Fabricating The Posthuman Child In Early Childhood Education and Care

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INTRODUCTION

Political interest in younger children and preschool as an educational institution is growing internationally. It is important, therefore, to attend to the social context in which preschools exists and that shapes the policy agenda surrounding them. This agenda entails reforms and developments that redefine the function and role of preschool and also, therefore, that shape the kind of preschool that actually emerges. Sweden is frequently regarded as a "model country,"2 as it combines care and education within the framework of the preschool institution. The percentage of children attending preschool in Sweden is among the highest in the world, with approximately 87% starting preschool before the age of 2³ (with preschool being available for all children from one year of age). Preschool is thus a well-established part of Swedish society, both culturally and in terms of how society is socially and economically organized;⁴ namely, its quest for social leveling and equality on the labor market. 5 Gradually, a larger proportion of children has come to participate in preschool, and from a younger age. Although it is not a compulsory part of schooling, preschool is covered by the Swedish Education Act.⁶ In this respect, the state has never before had so much (educational) influence over the younger generation.⁷

Furthermore, preschool is attributed great importance both as an instrument of societal integration and as providing appropriate school preparation. What is distinctive about preschool is that systematic measurements of knowledge cannot be made, which consequently leaves it susceptible to other types of governance and evaluation methods, and also to various ontological

assumptions, in an attempt to meet political expectations of "learning outcomes." In this essay, we aim to discuss a specific set of ontological assumptions that relate to the theoretical movement within educational research referred to as posthumanism, which has had a notable impact in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

The pursuit of equivalent quality across ECEC provision is high on the Swedish education policy agenda. The revised curriculum for Swedish preschools,8 which took effect in 2010, specifies goals regarding school-related subject knowledge and contains a new chapter titled "Follow-up, evaluation and development." This chapter emphasizes the responsibility of teachers to evaluate and develop pedagogical practice based on documentation of individual children's development and learning. To aid teachers in this work, the Swedish National Agency of Education (Skolverket) has published and distributed support materials9 that promote "pedagogical documentation" 10 as an observation and evaluation tool, to all preschools in Sweden. In these support materials, the use of pedagogical documentation is explicitly positioned within a "new" post-constructionist/posthumanist11 theoretical framework. In addition, the theoretical approach previously associated with pedagogical documentation as an evaluation tool is criticized for its excessive linguistic and interpersonal focus, and thus for obscuring the possibilities to fully describe and realize the transdisciplinary nature and relational complexity of learning.

Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, ¹² a Swedish scholar frequently quoted throughout the support materials, promotes the development of posthumanist methodologies in the ECEC field as a way to develop a language that enables researchers, as well as teachers, to work in ways that go beyond the binary divide (i.e. the Cartesian cut) between mind and body, intellect and emotion, nature and culture, and theory and practice. That is, a language that acknowledges both the "intertwined discursive and material reality of pedagogical practices" and the mutual dependence between the child and the world. ¹⁴ The theoretical shift towards posthumanism is described by Lenz Taguchi as an "ontological turn," i.e., it is not only a collection of theories that "give direction for how we produce knowledge (epistemology), but also for how we understand the world, matter

and materiality, and how we understand ourselves (ontology)." ¹⁵ Lenz Taguchi further argues that, if taken seriously, this posthumanist "ontological and material turn" will have major implications for how we understand education. Whether this is the case or not, the fact that an explicit theoretical statement has been made by a governmental authority through educational policy can be considered fairly unique. As the ECEC research field is still young, it is not yet limited by firm traditions. Parts of the field still lie in uncharted territory, which opens up opportunities for philosophical experimentation and theoretical challenge.

In this essay, we examine how posthumanist theory is expressed in ECEC research. With Swedish ECEC policy as an example, we consider what elements and themes are accentuated when posthumanist theory becomes practicable and is presented as a method for educational practice. Here, the relationship between child and nature (as an expression of materiality) seems to be of great importance. It appears as if the taken for granted connection between child and nature in the Nordic and Anglo-Saxon countries, guarded both culturally and by curricula, works as an enabler for establishing a posthuman perspective in the ECEC field.

