachable extensions of the forelimb." … Significantly, he imagined the tool to be at once "detachable" and an "extension," separate from yet partaking of the hand. If the placement and the kind of tool mark Oakley's affinity with the epoch of the human, the construction of the tool as a prosthesis points forward to the posthuman. (Hayles 1999 34)

Similarly, the slender wooden fingers of Leonardo's robotic arm point forward to the posthuman theme of "Scorpion": *Voyager*'s first real engagement with the Borg, and Captain Janeway's "liberation" of Seven of Nine from the Borg collective. In this episode, the Captain gets to see what intelligent life looks like when modelled on transhumanist philosophies that take Enlightenment humanism to its techno-scientific extremes.

The Battle for the Future

What I want to attempt in this essay is an extended reading of *Star Trek* that is not explicitly feminist but is nevertheless provoked by feminism – specifically, a passage from a feminist book review that's been haunting me since I read it back in 1996:

> Is it really enough to identify the Enlightenment as authority … without recognizing also the significance of thought's liberation and that the women's movement, including the feminist politics of difference, rejoices in just this freedom? It may not always be with us. Here, then, I also question [the] dismissal of "liberal feminism" … when, in the North American context and particularly in the United States, we (I and whoever else joins me in this) may well be looking

back on liberalism as a honeyed country from which we are severed forever by forms of totalitarianism we never dreamed of. (Smith 766)

This is a passage from Canadian Dorothy Smith's review of a collection of postmodernist essays not unlike scores of others that poured from the academic presses during the 1980s and 1990s. It resonated with my growing dissatisfaction with postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment project. In the years since Smith made this statement, I have become even more curmudgeonly in my views: critical theorists have effectively extinguished the Enlightenment's light without providing an alternative for illuminating a possible way to the future. I'm with Smith in questioning the repudiation of liberal feminism – not because I want to rehabilitate the liberal humanist subject, given its complicity in sexism, racism, and economic Darwinism, but because no one has been able to come up with an appealing replacement for the liberties that adhere to it.

I took Smith's intention as trying to get feminist academics to wake up to the changes going on all around us in the 1990s. Her words seem even more prophetic today than they did in 1996. George W. Bush's rise to power, the PATRIOT Act's assault on civil liberties, and the militarization of U.S. foreign policy are all reminders that postmodernist critique hasn't even made a dent in the status quo – quite the opposite, in fact. As Terry Eagleton wrote in the mid-1990s:

> Postmodernism is radical in so far as it challenges a system which still needs absolute values, metaphysical foundations and self-identical subjects; against these it mobilizes multiplicity, non-identity, transgressions, anti-foundationalism, cultural relativism. The result, at its best, is a resourceful subversion of the dominant value-system, at least at the level of theory.… But postmodernism usually fails to recognize that what goes at the level of ideology does not always go at the level of the market. If the system has need of the autonomous subject in the law court or polling both, it has little enough use for it in the media or shopping mall. In these sectors, plurality, desire, fragmentation and the rest are as native to the way we live as coal was to Newcastle before Margaret Thatcher got her hands on it. (Eagleton 1996 132–33)

Indeed, we may have brilliantly deconstructed the master narratives of Western culture, its institutions and its codes, but much of our work still lacks a program for change; thus it is complicit in the very Enlightenment project it critiques. Moreover, there is something vaguely disingenuous about finding fault with a particular vision of the future when one has no vision of one's own. By default, therefore, the battle for the future is being waged between transhumanists, whose technophilic, anarcho-capitalist vision for posthumanity is notable for its indifference to issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, politics, militarism, public policy, civic debate, etc., and critical posthumanists who "think that serious consideration needs to be given to how certain characteristics associated with the liberal subject, especially agency and choice, can be articulated within a posthuman context" (Hayles 1999 5). Among the latter are those whose textual preferences include *Star Trek* – despite/because of its humanism.

