Review of Sorgner's Philosophy of Posthuman Art

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with a review of Sorgner's new book, Philosophy of Posthuman Art. The review highlights Sorgner's positioning of postmodern art as emerging from a way of dealing with the realities of ontological naturalism and epistemic perspectivism. It is also highlighted why the author believes that the avant-garde and modernist aesthetic is lacking in dealing with a world of technology embedded post-modernity. In this sense, Sorgner's arguments for the totalitarian aspects of the avant-garde are presented. The paper also offers a critique regarding Sorgner's continental focus, and an argument for why his 10 aesthetics of posthuman art could be boiled down to eight, before finalizing with a walk through Sorgner's view on a posthuman total work of art and his view leisure within a posthuman era.

Philosophy of Posthuman Art
Stefan Lorenz Sorgner
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Sorgner's book is a timely addition to the posthuman discourse. Within The Philosophy of Posthuman Art, he manages to bind together posthuman philosophical contemplation with its praxis by highlighting how the former is revealed in various artworks. Similar to his prior works Sorgner positions posthumanism as a weak ontology, that is grounded in naturalism which in turn requires a perspectivist epistemic approach. While in other works he also engages with the idea of non-duality, it seems like here it has become one of the central pivot points of the discourse. Throughout the book we are invited multiple times to remember the dualist way of thinking and how we have culturally transcended it, following the disillusion of our "naïve self-love" at the hands of science. What Sorgner most often mentions is the Darwinian turn, however we can also extract from the text the two other blows that Freud mentions in his "Introduction to psychoanalysis". We can clearly observe the presupposition of the Copernican and the Freudian turn in his text (Freud, 2012). He even goes further than Freud when revealing the disillusions that hit our "naïve self-love" when he presents his ten aesthetics of the posthuman artwork that are embedded within a posthuman philosophy that has relinquished the childish ideals of humanism. What emerges is a perspective upon the good life that is being created as we speak by contemporary artist which are transforming the philosophical insights of our current human conditions into artworks that can allow us to reflect upon the posthuman shift.

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Posthuman art is presented as a form of postmodern art that utilizes technology. Like postmodern art it often appears counter to the aesthetic ideals of the 20th century avant-garde. Adorno's Aesthetic Theory is used as a reference when presenting the ideals of modern art. Sorgner focuses on the totalitarian aspect of Adorno's writings, the fact that it undermines plurality. The cause of this totalitarian attitude is diagnosed in the ontological duality inherent to Adorno which makes claims at universal validity. Adorno's authenticity, from a posthuman standpoint, is not about freedom but about fatalism. The way Adorno's authenticity is presented, there can be only one way of being authentic within a given historical period.

The focus on Adorno and the Frankfurt school to the detriment of other art critics and philosophers of the avant-garde time highlights a strong continental stance in Sorgner's approach. This stance can also be observed in his focus on perspectivism without highlighting pragmatism as an alternative given that both epistemic movements share a lot in common: "a commitment to some form of pluralism and to the recognition of the limits of human knowledge that could be described alternatively as anti-absolutism, anti-objectivism, or anti-fundamentalism. Furthermore, the pragmatists have valuable resources to offer the perspectivists, including a simpatico metaphilosophical orientation, a pluralistic and anti-reductionist metaphysics, a sophisticated contextualism and fallibilism, and non-dominationist and pluralistic ideas about building bridges and relations of reciprocity between diverse perspectives." (Brown, 2019) As one can soundly argue that the presentation of pragmatism is not essential since the book focuses on aesthetics and not on epistemology, this is not to be taken as a critique of the text but as an observation on the positioning of the author.

However, the sole focus on Adorno, while not fatal in any way for the construction of the overall argument, seems insufficient for painting an accurate picture of the 20th century avant-garde. It would have been appreciated if Clement Greenberg or Harold Rosenberg would have also been considered within the exposition of modernist aesthetic.

We can also observe that when addressing Adorno's Aesthetic Theory, Sorgner doesn't present Adorno's discourse on materiality, nor the argument for the truth revealing function of art. While the discourse on the truth revealing function of art could be used to throw Adorno further under the bus of totalitarianism, his presentation on materiality highlights a broader more pluralistic demand from artists. I will not engage here with further discission upon this point as it goes beyond the scope of this review, all I will do is raise the question of whether there isn't an embedded perspectivism in Adorno's claim that artists are to satisfy the imminent demands of the material which are contextually dependent?

