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"YOUR… YOUR DOG IS TALKING?"
Human/Animal Dichotomy in Geoff Ryman's *Air*.

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Abstract:Animal characters have been a part of the Western literary tradition since the beginning. They are also a frequent part of speculative fiction where they often perform the roles of metaphors, but also straightforward comments on the current interests.

Geoff Ryman's Air *offers its own addition to this tradition with Ling, a technologically modified dog. The character and his role in the novel are discussed using posthumanism and animals studies as frameworks. While the former has been most often connected with discussion on technology's continuing influence on humanity and the latter to animal right issues, both share an interest in discussing animals in connection with science, Otherness, and subjectivity.While Ling is only a minor character in the novel, his depiction offers interesting topics from these two approaches. The article presents their central roles for Ling. First, he is discussed as an Other, who, for example, disrupts the human/animal dichotomy. Second, Ling works as a metaphor for trepidations caused by technology's effects on humanity and its current ones towards dogs, for example, through animal testing. Finally, the article discusses how Ling fits into the field of posthumanism. The question remains, whether he transgresses enough boundaries to be considered a postdoggie.*

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Dogs and humans have a long history of evolutionary interaction. According to Donna Haraway, dogs are "partners in the crime of human evolution" (*Companion* 5). In connection to this history, dogs have featured frequently in science fiction literature. The history of the genre includes a variety of technologically modified canines that have been used to discuss the world from the perspective of animals or simply as metaphors for human existence. One such work of fiction is Geoff Ryman's *Air* (2005). The novel's story revolves around the encroachment of wireless communication into an isolated village, but for the purpose of this article, the interest lies in the minor character of Ling, a technologically enhanced dog. While Ling only features in the novel for a short period of time, his presentation offers many topics to discuss from the point of view of posthumanist and animal studies.

In this article, the novel is analyzed using posthumanist studies, which concentrate on the changes in world view greatly influenced by technological advances, and animal studies, which

emphasize animal subjectivity. The main foci are Ling as a literary representation of a dog and how his character is able to transcend/break the traditional categories set upon him as a dog. The main argument is that Ling both represents the human-centred values present in the humanist tradition, and, at the same time, is able to question these barriers and move into the territory of posthumanism, perhaps even to the field of postdogginess.

This article will first consider the role of animal characters in literature and in science fiction, or speculative fiction, in particular (henceforth SF). Subsequently, the discussion moves on to the main theoretical frameworks, posthumanism and animal studies, which are briefly introduced. In the following section, the article moves on to analyze the novel. First, the emphasis is on Ling as a representation of Otherness, second, on Ling as a metaphor for the effects of scientific experimentation on both humans and animals and, finally, he is discussed as a posthuman/postdoggie character. The conclusion summarizes the previous sections and offers suggestions for future research.

Animal Characters in Literature

Animal characters have a long tradition in Western literature. However, as Bruce Thomas Boehner claims, their formerly integral role in Western literary history has moved to the sidelines during the last two centuries (2). According to Boehner, during this period literary works with elements of animal subjectivity have often been marginalized as genre fiction; something that Boehner connects to the more widespread need to separate human from animals (2, 8). The so-called genre fictions have also answered the call. SF, for example, has frequently featured animal characters. While Sherryl Vint admits that it is not unreasonable to be surprised by the frequency of animals in SF, she claims that "sf's interest in imagining the future or 'next stage' of human identity frequently turns to images of animals, figured both as what we might become were we to construe our subjectivity otherwise and as a warning that we can be displaced if we do not find ways to transcend our self-destructive qualities" (1, 225).

SF has considered animal subjectivity as a fertile ground for exploring dilemmas of the modern world. Similarly, as Susan McHugh states concerning the main species of this study, "dogs are frequently used in science fiction to give voice to our worst fears" (*Dogs* 173). However, while both quotes, and the latter explicitly, refer to human trepidations, these texts they refer to also offer opportunities. As Sherryl Vint argues, SF can "convey some sense of animal's experience," usually through technology that is beyond the reach of what might be referred to as non-speculative fiction (4). These possibilities have also been noticed by many in the field of animal studies (see, for example, Haraway and McHugh). Indeed, one can even go as far as stating that SF and animal studies, or Human Animal Studies or HAS, share interest in human existence and its interconnections to animals (Vint 1). As Susan McHugh points out, depictions of animals in literature offer an important platform for critical discussion of both human and animal subjectivity (*Animal Stories* 1, 9).