Eagleton's advice to postmodernists is: "Why not just confess that your values are as precariously ungrounded as anybody else's? It would hardly leave you vulnerable to attack, since you have just craftily demolished any vantage-point from which any offensive might be launched" (1996 133). Eagleton is exposing both the great limitation and the great power of postmodernist critique: it demolishes all hierarchies of value, but at the price of an undifferentiated relativism – a critical landscape barren of moral and ethical contours. *Star Trek* has no vantage-point from which any offensive against its postmodernist critics might be launched: its humanist values – especially its utopian premise – make it *ipso facto* a loser. But by levelling *all* moral high grounds, postmodernist critique puts itself equally in question – which opens up a liberating possibility. It makes shifting the ground of critique an equally valid option. Therefore, I am making the shift from the familiar modern/postmodern binary to a humanist/transhumanist opposition. This alternative may well be as precarious as an orthodox postmodernist approach, but at least it avoids the foregone conclusions of the latter when applied to a text as frankly humanist as *Star Trek*. Placing *Star Trek*'s humanism in a contest with transhumanism's optimistic take on the techno-future gives it a fighting chance. Or, to put it another way, it clears a space for the kind of resistant readings that postmodernist critics gesture toward but seldom legitimize.

My focus on transhumanism requires some construction of the context within which *Star Trek* returned to television in the 1980s – in this case, the emergence of new technologies, their contribution to the creation of

transhumanist discourse, their influence on science fiction generally, and the rise of the cyborg as icon of the posthuman. These events helped shift the genre of science fiction from the peripheries to the centre of popular entertainment, but they also continue to remind us that humanism – much to the chagrin of those who think they've already interred its mouldering bones – is still very much alive. Cultural critic Neil Badmington sums up the present situation quite succinctly:

> [T]he "post-" of posthumanism does not (and, moreover, cannot) mark or make an absolute break from the legacy of humanism. "Post-"s speak (to) ghosts, and cultural criticism must not forget that it cannot simply forget the past. The writing of the posthumanist condition should not seek to fashion "scriptural tombs" for humanism, but must, rather, take the form of a critical practice that occurs *inside* humanism, consisting not of the wake but the working-through of humanist discourse. Humanism has happened and continues to happen to "us" (it is the very "Thing" that makes "us" "us," in fact), and the experience – however traumatic, however unpleasant – cannot be erased without trace in an instant. The present moment may well be one in which the hegemony and heredity of humanism feel a little less certain, a little less inevitable, but there is, I think, a real sense in which the crisis, as Gramsci once put it, "consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born." (Badmington 21-22)

Since humanism continues to happen to us, maybe we should cut it some slack. "I learned Gene's vision directly from Gene," says Executive Producer Rick Berman: "It wasn't my vision of the future, but it was at the foundation of *Star Trek....* We bend it a little bit, but we try not to break it" (quoted in Poe 3). In my view, this understatement is an invitation to develop better critical tools for apprehending cultural productions that occupy the transitional space between humanism and the posthuman. The need for such tools among both academic and non-academic critics is borne out by the sheer number of movie reviewers, mainstream and marginal, left in the dark by the second and third films of *The Matrix* trilogy. Most could grasp the humanist values of agency and choice as the first film's central theme – indeed, a pair of academic critics even let us know their profound disappointment with this humanist bias (see Bartlett and Byers). But the failure to recognize that agency and choice may always be

what's at stake in the conflicted interface of human and machine – the theme of the second and third films – resulted in a lot of "thumbs down" reviews. Clearly, reviewers had unrealistic expectations for *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*. *Star Trek*'s presentation of this theme may eschew the stylish pomo-spectacle of *The Matrix*, but the theme is no less important for that. Berman and his team preserve the humanist structure of *Star Trek* in deference to Roddenberry's dying wishes, but they also work "*inside* humanism" to explore the problems and possibilities of the posthuman. In other words, *Star Trek* is not merely about Western anxieties concerning "the ethical viability of liberal humanism" (Cranny-Francis 154); like *The Matrix* trilogy, it's also about the challenge of representing "the working-through of humanist discourse." Indeed, by being quite particular about the kind of humanism *Star Trek* endorses, its writers can offer a critique, not only of those aspects of the humanist legacy from which Roddenberry tried to distance his vision, but also of those (post)humanisms they themselves find increasingly problematic.

Extropian Transhumanists

Although transhumanism is a relatively diverse movement, the American Extropian transhumanists are its best-established and most visible constituency. The term "transhumanist" is used to describe the current transitional phase of technological evolution, the end-goal of which is the "posthuman." According to Max More, philosopher and founder of the Extropy Institute in California, Extropians "see humanity as a transitory stage in the evolutionary development of intelligence" and "advocate using science to accelerate our move from human to a transhuman or posthuman condition" (More). The point at which the shift from the transhuman to the posthuman will occur is known as "the Singularity." Like Christian fundamentalists awaiting the "Rapture," these techno-fundamentalists anticipate a coming rupture in social life "comparable to the rise of human life on Earth," as mathematician Verner Vinge describes it (1993). Ray Kurzweil, a prominent researcher in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) and artificial life (A-Life), sees the Singularity as "involv[ing] an accelerating increase in machine intelligence culminating in a sudden shift to super intelligence, either through the awakening of networked intelligence or the development of individual AIs." Kurzweil anticipates a post-biological future: "Biology will become an increasingly vestigial component