In an effort to examine how the posthuman child is made, or brought into existence, we draw on Thomas Popkewitz's interrelated concepts of "fiction" and "fabrication." ¹⁶ According to Popkewitz, fabrication has a double meaning as both a fiction and a "maker of 'things'." Understood as a fiction, "the posthuman child" provides ways to understand and describe things, relations, and the course of events. The fiction of "the posthuman child" is not only an idea and a way to describe the child's being in the world, however. Through educational research, "the posthuman child" is called into existence and it is "given the ontological status of 'real'." ¹⁷ The "posthuman child" is, then, a fabrication produced through research and policy. As such, the concept provides ways to think about, and act towards, children as particular kinds of people in educational practice. ¹⁸ As Popkewitz explains: "the fabrication of research make possible new techniques for structuring reality as new phenomena and effects are imagined." ¹⁹ Through policy, educational research can therefore be regarded as both a maker of fictions and a fabricator of human kinds.

FABRICATING THE POSTHUMAN CHILD

The need for a posthumanist reconceptualization of ECEC policy and practice seems to arise from a much broader political and philosophical notion about the world as being in a state of (ecological, financial, political, refugee, etc.) crisis. The EU Commission report titled *Europe 2020. A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth* describes how the last great financial crisis wiped out years of economic and social progress.²⁰ The world is portrayed as fast-changing, with long-term challenges such as globalization and the pressure on resources intensified. Not only are human political and social life chances at stake, but also the survival of the planet. This intensifies competition and raises new demands. In the report, strategies are formulated for how to maintain the EU's competitiveness in a socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable way, which is largely considered to be dependent on education, particularly in the areas of mathematics, science and technology, and language. The fiction of a world in crisis and the search for sustainable solutions opens up to theoretical innovation and new directions in educational research.

According to Rosi Braidotti, 21 as well as Lenz Taguchi, 22 the classic humanistic theories and ideological systems are inadequate for describing and understanding both the contemporary world and the human subject itself. Frans Kruger explains that, "in a time when the foundations of liberal individualism and its economic expression of advanced capitalism is increasingly being challenged due to a growing recognition of the havoc it has [caused] and is still causing, in terms of inter-human relations and human relations with the nonhuman," we as humans ethically "have no choice but to experiment with different forms of becoming in the world." ²³ In the posthumanist critique of the humanist worldview, the humanist subject is challenged. The presumption that humans stand above all other species (in a sort of human chauvinism) and have specific value, rights, and privileges based on the simple fact of being human, is rejected. In the light of the history of Western humanism's justification of colonialism, slavery, and objectification, some posthumanist scholars argue that the privilege of being counted as "fully human" was never afforded to everyone²⁴ (e.g., not to women, children, racialized groups, and the disabled). Thus, as Braidotti puts it, we have never been human (in a humanistic sense) in the first place. ²⁵

In ECEC research, posthumanism is explained as an invitation to reconsider the human subject through the child. Karin Murris ²⁶ advocates a "decolonization" of both education and childhood by introducing posthumanist theory as a form of counter-discourse to the understanding of learning in terms of economism and growth and as an alternative to a psychological, reductionist, universal understanding of the child.²⁷ The child needs to be freed from hierarchical categorizations. In order to go beyond these categorizations, Murris further argues, we must go back to what was before the humanist Cartesian cut, that is, before the divide between culture and nature. In an effort to "decolonize" childhood, i.e., to liberate the child from a humanist world view, the child is described as an "epistemological orphan." ²⁸ In the fiction of the posthumanist world, there simply are no epistemological or ontological fathers (such as Descartes) to turn to anymore. In this way, the child is explained as being "released" from historically segmented categorization.