THE NATURALIST AND PERSPECTIVIST TURN

Avant-garde aesthetics with its denial of mimesis, and imperatives of authenticity, truth, self-referentialism, and separation of pop-culture and high-culture in favor of the later does not possess the required conceptions to deal with posthuman artwork. Sorgner points to the ontological dualities that are foundational to the modernist art culture and to the categorical dualities that are also engrained within this art movement. Due to the dualistic ontology of the immaterial and material, which places the eternal world of the form, of divinity, of the immaterial above that of the material, greater value is given to the rational than to the sensual. Only art that requires the utilization of our rationality is worth pursuing. At the same time a type of art cannot be used for any other purpose than that of revealing itself. Meaning that the purpose of music is music, that of painting is painting, of photography is photography. To reveal itself each branch of art needs to explore its fundamental constituents and utilize them in a way in which they will not be tainted by external influences.

This siloing of art does not cut it anymore within the posthuman shift. Sorgner presents posthuman art as a movement that is non-dual, that does not separate poesis from praxis, nor the rational form the sensual. It is a naturalistic movement that acknowledges the impossibility of the sort of separation which the avant-garde requires.

Posthumanism seems to have one core requirement, namely non-duality. At the same time, it needs to be flexible with all other requirements. To fulfill the non-dual requirement posthuman aesthetic need to be rooted in naturalism and perspectivism which seem to go hand in hand. "[There] seems to be a dialectic relationship between naturalism and perspectivism, which are embedded in a hermeneutic circle" (119). The key requirement towards reaching a naturalist understanding is abandoning humanist ideas and realizations. As humanism as highlighted a world where value is given based on the degree to which something is connected to the immaterial realm, or to the res cogitas we have ended up placing white males at the top of the value hierarchy. In the posthuman shift we need to abandon these unfounded absurdities and relinquish the idea that the darker skin is associated with the world of instinct instead of rationality and is thus less valuable, or that males have reason and females have emotions thus only males could grasp the good, the truth and the beautiful, or that natural order unites male with female. Even the seemingly benign idea of "the dignity of all human beings" needs to be abandoned and transformed into the dignity of all beings. In other words, we need to abandon the unfounded humanist realizations of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and speciesism.

As dualism is relinquished, truth in correspondence also gets dissolved. What currently remains is a non-dual world where humans and animal are both results of evolutionary processes. While in the past we held steady the ideal of one truth this can no longer hold as it would require a static ontological realm. Though not mentioned by Sorgner, the naturalistic observation of permanent becoming is not the sole reason for the disappearance of the possibility of truth in correspondence. Another reason is the recognition of a permanent epistemic gap which comes from our filtering of reality through our sense apparatus and the processes of our mind. Given a world of permanent becoming and an unbridgeable epistemic gap, truth as correspondence is impossible. We need to move on to a pragmatic, a fictive, version of truth, a truth that is non-Platonic. "Truth is whatever works in this world. If acts make us feel good, if judgements lead to reliable conclusions and if reflections bring about predictable results, then these things work, and it is possible to regard them as true" (44). Truth in the posthuman world is not to be desired for truth's sake but in order to deal "with life's immense variety of challenges, and a timely scientifically informed kind of wisdom which enables us to live exciting, flourishing and fulfilled lives." (47) Perspectivism does not imply that a philosophical judgement has to be false. It is solely an acknowledgement that it can be false.

POSTHUMAN AESTHETICS

These ontological and epistemological realizations bring with them a new way of viewing and being in the world. One of the big realizations that emerges is the cybernetic nature of human evolution. "Cybernetics stands for the art of controlling, and κυβερνήτης (Kubernetes) is the helmsman. All controlled organisms are cyborgs. […] Humans are no different form a controlled and thus technically formed organism. […] The fact that we can speak implies that we must have been controlled and thus technically modified beforehand." (53) Our capacity to speak and reason has been used in the past to elevate us above other beings. In the past, this capacity was identified with the divine spark in us. Currently the divine spark has become implausible; however, our mind has remained, just that culture has recognized that it is not immaterial. On the contrary the mind has become something that is manifested by our brain which has come about via an evolutionary process. As such our capacity for language, while still spectacular in its own right, has ceased to be an outer-worldly ability and has become something that has also come about via adaptive processes and slow improvement that happened over generations.