The Theoretical Framework

Posthumanism[1] as a frame work is a varied field of thinking that critiques humanist tradition which has a long and influential role in the Western thought. While the field of humanist thinking is not homogenous, for the purpose of this article, when humanist thinking or humanist values are referred

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[1]   What this article refers to as posthumanism might also be called critical posthumanism as it makes a distinction between itself and transhumanism. For example, thinkers associated with transhumanism such as Hans Moravec advocate a new era where a human mind can be separated from the restriction set by the body, whereas writers associated with critical posthumanism see human, among other things, as an embodied entity that is intrinsically connected to its environment with which it has co-evolved (Hayles, 1; Nayar, 79; Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 49).

to, the reference is to human-centred world view that perceives such concepts as human identity as essential structures. This essentialism is achieved through separating human from what is considered nonhuman. As Cary Wolfe argues, it is "achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether" (*Posthumanism* xiv-xv). What is considered essentially human is associated with culture, reason, and mind, and separated from what are considered their opposites, such as nature, emotion, and the body, thus emphasizing a dualistic world view. For Wolfe, and many other posthumanist scholars such as Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles, posthumanist thinking opposes these "fantasies of disembodiment" and separation (*Posthumanism* xv).[2] Similarly, several posthumanist theorists such as Haraway see subjectivity as a problematic term due to it being historically built specifically to describe human and, indeed, has been used to distinguish human from the Others (*When Species*, 66-7). However, as, for example, Cary Wolfe and Rosi Braidotti have discussed, the subject and subjectivity still have potential to be used in a wider context than the past use as essential human characteristic (*Posthumanism* 47, *The Posthuman* 193). For the purpose of this article subjectivity is used also for non-human subjects, who, like Braidotti defines, are among other things "immersed in and immanent to a network of … relationships" not merely to members of their own species (*The Posthuman* 193).

These developments have increased attention on animals in ways that were not previously possible (Wolfe, *Zoontologies* x). In this reconsideration, posthumanism shares interest with animal studies and SF which both discuss the human and animal condition. While animal has traditionally been seen as Other to human, both posthumanism and animal studies have contributed to the rethinking of this boundary by bringing attention to the biological origins of *homo sapiens* and its connections to other species (Haraway, *When Species* 9; Vint 8). The animal is not only seen as an object, but animal subjectivity is also given attention.

Posthumanism and animals studies are connected in many ways. While animal studies tend to concentrate on its namesakes, many posthumanist writers consider the role of animals as an important factor to take into account in the reconsideration of human existence. Donna Haraway, as an example, is considered to be an important contributor to both. She herself argues that her earlier concept, cyborg, which has been an important idea in certain parts of posthumanism ever since, offers similar opportunities for her newer interest, companion species, in rethinking boundaries (*Companion* 4). Similarly, Cary Wolfe sees posthumanism as an "increase in vigilance, responsibility, and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited" (*Posthumanism* 47). Both seek to move away from a human-centred world view into a more aware and responsible one that takes the world beyond the strict essentialist category of human into consideration. In the next section, this article moves on to consider how these two fields and the ideas they present can be used to discuss the depiction of a dog at least approaching post-status in one particular piece of literature.

Ling, the Modified Dog

Geoff Ryman's *Air* is situated in a fictional Karzistan that is loosely based on the nation of Kazakhstan. The protagonist is Mae, a fashion expert in an isolated mountain village, who is

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[2]   Posthumanism is by no means alone in this critique and it is built on work of such schools of thought as structuralism and poststructuralism whose critique along with changes affecting societies and the whole humanity have begun to erode the essentialist views (Haraway, *Modest_Witness* 4; Wolfe, *Zoontologies*, x-xi). In addition, feminist scholars among who, for example, Haraway and Hayles are certainly counted, have criticised the dualistic world view. They have, for instance, pointed out that the opposites such as nature and body are usually associated with femininity and are, as such, hierarchically seen as inferior to their pairs culture and mind which are considered masculine (see, for example, Braidotti, *Patterns* 148, 216).

surprised by a beta test of a new wireless internet-like communication system, Air, that connects directly into the mind. As a consequence, she ends up sharing her brains with another woman, who died at the moment of the beta test. She realises that action is required to save both herself and her village. This quest leads her to a corporate facility where her condition is studied with interest. There she encounters Ling, a technologically modified dog, who for a brief but interesting period provides companionship to Mae.

