

Is There a Way Out? A Posthumanist Reading of Franz Kafka's "A Report to An Academy"Naghmeh Khoei^{1,*}

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ABSTRACT

Franz Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" tells the story of Red Peter, an ape who recounts his transformation into a human-like figure following his captivity. While the story structurally mimics a classic narrative of a civilizing progress, charting the trajectory of humanization, this paper aims to expose the darker tale of the enforced adaptation, making the narrative a critique rather than a celebration of civilization. Using a posthumanist theoretical framework, the study offers a critical analysis of Red Peter's journey as a critique of humanism and anthropocentrism. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and N. Katherine Hayles' theories of posthumanism, the paper examines how Red Peter's transformation reflects the disciplinary systems of mimicry, surveillance, and bodily regulation. By positioning Red Peter as a fractured, hybrid subject, the study explores how literature can expose and interrogate the systems that define and constrain what it means to be "human."

Keywords: Posthumanism, Humanism, Embodiment, Identity, Agency, Cyborg

1. INTRODUCTION

Franz Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" (Ein Bericht für eine Akademie), first published in 1917 in the journal *Der Jude*, is a short story delivered as a fictional lecture by an ape named Red Peter. While it initially appears to tell a story of progress and civilization, the text gradually reveals a darker reality. Poking fun at what we call civilisation, this story challenges the notion that "humanity," or the state of being human, is inherently positive. It raises questions about identity, imitation, and transformation.

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The story opens with Red Peter recounting his transformation from a captured animal into a quasi-human figure capable of speech and social conformity. After being captured and shot during a hunting trip, he is locked in a small cage. The cage is extremely small and drastically limits his ability to move. This marks the beginning of his transformation. Soon, he realizes that the only way to survive is to be “similar” to humans. By closely observing and imitating the people around him, he learns to behave like them: he spits, drinks alcohol, and even smokes a pipe.

This study examines how Kafka’s story engages with themes that posthumanist theory has brought to the forefront—particularly in relation to embodiment and subjectivity. Focusing on Red Peter’s transformation, the paper argues that his adaptation is not a narrative of progress but of enforced performance and survival.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Amid ecological crises, rapid technological advancements, biotechnological innovations, and the accelerating integration of technology into human life processes, the idea of what it means to be human has become unstable and constantly shifting in our current historical moment. Posthumanism, as a critical approach, views these major transformations not as threats, but as opportunities to fundamentally rethink boundaries, such as those between human and non-human, mind and body, and nature and culture, as fluid, co-constitutive, and historically contingent. It critiques humanism’s conception of human as autonomous, rational subject, ontologically and hierarchically elevated above non-human life forms. Thus, it calls for redefining the human as part of a complex web of material, biological, technological, and historical relationships.

Posthumanism, as articulated by Donna Haraway’s notion of ‘companion species’, which reconceptualizes human-animal relations, and Rosi Braidotti’s zoe-centered ethics prioritizing life beyond anthropocentric definitions, suggests a “multiple-species biopolitics,” an expanded framework of governance and ethical consideration that includes non-human and post-organic life forms [1,2]. Here, the body is no longer a fixed, autonomous entity; it becomes a site of transformation, hybridity, and co-evolution. Cloned humans, minds reconstructed in unfamiliar environments, and bodies that coexist with the natural world are all examples of these transformed bodies. Braidotti conceptualizes the posthuman subject as a non-unitary, relational being, whose subjectivity emerges through constant entanglements with technological, environmental, and non-human others [1].

Central to posthumanist thought is a sustained critique of anthropocentrism. By unsettling the human’s presumed primacy as the central source of value, agency, and intelligence, posthumanism reorients subjectivity as emergent from human and non-human interdependencies. In contrast to humanist frameworks that position the rational, autonomous individual at the centre of meaning-making, posthumanist thought emphasizes distributed agency across

human and non-human entities [1]. This shift opens the possibility of recognizing non-human animals, machines, ecosystems, and even viruses as active participants in shaping our world. As such, posthumanism is not merely a theoretical response to technological advancement but a reconfiguration of ethics and ontology in a world of entangled lives. As Donna Haraway and others suggest, humans are always already Embedded in “naturecultures”—inseparable entanglements of biological, technological, and cultural processes that challenge the binary of nature versus culture [3]. This perspective invites us to see the environment not as a passive backdrop, but as an active force in the construction of identity, memory, and meaning.

Technology plays a pivotal role in posthuman theory, not just as a tool but as a co-constitutive agent. As N. Katherine Hayles points out, technologies such as artificial intelligence, social media algorithms, and cybernetic systems actively participate in the formation of subjectivity. These technologies mediate our experience of reality, reshape our perception of time and space, and blur the boundaries between the organic and the synthetic [2]. While Hayles emphasizes the systemic nature of this shift, we can already observe its impact in everyday life—for instance, when social media algorithms subtly shape users’ beliefs or when wearable tech redefines the boundaries of the body. In this context, subjectivity becomes increasingly fluid, dependent not only on internal consciousness but also on constant feedback from the digital environment.

Posthumanism ultimately demands a rethinking of ethics beyond the human. Traditional humanist ethics rely on fixed categories of personhood and rationality, often excluding those who fall outside these norms. Posthuman ethics, on the other hand, proposes an ethics of relationality, responsibility, and becoming. It asks not what something is, but how it acts, connects, and transforms. This is particularly relevant in narratives involving clones, artificial life, and non-human intelligences, where the boundaries of moral consideration must be re-evaluated [1].

