Walls – barriers –

I am very happy to take part in this series of lectures, from my home here in Israel.

My talk will focus on the collapse of walls that demarcated the boundaries between the human and the non-human, walls that seemed to be fortified and unbreakable.

Consider the following list of binaries, of opposite characteristics attributed, respectively, to the human and the non-human. This list pertains to non-human machines (the robot, the artificial person):

Natural/artificial, organic/inorganic, alive/inanimate, free/unfree, unpredictable/predictable, rebellious/obedient, autonomous/controlled, flexible/rigid, graceful/lumbering, intelligent/unintelligent, conscious/nonconscious, spontaneous/programmed, sensitive/unfeeling, emotional/unemotional, intuitive/algorithmic, passionate/apathetic, playful/serious, sexual/asexual, emphatic/callous, moral/amoral, appreciative of beauty/oblivious to beauty, artistic/practical, poetic/literal, spiritual/material

Timothy Shanahan 2014, 30

The human is natural, free, autonomous, intelligent, conscious, moral, sexual, sensitive, and empathic.

These are the ways we tend to think of the human.

From the 1960s onwards, these binaries, or walls separating the human from the non-human, have been attacked from two main directions:

First, on the part of scholars of postmodernism and poststructuralism: Derrida, Foucault, Haraway, Butler, Latour, Hayles – thinkers who problematize the anthropocentric and foreground the constructed cultural and historical nature of the human. Their mission was to destabilize, to debase, to deconstruct the humanist idea of man as the center of the universe, along with such basic ideas as individuality and subjectivity.

The argument is that the individual, as an essential entity who possesses psychological continuity and coherence, and a unified self, is an invention dating back to the Enlightenment, and perhaps even earlier than that - to the Renaissance. It was Foucault who concluded his seminal tract, “Les mots et les choses” – ‘man might be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea’ – and a wave is approaching to erase it. The human is little more than another contingent entity, and what is ostensibly irredeemably anthropocentric is in fact merely a cultural construct.

The other attack emerged out of the tremendous technological advancement of recent decades. Technology exists – it is invisible and inevitable and everywhere. The human becomes interlaced with the machine, and the question is how it impacts or leaves its indelible mark on the human. Evidently, technology opens new avenues for thinking about the human.

The traditional conception of a unified self-body is no longer relevant, given the immense power of technologies that permeate the human mind and body. These include new bio-chemical, cybernetic and connectivity technologies. First, bio-technological-chemical engineering possibilities have implications for selfhood and subjectivity.

Scot Bukatman argues that posthuman subjectivity is a terminal identity at the computer terminal or television screen.

Modifications of the human itself embodied

Changes in the way we perceive space – through GPS systems, in which knowledge is not stored in our brain but rather in the palm of our hand, searchable with a tap on our smartphone.

For instance, screens around us – smartphones, laptops, iPads which enable presence in more than one place simultaneously, create a reality in which the subject is no longer limited to his physical body.

Under the aegis of technology, we are becoming more than human, as the body is infiltrated by technology: the prolongment of life, anti-aging, organ transplantation, and xenotransplantation – that is, transplants from animals to humans.

The cyborg (‘cybernetic organism’, Donna Haraway’s term) is seen not as deformation but as self-formation; the cyborg in the sense of anyone and all of us who let machines or technology be a part of them.

Scholars of technology and culture, such as Haraway, Hayles, Latour, and Lecourt, foreground the construction and performativity of the human, extolling the replacement of binaries with sequences and continuums.

Some say we have already become posthuman.

Posthumanism is the articulation of a non-anthropocentric vision of the human, of transcending the binary human/non-human, whether the latter represent machines or animals.

Posthumanism is a subject position open to alternative perspectives and alternative stances which decenter the human. It challenges the wall separating the human from the non-human.

Literature plays a significant role in shaping our imagination regarding the collapse of the walls of the Anthropocene.

As Manuella Rossini maintains, in the *Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, published in 2017:

“[R]ather sooner than later, cyborgs and other hybrids, androids, and technologically enhanced humans will people the earth (and maybe other planets). Imagineered in “sciencefictive” texts […] such embodied subjects can be seen as cultural prefigurations of future human beings in the real world.” (164-165)

The challenge is predicated on the human/non-human binary: It is our burden to take up this challenge, rather than avoiding it.

Literature speculates; it asks: What if?

What if post- or neo-humans lived amongst us?

What if we could have organic ‘spare parts,’ enabling us to overcome illness and disease?

What happens after the final bou?

Have the new posthumanist ideas revealed fissures in humanism’s rigid foundations?

One interesting speculation on this was articulated by Kazuo Ishiguro, and this is the focus of my talk today.

Previous literature dealt with distinguishing the artificial from the human, as well as questions about the human in the non-human – can it be a singular, coherent, unique individual?

Ishiguro refers to this debate with the gallery in the novel, but for him the question of whether non-humans can be human is of altogether negligible importance – we are beyond that phase.

, overrides them. Asking if these machines have conscious and reason