When Mae first encounters Ling, attention is immediately drawn to the modifications done to the dog: "The dog's head was shaved, and a neat little metal cap was bolted to its skull. The cap had a speaker in it." (210.) Ling has been given abilities that are not normally expected of dogs:

> "Mae, hello, Mae," the dog slobbered in affection. "I have a job. People trust me with a job. They have made me much smarter, and taught me how to talk. There may be a future for dogs, if we can tell jokes and love our masters."
>
> It came closer to Mae, backing her into a corner.
> "Please let me lick your hand. I only want to lick your hand." …
> "Don't you like me? Please like me," the dog was pleading, wanting to whimper, but the whimper was given a voice. "Who will feed me if I am not loved?" (210)

The dog has been given the ability of human language. He can communicate with humans on their own terms. Ling's initial words to Mae express the very things that humans usually expect dogs to want to communicate: timidness, desire to please, and interest in nourishment. The discourse is, in fact, so stereotypical that Mae later wonders if these words are not in fact fed to the dog by a human to see how Mae reacts. Whether she is right is not revealed in the novel, but the exchanges and Mae's view on them reveals some ideas that are connected to dogs' behaviour and communication. As Rosi Braidotti points out, "[dog] is as socially constructed as most humans" (*The Posthuman* 79). Of course, with dogs this does not only refer to how we interpret their actions, but also to the engineering to which humans have subjected dogs as a species, which will be discussed in more detail later as will Ling's communication which diversifies as his relationship with Ling ages.

The second most significant add-on installed on Ling is the ability to access an Air-like database, which the dog uses to gain more information on the world:

> "When there is nothingness," he said, "gravity does not attract. It becomes repulsive. Ask what those words mean."
>
> Obediently the dog consulted Air, sweat dripping off his panting tongue. After a moment Ling said, "Gravity pulls everything together. It makes us heavy so we stay on the ground. Otherwise we would float off to the stars." (221)

Ling can mentally access a database that has information beyond the normal needs of a dog or most humans. While it is not made clear whether he can understand this data, his access at least gives him the possibility of understanding the world beyond his usual senses.

As the description of their first encounter demonstrates, Ling unnerves Mae at least initially. While some of this can be attributed to Ling being a very large dog, most of it is connected with his modification. Ling is a part of, at least, two categories that humans consider Other: animals and machines (Haraway, *When Species* 9). Through technology, Ling is also given abilities normally associated with humans, like speech and the ability to use tools. This makes him a hybrid – he disrupts the boundaries of human/animal distinction by combining human attributes to his animal body, thus bridging the distance towards humanity. Yet his humanity is created by technology as is made evident by the description of his voice: "'Yes,' said the unreadable mechanic voice" (219). This in itself is enough to unnerve Mae. After all, as Donna Haraway suggests, "the familiar is

always where the uncanny lurks" (*When Species* 45). While animals and technology may be others to Mae, the language and voice, even in its mechanic feel, offers a familiar, even human element which turns the Other into uncanny.

