

***Dreaming the Future: What it Means to be Human***  
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The power of imagination is infinite.  
-John Muir

In [‘The Value of Imagining the Trans/Posthuman.’](#) Victoria explores the relationship between imagination and knowledge, positing that ‘imagination is the starting point for all there will be to know’ (13). Using this assertion as *my* starting point I intend to explore the role of imagination further, drawing on ideas concerning dreams, stories, and the future. I hope to consider these within the overarching theme of what it means to be human.

Whilst imagination can indeed be seen as the springboard for knowledge, I would argue that it is not just about what *will* be known but, importantly, what *could* be known. I believe that this is an important distinction to make as it emphasises the boundless nature of imagination and the sense of possibilities that this brings. Furthermore, it is this ability to dream, to wonder about the future, and perhaps most importantly, to hope for a better future that underlies the human condition. Whilst imagination has the potential, and the appeal, of being limitless and fantastical, it nevertheless contains the seeds of tangible realities. Crucially, imagination equips us with the tools to ask ‘what is possible?’ Indeed, the dream stretches the realms of possibility; it plays with the boundaries of what is real and epitomizes fantasy. But it is also the basis for speculation and invention. As Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatista Army states: ‘In our dreams we have seen another world... And this new, true world was not a dream from the past; it was not something that came from our ancestors. It came to us from the future; it was the next step that we had to take’.

Victoria’s visualisation of the trans/post-human invited and encouraged the audience to imagine the possible futures of ‘the human’. There are two key aspects that stand out for me here. Firstly, the idea of enhancing and perfecting ‘the human’ is a project of development; it assumes that history is a linear and forward marching process that builds upon that which has come before. Furthermore, it is not only a forward march but an upward one too, aiming to improve and progress humanity. For me, this reflects another distinctly human feature, namely that we make sense of our experiences and the world around us through narrative. The story is a powerful tool that draws on the imagination, as Polletta argues ‘people *do* things with stories. They entertain and persuade, build social bonds and break them, make sense of their worlds and, in the process, create those worlds’ (2006, 14). Creativity is central to interpreting, constructing, and re-telling our experiences of reality. Indeed, as Duncombe remarks ‘[i]t is not that reality doesn’t exist- it is more that by itself it doesn’t really matter. Reality is always refracted through the imagination, and it is through our imagination that we live our lives’ (2007, 18). Stories matter. But why do they appeal? Is it because of their tendency to structure events into a

beginning, middle and an end? Or is it the way that stories present and reinforce normative conclusions? Is it that they provide the space and freedom to imagine potential futures? Or is it because they play on our flair for the dramatic? Of course it is likely to be all of these things and many more besides (see for example Polletta 2006). However, I wish to elaborate on the dramatic element of storytelling here as, in my opinion, it ties into this undercurrent of what it means to be human.

For Duncombe, '[s]pectacle is our way of making sense of the world. Truth and power belong to those who tell the better story.' (2007, 8). As Debord (1992) proclaims, we live in a 'society of the spectacle'. Here, the public sphere is conceived as the public stage. It is 'a symbolic forum in which actors have increasing freedom to create and to project performances of their reasons, dramas tailored to audiences' (Alexander 2011, 49). In fact, Alexander explores this relationship between art and life, portraying the relationship between society and theatre in the shape of a figure of eight. In this way, societal issues are addressed by plays and questions concerning society are raised by dramas (2011, 48). Victoria's piece could be read as art imitating (a potential future) life. In any case, her imaginings raise questions about future realities.

Secondly, by organising discussion around the painting itself, Victoria draws our attention to the visual and its prominence in contemporary society. Indeed, in a culture of digital media and 24 hour news-feeds, punchy images and digestible sound-bites become the focus. The scene is painted of a fast-paced, consumer society where the present is pressing and immediacy is prioritised. We exist in a world, or a time, where '[w]e no longer have 'lives' but a 'life', in the present' (Presdee 2000, 26). It is about individualism and it is about now. While I agree that in the context of a visual culture it is important to 'speak to people's fantasies and desires through a language of images and associations' (Duncombe 2007, 8), I dispute the notion that in a world characterised by consumption and immediate gratification- we lose sight of the future. In fact, I believe that at the core of what it means to be human is our future-orientation and in particular, the ways in which we cast ourselves as part of a progressive story arc. Moreover, we do not merely view ourselves as playing a supportive role but as the star of the show. Indeed, at the centre of Victoria's exhibition was a portrait of herself imagined in a trans/post-human future.

Finally, at the heart of the human condition is emotion. As Eve Ensler (2011) defiantly exclaims, 'I am an emotional creature'. To have compassion is to be 'humane', alternatively we describe those who lack empathy and emotion as 'monsters'; we strip them of their human status. And yet, as Jasper and Polletta muse 'somehow, academic observers have managed to ignore the swirl of passions all around them' (2001, 1). The problem is that the emotional has traditionally been depicted as the antithesis of the rational. And it is reason which 'takes center stage. It is reason, after all, that distinguishes us as human.' (Duncombe 2007, 11). That which speaks to the emotions (or the heart and body, which have typically symbolised the emotional as opposed to the mind), is dangerous. Like imagination, emotion is uncontainable. It is messy and

threatens to overspill into areas of life such as the political which (according to Enlightenment ideals) should be a matter of the discerning mind and concerned with reason. Yet, Duncombe makes the pertinent point that modern day politics need to harness the power of the spectacle and appeal to people's emotions. In fact he contends that '[t]he refusal to accept that people are complex beings, with contradictory ideals of reality and fantasy (a refusal that often results in the ignorance, avoidance, or repression of the latter), is a hangover from the old Enlightenment ideal of authenticity, the dream of a seamless self' (2007, 76). Whilst I would be wary of throwing the Enlightenment baby out with the authenticity bathwater, I recognise and am sympathetic towards Duncombe's desire to appreciate and explore the complex contradictions of humanity. And although, like most dreams, Duncombe's enquiry of fantasy is not comprehensive or without flaws, at its heart is an inspiring idea. Just as Victoria proclaims '[s]o why not imagine or envision?' (14), I would add why not dream about the future? After all, the possibilities are boundless.

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