In a similar way, Lenz Taguchi argues that we, as teachers and researchers, can re-evaluate our current knowledge by going beyond the taken-for-granted truths about children's development and learning through challenging dominant binaries associated with a humanist world view. ²⁹ Affrica Taylor and Veronica Pancini-Ketchabaw stress that: "Not only human beings are learnable. These more-than-human pedagogies exceed the logic of developmentalism, in which the individual child acquires age-appropriate knowledge in the process of becoming rational and autonomous." ³⁰ The "traditional" (Western) educational system is thereby questioned, as is the notion of education as a human enterprise by people for people.

According to a posthumanist argumentation, there simply is no independent or autonomous subject. Children are described as "emergent in a *relational field*, where *non*-human forces are equally at play in constituting children's becomings." "They [the children] *are* the world, not 'in' it, but *part* of the world," just like all other organisms and matter. According to Karen Barad, who is heavily drawn upon in posthumanist ECEC research, we do not pre-exist our interaction with the world, because there is no self-contained exis-

tence in the world. ³³ Thus, as Lenz Taguchi puts it, individuals "*emerge* through, and as a part of, their entangled intra-actions with everything else." ³⁴ In order to emphasize the child's utterly complex "material-discursive" becoming in time and space, Murris describes the child as an "inhuman-iii." ³⁵ To reconnect this to the Swedish support materials mentioned in the introduction of this essay, children's relational existence is explained in the way that "the human and the social do not have a higher value than what is going on in the relationships between humans and the environment. All relationships are seen as important for human existence." ³⁶ In this sense, the world is viewed as "flattened" ³⁷ and non-hierarchical.

This fiction of the posthuman child portrays a being that embodies flexibility and transformation through its multiple becomings with the world. The child is not regarded as an autonomous actor of change, but as enmeshed in a huge relational field, becoming again and again in its entanglement with material and discursive forces. As such, the child is always in motion and always in transformation in itself. The posthuman child is, furthermore, positioned beyond subjectivity, discourse, and binary categorization. Fabricated as an answer and a solution to contemporary social, political, and environmental challenges, the fiction of the posthuman child becomes a site in which to realize an alternative form of being and a more "sustainable" human existence.³⁸ In the light of "ecocentrism," this interpretation of sustainability is often accentuated by promoting the child's relation to the natural environment as being "one." As discussed below, the notion of nature responds well to the fiction of the world and the child in constant flux.

THE CHILD'S RELATION TO NATURE

The posthuman child is being fabricated in relation to an ecocentric world, where the child is no longer positioned at its center, but, rather, at the periphery (and as part of everything else). Through a flat ontology, the complexity of the world is acknowledged at the same time as it is made manageable, as everything is valued as equal when hierarchies and taxonomies are removed. The

child is to rediscover the wonders of nature with reverence and respect instead of using it for their own benefit. The modern human portrays alienation from nature and the refusal to understand that humans are one species among all others, and expressions of meaning and life. The solution to these wrongdoings is the re-naturalization of humankind (through the child).

As well as in Sweden, the posthumanist movement has had an impact within the ECEC research field in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw⁴⁰ describe the theoretical foundations for preschool in Australia and Canada, where researchers from both countries join forces in urging how teachers can, and should, work with this perspective in the natural environment as a metaphor for the complexity of the world. In connecting posthumanism with indigenous studies, indigenous history (e.g., of New Zealand and Australia) is portrayed, by scholars such as Jenny Ritchie, 41 as an example of a bad postcolonial conscience connected to crimes against nature and the "natural" way of life, including exploitation and forced civilization, committed in the name of "Western civilization." Through the posthumanist project, the grandchildren of the postcolonial world can be understood to be re-naturalized and brought back to "nature." This can be interpreted as a mixture of posthumanism and outdoor education, where the latter has its place of honor in the Nordic countries, but also in England and in Anglo-Saxon countries where it comes to practical educational expression through so-called "forest schools" and the like.43