The possibilities of disrupting the dualistic barriers is discussed later, but what is also important to note is how these abilities add to the possibility of reading Ling as a metaphor of humanity. As mentioned above, dogs are frequently used in SF to convey humanity's fears (McHugh, *Dogs* 173). It is quite common to see SF fantastical elements as metaphors for current issues. As Roger Luckhurst argues, "SF works … speak to the concerns of their specific moment in history" (3). In this instance, the character of Ling can express the fears of how technology can affect the humankind. Like Mae in many ways, he is depicted as an innocent victim of experimentation, upon whom the technology is simply forced. Neither is given a choice whether they want to accept these modifications into their lives. As such, especially Ling, who is given little space to search for alternatives, can be seen to represent the many in less powerful positions such as the less wealthy or down right poor, who either might miss out on technological advances or they may be forced upon them. As a minor character Ling also supports Mae. He adds, for example, layers to the effects of technology on the metaphoric level. Ling can stand for the less active agents affected by technology, whether animals or humans with less power. As such, he falls at least partially to the role of an animal that is a metaphor for human beings – which is, according to Susan McHugh, a common way animal characters are utilized in literature (*Animal Stories*, 7-8). For Mae, Ling leads to an understanding of the more widespread effects of technology: "'Good boy. Good boy,' said Mae, feeling sorry for him – for being fooled, for being possessed. It made her feel they had things in common." (216.) They find companionship in their similar troubles adjusting to the new technology.

While Ling and Mae are affected in a similar manner, there are differences to their stories. Mae's possession is a result of an accident, whereas on Ling the installation is done consciously. Mae is an accidental test subject, Ling is a forced test subject. The corporation, in whose enclave they meet, looks at Mae with curiosity, but still as a person with subjectivity, while Ling is an object for their experiments. They follow the common ideal, which is a part of the human/animal divide, that animals are mere objects. This idea is still especially strong in science, for example. Sherryl Vint argues that laboratories "produce a reduced notion of animal being" (188). Ling being a dog cannot be seen as an accident. As Susan McHugh mentions, dogs are the most commonly used companion animal in scientific research mainly because of their closeness to humans, durability, and availability (*Dogs* 172-3). While they are used to study conditions affecting themselves, they are also frequently used to study human conditions such as hemophilia (Haraway, *When Species* 55-8). In this sense Ling acts less on the level of metaphor and more as a comment on current scientific practices: while he can be read as a warning that humans will be next, he is also a reminder that dogs are treated like he has in laboratories every day.[3] Susan McHugh reminds that dogs have contributed to the critique of positivism, "the faith in pure objectivity or reason and facts removed from social influence that prevailed among late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century researchers" (*Dogs* 175). The close relationship between the two species also challenges the reasoning that is used to justify animal testing and, therefore, the whole science that uses them. Ling works in a similar way in *Air* by connecting this history to Ling's story as well as calling forth sympathy for Mae's cause, connecting it to the innocence dogs are usually associated with.

Ling can also be read as a critique of the essentialist definition of human. Language and tool use are some of the most important factors used to separate human from animals (Wolfe, *Zoontologies* xi, Vint 71). Ling reminds that these lines are arbitrary: "'Your…Your dog is talking,'

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[3]   Dogs have traditionally also been modified outside of research labs. As Tiina Raevaara points out, many breeds of dogs have been subjected to modifications that are directly harmful to the dog throughout their breeding process (169-70).

said the man. … '*Tuh*,' was all he said, the sound of his world changing, suddenly, for real. (216-7, emphasis original.)"

Ling has similar effects on people he encounters. As experiments done in studies of animals, he erodes "the tidy divisions between human and nonhuman" (Wolfe, *Zoontologies* xi). He is a very concrete metaphor for moving away from some of the structures of humanism, perhaps towards posthumanism. Of course, despite the technology in his cranium, Ling can hardly be called posthuman. After all, he still has his abilities as a dog, too. As well as his human and superhuman capacities given by technology, Ling has, for example, his superhuman sense of smell: "He put his nose to the floor and snuffled. He was following a scent" (213). Cary Wolfe paraphrases the work of Stanley Cavell who stated that "the traditional humanist subject finds [the] prospect of the animal other's knowing of us in ways *we* cannot know and master *simply unnerving*" (*Animal* 4, emphasis original). It is not only the familiar that unnerves, but also, of course, the unfamiliar. Perhaps more significant than the feeling of uncanny, which Ling projects, are the other effects or the lack of them. Despite his human-made modifications, Ling still encounters the world through his canine body. The machines installed do not make him human; they merely add human-invented tools to his use. While a human being with the same technology, such as Mae, might easily be defined as posthuman, Ling's embodiment, at least from the point of view of critical posthumanism, does not. He rather moves along the axis defined by his embodiment, perhaps, towards postdogginess.