"When we are born, we do not possess language. Parents, family and our cultural environment upgrade us with language. We get controlled by means of this procedure. We become human cyborgs. This procedure continues. Every form of education is a form of control. Without having been controlled and shaped, it is impossible for us to survive. Clothing ourselves, living in houses and washing ourselves: all these are different forms of control." (54) Sorgner openly acknowledged through this

statement the Promethean nature of human beings. It also shows that we use various technologies, be they language, chemistry, mechanics, biology, etc… to enable us to live a flourishing life. Without technology humanity would not exist today.

Sorgner's ten different aesthetics of posthuman art, build on the idea of non-duality, naturalism, perspectivism, kubernetes, and other ideas that can be found within posthuman discourse. The aesthetics that he highlights are presented together with an artwork that he argues best represents them. Whenever attributing a certain aesthetic to an artwork, Sorgner does not mean that said aesthetic fully covers or explains the artwork. The attribution is neither essentialist nor exclusive, an artwork that contains an aesthetic of rationality can also contain an aesthetic of bodily plurality. One of the distinct moves that happens in posthuman artwork is the relegation of the autonomy of art. Within this move, art is relational with respects to all other aspects of the lifeworld. While the autonomy of art can still be maintained in posthuman art, this autonomy is not essential anymore.

As space does not allow to go into all ten aesthetics, I will only enumerate them all and then only deal with 3 aesthetics in slightly more detail as I find the categorization to not be MECE[1]. Sorgner classifies the 10 aesthetics under the schools of thought that he believes best represents them (Table 1).

Looking and these ten and at the descriptions Sorgner offers of them, I would prefer to generally talk about three different categories and with slightly modified ordering, as can be seen in Table 2.

A further development that I would propose would be the grouping of the Monster, Hybrid and psychophysiological plurality into one which would result in eight posthuman aesthetics (Table 3).

Both the aesthetic of the monsters, that of hybridity, and that of bodily plurality unites or twist together different psychophysiological properties that are not normally seen together. Sorgner argues that there should be three aesthetics as they work somewhat different from each other. For example, the aesthetic of Monstrosity focuses and revaluates what used to be identified with the bad, the evil, the other, i.e., Graham is a monstrous sculpture of a human that has evolved to survive car crashes; due to its hideousness we are set aback by it as it undermines out idea of beauty as a fitness indicator.

Table 1. 10 aesthetics under the schools of thought

Critical posthuman aesthetics	Metahuman aesthetics	Transhuman aesthetics
1. Monsters 2. Hybridity 3. Amorphous	1. Becoming 2. Twisting 3. Relationality 4. Plurality	1. Superheroes 2. Smoothness 3. Kawaii

Table 2. Three different categories and with slightly modified ordering

Plurality	Action	Perfection
1. Monsters 2. Hybridity 3. Amorphous 4. Plurality	1. Becoming 2. Twisting 3. Relationality	1. Superheroes 2. Smoothness 3. Kawaii

Table 3. The grouping of the Monster, Hybrid and psychophysiological plurality into one

Plurality	Action	Perfection
1. Amorphous 2. Plurality	1. Becoming 2. Twisting 3. Relationality	1. Superheroes 2. Smoothness 3. Kawaii

Hybrids on the other hand highlight an aesthetic where human and non-human or organic and inorganic elements get combined into a new creation. I.e. Edunia is a petunia mixt with human DNA – the veins of the flower gained a red color which make them look like blood is running through them. While bodily plurality focuses on plurality of goodness. While I follow Sorgner's argument that these three types of aesthetics provide different perspectives upon bodily plurality, I don't find the argument sufficient to justify the allocation of an additional two categories.

Of course, it is also possible to join the aesthetics of monstrosity and that of hybridity with the aesthetics of twisting. However, I find that the latter is more of a general method that can be applied to any formerly dualistic perspective, while the former two refer strictly to psychophysiology.