The notion of "nature" and the impact it is assumed to have on children's development and learning is also well established in the Swedish preschool context. Along with an emphasis on sociological, rather than developmental, perspectives on childhood,⁴⁴ nature and environmental discourses together make way for a relational understanding of the child, and open up a category of existence that transforms and comes into being in relation to the environment. It seems that the core aim for the fabrication of the posthuman child is to change direction completely, and to abandon human domination and supremacy in relation to nature.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this essay, we have discussed how the fiction of the posthuman child is fabricated as a response to the contemporary environmental, social, and financial crisis. In relation to a world in crisis, the posthuman child, through the reinvention of, and coexistence with, the environment/nature, becomes a site for the realization of an alternative relational form of being (i.e., an alternative to the individualistic, rational, and autonomous subject). The posthumanist perspective destabilizes the idea of progress (as understood from a humanist point of view), and appears to do so by revoking the uniqueness of human nature and by promoting the ability to gaze beyond the time and place of existence in efforts to solve human problems. When the child is positioned within a "flat ontology," where no distinction between different types of existence is made (cf. the universal child as described in the OECD and EU policy),⁴⁵ the child is expected to experience and comprehend the interdependence between self and the world. In the quest to save the world and to bring forth people who can participate in this, the posthuman child is put in a neutral value position alongside other agentic forms of life and materiality. The child is portrayed as both natural and transforming, as a prophetic being at the same time as it is wiped out (through the dissolution of the subject). As such, the child is not an autonomous "actor of change," but an embodiment of change in itself. Drawn upon as a posthumanist theoretical resource, the child's individual uniqueness, agency, and rights run the risk of becoming blurred; a contradiction that deserves further consideration.

In the Swedish example, posthumanist theory travels through policy in the form of recommendations and methods for how the child is to be perceived, i.e., the redefinition of the ontology of the child. This theoretical movement can be interpreted as a resistance to a school-oriented development that focuses on child-centered (individual) learning (based on outcomes) and specific subject knowledge within ECEC. Paradoxically, Sweden is one of the countries that, in an effort to improve the quality of educational practice, has chosen to focus on developing the curriculum for Swedish preschool, which defines both specific subject knowledge and learning subjects.⁴⁶ Two seemingly

incommensurable perspectives appear to be competing in the Swedish example: a developmentalist and a posthumanist. We argue that one of the reasons that posthumanist theory has gained impact in the Swedish ECEC discourse is rooted in the fiction of the young child as having a strong connection to nature and being physically and emotionally involved with the world. The theory challenges common assumptions about education, the child, and the world, and offers an alternative to what seems to be a universal developmentalist educational discourse, 47 but unfortunately at the cost of jeopardizing the child's ontological status as human subject.

- 1 See OECD, Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2015); Eurostat, Smarter, Greener, More Inclusive? Indicators to Support the European 2020 Strategy (Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union, 2015). For an illustrative example, see the influential economist James Heckman's work, on whose home page http://heckman.uchicago.edu (retrieved 1 November 2016), Hillary Clinton is cited as saying, "Early childhood education is the single best investment for growing the economy."
- 2 www.scb.se/statistik/_publikationer/UF0526_2005A01_BR_05_UF100OP0501.pdf
- 3 Skolverket, Start/Statistik & Utvärdering/Statistik i tabeller/Förskola/Barn och grupper/År 2015 (www.skolverket.se, retrieved 1 November 2016).
- 4Anne-Trine Kjørholt, Modern Child and the Flexible Labour Market: Early Childhood Education and Care (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- 5 Bengt Sandin and Maria Sundkvist, *Barn, Barndom och Samhälle: Svensk Utbildningshistoria* [Children, Childhood and Society: The Swedish History of Education] (Johanneshov: MTM, 2014).
- 6 SFS (The Swedish Code of Statues), *Skollag* [Education Act] Report No. 2010:800 (Stockholm, Sweden: Utbildningsdepartementet, 2010).
- 7 Kjørholt, Modern Child and the Flexible Labour Market; Sandin & Sundkvist, Barn, Barndom och Samhälle.
- 8 Skolverket (Swedish National Agency for Education), *Curriculum for the Preschool. Lpfö 98. Revised 2010* (Stockholm, Sweden: Skolverket, 2010).