of our nature. Biological evolution will become ever more suffused with and replaced by technological evolution, until we pass into the posthuman era" (More and Kurzweil 2002). The Singularity will be the fulfilment of mankind's destiny as "the teleological animal," defined by Greg Burch as "simply nature's own spontaneously generated means of knowing and ordering itself" (Burch 1997).

Extropians tend to be white, well-educated, radical libertarian, anti-environmentalist males who, according to sociologist and bioethicist James Hughes, share the "belief that an anarchistic market creates free and dynamic order, while the state and its life-stealing authoritarianism is entropic." A transhumanist himself, Hughes nevertheless notes that trans-humanism often exhibits an "ideologically narrow, apolitical, sectarian ahistoricality," but also points out that it's largely the anarcho-capitalism of Extropians that distinguishes them from other transhumanists. According to Burch, the movement is often referred to as "the New Enlightenment," not only because it embraces progress, but also because it rejects both the "explicit moral guilt of modern humanistic thinking" (1997) and "the pessimism of the so-called 'post-modernists'" (2000). Indeed, given our postmodern world, which oscillates in manic-depressive fashion within an eternal present, a "future anterior where we feel nostalgia for a time that has not yet arrived and whose realization is structurally impossible" (McLaren), is it any wonder that Extropianism, with its relentlessly optimistic focus on the future, is increasingly popular among techno-savvy young men?

Transhumanism's Critics

In a recent study of what he calls the "Extropian Invasion," cultural critic Eugene Thacker summarizes the Extropians' "growing body of research, both theoretical and practical," and their techno-teleological vision of the future. In addition to Kurzweil, Thacker also names Hans Moravec, Marvin Minsky, and Richard Dawkins as prominent scientist-theorists associated with Extropian thought. Interested in making a distinction between Extropianism and critical posthuman thought, such as that of techno-theorists Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles, Thacker places special emphasis on where Extropianism overlaps with more traditional humanisms:

> … like the types of humanisms associated with the Enlightenment, the humanism of extropianism places at its center certain unique qualities of the human – self-awareness, consciousness and reflection, self-direction and development, the capacity for scientific and technological progress, and the valuation of rational thought….
>
> Like the Enlightenment's view of science and technology, extropians also take technological development as inevitable progress for the human. The technologies of robotics, nanotech, cryonics, and neural nets all offer modes of enhancing, augmenting, and improving the human condition. (74–75)

In keeping with these qualities of traditional humanism, the conception of technology as first and foremost a tool is crucial to the Extropian project: "This technology-as-tool motif … presupposes and requires a boundary management between human and machine, biology and technology, nature and culture. In this way extropianism necessitates an ontological separation between human and machine." In "asymmetrical" relationship, "the human subject is the actor and the technology is the prosthetic that the human subject uses" (Thacker 76–77).

Thacker's article, entitled "Data Made Flesh," is a contribution to a special issue of *Cultural Critique* devoted to posthuman futures. In her Afterword to the issue, Katherine Hayles identifies Thacker's as the most revealing of the contributions because of its "repositioning of biotech in the context of the dichotomy between materiality and information…."

> Thacker, looking at the biological rather than the computer sciences, reconceptualizes how the material/information dichotomy works in the biological sciences. Unlike artificial life, where the materiality of the organism literally translates into information patterns, the biological sciences do not lose sight of the carbon-based materiality in which the information is expressed. Rather, information is seen as the handle through which the materiality of the organism can be manipulated and transformed. "Change the code," Thacker observes, "and you change the body." (Hayles 2003 136)

Whether it's a case of "Data Made Flesh," as in biotechnology, or "flesh made data," as in infotechnology, it's the data that are unproblematically privileged. Where conflicts arise is when transhumanists "must consider

the fate of the human or its history. What often goes unconsidered are the ways in which the human has always been posthuman and the ways in which technology has always operated as a nonhuman actant" (Thacker 76–77).

