

# Bataille's Laughter: Comedy, Irony, or Wonder? Examining Ecstasy as an Anthropocentric Limit

Rachel Holmes

Kingston University London, UK

**Abstract** This article applies a reading of Georges Bataille's *Laughter of Death* to the comedic, the ironic, and the wonderful, to determine whether these functions are amenable to the dissolution of subjectivity that his laughter implies. This dissolution, in turn, repositions humans within an ecology of death identified as the food chain. Bataille's laughter thus serves as a litmus test for the extent to which these functions – representing humanism (the wonderful), postmodernism (the comedic), and posthumanism (the ironic) – rely on identity and, consequently, anthropocentricity.

**Keywords** Georges Bataille. Bataille. Alenka Zupančič. Søren Kierkegaard. Caroline Walker Bynum. Comedy. Irony. Wonder. Laughter. Continental Philosophy. Posthumanism. Postmodernism. Humanism. Posthuman. Postmodern. Anthropocene. Ravencene. Immanence. Hegel. Clowns. Clown. Val Plumwood. Plumwood. Philosophical Animism. Crocodile. Eye of the Crocodile. Cyborg. Donna Haraway.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Humanism and Wonder. – 3 Postmodernism and Comedy. – 4 Posthumanism and Irony. – 5 Animals and Trickery. – 6 Conclusion.



## Peer review

Submitted 2024-07-29  
Accepted 2024-09-11  
Published 2024-12-06

## Open access

© 2024 Holmes | 4.0



**Citation** Holmes, R. (2024). "Bataille's Laughter: Comedy, Irony, or Wonder? Examining Ecstasy as an Anthropocentric Limit". *Lagoonscapes*, 4(2), 283-302.

## 1 Introduction

Sherryl Vint's publication *After the Human* (Vint 2020) presents a collection of essays that delineate the contemporary research field of posthumanism and its influence on the humanities. In Vint's introduction the ecofeminist Donna Haraway is described as playing an indispensable role in the emergence of scholarship on human-animal relations (3), while various essays cite her *Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway 1991) as an originating text for the posthuman movement. Therein Haraway presents the posthuman subject, the cyborg, as "a hybrid creature, composed of organism and machine" (4). This essay asks if cyborgs can laugh, more specifically, it asks if they can laugh in a particular way. It does this because laughter abolishes anthropocentric codes oriented around identity, by dissolving subjectivity. As posthuman subjects which allegedly deconstruct anthropocentricity, it therefore becomes pertinent to ask if cyborgs can laugh; and what posthuman alternatives can we imagine in the case that they cannot. However the nature of this laughter is also examined in the context of its inheritance from humanism and postmodernism, in terms of the transformation of the function of ecstasy that they exhibit.

Laughter is expressive of an ecstatic state, where ecstasy is understood according to the Medieval historian and documenter of shamanic rites, Claude Lecouteux, as derivative of "the Greek *ekstasis*, which literally means 'straying of the spirit'" (Lecouteux 2001, 12). Laughter is thus presented in this essay as an inversion of anthropocentricity insofar as it removes us, or 'strays', from anthropocentric codes. In doing this, laughter abolishes objectivity and identity defined in relation to utility; Georges Bataille describes this state of dissolution as immanence which he identifies with the intimacy of nature as being "*in the world like water in water*" (Bataille 2004, 34). Bataille thus formulated the laughter of death as the sacrifice of identity, and on the basis of this ecstatic commitment to the impossible loss of self (Bataille 2001, 24), described his philosophy as a "philosophy of laughter. It is a philosophy founded on the experience of laughter, and it does not even claim to further" (138). The Bataillean capacity to laugh, is therefore the capacity to (ecstatically) transcend codes oriented around (utilitarian) object schemes, thereby instituting a sovereign relationship with the impossible and unknowable which furthermore, collapses anthropocentricity.

This ecstatic preoccupation positions Bataille as a philosopher of environmental humanities, concerned with relocating the human subject in the intimate ecology of nature. This preoccupation motivated Bataille's ritual and meditative practices, as well as his discipleship to Nietzsche on the grounds of Nietzsche's tragic thought which posited "the ecstatic revelation of the impossible which ruins the separation between subject and object" (Lotringer 1994, x). The blossoming

of this Nietzschean lineage in Bataille's thought, resurrects the significance of the animal for modern philosophical discourse.

In *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy*, Vanessa Lemm emphasises this significance, contending

the animal is neither a random theme nor a metaphorical device, but rather stands at the centre of Nietzsche's renewal of the practice and meaning of philosophy itself. (Lemm 2009, 1)

In *Animal Philosophy* Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton express their astonishment that conversely, postmodernism

has only rarely given serious attention to the animal question [despite] the tremendous reception it has given a thinker as seemingly pro-animal as Nietzsche. (Calarco, Atterton 2004, xv)

Joseph D. Ycaza thus argues in *The Ecological Nietzsche* (2022) that indigenous perspectives are a better starting point for an understanding of Nietzsche than the Western European worldview, on the basis of the ecological orientation of indigenous ontologies.

