Biopunk Dystopias

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Utopias share with the totality of culture the quality [...] of a knife with the edge pressed against the future (Bauman, *Socialism* 12)

2.1 Science Fiction

The world has become *science-fictional*, to borrow a term from Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. (*Seven Beauties* 1). We\(^1\) are now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, living in a world that is harder and harder to grasp, that moves ever faster, transforms radically on a daily basis, and confronts us with situations that seem outrageously beyond the scope of our understanding. It is in this world, we feel, that sf has become not

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\(^1\) In a book dealing with posthumanism, a few words on the use of the word ‘we’ are in order. As Bill Readings has rightfully pointed out (with reference to Lyotard’s *The Differend*), the use of ‘we’ in critical writing is deeply entrenched in conceptions of humanism and universalism, which need to be acknowledged because ‘the homogeneous “we” is not innocent, [...] its union of the “I” and the “you” is the domination of the sender or speaker and the suppression of the receiver or hearer’ (118). Consequently, in a book promoting the idea of a posthuman, hybrid, multiple, and protean subjectivity beyond the values and mores of humanism, the use of a naturalized, universal ‘we’ obviously proves problematic. Neil Badmington suggests the use of quotation marks to signal such a problematic position (*Posthumanism* 1, note 3). Other writers of posthumanism (Wolfe, Braidotti) seem to have no such qualms, using the term without a mention of its humanist origin. I would like to use the middle position and proclaim that when using the ‘we’ (which I will do in the following without quotation marks) I am aware of its genealogy but reject any notions of universalism and/or discourses of domination that are implied in it.
just a literary genre but a mode of response, almost an epistemological category:²

As the world undergoes daily transformations via the development of technoscience in every imaginable aspect of life, (and, more important, as people become aware of these transformations) sf has come to be seen as an essential mode of imagining the horizons of possibility. However much sf texts vary in artistic quality, intellectual sophistication, and their capacity to give pleasure, they share a mass social energy, a desire to imagine a collective future for the human species and the world. (Csicsery-Ronay, Seven Beauties 1)

Consequently, the science-fictional has become ubiquitous in much of our everyday culture, from newspapers and political discourse (see Barr) to the use of sf elements in global media ‘outside of traditional venues’ (Bould and Vint 202), and its proliferation in circles of high culture (formerly strongly opposed to ‘genre fiction’; see Rieder), as witnessed by science-fictional forays of novelists such as Philip Roth (The Plot Against America, 2004), Richard Powers (Galatea 2.2, 1995), or many of the authors Bruce Sterling grouped together in his coinage of the ‘slipstream’ subgenre (‘Slipstream’).

In an attempt to define what he means by science-fictionality, Csicsery-Ronay argues that it is linked to two ‘forms of hesitation, a pair of gaps’ (Seven Beauties 3): Firstly, the historical dimension of possibility – are we at this point in our technoscientific progress able to actually do this? Is this possible? And secondly, the ethical dimension of consequence – if we do this, what would the repercussions be and how would things change in accordance? Would it be good or bad to do this? Both dimensions are part of science-fictionality and determine the extent to which we think about the future as historical process. As Csicsery-Ronay points out: sf ‘is not a genre of aesthetic entertainment only, but a complex hesitation about the relationship between imaginary conceptions and historical reality unfolding into the future’ (Seven Beauties 4). As such, sf is a direct interaction with contemporary culture that lies at the nexus of technological, scientific, critical, and social thought in that it determines what we conceive of as possible in and

² As a literary genre, science fiction has a rich and varied history, which it would be impossible to do justice to in the context of this book – readers are instead referred to Science Fiction by Roger Luckhurst or The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction by Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint for two excellent accounts of the genre’s historical perspectives.
for our future. Analyzing the collective desires and fears that determine such conceptions grounds us in the present and the social realities from which the science-fictional imagination starts.

In the case of biological sf, I have explained in the last chapter that developments in technoscientific progress have engendered different and changed perspectives of fictional explorations of the genetic since the end of the nineteenth century. Determined by evolutionary and hereditary approaches, much early biological sf necessarily took a long-term and large-scale approach to human development that today we might consider to be part of the space opera subgenre, which is ‘set in the relatively distant future and in space or on other worlds’ (Hartwell and Cramer 17). As David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer explain in their introduction to *The Space Opera Renaissance*, the term ‘space opera’ has shifted in meaning from Bob Tucker’s original pejorative dismissal of it as ‘hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn space-ship yarn’ (cited in Hartwell and Cramer 10) to become a nostalgic and even praiseworthy term that today usually refers to ambitious sf speculations. I do not wish to engage in a discussion on the quality of sf, but here refer only to the scope of much biological sf with a hereditary/evolutionary background as being akin to the space opera tradition (Parker, chapter 3; Herbe 56).

In addition, the general ignorance of biological processes, especially in terms of genetics, and the contradictory theories still in circulation (such as the existence of “vitalistic” or “emergent” principles distinct from physical or chemical laws”) until the 1970s, kept much biological sf ‘somewhat vague as to mechanisms’ (Slonczewski and Levy 175). By the end of the 1970s, though, biology had moved beyond the hereditary model as a basis for genetics and had embraced resequencing through rDNA as the most promising technological development. From this point on, discourse on biology took a science-fictional turn in that the radical alteration of the human genetic structure came into scientific reach. In regard to the sf dimension of possibility, genetic engineering had by 1980 become realizable and thus an object of near-future extrapolation rather than intergalactic speculation.

Parallel to the biological research that started with Watson and Crick in 1953, another scientific development had come to full fruition by the 1980s, one that would overshadow genetic engineering at least for a while: information and communication technology. The invention of the computer, claimed by Dyson in 1994 as Haldane’s biggest oversight and ‘the most potent agent of social change during the last fifty years’ (58), began roughly around the same time as genetics did in the late 1940s with ‘John von Neumann, the mathematician who consciously pushed mankind into the era of computers,’ dreaming of artificial intelligences
and self-reproducing automata (Dyson 59). By 1982 the computer had even become *Time* magazine’s ‘Man of the Year’ (see the issue of January 3, 1983). Robotics and computer science had progressed immensely and the cyborg became the central metaphor to understand social and cultural reality as a construction of multiple identities, a metaphor truly made for the late twentieth-century imagination: ‘a hybrid of machine and organism’ (Haraway, ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ 149).

During the 1980s biology remained in the background – noticeable but not dominant – mostly upstaged by information technological progress and the establishing of network society, and surfacing in the cultural imagination only sporadically. In terms of science fiction, cyberpunk claimed to be the literary incarnation of the new technoscientific developments, both informational and biological, as Bruce Sterling points out in his now infamous preface to the *Mirrorshades* anthology:

> For the cyberpunks, by stark contrast, technology is visceral. Certain central themes spring up repeatedly in cyberpunk. The theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry-techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self. (xiii)

Cyberpunk thus inserts itself into posthuman discourse by providing a science-fictional imaginary for both cyborg-enhanced and genetically engineered humanity and the social implications both technologies bring with them. The exact demarcation of who or what is or is not cyberpunk is contested among critics, but the general agreement on the historical ‘movement’ is to limit it to a specific set of writers from the 1980s (Murphy and Vint xi; Butler 9). In terms of my argument, a wider understanding of the term is needed though, as in the 1990s cyberpunk underwent a ‘sea change into a more generalized cultural formation’ (Foster xiv) and began to proliferate into what Andrew Butler calls ‘Post-Cyberpunk and Cyberpunk-Flavoured’ (15) fiction. I agree with Graham Murphy and Sherryl Vint that cyberpunk offers diversity and relevance especially through ‘its transformations into a more generalized set of practices’ (xiii), proving its persistence in ‘our cultural imaginary’ (xvii). For me then, at the heart of cyberpunk fiction is the radical breaking up of dichotomies and the destabilizing of boundaries: machine/human, nature/culture, male/female, high culture/low culture, body/mind. Because of this, cyberpunk is believed by many critics to embody the postmodern, post-industrial, globalized,
and late-capitalist world at the end of the twentieth century (Luckhurst 196ff.; McHale 225ff.). Fredric Jameson sees in cyberpunk ‘the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself’ (Postmodernism 419), whereas Csicsery-Ronay argues that by 1990 sf and its topoi need to be understood not just as a ‘major symptom of the postmodern condition, but as a body of privileged allegories, the dream book of the age’ (‘Postmodernism’ 305).

As such, cyberpunk sf is deeply ingrained in the ‘ideologically riven’ (Luckhurst 202) historical moment of the 1980s. Cyberpunk’s societies are fraught with inequality, exploitation, and insecurity. Its worlds are unstable and fragmented, its representation stressing the fluidity of its ontological aspects (McHale 247). Cyberpunk emphasizes the construction of a globalized society into class or caste systems, showing off the mobility of characters from the elite class and the rigidity of the lower classes.

In addition, cyberpunk strikes a revolutionary, anti-establishment, anti-capitalist pose similar to its nominal relation ‘punk.’ To facilitate this critique, cyberpunk essentially orchestrates the evanescence of the human body initiated by ‘multinational capitalism’s desire for something better than the fallible human being’ (Csicsery-Ronay, ‘Cyberpunk’ 191). This casting of multinational corporations as villains and the ensuing portrayal of a cold, inhuman, consumerist, and capitalist society as well as the genre’s ‘cheerfully nihilistic denial of middle-class American values’ (Kessel 116) has informed the understanding of cyberpunk as a political movement. The punk reference in its name determines a political stance that can be understood as an anti-authoritarian ‘urban political disaffection’ forming ‘a stylization of revolt’ (Bould, ‘Cyberpunk’ 218) that in the cyberpunk context comes to represent the equivalent of ‘young, streetwise, aggressive, alienated and offensive to the Establishment’ (Nicholls 288). Cyberpunk picks up on the aggressive rejection of authority, as reflected in its outcast heroes, the lowlifes, drifters, drug users, and petty criminals that populate the stories, as well as on the disillusionment with the established order of late capitalism. For Sterling, all this represents a ‘subversive potential’ to reassess and reinvent power structures from ‘a wide-ranging, global point of view’ (‘Preface’ xiv), but this political claim does not register with many of cyberpunk’s critics. They point out that the technologically saturated, urbanized worlds of cyberpunk are at best indifferent towards their depiction of multinational corporate rule, late-capitalist consumerism, and mass mediatization (Nixon 230; Frelík).

Darko Suvin, for example, states that Gibson has a strong distaste for the dark world he describes and the status quo in his novels, but on the
other hand, Gibson ‘accepts the status quo a bit too readily as inevitable and unchangeable’ (45). The fact that cyberpunk protagonists easily navigate the multinational capitalist world and find their own way of survival rather than trying to incite social changes has been a major concern for critics trying to identify the utopian–dystopian impulse in cyberpunk. The genre reflects a fast-paced world, where ‘the speed of thrill substitutes for affection, reflection, and care’ and all critical stance is passed by, a lack which has prompted Csicsery-Ronay to call cyberpunk writing ‘the apotheosis of bad faith,’ which isn’t concerned with the implications of its technologies (‘Cyberpunk’ 193). A similar skepticism about cyberpunk’s revolutionary stance prompts Nicola Nixon to argue:

In Gibson’s fiction there is therefore absolutely no critique of corporate power, no possibility that it will be shaken or assaulted by heroes who are entirely part of the system and who profit by their mastery within it, regardless of their ostensible marginalization and their posturings about constituting some form of counterculture. (230)

Rob Latham argues that it is especially cyberpunk’s ‘ambivalent posthumanism’ of transgressing known human boundaries ‘that tended to view these processes as ethically neutral if not politically neutralizing’ (39–40). Because of this neutrality, in both cyberpunk’s descriptions of the late-capitalist society and its ideological posturing in regard to the posthuman, the same novel could be characterized – depending on the perspective taken – as displaying either the ‘confident technological utopianism sometimes associated with cyberpunk’ (Luckhurst 212) or ‘a shabby dystopia of ubiquitous information and communications technologies and biotechnological body modifications’ (Bould and Vint 154).

Cyberpunk therefore does not position itself easily within the utopian–dystopian dimension, and it certainly does not lend itself to a clear-cut ideological message in regard to (post)modernity and late-capitalist society, but it seems that critics at least agree on the strong interconnection of cyberpunk and posthumanism (Luckhurst 208; Butler 15). Thomas Foster goes so far as to argue that cyberpunk’s discussion of posthumanism is ‘an intervention in and inflection of a preexisting discourse, which […] [it] significantly transformed and broadened, providing a new basis for the acceptance of posthuman ideas in contemporary American popular culture’ (xiii).

In Constructing Postmodernism, McHale identifies three motif complexes of cyberpunk poetics that seem central to the literary movement: ‘worldness,’
‘the centrifugal self,’ and ‘death, both individual and collective’ (246–47). Posthumanism features in all three, but it is especially cyberpunk’s tendency to deal with the ‘dispersion and decentering’ (255) of the centrifugal self that allows McHale to address the split in technological development that I mentioned at the outset of this chapter. Both technoscientific moments – the biological and the informational – find their way into cyberpunk’s intervention in the posthuman discourse. McHale, in arguing for a connection between the two and a different outlook in how to appropriate the posthuman, refers to Sterling’s ‘Schismatrix’ story cycle for terminological clarity: In the stories two posthuman factions vie for power, the Shapers and the Mechanists. The Mechanists ‘use electronic and biomechanical means to augment themselves,’ while the Shapers ‘use bio-engineering techniques – cloning, genetic engineering – to achieve the same ends’ (ibid.). This opposition of mechanical versus biological augmentation then prompts McHale to conclude in regard to his cyberpunk poetics that there are two sets of posthuman conceits employed by the authors: ‘We might call the first set, corresponding to the Mech option, cyberpunk proper, and the second set, corresponding to the Shaper option, “bio-punk”’ (ibid.). McHale’s use implies that biopunk should therefore adhere to the general definitions given for cyberpunk fiction, differing only slightly by use of the biological body enhancement conceit instead of a cybernetic or mechanical one. In most cyberpunk novels, elements of biopunk exist, but only a few examples of the 1980s exhibit a dominant biological posthuman motif: best known are Sterling’s Schismatrix (1985) and Greg Bear’s Blood Music (1985).