Ling disrupts the barriers between human and animal, or human and dog, but whether this puts him beyond the category to, shall we say, postdogginess is another issue. While Ling is able to express himself to humans through access to language, this does not express much of subjectivity. In many ways he remains trapped by the human conceptions of dog and human relationship: "It is my job to stay with you" (215). Whether this is to emphasize his role and evoke sympathy in a reader or whether it is an example of a faulty writing of an animal character by the author, is a difficult question. Sherryl Vint writes that "one of the things sf can do is convey some sense of animal's experience [, for example,] through the *novum* of technology which enables the animal to talk" (4, emphasis original). Ling sadly stays in that category of "some sense," which can be partly attributed to his short appearance in the story.

However, during his minor part in the novel, Ling has an important role in relation to Mae. She is experiencing changes that in many ways are moving her towards something that might very easily be defined as posthuman. Firstly, the invasion of technology has disrupted the borders of her limited world, promising connection to the rest of the humanity in a way that she could not anticipate before. Secondly, the accidental invasion of her mind by the female villager who died during the beta test of Air certainly has not strengthened her faith in herself as an autonomous subject. And, finally, encountering Ling has eroded the boundaries between human and Other. According to N. Katherine Hayles, "the posthuman subject is an amalgam … whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (3). Through the novel, Mae is certainly subjected to such changes, but it must also be remembered that Ling is there to experience at least some of these changes with her. While Ling is employed to further Mae's story, an argument can be made that the changes affect not only Mae, but also Ling. Their short companionship is more co-evolution than a mere collection of effects one has on the other.

This co-evolution is visible in the actions Ling performs and the thoughts he expresses before his way parts with Mae. Although Ling seems like a stereotypical dog to a certain extent, there are glimmers of a stronger and more measured will present during these moments. During one of these, Ling escorts Mae out of the corporation facility, even lying in the process. Through these actions he demonstrates a measure of subjectivity beyond mere loyalty to his masters. However, more significant is the last request to his owner Tunch that Ling makes before Mae and he part ways: "'I want this box taken off my head,' he said. 'I want this voice taken out.' … 'I will be a dog again,' he said." (222-3.) It is a confirmation that Ling has looked at the role of human, dog, and

something in between, and has chosen that of the dog. If the technology in his head did not make him a postdoggy, this understanding of his own identity, if just for a moment, did.

Conclusion

According to Donna Haraway, "species of all kinds, living or not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters" (*When Species* 4). The meeting between Ling and Mae is certainly one dance in such a cavalcade of encounters. Ling challenges Mae and those around him to consider questions of subjectivity and technology in a different manner. As such he works as a companion to Mae, guiding her through his brief visit to the novel.

However, Ling and Mae's encounter does not affect only the latter nor raise questions solely on humanity. Ling certainly raises the issue of non-human subjectivity and, as argued, even the possibility of a non-human post-subject. Because of the limited amount of pages given to his character, Ling may not have the room to develop or be presented as a full postdoggie, but through his actions and interaction with his surroundings he certainly gives grounds for discussion on the matter. He is an amalgam of a dog and technology, just like the species has been since they began their co-evolution with humankind, but in a more defined way. However, he is not merely a loyal servant as dogs are often depicted to be, but capable of both his own actions and thoughts on his identity. Whether Ling's request for the removal of the technology is followed or not, it seems plausible that this experience will leave its mark on him. With or without the machines and software, Ling is beyond what the human conception of a dog is – he might even be a postdoggie.

While the shortness of this encounter leaves much of the potential of Ling unused, his character could be combined with other similarly sidelined dog characters or even other SF animals in a larger study. Susan McHugh points outs that, while animal characters are a frequent feature in literature, they have been only narrowly studied through "systematic literary [studies]" (*Animal Stories* 6). There is a need for a further study of the relationship between dog characters and technology in SF and literature in general. After all, even in small roles, such as the one given to Ling, the dogs can carry important messages, perhaps of how, like Cary Wolfe argues, "our stance towards the animal is an index for how we stand in a field of otherness and difference generally" (*Animal Rites* 5). The discussion about animal subjectivity is connected to discourse on humanity. While animals deserve attention on their own, animals such as dogs are our companion species: their future is directly linked to ours.

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