- 9 Skolverket, *Uppföljning, Utvärdering och Utveckling i Förskolan: Pedagogisk Dokumentation* [Follow-Up, Evaluation and Development in Preschool: Pedagocial Documentation] (Stockholm: Skolverket, 2012).
- 10 The concept "pedagogical documentation," as a method and tool, was coined by the Gunilla Dahlberg in Sweden in the mid-1980s, but finds its origin in the municipal nurseries and preschools in the province of Reggio Emilia, Italy. In the Swedish adaptation, a connection between the Reggio Emilia philosophical pedagogical approach, pedagogical documentation as method, and a postmodern social constructionist epistemology has been made. See Gunilla Dahlberg and Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, Förskola och Skola: Om Två Skilda Traditioner och om Visionen om en Mötesplats [Preschool and School: About Two Distinct Traditions and the Vision of One Meeting Space] (Stockholm, Sweden: HLS, 1994) and Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss, and Alan Pence, Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspectives (London: Falmer, 1999). The focus of the documentation is, in a Swedish ECEC context, outlined as children's learning strategies and processes in educational practice. Skolverket, Uppföljning, utvärdering och utveckling i förskolan: pedagogisk dokumentation.
- 11 The fact that the term "post-constructionist" is used in the support material (Skolverket, Uppföljning, Utvärdering och Utveckling i Förskolan: Pedagogisk Dokumentation) is interesting. We believe that this is probably done to emphasize a break from the previous, postmodern, social constructionist theoretical framework. However, the term used in other texts, in both research and literature aimed at teachers working with "pedagogical documentation," is "posthumanism." See, e.g., Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, Going beyond the Theory/Practice Divide in Early Childhood Education: Introducing an Intra-active Pedagogy (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010). See also Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, "Investigating Learning, Participation and Becoming in Early Childhood Practices With a Relational Materialist Approach," in Global Studies of Childhood 1, no. 1 (2011): 36-50; and Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, Pedagogisk Dokumentation som Aktiv Agent: Introduktion till Intra-aktiv Pedagogik [Pedagogical Documentation as Active Agent; Introducing an Intra-active Pedagogy] (Malmö, Sweden: Gleerups utbildning, 2012).
- 12 Lenz Taguchi, Going beyond the Theory/Practice Divide; see also Lenz Taguchi Pedagogisk Dokumentation som Aktiv Agent.
- 13 Lenz Taguchi, Going beyond the Theory/Practice Divide, 3.
- 14 Skolverket, Uppföljning, Utvärdering och Utveckling i Förskolan: Pedagogisk Dokumentation.

- 15 Lenz Taguchi, Pedagogisk Dokumentation som Aktiv Agent: Introduktion till Intra-aktiv Pedagogik, p. 12.
- 16 Thomas Popkewitz, "The Sociology of Education as the History of the Present: Fabrication, Difference and Abjection," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 34, no. 3 (2013): 439-456.
- 17 Popkewitz, "The Sociology of Education as the History of the Present," 440.
- 18 See further discussion on "making up people" in Ian Hacking, "The Looping Effect of Human Kinds," in *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, eds. Dan Sperber, David Premack, and Ann J. Premack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 19 Thomas Popkewitz, "The Alchemy of the Mathematics Curriculum: Inscriptions and the Fabrication of the Child," *American Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 1 (2004): 3-34, 13.
- 20 European Commission. Europe 2020. A Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth (Brussels: European Commission, 2010), 3.
- 21 Rosi Braidotti, The Posthuman (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).
- 22 Lenz Taguchi, Pedagogisk Dokumentation som Aktiv Agent.
- 23 Frans Kruger, "Experimenting with Nomadic Posthumanism: Conceptualising education and rural learning ecologies differently," Alter*nation*, Special Edition 16 (2015): 329-345, 337. Available at: http://alternation.ukzn.ac.za/Files/docs/22%20SpEd16/15%20Kruger%20F.pdf
- 24 Braidotti, The Posthuman.
- 25 Braidotti, The Posthuman.
- 26 Karin Murris' book *The Posthuman Child: Educational Transformation through Philosophy with Picturebooks* was published in the Routledge book series titled *Contesting Early Childhood* (London: Routledge, 2016). This book series, with roots in the Swedish Reggio Emilia philosophical approach to education, has had a significant impact internationally on theoretical challenge and development in the ECEC field.
- 27 Concerning ECEC policy and practice, Lenz Taguchi (*Going beyond the Theory/Practice Divide in Early Childhood Education*), Affrica Taylor, Veronica Pacinini-Ketchabaw, and Mindy Blaise ("Children's Relations to the More-Than-Human World," *Contemporary Issues In Early Childhood* 13, no. 2 (2012): 81-85) stress that, from a global point of view, child development theory is