THE TOTAL WORK OF ART AND LEISURE

Following the presentation of the ten Posthuman Aesthetics, Sorger moves the discussion in Chapters 6 and 7 around the total work of art, centering his discourse around the compositions of Wagner and Helbig. The total work of art is more than an artwork it strives outside of itself into the larger socio-cultural-political context and aims to modify it. In Plato's view the total work of art should enable the formation of a new political order, for the 16th century Florentine's it was supposed to promote the virtues, while for Wagner it is meant to drive the manifestation of a new culture. The total work of art raises the problem of totalitarianism as it requires a community in which the values and symbols represented are shared. Sorgner argues that a total work of art can also be non-totalitarian if it affirms naturalism and perspectivism instead of dualistic ontologies and an epistemology of correspondence. By acknowledging this reality, we realize that given the idiosyncratic needs of each individual no artwork can hope to fulfil everyone's psychophysiological requirements. Thus, each individual needs to find the artwork that they need. This means that a total artwork depends on the observer. For some, Helbig's works may realize all the necessary elements required for being a total artwork while for other this status does not obtain.

The following is an extract of Sorgner's view on one a verse from one Helbig's operas. " 'I eat the sun, and drink the rain, quiet like the moon.' The ego, which used to be the crowning glory of creation, no longer exists. The rational subject, which categorically differs from the purely natural world, elevates itself above it and is supposed to make the world its subject, is now embedded in it, and differs at most gradually from the existing entities. Nor is the distinction static and unchangeable, but dynamic, inter-relational and constantly changing. The ego is no longer an immaterial thing that is connected to a material body, but the ego is always already the other, which is why the concept of the ego and thus also that of the subject as well as that of the object can no longer be grasped accurately but must be replaced by something else. 'I eat the sun and drink the rain'. Here the fusion between originally categorical dualistic opposites takes place. The formerly immaterial 'I' and the material rain and sun merge. There is a constant exchange of everything with everything else. Culture and nature, body and soul or human and machine are no longer radically different binary opposites. The brain pacemaker is a part of a human being, just as the smartphone represents our extended mind. However, the mind is no longer immaterial, just as the smartphone is no longer just a material object. I am my psychophysiology, whereby mine is not clearly distinguishable from non-mine." (113-114)

Hilberg's artwork sets itself up as a piece for contemplation. Sorgner highlights this as a key property of a total work of art. However, contemplation has also changed in the posthuman turn. As the object of contemplation is not the eternal unchanging truth, but a naturalistic object that is subjected to the processes of permanent becoming, our way of contemplating needs to be redesign. Presently we need to twist vita contemplative with vita active. The posthuman turn dissolves the categorical dualities of maser/slave, otium/labor. While 200 years ago 90%of the population lived in absolute poverty, currently only 10% are affected by this condition. Automation and digitization have turned a large amount of the population into aristocrats. This has also led to a change of the meaning of leisure, to where it currently refers to "the activity of intellectually or sensually dealing with the fundamental

philosophical challenges." (112) The consideration that arises from engaging with the fundamental philosophical questions need to also be put into practice. Thus, the non-dualistic practice of leisure places us into a constant dialectic between otium and labor, between vita contemplativa and activa.

CONCLUSION

Sorgner's philosophy of Posthuman Art, is about more than Art. It is about how we put into practice the posthuman shift through aesthetic means in works of art but also in our way of norming the world. It is a book that presents the posthuman way of life while at the same time providing a language to discuss how this new way of life is made apparent in art.

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ENDNOTE

[1]   "MECE is an acronym for the phrase Mutually Exclusive, Collectively Exhaustive. […] MECE is made up of two parts. First, 'mutually exclusive' is a concept from probability theory that says two events cannot occur at the same time. For example, if you roll a six-sided die, the outcomes of a six or a three are mutually exclusive. When applied to information, mutually exclusive ideas would be distinctly separate and not overlapping. Second, 'collectively exhaustive' means that the set of ideas is inclusive of all possible options. Going back to the six-sided dice example, the set {1,2,3,4,5,6} is mutually exclusive AND collectively exhaustive." Source: https://strategyu.co/wtf-is-mece-mutually-exclusive-collectively-exhaustive/

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