



Shifting scales, inventive intermediations: posthuman ecologies in contemporary poetry

Jesper Olsson

To cite this article: Jesper Olsson (2021): Shifting scales, inventive intermediations: posthuman ecologies in contemporary poetry, *Studia Neophilologica*, DOI: [10.1080/00393274.2021.1916997](https://doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2021.1916997)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2021.1916997>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 16 Jun 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 233



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Shifting scales, inventive intermediations: posthuman ecologies in contemporary poetry

Jesper Olsson 

Department of Culture and Society, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This essay describes and investigates representations and figurations of 'posthuman ecologies' in contemporary poetry, i.e., how non-human agencies and materialities are evoked and explored in poetic writing, and how this is accompanied by a problematisation of anthropocentrism and certain strands of humanism. Specific attention is paid to shifts in scale and 'intermediations' between, for instance, bacteria and humans. The emergence and analysis of such ecologies are connected to a history of 'cyberneticization' and 'ecologization' manifested both in digital media, techno- and bio-capitalism, and in a rejuvenation of the concept of ecology in contemporary thinking. In this essay, these issues are discussed in relation to three recent poetic works by Adam Dickinson, J. R. Carpenter, and Nasser Hussain. While affirming a new historical situation shaped by computational technologies and cultures of control, this poetry also challenges this situation – and invites alternative ways of seeing and understanding the world – through a playful critique partly influenced by ideas, forms, and operations from an avant-garde tradition in literature and art.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 February 2021
Accepted 11 April 2021

KEYWORDS

Posthuman; ecology;
cyberneticization; scale;
intermediation

The *Ur*-image of the poet is not seen, but heard. Located in a voice that intends to open a passage between two realms – the inner and the outer, the subject and the object – it is both concretely situated and an entity that invites metaphysical speculation and reverie. The voice shapes an expressive subject that we can desire and identify with, or turn away from in awe or irritation. It stages an individual, a human in front of a thriving world to which it both belongs and is sadly separate from. Or so it states. And, consequently, it laments; it sings.

Thus described, the poet seems a bit obsolete today, even an intimation of nostalgia; the same goes for the human figure in its shade. However, the history and practice of poetry is more variable than this stubborn default form of the lyric suggests. Poetic expression and form have always responded to and problematised the external, material, and mediatic conditions that mould the modes of writing and reading. The 'word salad' of the Dada poets, as it was famously named by Walter Benjamin (2008[1935]) was also, by Benjamin, diagnosed as a creative and congenial response to a world in which radio waves and cinematic

CONTACT Jesper Olsson  jesper.olsson@liu.se  Department of Culture and Society, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

projections fragmented the speaking subject and in which the book was erected from the horizontal desk to the vertical billboard in a crowded and electrically charged metropolis.

More than this, within the tradition of the avant-garde, and especially perhaps through its mutations during the post-war decades – in concrete poetry, conceptual art, and so on – when the media situation analysed by Benjamin became more fraught through the emergence of new technologies such as tape recorders, video cameras, and computers, poetic writing came to further the reconfigurations of the human subject and expand and differentiate the relations to the non-human, in form as well as content. Most notably, perhaps, this new expressivity was manifested, in the 1960s, through the incorporation and exploration in poetry of acoustic and visual noise, beyond the voice, as well as modes of signification other than language and alphabetic writing – photographic images, graphic figures, doodles, codes, the sounds of animals and machines (in sound poetry), and so on.

This neo-avant-gardistic swerve from human and natural language and speech, as the rock bottom of poetry – once analysed by Marjorie Perloff (1991) as an approach to ‘radical artifice’ – can be linked to the thought provoking proposal by Félix Guattari about the evolution of a late capitalist machine-centric universe in which subjects are replaced by subjectivities and complex assemblages, and in which language is bypassed by a signifying semiotics operative in stock listings and computer code, but also in music and art (Guattari’s thought summarised by Lazzarato 2014: 60, 80; cf. also Guattari 2011). It can, furthermore, be observed in relation to the increasing ‘intermediation’ between man and machine, language and code, analysed by N. Katherine Hayles (1999; 2005) in relation to the histories of cybernetics, informatics, and the posthuman.