- still the dominant and determinative theory.
- 28 Karin Murris, The Posthuman Child: Educational Transformation through Philosophy with Picturebooks, 88.
- 29 Lenz Taguchi, Going Beyond the Theory/Practice Divide in Early Childhood Education; see also Lenz Taguchi, Pedagogisk Dokumentation som Aktiv Agent.
- 30 Affrica Taylor & Veronica Pacini Ketchabaw, "Learning with Children, Ants, and Worms in the Anthropocene: Towards a Common World Pedagogy of Multispecies Vulnerability," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 23, no. 4 (2015): 507-529, 516.
- 31 Karin Hultman & Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, "Challenging Anthropocentric Analysis of Visual Data: A Relational Materialist Methodological Approach to Educational Research," *QSE. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 23, no. 5 (2010): 525-542, 525.
- 32 Karin Murris, The Posthuman Child: Educational Transformation through Philosophy with Picturebooks, 54.
- 33 Karen Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 34 Lenz Taguchi, Going Beyond the Theory/Practice Divide in Early Childhood Education, 41.
- 35 This figure is set in contrast to the child-as-nature (or the "last savage), the "child-as-i", and the social constructionist/poststructuralist discursively constructed child, the "child-as-I".
- 36 Skolverket, *Uppföljning*, *Utvärdering och Utveckling i Förskolan: Pedagogisk Dokumentation*, 32 (our translation).
- 37 "An ontology is flat if it makes no distinction between types of things that exist but treats all equally." Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or, What it's like to be a Thing* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 17.
- 38 In the creation of a more sustainable world, the agency of nature is emphasized, not the possibilities of technology.
- 39 Jenny Ritchie, "Early Childhood Education as a Site of Ecocentric Counter-colonial Endeavour in Aotearoa New Zealand," *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 13, no. 2 (2012): 86-98.
- 40 Taylor & Pacini Ketchabaw, "Learning with Children, Ants, and Worms in the Anthropocene."
- 41 Ritchie, "Early Childhood Education as a Site of Ecocentric Counter-colonial Endeavour in Aotearoa New Zealand."

- 42 Debashish Banerji and Makarand R. Paranjape, *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures* (New Delhi: Springer India, 2016).
- 43 Magdalena Sjöstrand Öhrfelt, Barn i Natur och Natur i Barn: en Diskursanalys av Texter om Utomhuspedagogik och Uteförskola [Children in Nature, and the Nature of Children; a Discourse Analysis of Texts on

Outdoor Pedagogy and Outdoor Preschool] (Malmö högskola, Sweden: Fakulteten för Lärande och Samhälle, 2015).

- 44 With roots in a Froebel-based pedagogy and later strongly influenced by a progressive educational movement. Barnomsorg och Skolakommittén, *Att erövra omvärlden: förslag till läroplan för förskolan : slutbetänkande* [To Conquer the World: Draft Curriculum for Preschool: Final Report] (Stockholm, Sweden: Fritze, 1997).
- 45 OECD, Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2015); Eurostat, Smarter, Greener, More Inclusive? Indicators to Support the European 2020 Strategy and European Commission, Europe 2020. A Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth.
- 46 OECD, Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care; Eurostat, Smarter, Greener, More Inclusive? Indicators to Support the European 2020 Strategy; http://heckman.uchicago.edu.
- 47 Braidotti, The Posthuman.