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*Transhumanism: Evolutionary Futurism and the Human  
Technologies of Utopia* by Andrew Pilsch (review)

Matthew Hannah

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proceed by using the same methods or touchstones, and do not end up with the same conclusions or implications. They run mostly parallel to each other with few points of contact or shared context. A handful of the essays draw on prominent interpreters of Wittgenstein; a couple refer briefly to other philosophers including Kant, Hegel, Walter Benjamin, and Rudolf Carnap; and a very few cite literary scholars. There is a lot to be learned from reading these essays, but reading them does not provide a systematic overview of a particular interdisciplinary conversation. That overview is provided, very capably, by LeMahieu and Zumhagen-Yekplé's Introduction, which relates the essays to each other, but in doing so also shows how far-flung they are.

This book is a valuable addition for those of us interested in philosophy and literature as well as modernism more generally, but I'm not sure it will anchor an interdisciplinary conversation, simply because that conversation has already fractured into many. And so *Wittgenstein and Modernism* is prismatic rather than comprehensive. These essays are not introductory; while there are concise summaries of (for example) Wittgenstein's private language argument or Conant and Diamond's resolute reading of the *Tractatus* included here, they serve better as reminders than as primers. Rather, the best of these essays are exemplary: they show how this kind of interdisciplinary work can be done rigorously and also with devotion.

***Transhumanism: Evolutionary Futurism and the Human Technologies of Utopia.* Andrew Pilsch. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. Pp. 1 + 244. \$108.00 (cloth); \$27.00 (paper).**

**Reviewed by Matthew Hannah, University of Iowa**

Philosopher Slavoj Žižek outlines multiple imminent challenges to late capitalism, threats based in what he calls "questions of commons" unresolvable by capitalist market forces.<sup>1</sup> One of these crises of commons, he argues, will occur in the arena of biogenetics, the manipulation of human genetic codes by technology to prolong life and eliminate disease. For Žižek and other cultural critics, claims for a return to authentic Nature, isolated from technological manipulation, are ideology par excellence because it presupposes an "authentic" organic nature to which we can somehow return. Instead, we hurtle toward a world in which the boundaries of human existence confront the increasingly scarce and managed technologies of our commons. Technological intervention has become a reality of life in the West.

Like technology itself, debates about the limits of the human body and the role of technology in improving human life have accelerated exponentially over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Technological supplements to the human experience have become second nature for many of us in ways that the science fiction of yesteryear could only imagine. Concurrently, thinkers have advanced transhumanism, a philosophical, technological, and epistemological transcending of humanity's boundaries. As Oxford University philosopher Nick Bostrom explains: "Transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways."<sup>2</sup> Essential to the transhumanist perspective is that current human existence is not at an "endpoint of evolution"; rather, through a responsible application of technology and science, humans will evolve into "beings with vastly greater capacities than present human beings have," (Bostrom, "Human Genetic Enhancement," 493–506). For transhumanists, technological and scientific innovations will catapult human life into a new existential phase in which disease and death can be regulated or eliminated altogether.

Andrew Pilsch's *Transhumanism* traces the intellectual formation of transhumanist ideas and movements. In this regard, his book is a history of sociocultural phenomena that are still in the

210 process of evolving. But *Transhumanism* is more than just a history; it is also an engagement with the philosophical underpinnings of transhumanist thought. Pilsch examines disparate strands of transhumanist ideology, putting them into dialogue with one another. While transhumanism can be critiqued for not fully thinking through its positions, Pilsch contends, “transhumanism offers a Utopian goal for humanity . . . At some point in the work of negation, we must find a theory of the positive, something to sift out of the ashes of the Enlightenment” (176). In a time of amazing and often terrifying technological changes, the possibility of a utopian future based loosely on transhumanist ideas is intriguing, even as we see the ashes of the Enlightenment project cooling rapidly.

Transhumanism first appears in the early twentieth century as technological developments radically alter human conceptions of the world. Over the course of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, communication, medical, and transportation technologies exploded in complexity and breadth, connecting the globe and expanding conceptions of the human body. As a result of such colossal changes, modernist experimentation flourished as a cultural response. Pilsch locates transhumanism’s genesis in this modernist moment, unearthing traces in the works of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, poet Mina Loy, and esotericist P. D. Ouspensky. Pilsch reads both Loy and Ouspensky as following a Nietzschean philosophy of the *Übermensch*: the notion that humans can and should exceed their spiritual limitations, giving rise to a new permutation of humanity based on internal developments. During the explosion of experimental art, literature, and thought that succeeded Nietzsche, intellectuals engaged with notions of what Pilsch calls “evolutionary futurism,” a belief in the extensibility of the human through an internal spiritual awakening. For Loy, evolutionary futurism resists the technological fetishism of the Italian futurists led by F. T. Marinetti, with whom she affiliated, offering instead a poetics that questions the body’s limitations. Pilsch reads texts such as Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto” within this framework, arguing that “poems about love and about childbirth are what allow her to dissolve her Cartesian subjectivity into a web of intersubjective, transspecies affect that oscillates between the interior experience of pain and the ripples those experiences create through the concentric circles her being inscribes in the cosmos” (51). Moving beyond poetics, Ouspensky “is invested in actualizing this type of cosmic consciousness to effect a general evolutionary conversion into a transhuman being” (52).