The biopunk subgenre thus developed from progress in genetic research, posthuman discourse, postmodern late-capitalist society, and the intervention of cyberpunk literature to culturally capture such a historical moment. In my opinion, the term ‘biopunk’ suggests a strong derivation from cyberpunk and its aesthetics and poetics that seems to exclude many examples of biogenetic posthuman science fiction. The name is derivative and suggests a connection made by clever authors and publishers in order to market yet another subgenre (e.g. steampunk, splatterpunk, biopunk, elfpunk) by association with the success of cyberpunk, but the cultural artifacts generally grouped with it are not as closely related as the denomination suggests. On the grounds of varying subject matter and the general aesthetics of setting and characters, but

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also because of diverging socio-political aims, I would claim that even
the above-stated ‘original’ examples of 1980s biopunk, Sterling and Bear,
do not fit the bill fully. Yes, the ‘bio’ in biopunk is obviously determined
by the shifting source material for the technological novum – biology
instead of physics – but the problematic lies in the ‘punk’ syllable of the
term. Cyberpunk finds connections with punk – music and drug culture,
anarchy as valued political form, streetwise characters, criminal heroes,
and rebellious devil-may-care attitudes – but biopunk does not really
reflect this. The punk connotation here seems construed and reflects
less in the cultural artifacts associated with biopunk than in the newly
formed social and political movements, for example DIY biology and
biohacking, that occupy anti-government and anti-corporate positions
more sympathetic to ‘punk’ as a marker of their subversive viewpoints.
The association is one that lends the scientific branch of the movement
an air of subcultural deviancy and provocation – especially its connection
to hacker culture, the figure of the ‘outlaw,’ and punk channels public
perception and provides ‘outsider status’: ‘defiance of accepted norms
was the essence of the biohacking ethic’ (Wohlsen 179).

In terms of literature, this deviation from bio/cyberpunk poetics can
perhaps best be exemplified in Octavia Butler’s ‘Xenogenesis’ trilogy
(Dawn [1987], Adulthood Rites [1988], and Imago [1989]) or Nancy Kress’s
‘Sleepless’ series (starting with Beggars in Spain [1993]). In both cases,
music, hacker culture, and street culture are not part of the setting, and
the political statement of the novels is not anti-corporate or anti-govern-
mental, instead focusing on issues of race, gender, and posthumanity.
Aesthetically as well as politically these novels are thus clearly not punk
and grouping them under the heading of ‘biopunk’ (which for example
Wikipedia and other internet platforms discussing the topic still do)
does them an injustice. Unfortunately and despite efforts to establish
other terms,4 ‘biopunk’ has become the cultural formation’s misnomer

4 Most famously, in 1996 writer Paul Di Filippo proposed the term ‘ribofunk’
and defined it as: ‘speculative fiction which acknowledges, is informed
by and illustrates the tenet that the next revolution – the only one that
really matters – will be in the field of biology.’ Unlike ‘biopunk,’ the term
‘ribofunk’ expressly takes its leave from its cyberpunk roots, as Filippo
emphasizes, calling cybernetics ‘dead science’ and punk ‘dead music when
cyberpunk was born.’ But as Filippo later admits in an interview, he himself
only used the term ‘half-jokingly’ and the ‘alleged genre […] never really
materialized’ (Payne). Other examples include ‘Agripunk’ and ‘Greenpunk,’
but these terms similarly never made it into widespread usage in science
fiction communities and would still use ‘punk’ as a reference (Hageman
301, note 4).
headline, as the literary discourse on genetic engineering was picked up and successfully appropriated by pop culture as well as mainstream news media.

That ‘biopunk’ was a term that was here to stay and to be associated with a cultural formation encompassing not only literature, but also films, TV series, video games, and artworks, as well as cultural practices and socio-political beliefs, became clear in April 2002. When Rolling Stone magazine announced the newest trends of fashion, music, and cultural attitudes in ‘The Cool Issue’ (number 893), one of them was a concept promising the 2000s the ‘trendiness of cyberpunk’ (‘The Gene-Hack Men’ 80) not just in terms of sf writing but also in terms of its overlap into other aspects of culture: ‘biopunk.’ The article claims that biopunk is cyberpunk’s ‘successor,’ dealing with ‘biotechnology and hacking the gene pool,’ once more drawing the connection to cybertechnology and hacker subculture. It names several sf writers (Jeff Noon, Paul Di Filippo, Octavia E. Butler and Michael Marshall Smith’), the TV show Dark Angel (created by James Cameron, 2000–02), bio-artist Eduardo Kac, and a website for buying biotechnology equipment, in order to show the diversity of sources contributing to the biopunk formation. The shortness and scope of this piece as well as the overall sentiment of a looming threat of bioterrorism (‘Hey, nobody ever said that punk was nice’) do not really qualify this article as a deep academic insight, but what is noteworthy and interesting about it is that the self-proclaimed zeitgeist icons of a popular music magazine such as Rolling Stone, by 2002, had noticed this cultural formation, as well as the science fiction terminology from which it originated.

In this sense, ‘Biopunk’ referred to the aforementioned variety of cultural practices and socio-political beliefs which centered around an anti-corporate, anti-governmental approach similar to cyber hacking, only this time with reference to genetics. And the term, with connection to do-it-yourself (DIY) biology and an open-source research in the life sciences, had already been introduced into general discourse in the form of journalism dealing with technoscientific progress, such as in the blogs and columns of Annalee Newitz. In one column in the San Francisco Bay Guardian she reminds her readers that ‘Cyberpunk is passé,’ then explains that the new trendy inspiration for the 2000s will be ‘the biopunk revolution’:

Biopunks are the visionaries whose imaginations were set on fire by the knowledge that we had finally sequenced the human genome last year. Biopunks get off on creative genetic engineering, RNA research, cloning and protein synthesis. Biopunks hack genomic
data, lining up human genomes next to mouse genomes to find out what the two species have in common and what they don’t. (‘Biopunk’) Newitz, who identifies several cultural aspects of the ‘movement in the making’ in addition to the scientific ones, remarks that one of its strengths is that ‘the biopunk revolution has yet to be codified or legitimized’ and that ‘it’s as ill-defined as the genome itself’ (‘Genome Liberation’; see also ‘Biopunk’). Bloggers and self-declared biopunks of the movement have since indulged in squabbles over which cultural objects to embrace under the heading (if any), and understand cultural production only as one aspect of a possible definition. The constant revisions of the Wikipedia entry for the term indicate the conflict over the cultural terrain. Whereas the entry originated in the science fiction subgenre, it was later expanded to encompass the socio-political movement before being reduced to its current state, which strongly emphasizes sociology, not literary studies: ‘a technoprogressive movement advocating open access to genetic information,’ with only a subsection dealing with biopunk sf as being ‘related.’

Biopunk thus connects to the emergence of ‘amateur genetic engineers,’ which Sylvan Katz foresaw in 1990, when he warned ‘that biohackers probably will emerge in the coming decade’ and that they will ‘pose a serious regulatory challenge’ (66) to authorities. Biohackers use public domain information about genetics in order to work on DIY biology in their home-basement laboratories – people such as Meredith Patterson, whom Marcus Wohlsen in his journalistic study of entrepreneurs and figureheads of the movement calls a ‘self-taught bioengineer […] [who] spliced genes at her dining room table’ (37). Patterson epitomizes the

5 Retrieved on October 10, 2013. The original entry from Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biopunk) dates to September 2004 and merely defines ‘biopunk’ as a subgenre of sf. In October 2005 a section on a ‘Movement’ was added and expanded in May 2006. By January 2007 the focus had shifted and the socio-political meaning of the term had been moved to the foreground; science fiction featured as the ‘historical’ meaning. One year later, January 2008, the order had been rearranged again, eliminating the past-tense formulation and by the end of February 2008 providing a tri-part definition (the hacker as person, the movement, and the sf genre). A discussion on which cultural products to include in the entry ensued, which was cut short in January 2012, when the tripartite definition was removed and the abovementioned summary was provided. The cultural in- or exclusion debate continues on Wikipedia as well as on other forums and internet platforms, such as www.biopunk.org.
biohacker because of her ‘primal urge to tinker’ (Wohlsen 40) and because she has written the movement’s first unofficial statement of intent: Her ‘Biopunk Manifesto’ is a form a self-proclamation and call to join ranks (‘Come, let us research together’). Both Newitz and Wohlsen further argue that these individual DIY scientists form a loose network with lawyers, social and political activists, writers, and artists, who fight for public domain access of genomic data. The movement is decidedly anti-corporate and empowered by the “information-wants-to-be-free” hacker ethos’ (Newitz, ‘Genome Liberation’; see Wohlsen 5) that originated in the computer hacker scene of the 1980s, which is also where Katz took inspiration from when coining the term ‘biohacker’ (Katz, personal communication, October 14, 2013).

Returning to my original premise, I believe that the rise of biology as one of the driving forces of scientific progress since the late 1970s, the mainstream attention given to genetic engineering in the wake of the Human Genome Project (1989–2003), the changing sociological view of a liquid modernity, and the shifting discourses on the posthuman form a historical nexus that produces the cultural formation of biopunk – in terms of both a socio-political and scientific DIY biology movement and its artistic negotiation in the popular culture imagination. How such an artistic expression of biopunk navigates the two dimensions claimed by Csicsery-Ronay, the historical dimension of possibility and the ethical dimension of consequence, remains to be seen. It is from within the genre tradition of science fiction and especially cyberpunk that biopunk was born into a world that has become science-fictional itself. At the heart of this development lies the realization that we are now not ‘considered fully human’ and that ‘after the postmodern, the post-colonial, the post-industrial, the post-communist and even the much contested post-feminist conditions, we seem to have entered the post-human predicament’ (Braidotti 1), one clear indication of which seems to be that ‘contemporary science and biotechnologies affect the very fibre and structure of the living and have altered dramatically our understanding of what counts as the basic frame of reference for the human today’ (Braidotti 40).
2.2 Posthumanism

2.2.1 Origins in Humanism/Anti-Humanism

But what is the supposed existing frame of reference for the human that is being altered so radically that it commands a new terminology, as well as a new politics? What is ‘the human’? For more than 200 years of Western thought, the human as a category has been determined by Enlightenment philosophy and its legacy of humanism. The human as category is a fleeting and historically specific concept, as Foucault famously argues at the end of his book *The Order of Things*, that could just as easily disappear, should the ‘fundamental arrangements of knowledge’ (387) shift once more as they did at the end of the eighteenth century, when the era of humanism as we understand it began. With the emergence of this posthuman condition, the human as a category – to quote Foucault’s famous line – ‘would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea’ (387). Before moving beyond the category, before the wave of posthuman change erases the image, it seems appropriate to shortly capture the humanist outline drawn in the sand that gave shape to the concept in the first place.

As Richard Norman points out in his book *On Humanism*, the term itself is hard to define, as there is no ‘definitive set of beliefs called “humanism”’. There are many humanisms’ (8). The concept refers back to Italian Renaissance scholars employing studies in the ‘disciplines of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy’ (Norman 8) but has since been applied by many to a philosophical school of thought reaching back to Enlightenment concepts of human nature. Today humanism is commonly viewed as simply referring to practical atheism, or an alternative to religious worldviews. Ignoring the many different historical facets of the debate, as well as deviations in the philosophical assessment of the term, I would agree with Kate Soper in defining the central aspects of humanist thinking as follows:

*Humanism*: appeals (positively) to the notion of a core humanity or common essential features in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood, thus (negatively) to concepts (‘alienation’, ‘inauthenticity’, ‘reification’, etc.) designating, and intended to explain, the perversion or ‘loss’ of this common being. Humanism takes history to be a product of human thought and action, and thus claims that the categories of ‘consciousness’, ‘agency’, ‘choice’, ‘responsibility’, ‘moral value’, etc. are indispensable to its understanding. (11–12)
Humanism claims that there is a unique and absolute difference that sets humans apart from the rest of creation: the difference of Cartesian reason. Neil Badmington explains Descartes’s humanist philosophy quite ingeniously and defines the key argument: ‘Reason belongs solely to the human and, as such, serves to unite the human race. “We” may have different types of bodies, but because reason is a property of the mind, deep down “we” are all the same’ (Posthumanism 4). But even though the main concepts may have been taken from the Renaissance or Enlightenment, as Tony Davies points out, humanism ‘is the myth of the modern’ (22), ‘shaped by and inseparable from nineteenth-century conditions and concerns’ (18) such as changes due to the preceding political revolutions as well as those brought about by industrialization and imperialism. Humanist thinking thus needed to justify this radical change to modernity as an achievement of human progress while at the same time atoning for its by-product of inequalities. As a result, nineteenth-century discourse idealized the figure of the human by creating ‘the myth of essential and universal Man: essential, because humanity – human-ness – is the inseparable and central essence, the defining quality, of human beings; universal, because that essential humanity is shared by all human beings, of whatever time or place’ (Davies 24). But this concept of ‘Man,’ so pervasive in common discourse even today, when political rhetoric appeals to ‘human nature’ or the ‘human condition,’ has in the last century come under attack by anti-humanists such as Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault.

Similar to humanism, there is also more than one single concept or aspect to anti-humanism, but as Soper argues, anti-humanism can best be summarized as follows:

*Anti-humanism:* claims that humanism as outlined above is pre-scientific ‘philosophical anthropology’. All humanism is ‘ideological’; the ideological status of humanism is to be explained in terms of the systems of thought or ‘consciousness’ produced in response to particular historical periods. Anthropology, if it is possible at all, is possible only on condition that it rejects the concept of the human subject; ‘men’ do not make history, nor find their ‘truth’ or ‘purpose’ in it; history is a process without a subject. (12)

This argument is exemplified in Roland Barthes’s critique of the ‘facts of nature, the universal facts’ of birth and death that are supposedly displayed in the photographic exhibition ‘The Great Family of Man’ as signs of a universal human essence. Barthes argues in his essay of the same name that
if one removes History from them, there is nothing more to be said about them; For these natural facts to gain access to a true language, they must be inserted into a category of knowledge which means postulating that one can transform them, and precisely subject their naturalness to our human criticism. For however universal, they are the signs of an historical writing. (12)

Even though Barthes's criticism represents only a first step towards anti-humanism, his ‘progressive humanism’ (12) calls for exactly the kind of awareness of the difference in circumstances that is harshly aware of the limitations of the universal humanist subject and that is key to anti-humanist thinking. As Michèle Barrett puts it, this subject is ‘made in the image of his inventor’: a white, rich, male, healthy subject at the center of power, and it should be ‘entirely clear to us that this model of the subject is centred, and unified, around a nexus of social and biographical characteristics that represent power’ (cited in Davies 59).

