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"A Blink of an Eye in the History of the Universe": An Interview with Cary Wolfe

CONDUCTED BY GRY ULSTEIN (GU) AND NIELS SPRINGVELD (NS)

From 8 to 10 June 2016, Cary Wolfe (CW) visited Utrecht University, leading a Q&A on interdisciplinary animal studies, hosting a masterclass, and delivering a public lecture titled "(Auto)Immunity, (Bio)Politics, and Posthumanist Social Theory." Frame's time with Prof. Wolfe was short, and we had agreed upon approximately seven minutes per question beforehand.

NS: In *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame*, you argue that animal studies and biopolitical thought, although drawing on similar genealogies, have hardly been connected with each other. Especially biopolitical thought seems to have become more prominent in your recent work, as your critiques of thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito and engagement with Michel Foucault testify. How does the question of the animal relate to the biopolitical question of life (and what does or does not count as a life)? In what ways does the growing debate concerning the Anthropocene affect or how is it affected by these questions? How would you situate your "Anthropocene knowledge" versus other thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti, Claire Colebrook, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour?

CW: OK, that's a huge question for seven minutes [laughs], but I guess… I think the term "Anthropocene" is much too general and much too specific at the same time as a concept for me—for how I think and how I work. Not that it's not important, but it's not really the way I have approached a lot of these questions. I am actually more interested in how—and I talked about this yesterday in the lecture and the Q&A—how what we call the "bio" of "biopolitics" or what we designate as "life" is always radically situated in terms of the self-reference and the autopoiesis of different discursive and different social systems. This would be systems of knowledge, systems of production, and systems of commodification, as well as economic systems, but also, crucially, legal systems and the law, in terms of what counts as life. There's a new piece that's coming out pretty soon in a collection edited by Erich Hörl, who is a scholar in Germany on the ecological paradigm, and there's a piece I wrote for that in which the subtitle is something like "What is the 'Bio' in 'BioArt'?," and that's where I try to zero in on this.[1] The way I would theorize this problem is to say that the difference

1. *On General Ecology: The New Ecological Paradigm in the Neocybernetic Age*, ed. Erich Hörl with James Burton, forthcoming this fall from Bloomsbury Press. Among the contributors are: Timothy Morton, Didier Debaise, Jussi Parrika, Bernard Stiegler, Bruce Clarke, Elena Esposito, Brian Massumi, Luciana Parisi, James Burton, David Wills, Frederic Neyrat, Matthew Fuller and Olga Goriunova.

between "Life" (capital L) and the actually empirically "living" is overdetermined radically by the particular self-reference of the different systems in which the question of "life" is taken up. So how it is taken up in molecular biology, versus how it is taken up in, let's say, the legal system. The tautological or paradoxical self-reference of each of those autopoietic systems and how they conceive what life is gives each system a kind of "blind spot," as Niklas Luhmann puts it, because of their own self-reference—a blind spot that they can't see. And that blind spot generates a constitutive "outside" to the self-reference which is, in fact, the contingency of the observation itself—it could always be otherwise. So the domain of "Life," capital L [laughs] is always, in any concrete act of specification or designation, pushed to the outside as the next space that can always be marked or designated by any self-referential discourse that takes place in a social system. And so, the next question, that you [NS] raised yesterday at the end of the Q&A, is "why is this not dialectical?"[2] Why is the relationship between the empirically "living" and "Life" not dialectical? And it's not dialectical because any self-referential "map" or any self-referential designation of what the "living" is, is radically contingent: it could always be otherwise. And so the contingency of self-reference actually means, as I put it in *Critical Environments*, that you can't have what Hegel called "the identity of identity and non-identity," secured in the dialectic. Instead, you actually have the non-identity of identity and non-identity because of the contingency of the self-referential designation or mark. And so this is a way of mapping and formalizing, non-dialectically, the ongoing, unfolding relationship between what we think of as "Life" as a general problem or domain, and the actually, empirically "living" in particular practices and systems—which is, in fact, the only place "Life" ever actually makes itself manifest. This is precisely what Foucault's work is interested in, of course—not just in the later work on biopolitics but

2. *Wolfe is referring to a question asked by Niels Springveld during the Q&A-session after the public lecture on 9 June: "In his biopolitical triology, Esposito conceives of the immunitary paradigm as the relationship between immunitas and communitas, terms that share the same root, munus. Esposito explicitly states that the relationship between these terms is a dialectical one, something which is occasionally glossed over in the secondary literature on his work. If, to use Foucault's phrase, the immune system constitutes the "tiny secret" of modernity, what are the problems of thinking the immune system with Esposito's work, considering his insistence on dialectics?*

from *The Order of Things* onward—and this fact is dramatized, of course, in areas such as synthetic biology. And that, in turn, raises the question of the relationship between the organic and the non-organic, in relation to the empirically living, which is a relationship that has never been more complicated than it is now.