Star Trek versus Transhumanism

The contrast between *Star Trek*'s humanism and that of Extropian transhumanism provides a framework for recognizing that like most science fiction authors, *Star Trek*'s writers take seriously their role as critics of science and technology. The Extropian "assumption of the neutrality of technology"; its disregard for "the historical, social, and political contingencies that enframe each technological development"; and its assumption that the human user "guarantees the right, beneficial use of otherwise value-neutral technologies" (Thacker 77) are frequent themes in the *Star Trek* narrative. And anyone familiar with the AI theories of Moravec, Kurzweil, and Minsky, and the "memetics" of Dawkins – all of whom have published their thought in books aimed at a general readership – will detect their influence on *Star Trek*. However, the *Star Trek* text needs to be read as only a partial endorsement of their ideas, and often an outright critique of them. But with so many writers contributing to the ongoing development of the *Star Trek* saga, critique is often fraught with contradiction as individual writers take turns at grappling with the ethical, political, and social issues raised by these ideas. But the contradictions mirror those within transhumanist discourse and critical techno-theory themselves.

As long as Roddenberry remained at the helm, *The Next Generation*'s Captain Jean-Luc Picard remained an unambiguous representation of what Hayles describes as "a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice" (1999 286). But with Roddenberry's death in 1992, *Star Trek* philosophy became more complicated. In the most recent film, *Nemesis*, Picard suffers a nasty shock with respect to a central principle of Enlightenment humanism – the human potential for self-improvement. Inspired by the android Data, whose programming, like that of Janeway's holographic Leonardo, exhibits a distinctly humanist bias, Picard attempts to teach this principle to his genetic clone Shinzon. But in true postmodern fashion it's Shinzon who teaches

Picard that self-improvement is radically relative. A product of politically motivated genetic engineering and a brutalizing childhood, Shinzon has ruthlessly risen to power as Praetor of the Romulan Empire, thus demonstrating a vast "improvement" over both genes and culture – not, however, in line with Picard's liberal humanist tastes. Similarly, Janeway's confident assumption that the precise location of the boundary between human and machine is easily distinguished is challenged in her conflicted relationship with Seven of Nine. As a consequence, she ends up being the most fallibly human of all *Star Trek*'s captains – especially in her dealings with the cyborg members of her crew, who gradually teach her that if there is a boundary between human and machine, it's a constantly moving target. The Extropian ideology Thacker describes as an asymmetrical relationship in which the human subject is the actor and the technology merely the prosthetic used by that actor is a conflicted issue for both captains, whose humanism is tested and transformed by it.

The presence of cyborgs and androids, sentient holograms and human clones, makes the *Star Trek* universe a posthuman one. Many of the personal and professional relationships that exist between biological humanoids and synthetic life forms are analogous to the symbiosis between the human and the machine that the critical posthuman position advocates. Others of those relationships are analogous to the asymmetry characteristic of transhumanist ideology. Thus *Star Trek* provides an opportunity to explore some possible answers to a question posed by Hayles. For her, "the question is not whether we will become posthuman, for posthumanity is already here. Rather, the question is what kind of posthumans we will be" (1999 246). Her own exploration of such celebrated works of posthuman imagination as Greg Bear's *Blood Music*, Cole Perriman's *Terminal Games*, Richard Powers' *Galatea 2.2*, and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* yields the same kinds of anxieties I see expressed in the *Star Trek* text:

> Underlying their obsessions is a momentous question: when the human meets the posthuman, will the encounter be for better or for worse? Will the posthuman preserve what we continue to value in the liberal subject, or will the transformation into the posthuman annihilate the subject? Will free will and individual agency still be possible in a posthuman future? Will we be able to recognize ourselves after the change? Will there still be a self to recognize and be recognized? As the texts struggle with these questions, the surprise, if there is one,

is how committed the texts remain to some version of the human subject. (Hayles 1999 281)

With respect to *Star Trek*, it's not so much a question of the survival of the liberal humanist subject but more a question of what the characters who embody that subjectivity learn about it as a consequence of their encounters with the posthuman. As embodiments of the humanist position, Captains Picard and Janeway are at the centre of an apparent contradiction: on the one hand, they struggle to contain the posthuman within the circle of liberal humanist assumptions, sometimes even abusing their authority in the process; on the other, often putting themselves at risk, they actively engage in redefining and expanding the human so that it opens out onto the posthuman. Read in the context of the intersection of infotechnology, nanotechnology, and biotechnology, the character development of both captains can be seen to support Hayles' "insight that posthumanist productions are folded together with humanist assumptions," assumptions which – as Neil Badmington asserts – require a "'working through' … rather than a belief that we can simply leave them behind."