The full-fledged anti-humanist argument against this subject probably begins with Louis Althusser and his critical re-reading of Marx. Althusser claims that in 1845 ‘Marx broke radically with every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man’ (30) and goes on to declare Marx’s writing to be promoting a ‘theoretical anti-humanism’ that is ‘the absolute (negative) precondition of the (positive) knowledge of the human world itself, and of its practical transformation. It is impossible to know anything about men except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes’ (32). The ultimate argument for this disappearance, though, belongs to Michel Foucault and his claim that ‘man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end’ (The Order of Things 387).

In her excellent study The Posthuman, Rosi Braidotti argues that the humanist subject – in its privileged and limited definition – is not and has never been universal, nor essential. At the beginning of the twenty-first century it rather becomes clear that ‘the very structures of our shared identity – as humans’ (2) are far more complex and integrated into categories that humanist subject construction excluded and which now through social, political, economic, and ecological shifts demand a position in our critical thinking: ‘the non-human, the inhuman, the anti-human, the inhumane and the posthuman proliferate and overlap in our globalized, technologically mediated societies’ (2). For Braidotti, the posthuman then becomes a critical tool for examining the complex construction of a new subject position, one that acknowledges ‘our globally linked and technologically mediated societies’ and helps in
re-evaluating ‘the basic unit of reference for the human’ as well as ‘our interaction with both human and non-human agents on a planetary scale’ (5–6).

2.2.2 Origins in Proto-Science-Fiction

Before examining the posthuman in today’s critical thinking, I would first like to point towards its origin in a proto-science-fictional context. The term ‘posthuman,’ according to Neil Badmington (‘Posthuman Conditions’ ix), might have been coined in 1888, when Helena Blavatsky used it in her book *The Secret Doctrine* to describe the development of mammals as an after-product of human ‘astral’ evolution: ‘a post-human Fourth Round product’ (688). Blavatsky’s reversal of Darwinist evolution claimed that humans developed in several stages through the rounds of ‘astral races,’ originating physically for the first time in the ‘Fourth Round’ and then developing further in the ‘Fifth Round’. Mammals, she claims, share man’s evolutionary features not because humans evolved from them but rather because they need to be understood as products of the same group, originating in the human, thus making every mammal ‘posthuman’ in the sense that they came ‘after the human’ in terms of Blavatsky’s ‘astral’ evolution. As proto-science-fictional and scientifically dubious as Blavatsky’s ‘Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy’ is (this is the subtitle of the book), it clearly seems to introduce at least the concept and terminology of an evolution of the species that goes beyond or remains after the human – in terms of ontology and/or time.

In a sense, one could argue that the concerns with and conceptions of (post)humanist thinking lie at the heart of science fiction. After all, the genre’s ‘ur-text,’ the first novel to ‘contain every major formal characteristic that can reasonably be held to mark science fiction as a genre’ (Freedman 253), Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, reflects upon the constitution of human nature as one of its main concerns. Brian Aldiss refers to Shelley’s novel as the birth of sf and then argues more

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6 The *Oxford English Dictionary* does not mention Blavatsky, but rather names Maurice Parmelee’s 1916 *Poverty & Social Progress* as the first usage of the term. But the *OED* agrees in its originating in ‘Chiefly Science Fiction. Of or relating to a hypothetical species that might evolve from human beings, as by means of genetic or bionic augmentation’ (www.oed.com). The supposed earlier usage Stefan Herbrechter (in quoting Oliver Krüger) identifies as ‘posthumain,’ stemming from Thomas Blount’s *Glossographia* (1656), is an error in spelling: The *OED* quotes ‘posthumian,’ not ‘posthumain,’ as ‘following or to come, that shall be’ (Herbrechter 33) in the sense of ‘posthumous’ (after death).
broadly with regard to the genre that ‘Science Fiction is the search for a definition of man and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science)’ (8). And indeed, in *Frankenstein*, the monster, scientifically created and then rejected by its creator, Victor Frankenstein, finds himself alone and confused reading about humanity in Goethe, Milton, and Plutarch and, when comparing himself to the described humans, always lacking some aspects. Consequently, pondering his own state of being, he asks: ‘Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?’ (Shelley 128). His questions point to the central motif of the story: the question of human nature, a human essence, and what to include in the definition of this essence. As such, the novel for the first time explores elements of knowledge about the human position in the technologized world that reverberate with early nineteenth-century discourses of ‘humanism.’ This discussion of humanism – as well as all forms of critical discourse derived from it – humanist, anti-humanist, or posthumanist – informs the cultural imagination of science fiction.

As a cultural discourse, sf has always been a reflection of the political and social issues of its time. For example, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., points out in his analysis ‘Marxist Theory and Science Fiction’: ‘In its simplest terms, sf and utopian fiction have been concerned with imagining progressive alternatives to the status quo, often implying critiques of contemporary conditions or possible future outcomes of current social trends’ (113). As such, sf is ideally suited to negotiate humanist concerns to the full by fictionalizing both its ideals and any possible critique of the humanist stance. Especially the defining questions of humanism ‘What constitutes human nature?’ or ‘What does it mean to be human?’ have thus been a central concern of science fiction exploration. The imagined changes in the ‘human’ can be individual (as in *Frankenstein*) but more often tend to affect a society if not the whole species, ‘and these changes are often the results of scientific discoveries and inventions that are applied by human beings to their own social evolution’ (Csicsery-Ronay, ‘Marxist Theory’ 113). Returning thus to *Frankenstein*, sf ‘foreshadows many of our anxieties about the two-faced triumphs of scientific progress’ (Aldiss 26) and at the same time reflects upon the contemporary debate of evolution and creation. Shelley’s fictional interjection into the ongoing debate dramatizes Erasmus Darwin’s evolutionary theory of species improvement (Hunter 140). The idea of continual advancement and evolutionary progression in *Frankenstein* results in a new species, which is better than man (taller, stronger, more agile, and much more resilient), and according to Darwin in every evolutionary sense the next generation to take over the earth.
For all intents and purposes, then, the monster represents what we might name the posthuman: a being replacing the human, coming after the human, and existing beyond human capacity. Frankenstein’s creation anticipates the posthuman condition.

As such, the posthuman has been part of the sf repertoire from the beginning of the genre with Frankenstein and later in the century with H.G. Wells’s novels The Time Machine (1895) and The Island of Doctor Moreau (1896). Jeff Prucher traces Blavatsky’s term ‘post-human’ in his dictionary Brave New Words to be employed by authors such as H.P. Lovecraft, who uses it in his 1936 novella ‘The Shadow Out of Time’ to refer to the Great Race of the Yith, who possess human bodies for a time before moving beyond/past the human (Prucher 153). Likewise, it can be argued that James Blish’s concept of ‘pantropy,’ that is, the alteration of human bodies to allow for life on another planet otherwise uninhabitable (Prucher 143), as well as many other sf ideas throughout the century such as hybrid creatures, robots, and artificial intelligences, all de facto refer to the posthuman. These fictional posthumans, represented through the lens of sf, laid the basis for a fruitful and engaging discourse on posthumanism, which was first introduced into critical theory in 1977.

2.2.3 Posthumanism and/as Critical Theory

The critical theoretical discourse on posthumanism, as Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter explain, derives partly from humanist discourse and partly from the original sf definition of characterizing the next step in human evolution:

Posthumanism, as the name of a discourse, suggests an episteme which comes ‘after’ humanism (‘post-humanism’) or even after the human itself (‘post-human-ism’). Implicit in both these articulations is a sense of the supplanting operations wrought by time, and of the obsolescence in question affecting not simply humanism as displaced episteme but also, more radically, the notion and nature of the human as fact and idea. (f)

As such, and in a way inherent in the meaning of its prefix, as referring to a reaction or sometimes even rejection of the concept it prefixes (e.g. in ‘postmodernism’), posthumanism can be understood as culminating anti-humanist thought, describing or theorizing the condition anticipated by Foucault’s vanishing of ‘the figure of man’ (The Order of Things 386). As a reaction to this call for the ‘end of man’, in
1977, Ihab Hassan re-appropriated the term, convinced that Foucault and
the other anti-humanists ‘mean not the literal end of man but the end
of a particular image of us’ (213). Hassan claims that the posthuman is
emergent within our culture and that we need to overcome the division
of imagination and science because both ‘are agents of change, crucibles
of values, modes not only of representation but also of transformation,
their interplay may now be the vital performing principle in culture
and consciousness – a key to posthumanism’ (208). The concept of
posthumanism for him is therefore not just wordplay or anti-humanism
in disguise, but rather ‘posthumanism may also hint at a potential
in our culture, hint at a tendency struggling to become more than a
trend’ (212). This potential is transformation, a radical change in our
understanding of the human: ‘We need to understand that five hundred
years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms
itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism’ (212).

With this potential of transformation comes the threat of something
going wrong, signaled in Hassan’s choice of the word ‘helplessly.’ He
warns that the posthuman joining of divisions might not ‘find a happy
consummation. It may also beget monsters and mutants’ (216). In
posthumanism lies not just the utopian dream of a new evolutionary
step but also the potential for a dystopian nightmare. This duality of
possibilities is essential here, as posthumanism is understood by Callus
and Herbrechter to refer to the discourse which all at once ‘articulates
our hopes, fears, thoughts, and reflections at a post-millenarian time
haunted by the prospects of technology’s apparently essential and causal
link with the finiteness of the human as a biological, cognitive, informa-
tional, and autonomous integrality’ (g).

As with humanism and anti-humanism before it, there is actually
not one single posthumanism, but rather a whole discourse negotiating
these and other aspects of the posthuman condition. In 1986 in her
famous ‘Cyborg Manifesto,’ Donna Haraway introduced the cyborg into
posthuman critical theory as a metaphor of breaking through ontological
boundaries and dichotomies: ‘The cyborg has multiple origins, and
cannot be pinned down to any one, and disturbs the categories and
statuses of men, women, artifact, racial identities but also bodies and
the categories of living/non-living’ (Nayar 22). Haraway uses the cyborg,
in ‘ironic faith, my blasphemy’ (‘Cyborg Manifesto’ 149), in order to
blur the lines between the science-fictional creature (the hypermas-
culine, militarized human-machine epitomized in the T-1000, Arnold
Schwarzenegger’s portrayal of the Terminator) and the social reality of
newly found hybridized political subject positions. In her terminology,
‘we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and
organism’ (‘Cyborg Manifesto’ 150) and have all thus already begun our posthuman existence. Haraway’s cyborgian negation of ‘boundaries between human and machine [needs to be seen] as an opportunity to weaken other humanist boundaries’ (Herbrechter 99) as well. She argues that we are experiencing a shift towards living in a multiform information system in which all aspects of life are infused with technoscientific progress, which in turn eliminates all distinctions of category: ‘The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically’ (Haraway, ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ 163).

In her 1997 book Modest Witness, she extends the cyborg metaphor even further to include any kind of technoscientific object as ‘Cyborg figures – such as the end-of-the-millennium seed, chip, gene, database, bomb, fetus, race, brain, and ecosystem,’ all of which she describes as being the ‘implosion of the technical, organic, political, economic, oneiric, and textual’ (12). She refers to technoscience as the historical continuum that exceeds the dichotomies of modernity and replaces it with ‘the promiscuously fused and transgenic quality of its domains by a kind of visual onomatopoeia’ (4). In technoscience, everything becomes fused into the cyborg metaphor and thus part of the posthumanist subjectivity, in so far as everything needs to be understood as an object of multiple identities: ‘Technoscience as cultural practice and practical culture, however, requires attention to all the meanings, identities, materialities, and accountabilities of the subjects and objects in play’ (82). We, as cyborgs or posthumans, do not inhabit a certain natural order or pure essence but rather, as ‘entities in technoscience culture,’ are simultaneously ‘a metaphor, a technology, and a beast living its many-layered life as best it can’ (83). We are culturally created beings and always were, while the concept of human nature reflects a myth that we have now outgrown. It is this new, technoscientific and cyborgian way of relating to ourselves that Haraway considers to open up ‘contestations for possible, maybe even livable, worlds in globalized technoscience,’ (270) for new ways to negotiate conditions of power, expressed in discourses of racism, sexism, classism.

By breaking down these cultural boundaries, Haraway states, the cyborg as adopted metaphor represents a world in which ‘the practices of domination’ have been challenged and ‘we find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras’ (‘Cyborg Manifesto’ 177), we find ourselves posthuman, partly infused with and extended by technoscience. As a cultural metaphor the cyborg thus presents us with the realization that we are embodied in a technoculturally determined body, that our
bodily identity is multiple, active, and changing, and that the posthuman ‘might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints’ ('Cyborg Manifesto' 154).

The cyborg is a very central figure not just in Haraway’s theoretical conception of posthumanism, but also in transhumanist thought, where it functions as an evolutionary step towards a fully transcendent humanity. As mentioned in the introduction, transhumanism is one of several contemporary strands of posthumanism, in which enhanced human existence is understood as a first step beyond the limitation of the biological body. Transhumanism, as a form of posthumanist discourse, must be understood as oppositional to Haraway’s embodied fluid identities, in that it proposes ‘transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether’ in order to achieve true humanity – as such representing rather an ‘intensification of humanism’ (Wolfe, What Is Posthumanism? xv). Bostrom argues that transhumanism ‘holds that current human nature is improvable through the use of applied science and other rational methods, which may make it possible to increase human health-span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities, and give us increased control over our own mental states and moods’ (cited in Nayar 6). Bostrom bases his argument on the assumption that there is something like a ‘human nature’ but that it is not universal and essential. Rather, he believes, we will be able ‘to transcend our biological limitations by means of technology’ and thus need to ‘re-evaluate the entire human predicament’ ('Transhumanism').

