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STIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Cultural Studies

# i hope you can dance fast enough

IAN PINDAR

Robert Pepperell

THE POST-HUMAN CONDITION  
206pp. Oxford: Intellect. Paperback, £14.95.  
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437pp. Cabinet Editions. £9.99.  
0 952 58240 6

Visitors to his installation at the Barbican Art Gallery's JAM exhibition at the end of last year were presented with an encapsulation of his thoughts inscribed in the stone floor: "Complex machines are an emergent life form . . . in the end machines will be gods." It isn't the familiar sci-fi thesis that machines will take over the world that rankles, it's his sloppy deification of the things. There is nothing post-human about that. Surely the most beautiful and threatening aspect of this new technology is that nobody is in control, least of all a cyber-theocracy.

Robert Pepperell is a founder member of Hex-Media, an offshoot of the successful Ninja Tune record label which operates from a warehouse

ness can arise in an apparently deterministic system try the following experiment." We are advised to hold a coin against a wall, draw a circle around it and let it drop a number of times. Look, sir! You can't predict where it will land! That's right, says Pepperell, "The initial positioning of the coin is apparently fixed and determined yet it falls in a chaotic way." Huzzah! Perhaps Pepperell has pitched this explosively contentious manifesto at school-age children, in which case he has been pre-empted by Jeff Goldblum in *Jurassic Park*.

Naturally the Post-Human Manifesto is posted on the Internet, and it is typical of much of the half-baked nonsense which passes for debate on that overrated medium. "Surf or die", says the manifesto, unwittingly capturing the sneering tone of every schoolboy fascist. This is mere soundbite philosophy. Pepperell ignores one of the most interesting aspects of the Internet's "revolution", which is the creation of an alienated electronic underclass without the money, means or skills to access it. According to David Blakey, Chief Constable of West Mercia, the disenfranchised "will haunt the empty shopping and enter-

facing, they become mottled and reptilian. They kill each other for artificial body-parts, explore the outer reaches of meaningless sex, tinker with their DNA, and listen to loud electro-sonic mayhem untouched by human feeling."

Once more there is the modish submission to technology which Pepperell advocates. But unlike Pepperell, o d does not reflect on the post-human, he immerses us in it. There is a real sense of disorientation and terror, as the human narrators lose control and great chunks of binary code or computer noise take over the narrative. At times one has the impression that the author has simply leant on the keyboard, like a true master. After all, the glitch is now a recognized literary device, and a rather effective one at that.

For Pepperell, computers represent the dawn of a new theological era, but for o d it is more like a pact with the Devil: "We are being reprogrammed while we're out." Electronic dance music is at the forefront of this loss of control. "Music is laying the paths for digital recoding to enter . . . change for the machines, that's all we've ever done. -e ve [sic] changed enough now that the machines will be making all the changes from now on." And it is on the dance floor that this sinister process is taking place. "i hope you can dance fast enough."

The music which dominates o d is "the sound of machine gun techno" or drum 'n' bass. It con-

God can do without man. God could do without the ichthyosauri and the mastodon. These monsters failed creatively to develop, so God, the creative mystery, dispensed with them. In the same way the mystery could dispense with man, should he too fail creatively to change and develop . . . dispose of man, and replace him with a finer created being.

So thinks Rupert Birkin in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*. It is a view which finds favour with Robert Pepperell in his book, *The Post-Human Condition*, with one notable alteration: the "creatures" which will supersede humankind are not in any obvious way alive, they are computers.

As Pepperell points out, judging by archaeological evidence:

humans have not changed much in the last five thousand years in terms of their anatomy and mental capacity . . . Within a fraction of that time, computers have evolved from nothing to a point where they densely populate our lives . . . It is a fair bet, then, that given the same rate of growth in complexity there will come a point within the next five hundred years when the computer will reach such a phenomenal state of intricacy that its workings will be wholly beyond human comprehension.

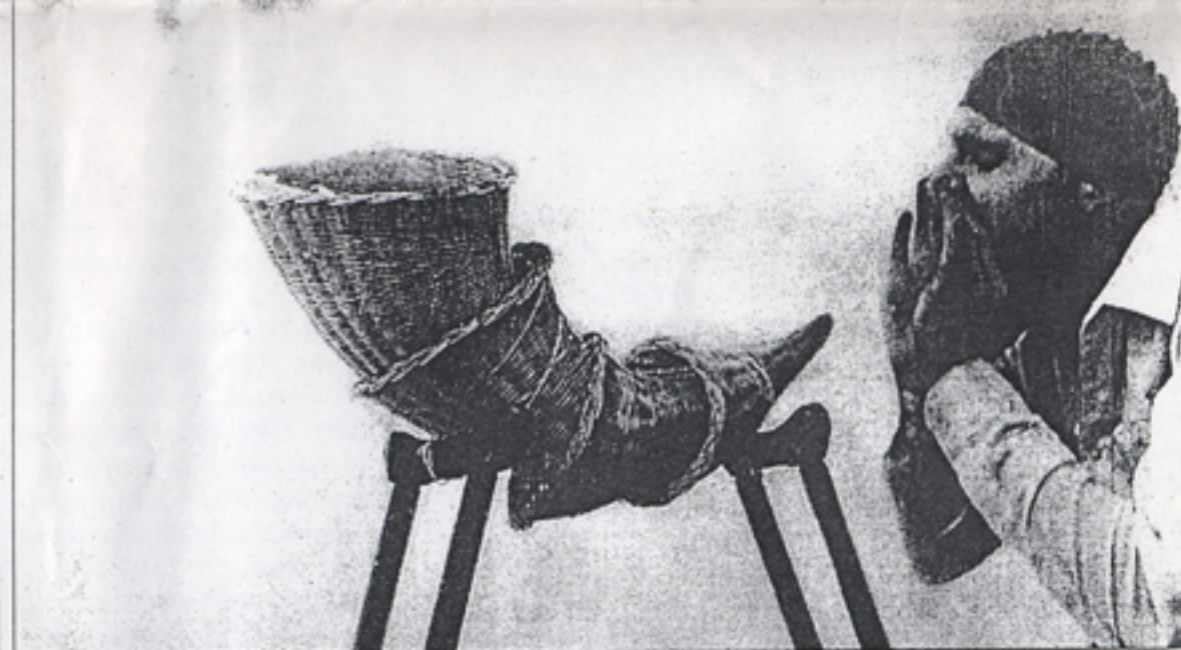
At this juncture, Pepperell prophesies, "Post-

