



The Blind Spot of the Future

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When I proposed having the future at the center of this issue, which marks the 10th anniversary of *Humanist Studies & The Digital Age*, I was aware of the complexity of this controversial topic. The possibility of *magnifiche sorti e progressive* — a “splendid and progressive destiny” — made possible by human technology inspires hope in some and critique in others. The expression comes from one of Leopardi’s last poems, *Ginestra o il fiore del deserto* (Broom, or the flower of the desert), where he uses it ironically to suggest the powerlessness of humanity in the face of natural disasters. The poet argues with all those who praise the human condition and progress acritically. He condemns their hubris and bitterly invites them to visit the arid slopes of Vesuvius, reduced to a desert by the volcano’s eruption.¹

This vision of an earth devoid of human presence is emblematic for many. Like Leopardi, they doubt the very existence of a future for a society increasingly prey to environmental and technological catastrophism. In contrast, true advocates of *magnifiche sorti e progressive* respond by pointing to the astronomical advancements in technology that we have seen in the contemporary world. Moreover, between these two opposite poles — those who prophesy an extraordinary future for humanity and those who deny even the possibility of a future altogether — are those who do see a future for hyper-technological society, but see it as rather uncertain, if not dark.

Beyond these distinct positions, however, there is a perception that any conception of the future, no matter how anthropocentric and/or technocentric, can no longer avoid confronting the problems that humans have created in the Anthropocene. This awareness — reinforced by the ongoing pandemic and drastic climate change that we have witnessed in recent years — also emerges in some of the essays published in this issue. It prompts us to look closer at the future and argue in favor of a more-than-human humanism; humans should develop a sense of responsibility towards themselves, other animals, the environment, and the technology in which we are immersed and with which we interact.

Today, we no longer share the same vision of the future with previous eras of modern civilization. Over the past few decades, we have started to view the future through a closed perspective and question the idea that it could be better than the past. In adopting this viewpoint, we have begun to consider the future as a threat, and we have entered a new relationship with time, one dominated by the present. This shift in perspective, which does not only concern academia, has taken place above all in what we consider the Western world; it happened even before the digital revolution and the new world of telecommunications that have conflated time and space. It is a profound transformation; by asserting the domain of immediacy, it considers the present as the only possible time. Even when memory and the study of the past survive in our time, they appear increasingly detached from a future perspective that would give them meaning and direction. We no longer perceive the present with its necessary linkages to past and future, and we are now without contextualization.

¹ “Dipinte in queste rive / Son dell’umana gente / Le magnifiche sorti e progressive.” “Inscribed on these slopes you’ll find / Mankind’s / Splendid and progressive destiny” (Leopardi, *La Ginestra*, vv. 49-51; pp. 72 and 75).

For centuries, this contextualization has been central to the very idea of history and political philosophy, as discussed in Hanna Arendt's *Between the Past and the Future*, where she thematizes the present as a "gap" (3-16). The historian François Hartog, in his *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (2017), has coined the term "presentism" to define our relationship with this era in which "enlightenment has its source in the present, and the present alone." He concludes, "to this extent — and this extent only — there is neither past nor future nor historical time" (Hartog 2015, 203). In this way, we can delude ourselves of the notion that we are walking towards the future, yet we still lack a clear path unfolding in front of us. We can only take a few tentative steps forward, and even then, possibly toward hidden threats — which appear to us in the present-day only as a blind spot.

In this publication the idea of the future is discussed above all in relation to technological changes, the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and, in some respects, the problems posed by the Anthropocene. In the interview *Education, Technology, and Humans* that opens the "Perspectives" section, Jeffrey Schnapp recounts his brilliant career, in which started as a scholar of Dante and the Middle Ages and then developed to embrace his now-current interdisciplinary interests. Among other things, Schnapp's work deals with knowledge design, museums, libraries, media history and theory, history of the book, and the future of archives. The main themes of the interview concern the relationships between technology and pedagogy, the future of reading, and artificial intelligence. Schnapp's point of view is particularly interesting for the discussion of humanism in the age of artificial intelligence. Seeing continuity from his training as a medievalist to his most recent research in Humanities Computing, he reminds us of how it is still important to study Dante and the classics. It was in these works that the very idea of humanity originated, and this study remains essential in a time like ours that is characterized by radical technological and pedagogical changes. He holds that the strength of AI and machine learning is pattern recognition at scale. However, in his view, "pattern recognition isn't thinking; it's only a first stepping-stone towards thought, many steps removed from *critical* thought. So, these are powerful tools but, like all tools, they do some things well (especially at more-than-human scales) and other things poorly."

