

Book Review: Posthuman Urbanism: Mapping Bodies in Contemporary Space by Debra Benita Shaw

In Posthuman Urbanism: Mapping Bodies in Contemporary Space, Debra Benita Shaw examines the disciplinary control and classification built into the design of the contemporary city and explores practices of posthuman resistance, from squatting, dumpster diving and protest to parkour. This book provides excellent insight into how urban space can both stabilise and disrupt notions of 'the human' and other dominant ideologies, writes Hannah Spruce.

Posthuman Urbanism: Mapping Bodies in Contemporary Space. Debra Benita Shaw. Rowman & Littlefield International. 2018.

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Who is the contemporary city designed for? And how do posthuman subjects disturb this design? These questions are central to Debra Benita Shaw's *Posthuman Urbanism: Mapping Bodies in the Contemporary City Space*, dividing the book into two parts: 'I: Political Anatomies of Bodies and Cities' and 'II: Monsters in the Metropolis'. Part One explores *who* exactly the city is designed for. Shaw explains how architectural spaces such as hospitals, museums and art galleries intersect with scientific discourses to naturalise Eurocentric, humanistic understandings of 'the human'. Part Two explores posthuman urban resistance by examining how squatters, dumpster divers, protesters and practitioners of *parkour*, among other 'monsters', resist the regulation, surveillance and humanism which is otherwise designed into urban spaces.

Shaw establishes that her posthumanism stems from the view that 'who "we" are [...] is not to be taken for granted' (7). Her posthumanism 'does not refer to what comes *after* the human' (often, but not always, termed 'transhumanism'), but is rather a theory and praxis which recognises an 'imperative to deconstruct the premises which have sustained the myth of androcentric humanism and its associated political structures' (44). The human, she argues, is an 'aspirational category, an ideal caught up with transcendence and the realisation of an exclusive form' synonymous with [Leonardo da Vinci's iconic sketch, Vitruvian Man](#) (184). These ideas of humanism and transcendence are integral to her exploration of city space. Through a focus on the ways that Western aspirations regarding human perfection are built into the architecture of the city, Shaw interrogates how urban structures can incorporate and reinforce the racist, classist and sexist hierarchies of Eurocentric knowledge systems.

Posthuman Urbanism is also wonderfully alert to the ways that posthuman theory can be, and often is, used to critique social Darwinism. Shaw provides an excellent outline in Chapter One, 'Darwin's Monsters', in which she illustrates how the discourses of evolutionary-based sciences have been spatially structured into the architecture, organisation and functions of 'cultural' institutes in urban centres. Shaw demonstrates how in the nineteenth century, when London's Natural History Museum was opened to the working classes, the new exhibits on human evolution spread 'sanctioned forms of knowledge' (108) about racial hierarchies from the museum to the street. The museum, asserts Shaw, operates as a transcendental space which elevates the European man over and against the foreign 'Other' through the structure of the museum exhibit.

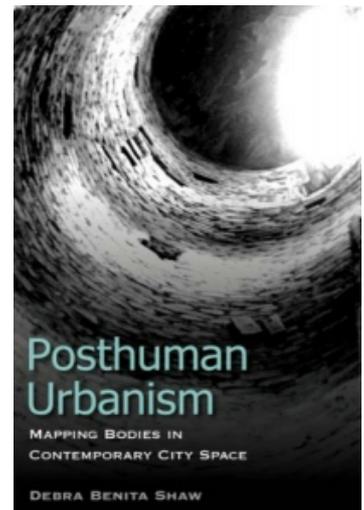




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Moreover, by adhering to the museum's architecture of engagement, which regulates the movement of the working classes through the museum and enforces a specific way of understanding the exhibits, subjects are granted a humanistic theory of man which they can take to the street to wield upon the urban public. By drawing on the *flâneur*, a figure who strolls through the city observing and assessing the masses, Shaw argues that the museum equipped working-class citizens with a new lens: that of the nineteenth-century gentleman who catalogues the urban crowd through evolutionary taxonomies. According to Shaw, the sanctioned knowledge of the museum allowed the working classes to classify and differentiate the public according to a scientific morphology which naturalised racial hierarchies. In this analysis, Shaw recognises how city spaces operate as disciplinary sites which educate citizens in humanism and what it means to be human.