The above sets up a space that I will travel through in this essay. More precisely, I aim to take a look at how poetry today, in our ‘post-humanist present’ (Hörl 2017: 3), imagines and reconfigures the relations between human and non-human at different scales. This is certainly a grand task, and a territory too vast to cover in an essay. But I will stick to a few examples that not only deconstruct an insistent anthropocentrism in science, culture, and art but also affiliate with the avant-garde tradition outlined above and actualise the techno-historical transformation analysed by Hayles and recently described by German media philosopher Erich Hörl (2017) as ‘cyberneticization’ and ‘ecologization’.

As my title suggests, I intend to use the term *ecology* as an optic in my approach – ecology as a ‘way of looking at things in their relations, conceptualizing and making sense of their multiple scales’, to quote Jussi Parikka (2019: 44). Such an observation sits well with the movements between shifting perspectives and scales, between the microscopic and the planetary, between human, animal, and machine, that energise the poetry to be discussed. But such an optics can, of course, not be reduced to a mirror. It must also be engaged to deflect things and sharpen the perception of how these works – from within, so to speak – both affirm and perform a critical analysis of their material conditions.

Before approaching the works picked out, I want to consider briefly some theoretical concerns that will resonate in my readings.

Cyberneticization and posthuman ecologies

‘Not seeing anything intelligible is the new normal’, writes artist and filmmaker Hito Steyerl (2017: 47) in an apt comment on a blurry image from the Snowden files in her

essay 'A Sea of Data'. At the outset, such an image might contain a perceivable pattern, but of a kind not identifiable and decodable by the human eye. In this, Steyerl's comment is released from its context and starts to hover over a broader cultural condition. Today, so many images, patterns, and presentations are decoupled from the human sensorium and intellect in order to be processed by machines and complex agential assemblages – to an extent that not seeing, hearing, or reading anything intelligible might very well be considered the new normal.

The conflict between perception and intelligibility, between shape and apprehension, highlights how Guattari's machine-centric world, addressed above, manifests itself in the early 21st century. Its emergence is related to a long historical process that has accelerated during the last decades. If technical modernity – train travel and thermodynamics, transistor radios, quantum physics, and the atomic bomb – radically transformed the life-worlds of humans and, especially, non-humans, the more recent cyberneticization and the effects of a 'computational regime' (Hayles 2005) upon thinking and being, has both widened and deepened this change. Today it affects all fields of knowledge, everyday life, the market, and so on, through the ubiquitous presence of digital media.

As mentioned, Hörl has analysed this process as linked to an expansion and theoretical rejuvenation of the concept of ecology. The latter has become 'increasingly denaturalized', he writes, allowing for previously unthinkable compounds such as 'techno-ecology' (Hörl 2017: 1). Hörl, here, joins the company of other theorists who have problematised a distinction between nature and culture (Haraway 2003) and ponder upon an 'ecology without nature' (Morton 2007). Accordingly, he also observes how a critical potential has been activated in the transmutation of the concept, "'Ecology" has started to designate the collaboration of a multiplicity of human and nonhuman agents [...] it forces and drives a radically relational onto-epistemological renewal' (Hörl 2017: 3).

On the other hand, this rejuvenation, is also an effect of the culture of control that cybernetics, computer technology, biotechnology, and so on, have produced. As Hörl (2017: 4–5) contends:

The technological evolution that drives this fundamental re-ecologization [...] has developed, more precisely, since the end of the nineteenth century and especially since 1950 in an ongoing process of cyberneticization, in an environmental culture of control that is radically distributed and distributive, manifest in computers migrating into the environment, in algorithmic and sensorial environments.

While the latter tend to reduce, control, and capitalise 'relations to calculable, rationalizable, exploitable ratios' (8), what Hörl (2017: 5) terms *general ecology* instead 'stands for the critical analysis and affirmation of this environmental turn and thereby marks the key content of a neocritical project that is no longer negativistic but characterized by a non-affirmative affirmation'.

This somewhat dense formulation underlines what is at stake in the poetic works to be discussed below – an exploration of assemblages of human and more-than-human that, on the one hand, affirms an ecologization driven by computational technologies, information- and bio-capitalism, and ubiquitous networks of control, but also, on the other hand, makes possible a critical reconfiguration of this situation in poetry and art, through subversive play, recontextualization, translation, transposition, and the misuse of forms, codes, and concepts. The *posthuman* ecologies thus construed open a space and time for

artistic negotiations of cyberneticization and ecologization. Instead of a somnambulist support for a control society and an automatised extension of anthropocentrism – e.g. through the pursuit of a transhuman ideal – alternative compositions of human and non-human are suggested. It is a transmutation of the Anthropos as an autonomous subject in front of the world-object into an embodied and distributed subjectivity, linked to those investigated in pioneer works (Hayles 1999) as well as more recent accounts of the posthuman (e.g. Braidotti 2015).