Schnapp argues that "the objects of study in the human sciences that AI can serve are new objects of study; they aren't simply extensions of traditional modes of inquiry." For this reason, he resists using the label "digital humanities." The new objects of study require a deeply interdisciplinary approach and often do not even fall within the conventionally understood domain of the Humanities: "once you begin working critically and creatively with data as a material and expressive medium, the boundary lines between natural/human/social science have a tendency to become pretty porous." In this perspective, he considers it necessary to question the more anthropocentric and technocentric aspects of humanism, without having to embrace the transhumanist philosophies that propose a projection of the human beyond the terrestrial dimension. To face the challenges of the future, what we must do instead, he concludes, is face our deepest entanglements with a natural world that we still barely understand.

In *Steps Towards the Future: More-Than-Human Humanism in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, I first discuss our current idea of the future in the context of Carl Schmitt's vision of the spatial revolutions of modernity. The focus is on the conquest of space and the colonization of Mars, which is at the center of futuristic and technocratic visions that appear as an attempt to escape from human responsibilities on Earth. Then, I examine the extent of intellectual hubris expressed in computation, AI (Garvin Minsky e Ray Kurzweil), and the philosophy of computing and information (Eric Fredkin) involved in the elaboration of new theoretical assessments on the ultimate nature of reality. The futuristic and robotic visions of Minsky and Kurzweil, based on the idea of unlimited expansion of human capacities, are inextricably linked to the issues of the present.

Despite their presentation of a world full of luminous promises, the future they describe appears instead to contain blind spots because of the urgent problems humans face in the present — and the need to come to terms with the long shadow of the past. Their vision is then contrasted and made to interact with the ideas of philosopher Timothy Morton. He has taken the issues of global warming and possible ecological catastrophe seriously, avoided all the futuristic enthusiasms, and preferred to emphasize the radical nature of the transformations that humans are experiencing in the present. In this perspective, AI becomes one of the “hyperobjects,” like the Internet or climate change, in which humans are immersed. Morton’s hyperobjects delineate an uncanny view of the future, and this uncanniness is not related to the supernatural but the environment.

My essay seeks to understand the human position in the face of radical technological transformations induced by cybernetics and AI. In the third paragraph, I discuss Anti-humanism, Transhumanism, and Posthumanism within the broader category of “more-than-human thought,” a label meant to sidestep the possible misunderstandings induced by the words “posthuman” and “transhuman.” Indeed, all the philosophers analyzed, even if they declare themselves posthumanists, refuse to completely abandon the idea of the human being. I conceive “more-than-human” in a horizontal sense. The central question is not to empower (Transhumanism) or disempower (Posthumanism) humans but rather to see them in relation to what is *not* human, including other animals, the environment, and the machine. The analysis considers the works of Cary Wolfe, Jane Bennet, Bryant Levi, among others, and introduces the ethical debates on cyborgs, robots, and autonomous weapons systems (AWS). The real problem, as evidenced at the end of this section, is grounded in the difficulties of finding adequate rules for our new technological realities. Then, more importantly, it emphasizes the need to reflect on the very nature of ethics in this era of technological and spatial revolution. The fourth paragraph continues this inquiry, concentrating on the non-standard ethical theories of Luciano Floridi (Computer and Information Ethics) and David Gunkel (*The question of the Machine*). I examine the opportunity and feasibility of including in this discussion on the ethics of our time — characterized by the pervasiveness of AI — a notion of consciousness, as theorized by Emmanuel Levinas’s *Humanism of the Other* and Paul Ricoeur’s *Oneself as Another*.

