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The Holographic Human

Dominic Pettman. *Human Error: Species-Being and Media Machines*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 360 pp.

This tour de force work consists of a series of attempts to articulate and correct some metaphysical errors in humanist, anti-humanist, and posthumanist literature. Perhaps the greatest and most general "human error" that this book manages to correct is the exclusion of the machine from the literature of the animal turn. Even current talk, on the heels of Giorgio Agamben, of the anthropogenic or anthropological "machine" falls short of really exploring the technological nature of humanist logic. From the first page, which places us in front of our TVs, watching *Planet Earth* on the Discovery Channel, through chapters that examine voice recording technologies, the camera, the telephone, the Turing Test, time capsules, and crude oil extraction, Pettman's engagement with the question of the animal is deeply technologically inflected. This is to be expected given Pettman's other work, like *Love and Other Technologies* (2006), in which he shows that our most erotic, libidinal, and "spiritual" modes of being depend on tools, prosthetics, and media, all in the business of trying to capture the elusive human element, that mythic thing that sets us apart from "other animals." In fact, we not only depend on technologies for our most human modes of being, but these modes themselves are technologies. Pettman amends Agamben's insight with a more complex machinery, or three machines together working as one: "Crudely put, 'the world' is no more and no less than the 'objective' interaction of the anthropological machine, the zoological machine, and the medialogical machine (as opposed to the first framing and determining the other two)" (205).

This negentropic tendency towards complexification, as well as the possibility that we may all be automata (which has haunted philosophy since Descartes looked out his window) is at the heart of Pettman's own style, marked by quick, intelligent puns and bursting at the seams with multi-directional references to high and low culture, so that rather than the expected, linear experience of reading a book, one undergoes something that feels more like an interactive digital humanities experiment. This is more than a response to the general demand to write differently, a serious demand, as Pettman and the philosophers whose authority he invokes (Derrida, Haraway, Agamben, Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, and Baudrillard) know all too well. The nature of the subject calls for what Pettman calls a "methodology of metonymy." "Human error is evident

wherever human eyes care to look without the rose-tinted glasses bequeathed to us by our forebears. A critique of such, figured in the singular, understands that the subject itself is holographic. That is to say, the mythic, originary error is fractured into an infinite number of micromistakes, which themselves comprehensively reflect the primal image…" (34). The human poses unique challenges to the practice of critique.

For those of us interested in the special place reserved for sexuality in the production of the human, this book houses some great metonymic moments, including a history of court cases in which animals were prosecuted in bestiality cases for seducing humans, a great reading of the closeted gayness of Timothy Treadwell in Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man,* and a reading of Steven Soderbergh's film *The Girlfriend Experience* in relation to the fuel economy. The latter appears in the excellent fourth chapter, "The War on Terra: From Political Economy to Libidinal Ecology," which (finally!) includes the voice of Jean-François Lyotard in the conversation about sustainability. Pettman gives a detailed, edgy reading of Lyotard's early and under-read work, *Libidinal Economy*, for today's politics of expenditure, scarcity, and desire, deftly invoking one of Lyotard's own critical paradigms, namely Bataille. This chapter also includes readings of Timothy Morton, Allan Stoekl, and Bernard Stiegler, in the course of a sophisticated analysis of the outermost metaphysical limits of the very notions of ecology and sustainability, words we habitually throw around as if we knew what they meant. Even rapper Nelly makes an appearance in the problematics of today's terminal capitalism, in what is possibly my favorite passage in the book: "[Lyotard] thereby rather gleefully removes the ever-beckoning EXIT sign from the constantly burning movie palace of contemporary life. But in the same gesture, he grabs the microphone and announces, 'Ladies and gentlemen, it's getting hot in here. So take off all your clothes.'" (182) The book's title and cover, which shows a man observing a mouse with some sort of visual prosthesis attached to his head, leads one to believe the book is about animals and not about the environment. But chapter four is a significant contribution to the environmental humanities and could (perhaps even should) be developed into a book-length work in its own right (with a very different cover).