I will, in the following, turn to three recent books of poetry that in different ways and on different scales explore such posthuman ecologies. There are, certainly, other candidates for such a discussion, and my selection is, accordingly, if not arbitrary, partly shaped by chance and personal reading habits. However, and as mentioned, the three works are appropriate as they in both form and content continue an avant-garde tradition of poetic writing and, at the same time, engage with the history of cyberneticization as crucial for an understanding of the posthuman today.

Microbes

'A body/is a crowd/getting out/of bed. [...] with its/chemicals/it can never/be lonely' (Dickinson 2018: 107). Thus, begins – and ends – one of the evocative poems in Canadian writer Adam Dickinson's book *Anatomic* (2018). The sly allusion to Whitman's multitudes – but also to tracts on crowds by Gustave Le Bon, Elias Canetti, and others – is apposite for the project that Dickinson performs on the pages of his book. It is about an arduous inner journey, but not through the landscape of the soul, as lyrical habits might make us believe, but with the biochemical agents that move through and inhabit what we identify, somewhat misleadingly, as *our* body.

More than this, it is a carefully orchestrated and procedural poetry of ecological forces that situate the body in a larger system or environment, where different entities, very small entities, cross paths and become entangled, e.g., bacteria, proteins, and residues of petrochemicals, whose corporate genealogy, inside of the body, can be traced to Monsanto and other famous capitalist authors. As the back of Dickinson's book claims: 'The outside writes the inside, whether we like it or not'.

Partly, *Anatomic* continues a bio-geo-chemical-poetical investigation that was present in Dickinson's preceding book, *The Polymers* (2013), in which plastic materials serve as topic and formal model for a playful poetic endeavour. The poems taking shape, via the molecular structures of different plastics, such as polypropylene, include perambulations into our everyday life with the material – 'Bubble wrap fucks with us/like a rhyme scheme/of blistered ellipses' (Dickinson 2013: 28) – and critical observations of how it participates in the transformation of the habitats of different life forms ('Food courts organize appetites/for deforestation weeping with shelf lives' [14]), as well as punning uses of the concept's metaphorical capacity – 'Cognitive Neuroplasticity' (24), as one poem is called.

If a specific material is focused in the new materialist poetics in *The Polymers*, then it is the connections, the shifts and transpositions in scale, and the intermediations between micro entities (and the modes of representing them) and a human subject – a humanist subject: the poet – that are exposed and explored in *Anatomic*. The book creates, in form and content, a posthuman ecology, which poses questions about how subjectivities and

knowledge take shape in the intersections and combinations of different materialities and semiotics.

In order to achieve this poetic feat, Dickinson began his project by initiating a series of tests of, not his body of work, but the writer's actual corpus. He took, from himself, samples of blood, urine, faeces, and bacteria, and sent these to a medical lab for analysis. The investigation resulted in some scary, if perhaps unsurprising, discoveries. Not only was Adam the host of many microbes, but also of pesticides, herbicides, and other substances; for instance, dioxin, used in both paper production – the stuff of poetry – and in Agent Orange, the well-known toxic from the Vietnam war. The poet was colonised by a global corporate system and a complex media ecology, which connects him and his body to places and times he has never visited. As is underlined in one of the poems in the book, in order to bring forth the complex temporalities of the poet as biocultural entity, and accordingly of the poetic act and object as well: 'When my mother's breasts were building my brain, her milk sent me a postcard from the post-war boom' (Dickinson 2018: 34). This metaphor (this transport) inserts the subjectivity at stake, via informational biology and bio-capitalism, into the process of cyberneticization discussed by Hörl.