Ycaza's view can be substantiated by the postmodern absence of critical philosophising around the animal question, which Calaraco and Atterton identify in Continental philosophy. This is problematic for the posthuman movement which Vint describes as an attempt to "take account of the more-than-human world and to redefine its concepts and methods beyond anthropocentrism" (Vint 2020, 1), on the basis that posthumanism is the contemporary prodigy of the postmodern "reluctance to embrace traditional humanism and anthropological discourse" (Calarco, Atterton 2004, xv) which Calarco and Atterton describe. Stefan Herbrechter thus characterises posthumanism as a new participant in "the still-ongoing deconstruction of [the humanist] subject by critiquing subjectivity's inherent anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism" (Herbrechter 2020, 39), which it has furthermore, inherited from poststructuralism (as the precursor of postmodernism).

What is at stake therefore, is a threat that posthumanism will reproduce the implicit anthropocentrism of postmodernism by excluding the value of the animal as an ecological subject. This of course has a ricochet effect, insofar as the human being *is* and has been identified as a human-animal by writers like Vanessa Lemm, David Abram (Abram 2011) and, indeed, Georges Bataille. As such, Bataille's commitment to Nietzsche's ecstatic thought - which relocates the human subject in an intimate order Bataille equates with animality in "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" (Bataille 1990) - offers a sort of renegade factor which can critique the systems (including posthumanism) founded on Nietzsche's thought from within. It does this by restaging the significance of the animal in his thought; in this essay this renegade

factor is presented as Bataille's laughter of death which is as impossible as the animal, insofar as they both collapse the utilitarian order.

The methodology undertaken herein can thus be described as ecstatic insofar as it is concerned with the extent to which laughter can relocate the objects it critiques, from an anthropocentric order into an immanent order identified with our natural ecology. I furthermore, employ the work of the ecofeminist Val Plumwood to characterise this ecological system as the food-chain. Plumwood's food-chain is commonsensical, but also true to Bataille's fixation with sacred experience as a form of violence. The crocodile which death-rolled Plumwood three times, changing her philosophical commitments and resulting in her conception of the food-chain outlined in *The Eye of the Crocodile* (Plumwood 2012), is native to Bataille's erotic conception of the sacred as the experience of both horror and ecstasy (Bataille 1986), which Plumwood also describes in *Being Prey* (Plumwood 2008).

This analysis of laughter is interpreted through four humours; wonder, comedy, irony, and finally trickery. This is on the basis of their correspondence with humanism, postmodernism, and posthumanism. Comparing these movements means we can see more clearly their individual relationship to laughter, and thereby, critique their capacity to escape anthropocentricity (or not). It also allows us to identify the transformation of the ecstatic function which has resulted in our current predicament, exemplified by the symbolic crises of The Anthropocene which I will critique. This comparison will be mediated primarily through the work of Caroline Walker Bynum, Alenka Zupančič, Donna Haraway and Val Plumwood; and interpreted through a Bataillean framework.

Bynum's theory of wonder is presented as humanist insofar as it is derived from the Medieval epoch wherein humanism developed and is thereby representative of its ecstatic values. Zupančič's theory of comedy is presented as postmodern insofar as it is cognizant with the predicament of the clown as a postindustrial construction which furthermore, is still expressive of the Mediaeval function of wonder but beginning to lose its ecstatic function. Haraway's theory of irony is presented as posthuman insofar as she describes it as such and her work has been generative for the movement; which furthermore, completes the vanishment of the ecstatic function. By contrast Plumwood will also be positioned as a posthuman writer, but one capable of salvaging the ecstatic function, thereby offering trickery as an alternative to irony.

What emerges from this analysis, is the predicament whereby wonderful humanism appears more posthuman than Haraway's ironic posthumanism, insofar as it is more ecstatic and thereby less anthropocentric. This is an important alarm for posthumanism, which may be informed by examining the origins of humanism as a struggle

against tyranny which emerged during the Florentine Renaissance, and developed into a pantheistic materialism which Arran Gare has characterised as 'nature enthusiasm'. Gare identifies "Giordano Bruno, who was burnt at the stake in 1600, [as] the foremost proponent of this" (Gare 2021, 3). To this end I have offered Plumwood's view on the food-chain as a solution to the posthuman return of anthropocentricity, on merit of its capacity to reposition us in a living ecology identified with the food-chain.

In the following I will describe the function of wonder for the humanism of the Mediaevals, predicated on the experience of hybridity which triggered ecstatic states, "as a response to 'majesty', to 'hidden wisdom' or significance" (Bynum 2005, 55). This is correlate with Bataille's conception of laughter as a response to *the unknowable* (Bataille 2001, 135).

## 2 Humanism and Wonder

We begin this analysis in the Mediaeval epoch, as an ecstatic time concerned with the paradox of the miraculous and the monstrous, and the divinatory states their coexistence induced. Bynum's *Metamorphosis and Identity* (Bynum 2005) is a study of concepts of change among Western Mediaevals in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, organised by the encounter between the monstrous as finite experience, and the miraculous as infinite or divine experience. This paradox was representative of the Mediaeval predicament of the finite human being having an infinite experience, personified by Jesus Christ as the Son of Man and embodiment of God; resulting in a wonderful view of hybridity which "lingers at the highest levels of *unitas*" (175). This doubled hybridity, both miraculous and monstrous, resulted in the experience of wonder as a significance reaction (55), and was generative of the popularity of the werewolf in Mediaeval entertainment literature. Bynum thus refers to Angela Carter's suggestion that Christmas day is the werewolf's birthday, on merit of the hybridity shared by both Christ and the werewolf (159).

