

DE/RE/TERRITORIALIZATION AND POSTHUMANIZATION IN OLGA RAVN'S *THE EMPLOYEES*

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INTRODUCTION

Posthumanism critically pursues a transgressive agenda that seeks to challenge hierarchies among humans, such as gender, race, and class, and tries to demystify the notion that the human sits in hierarchical supremacy over other beings, including the environment and nonhumans (Braidotti and Jones, 2022: 28). It also addresses the potential transformations that humans may undergo through the integration of technologies (LaGrandeur, 2022: 2). It examines the rapid growth of novel social models, including virtual communities, artificial intelligence, and cyborgs, which appear fluid and subject to transformation beyond restrictions determined by biological boundaries (Simon, 2013: 2). With this definition, posthumanism recognizes the idea that it surpasses conventional human limitations, both physical and conceptual. Posthumanism, as an intellectual framework, defines reality as beyond human-centered and dualistic. In this discourse, the traditional concept of the human being is just one among many intelligent beings interacting within a multifaceted ecosystem. It explores how the development of nontechnological posthumans has consistently called into question the conventional idea of humans as the only members of society. These include cultural artifacts, myths, and literature that depict quasi-human entities such as monsters, ghosts, angels, anthropomorphic animals, cyborgs, and extraterrestrial beings (Haraway,

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1985, 1991; Halberstam & Livingstone, 1995; Hayles, 1999; Graham, 2002; Badmington, 2006; Herbechter, 2013). These entities have been created to challenge the boundaries of our understanding of what it means to be and/or become a human on earth. Alternative posthumanist perspectives focus on how humans and intelligent entities in this world change and grow due to the creation of new types of beings like humans with neuroprosthetic implants, genetically altered humans, social robots, conscious networks, and other sophisticated forms of artificial intelligence, which are achieved through technological posthumanization (Miah, 2008; Ferrando, 2013; Bostrom, 2008; Gordijn & Chadwick, 2008).

In his seminal work, “Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?” Ihab Hassan asserts that it is imperative to recognize the potential end of five centuries of humanism (1977: 843). Hassan’s position might be seen as the destruction of existing boundaries, hierarchies, and norms, and yet as the significance of diversity, hybridity, and flexibility. I suggest that Hassan advocates for the deterritorialization of Eurocentric perspectives, which neglect alternative frameworks and systems that facilitate the proliferation of multiplicities and alternatives through technological progress, namely the posthumanization of human beings. One could argue that Hassan challenges the conventional perception of humans within traditional humanism by examining the implications of modern technologies such as cybernetics, genetics, nanotechnology, pharmacology, and artificial intelligence. I contend that Hassan agrees with the possible transformation of humans into novel models through nano-, bio-, info-, and cognitive technologies. I read this potential transformation as the posthumanization of humans, which seems inevitable. In this paper, I critically examine Olga Ravn’s novel *The Employees: A Workplace Novel of the 22nd Century* (2020) by delving into the process of posthumanization, and the angst it potentially generates. The notions of de/re/territorialization proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari will also help pose potential concerns about what it means to be or to become human.

DETERRITORIALIZATION, POSTHUMANIZATION, AND ANGST

Modern technologies both de – and re-territorialize human beings and separate humans from the physical territories or cultural frameworks in which they are raised (Clarke and Rossini, 2016: 72). Deterritorialization refers to one’s move and flow from the territory (Deleuze and Guattari, 1998: 508). It does not just convey the physical act of removal from a

certain geographic location; it also signifies the process of transforming the physical and conceptual aspects of a territory, characterized by its tendency to expand and change. Instead of being only occupied by animals and humans, Deleuze and Guattari consider the territory as the interconnectedness of spaces within biological and inorganic assemblages and species, including a continuous system of activities, the potentialities of novel connections, and the process of transformation across spaces that continuously generate new territories. As such, it refers to the infinity of the movement, or the movement of infinity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 37). That is, it signifies a continuous process of becoming. This explains the inherent presence of life, continuous variety, and evolution that cannot be reduced to negative distinctions but is linked to the process of abandoning established boundaries, which eliminates any stable point of reference, ultimate endpoint, and historical roots to depend on (Nebioğlu, 2020: 13). Expanding upon such discussions, Olga Ravn's novel, *The Employees*, offers a glimpse of becoming by abandoning solid boundaries and points of reference.