In composing the book – in relation to the tests – Dickinson paid as much attention to formal processes as to the issues and themes explored. The book opens with two long lists of the microbes found in his body and of the chemicals sought for, which are also reactivated in the ensuing poems. Moreover, the writing method in *Anatomic* uses the hormone as both a shaping and generative template, 'with its emphasis on concentration, cascade, and sequence' (145). This is similar to how molecules offered support for the poems in *The Polymers*, and it is an idea that finds a fertile background in the avant-garde procedural poetics of John Cage and many others. One major incentive for such an operation, with Cage, was to displace the lyrical subject, as something stable and whole, as a primary and final reference for the interpretation. The same goes with Dickinson, who, not lest in *Anatomic*, consequently de- and recomposes subjectivity as well as the meanings engendered by his work. Language, writing, various materialities, and bio-geo-chemo-semiotics are, in different ways, granted agency and ontogenetic force, which is given a humorous touch in some lines, for instance, these *détournements* of Lacan and Wittgenstein: 'The unconscious/is structured/like a hormone' (49), and 'The limits/of my enzymes/mean the limits/of my world' (Dickinson 2018: 44).

What is at stake are, to use the word brought up by Hörl (with reference to Karen Barad), 'onto-epistemological' questions concerning relation, world-making, control, and agency. As one poem explicitly says, '[i]t is unclear, in fact, whether the immune system controls the microbes or the microbes control the immune system' (42). Naturally, this evokes political questions related to, for instance, the mentioned inscriptions of techno- and bio-capitalism into the human body. As is obliquely suggested in a passage such as this:

*At the business end of this shit,
complex sugars are abducted
by aliens necktied
in a carpool, still rocking
classic haircuts and metabolic
pathways from the oxygen-starved
oceans of Archean Earth.* (Dickinson 2018: 43)

A key theme in *Anatomic* is, thus, the assemblage of subjectivities and agencies: / is always a *we* or, rather, a collective ensemble, a multitude, an ecology that can, in its aggregation of organic and inorganic, nature and culture (bacteria and chemicals etcetera) be termed posthuman. This aggregation is not only addressed but also embodied in the media of writing and the book with its gathering of scientific taxonomies, code, instruments, x-ray images, and so on.

In an essay with the alluring title 'Deep Shit', Nigel Clark and Myra Hird (2014) point out – while referring to Bruno Latour's observation that the point with bacteria is their capacity to compose worlds for others (Latour 1988), and Lynn Margulis' laconic reminder that life on this planet will always be dominated by microbes (Margulis 1998) – 'Bacteria invented all the basic metabolic processes, including photosynthesis and chemical conversion that every other life form remains utterly dependent on' (Clark & Hird 2014: 45). That they have found ways of interacting thoroughly with, even living on, plastics is nowadays known. As the greeting in Dickinson's previous book makes clear:

*Hello from bacteria
making their germinal way
to the poles in the pockets
of packing foam.* (Dickinson 2013: 7)

'[N]ext to the traversal artistry of bacteria, humans are crude and clumsy destratifiers', Clark and Hird (2014: 50) claim in their essay, invoking the possibilities of *destratification* and *detritorialisation* once outlined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. But Dickinson's poetry in *Anatomic* (and in *The Polymers*) shows that in acknowledging and playing with bacterial and other microprocesses, exchanges, and intermediations between materialities and semiotics – in exploring such posthuman ecologies – poetry can approach a similarly enlivening artistry. This has aesthetic as well as political, epistemic as well as existential relevance today. It forces out a reconsideration of how human and other subjectivities are composed, and, by extension, how we might find other and more ethically viable ways of composing and living together.

Clouds

In the early 1900s Swedish writer August Strindberg conducted one of his many experimental works on the threshold of art and science. His gaze and interest were at the time drawn towards the heavens, not in a solely spiritual way, even if religion was a conflicted presence in his writing. Using technical media, he developed a more materialist approach, zooming in on the cloudy shapes orchestrating the sky as a setting for meditation and for thinking.

Strindberg's cloud photographs were linked to his earlier 'celestography' – imprints of the sky on light-sensitive glass, made without a camera – and to his scientifically moulded interest in alternative modes (sometimes verging on 'pataphysics') of observing and understanding the world. His photographic operations are an example of how the conditions for relating to and making visible the sky was changing in the 1800s, turning it into a component in a modern media ecology. That the concept of the cloud has come to designate a decisive node in digital networks today is obvious. But there are possibilities of further exploring and historicising it, as a medium, and as part of a technical

infrastructure, as has been manifested in works by Tung-Hui Hu (2015) and, in the longer *durée*, by John Durham Peters (2015). In Janine Randerson's recent study *Weather as Medium* (2018), clouds, naturally, play a leading role (even though Strindberg's part in the story is not mentioned), and in a famous fictional work such as David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004), they are elevated to a crucial metaphor for negotiating questions of history, time, and humanity.

