

The French philosopher Louis Althusser (1918 – 1990) coined the phrase “always already given”<sup>1</sup> to indicate that ideological state apparatuses are an inextricable governing factor in how we are constituted as subjects. In other words, we respond to the hail ‘hey you!’ knowing who we are, but knowledge of ourselves, or at least the form that it takes, is determined by the ideological structures of the societies that we are born into. If I respond to the hail as a woman, I am doing so as a person largely defined by the cultural determinants of femininity and this is true even if, as a feminist, I am in disagreement with what they attempt to impose.

Responding as a *human* is even more problematic. ‘Hey you!’ has a very different meaning for me than it does for a young black man in the United States who, rather than turn around in mild irritation, will likely take it as a cue to run, literally, for his life. In the moment that he is hailed, he is reduced to what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben called ‘bare life’ or a person who can be killed with impunity. He is always already bare life by virtue of his skin colour which, under the ideological tenets of Western historical and biological discourse condemns him as less-than-human.

# THE

# IRREVERSE

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# POSTHUMAN

These ideologies are grounded by a concept of being human which refers to an idealised white, male body of which Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man is the quintessential representation. The Roman architect Vitruvius' template for the standardised human is still taught to architecture students as a founding principle and da Vinci's canonical image is, tellingly, sewn into the suits of astronauts who boldly go hoping to colonise other planets in the name of a 'human race'

My argument (and that of other critical posthumanists) is that this is true of *all of us* in the third decade of the 21st century. Historically, the human has been understood as a tool user and manipulator of its environment but now we must entertain the idea that we are constituted both through the technologies that condition our lifeworlds and the way that science writes that world. Karen Barad, for example, extends Niels Bohr's thesis that the apparatus of the laboratory is significant not as a ground or screen for the production of phenomena but actively part of the phenomena as they are observed and understood. Reading his findings through ideas developed by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, both of whom propose that language does not merely describe the world but actively produces it, she concludes that "humans do not merely assemble different apparatuses for satisfying particular knowledge projects; humans are part of the configuration or ongoing reconfiguration of the world – that is, they/we too are phenomena".<sup>3</sup> In other words, Vitruvian Man does not stand above and apart from a world that he is able to survey and describe but the very tools through which he attempts to understand it effect a process of dynamic change which is ongoing and confounds the humanist assumption of a separation between bodies/objects and their environments. This has consequences, not only for how we conceive of bodies and their relation to the world but how we differentiate between phenomena previously thought of as distinct.

that they, ironically, have left behind. This is true not only because they go 'where no one has gone before' but because, they can only be hailed as posthumans or what the Italian philosopher Rosi Braidotti calls "bio-technologically mediated bodies".<sup>2</sup> In other words, there is no astronaut-subject without the technologies that provide for their subsistence as bodies living beyond Earth's gravity.

My claim, then, is that we are irreversibly posthuman. Or, put another way, the mode of posthuman thought requires us to entertain the idea that the end of man which Foucault predicted in 1970 is not only here but that the "event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility"<sup>4</sup>, which would herald the end has already happened and has been happening for some time. Our task is to acknowledge it. If 'man' is no longer a secure category, either as a determinant of taxonomical distinctions which have been the founding principle for everything from slavery to genocidal war or as a universal signifier conditioning gender distinctions, then we have space to think otherwise about how we should live. The posthuman irreverse thus both describes our ontology and conditions our politics.

1. Louis Althusser (1970), 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1970), <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>

2. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p.61.

3. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p.206.

4. Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p.387.