

*Book review*

*Life in the Posthuman Condition. Critical Responses to  
the Anthropocene*

*Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 312 pages*  
*Edited by S. E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė*

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Posthumanism has had a significant impact on art and art research in Nordic and Baltic countries, including all kinds of performances and theatre, dance, and performance studies. The field of posthumanist research encompasses a wide range of theoretical and philosophical approaches, whilst the different fields related to posthumanist thinking, such as cognitive science and animal ethics, are developing rapidly. For instance: we are constantly gaining new insights into non-human beings and their abilities; artificial intelligence has quickly become integrated into the everyday lives of ordinary people; and the debate on human rights, intersectional feminism, and postcolonial theory, which are also part of the posthumanist discourse, shape academic as well as social discussions. The new information and theoretical pondering related to posthumanism have presented challenges to performing arts and research, but they have also offered inspiring new insights and opportunities.

*Life in the Posthuman Condition. Critical Responses to the Anthropocene*, co-edited by S. E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė, is a theory-oriented work that discusses and evaluates posthumanism from various perspectives. Some of the articles in the book analyze art works,

while some of them leave the task of creating a connection between the theory and performances to the reader. The book is divided into three parts, each exploring new conceptualizations of life in the posthuman condition. Like the introduction by the editors of the collection, the first part critically examines the Anthropocene theory and explores alternative approaches to it. The second part focuses on the boundaries and interactions between human and non-human animals, and between life and non-life. The third part delves into the question of life concerning ideality and materiality.

Bruce Clarke begins the collection by replacing the Anthropocene theory with Gaia theory, formulated by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis in the 1970s. It suggests that earth and its biological systems behave as a huge single entity. Apocalyptic visions and fiction, some of which are analyzed in this volume, see the earth dying and humans struggling on its remains, but Gaia theory considers the apocalypse to only be destructive to humans. According to Clarke and Lovelock, Gaia, the goddess of earth in Greek mythology, will return balance to the earth, but considering recent disastrous developments, humans may no longer be welcome.

Mintautas Gutauskas and T. J. Demos bring fresh perspectives to familiar problems. Gutauskas makes waste a subject of phenomenological consideration and argues that, in the time of the Anthropocene, waste has become a “fundamental phenomenon”. This concept is derived from Eugen Fink, who refers to phenomena that reshape our view of the world and our relationships with others and ourselves. Love is a fundamental phenomenon, and it makes us lovers, while death makes us mortals. In the context of the Anthropocene, Gutauskas suggests that humans have also become “wasters”. Waste requires attention and responsibility, while paradoxically reminding us that we cannot control it. Waste, and all the problems caused by it, indicate that humans are not in control of the consequences of their own actions. T. J. Demos, on the other hand, offers a new outlook on climate change by addressing the weaponization of the air, specifically the use of tear gas as a legitimate tool of violence and political oppression. Demos identifies a range of political goals, often aligned with posthuman theories, that have been repressed by tear gas, such as antimilitarism, equality, and social justice and attempts to replace borders with radical hospitality.

Several articles analyze works of art that represent posthumanist thinking or art that is created by non-humans. These articles bring to the forefront the limits of human knowledge or new knowledge, such as indigenous knowledge, beaver knowledge, spiders' advanced logistic systems, and other-than-human aesthetics. Jussi Parikka analyzes Studio Tomás Saraceno's work with spiders and applies the concept of working objects, originally by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, thus emphasizing the role of spiders as producers of knowledge and aesthetics in a contemporary art-science project. Agnė Narušytė introduces the artist Aurelija Maknytė, who photographed the habitat of beavers as it might appear to beavers showing the landscape they had created and thus voluntarily steps back to make room for a beaver perspective, aesthetics, and their persistent works as "partisans of landscaping". After these inspiring case studies, it comes as no surprise that Cary Wolfe wants to bring the question of animals to the forefront. According to Wolfe, the real rulers of the world are microbes. Considering their influence on life and climate, humans' self-image as the masters of the earth appears foolish.

Extended cognition and interspecies communication are some of the key questions in *Life in the Posthuman Condition* and readers are constantly reminded of the limitations of human knowledge and perception. Therefore, not acknowledging the capabilities of other species seems arrogant and even life-threatening. Anna Barcz and Michael Cronin emphasize the importance of interspecies communication and eco-translation, which is becoming easier with the help of AI. Species receive information about their environment and react to it accordingly. Listening to other species is a means of survival, but humans have overlooked significant information by imagining other species as mute. The authors also point out that the climate crisis and the pandemic may be the result of not listening to the signals and warnings from the more-than-human world.

In *Life in the Posthuman Condition*, prominent posthumanist thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Rosi Braidotti face their challengers. Cary Wolfe critiques Bruno Latour's system theory as too narrow and instead studies the multilevel internal processes of an organism in relation to the complex environment and the interrelationships between them. Thomas Nail sees problems in

Rosi Braidotti's neo-vitalism based on Gilles Deleuze's thinking and offers a philosophy of movement as an alternative. Philosophy of movement fits well into the present, when people, animals, goods, and matter are moving at an accelerating pace and the whole earth is in a state of change. Compared to "life", "movement" is a neutral, non-hierarchical term and therefore a capacious enough concept to accommodate multiple agencies, alongside that of the human.

Audronė Žukauskaitė's article explores the relationship between life, living beings, and non-living beings in relation to the notion of form. She compares the ideas of three different thinkers, Gilbert Simondon, Raymond Ruyer, and Catherine Malabou, who all ponder the concept of life from a non-vitalistic starting point. Malabou gets the last word in the book in her own article, in which she takes her readers to the world of neurobiology and epigenetic mechanisms, machine intelligence, and neuromorphic chips. The plasticity of brains has been one of the characteristics explaining human superiority, but considering the recent developments of machines and artificial intelligence, the question is now raised in relation to the plasticity of machines and their ability to design and manipulate such plasticity on their own behalf. In her article, Malabou explores imitation and simulation and the concept of mimesis, especially by Plato and Kant, in the age of artificial intelligence, robots, and contemporary technology.

In their introduction to *Life in the Posthuman Condition*, Wilmer and Žukauskaitė describe posthumanism as "a patchwork of insights rather than a unified and coherent theory" (p. 4) and as an inclusive way of thinking that attempts to conceptualize the more-than-human. The challenge is precisely its inclusiveness as it encompasses a wide range of topics including, for example in this volume, Gaia, microbes, waste, climate change, beavers, a wide range of works of art, artificial intelligence, and considerations of the essence of "life" and what ethical significance it holds, if any. The questions are vast and challenging, but also important and fascinating for philosophical reflection. Wilmer and Žukauskaitė state that posthumanism "offers partial and perspectival 'situated knowledges'" (p. 4), and similarly, *Life in the Posthuman Condition* provides a partial look at the latest trends in posthumanism with special emphasis on notions of life. "Life", "nature", "world" and other all-encompassing concepts can

blind us, leaving us unable to perceive diversity. Cary Wolfe quotes Jacques Derrida while claiming that “there is no world, only islands” (p. 199), which also seems like a good metaphor for *Life in the Posthuman Condition*. There is no world of posthumanism, but merely islands of posthuman theory that a reader can explore. The collection provides a valuable contribution to the ongoing philosophical discourse on posthumanism.