Here, I want to turn to a recent poetic project staged both in print, on the web, and through live performance that engages similar issues as the studies mentioned and zooms in on the same fluffy object. J. R. Carpenter's *The Gathering Cloud* (2017) is a work in poetic media history or, rather, media *archaeology*. It draws on many forms and artistic operations and attests to Carpenter's multiform background as an artist, which includes a dissertation in artistic research. *The Gathering Cloud* is also described on the book's flap as collating 'research into the history and language of meteorology with current thinking about data storage and climate change'. This material is brought to the reader – I will focus on the book here – through photographs and a text that veers between verse, lists, and prose organised into stanzas with vague lyrical echoes.

Meteorology and the history of clouds offer a structure for *The Gathering Cloud*, stretching as far back as 423 BCE. The book, however, begins with an alphabetical list, an 'index of objects', from *aerosol* to *wind*. The first stanzas, with observations and reflections, situate the poetic investigation in the present, and directs the reader's attention to weather, rain, storms, and floods and their role in an eco-narrative – the Met Office's chief scientist says the changes in weather 'suggests a link to climate change' (Carpenter 2017: 16) – followed by a series of photographs of beaches, weather, water, and of clouds. It is a landscape fraught with transition and instability. That the book opens with an ecotone is telling. Moreover, we also encounter, here, a transposition or tension in scale – comparable to the one between microbes and human subject in Dickinson's poems – summarised in one of the photographs in which some miniature people show up on a pier, next to the ocean, under the vast and cloudy sky.

This initiates a sublime negotiation between human and more-than-human that will continue, by different paths, in other texts and images. One of the most important issues interlaced with the theme concerns how humans have engaged art and *techne* to navigate the celestial space and ecology. Already in Greek drama – Carpenter, naturally, enrolls Aristophanes' comedy *The Clouds* – the sky becomes a theatre for a rambunctious crowd of gods, and the technique of *deus ex machina* attests to this cultural framing. And Carpenter (2017: 27) reminds us that the sky itself has for long been approached as a media technology – as 'compass, calendar, map, and clock'.

At the same time, clouds have always been interpreted as harbingers of something ominous, of threats and destruction. For good reason, as they signal weather events such as storms and hurricanes. But they are also worrying in themselves, in their shifting outlook and shape, which have elevated them as a *topos* in the aesthetics of the sublime. Morphologically instable and always in transformation they challenge and evade the standard human fortifications offered by language, figuration, and thought.

The latter is ironically staged in Carpenter's book in a series of excavations in the archive around the conceptual work and 'methodological nomenclature' of clouds – *cirrus*, *cumulus* etc., but also, for instance, 'nuages moutonnées' (flocked clouds), one of the terms offered by Lamarck in the 1820s. Also, other nineteenth-century media

were, as we have seen, engaged in this interaction. Not only photography, but, for instance, the old technique of painting. Carpenter brings up both J. M. W. Turner and William Constable, whose transpositions and intermediations between two realms – between the elemental media of earth and air (see Peters 2015) – are appositely addressed: ‘Constable applied minerals of the earth – /manganese, mercury, chromium, oxide – /to modifications of clouds in the sky’ (Carpenter 2017: 46; change in colour in original).

The media geological component points, metonymically, to the current operation of using rare minerals of the earth as material support for digital technologies and for our enormous data cloud. Such metonymic linking and translating between different times give resonance to Carpenter’s book. And between Constable and the contemporary situation – chronologically speaking – the history of cyberneticization takes place. (Interestingly enough, thermodynamics, which played a crucial theoretical role in the history of information theory and cybernetics, is also present in the visual art brought up by Carpenter, at least in Michel Serres’ (1982) reading of Turner.)

Carpenter invokes that history explicitly; not least through the transformation of the sky into a setting for war – ‘Modern warfare is waged in a theater of air’ (60), as she writes in a passage on Heidegger’s work as weatherman in World War I, which establishes a charged connection between philosophy, meteorology, military technologies, and media, analysed by Paul Virilio (1989) and Friedrich Kittler (1999), among others. This actualises the ensuing formation of a series of human made clouds that evoke both The Anthropocene and its violent causes – the clouds of smoke from the ovens in the German concentration camps (Paul Celan’s lines from the poem ‘Todesfuge’, about a grave in the air, are cited), the iconic mushroom cloud of the atomic bomb, and, as part of the same narrative, the computer clouds that were begun to be created in the post-war years (see Hu 2015) and that hovers around and in-between us today.