In 'Metropolitan Others' (Chapter Two), Shaw discusses the concept of *cyberflânerie*. The *flâneur*, she argues, migrated to digital space in the late twentieth century to surf the web through online 'voyages of discovery' (80). Shaw expands on the concept, which she credits to William J. Mitchell, by reconnecting the cyberflâneur to urban material space. The cyberflâneur, she claims, is 'alive and well and is a significant feature of the way that urban and digital spaces merge and interact' in the twenty-first century (89). Shaw focuses here on the popularisation of image-sharing social media sites like Instagram and Snapchat. By leisurely meandering through and gazing on these apps, the cyberflâneur traverses digital urban space to pass comment on the material world. Critically, asserts Shaw, the cyberflâneur may use digital space to recirculate 'oppressive racial meanings' (89) that dominate outside of digital space. This has the effect of expanding, intensifying and reproducing the reach of Eurocentric racisms and humanism. Shaw's focus on the cyberflâneur usefully relocates a perspective on digital space to consider the ways that cyberspace and urban space interconnect.

Part One of *Posthuman Urbanism* ends with an exciting prospect: a manifesto for a contemporary posthuman politics. Posthumanist scholars frustrated with posthumanism as 'mere theory' may be interested in taking up Shaw's call to develop posthumanism from a critique of biopower to a deliberate and active political strategy. Through the concepts of 'dark space' (spaces which resist the panoptical gaze of the state) and 'junkspace' (liminal, disciplinary spaces like shopping centres, supermarkets, hotels and airports), Shaw outlines how posthuman bodies can accelerate the process of repurposing urban space for left-political means. As an example, Shaw draws on the tactic of 'civic swarming': a posthuman urban response to police kettling (a tactic of constraining protesters through police barriers to incite agitation and violence and also to render the 'ugly crowd' visible through police helicopters). Civic swarming involves using knowledge of urban space, so that posthuman bodies, free of riot gear and equipment, can move agilely through city space to resist the police kettle and avoid the visibility of the crowd (132).

In Part Two, through vignette-like chapters, Shaw focuses principally on posthuman subjects who are active, able-bodied and economically privileged agents, political or otherwise, like urban explorers and Occupy activists. In other words, these subjects *choose* their posthumanity. While this is a useful mapping of how these bodies interact with the city, missing from this section is a posthuman praxis for urban subjects who are forcibly expelled from the category of 'the human', and with this, from homes, occupations and urban space. Without such a politics, Shaw's posthuman manifesto for 'queering space through living differently' (186) risks being read as a utopian dream for the economically and physically able. While her posthuman praxis would benefit from further inclusion, it would do her scholarship a disservice not to mention that Shaw does acknowledge that the majority of her posthuman subjects are privileged citizens who live differently by choice.

That said, one of the unique strengths of *Posthuman Urbanism* is how Shaw draws on her experiences in twenty-first-century London as an academic, activist and participant in the [social centres movement](#) (which involves adapting and utilising abandoned buildings as community spaces). In doing so, Shaw introduces a welcome autoethnographical perspective to the field of posthumanism, making her book a critical contribution which articulates a posthuman praxis where most offer only theory.

Posthuman Urbanism will be useful to students and scholars concerned with how city spaces and architecture include and exclude certain subjects through designing operations like separation, classification and disciplinary control. It is relevant to those occupied with the intersections of cultural geography and ideology, providing excellent insight into how humanism and urban space interact to stabilise the idea of the human as well as how posthumanism can disrupt the symbiotic relationship between urban space and dominant ideologies.

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