Drawing on the theoretical insights of N. Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway, and Rosi Braidotti, this paper argues that literature—particularly speculative and posthumanist fiction—functions as an aesthetic and experimental space that enables a rethinking of subjectivity, temporality, and reality itself. In a world increasingly shaped by digital technologies, algorithmic systems, and biotechnological interventions, classical humanism—with its emphasis on autonomy, stability, and human centrality—can no longer fully account for contemporary lived experiences. Posthumanist theory challenges this legacy by emphasizing the fluid, relational, and entangled nature of identity and agency. In this light, fictional literature does not merely reflect anxieties about technological futures; rather, it invites readers to embrace the posthuman condition: one in which humans, technologies, and environments are co-constitutive agents in the ongoing production of meaning and being.

In this sense, Posthumanism is not merely a philosophical framework, it also serves as a critical tool to better understand the lived experiences of our time, and experiences where humans are deeply entangled with their environment, technologies, and overlapping pasts and futures. This paper will explore how this idea plays out in a narrative that reimagines the human body and mind within unfamiliar biological and temporal settings.

3. ANALYSIS

3.1 The Violence of Becoming Human – Scars and the Cage

While Red Peter is “reporting” to the academy the story of his being captured by humans, he recounts how he received two gunshot wounds: one to the face, leaving a permanent red scar, and one to the thigh, resulting in a limp [6]. These marks of violence become foundational to his identity: his very name —Red Peter—derives from those wounds, and his altered walk signals a bodily transformation that precedes and enables his “humanization.”

Donna Haraway’s theory of the cyborg, which challenges binary oppositions such as animal/human and nature/culture, provides a crucial framework here. Haraway argues that cyborg identities emerge not from organic wholeness but from fractured, technologized, and politically inscribed bodies [4]. In this context, Red Peter, as a limping, scarred, speech-learning figure who is forcefully transforming into another being, is precisely such a fractured subject—a cyborg caught between categories.

Red Peter’s transformation is not just physical—it is political. His wounded body is rebranded and restructured to fit the demands of a “civilized” audience. The limp he acquires becomes more than a scar; it turns into a visible marker of his submission and supposed development. Rather than being liberated, his body is co-opted into a new regime of utility and display. In this sense, Kafka shows how power operates not through overt compulsion alone, but through the normalization of suffering and adaptation as progress.

The three-walled cage in which Red Peter is initially confined serves as a powerful metaphor for his liminal condition—neither fully animal nor fully human. The cage is not only symbolic but also physically oppressive; so small that he cannot stand upright, it forces his body into submission. As he describes it, “It was not a four-sided barred cage; it was only a three-sided cage nailed to a locker; the locker made the fourth side of it. The whole construction was too low for me to stand up in and too narrow to sit down in it” [6]. his spatial compression mirrors his existential compression, as he is crammed into a role that is neither natural nor freely chosen.

Red Peter does not become fully human; instead, he performs a version of humanity that is always marked by his otherness. As Red Peter declares:

When I come home late at night from banquets, from scientific receptions, from social gatherings, there sits waiting for me a half-trained little chimpanzee and I take comfort from her as apes do. By day I cannot bear to see her; for she has the insane look of bewildered half-broken animal in her eye; no one else sees it but I do and I cannot bear it [6].

His transformation is not a linear ascent but a pressured adaptation; as he says: “I had no way out but I had to devise one, for without it I couldn’t live... I had to stop being an ape” [6].

3.2 The Paradox of Freedom — Posthuman Agency

A pivotal moment in Kafka’s *A Report to an Academy* is when Red Peter declares, “No, freedom was not what I wanted, only a way out.” This admission captures the central paradox of his transformation: what appears to be liberation is merely a transition from one form of confinement to another. The cage Three-walled cage is replaced by a more sophisticated structure—the human world—with its own set of invisible bars, expectations, and performances.

According to N. Katherine Hayles’ theory of posthumanism, agency in a posthuman context is never absolute. Rather, it is always situated, partial, and constrained by the systems—biological, social, technological—that shape embodiment [2]. Red Peter becomes “human” not through self-determined choice, but by adopting the behaviors demanded by those who hold power over him. His ability to act, speak, or even move freely is mediated by his role as a spectacle. He speaks not because he has a voice, but because he has learned to mimic one.

His inability to distinguish one human from another Further reinforces the notion of humanity as a homogenous structure of power: what he sees is not individuality but a monolithic structure of power. Humans, in his eyes, are undifferentiated agents of discipline—trainers, spectators, colonizers of his body and behavior. This aligns with Haraway’s notion that identity is relational and constructed through material-semiotic interactions, rather than innate [4]. Red Peter’s so-called “freedom” is revealed to be just another disciplinary regime—a more refined cage. After escaping the literal cage, Red Peter enters a larger, more refined form of captivity: a social stage where he is constantly observed by humans. He sees himself being seen, and in doing so, begins to internalize the gaze of his spectators. Red Peter adopts behaviors (such as rubbing his belly after drinking) not just out of mimicry, but because they are expected—and rewarded—by his human observers.

4. CONCLUSION

Franz Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" unfolds a transformation where survival and identity intertwine in uncertainty. Red Peter does not shed his past, he wears it; scarred, limping, and speaking in echoes borrowed from others. His body becomes a fragile script, rewritten under the gaze of a world which demands that he erase what he was and perform what he is not. In this space of liminality, the boundaries between human and animal dissolve into a restless tension, where identity flickers. What looks back is not the animal, nor the man, but the shadow between them: the blur where categories collapse. In that blur, posthumanism finds its voice, not clear, not pure, but urgent.

This urgency is not abstract; it speaks to a world marked by the limits of human exceptionalism. To remain within old boundaries is no longer viable. The time has come to unlearn anthropocentrism, to rethink the human-animal divide not as a separating line but as a field of "shared vulnerability" [1]. It is not a choice, but a necessity pressed upon us; as Red Peter declares, "one learns when one has to; one learns when one needs a way out; one learns at all costs" [6].

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