Through descriptions, metonymic connections, and figurations of this kind, Carpenter discloses a destructive narrative shaped by anthropomorphic interventions, manipulation, and desire for control – a human-centric story that has had disastrous effects for the climate, for other species, and for the planet at large. But at the same time, her writing and photographs also call forth a posthuman ecology that challenges and undermines the above; a cloudy and complex ecology of elemental and more-than-human forces and agencies, to which there are many ways to relate.

In his recent book on computational thinking and technologies of control, *New Dark Age*, the critic James Bridle (2018: 33) writes that ‘[a]ll contemporary computation stems from this nexus: military attempts to predict and control the weather, and thus to control the future’. In light of such an observation, the cloud and its history become, with Carpenter, a metaphor and a reminder of how something always also evades control and computation. At one point in her book (Carpenter 2017: 31), she stops to read the work of an anonymous Christian mystic from the 14th century called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The same work is by chance (or perhaps not) brought up by Bridle (Bridle 2018: 9), as an instance of thinking that can make us aware of the limits of the computational and the instrumental. The cloud as a model for an ‘embrace of unknowing’ opens up to reflection and rumination – to the possibility and necessity of another eco-narrative.

Codes

My third example of poetry staging shifting scales and intermediations brings us closer to the perhaps most expected setting for a discussion of posthuman ecologies today, the global media network. However, the aesthetic energy generated in Nasser Hussain's (2018) playful book, *SKY/WRI/TEI/NGS*, has as much to do with the older media culture of print as with the digital. It is first of all a beautifully crafted *book*, with neat visual figures and typesetting, and thick textured paper, which adds a richly tactile dimension to the 'verbivocovisual' edging experience, to use James Joyce's compressed coinage from *Finnegans Wake*. Moreover, the poetic media archaeology at work here – and this links Hussain to Carpenter – complexify the contemporary media landscape through a material and historicising operation.

As the title suggests, the poetry in *SKY/WRI/TEI/NGS* is also, just as Carpenter's, about celestial matters, but in a somewhat more restricted or focused way. While she researches the 'medianatures' (Parikka 2012) of the cloud and its environs, Hussain's poetry explores a specific system of signification used to map a human-machine-based activity in the sky that has a long history in the cultural imagination, but, in reality, dates back only a hundred years. All of the poems in Hussain's book are composed by the three-letter codes for airports over the world (e.g. ARL or LAX), based on a system established by IATA (International Airport Transport Association). In order to extract poetry out of these letter strings, Hussain has exploited the specific capacity of the alphabetic medium to encode sound, as manifested in this exemplary and ambiguous piece called '**ALF AAH BET (2)**':

AIE BEE SEE
 DEE EAT EPH
 GEE ACH EYE
 JFK ELM ENS
 OHH PEE CUE
 ERR ESS TEA
 YOO VEE
 DUB BLE YOO
 SEX WYE ZIA
 (EYE CAN SAY THE ABC EZE) (Hussain 2018: 85)

The meaning begins to shimmer and spread when the codes are read aloud, or at least sounded inside your head. In the same manner their generic identity as poetry, even the preferred poetics, might be disclosed (all titles are set in bold):

POE TRY ISS NUS THA TST AYS NEW
 PET ALS ONA WET BLA ACK BOW(45)

Apart from Ezra Pound, other modern poets and poetries are invoked – William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein, Walt Whitman and Christian Bök. Considering the forms activated, and the attention paid to typography and the page as a stage, Hussain, elegantly interweaves his work with an avant-garde tradition of visual and sound poetry. A close relative is Emmet Williams' (1975) post-concrete artist book *THE VOY AGE*, which also explores travel through an inventive use of three letter compounds, but without the specific connection to codes.