Bynum characterises Mediaeval hybridism as the simultaneous holding together of contradictory parts, which evokes a wonder reaction associated with the sublime in "which ontological and moral boundaries are crossed, confused or erased" (69), evocative of "paradox, coincidence of opposites" (43). Wonder was attributed to sublime experience as a

signification-reaction - which is only another way of expressing the tautology that things are signs or portents not because of their natures or their causes but because they indicate or point. (71)

Bynum points out

As every Mediaeval schoolboy knew, monsters are named from the verb *monstrare* (to show) – that is, not from their ontology but from their utility. (71)

In this regard the werewolf (as paradox) was monstrous not so much because of how spectacular it was, but what this portended to as the negation of human knowledge; Bataille's ecstatic experience of the unknowable. In the Mediaeval era of humanism, identity was thus inscribed with negation in terms of its orientation to the beyond-human; it was thereby not an anthropocentric position. Rather, this paradigm necessitated humanism as the humanising of hybrid beings toward infinity, as opposed to finity.

Michel Foucault similarly identifies the function of the monstrous before the seventeenth century; which defined madness as expressive of a divinatory relationship with a 'Beyond' (Foucault 1988, 36). This Beyond existed in an antagonistic relationship with the state, insofar as it began to be associated with unemployment, idleness, and finally madness. However these zones of deviance mapped the site of humanist struggles of resistance against state despotism. Silvia Federici has demonstrated how this was descriptive of the heretical movement "aspiring to a radical domestication of social life" (Federici 2014, 33) following the crisis of feudalism, which offered an alternative to the development of a money-economy which eventually triggered capitalist industrialisation. Federici argues that the transition from the persecution of heresy to witch-hunting, was facilitated by the demonisation of folk practices previously associated with the wonder paradigm (40), including ecstatic rituals of divination.

Nevertheless, apart from hybridity, the Mediaevals did also conceive of forms of transformation and metamorphosis as metempsychosis and shape-shifting; or what Bynum describes as identity-replacement. However, for the Mediaevals these feats of transformation still assumed

an atomism according to which nothing disappears. Things merely aggregate or dissolve, returning to the elements, the ultimate parts or bits. Hence, in a sense, there cannot be change; a thing is merely more or less of what it is. (Bynum 2005, 144)

Change was thus often only a revelation of a disguised state; expressed by shape-shifting allegories of "overclothing" (103) which were discarded to reveal an authentic, preexistent nature. Bynum subsequently laments that

we seem at the present moment to lack images, metamorphosis, and stories that imagine... a self that really changes while remaining the same thing. (166)

This self that really changes while remaining the same thing in terms of spatio-temporal location, is important insofar as its metamorphosis generates stories which "involves *metabole*, the replacement of something by something else" (181). For Bynum, "without it there is no story; nothing happens" (177). In this regard, we need more stories of metamorphosis as thirdness; an absence which postmodernism can be described as trying to compensate for, with the non-binary obsession it has plausibly inherited from the Mediaevals.

Nonetheless, Bynum's theory of Wonder is capable of producing laughter insofar as it is concerned with the divinatory implications of paradox and the ecstatic states it evoked for the Mediaevals. Wonderful monsters transcended anthropocentric codes and symbolised a Beyond. In so doing, they animated a living ecology woven by beyond-human relationships; including the relationship between the monstrous and miraculous as "a likeness moving toward like, or a midpoint in the chain of being between animal and angel" (129).

However this wonderful 'coincidence of opposites' would be castrated of its ecstatic function in modernity, resulting in the postmodern predicament of the clown, haunted by its opposite or double. Bataille also refers to the hybridity of Jesus Christ, but as a comedy which cannot reconcile the infinite nature of God with his death (Bataille 1990, 13), but instead mocks it (2001, 23). This construction of comedy is based on Bataille's reading of the labour of the negative (as death) for Hegel, which Zupančič similarly invokes to characterise the comic as the personification of the negative. For Bataille this personification "reveal[s] to the living the invasion of death" (1990, 19), identified by him as Jesus Christ.

Comedy thus personifies the negative as the "acting subject" (Zupančič 2008, 27), thereby collapsing the ecstatic experience of contradiction or negation, into the postmodern experience of timeless, endless space; for which there is no Beyond. In this regard Jesus is described by Bataille as comic instead of wonderful, insofar as he is no longer representative of an ecstatic Beyond, but a postmodern 'here, now' instituted in the absence of God (Bataille 2001, 23). This is consistent with the transformation of divination which characterises modernity. While this is a degradation of the status of ecstasy and thus the possibility of laughter, it nonetheless persists as the haunting which traces the space of a vanished double that once offered the wonderful experience of hybridity.

In the following I will analyse the possibility of ecstatic experience for postmodernism, through the function of comedy. This transformation from wonder to comedy was foreseen by Nietzsche in *The Birth*

of *Tragedy* (Nietzsche 2003) which laments the degradation of tragedy Nietzsche associates with divination, into comedy. However, I will conclude that postmodernism is ecstatic, insofar as it is concerned with the destruction of experience. While this is not divinatory and thus not wonderful (or in Nietzschean terms, tragic), it is nevertheless expressive of Bataille's laughter of death.