Evolutionary futurism as it is born in the literary modernism of the 1910s grows during the 1930s Golden Age of science fiction, which Pilsch argues is a genre for exploring political questions about bioethics, technology, and human progress. If modernist “supermen” were imagined as the product of inner spiritual development, science fiction reconfigured the superman as master of amazing technologies and biogenetic superpowers. Pilsch’s second chapter offers a fascinating look at the context in which American science fiction appeared, focusing on the sociocultural basis for sci-fi productions: the fan communities, internal conflicts among practitioners, and debates about the contemporaneous historical phenomenon of fascism. Pilsch also details the masculinist fantasy element of much early sci-fi, illustrating the ways in which weapons and devices proved especially attractive to American boys. In many ways, transhumanism as it exists today translates the fantasy elements of early sci-fi into real-world possibilities predicated on technological advances. “Contemporary transhumanism is itself a kind of science-fictional realism,” Pilsch contends, “a combination of philosophy and fantasy in an emerging discourse of a new humanity” (101).

Whereas Pilsch’s first two chapters focus on historical precedents, his third chapter turns to contemporary transhumanist discourses, parsing two models for conceptualizing the human/technology nexus in a departure from the literary and sociocultural readings of the first two chapters. In chapter three, Pilsch turns to philosophical debates within transhumanism, claiming there are two principal ways to imagine the body in contemporary transhumanism: abolitionism (the elimination of disease and pain) and suffering (the transcendence of pain by

passing through it). Abolitionists seek ways to enhance physical pleasure and reduce physical pain, positing hedonism as the apotheosis of an ideal human life. Pilsch opposes this hedonism model, promulgated by philosopher David Pearce, to the mystical philosophy of French Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who seeks a path to humanism through suffering. Despite the dismissal of his ideas by contemporary transhumanists due to his religious mysticism, Pilsch argues that Teilhard's "science of the spirit" offers an important experimental element to the field. By combining scientific and metaphysical accounts of evolution, Teilhard "coalesces a number of precursor elements into a recognizable transhumanism" (136). Pilsch draws on Teilhard in order to insert a Cartesian duality back into transhumanism, one in which the spirit remains part of the evolutionary process. Unlike the ascendant abolitionist trend, in which the body is the locus for pain to be transcended through technological evolution, Teilhard remains committed to the kind of "spiritual evolution" explored by the modernists.

If the first two chapters are most interesting to modernist scholars, the fourth chapter and conclusion offer original analyses of the aesthetic movements and manifestos of contemporary transhumanism, which may be of interest to scholars of New Media and the avant-garde. Pilsch argues that Internet culture represents a sophisticated negotiation of anxieties in postmodernity, representing a New Aesthetic in which web content such as Google maps and viral memes "capture an increasingly global, emergent linguistic phenomenon in which we articulate our own relationship to this newly networked world that always seems to just exceed our understanding" (165). Viral memes activate a "global brain" based on the creation and exchange of macro images. "Exchanging images of talking cats," Pilsch concludes, "we are exchanging images of ourselves" (173). Memes allow us to negotiate anxieties about navigating a globally networked world by reproducing simple image texts that mimic our natal understanding of the posthuman world. Aesthetic responses in the Web 2.0 era respond to the networked global creation, curation, and transmission of images, reconceptualizing human experience from the point of view of satellites and drones. If these images represent the early development of a Human 2.0 "global brain," one wonders what the weaponization of memes in the post-Trump political climate represents: the pain of adolescence or regression to an earlier state of being?