most successful species on earth." Fearsome stuff, and yet, despite its relentless human-baiting, *The Post-Human Condition* isn't nearly scary enough. Pepperell has done his homework (chaos theory, the Internet, cyberspace, nanotechnology, etc), but his conclusions are curiously bathetic. Proclaiming the death of humanity is not yet killing it. Pepperell describes a post-human universe, but he is not of it. If, as he says, we are approaching "the electrification of existence" and "there is a tangible sense of a storm in the air", then Pepperell's contribution proves to be a very small rain cloud indeed.

... somewhere on London's South Bank. He is regarded by many as Ninja's in-house theorist, but reading this book one cannot help thinking that a less uncritical audience might have sharpened its focus and deterred him from posturing behind empty phrases. The blurb hails him as "spokesman for a generation that believes traditional notions of order and disorder are redundant", which means precisely nothing. The first 170 pages of the book are a sort of rambling preamble to the crux of the matter: the trumped-up Post-Human Manifesto (why would a post-human want a manifesto?). This proves to be a disappointing mishmash of ideas which rarely withstand scrutiny. If, for instance, in the post-human era, "beliefs become redundant" and "human beings, like gods, only exist inasmuch as we believe them to exist", then how is it that "in the Post-Human era machines will be gods"? Shouldn't Pepperell's belief in machines become redundant too? Why is he reluctant to turn his laser-beam scepticism on to computers themselves? If, as he argues, computer modelling leads us to the conclusion that "reality is essentially non-computable", why does he think computers will cope more successfully with this reality? Might they not just throw up their little computer hands in despair and be dispensed with in their turn by Lawrence's creative mystery?

*The Post-Human Condition* also suffers from being hastily edited. Early on we read that "the Post-Human is entirely at ease with the idea of 'transcendence'", surely an uncomfortable word for any self-respecting post-human; whereas in the final manifesto the word has been spirited away and replaced by the no less awkward "immateriality". We must leave it to a cleverer writer, the anonymous o d, to remind us that immanence, not transcendence, is the truly post-human domain.

Throughout *The Post-Human Condition* one is reminded not so much of Jean-François Lyotard as of an old-fashioned school primer like *Discovering Physics*, illustrated with pictures of boys in V-neck jumpers and spectacles gazing intently at Bunsen burners. *The Post-Human Condition* is nicely illustrated too (by Pepperell himself). The theory has moved on but the practical hasn't: "To illustrate how random-



Robert Harrison's "The Scream"; from *Contemporary Art in New Mexico* by Jan E. Adlmann and Barbara McIntyre (226pp. Reading: Gordon and Breach Arts International. £35. 976 8097 71 X)

tainment areas, causing major problems for the police and for the rest of society". It is a reassuring thought that real human beings will still be operating at the margins of Pepperell's synthetic Brave New World, albeit reduced to damaging bus shelters and urinating outside Sainsbury's. Mr Blakey is also right to point out that this burgeoning technology is no guarantee of escape from the human, all-too human: "The Internet presents the views of the zealot, the racist or the madman in just as well packaged a way as those of government agencies and churches."

After the damp squib of *The Post-Human Condition* it is gratifying to discover o d, an audacious and intriguing fusion of fiction and philosophy which makes a much better job of disturbing us. If sampling has opened up new frontiers in modern music, then o d promises to do the same for what we used to call literature. It could be described as a sort of cut 'n' paste fiction, mixing together the likes of William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, Greg Bear, J. G. Ballard, William Gibson, and Deleuze and Guattari as effortlessly as the Ninja Crew mix records. Technology-driven music also has a role to play in o d: "As their skins migrate to machine inter-

sists of effortlessly fluid, devilishly intricate computer-generated drum rhythms played faster than any drugged human could hope to achieve, or hope to dance. But visit any drum 'n' bass nightspot, and you will observe with envy that people hampered by transparent puffa jackets and pastel rubberwear have somehow managed to adapt themselves to it. o d allows one to imagine what Burroughs would have made of the rave culture:

Garage, hardcore and ambient. For ecstasy [sic] junkies. The trance oblivion market. But then there's the insistent memory of someone telling you that MDMA is a receiver chemical that fine-tunes the neural pathways for immersion . . . We've been going to one place for a while now, because both of us are so into the voices in the music there. The first time, you didn't hear them. They stayed human, and you got transfixed by the strobeflicker in your head . . . Next time . . . trying to get lost in the music pulse . . . some of us will make it, changing for the machines . . . roaring wind from the future. Eroding you through the music. If o d is right, then the dance floor at its best is the next philosophical arena.

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