This counterintuitively positions postmodernism as an animal expression concerned with the unknowable. From this perspective, postmodernism's lack of animal theorising can be understood as a lack of the self-consciousness Nietzsche attributes to the tragic artist as a hybrid-satyr of the Apolline and Dionysian orders (43); derived from their (wonderful) encounter with a Beyond. According to Nietzsche's tragic theory this undoubtedly stems from modernity's rejection of the Apolline world of divination and dream, which offers the dualistic complement to the Dionysian realm of intoxication from which the hybrid derives self-consciousness, as "the weird fairy-tale image of the creature that can turn its eyes around and look at itself; he is at once subject and object, at once poet, actor and audience" (32).

This points to the sobering problem that as animals begin to appear as literary devices or inventions, our self-consciousness only confesses to our realtime alienation from them. They are once again instilled with the nostalgia and alienation Bataille ascribed to Pleistocene man's cave-paintings of deified animals (Bataille 2005, 76). This transformation is representative of our anthropocentric predicament, as we watch the disappearance of animals into myth.

### 3 Postmodernism and Comedy

Richard Schechner's identifies the postmodern appetite for "retribalisation" in *The End of Humanism*, which replaces the order of narrative with ritual (Schechner 1979, 12-13)

in its its ethological sense of repetition, exaggeration (enlarging, diminishing, speeding, slowing, freezing), use of masks and costumes that significantly change the human silhouette. (13)

The dizzying space such suggestive techniques open, animate the vertigo of postmodernity as a performance of crisis, disintegration of the basis of truth and destruction of experience (13), whose effervescence is comparable to the circus. Therein we discover ritualistic, painted clowns 'running into themselves' in the classic gag of the clown who slips on a banana peel, suddenly *finding themselves* on the floor.

This coming to consciousness through a violent encounter with an external force, initially described by Schechner as the invention of



the atom bomb (9-10), but represented in this case by the banana – inaugurates the zone of the double which is native to comedy; with comedies of disguised doubles such as Plautus' *Amphitryon* representative of the genre. Comic effect issues from the fractured identity of the double, whose abjection manifests as invisible traces that undertake a symbolic vandalism toward self-expression. In his essay *On the Psychology of the Trickster* Carl Jung describes the predicament of the modern man, secularised yet nonetheless haunted by

countertendencies in the unconscious, and in certain cases by a sort of second personality, of a puerile and inferior character, not unlike the personalities who announce themselves at spiritualistic seances and cause all those ineffably childish phenomena so typical of poltergeists. (Jung 1956, 201-2)

Jung refers to the influence of this unconscious force as 'the shadow'; yet its omnipresence is inscribed in Western culture, with James Frazer identifying it in his encyclopaedic study of folklore and myth, *The Golden Bough* (Frazer 2009), as "ghost" or "shade" (Wittgenstein 2018, 48). In his remarks on Frazer's canonical study, Wittgenstein attempts to disenchant Frazer's superstitious choice of terminology by comparing it to the relatively normalised inclusion of the words soul or spirit in ordinary language (48). Heonik Kwon argues that Wittgenstein undertakes this comparison so that

the distance between secularised modern society and the world of natural religions [to which concepts of ghosts, shades and spirits is native] is finally put behind us. (Kwon 2018, 90)

However, while this distance maintains, comic effect lies in the state of double negation occupied by a subject coming to a kind of consciousness which is not permitted in our hegemony. This is the comic juxtaposition of two mutually exclusive realities; one in which I have recognized my double, and one in which my double (the shade, shadow, spirit, soul, or ghost; Beyond) does not exist. This crisis describes the (forbidden) craft of ritual, which doubles the symbolic fiction as its theatre, in order to institute the uncanny return of the double as a mirror of self. However, the postmodern clown regulated to the circus, discovers that they are also a mirror, and their reflection is a reflection of the other's reflection who is a reflection of their reflection in a ricochet effect *ad infinitum*, which conjures a wormhole in space. In *The Semiotics of Clowns and Clowning*, Paul Bouissac corroborates

It is probable that modern clowns are the continuators of secularised ancient rituals, without being aware of their origin, because

their cultural memory rarely goes back more than two or three generations. (Bouissac 2015, 139)

While Nietzsche attributed a tragic effect to this haunting voice of the other in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he conceded its transformation into comedy which castrated tragedy of its essential divinatory nature. Bereft of this divinatory function, the double becomes a clown; a caricature of its own revelatory function, in the comic spectacle of an excluded part visibly trying to integrate, but trapped in its own exclusion becomes ridiculous. In the comic performance doubles never meet, never experience the 'coincidence of opposites' as the invasion of the unknowable. They only run into its eerie traces like strange clues pointing to a pending symbolic crisis, where references are mixed and become senseless. However, this very ridiculousness represents the terrific aspect of the clown, whose excluded spectacle is both hilarious and threatening;

... the clown is perceived as standing both out of time and out of space, to the extent that an outcast is always out of place, in the margin of the socio-spatial categories that assign statuses and functions to slots in the virtual grid of the social order. (Bouissac 2015, 24)

Bouissac identifies the term clown as originating from the English 'peasant' (54) drawing out the historic identification of clowns with a "class of uneducated peasants" (171) demeaned by city dwellers who enjoyed making fun of them as farmers lacking in social graces. Such 'clowns' became stable characters in British pantomime of the eighteenth century, appearing in European circuses by the nineteenth century as representations of emerging class relations embodied in the tradition of the 'whiteface' and 'auguste' doubles. The *auguste* clowns

drew their name from the antiphrastic use of the noble name August as a way of ridiculing a person as slow-witted, clumsy, and possibly inebriated. (171)