In its extreme position, transhumanism as the complete transcendence of the human body, this philosophy moves us into what Hans Moravec calls the “postbiological” world in which the human race has been swept away by the tide of cultural change, usurped by its own artificial progeny’ (1). Moravec argues along similar lines as many early cyberpunk writers did (e.g. Gibson, Rucker) that the human body is a prison of flesh and blood and that in order for humanity to evolve, we will need to ‘liberate human minds’ from it completely because in the ‘present condition we are uncomfortable halfbreeds, part biology, part culture, with many of our biological traits out of step with the inventions of our minds’ (4). His vision is that information technology will allow us ‘to imagine human thought freed from bondage to a mortal body’ (4) and that at some point, given the development of computational power and artificial intelligence, we might actually free the mind from its brain and transfer it as computational code to a new, artificial body. These eutopian fantasies of better-abled (cyborg) or non-embodied (virtual)
existence beyond the biological confines represent an extreme and distilled version of humanist privileged subjectivity – based on human exceptionalism and hierarchies of power.

Pramod Nayar thus calls transhumanist thought ‘techno-deterministic, and techno-utopian, in its faith in technology’s ability to ensure a certain kind of future,’ which especially science fiction celebrates in a ‘near-obsessive exploration’ of the conflation of human and machine (7). In his view, this enmeshed human-machine future of transhumanism represents the ‘pop posthumanism of cinema and pop culture’ that is found in films such as *The Terminator* (dir. James Cameron, 1984) and *The Matrix* (dir. the Wachowskis, 1999). In literary terms, even the fully digitalized existence has been explored by cyberpunk, as in Rucker’s novel *Software* (1982) or Gibson’s *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), and is thus part of this pop posthumanist discourse.

But conflating sf (in all forms and media) into so neat a category as ‘pop posthumanism’ is too wide a generalization to make much sense. It assumes that a more critical and nuanced exploration of the posthuman is not possible within the confines of science fiction (or popular culture more generally). As my analyses show, this is not the case: The popular cultural imagination is just as varied and critical in its posthumanism as is theoretical thought. The argument already fails in conflating the transhumanism of Moravec or Bostrom with films such as *The Matrix*. Even if all agree on the possibility of human–machine hybridity, the ideological stance towards this argument is at opposite ends, one representing a techno-eutopian dream, even a philosophical or quasi-religious discourse on the future of the human (Herbrechter 102–03; Graham, ‘Post/Human’ 23), while the other represents a dystopian warning about the social realities of the contemporary moment and the loss of human nature through technologization and cyborgization.

At the other end of the spectrum of posthumanist discourse and much more consistent with a dystopian view of the ‘Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution’ is Francis Fukuyama’s position, expressed in his 2002 book *Our Posthuman Future* (which bears the above-quoted subtitle). In it he claims that ‘the most significant threat posed by contemporary biotechnology is the possibility that it will alter human nature and thereby move us into a “posthuman” stage of history’ (7). Especially the moral and ethical dimensions of eugenics are at the heart of this debate that is also prominently present in Jürgen Habermas’s and Peter Sloterdijk’s argumentations: ‘In different ways, they express deep concern for the status of the human, and seem particularly struck by moral and cognitive panic at the prospect of the posthuman turn’ (Braidotti 64).
As genetic engineering provides the tools, such as rDNA splicing or germline engineering, to manufacture completely new species by ‘purely’ biological means, futurists such as Lee M. Silver rejoice at the idea of creating genetically enhanced posthumans, because we ‘gained the power to control the destiny of our species’ (15) by mapping the human genome. In contrast, this potential of applying genetic engineering to humans has Fukuyama ‘fear that, in the end, biotechnology will cause us in some way to lose our humanity – that is, some essential quality that has always underpinned our sense of who we are and where we are going’ (101).

At the heart of this argument is of course a nostalgia for the liberal humanist subject that tries to hold on to a privileged and central position of the human: a position that is threatened by genetic engineering because it blurs ‘the qualitative lines of demarcation not only among the categories (male/female, black/white, human/animal, dead/alive, centre/margin, etc.), but also within each one of them’ (Braidotti 64; see Herbrechter 164).

2.2.4 Critical Posthumanism

In recent years, another strand of theory has emerged in posthumanist thinking that might be understood to have started with Donna Haraway and the cyborg’s fluid, flexible embodiment of the posthuman. From there on, the question of the body as a site for enacting posthuman discourses has become hotly debated. Moravec, the cyberpunks, and the transhumanists like to disembody the (post)humanist subject and free it from the constraints of the flesh. On the opposite side, Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston argue that the human body has become challenged by posthumanist discourse, creating the need to view the body as emerging at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context. Posthuman bodies are the causes and effects of postmodern relations of power and pleasure, virtuality and reality, sex and its consequences. The posthuman body is a technology, a screen, a projected image; it is a body under the sign of AIDS, a contaminated body, a deadly body, a techno-body; it is, as we shall see, a queer body. (2–3)

These queered, fragmented, and transformed embodiments then integrate material extensions (animal, machine, non-human) into the posthuman
as a multitude of posthuman bodies (Herbrechter 98; Halberstam and Livingston 16), disconnecting them from any form of ‘bodily master-narratives’ (Halberstam and Livingston 18).

In her book *How We Became Posthuman* N. Katherine Hayles builds on this concept of multiple and fluid embodiments of the posthuman in order to negate transhumanist notions of the de-coupled mind–body relation. In her argument, posthumanism needs to be understood as based in an embodied form, whereas the ‘erasure of embodiment is a feature common to both the liberal humanist subject and the cybernetic posthuman’ (4), sharing a preference for the consciousness as the seat of human subjectivity. As such, Hayles warns that transhumanism ‘continues the liberal tradition rather than disrupts it’ (5) and thus problematizes a truly critical posthumanism. In her study, she examines how information became disembodied and how this interconnects with concepts of the posthuman turn. Her project needs to be understood as a warning against ‘what might be called apocalyptic or complacent posthumanism’ (Badmington, ‘Theorizing’ 11), reminding us that information is based in a specific form of materiality. Hayles’s investigation is thus most useful in its reminder that

the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice. Located within the dialectic of pattern/randomness and grounded in embodied actuality rather than disembodied information, the posthuman offers resources for rethinking the articulation of humans with intelligent machines. (286–87)

Hayles’s work needs to be understood not just as an intervention in transhumanist techno-eutopian debates, but rather as one of the inaugural works that initiated a shift in theory towards an understanding of posthumanism as a form of critical discourse.

In the 2000s a whole body of works engaged aspects of the posthuman and of posthumanism. On the one hand, several book-length studies and anthologies of cultural and especially science-fictional analyses took to the posthuman as a category, exploring the shifting social, cultural, political, and technological landscapes of late-capitalist globalized society (among many others see Badmington, *Alien Chic*; Dinello; Gray; Lake; Pastourmatzi; Smith and Morra; Toffoletti; Vint, *Bodies*).
On the other hand, the idea of a *critical posthumanism* emerged. It represents a form of critical theory negotiating not only the posthuman as bodily category but also the changes needed in discourse itself to address an emergence into the posthuman condition; as Cary Wolfe argues: ‘we must take another step, another post-, and realize that the nature of thought itself must change if it is to be posthumanist’ (*What Is Posthumanism?* xvi).

Neil Badmington’s *Posthumanism* (2000) is probably the first attempt to consolidate earlier discourses, as divergent as they may be, on posthumanism and to open the discussion on a new critical paradigm: ‘What matters, rather, is that thought keeps moving in the name of a beyond, in the shadow of the unknown, in the fault-lines of the “post-”’ (10). Badmington argues for an approach towards posthumanism that ‘repeats humanism […] [in Derrida’s terms,] *in a certain way* and with a view to the deconstruction of anthropocentric thought’ (*Theorizing*’ 15). Humanism in Badmington’s view is always present in posthumanism and a truly outside position is impossible to attain, he argues, by referring to Derrida’s critique of an anti-humanist break with humanism:

> Precisely because Western philosophy is steeped in humanist assumptions, [Derrida] observed, the end of Man is bound to be written in the language of Man. Each ‘transgressive gesture re-encloses us’ because every such gesture will have been unconsciously choreographed by humanism. There is no pure outside to which ‘we’ can leap. To oppose humanism by claiming to have left it behind is to overlook the very way that opposition is articulated. (*Posthumanism* 9)

Badmington is one of several scholars that have introduced this critical approach to posthumanism, along with Ivan Callus, Stefan Herbrechter, Cary Wolfe, Rosi Braidotti, Pramod K. Nayar, and others. This critical posthumanism points towards a new form of critical theory that engages our contemporary society from a posthumanist perspective. As Stefan Herbrechter points out, appropriating Lyotard’s analysis of postmodernism for posthumanism: ‘The prefix “post” therefore does not signify a radical break with humanism but a continued deconstructive-cum-psychoanalytical “working through”’ (48).

But what exactly is a critical posthumanist position? Most importantly, it not only takes into consideration the technological changes to the ontology of human existence but rather considers the full effect contemporary social, political, and technological changes have wrought on the conceptualization of the human. It is a posthumanism ‘which
understands the human species as a historical “effect,” with humanism as its ideological “affect,” while distancing itself from both – a “critical posthumanism,” which does not, from the start, position itself “after” a humanism, [...] but which inhabits humanism deconstructively’ (Herbrechter 7). Or as Cary Wolfe has put it, posthumanism is not exclusively about the ‘decentering of the human in relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates,’ but also includes a critique of humanism that keeps intact some of its ‘values and aspirations,’ while at the same time showing ‘how those aspirations are undercut by the philosophical and ethical frameworks used to conceptualize them’ (What Is Posthumanism? xvi).

The discursive foundation that a critical posthumanism builds upon, as stated before, is that the humanist subject is dissolving – even for those that somewhat fit the narrow and privileged position. Progress in informational technology, neuroscience, bioinformatics, and genetics has undermined the categorical and biological distinctions of human and non-human by introducing ‘figures’ such as the cyborg, OncoMouse™, or Alba, the glow-in-the-dark bunny (Haraway, Modest_Witness; Graham, Representations; Kac), as well as theories that strip the human of its essentialist features, such as a free and autonomous consciousness, genetic uniqueness, and bodily autonomy (Herbrechter 47–48). The use of language and tools reveals ‘Man’ to be culturally co-evolving with technology and the immaterial. Similarly, the human is exposed to have always been co-evolving with animal species, in terms of both biological (bacteria, microbes) and cultural processes, as exemplified by companion species such as dogs and horses (Haraway, Companion Species 32, 26ff.). Most recently, critics have adopted the concept of the ‘Anthropocene’ to refer to the historical moment of our globalized, mediatized, and highly technologized age, ‘when the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet’ (Braidotti 5) – technological progress has made humanity a force affecting not just any regional surroundings but all life on a global scale.

As such, a critical posthumanism is the ‘radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines’ (Nayar 2, emphasis in original). Instead of an autonomous, superior, and dominant position, the human needs to be understood as ‘an assemblage, co-evolving with other forms of life, enmeshed with the environment and technology’ (Nayar 4), sharing social, ecological, and cultural space with non-human agents. The posthuman, as conceptualized by critical posthumanism, thus needs to move beyond anthropocentric views of life. Grounding on the molecular
biological understanding that matter is ‘self-organized (autopoietic)’ and ‘structurally relational and hence connected to a variety of environments’ (59–60). Rosi Braidotti argues that humans are only small parts of a larger force, which she refers to as zoe: ‘Living matter – including the flesh – is intelligent and self-organizing, but it is so precisely because it is not disconnected from the rest of organic life’ (60). Life is not a privilege or property of the human but extends to all matter as ‘process, interactive and open-ended,’ thus calling for a reconceptualization of life not as bios (in the sense of a ‘subjective’ and purposeful ‘human’ life) but instead as zoe (in the sense of the raw and ‘objective’ life common to all beings).

This zoe-centric position can also be found in Herbrechter’s commentary that a critical posthumanism needs ‘to acknowledge all those ghosts, all those human others that have been repressed during the process of humanization: animals, gods, demons, monsters of all kinds’ (9; see Graham, Representations), which due to the crisis of the humanist subject now ‘re-emerge with a vengeance’ (Braidotti 37). These ghosts, the others of the humanist subject, are not just found in the category of the non-human (animals, machines), but also need to be thought in terms of other excluded categories, as Cary Wolfe explains in regard to speciesism:

> As long as this humanist and speciesist structure of subjectivization remains intact, and as long as it is institutionally taken for granted that it is all right to systematically exploit and kill nonhuman animals simply because of their species, then the humanist discourse of species will always be available for use by some humans against other humans as well, to countenance violence against the social other of whatever species – or gender, or race, or class, or sexual difference. (Animal Rites 8)

Critical posthumanism rejects this structure of subjectivization and proposes, in Braidotti’s terms, a new subjectivity beyond boundaries of sexualized, racialized, and naturalized categories:

> I define the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable. Posthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building. (Braidotti 49)
Braidotti understands posthuman subjectivity as a hopeful possibility to find a new ethical position, grounded in the interpenetration of the posthuman with non-human others. Instead of anthropocentric and individualist accounts of life, she argues for a *zoe*-centric position that ‘transposes hybridity, nomadism, diasporas and creolization processes into means of re-grounding claims to subjectivity, connections and community among subjects of the human and the non-human kind’ (50). In understanding the posthuman self as relational and extended, Braidotti proposes a post-anthropocentric view that opens up transformations, which she labels with a nod to Deleuze and Guattari as ‘becoming-animal, becoming-earth and becoming-machine’ (66; see Deleuze and Guattari 237ff.), each extending the relational dimension of the posthuman into solidarity and categorical enmeshment with animals, the environment, and machines, revealing subjectivity as ‘embodied, embedded and in symbiosis’ (Braidotti 67) with each.