Finally, in the last paragraph, I reflect on how the hyperobject anthropocene re-establishes a sense of limit in human history. The climatic threat introduces the possibility of the end of the human world and the realization that Earth may continue to exist without humans. However, my essay ends on a note of hope. Indeed, awareness of the current challenges of technology can and must express itself in different forms of resistance to the adverse effects of AI in our lives. An ethical approach based on the persistence of the role of human consciousness is essential, but it must be coupled with human decision-making and political action.

Jeff Staiger’s contribution, *After the Book, the Book? The Digital Writing Experiments of François Bon*, argues that while most commentators believe the traditional print book will not be replaced by digital media, there has been considerable debate over its possible effect on the forms of the book, given the current widespread digital revolution. One of the most sustained and searching investigations of these effects have been conducted by the French writer, François Bon. In his theoretical writings on the subject, gathered in the book *Après le livre* (After the Book), Bon makes a strong case for the dependency of literary forms on the “material conditions of their enunciation.” Extrapolating from historical examples, he suggests that the book will accordingly undergo major — if yet unforeseen — transformations. He also argues that it is urgent for writers to experiment with the material conditions generated by the digital revolution, lest the field of possibilities be constrained by the commercial interests of large technology companies. True to his sense of urgency, Bon himself has engaged in

a number of experiments with the form of the book in the digital environment; most notably are his “novel” *Tumulte*, which consists of daily blog posts mixing fiction, memoir, criticism and other genres, and a series of digital remediations of his early novel *Limite*. While Bon’s experiments raise profound questions about the concept of the book, it is less certain whether they represent viable avenues for the book’s development, since their main appeal is arguably to scholars and theoreticians. Considering his concern with forms of organization and delivery, and the ontological complexities arising from multiple versions of the same (or nearly the same) text in a digital environment, Bon’s experiments seem to necessarily scant the power of concentrated prose that has been the principle means — whereby books have conveyed thought and sustained intellectual culture.

The section “Interventions” opens with Micaela Simeone’s essay: *Unknown Future, Repeated Present: A Narrative-Centered Analysis of Long-Term AI Discourse*. In this piece, she examines the recent narratives and debates surrounding long-term AI concerns — the prospect of artificial general intelligence in particular — and their hidden assumptions, priorities, and values. The analysis employs a humanistic narrative and a close-reading-centered approach to analyze the works of two vocal (and opposing) thinkers in the field, Luciano Floridi and Nick Bostrom. Using these tools, Simeone investigates how the representational, descriptive differences in their works reveal the high stakes of narrative choices in how we form ideas about humanity, urgency, risk, harm, and possibility in relation to AI. This essay convincingly weaves the discourse regarding climate change and slow violence (as defined by Rob Nixon) into the main argument on how narratives in non-AI-related fields resonate in the two main foci — the perspectives of Bostrom and Floridi. Simeone explores the two philosophers’ differing views on the entanglements of humanity and AI, succinctly summarized as the gradual and the spectacular, with brilliantly articulate, logical, and persuasive reasoning.

The idea that today’s technological landscape is or can be one of slow violence is both stimulating and worrying. Drawing attention to “the slow violence in AI bias,” Simeone puts into focus the problematic scenario of how overcoming our human limitations through technology may eventually bring about the demise of humanity itself, along with its habitat. Ultimately, what emerges from her analysis is the degree to which the human factor will be central to conversations about AI and the “ethical and moral implications of digital technology.” With regard to the future of AI and humanity, Simeone both establishes the power of storytelling and emphasizes the limitations of a narratological and imaginative scenario forecasting future entanglements. The essay also offers a fascinating investigation into the early modern roots of the current discourse on AI, highlighting how Bostrom and Floridi’s outlooks both echo the pessimistic and optimistic views of technē in the Renaissance. Finally, Simeone concludes her essay by posing an important political question: how might other voices — particularly, voices from marginalized and disenfranchised groups — offer alternative narrative possibilities to the white, patriarchal, and European perspectives represented by thinkers like Floridi and Bostrom?