While the *whiteface* represents their opposite, the aristocratic personality who

is articulate, moves graciously, and is elegantly dressed. In contrast, the garb of the *auguste* is gaudy and ill-fitting, his behaviour is awkward, and his way of speaking is unpolished as well as impolite. They form a semiotic couple in which the signs that define one are inverted in the other. (39)

The ridiculous appearance of this double is representative of the social crises that conjured our postmodern abyss. They mirror the transformation of society during the centuries of industrialization which not only disenfranchised the foreign populations of colonies abroad, social deviants at home, but also excluded peasant labourers and conservative aristocrats from capitalist progress concentrated around cities, and galvanised by the industrial promise of meritocracy. Those left behind in the 'countryside' are represented by the pair's performative critique of "the conjugated forces of cultural inertia and nostalgia" (38) represented by the caricatured peasant and lord, whose exploitative codependency is satirised in the circus ring; but whose irrepressible presence also destabilise reality within the circus. As the haunting image of exploitation disturbing contemporary allusions to 'meritocracy' in a classless society, Bousiac reminds us that zombie-like, "The auguste is by essence both dead and undead" (164). The comic value of the auguste thus diverts attention from the contradictions of the economic system whose early effects were brutally impoverishing, to a scapegoated and nostalgic image of the whiteface lord as the personification of feudal exploitation. Occupying this absence of God, they are *nowhere at all*, exiled to the timeless realm of the negative.

Zupančič's characterisation of the comic in *The Odd One In* suggests that this timeless, negative space becomes personified in the acting subject as the clown, thereby offering a synthetic Hegelian state described as 'the odd one in' which subsumes difference; the double has become the acting subject (clown). Echoing Nietzsche's description of the evolution of the tragic into comedy, Zupančič formulates this transformation as such,

To recapitulate: in the epic, the subject narrates the universal, the essential, the absolute; in tragedy, the subject enacts or stages the universal, the essential, the absolute; in comedy, the subject is (or becomes) the universal, the essential, the absolute. Which is also to say that the universal, the essential, the absolute becomes the subject. (Zupančič 2008, 28)

Yet for Hegel, in this very state of personified negation, is the emergence of being "outside meaning, yet inextricably from it" (182). This position outside meaning is the site of the negative, which Bataille describes as being founded on the animal in *Hegel, Death and Sacrifice*. Emergence through this negativity, is thereby emergence through the animal as an immanent being indistinguishable from nature. However the experience of this immanence offers "precisely human death" (Bataille 1990, 16). The laughter of death is thus expressive of Bousiac's clowns, and Zupančič's comics, but as a Hegelian emergence of being that transcends objectified human identity. The Comic

is capable of producing the laughter of death, precisely as the enactment of death; which conversely, makes us animals.

The wonder oriented humanism of the Mediaevals diverges from postmodern comedy here, insofar as it was concerned with humanising such animals as the experience of hybridity; for Bataille this was the possibility of sovereignty invoked by an *insidious* laughter (Bataille 2001, 186) and cognizant with the origins of humanism as a struggle against despotism. In *Against Posthumanism*, Gare reminds us that humanism originated in a republican struggle against despotism in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Northern Italy. This began as an attempt to humanise or culture subjects to participate in governance, when

Petrarch introduced the humanities as a form of education designed to inspire people to develop the virtues of wisdom, justice and courage to defend their liberty and participate as citizens in the governance of their republics. (Gare 2021, 3)

In this regard the rejection of utility that Bataille ascribes to the laughter of death, is also descriptive of sovereignty as rebellion against systems of despotic tyranny; which finally, converts slaves into princes staked in governance. Lemm has shown how this also characterises Nietzsche's conception of culture as an animalistic resistance against oppressive hegemony or civilization (Lemm 2009, 11).

So while postmodernism expresses the laughter of death, it does not become sovereign; insofar as it is preoccupied with crises as opposed to rebellion. This failure is also descriptive of posthumanism whose loss of animality, enacted by its alienation from the food-chain, has instigated the symbolic crisis of The Anthropocene. In the following I will show how this operates as the realisation of Haraway's irony, and rejection of ecstasy.

#### 4 Posthumanism and Irony

Following Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard similarly identifies "infinite absolute negativity" in the function of the ironic (Frazier 2004, 418). However, irony utilised as pure negativity fails to respond to Kierkegaard's task of becoming, predicated on attaining historical actuality as a gift and a task (428). The ironic rejection of the feat of actuality as "partly a gift that refuses to be rejected, partly as a task that wants to be fulfilled" (Kierkegaard 1989, 276-7) transforms into pure negativity, which suspends the ironist in a state of detachment which fails to realise positive freedom (Frazier 2004, 425) in relationship with a historical community. In this regard, the ironic becomes a narrative of detachment and rejection, which produces

ironic performances and rituals detached from positive freedom insofar as "everything becomes nothing" (419). This becomes interesting when we apply it to a reading of Haraway's use of irony in the *Cyborg Manifesto*.