Becoming-animal takes as its argumentative base, on the one hand, the concept of companion species as defined by Haraway as ‘species in obligatory, constitutive, historical, protean relationship’ with each other, in interdependence and ‘co-habitation, co-evolution, and embodied cross-species sociality’ (*Companion Species* 12, 4). Most specifically seen in dogs, companion species are as much products of natureculture as humans are, as they develop alongside the human, are subject to technological manipulation and social construction – the dog as ‘man’s best friend’ is just as much a cultural ‘narrative’ as is the wolf as ‘savage beast.’ On the other hand, becoming-animal considers the similarities in the conditions faced by all categories of others to the humanist subject. The ‘zoo-proletariat’ of animal labor endures the same exploitation and reduction to ‘tradable disposable bodies, inscribed in a global market of post-anthropocentric exploitation’ (Braidotti 70), as women, non-whites, and disabled-bodied humans do. The bond forced by the capitalist, globalized, and inhuman system is a post-anthropocentric, posthuman solidarity that enables our becoming-animal.

Becoming-earth is the most theoretical of Braidotti’s projections and starts from the realization that humanity has entered into the Anthropocene, the historical moment in time when humans have become a global force that influences the planet and needs to address questions of ‘environmental crisis, climate change and ecological sustainability’ – questions that will need a ‘planetary, geo-centred perspective’ (Braidotti 81) to answer. Since the scale of natureculture has grown to allow humans to effect changes beyond the biological dimension of their ontology and onto a global, geological scale, subjectivity can no longer be limited to conform with that of humanism – human actions
involve all life (*zoe*) on the planet. History extends in both dimensions beyond the limit of the human, to include both a pre-human past and ‘the idea of extinction, that is to say, a future without “us”’ (Braidotti 83). The differentiation between natural and human history thus no longer applies. The human is part of all autopoietic matter, part of that Deleuzian ‘great animal, the cosmic “machine”’ (cited in Braidotti 86) of eternal energy. The posthuman subject asserts itself through these relations by ‘becoming’ – which is, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, not ‘a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification’ (239) – it is ‘becoming-earth’ by its rhizomatic interconnection with the planetary.

Becoming-machine is the last aspect of posthuman subjectivity discussed by Braidotti, and the least relevant in terms of my argument in this book. It builds on Haraway’s and Hayles’s work of cyborg/virtual subjectivity and the hybridity of human and machine: ‘The posthuman predicament is such as to force a displacement of the lines of demarcation between structural differences, or ontological categories, for instance between the organic and the inorganic, the born and the manufactured, flesh and metal, electronic circuits and organic nervous systems’ (Braidotti 89). But in contrast to Haraway’s use of the cyborg, Braidotti argues that becoming-machine is not merely a metaphorical stance; it is an ontological, social, and political reality, extending the relational self of the posthuman in Marshall McLuhan’s sense of extensive media: ‘Contemporary information and communication technologies exteriorize and duplicate electronically the human nervous system: we have become “biomediated” bodies’ (Braidotti 90, citing Patricia Clough). Braidotti argues for the strong biopolitical implications of existing in technologically saturated and mediated socio-cultural constructions – not just in the highly visible categories of military pilots (flying remote drones) or film stars (surgically enhancing their bodies) but also in the globalized exploited masses, such as support hotline workers (mediated voices from India or Pakistan) or assemblers in China (flesh automatons).

As a consequence, Braidotti and other critical posthumanists argue for a different critical subjectivity of the posthuman, based in contemporary shifts in the ontology of living matter (*zoe*-centric ‘chaosmos’; 86) and the ecological, economic, and socio-political realities of the twenty-first century. At the center of this argument is the realization that the humanist subject is dissolving, opening up the room for a transformative new subjectivity that embraces the shifts in ontology, the enmeshment, the interpenetrations: a subjectivity that can be characterized as embodied in – with a quick forward glance to what will follow in my argument and borrowing Bauman’s terminology – a
liquid humanity. Critical posthumanism sees ‘us’ (in our posthuman predicament) as becoming, always radically in the process of changing, but not as lost or evaporating: “We need to be “worthy of the present” and thus be part of contemporary culture, embodying and embedding the subject of this particular world. Far from being a flight from the real, posthuman thought inscribes the contemporary subject in the conditions of its own historicity” (Braidotti 189). And it is to those conditions, to that particular world, I would now like to turn my attention by introducing the concept of liquid modernity.

2.3 Liquid Modernity

2.3.1 From Postmodernity to Liquid Modernity

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman refers to the contemporary world, to globalized, late-capitalist society at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as one of constant change – one best characterized by the metaphor of fluidity: ‘like all liquids, [this society] cannot stand still and keep its shape for long’ (44 Letters 1). In his writing since 2000, Bauman has reacted to a conceptual disappointment with postmodernity as the dominant paradigm in critical theory (Lee 355; Tester 157ff.) and instead argues for a different terminology. For him, the terms ‘postmodernity’ (the social dimension) and ‘postmodernism’ (the aesthetic dimension) were used too indiscriminately, even though a separation was clearly needed (Tester 158; see Bauman, Intimations). The resulting confusion of terms renders discussion useless and incomprehensible. Further, Bauman points out that the prefix of the term ‘postmodernity’ conjured up the impression of a chronological ‘after’ that ‘implies the end of modernity, leaving modernity behind, being on the other shore’ (Bauman and Tester 97). Rather than trying to fix a new end point of modernity by giving the era to follow a different name, he argues that contemporary society needs to be theorized from within the concept of a changed form of modernity, adapting existent processes to its ever-changing nature and addressing the protean and transitory state of contemporary society. As Bauman himself says:

The society which enters the twenty-first century is no less ‘modern’ than the society which entered the twentieth; the most one can say is that it is modern in a different way. What makes it as modern as it was a century or so ago is what sets modernity apart from all other historical forms of human cohabitation: the compulsive
and obsessive, continuous, unstoppable, forever incomplete modernization; the overwhelming and ineradicable, unquenchable thirst for creative destruction (or of destructive creativity[...]). (Liquid Modernity 28)

Thus for Bauman, society today cannot be grasped by the concepts of postmodernity, marking a period of overcoming and thinking beyond modernity, but rather as a continuation of it in a new stage of modernity. Consequently, his term ‘liquid modernity’ refers to a world that is fluid in that it can ‘neither fix space nor bind time’ (Liquid Modernity 28):

Everything or almost everything in this world of ours keeps changing: fashions we follow and the objects of our attention, things we dream of and things we fear, things we desire and things we loathe, reasons to be hopeful and reasons to be apprehensive. And the conditions around us, conditions in which we make our living. (44 Letters 1)

This is in accordance with German sociologist Ulrich Beck’s very similar argument that contemporary society needs to be understood as undergoing a ‘second rationalization,’ constituting not a ‘classical’ but a ‘reflexive modernization’ that allows for the ‘modernization of industrial society’ itself instead of just a ‘modernization of tradition’ (Risk Society 11). The first rationalization liquefied (or ‘dissolved’ in Beck’s terminology) conceptions of tradition in feudal pre-industrial times, such as a rigid class system, belief structures, and customary rights of that society. But, as Bauman points out, it did so only to establish ‘new and improved solids’ that promised a ‘lasting solidity, a solidity which one could trust and rely upon and which would make the world predictable and therefore manageable’ (Liquid Modernity 3). This desire for a lasting solidity was so dominant, Beck argues, that far into the twentieth century, it produced a mythology that has gone long unnoticed:

This myth asserts that developed industrial society with its patterns of work and life, its production sectors, its thinking in categories of economic growth, its understanding of science and technology and its forms of democracy, is a thoroughly modern society, a pinnacle of modernity, which it scarcely makes sense even to consider surpassing. (Risk Society 11)

In Marx’s famous phrase, ‘melting the solids’ in this first phase of modernity meant freeing the economy from traditional restrictions and
limitations due to politics, religion, or tradition, which established a new, mainly economic order intended to be even more ‘solid’ than what it replaced precisely because it was free from any kind of social, political, or cultural leverage. The liquefaction or dissolution of rigid or established forms is at the heart of any form of modernity and what has changed today, in its ‘liquid’ or ‘second’ phase, then is ‘a redistribution and reallocation of modernity’s “melting powers”’ (Bauman, Liquid Modernity 6). Modernization, which in the nineteenth century had been determined by its opposite (i.e. the traditional), has today ‘consumed and lost its other and now undermines its own premises as an industrial society along with its functional principles’ (Beck, Risk Society 10). Whereas solid modernity demystified ‘privileges of rank and religious world views,’ liquid modernity does the same to our ‘understanding of science and technology as well as to the modes of existence in work, leisure, the family and sexuality’ (Beck, Risk Society 10). A second, liquid modernity is turning against the principles of its predecessor, but in both Bauman’s and Beck’s view this means not the end of modernity, and thus a ‘post-modernity,’ but rather the onset of new modernity – the beginning of a liquid, fluid, reflexive, and ever-changing form of modernity. As Bauman points out in his 2012 foreword to the second edition of Liquid Modernity:

What was some time ago dubbed (erroneously) ‘postmodernity’, and what I’ve chosen to call ‘liquid modernity’, is the growing conviction that change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty. A hundred years ago ‘to be modern’ meant to chase ‘the final state of perfection’ – now it means an infinity of improvement, with no ‘final state’ in sight and none desired. (iix–ix)

This new form of modernity is thus, according to Bauman, best categorized as an uprooting of patterns, structures, and figurations in all those aspects of life that have dominated the solid phase of modernity: nation, territory, class, family, neighborhood, religion, and ethnicity. As a consequence, when all boundaries separating people from each other are dissolved, and markers of difference become porous, then any attempt at sociological theorizing must start from the assumption of liquid modernity as ‘a condition of global space’ (Tester 161). Bauman argues that ‘by far the most prominent and seminal feature of our time is the emergence of “global figuration”: of a network of dependencies which covers the entirety of the planet’ (‘Wars’ 11) – in his argument referring to similar concepts as those expressed by Braidotti in her discussion of the Anthropocene and posthuman becoming-earth. The
globalized economy, transnational capitalism, and planetary media networks represent this ‘global figuration’ that determines ‘our’ future and is beyond any form of localized control. But with the advent of the Anthropocene, the accompanying risks of this global network of power grow to planetary proportions:

Our present dangers differ from those the category of ‘risk’ strove to capture and bring to light because they are unnamed until they strike, unpredictable and incalculable. And the setting for the birth of our dangers, from which they emerge, is no longer framed by the Gesellschaft or society – unless the concept of Gesellschaft, in opposition to its orthodox connotations, is made coterminous not with the population of a territorial nation-state, but with the population of the planet, with humanity as a whole. (Bauman, 44 Letters 113)

I want to extend this sentiment, with a critical posthumanist view in mind, to the notion that the frame in which to understand and think globalization needs to be planetary, that any solution or social destiny needs to be zoe-centric.

On the other hand, the processes of globalization bring with them a shift in the conception of politics, defined by Bauman among other things as ‘the art of translating individual problems into public issues, and common interests into individual rights and duties’ (Society 170), which has now been ‘substituted by a myriad of private and individual life-projects and a lack of concern with long-term or collectively binding political engagements’ (Jacobsen, ‘Liquid’ 77). Instead of political institutions defining public policy, the main struggle of the political has become life politics, the individual as the central ‘body politic’: ‘Life politics [...] is from beginning to end enclosed in a framework of individuality: the individual body complete with the “inner self”, personal identity claimed and granted [...] Life politics is self-centred and self-referential’ (Bauman, Society 170–71).

In liquid modernity, former solid patterns and organizing configurations have become contradicting and thus lost their compelling power over the individual; they have been dissolved into options for life choices. The dissolution of solids has moved from macro-levels of society towards the micro-levels of life policies. The choices of living have become privatized in liquid modernity, ‘the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual’s shoulders’ (Liquid Modernity 8).

As we can see, then, Bauman’s work centers on the changes brought about by contemporary society in two different directions of inquiry.
On the ‘meta-level of human being in the world’ we find an inquiry into the functions and consequences of globalization, whereas on the ‘life-political level’ he analyzes specifically the individual effects of liquid modernity (Tester 162). Both levels, of course, are complexly interwoven and form the synthesis that makes up his work in the last two decades – from conceptions of postmodernity to liquid modernity – but the different foci of global and individual change make a good starting point for discussing Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity.

2.3.2 Globalization and Liquid Modernity

The key to understanding globalization in Bauman’s thinking is that it is characterized by what David Harvey has called ‘time-space compression’ (284), and which differentiates, while at the same time interconnecting, the experiences of globalization and localization: ‘Globalization divides as much as it unites; it divides as it unites – the causes of division being identical with those which promote the uniformity of the globe’ (Bauman, Globalization 2). Globalization processes throw into sharp contrast the mobility of the global population, with freedom of movement – in pre-modern times already a source of inequality of power – becoming the defining factor of liquid modernity. The globalization process has raised mobility and speed to be the top value in determining social, political, economic, and cultural hierarchies by compressing spatial categories to be virtually non-existent.

Bauman’s argument is based on the principle of modernity as progress (in the sense of ‘moving through space’), rendering movement the ultimate goal of progress. The struggle between space and time as independent but interrelated factors is what defined the solid stage of modernity, bringing with it concepts such as the Panopticon or national boundaries, symbolizing the exertion of power by the restriction of spatial movement (Liquid Modernity 9–10). In solid modernity, the Fordist factory came to be a model of the workings of reality – both socially and individually: Reality was determined by the solid, controlled, and bound system of labor and workplace that was needed in industrial times. Space was a fixed category and the decrease in time needed to control or conquer space was the measure of progress. In liquid modern times, though, the speed of progress has increased to virtual instantaneity, and in consequence ‘power has become truly extraterritorial, no longer bound [...] by the resistance of space’ (Liquid Modernity 11). Power, Bauman argues, has become ‘increasingly mobile, slippery, shifty, evasive and fugitive’ (Liquid Modernity 14):
The new hierarchy of power is marked at the top by the ability to move fast and at short notice, and at the bottom by the inability to slow down those moves, let alone arrest them, coupled with its own immobility. Escape and evasion, lightness and volatility have replaced weighty and ominous presence as the main techniques of domination. (Bauman, *Individualized Society* 35)

This shift in domination is best exemplified in globalized capitalism, which has become unrestricted as never before, in effect granting capitalist forces spatial independence from local governments and dissolving the ‘territory/nation/state trinity’ (Bauman, ‘Fate’ 289) that ordered and controlled global space during solid modernity. With the advent of globalization and exterritorial economic power, the ability of the state to impose laws and restrict corporate decisions has been severely limited. Instead of the Fordist factories of solid modernity, which tied capital to local workers and machinery and therefore to the states they were in, liquid modern capital is determined by a ‘new policy of disengagement and noncommitment’ (*Liquid Modernity* 150) that keeps investments highly mobile, flexible, and unbound – independent of the territory/nation/state trinity. Focusing on ideas and the digital culture of liquid modernity, rather than objects and the material culture of solid modernity, this new economic power ‘moves with the speed approaching the velocity of the electronic signal,’ making it ‘practically free from constraints related to the territory inside which it originated, towards which it is aimed or through which it passes on the way’ (*Globalization* 55). This ties in with Braidotti’s argument that capitalism itself has become posthuman in the sense that the current objective of capitalist enterprises is informational as well as biopolitical: ‘Data banks of bio-genetic, neural and mediatic information about individuals are the true capital today’ (Braidotti 61). All life, on a global scale, becomes the informational venture capital of the globalized, liquid modern system – making a profit means being able to surf information flows of a global zoe-centered economy: ‘The global economy is post-anthropocentric in that it ultimately unifies all species under the imperative of the market and its excesses threaten the sustainability of our planet as a whole’ (Braidotti 63).