SKY/WRI/TEI/NGS outlines a number of themes and topics: air travel and sky (of course), storytelling and history (one poem moves from ancient Egypt and the Bible and swiftly to

our cybernetic and digital era: 'EVE ATE THE APP LES//AND SAW THE LIE//DAV GOT COM PUT ERS//BUT HAL CAN NOT SAY YES' (19), digital culture and social media (there is one poem named '**INT ERR NOT**'), street lingo and hip hop, surveillance, control, racism, and islamophobia. In many pieces, the relationship between code, writing, and language are meta-poetically addressed, and in a wonderful text on Noah's ark, the question of anthropocentric domination and organisation of the world – from the Biblical story to the bio-informatic representation with DNA and RNA, i.e., a crucial moment in cyberneticization – sheds light on the passage between different media and sign systems that is at the centre of the whole project.

Accompanying some poems are also, on the verso page, world maps in different forms and formats, with lines in black or red that display the itineraries between airports. Accordingly, a dense and complex network is manifested, which invokes, in image, the global infrastructure that through a radical act of translation has been turned into poetry on the other pages (well, text and image, of course, cooperate as integral elements in a mixed media setting). Hussain's poetry, thus, comes forth as a fascinating intermediation (Hayles 2005) between language and code; or between the world of the symbolic and the world of the machine, to use Friedrich Kittler's (1997) phrasing of this passage between different ontologies in his essay on Lacan and information theory.

While literature and writing today – or mainly the industry of letters, with key-actors such as Amazon and Google – has transposed and refashioned the book for the screen, Nasser Hussain moves in the other direction. The airport codes used by him have been reconfigured to operate as words and sentences in an alphabetic environment. In the 1950s, the concrete poet Eugen Gomringer – famously, in a fit of cold war rationalist frenzy – dreamt of a universal (concrete) poetry as accessible and universal as the signs in airports. Hussain, on the other hand, *embodies* and *situates* the codes from a mediatic and semiotic system intended to function globally and universally, independent of time, place, and accent. Thus, through a complex and humorous cyborgian device – the machinic code is read from a human or rather an alphabetic standpoint, from one medium to another – the lyrical starts to sing in the interstices between man and machine.

Some remarks

If Hussain's humorous and thought-provoking poetry makes its reader consider questions of code and language, writing, sound, and voice – and, by implication, the negotiations, collaborations, and intermediations between man and machine – it will also, by addressing the global infrastructure of air travel, address the relation between man and fossil fuels, between (post)modernity and the earth as it was millions of years ago. That is, it will indirectly address the climate crisis that affect the whole planet and the so-called Anthropocene (I will not discuss the problems with this concept, but see for instance Moore 2015). Moreover, and as hinted at above, in deconstructing the idea of a technical, de-situated, and supposedly disembodied and universal system of signification through a poetic gesture, Hussain's work also destabilises some of the support for an anthropocentric and cyberneticized control culture, postulating a human subject in front of a world-object. In *SKY/WRI/TEI/NGS* the code is re-situated and re-embodied.

Not only metaphorically speaking, high flying (idealistic) perspectives on human ingenuity and achievement are brought to earth, even under ground, where the dead

animals energising this fossil-based anthropo-worldview are found. The posthuman ecology in Hussain comprises a geological element of the same kind as with Carpenter, where the painterly visions of the sky as well as today's big computer cloud were exposed as based on earthly minerals and underground, and underwater, networks of cables. One might even find a similar elemental connection and transition in Dickinson's *Anatomic*, where fragments of herbicides and pesticides orchestrate, on a minuscular level, the everyday bodily life of the poet.

Thus, a number of ideas about the human – as autonomous subject, as discoverer and sovereign – are reconfigured in a critical and playful way in these works that build on an avant-garde tradition going back to the early twentieth century, but which finds new intellectual and aesthetic energy in the cyberneticization and technological changes during the post-war decades. Bacteria, chemicals, code, cloud computing, and social media are not only topics in these works, but affect the forms and in this become generative in the meaning making. It is a poetry that problematises the lyrical subject and the anthropocentrism (often) underpinning it.

I have invoked, above, the term 'ecology' and, more specifically, 'posthuman ecology', as a way of looking at and designating these reconfigurations and the relations between humans and microbes, clouds, code, etc. The poetry discussed not only deflects anthropocentrism but can also be read as a step towards an expansion of the ethical and political imagination for the future. This sits well with how Simone Bignall and Rosi Braidotti circumscribe what they call posthuman ecologies in a recent anthology under the same name. These can be, they write (Bignall & Braidotti 2019: 2), 'understood as an epistemological framework for supporting the elaboration of alternative values and new codes of inter-relation that extend beyond human influence and cognizance, but do not discount it'.