Describing irony as a "rhetorical strategy and political method" (Haraway 1991, 149) Haraway positions the image of the cyborg as "the centre of [her] ironic faith, [her] blasphemy" (149). This ironic mascot has become a sort of prophetic vision for the posthuman movement, with her *Cyborg Manifesto* repeatedly quoted in *After the Human*, and similarly referenced as a sort of genesis event by post-human critics like Arran Gare, Thomas F. Thornton and Patricia M. Thornton (Thornton, Thornton 2015, 66-85), among others.

Haraway locates irony besides blasphemy as an insistence on the need for community that rejects a moral majority, and is instead founded on holding together "contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes" (Haraway 1991, 149). It is in this vein that we can read her work *Staying with the Trouble* which seeks a response to "mixed-up times" (2016, 1). These mixed-up contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes are embodied by the cyborg as a hybrid of organic flesh and technology. However, can the cyborg laugh?

If Bataille's laughter of death is predicated on the animal as the induction of immanence, the cyborg seems incapable of accessing this experience. This can be simply determined from its exclusion from the food-chain. For Bataille, "That one animal eats another scarcely alters a fundamental situation: every animal is *in the world like water in water*" (Bataille 2004, 34). Jill Marsden shows how this immanent state of being *like water in water* is generated by

the similarity between the eater and eaten [insofar as] the animal that eats another does not distinguish what it eats in the same way that a human being distinguishes an object. (Marsden 2004, 38)

This indistinction, experienced as "the dissolution of boundaries in poetic and erotic activity is not a reduction of difference to sameness, which would be to understand difference conceptually" (42); it is rather, representative of the collapse of identity altogether, from which becoming emerges. Insofar as the cyborg is omitted from the food-chain, it is separate from immanence and hence the laughter of death.

By contrast, Plumwood describes a form of philosophical animism founded on the food-chain, and the vulnerable position of the human being within it. She developed this idea following a gruesome encounter with a crocodile that death-rolled her three times. Subsequently, she critiques forms of Ontological Veganism (Plumwood 2012, 79) which attempt to displace human-animal relations from the food-chain, thereby generating a sterile and ultimately ironic view of nature in Kierkegaard's terms which does not achieve positive freedom,

insofar as it excludes the agency of nature as a historical fact and limit of becoming; as a gift and a task. The structure of Ontological Veganism is repeated by Haraway's cyborg, as an entity removed from the food-chain. As a foundational text for posthumanism, it implicates the movement, despite Haraway's allusions to play, as a little bit laughter-less. It also shows that Haraway's irony functions much more closely according to the system Kierkegaard describes for which "everything becomes nothing" (Frazier 2004, 419). This is in contrast to Bataille's view, which could be described as 'nothing becomes everything'.

This paradox is epitomised by the very ironic problem that one of the founding tenets of posthumanism, regarding the onset of the age of The Anthropocene which "combines the Greek root for humans, *Anthropos*, with the term for new 'cene', and is usually glossed as 'The Age of Humankind'" (Thornton, Thornton 2015, 3) was rejected by its examining community of geological scientists on 20th March 2024 (Witze 2024). In effect, we are not in the Anthropocene according to the scientific community. This can of course be disregarded by sociological theorists, however posthumanism and its cyborgs are also voluntarily predicated on scientific method inaugurating the cyborg "technosubject as a hybrid composed of flesh and machine" (Hollinger 2020, 18). This problem reinforces an ironic reading of posthumanism through Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony*, insofar as

In irony, the subject is continually retreating, talking every phenomenon out of its reality in order to save itself - that is, in order to preserve itself in negative independence of everything. (Kierkegaard 1989, 257-8)

Posthumanism cannot salvage The Anthropocene without contradicting its own premise of scientific method, except to "preserve itself in negative independence of everything" thus becoming pure irony.

Most optimistically we could hope this collapse of posthuman language may forestall an emergence from negation, but one which will surely be poetic; divinatory, and thus wonderful. At any rate, it exceeds the parameters of posthumanism as the remainder of difference; or the attempt to differentiate itself from a historical lineage which already critiques human identity and its relationship to the environment; including through the humanist movement itself. Herbrechter thereby remind us "'after the end of man' or 'after the human' also need to be understood as *before* the human" (Herbrechter 2020, 40).

In comparison to divinely inspired ecstasies electrified by the laughter of death as an encounter with the Beyond, cyborgs appear as ironic representations of an allegedly ahistorical present, and yet

nevertheless constructed by Mediaeval hybridity. The wonderful and the ironic thus double as werewolves and cyborgs in a comic performance. It is at this moment it seems fitting to ask, but who is laughing? Who occupies the limit of knowledge as the unknowable? It is at this boundary we discover the emergence of another being; an other that haunts this text, beneath its rippling surface, peering up at us through its murky web with a monstrous and yet miraculous eye; the third. The being capable of metamorphosis as identity-replacement; or, predation. The crocodile – laughing an insidious laughter of death, *at us*; at our limit of knowledge. To this end, Plumwood described the crocodile as her teacher (Mathews et al. 2012, 10).

I will now offer a posthuman alternative to Haraway's irony, which is capable of ecstatic experience (and thus the laughter of death) insofar as it is constructed in proximity to the food-chain. This is an attempt to rescue the status of the animal in the postmodern legacy which has detonated the problem of The Anthropocene, as the absence of coherent theorising about our position in a living ecology. I have traced this to a misreading of Nietzsche, however also indicated my misgivings that as we imagine animals into theory and literature, we compensate for their extinction. In effect, animals need to speak for themselves; however the nature of this language complicates our relationship to writing as problematically, "pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs" (Haraway 1991, 176). As Plumwood has shown, death is more properly the language of animals; or in Bataille's terminology, sacrifice.