Further, a state’s influence on keeping capital in its territory has vanished with that capital’s need for a specific local labor force – shifting it to globalized information processing independent of locality – while at the same time leaving the workers (those that provide Fordist factory work and manual labor) ‘to be the most expendable, disposable and exchangeable parts of the economic system’ (Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*)
152). The threat of moving capital elsewhere is enough to undermine any state regulation, while at the same time, territory as a boundary has become porous through the globalizing effects of Anthropocene reality and a network of interconnected reliance, tying together everything on the globe with everything else.

Resulting from global capitalism’s desire and need for exterritoriality and freedom from state-imposed constraints, Bauman identifies a current strategy in forcing resistant states into this ‘new world order’ by ‘globalizing wars’ justified to ensure the unhindered interests of a supposed ‘international community’ (‘Wars’ 14). In effect, these conflicts need to be understood as the assertion of a global economic order by non-political means, in that they are intended to bring into line states resistant to the global flow of power, information, goods, and capital (Tester 167; Bauman, Liquid Modernity 187). Bauman comments on the symbolic nature of these wars, as the message – a fluid and unhindered movement of power – is also encountered in the medium itself. War is fought in the manner of ‘frontier-land’ conflicts: no territory to claim and defend, constantly on the move, shifting allegiances, and a focus on flexible tactics instead of mere weapon power (Bauman, Society 90). Continued management of the territory is to be avoided at all costs, as the free and flexible access of power to the territory is the objective of the war: ‘Ideally, a globalizing war would be a hit-and-run affair: forcing the adversary into submission without taking charge of the immediate consequences, side-effects and “collateral damages” of the military actions’ (‘Wars’ 17). As a result, these wars are fought via necropolitical means, sorting life matter into informational categories of usefulness, and using posthuman drones with the express purpose of achieving more flexible goals. War evolves beyond the solid phase of territorial occupation, into what Achille Mbembe calls ‘infrastructural warfare’ (29), which aims at dissolving state control via the destruction of civil services while leaving the natural resources intact: ‘Many contemporary wars, led by Western coalitions under the cover of “humanitarian aid” are often neo-colonial exercises aimed at protecting mineral extraction and other essential geo-physical resources needed by the global economy’ (Braidotti 123).

On the opposite side, but just as much resulting from the rise of exterritorial and uncontrolled capitalism and the simultaneous waning of territorial state-controlled power over the effects of globalization, Bauman argues, is the practice of ‘globalization-induced wars,’ which are a direct reaction to the loss of territorial meaning: ‘the more vulnerable the place becomes, the more radically it is devalued,’ then ‘the more it turns into an uncertain, easy to lose and difficult to gain, stake in the life
struggle. It becomes a focus of intense emotions, hopes and fears which merge into hysteria’ (‘Wars’ 19). As a manifestation against globalization, extremely violent and overt conflicts arise that try to reclaim a sense of local resistance to the globalized insecurity and uncertainty of territory (Tester 167–68).

Interestingly, Bauman argues, reminiscent of Braidotti and the Anthropocene as a geopolitical reality, that there is a ‘present-day mutually assured vulnerability of all politically separated parts of the globe’ (‘Reconnaissance Wars’ 82):

Humanity has become universal because we can all die at one and the same time, either through the global effects of the local use of weapons that do not respect territory, or through the effort of the anxious and uncertain to shore up the few sources of a sense of security that remain available to them. And the compression of time and space means that there is no place left to hide from these terrors. (Tester 168)

But what is true for abstract power and corporations also holds true on the level of people, in that mobility, flexibility, and fluidity become the key features to personal success and freedom of choice: ‘The degree of immobility is today the main measure of social deprivation and the principal dimension of unfreedom’ (Bauman, Individualized Society 38). Bauman claims that people unable to move with the flow of capital, labor, and information are left behind, stuck in ‘space,’ whereas the global elite now ‘live solely in time’ (Individualized Society 40). This global elite is as ‘light and volatile as the new capitalist economy which gave birth to them’ (Liquid Modernity 153). Without territory they navigate the flow of information and capital that network society provides them with – thus completely inhabiting the posthuman condition of what Braidotti described as becoming-machine, their existence co-inhabited by the network of information flows and mediated globality. They embrace progress, change, and novelty, and symbolize their own flexibility in the use of a different language, as Bauman notes (with reference to Nigel Thrift):

To convey the gist of their own actions, they use metaphors of ‘dancing’ or ‘surfing’; they speak no longer of ‘engineering’, but instead of cultures and networks, teams and coalitions, and of influences rather than of control, leadership and management. They are concerned with looser forms of organization which could be put together, dismantled and reassembled at short notice
or without notice: it is such a fluid form of assembly which fits their view of the surrounding world as ‘multiple, complex and fast-moving, and therefore “ambiguous”, “fuzzy” and “plastic”, ‘uncertain, paradoxical, even chaotic’. (*Liquid Modernity* 154)

At the opposite end of the power pyramid, globalization produces a growing number of ‘victims of order maintenance and economic progress, two eminently human, and blatantly unnatural enterprises’ (*Collateral* 7), who are best categorized with the provocative term of “human waste”, or more correctly wasted humans (the “excessive” and “redundant”, that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay’) (*Wasted Lives* 5). More and more parts of the workforce, those unable to keep up with the newly required mobility, flexibility, and speed, are declared redundant by exterritorial capital: ‘To be “redundant” means to be supernumerary, unneeded, of no use – whatever the needs and uses are that set the standard of usefulness and indispensability. To be declared redundant means to have been disposed of because of being disposable’ (*Wasted Lives* 12). In Western societies, where biological survival might not be as dramatically challenged by this claim of redundancy, ‘wasted humans’ fear for their social survival, as re-entry into useful society is almost certainly denied. As Danièle Linhart suggests, ‘these men and women lose not only their jobs, their projects, their orientation points, the confidence of being in control of their lives; they also find themselves stripped of their dignity as workers, of self-esteem, of the feeling of being useful and having a social place of their own’ (cited in Bauman, *Wasted Lives* 13). Denied any social position in this fluid consumer-oriented society, the feeling that there is no remedy for the situation is overwhelming as there are no options to return to productivity. Their prolonged status as ‘wasted lives’ soon becomes problematic in that it blurs the lines of separation from the rest of society and by throwing up an image of a potential future of all of us: ‘Rather than remaining a misery confined to a relatively small part of the population, as it used to be perceived, assignment to “waste” becomes everybody’s potential prospect – one of the two poles between which everybody’s present and future social standing oscillates’ (*Liquid Times* 32).

Even worse off are the ‘wasted humans’ of newly modernized societies, in which liquid modernity has just recently found a foothold, because as it now becomes ever more obvious that ‘our planet is full,’ as Bauman so provocatively calls out, in a ‘statement in sociology and political science’ (*Wasted Lives* 4–5). Whereas before, human waste, if unmanageable in its own modernized society, could be expelled through
colonization and imperialist conquest to these pre-modern societies, thus providing ‘global solutions to locally produced “overpopulation” problems,’ now with modernization ‘crowding’ the planet, globalization forces these societies to seek ‘local solutions to globally produced problems’ (Wasted Lives 6).

As survival becomes threatened, physically and socially, and no release valves for the building pressures are available, the issues of immigration and asylum become ever more relevant to global politics. In frontier-land, refugees find themselves stateless in an extreme sense of the word, as no state exists to which they could be attributed: They are ‘outside law; not this or that law of this or that country, but law as such’ (Wasted Lives 76). They are forced to stay liminally adrift, to rephrase Michel Agier (cited in Bauman, Wasted Lives 76), in camps outside of controlled statehood and being denied any form of identity – no place, no community, no purpose. Those camps, as Braidotti argues, are the ‘undignified monuments of posthuman inhumanity’ as they showcase necropolitical management of ‘disposable humanity’ (127): ‘the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and population’ (Mbembe 19).

The alternative to inhuman camp life is becoming ‘economic immigrants,’ scraping together their last money to head out towards a new place, only to find that they ‘do not change places; they lose a place on earth, they are catapulted into a nowhere’ (Bauman, Society 112). As such, their exterritoriality, mirroring the fluid state of being of the global power elite as bizarre doppelgängers, makes them ideal targets for the fear and anxiety of the waning territorial power in the societies they are fleeing towards. Whereas the elite cannot be confronted, fears cannot be defused, the refugees in their forced movement, be it for economic or political reasons, become the scapegoats to blame for any and all existential uncertainty:

‘asylum seekers’ have now replaced the evil-eyed witches and other unrepentant evildoers, the malignant spooks and hobgoblins of former urban legends. The new and rapidly swelling urban folklore puts the victims of the planetary outcasting in the role of the principal ‘villains of the piece’ – while collecting, collating and recycling the transmitted lore of hair-raising horror stories, for which the insecurities of city life have generated, now and in the past, a constant and ever more avid demand. (Liquid Times 43)

Fear of uncertainty and insecurity is thus found on both sides of this divide. Aside from the very few on top, we all find ourselves in the
(potential) position to easily lose our identity, our livelihood, and our life projects as these categories become more and more fluid in liquid modernity and the posthuman predicament. Just as the unemployed in our societies tend to remind us of the precariousness, so do the aliens nearby – represented in the refugees of the globalized power struggles. This problem of precarious existence concerns both globalization – the meta-level – and the individual, life-political level of liquid modernity and thus functions as a bridge between the two.

2.3.3 Individuality and Liquid Modernity

We live in a ‘society of consumers,’ Bauman argues, a society ‘guided by seduction, ever rising desires and volatile wishes – no longer by normative regulation’ (*Liquid Modernity* 76). As such, we have given up the organizing principles that a society of producers is based upon: a life of conformity and limitation on the one hand, but one that has reference points, established roles, and security. A society of consumers places importance on instant gratification, on the immediate accessibility of goods, and on the consumer’s ‘adequacy – of being “ever ready”, of having the ability to rise to the opportunity as it comes’ (*Liquid Modernity* 77). Consumption has become the one defining mode of our existence: We are trained ‘to perceive of the world as of a container full of disposable objects, objects for one-off use. The whole world – including other human beings’ (*Individualized Society* 156). Our lives become our individual responsibilities in a world that ‘consists of offers, not norms,’ where the act of making choices is not only desirable but at the same time ‘unavoidable: a life necessity, and a duty. And that responsibility, the inalienable companion to free choice, stays where the liquid modern condition has forced it: on the shoulders of the individual, now appointed the sole manager of individually conducted “life politics”’ (*44 Letters* 73).

The ongoing process of individualization is, according to Alan MacFarlane, ‘the essential feature of “modernity”’ (486), which Alexis de Tocqueville famously castigated as ‘being no longer attached to one another by any tie of caste, of class, of corporation, of family’ and which led men to be self-absorbed, ‘to retire into a narrow individualism’ (cited in MacFarlane 486). But while solid modernity freed the individual from these constraints, freed emancipated man ‘from the tightly knit tissue of communal dependency, surveillance and enforcement,’ it also set before him the task of individual living, of ‘needing to become what one is’ (*Bauman, Liquid Modernity* 31–32). In the first, solid phase of modernity this meant finding one’s position in choosing the societal
roles offered to the individual, rather than being ascribed one by birth. Thus, becoming a member of a social group meant the continuous achievement of enacting the patterns of and conforming to the norms of a specific role (Liquid Modernity 32). But both Beck and Bauman see a significant change imposed on the individual in the second, liquid phase of modernity, in that all categorical security has been transformed into a state of precariousness and that ‘active effort’ has become a necessity of individualism: ‘One has to win, know how to assert oneself in the competition for limited resources – and not only once but day after day’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 3).