In his conclusion, Pettman raises an excellent point regarding the methodology of critiques of anthropocentrism. They tend to lead to more and more anthropocentrism precisely as they center on the limitations of the human capacity to truly, deeply, freely self-reflect. He calls it "metanarcissism." "There is a *jouissance* in being confronted by our limitations. We can be mesmerized by our own capacity to be captivated" (204). In other words, all this literature about how we have never been human is still talking about us, and perhaps more ecstatically than ever. There is an air of amateur porn about

this spectacle of human weakness in the face of anthropogenesis, and "one cannot help but wonder about the relation between simulation and stimulation" when the anthropogenic machine is a mirror to which we find ourselves constantly and irresistibly drawn in order to watch ourselves caressing ourselves (206). Far from being passive victims of the machine, we participate in it like the gambling addict pulling the lever. This book does a wonderful job of showing that our relationship to our humanity is not merely ideological, but (auto) affective, or that Foucault's power/knowledge hybrid must be extended into something like power/knowledge/desire. Of/for what? The anthro-machine itself is not one thing, but "is customized by all of us, according to the protocological limits of our conceptual inheritance," so the answer to this will always itself be customized (10).

As Pettman points out, when scholarship in this area is critical of other scholarship in this area, it is on the grounds of some illicit anthropocentrism or humanism being snuck in through the back door. This is especially evident in Pettman's own reading of what might be called the Derrida-Haraway Encounter in Haraway's book, *When Species Meet* (although it is not a real encounter, since Derrida died prior to the publication of *When Species Meet* and his own book, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, and thus cannot respond). Derrida exposes the humanism in Levinas, Haraway exposes the humanism in Derrida, and Pettman exposes the humanism in Haraway: "Despite its open, curious, worldly intentions, Haraway's love for her dog still shows subtle signs of circulating within a familiar libidinal economy…" (95). Haraway, however, is a very different sort of thinker, always at a slight distance from the boys' club of postwar Continental theory, and I worry that Pettman may be too quick in using the same tools on her work that he uses on Agamben and others. She knows, for instance, that the accepted forms of pet-love fall prey to projective narcissism and parochialism (89), and is very critical of pet keeping on those grounds, calling for a Levinasian type of love between companion animals. She knows that writing about domestic animals and the economy of the family evokes familiar structures and figures, and that is largely what sets her apart from the thinking of becoming-animal. The figures she puts at the center of her ethical questions — the service dog, the foetus about to be aborted, the experimental animal, the chicken about to be eaten — are ones about which we cannot weave the kinds of fantasies about becoming-them that we can about peregrine falcons (95-101), bears (47-50), and totemic rabbits (44, and the author's latest book, *Look at the Bunny: Totem, Taboo, Technology* [2013]), precisely because we have never been not-them. Thus, the criticism that

Haraway keeps it too close to home misses the mark, in a sense, since she never strives to leave home in the first place.

But even this, the only moment that gives me pause, contributes to what I consider a great strength of this book, namely the way it invites discussion and continuation of its own, unlimited project. Pettman's metonymies form an ecstatically fragmented work that begins in media res and need never end. The Derrida-Haraway Encounter is one of many conversations in this work that could go on forever, precisely because Pettman has framed it so well and linked it so intricately to other texts of philosophy and pop culture. I agree completely, for instance, that Haraway's own charge that Derrida strays so far from home that he falls into anthropocentric narcissism — because in all his meditations on what man calls "the animal," he never once wonders what the animal is thinking — is too dismissive, and that his exhaustive critique of the forgetting of the animal from "the supposedly antihumanistic turn of postwar Continental philosophy" is a much greater resource for Haraway's work than she has so far allowed it to be (94).

In particular, Derrida's articulation of the ontological presuppositions, or, to use Pettman's term, micromistakes behind the question "does the animal speak?" is in productive alignment with Haraway's ongoing struggle to work out what she means by "semiotic agency" in the case of animals, a fascinating problem that continues to haunt posthumanist scholarship in spite of the obvious anthropocentrism and -morphism governing all imaginaries of what counts as language. In connection with these concerns, the very short, third chapter, "After the Beep" takes up the role that voice recording plays in the "endless identity crisis known as humanity" (126). Given the privileged status of language in the production of the human, and the history of the claim that the speaking animal can never be merely more than a machine-like imitation of true, human speech (right down to the great ape sign language experiments), Pettman is correct to amend the current literature with a cultural history of the obsession with recording the human voice.

These are the particular moments that hooked me, but I predict that readers will find their own customized hooks in *Human Error*, and find themselves inspired to write from one of the many starting points this fascinating book presents. Beyond its rather fuzzy and mobile boundaries lies the vast sea of human micromistakes yet to be cataloged. Musing about the boundary of a work or a discourse, Pettman openly invites us to do just this: "The true traffic in ideas allows for the fact that grass will grow on both sides of the fence. Judging degrees of greenness can thus be a collective project." (34)