## 5 Animals and Trickery

In his essay *The Sovereign*, Bataille introduces *insidious* laughter (Bataille 2001, 185), which he associates with sovereignty and rebellion as "the condition of loving death more than slavery" (188). This condition fuels the caprice of sovereign princes, who "gamble even with their lives" (188). This is related to Bataille's laughter of death insofar as it is organised around the unknowable and the impossible, as that which exists outside the possible and the order of utility. Insidious laughter is therefore native to the order of death, but as the gambler's caprice that risks death on his sovereignty. For Bataille, this discipleship to impossibility is animal (217) which in "putting life to the standard of the impossible, [and] renouncing the guarantee of the possible" (23) deifies him as sovereign. In this regard, the crocodile serves as Bataille's deified animal "image of an impossibility, of the hopeless devouring implied in *what happens*" (217). This impossible image of devouring illustrates Plumwood's attack, which she miraculously (or impossibly) survived. Furthermore, it expresses the insidious laughter of the crocodile who gambled life on its caprice before arbitrarily releasing Plumwood from its jaws. Plumwood

would subsequently come to describe the crocodile as both a teacher and a trickster (Plumwood 2012, ix).

In this vein, the crocodile is not straightforwardly generic to the category of wonderful monsters Bynum delineates. Rather Plumwood describes her

saurian teacher [who] was a wrestling master and a far better judge than I of my incautious character, the precarious nature of human life, and of various other things I needed to know and have striven to pass onto others. (Mathews et al. 2012, 10)

The crocodile thereby exceeds the monstrous category insofar as it does not appear as a hybrid being, but was rather native to

what seemed a parallel universe, one with completely different rules to the 'normal universe'... the universe represented in the food-chain. (Plumwood 2012, 13)

Whereas the hybrid can be identified with Plumwood herself, who was exposed to a Beyond and irreparably changed.

The crocodile is furthermore capable of the identity-replacement absent from the wonderful view of hybridity, as metamorphosis. In effect, the crocodile could have instigated Plumwood's identity-replacement by consuming her, whereby she would have metamorphosed into a crocodile. We can also imagine the crocodile could have been eaten by another predator and similarly, replaced. In this regard its position in a food-chain is metamorphic, insofar as it "live[s] the other's death, die[s] the other's life" (Plumwood 2012, 13). The repression or loss of this experience of being in the food-chain in philosophical discourse - reflective of our anthropocentricity - renders metamorphosis (as identity-replacement) unthinkable for our cultural systems of change, as Bynum has pointed out. Emanuele Coccia has attempted to address this problem with his recent publication *Metamorphoses* (Coccia 2021), emphasising evolution and birth as forms of human metamorphoses. This contrasts with the invasion of the impossible and death, which characterised Bataille's work as a philosopher of laughter and sacrifice.

The crocodile thus offers a fourth framework expressive of Bataille's laughter of death, and one which haunts posthumanism in the distance between Haraway and Plumwood. This is the insidious laughter of the trickster, which qualifies the sovereign as he who "puts his life in the hands of his caprice" (Bataille 2001, 188) and whose "first phase of autonomy is trickery" (168). This trickery is written in these pages as the sovereign voice of the crocodile.

Thomas F. Thornton and Patricia M. Thornton similarly present trickery as an alternative to posthumanism and the Anthropocene.



They describe the *Ravencene*, invoking the trickster-demiurge Raven described in “indigenous and pre-modern narratives and myths disseminated across the north Pacific and East Asia” (Thornton, Thornton 2015, 1). Raven offers stories of survival, adaptation and change based on an understanding of our mutual dependence in a “web of relations that constitutes and maintains life on earth” (18). Thornton and Thornton thus argue,

we are better served by understanding the present in continuity with the past, instead of within the context of an unknown and unknowable future. (16)

Tony VanWinkle has also described a Trickster Ecology, which

applies our present socio-ecological quandaries to the teachings embedded in traditional trickster stories. For our present realities are characterised first and foremost by constant change, contingency, and ambiguity - precisely the domains where trickster consciousness thrives. In various Native American traditions, these stories might revolve around Coyote, Raven, or Rabbit. (VanWinkle 2023, 291)

Plumwod's narrative of her encounter with the trickster crocodile is presented as a viable alternative to Haraway's posthumanism - one capable of enlivening the insidious laughter of death that marks the boundary of the unknowable; turning us into coyotes, ravens or rabbits, navigating a complex food-chain and living ecology. As Thornton and Thornton contend, the character of the trickster underscores the timeless problem of change and adaptation which continues to face us today, as it has always faced the animals competing with us in our planetary food-chain. By contrast, Harway's insufficient theorising around hybridity and its historic representation of our relationship with a Beyond which transcends anthropocentric codes, is demonstrative of naive conceptions of change - derived from postmodernism's theoretic alienation from our living ecology.

In effect, if we cannot laugh; we cannot change.