The section “Interventions” closes with Christina Linardaki’s essay, *Poetry at the first steps of Artificial Intelligence*, which explores how the spirit and pervasive ambitions of AI are impacting the composition of poetry. AI attempts in this sphere of art are usually referred to as “poetry generation,” which Linardaki first contextualizes within the field of humanities computing. She reveals how poetry generation evolved in the digital humanities and has come to be included in the broader field of Computational Creativity, which encompasses several areas of art and science. The paper first examines why poetry, out of all other literary genres, is particularly suitable for writing experiments that use AI. Some of the characteristics of poetic discourse, including arbitrariness and absurdity as opposed to common discursive practices, make it fertile ground for such endeavors. Even human poets have practiced the disruption of common language in their

poetry, illustrating this fundamental spirit of creativity and flexibility. Then, the paper offers a brief historic look at poetry generation, followed by a review of the methods employed to produce poetry generation — either for fun or academic projects. Then, the essay displays different taxonomies of generative poetry techniques including Carolyn Lamb's, which distinguishes between mere poetry generation and result enhancement, Gonçalo Oliveira's, which considers form and content features in poetry generation.

Linardaki finds that the results of poetry generators are generally poor, especially in terms of meaningfulness, and examines the reasons for this failure, including computers' 1) inability to understand any word as a sign with a signified, 2) lack of general intelligence, and 3) the reliance on process- (rather than output-) driven attempts. Then, Linardaki contrasts computer's results with computer-like results from several human poetic movements and features, such as DADA, stream of consciousness, OuLiPo, LangPo, Flarf, and blackout/erasure poetry. The striking similarity between human poets who are concerned more with experimentation than with good poetic results and computer scientists who are process-driven leads to a discussion of the characteristics of humanity, the possibility of granting future AI personhood, and the need to see our world in terms of a new and more refined ontology.

The section "Projects" opens with Jeffrey Schnapp's *Two Projects from the metaLAB (at) Harvard*, a presentation that complements the interview conducted by Farley and Lollini. The first project, [A Flitting Atlas of the Human Gaze](#), performs a historical art experiment:

Using AI-based extraction and analysis, this project allows the visitor to explore the Harvard Art Museum through the eyes of the subjects of artworks. The installation is built upon the AI-based extraction and analysis, fine-tuned via human supervision, of pairs of eyes from the Harvard Art Museum painting, print, sculpture, and coin collections. It allows the visitor, equipped with an input device, to explore the collections from the standpoint of the depicted subject's gaze direction.

The second project, [Their Names](#), is an online Denkmal, or monument, that visualizes names from 28,000+ fatal encounters with American police, dating from the year 2000 through the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. Beyond listing victims' first names and initials, the site makes available the news and police reports from which the data are taken. It further draws on data compiled by [Fatal Encounters](#), a nonprofit led by journalist and researcher D. Brian Burghart that is committed to gathering data on police-related deaths across the United States.

Finally, the section "Projects" closes with *Just Because We Can Doesn't Mean We Should: On Knowing and Protecting Data Produced by the Jewish Consumptives' Relief Society* by Jack Maness and Kim Pham. This essay describes a recent project developed at the University of Denver Libraries, detailing how handwritten text recognition (HTR) software was used to create transcriptions of records from the Jewish Consumptives' Relief Society (JCRS), a tuberculosis sanatorium located in Denver, Colorado from 1904 to 1954. Among a great many other potential uses, these type- and hand-written records give insight into the human experience of disease and epidemic (plus their treatment and effect on cultures), Jewish immigration, and early life in the American West. The project aims to transform these transcripts into data that allows the text to be computationally analyzed, pursuant to a larger effort toward developing capacity in services and infrastructure, supporting digital humanities from a library framework, and contributing to the emerging HTR ecosystem in archival work.

It is essential to acknowledge that publishing these large datasets online, which contain the medical and personal histories of potentially vulnerable communities, does introduce serious ethical considerations. This paper both underscores the value of HTR and frames the necessary ethical reflections on protecting data

derived from it. It suggests a terms-of-use intervention, perhaps valuable to similar projects, one that balances the needs of digital-scholar researchers with the care and respect of individuals, whose lives produced the very data now valuable to this scholarship.

The 2022 issue of *HSDA* henceforth closes with an ethical reflection that encompasses these various contributions. We are pleased to conclude ten years of activity for the journal, greeting readers who have followed us since 2011 with an in-depth study of the urgent ethical problems ahead in our uncertain — yet open — future.