The novel *The Employees* is set in a spaceship, a future workplace known as the Six-Thousand Ship. In this workplace, both humans and humanoids as employees “are to search for objects on New Discovery” (Ravn, 2020: 25) and to maintain various objects discovered there. The novel (translated from Danish by Martin Aitken) is told through numbered statements by anonymous ship employees to an invisible committee. The preface to the book reads the committee's objectives: these include to “gain knowledge of workflows and to investigate possible impacts of the objects, as well as the ways those impacts, or perhaps relationships, might give rise to permanent deviations in the individual employee” (Ravn, 2020: 9). Additionally, one would read that the collected objects from the planet New Discovery provoke a plethora of emotions and reactions among human and humanoid employees¹, including desire, repulsion, unsettling nightmares, and a sense of unease. The impact of these objects is so profound that it prompts the employees to revisit their roles and question what it means to be and/or to become human and humanoid.

Ravn's narrative begins *in media res*. It does not include details about the employees' *odyssey* to the spacecraft, their level of resilience, and the

1 The article uses the pronoun “they” to refer to employees of unknown gender to encourage gender inclusion and avoid misconceptions. The pronouns “it” and “they” are employed to refer to the humanoid employees, depending on the context.

extent of their posthumanization, whether they are humans with implanted computers, genetically modified humans, robots designed for social interaction, or whether they are humans using virtual reality devices and engage with others and their environments. The novel imagines a speculative future in which it becomes difficult to distinguish between humans and humanoids because of the integration of humans and technology that blurs the boundaries between the two. In Statement 010, for example, one of the employees (we cannot ascertain whether it is a human or humanoid) says: “I don’t know if I’m human anymore. Am I human? Does it say in your files what I am?” (Ravn, 2020: 19). Likewise, in Statement 052, a humanoid employee says: “I feel a similar longing to be human, as if I used to be, but then lost the ability... But I look like a human and feel the way humans do. I consist of the same parts” (Ravn, 2020: 43). The humanoid explains a deep sense of desire to be human, despite being physically indistinguishable from humans. It expresses a sense of despair, as if it could be human but could not be anymore. Nevertheless, the novel argues that for humanoids to maximize their cognitive flexibility and reach a similar level as humans in the crew, they must undergo a process of deterritorialization, specifically targeting their cognitive territories. That is, they must, therefore, be both cognitively and physically reterritorialized inside the human body, namely, human corporeality and the physical and material aspects of human life, by disengaging from their territories in the spaceship. Humans, on the other hand, have challenges when it comes to adjusting their cognitive and physical capacities to a different territory. In statement 038, one of the human employees says: “After a 28-day shift in the rooms, I started to wonder who I am here. An employee, a human, a programmer, Cadet 17 of the Six – Thousand Ship... As if the objects only existed to awaken feelings in me by way of their form and material” (Ravn, 2020: 37). The statement argues that the objects discovered on the New Discovery evoke recollections of their previous lives on the planet Earth and prompt them to ponder these questions:

Who are these employees around me? Who’s that waiting in the corridor for you to talk to them? Are they humans, like me? Or spiders in human form? Does a human being need to have been born? Or can I be a living human expelled from a sac of slime, hatched out of an accumulation of roe, a clump of spawn in a pond, a cluster of sticky eggs concealed among cereal crops or wild grasses? Do I exist at the centre of the

world, and am I significant there? Or am I merely one of those soft eggs among a mass of many? (Ravn, 2020: 37)

In this passage, one might read that a human employee experiences an existential crisis and angst when deterritorialized from their familiar environment on Earth and reterritorialized inside a spaceship. It examines fundamental and existential inquiries, delving profoundly into the essence of their identity, existence, and value. The employee ponders the employees in their proximity, questioning their true nature as humans or maybe as altogether other entities, such as spiders disguised as humans. This engenders a feeling of uneasiness and detachment from the outside world, as if one is uncertain of their position within it. Furthermore, it delves into the basic principles of human birth and existence. That is, it questions the conventional notion that being born in a certain manner is a prerequisite for being recognized as a human being. Instead, it raises doubts about the comparable legitimacy of other kinds of emergence, such as expulsion from slime or hatching from eggs. This raises questions about the essence of human beings. The employee also ponders their position in the world, and questions whether they have a central role with a distinct and meaningful purpose, or if they are just one among many. The objects the employees find on the New Discovery have a profound impact on their consciousness and thus intensify their despair and angst. That is to say, the higher their level of consciousness becomes, the more severe their despair increases (Yalom, 1980: 380). In this passage, one could also read that the human employee experiences existential despair and angst, which is an expected response to their human condition, prompting them to reflect on their actions and beliefs to guarantee alignment with their authentic selves and ideals. Experiencing this angst provides them a chance to contemplate the choices they make, reflect on their drives, and aspirations, and determine whether they are in line with their inherent value and meaning. Their angst might also originate from their solid knowledge, which entails their solid and stable territories nearing their end. This reminds me of Michel Foucault's famous phrase, the "end of man." In this phrase, Foucault says, "One thing is any case certain: ... man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end... man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (1970: 386-7). With this, Foucault addresses the shift in human perception from an anthropocentric viewpoint that considers humans as the center of the universe, to a perspective where humans appear as interconnected with technology, social, and natural beings, as well as