"In an age dominated by themes that hinge on the failure of the welfare state as a utopian experiment," Pilsch claims in his Introduction, "this rhetorical shift (from the state to the body) offers a potential means to reanimate speculation about spaces beyond the current configuration of power" (13). Such a rhetorical shift raises new possibilities and new challenges about the contested locus of the human body. In reading this book, I found myself wondering which bodies would become sites for new configurations of power in transhumanism. As recent controversies starkly demonstrate, cultural productions touting transhumanist concepts can erase racial diversity in imagining universal artificial bodies, such as occurred with the casting choice for 2017's remake of *Ghost in the Shell*, which imagines Scarlett Johansson as the epitome of an idealized artificial (white) body.<sup>3</sup> I also found myself wondering about the neocolonial implications of technocentric solutions to human limitations: who makes the devices that supplement the quest for human evolution? Technological advances that populate the transhuman imaginary are products of Western capitalist economic infrastructures often outsourced to neocolonized nations in which scarcity creates unethical exploitation by tech companies. Shifting the rhetoric to the body also complicates Marxist visions of a society without social inequalities by focusing on individual bodies rather than on material economic structures. Questions such as these are crucial as we consider transhumanism, and Pilsch's conclusion addresses some of these questions, offering an adroit analysis of Xenofeminism as one among a group of contemporary transhumanisms resisting white male technoscience in late capitalism. Unlike other visions of a posthuman future, Xenofeminism posits increased alienation from our bodies as a way to achieve an "oppositional politics of the present" based in intersectionality and gender evolution (198). Such movements offer radically emancipatory permutations to the rhetoric of transhumanism.

212 *Transhumanism* offers an indispensable intellectual history of a movement still in the process of becoming. Former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, a stringent critic of late capitalism, articulates two possible futures for a technocentric society: either we will be consigned to human waste in a technocratic dystopia or we will enter a new utopian phase of human existence in which technological developments have eliminated disease, hunger, and capitalism.<sup>4</sup> This opposition raises questions about what we value as a globalizing society. While many films and books in recent years have imagined dystopian futures arising out of such technological interventions in the human body—*Blade Runner 2049* being the most recent—Pilsch's book offers a positive outlook of the posthumanist ethos and a nuanced consideration of transhumanism, contributing an important and lucid analysis of the movement's evolution and a theoretical engagement with transhumanism's rhetoric that will prove fascinating to anyone thinking about technology and the human limit.

### Notes

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1. For a recent version of his argument about commons, see Slavoj Žižek, "Democracy and Capitalism are Destined to Split Up," YouTube video, 17:19, posted by "Big Think," January 7, 2015, [youtube.com/watch?v=AXVExtZe\\_w/](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXVExtZe_w/).

2. Nick Bostrom, "Human Genetic Enhancement: A Transhumanist Perspective," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 37, no. 4, (2003): 493–506; Retrieved from [nickbostrom.com/ethics/genetic.html/](http://nickbostrom.com/ethics/genetic.html/).

3. Mamoru Oshii, director of *Ghost in the Shell*, defended his casting of Johansson by arguing that the character is a cyborg with no defined race or gender. Thus, the body inhabited by a Japanese girl is imagined to represent a universal body, but the racial implications of such a representation are enhanced by the pure whiteness of the artificial body. See Hunter Harris, "Ghost in the Shell's Original Director Mamoru Oshii Doesn't See Scarlett Johansson's Casting As Whitewashing," *Vulture*, March 27, 2017, [sbs.com.au/movies/article/2017/03/27/ghost-shells-original-director-mamoru-oshii-doesnt-see-scarlett-johanssons/](https://www.sbs.com.au/movies/article/2017/03/27/ghost-shells-original-director-mamoru-oshii-doesnt-see-scarlett-johanssons/).

4. Varoufakis discusses the relationship between labor and technology in *The Global Minotaur* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 50–2. He also described this dynamic in a TED talk entitled "Capitalism will Eat Democracy—Unless We Speak Up," TED video, December 2015, [ted.com/talks/yanis\\_varoufakis\\_capitalism\\_will\\_eat\\_democracy\\_unless\\_we\\_speak\\_up/](https://www.ted.com/talks/yanis_varoufakis_capitalism_will_eat_democracy_unless_we_speak_up/).

***Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature.* Maren Tova Linett. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017. Pp. 257. \$34.95 (paper); \$34.95 (eBook).**

**Reviewed by Tammy Berberi, University of Minnesota, Morris**

What are the stakes of literary encounters with physical difference? Michael Davidson notes that "[A] poetics—as much as a politics—of disability is important: because it theorizes the ways that poetry defamiliarizes not only language but the body normalized *within* language."<sup>1</sup>

Literary disability studies discovers meanings that accrue to disabled bodies and how these meanings inflect the trajectory of a narrative and catalyze artistic praxis, foregrounding discursive norms of embodiment as well as departures from them. Disability studies pairs particularly well