In their judgment of these consequences, Beck and Bauman diverge: Bauman argues that the first, solid phase of modernity “‘disembedded” in order to “re-embed’” and that today there is ‘no prospect of re-embeddedment’ (Liquid Modernity 32, 34). Beck, though, argues that at ‘the same time as this liberation or “disembedding” occurs, new forms of reintegration and control are created (“re-embedding”)’ (‘Zombie Categories’ 203). Beck’s outlook might be more constructive towards possible social changes in this development, but he and Bauman agree on the effects that modernity has on the individual in the sense that ‘individuals have to develop their own biography and organize it in relation to others’ (Lee 365), that everyone’s biography becomes ‘elective,’ ‘do-it-yourself,’ and because of the instable categories of current modernity also a precarious ‘risk biography […] in] a state of permanent […] endangerment’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 3). Bauman points out that this individualization is ‘a fate, not a choice’ and that risks, contradiction, and failure can still be systemic, but that our social reality keeps demanding we find biographical solutions for them (Liquid Modernity 34). Beck refers to this as living in a ‘risk society,’ in which risk becomes increasingly less natural but rather manufactured, and in which the individual is faced with ‘industrialized, decision-produced incalculabilities and threats’ (Risk Society 22) that go far beyond their capacity to deal with them (again referring back to the Anthropocene as a concept beyond the reach of the individual, even beyond society), as these threats are mostly global, imperceivable, and irreversible, and any action against them needs to be based in knowledge about them. At the heart of Beck’s ‘risk society’ argument as well as the core factor of liquid modernity is thus ‘precariousness’: as Bauman puts it, ‘the combined experience of insecurity (of position, entitlements and livelihood), of uncertainty (as to their continuation and future stability) and of unsafety (of one’s body, one’s self and their extensions: possessions, neighbourhood, community)’ (Liquid Modernity 160–61).
One aspect in which we are trying to counteract such a feeling of insecurity, as Bauman argues, is in envisioning community as ‘an island of homely and cosy tranquillity in a sea of turbulence and inhospitality’ (Liquid Modernity 182). But this is just as fraught with problems of volatility as other aspects of liquid modernity, as communities are changing as rapidly as life policies do. When work, relationships, living environments, and fashions change in a constant rearranging of one’s social commitments, then society, Émile Durkheim’s refuge for the individual, is just as ephemeral and not the ‘body “under whose protection” to shelter from the horror of one’s own transience’ (Durkheim, cited in Bauman, Liquid Modernity 183). Indeed, the idea that one can overcome one’s own transience, is at risk when collectivistic notions of immortality such as nation, culture, religion, and family are dissolving in the ever-changing progression of liquid modernity. Immortality, defeating the last enemy of modern notions of individuality, made possible in solid modern times via ‘membership of a durable totality’ in which ‘the circumstance not of one’s choice, was cast as giving sense to otherwise brief and meaningless human life’ (Bauman, In Search 35), cannot be achieved collectively anymore. Dying for nation or religion and thus becoming immortal through collectivism is not appealing to the individual in liquid modern societies.

Liquid modernity seems to prefer the individualistic approach to immortality through the symbolic (in either the memory of one’s children or in leaving traces in the collective memory) by making a mark on history. The self-centered and celebratory road of stardom, self-aggrandizement, and public exposure seems to be the contemporary strategy of choice in order to achieve immortality. In addition, Bauman says, (solid) modernity’s attempts at deconstructing death into a number of disturbing but ultimately manageable sicknesses has shifted into liquid modernity’s deconstruction of immortality:

[T]he majestic yet distant immortal bliss that is being deconstructed into a sackful of bigger or smaller, but always-within reach, satisfactions, so that in the ecstasy of enjoyment the likeness of the ultimate perfection may dissolve and vanish from view. Each moment, or no moment, is immortal. Immortality is here – but not here to stay. Immortality is as transient and evanescent as the rest of things. (Mortality 164)

Consequently, living life to the fullest, making the moment eternal and thus being immortal in the here and now becomes the goal of individual life choices, leading to consumption of life itself: ‘Life becomes
just another item ready-made for consumption, the attraction being instant gratification and immediate obsolescence’ (Jacobsen, ‘Liquid’ 85) – all life, human and non-human alike, becomes a commodity to be consumed. All categories of existence become transient in that they do not last: ‘life, death, identity, love, work, immortality’ (Jacobsen, ‘Liquid’ 86).

With the transience and constant protean changes of everything around us in mind, Bauman writes (in 2000) that the body appears to us as the ‘longest-living entity around (in fact, the sole entity whose life-expectation tends to increase over the years),’ making it all the more valuable to the individual as ‘its mortality-bound brevity seems like eternity’ (Liquid Modernity 182–83). But as one of the last vestiges of solidity, the body has come under attack by liquid modernity mostly through conceptions of the posthuman. As I have shown above, all life (zoe) has come to be a commodity, and the body, made of flesh and blood, deconstructed into genetic information, is today just as much ready for consumption. In an interview with Citlali Rovirosa-Madrazo Bauman argues that the ‘aim to engineer human selves (indeed, to create a “new man”) has accompanied the modern form of life from its inception’ (exemplified in literature for example in Frankenstein, as I have argued above), with a string of experiments in social engineering that were terrifyingly flawed: ‘the only consistent and effective specimens among them were also the most inhuman, cruel, atrocious and outrageous’ (Living 144).

But social engineering might not have been the right tool to create a new human, Bauman concedes, because it ‘was to be an operation performed on human society, not its individual members,’ whereas new technologies nowadays aim their services at ‘medical consumers’ who have discovered their own bodies to be ‘far from perfect’ and available ‘to be tinkered and tampered with’ (Living 144–45). So the appearance of the body and even the essence of the body itself become objects of the same processes that other aspects of life have fallen under. They are prone to the individualized task of ‘remaking oneself, dumping the discarded identity and constructing a substitute’ in an act of ‘being born again’ (Living 148). But the process of cosmetics and enhancements of the body is time consuming, and it is discomforting, so the individualized, liquid modern society is undertaking the next commodification: life can become a matter of simply pressing the right buttons: ‘Soon, you’ll be able to view your own DNA on your iPod, and download other people’s instead of the tedious and messy business of procreation’ (Guy Browning, cited in Bauman, Living 149).

Posthuman technoscientific progress – especially genetic engineering
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– promises to come through where social engineering failed: at making the ‘new man’. ‘Making yourself to the measure of your dreams, being made-to-your-own-order: this is, after all, what you always wanted, only lacking thus far the means of making your dreams come true. Now the means are within reach’ (Bauman, Living 149). Genetic engineering, cloning, and xenotransplantation promise the ultimate victory over Nature. Humanity is now almost at the point where it is able to place made-to-order beings above ‘the abominable and deeply resented messiness of the pre-cultural’ and all its ‘irregularity, randomness, underdetermination, underdefinition, ambiguity’ (Living 122). That final triumph of order over chaos is almost within reach, almost but not quite yet. Bauman questions the worth and wisdom of pursuing this objective further: In the past, he argues, dystopias were written to explore these possibilities and to cast a warning light on the ‘new horrors, no less if not more horrifying than the old ones, even if horrifying in a different way and for different reasons’ (Living 123). Dystopias were (and still are) warnings that our need for order and control over Nature might backfire. For this reason, he argues, utopian thinking needs to be part of our discourse on these new technologies, because as the science-fictional dimension of possibility grows closer, so the dimension of consequence becomes ever more important. We need to discuss the repercussions of crossing the threshold of the human ‘made-to-order’ ever more urgently, the closer we come to this possibility.

In the insecurity of liquid modern times, our dreaming of a better, more controlled and safe world – utopianism, in both its eutopian and its dystopian notion – becomes ever more relevant, as Bauman argues: ‘To put it in a nutshell, we dream of a reliable world, one we can trust. A secure world’ (Liquid Times 95). But utopianism is much older than liquid modernity and thus the idea of what constitutes a utopia – and thus exudes safety – has changed with time, as Bauman remarks: ‘We may say that if the premodern posture towards the world was akin to that of a gamekeeper, it was the gardener’s attitude that would best serve as a metaphor for the modern worldview and practice’ (Liquid Times 98). Bauman’s metaphor of the gamekeeper (of pre-modern times) was mainly one of controlling and keeping intact a world that was in perfect natural balance and as good as it could be. Upholding God’s design and keeping the boundaries of nature and culture under supervision were thus the ideals of pre-modern utopian endeavors.

With modernity came the urge to control and manipulate nature, resulting in the gardener’s approach as a concept of utopianism. ‘The declining importance of the church, secularization and an increasing
impact of a natural scientific worldview coupled with the rise of territorial state authority’ (Jacobsen, ‘Liquid’ 75) brought with it a new approach to creating a safe and reliable world. In gardening utopias, man took control over his garden, giving it ‘constant attention and effort,’ forcing ‘his preconceived design on the plot’ (Bauman, Liquid Times 99) by selection, cultivation, and exclusion of unwanted elements. By controlling the garden and shaping it according to his will, the gardener creates a utopian blueprint, an ideal that society should strive for. As such, utopia is a modern project, Bauman argues, because in times of melting solids, of trying to find new and improved ways to order a society, ‘Utopia was to be the fortress of certainty and stability; a kingdom of tranquility. Instead of confusion – clarity and self-assurance. Instead of the caprices of fate – a steady and consistent, surprise-free sequence of causes and effects’ (Society 229). Utopias were seen as the end products of the modernizing processes, of the changing and insecure times leading towards new and better futures. But they were fixed, solid themselves, and could withstand the uncertainties of the times and tremors that society underwent. As such, utopia was stable, ordered, and controlled. Utopia needed a fixed space; it was based in territoriality.

In liquid modern times, though, this kind of ‘utopian model of a “better future” is out of the question,’ as Bauman puts it, because it promises ‘fixity’ in time and space, ‘stasis’ once society has been engineered into ‘perfection,’ and an unwavering ‘trust’ (Society 239–40) in the future. All of these are not part of individualized, consumption-oriented society of liquid modernity; rather ‘happiness means now a different today rather than a more felicitous tomorrow[, it] […] has become a private affair, and a matter for here and now’ (Society 240). Utopia – or at least the dream of a better life, of the soothing of one’s discomforts – has become privatized, separate from the well-being of others, and even a somewhat generic term for individual wish fulfillment, as Bauman argues after having googled the term and sampled the resulting websites: ‘all of them offer individual services to individuals seeking individual satisfaction and individual escape from individually suffered discomforts’ (Liquid Times 103).

Most importantly, utopia in liquid modernity is ‘linked to mobility, not to a place’: ‘The liquid modern equivalents of the Utopias of yore are neither about time nor about space – but about speed and acceleration’ (Society 241). Bauman concludes that ‘the posture of the gardener is nowadays giving way to that of the hunter’ (Liquid Times 100). His argument is that we don’t believe in a better, safer, and fixed state of life – utopia as fortress, utopia as garden – but rather have embraced the
ideology that security is an impossibility and that in order to survive we must act according to the idea that “good luck” means keeping “bad luck” at a distance (Liquid Times 104), that escape (by being faster than everyone else) guarantees our well-being.

The hunter’s utopia is thus most importantly characterized not as a fixed goal to strive for, but as a process of living in constant movement. ‘Hunters search for fun, excitement, validation, consumer goods and identity’ (‘Liquid’ 76), Jacobsen argues, all the while sampling and surfing their way through an endless array of opportunities. Because of the ample and never-ending supply of new and enticing offerings to choose from – more than any individual could ever sample – both utopias and dystopias of societal proportion have been rendered obsolete and irrelevant by the individualized hunts:

Living in a world full of opportunities – each one more appetizing and alluring than the previous one, each ‘compensating for the last, and providing grounds for shifting towards the next’ – is an exhilarating experience. In such a world, little is predetermined, even less irrevocable. Few defeats are final, few if any mishaps irreversible; yet no victory is ultimate either. For the possibilities to remain infinite, none may be allowed to petrify into everlasting reality. They had better stay liquid and fluid and have a ‘use-by’ date attached, lest they render the remaining opportunities off-limits and nip the future adventure in the bud. (Bauman, Liquid Modernity 62, quoting David Miller)

The downside of this kind of utopia is that ‘hunting is a full-time occupation’ (Bauman, Culture 27), in which ultimate satisfaction can never be achieved as some options are by necessity (because of the amount offered) never explored, some goods never sampled. For consumers, the misery is not how little is on offer, but that they must deny some of the offerings. The key to living in a hunter’s utopia is thus finding the right path, choosing the most advantageous options, and ‘getting the most’ out of the individual life lived. With this constant choosing comes the thrill of never being quite assured and satisfied that the choices were the right ones: ‘Hunting is like a drug: once tasted, it turns into a habit, an inner necessity and an obsession’ (Culture 28). The hunt itself much more exciting than the actual ‘kill,’ the next object of desire immediately beckons, as stopping the hunt is not an option: ‘In a society of hunters, the prospect of the end of the chase is not beguiling, it is horrifying: it would, after all, be a moment of personal failure’ (Culture 28).
As such, the hunter’s utopia extends our conception of what is and determines the category of utopia. It is a ‘strange and unorthodox utopia,’ Bauman says, that might even require us to ‘exchange the term “u-topia” for the term “u-via,”’ as ‘it brings forth a land of solutions and cures from the “there and then” of the distant future to the “here and now” of the present moment. Instead of a life towards utopia, hunters are offered a life in utopia’ (Culture 29; see Liquid Times 108–09). But Bauman is wary of the utopian perspective that the hunt offers, as he concludes his musings by saying that ‘the utopia, or “u-via”, of hunters, the utopia of life revolving around the pursuit of constantly elusive fashion, does not give sense to life, whether authentic or fake. It merely helps to banish the question of life’s meaning from our minds’ (Culture 30).

2.4 Utopian Fiction: Eutopia and Dystopia

Utopianism, Lyman Tower Sargent famously argues, takes different forms and has many varied traditions (2). The ‘Three Faces of Utopianism’\(^7\) that he discusses in the essay of the same name are ‘utopian literature; communitarianism; and utopian social theory’ (4), the first and last of which will be relevant to my analysis here. He then goes on to provide definitions of what constitutes specific forms of utopia that have so far proven to be the common denominator on which to base discussions of the topic. He defines utopianism as ‘social dreaming – the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live’ (3).

In terms of the literary utopia (and other media forms by extension), he then proposes the ideologically neutral term ‘Utopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space,’ with the differentiation between ‘Eutopia or positive utopia’ and ‘Dystopia or negative utopia’ (9) depending on the authorial intention of depicting society as better or worse than the author’s own. He strongly opposes the general conflation of anti-utopia with dystopia on the grounds that these are not depictions of negative societies but rather critiques that use ‘the utopian form to attack either utopias in

\(^7\) The original essay ‘The Three Faces of Utopianism’ was published in 1967 in the Minnesota Review, whereas I am using the extended and revised edition that appeared as ‘The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited’ in Utopian Studies in 1994.
general or a specific utopia’ (8). Anti-utopias can be dystopian, but they need not be.8

Lastly, Sargent agrees with Tom Moylan that there is a newer, hybrid form of critical utopias, which depict a flawed yet positive utopia and which are characterized by a critical stance towards utopia itself: “Critical” in the Enlightenment sense of critique – that is expressions of oppositional thought, unveiling, debunking, of both the genre itself and the historical situation. As well as “critical” in the nuclear sense of the critical mass required to make the necessary explosive reaction’ (Moylan, Demand 10; see Sargent 8–9). Following that argument, Sargent proposed the possibility of a ‘critical dystopia’ (9), which prompted Moylan to later explore the category, which he argues is characterized by the same self-reflexivity as and continuing ‘in the political and poetic spirit of critical utopias even as they revive the dystopian strategy to map, warn, and hope’ (Moylan, Scraps 196).