“interacting with social actors” (Zizek, 2002: 20). Foucault’s argument questions the traditional understanding of the solidity and stability of territory. He specifically challenges traditional views on human physical and conceptual aspects through examination of the concept of territory, namely the physical and conceptual boundaries that influence the notion of humans.

In one of his 1975–1976 seminars, Deleuze links human existence and its territories, which can take on various forms, including physical, cultural, or conceptual. These spaces establish the boundaries and principles that define how humans interact with their environment. Deleuze argues that the physical and conceptual aspects of human life, have been gradually disengaging from territories through technology since it blurs the boundary between being human and humanoid. In Statement 077, a human employee says:

Even though I was born and brought up and my documents all said human, there was something about his behavior that made me think he didn’t consider me to be an equal, and for a few brief and terrifying seconds, I felt I was artificial, made, nothing but a humanoid machine of flesh and blood. My maker’s screen. Fabricated, conducted. (Ravn, 2020: 66)

In this passage, the human employee focuses on the problem of identity, specifically the internal conflict that they have in relation to their sense of self and image. Although they hold official evidence confirming their humanness, the employee encounters a scenario where they feel marginalized or dehumanized by the invisible committee. This experience prompts a deep existential crisis and angst, triggering a doubt of their humanness and seeing themselves as an ordinary fabrication, akin to a “humanoid machine of flesh and blood.” Their phrase “my maker’s screen” touches on those who have experienced the influence of outside factors on their lives, compelling them to face the boundaries of their independence and doubt the authenticity of their very existence. This serves as a discomfort reminder of the intricate interplay between one’s own autonomy and external influence that determines their existence and sense of self. In other ways, this entails the erosion of the traditional and natural connections between the body and certain settings or codes. To replace the previously lost corporeal codes, the body is subjected to new rules, limits, and structures. Deleuze contends that this process of deterritorialization has eradicated or altered the inherent or innate systems that make up the nature of the body by artificial

methods (Lecture 5, 16 December 1975). In Statement 052, one could read that the humanoid, programmed by speculating about its existence, roles, and responsibilities in the spaceship, displays a sort of existential crisis. It has developed a strong working relationship with human Cadet 08 and gained a deep understanding of her. It becomes aware of her yearning for Earth, and it desires to be human, possibly indicating a previous human existence that has been abandoned. The humanoid explains that it was transformed from its original human form to its current form as a humanoid. That is, regardless of being different, the humanoid experiences sensations in a similar way as humans and possesses similar components. It then raises questions about what it means to be human by asking, “Perhaps all that’s needed is for you to change my status in your documents? Is it a question of name? Could I be a human if you called me so?” (Ravn, 2020: 43). Considering this passage, I argue that the ongoing process of decentralization, relocation, movement across boundaries, and revisiting values and meanings within territories, including the elimination of human symbols, beliefs, and rituals, are essential components of posthumanization. Stefan Herbrechter argues that the posthumanization process is inevitable “to enable humans to face the conditions that would have to be met to send some (quasi-)human form onto future intergalactic travels” (2013: 4). The prefix “post-” denotes a state where the distinctions between humans and non-humans have been partially blurred, leading to a society that includes intelligent social actors such as humanoids beyond typical human beings. Posthumanization refers to the mechanisms through which a human society incorporates non-biological human beings who play a part that influences the structure, activities, or value of that society (Gladden, 2018: 19). That is, technological progress will inevitably lead to the posthumanization of humans, whereby humans may modify themselves using the integration of mechanical technologies, cybernetics, nanotechnology, and biotechnology. This will transcend the conventional boundaries of human existence and redefine the essence of being human, despite humans’ insistence on following established boundaries and traditions.