## 6 Conclusion

This essay has attempted to show that anthropocentricity should be analysed in terms of what exceeds it; this is the function of Bataille's laughter of death in this text, which demands ecstatic experience as the sacrifice of identity and the stake of becoming. I have tried to show that while this is logical to the wonderful and comic, the ironic fails to offer this flight and thus implicates the irony of posthumanism

as identity-centred, and subsequently anthropocentric. In this regard it does not represent the experience of immanence as participation in a living ecology, or the possibility of metamorphosis; conversely identified herein with the crocodile. However, Plumwood's writing offers an alternative posthuman system based on an encounter with the impossible, generative of the insidious laughter of sovereignty and death. I therefore encourage the environmental humanities to review the significance of ecstasy for a contemporary posthuman agenda as the staying of spirit.

## Bibliography

- Abram, D. (2011). *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bataille, G. (1986). *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. Transl. by M. Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Bataille, G. (1990). "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice". Transl. by J. Strauss. *Yale French Studies*, 78, 9-28.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2930112>
- Bataille, G. (2001). *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*. Edited by S. Kendall; transl. by M. Kendall and S. Kendall. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bataille, G. (2004). "Animality". Calarco, Atterton 2004, 33-6.
- Bataille, G. (2005). *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*. Princeton: Zone Books.
- Bouissac, P. (2015). *The Semiotics of Clowns and Clowning: Rituals of Transgression and The Theory of Laughter*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bynum, C.W. (2005). *Metamorphosis and Identity*. Brooklyn: Zone Books.
- Calarco, M.; Atterton, P. (eds) (2004). *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*. New York: Continuum.
- Coccia, E. (2021). *Metamorphosis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Federici, S. (2014). *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia.
- Foucault, M. (1988). *Madness & Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Random Books.
- Frazer, J. (2009). *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion: A New Abridgement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frazier, B. (2004). "Kierkegaard on the Problems of Pure Irony". *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 32(3), 417-47.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9795.2004.00173.x>
- Gare, A. (2021). "Against Posthumanism: Posthumanism as the World Vision of House-Slaves". *Borderless Philosophy*, 4, 1-56.  
<https://philpapers.org/archive/GARAPP.pdf>
- Haraway, D.J. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Haraway, D.J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. London: Duke University Press.
- Herbrechter, S. (2020). "Poststructuralism and the End(s) of Humanism". Vint 2020, 31-43.
- Hollinger, V. (2020). "Historicizing Posthumanism". Vint 2020, 15-30.

- Jung, C.G. (1956). "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure". Transl. by R.F.C. Hull. Radin, P., *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*. New York: Philosophical Library, Inc, 195-211.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1989). *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates, Together with "Notes on Schelling's Berlin Lectures"*. Transl. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kwon, H. (2018). "Wittgenstein's Spirit, Frazer's Ghost". Da Col, G.; Palmié, S. (eds), *The Mythology in Our Language: Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*. Transl. by S. Palmié. Chicago: Hau Books, 85-94.
- Lecouteux, C. (2001). *Witches, Werewolves and Fairies: Shapeshifters and Astral Doubles in the Middle Ages*. Vermont: Inner Traditions.
- Lemm, V. (2009). *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy: Culture, Politics, and the Animality of the Human Being*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Lotringer, S.L. (1994). "Furiously Nietzschean: An Introduction by Sylvère Lotringer". *On Nietzsche: Introduction by Sylvère Lotringer*. Transl. by G. Bataille and B. Boone. Minnesota: Paragon House, vii-xv.
- Marsden, J. (2004). "Bataille and The Poetic Fallacy of Animality". *Calarco, Atterto* 2004, 37-44.
- Mathews, F.; Rigby, K.; Rose, D. (2012). "Introduction". Plumwood, Shannon 2012, 1-6.
- Nietzsche, F. (2003). *The Birth of Tragedy, Out of the Spirit of Music*. London: Penguin Books.
- Plumwood, V. (2008). "Being Prey". *Remembering Val Plumwood*.  
<https://valplumwood.wordpress.com/2008/03/08/being-prey/>
- Plumwood, V. (2012). *The Eye of the Crocodile*. Edited by L. Shannon. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Schechner, R. (1979). "The End of Humanism". *Performing Arts Journal*, 4(1/2), 9-22.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4623759>
- Thornton, T.F.; Thornton, P.M. (2015). "The Mutable, The Mythical, and the Managerial. Raven Narratives in the Anthropocene". *Environment and Society*, 6, 66-86.  
<https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2015.060105>
- VanWinkle, T. (2023). "Living with Ambiguity and Akebia: Invasive Species and Trickster Ecologies". Von Tscharnier Fleming, S.; Maloney, A. (eds), *The New Farmers Almanac*. Vol. 6, *Adjustments and Accommodations*. Maine: Greenhorns, 290-3.
- Vint, S. (ed.) (2020). *After the Human: Culture, Theory, and Criticism in the 21st Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2018). *The Mythology in Our Language: Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*. Edited by G. da Col and S. Palmié; transl. by S. Palmié. Chicago: Hau Book, 29-73.
- Witze, A. (2024). "Geologists Reject the Anthropocene as Earth's New Epoch – After 15 Years of Debate". *Nature*, 627, 249-50.  
<https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-024-00675-8>
- Ycaza, J.D. (2022). "The Ecological Nietzsche: Considering the Environmental Implications of Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy and the Possibility of Grounding der Uebermensch in Indigenous Thought". *Ex Animo*, 2, 3-11.  
<https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/27944/Ex-Animo-Volume-II-Essay-1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Zupančič, A. (2008). *The Odd One In: On Comedy*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.