The history of utopian literature (in both its eutopian and its dystopian form) with all its different literary variations is too long and varied to be discussed here in detail,9 but one of its key features is and remains ‘its relationship with reality’:

Utopists depart from the observation of the society they live in, note down the aspects that need to be changed and imagine a place where those problems have been solved; utopias are by essence dynamic, and in spite of the fact that they are born out of a given set of circumstances, their scope of action is not limited to a criticism of the present; indeed utopias put forward projective ideas that are to be adopted by future audiences, which may cause real changes. (Vieira 8)

Utopian literature is thus concerned with both a flawed or problematic present and the creation – by criticism, projection, and/or warning – of a

8 Tom Moylan explores the difference between anti-utopia and dystopia in his book Scraps of the Untainted Sky in developing what he calls ‘The Dystopian Continuum,’ a matrix of literary forms that shift between ‘radical hope’ and ‘resigned pessimism’ (195). In short, he argues that dystopia ‘negotiates the continuum between the Party of Utopia and the Party of Anti-Utopia’ (xiii) depending on the existence of an alternative to dystopia or the text’s insistence on the settling into the status quo of the dystopia respectively.

9 For a short overview see Vieira, as well as the other essays in Claeys, Companion. Longer works discussing the changing utopian imagination are, among others, Baccolini and Moylan; Heller et al.; Kumar; Levitas; Moylan, Demand; Moylan, Scraps; Schaer et al.
new and better future. Whereas the eutopian form wants to set examples, informing the reader about alternatives for a better life, the dystopian form is ‘pessimistic in its presentation of projective images’ (Vieira 17) and uses a similar didacticism rather to warn readers about their responsibility to ensure that things do not turn out the way depicted. The reader’s response is similar for both genres though: In both cases, the presented future is only supposed to show one possibility, one path that can be chosen. The critical variants (as discussed above), on the other hand, blur the lines of utopia/dystopia, leaving fragmented, diverse, and multiple futures for the reader to explore, and thus teach them ‘not only about the world around them but also about the open-ended ways in which texts can both elucidate that world and help to develop the critical capacity of people to know, challenge, and change those aspects of it that deny or inhibit the further emancipation of humanity’ (Moylan, Scraps 199).

Utopian/dystopian literature is thus the epitome of a creative intervention into central socio-political discourses that are negotiated in a given society, making it ‘one of the most important means by which any culture can investigate new ways of defining itself and of exploring alternatives to the social and political status quo’ (Booker 3). In this form of social criticism, dystopia ‘constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems,’ defined not so much as a literary genre but rather as ‘a particular kind of oppositional and critical energy or spirit’ (Booker 3).

Sargent similarly identifies this critical energy in his third ‘face’ of utopianism: utopian social thought. He argues that social reform and the imagination of a better/different future are interconnected and interdependent: ‘Utopia serves as a mirror to contemporary society, pointing to strengths and weaknesses, more often the latter. This is one of its most important functions’ (27) in terms of both literature and social thought. But especially in the latter case, this function and how to apply it has not gone unchallenged, as Ruth Levitas shows in her seminal study The Concept of Utopia. Levitas identifies the concept of utopia as an ideological battleground on which political, sociological, and cultural turf wars are being fought over what exactly the form, function, and content of utopia are. The range of utopian studies from the nineteenth century onward (Marx, Bloch, Mannheim, Marcuse, etc.) that she analyzes is impressive but nevertheless leaves her dissatisfied, as these voices remain in dissonance: ‘The present absence of consensus, however, results not simply in the peaceful coexistence of different definitions but in competing claims for primacy’ (180).

As a result, she proposes an inclusive definition that eschews discussions of content, form, and function in favor of ‘a broad analytic
definition of utopia’ (198). As Levitas explains, the ‘essence of utopia seems to be desire – the desire for a different, better way of being’ (181), all aspects of which are socially constructed and specific to circumstances and not inherent in human nature: ‘Utopianism, then, has as a precondition a disparity between socially constructed experienced need and socially prescribed and actually available means of satisfaction’ (183). Utopian thought is the product of need faced with a ‘scarcity gap’ (184) in realizing that need. Because of the socially constructed nature of both need and satisfaction, Levitas further argues, there cannot be an evaluation of utopia based on universal principles of what constitutes a ‘good society’ and what a ‘bad society’: ‘If needs are socially constructed, the project of trying to read off the good society from a definition of human nature and human needs is doomed to failure’ (184). In terms of their ideological evaluation, utopias’ value is just as socially constructed and not universally recognized, making it possible for utopias to be counter-cultural or culturally affirmative, socialist or neoliberalist, Marxist or fascist (183ff.). Lastly, Levitas addresses the issue of practicability or possibility by saying that utopia is defined by desire for improvement, not necessarily by the hope that change towards that desire is possible:

The essential element in utopia is not hope, but desire – the desire for a better way of being. It involves the imagining of a state of being in which the problems which actually confront us are removed or resolved, often, but not necessarily, through the imagining of a state of the world in which the scarcity gap is closed or the ‘collective problem’ solved. (191)

Consequently, utopia does not always include societal solutions to the problem, but would also allow the ‘pursuit of individual psychological and physical “fitness”’ that signals a ‘withdrawal of utopia from the social to the personal’ (192). Under this definition of utopia, Bauman’s continuous hunt for consumer goods certainly makes sense as a utopian construction.

What remains is the question of the function of utopia in regard to its sociological and political impact. ‘The function of utopia,’ Levitas concludes, ‘thus reverts from that of a goal and catalyst of change to one of criticism, and the education of desire, without any necessary move forward into action’ (196). This is especially true of the critical variety of both utopia and dystopia, characterized through its ambiguous nature, which in Levitas’s opinion signals a loss of confidence: ‘The presentation of alternative futures, multiple possibilities and fragmented
images of time reflects a lack of confidence about whether and how a better world can be reached’ (196). The uncertainty, insecurity, fragmentation, and dissolution of social, political, and economic realities that we experience in liquid modernity are thus reflected in critical utopia/dystopia’s ambiguous models of potential change.

For Levitas, the problem of a realization of change lies not in utopianism but in ‘political culture in general,’ as the urgency of political action grows while the agent of change is increasingly absent with the demise of proletarian socialist revolutions, as we seem ‘unable to substitute convincingly any group or element which would form the basis of opposition’ (196). But exciting political action is not the only function of utopia; rather it serves as cultural ‘exploration of the implications of alternative values,’ presenting the transition towards a better state of being as: (i) merely possible, rather than inevitable; (ii) involving some kind of radical break from the present, necessary because it is not possible to identify trends in the present which seem likely to lead to utopia; (iii) a very vaguely defined event’ (197). This analysis is reflective of Bauman’s conception of utopia, which according to Jacobsen is ‘an embryonic utopia of possibilities,’ not a ‘master plan or a blueprint,’ and which ‘oozes of ambivalence, emancipation and alterity, not control, order and subjugation’ (Jacobsen, ‘Liquid’ 91).

Bauman shares Levitas’s analysis that the possibility of utopian change is located in politics and that political agency has been dissolved: ‘The most conspicuous feature of contemporary politics,’ Bauman writes, ‘is its insignificance’ (In Search 4). The dual translation between the public and the private that politics is supposed to facilitate has been turned inside out, as Bauman argues, and ‘politics has been effectively disarmed’ (Society 169). Flaws in policy cannot be grasped as unethical anymore, because they do not connect to the individual directly, whereas unethical private actions become political outrages (as witnessed in the Clinton–Lewinsky affair), when the individual life choices do not appeal to the public. Politicians have been replaced by idols, who share their private life politics, becoming examples not leaders. Politics has become part of liquid modernity’s array of privatizations and individualizations, in the process losing utopian vision and intention. The main concern in regard to this concentration on individual life politics instead of global political and social issues, as Bauman claims (drawing on Cornelius Castoriadis), is a loss of self-reflection necessary for utopianism: ‘the trouble with the contemporary condition of our modern civilization is that it stopped questioning itself. Not asking certain questions is pregnant with more dangers than failing to answer the questions already on the official agenda’ (Globalization 5). Bauman continues by claiming his book – and
all of his sociological work – as an ‘exercise in asking and prompting the asking of questions’ (Globalization 5).

This then is the utopian dimension in Bauman’s work: instead of providing blueprints and ‘map[ping] out the future in inches and minutes,’ his thought needs to be understood as ‘iconoclastic’ in that the future could not be described [...] it could only be approached through hints and parables. One could “hear” the future, but not see it (Jacoby, Picture xv; see Jacobsen, ‘Liquid’ 91). Russell Jacoby had only five years earlier declared ‘blueprint’ utopianism to be dead and all hope of a better future extinguished by a fatalistic consensus that ‘[t]here are no alternatives. This is the wisdom of our times, an age of political exhaustion and retreat’ (End of Utopia xii). But Jacoby also believes that at the same time we might learn from ‘iconoclastic utopianism,’ even see it as ‘indispensable’ (Picture xvi). Central to his view is that the iconoclasts’ pictorial reserve about the future coexisted with attentiveness to the present; this form of utopianism has a strong ‘regard for the here and now. It yearns for the future and values the present’ (Picture 141).

This strong attentiveness to the present, as we have seen above described by critics in regard to literary utopias as well as sociology, can easily be appropriated to Bauman’s utopian thought, a complex of ideas which Mark Davis describes as ‘Bauman’s compass’: ‘a particular way of orienting ourselves towards the present, rather than towards some distant and longed-for future’ (187). Important to Bauman’s utopianism then remains the concentration on the current moment in liquid modernity, which Davis claims ‘allows us to ensure that we are better able to navigate the complexities and uncertainties of the current interregnum and to move hopefully beyond it’ (187). The interregnum, a concept originally introduced to Bauman’s work by Keith Tester, describes the early twenty-first century as beginning with ‘a dramatic stage of transition away from the established social, economic, political and environmental certainties of the recent past’ (M. Davis 185). Whereas the term originally describes a period of time that is characterized by the uncertainty during the transitional phase between two sovereigns, Bauman himself extends it beyond that individual process of transferring power from one ruler to the next, as Davis claims, in order ‘to capture those seminal moments when an entire social order starts to fragment and to lose its authority,’ especially ‘when there is no new social order currently ready to take its place’ (185). So when the solid phase of modernity began to unravel and dissolve, it left society in the new and globalized (dis)order of liquid modernity, but without any form of sovereign to replace the former ruler of liberal industrial capitalism. Bauman himself remains unsure if liquid modernity is ‘an augury or a
portent of things to come’ or just ‘a temporary and transient […] interim settlement’ representing thus a form of interregnum:

when the old ways of doing things no longer work, the old learned or inherited modes of life are no longer suitable for the current *conditio humana*, but when the new ways of tackling the challenges and new modes of life better suited to the new conditions have not as yet been invented, put in place and set in operation […] we don’t have a clear image of a ‘destination’ towards which we seem to be moving – which needs to be a model of *global* society, a global economy, global politics, a global jurisdiction … Instead, we react to the latest trouble, experimenting, groping in the dark. (*Liquid Modernity* vii)

Social thought, as practiced by Zygmunt Bauman, takes into consideration the darkness that is around us, and remains critical of the conditions of our lives, sees as its purpose the active ‘asking’ of critical questions and the disclosure of said conditions (*Liquid Modernity* 215). It is utopian, as Jacobsen and Tester (1) argue, in that it displays a *confidence* in finding a better being in the world, has the *hope* that finding the way there is worthwhile, and in that it identifies certain *latent tendencies* in our existence that project that future. In liquid modern reality, the latent tendencies that Bauman identifies are characterized by the decay, degradation, and dissolution of social categories, and thus need to be viewed in terms of the dystopian imagination – even if for the individual the hunter’s utopia might be a feasible and subjectively positive path. These dystopian tendencies are not in any way less important to disclose though: ‘Sometimes the uncovering of latent tendencies points to graveyards not just open fields and enchanting horizons. Yet knowing where the graveyards might be may enable the journey into the not-yet to take a different route’ (Jacobsen and Tester 3).

Liquid modernity needs to be understood as a critically dystopian present that thinkers such as Bauman continuously critique and deconstruct, disclosing its utopian and dystopian dimensions, in order for society to be able to see alternative routes to the future. But as Levitas has argued, the fragmentation of these futures, the dissolution of clear-cut boundaries, and the presentation of multiple possible paths leave us in the dark, unable to decide which way to turn as no destinations appear. Critical posthumanism, as described by Herbrechter, Wolfe, or Braidotti, may present us with the option to shine a light into that socio-political darkness as it opens up new ways of thinking and conceptualizing what Bauman describes as the current *conditio humana*. 
In light of the posthuman conception of a \textit{zoe}-centric becoming-animal, becoming-earth, and becoming-machine as well as taking into consideration the necropolitical dimensions of globalization and liquid modern, individualized consumer society, we find ourselves not in the \textit{conditio humana} but rather in the \textit{conditio posthumana}.

The technoscientific progress of genetic engineering, the late-capitalist globalized economic and media networks, and the Anthropocene condition of our existence all have catapulted us into becoming posthuman. The world around us has with its modern desire for progress become science-fictional. The historical dimension of possibility has long passed our human selves and embraced a posthumanity, and we only now catch up with the consequences of these transitions. The cultural formation of biopunk, grounded in the literary tradition of cyberpunk science fiction but extending beyond that, interconnects the diverging discourses on liquid modernity, posthumanism, and technoscientific progress into an array of artworks that negotiate the wide field of the critical dystopian imagination left open by our fears and anxieties, but also our hopes and desires in being posthuman. It will be the work of the next chapters to chart this field, to analyze exemplary cultural artifacts (films, TV series, novels, and video games) as artistic and social criticism aimed to provide a possible map of the dark and uncharted territory that lies ahead.