The growing popularity of humanoid robots, advanced artificial intelligence systems, and cybernetic machines that could perform jobs formerly performed by humans may be considered a potential step toward posthumanization. Posthumanization via technology, as described by Gladden (2018: 135–36), can be viewed as an emergence that is exclusively noticed in technologically sophisticated, and industrialized countries. The Statement 077 conveys a human employee expressing a sense of artificiality

despite being born and raised as a human, with official documentation confirming their human status. However, they feel they are artificial, made, nothing but a humanoid machine of flesh and blood, a mere humanoid machine composed of organic matter. This agrees with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "spaces of enclosure" (2017: 3-4), which challenges the notion of autonomous human body. That is, their conception complies with the continuous process of de – and re – territorialization between human bodies and non-human ecologies, such as plants, animals, and technology. The de/re/territorialization of the notion of the human, which involves the process of posthumanization, and the emergence of posthumans, is continuously evolving within the realms of time, science, and technology and has the potential to facilitate the reconstruction of humans' physical and mental capacities, enabling humans to possess high levels of physical, intellectual, and psychological capacities (More, 1998).

The humanoid described in Statement 018 displays a strong desire for a life beyond work and mechanical functioning. The humanoid has consistently been employed or engaged in some form of work created for a specific purpose or function. It asserts that they have never had a childhood, which is a metaphorical way of saying that they have never experienced the freedom and innocence associated with human childhood. The humanoid engages in a conversation with a human coworker who talks about work not being the only defining aspect of a person, which leads to a discussion about what it means to be human. The humanoid expresses a strong desire to be part of a human community, engage in everyday human activities like drinking iced tea, driving, getting married, baking cookies, pushing a pram, playing an instrument, and dancing a waltz, and enjoy the simple pleasures of life (Ravn, 2020: 22). Overall, the humanoid exhibits an unwavering yearning for a more human-like existence, where the AI or robot can participate in the full spectrum of human experiences and relationships, transcending its programmed purpose of work. This reflects themes of an intense longing for a sense of belonging and connection and the freedom to explore a life beyond a narrow, work-focused existence in a spaceship. Statement 018 contends that the humanoid desires to take on a human form, a desire to be de/re/territorialized. This can be achieved by integrating into a human society and engaging in various human activities such as putting flowers in its hair, drinking tea in the morning, driving a vehicle, living with another person, getting married, baking, learning to play a musical instrument, and performing a waltz. Moreover, it is evident that the humans on the spaceship encounter unease in their strange territory.

The objects found on New Discovery, now placed in their chambers, evoke a sense of nostalgia, serving as reminders of their previous territory and the connection they derived from their daily routines and practices. In Statement 091, a human employee says:

I'd rather spend my time with the humanoids; at least they still believe there's a life ahead of them that's worth living. After the objects came on board, everyone's mood lifted noticeably, but to them, it's something special. To us, the objects are like an artificial postcard from Earth. To them, they're a postcard from the future. (Ravn, 2020: 77)

Despite nostalgia attacks and human employees' potential negative stance towards de/re/territorialization, I contend that the process of posthumanization, enabled by using matter and technology, unveils novel potentials and promising outcomes. This process involves continuous emancipation of the body from its inherent limitations, known as deterritorialization of the body (Gardels, 2023). One could argue that humans exist inside a constantly evolving network of interactions with both the natural cosmos and the artificial environment shaped by technological progress. That is, it elucidates the perpetual process of organisms, systems, and ecosystems undergoing alterations and conversions, resulting in the erosion and acquisition of territories. One could also argue that posthumanization involves a complete transformation through redefining geographical boundaries for entities, which might change our sense of the distinction between humans and non-humans.

CONCLUSION

Olga Ravn's novel *The Employees* explores de/re/territorialization as the process of humans evolving into posthumans through technical and societal factors. It demonstrates how posthumanization processes lead to an existential crisis in humans, resulting in the loss of their essential nature and concerns regarding physical existence. The novel suggests a close look at the potential consequences of growing technology and the exploration of the concept of being a human or humanoid.

Olga Ravn depicts a dystopian workplace where humans and human-like robots coexist. She examines how the novel portrays the existential despair and angst faced by the human and humanoid characters and investigates the idea of human employees feeling deterritorialized from their traditional

environment, leading them to contemplate their humanness. The novel explores the essential nature of human existence and the impact of technology on the sense of self. It discusses the convergence of boundaries between humans and humanoids, highlighting how it blurs the boundary between natural and unnatural. My reading of Ravn's *The Employees* is that posthumanization includes continually removing the human body from its constraints, leading to a transformation of human existence in an advanced technological environment. This serves as an attempt to explain this complex and evolving interaction between humans and technology and how it transforms our perceptions of humanness.

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