This also reminds us of the politics at stake, a question which is raised by both Guattari, Hayles, and Hörl, albeit from somewhat different perspectives. In general, and I will stick to this level, there is an explicit and implicit political critique of the computational as a dominant mode of understanding, organising, and occupying time, memory, perception, relations through algorithmic technologies, big data, and a 'data behaviorism' that shapes even our futures (Rouvroy 2012; see also Cray 2013). The inventive poetics discussed here loosen up and challenge some of the presumptions of such a managing of time, space, and the planet. They suggest that there are other modes and forms of world making worth considering.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Jesper Olsson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8111-1030>

References

- Benjamin, Walter. 2008 [1935]. *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility and other writings on media*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2015. *The Posthuman*. Oxford: Polity.
- Bignall, Simone & Rosi Braidotti (eds.). 2019. *Posthuman ecologies: Complexity and process after Deleuze*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bridle, James. 2018. *New dark age: Technology and the end of the future*. London: Verso Books.
- Carpenter, J. R. 2017. *The gathering cloud*. Devon: Uniformbooks.
- Clark, Nigel & Myra Hird. 2014. Deep shit. *O-Zone: A Journal of Object-Oriented Studies* 1, 44–52.
- Crary, Jonathan. 2013. *24/7: Late capitalism and the ends of sleep*. London: Verso Books.
- Dickinson, Adam. 2013. *The polymers*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.
- Dickinson, Adam. 2018. *Anatomic*. Toronto: Coach House Books.
- Guattari, Félix. 2011. *The Machinic Unconscious*. Translated by Taylor Adkins. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Haraway, Donna J. 2003. *The companion species manifesto: Dogs, people, and significant otherness*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. 1999. *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. 2005. *My mother was a computer: Digital subjects and literary texts*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hörl, Erich. 2017. Introduction to general ecology: The ecologization of thinking. In Erich Hörl (ed.), *General ecology: The new ecological paradigm*, 1–73. London: Bloomsbury.
- Hu, Tung-Hui. 2015. *A pre-history of the cloud*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hussein, Nasser. 2018. *SKY/WRI/TEI/NGS*. Toronto: Coach House Books.
- Kittler, Friedrich A. 1997. The World of the Symbolic – A World of the Machine. In John Johnston (ed.), *Literature, media, information systems*, 130–146. Amsterdam: G+B Arts.
- Kittler, Friedrich A. 1999. *Gramophone, film, typewriter*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 1988. *The Pastuerization of France/Irreductions*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lazzarato, Maurizio. 2014. *Signs and machines: Capitalism and the production of subjectivity*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).
- Margulis, Lynn. 1998. *The Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution*. London: Phoenix.
- Mitchell, David. 2004. *Cloud Atlas*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Moore, Jason. 2015. *Capitalism in the web of life: Ecology and the accumulation of capital*. London: Verso Books.
- Morton, Timothy. 2007. *Ecology Without Nature. Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Parikka, Jussi (ed.). 2012. *Medianatures: The materiality of information technology and electronic waste*. <http://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Medianatures> (last accessed 4 September 2020).
- Parikka, Jussi. 2019. Cartographies of environmental art. In Rosi Braidotti & Simone Bignall (eds.), *Posthuman ecologies*, 41–60. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Perloff, Marjorie. 1991. *Radical artifice: Writing poetry in the age of media*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Peters, John Durham. 2015. *The marvelous clouds: Toward a philosophy of elemental media*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Randerson, Janine. 2018. *Weather as medium: Toward a meteorological art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Rouvroy, Antoinette. 2012. The end(s) of critique: Data-behaviorism vs. due process. In Mireille Hildebrandt & Ekaterina De Vries (eds.), *Privacy, due process and the computational turn*, 143–167. London: Routledge.
- Serres, Michel. 1982. *Hermes: Literature, science, philosophy*. Josué V. Harari & David F. Bell (eds.). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Steyerl, Hito. 2017. *Duty free art: Art in the age of planetary civil war*. London: Verso Books.
- Virilio, Paul. 1989. *War and cinema: Logistics of perception*. London: Verso Books.
- Williams, Emmet. 1975. *THE VOY AGE*. Stuttgart: Edition Hansjörg Mayer.