GU: So do you think there is too little focus on "Life" with a capital L in the discussion around the Anthropocene, or is the Anthropocene so "big" that it is difficult to relate Life to it at all?

CW: Yes, I think that's exactly right. I think the Anthropocene is too large as a concept in a way, in that it invites us to pretend that we already know what life is. And then we just start talking about how we insert what we already know about what life is into this geological time-frame. And then the Anthropocene is also, and at the same time, too specific, in the sense that, strictly speaking, it's a term from the discipline of geology. And the space I'm talking about actually falls in between these two. The other thing that needs to be said about this term "the Anthropocene," is I think we also have to step back and realize that this term arises specifically in the domain of academic knowledge production, which thrives on the production of novelty, and is basically governed by an economy of planned obsolescence. This is irrespective of the conceptual merits or deficits of the idea of the Anthropocene or any other concept.

GU: Like autopoiesis, for instance.

CW: Right, or "animal studies"! I mean these are basically labels, they are logos, they are brands, that academic knowledge production within the university as we know it depends upon—the constant production of these kind of terminological and conceptual novelties. Otherwise, what happens to higher education when you say, "Well, guess what? We know everything, we don't need to produce any more concepts!" [laughs]. We wouldn't be having this interview, and you guys would be out of business. That seems like a mundane point, but you know, in one of the chapters in *What is Posthumanism?* I talk about

what some have called this kind of logic of neo-liberal incorporation, and how it affects the production of these kinds of knowledges around the problem of animal studies, and why I actually don't like the term "animal studies," or "human-animal studies," precisely because it invites this kind of serializing logic that exerts a kind of levelling force: "animal studies" is "queer studies" is "jazz studies" is "critical race studies" [laughs].[3] So even though these are supposed to be different things, on a deeper level, they are just simply the latest iteration of a deeper logic of the production of what is the latest "thing." And so after animal studies, you could see, you *knew*, that the next thing was going to be "Uhm, what about plants?" And then you knew that after that, or coincident with that, was going to be "What about objects?" And of course now people's attention is turning to other areas, as I said in the talk yesterday, for instance, what about the microbiome? What about epigenetics? So at a certain point you just step back and say, you know, there's a pattern here! [laughs] These aren't terms that just fall out of the sky, and they're produced by very historically and sociologically specific kinds of practices and protocols that dictate, for example, whether you get your degree or not, and whether people get tenure or not. So you're talking about the production of very specific forms of knowledge, that have nothing, or very little, to do with their abstract conceptual value. And so I think that's important to register about the Anthropocene and that's why I think that the discourse on the Anthropocene is already on the way out.

GU: That actually brings us very nicely to the next question about "scale." Because many of the current thinkers and ecocritics like Latour, Colebrook, Timothy Clark, and Timothy Morton are concerned with the question of scale and how it affects how we think. Clark for instance argues that the Anthropocene presents us with a "newly recognized context," in which we are forced to "think on a planetary scale" (*Ecocriticism on the Edge* 21). And I think… they rather often say that we have to "broaden" our scale, broaden the way we think, but we are wondering, is that even possible? How can you think on a planetary scale?

3. [**NS**]: Chapter four, "'Animal Studies,' Disciplinarity, and the (Post)Humanities," 99-126.

CW: I don't think you *can* think on a planetary scale, for the reasons I've just outlined. I mean, as Gregory Bateson put it in first-wave systems theory, going back to the 1950s and 60s, and even 40s actually. Bateson borrows from Korzybski in his project on general semantics the phrase, "the map is not the territory." And so whenever we try to think this thing called the planetary, to go back to my previous answer, we are always thinking it from a standpoint of what Donna Haraway long ago called "situated knowledges." So we're always thinking it within the terms of *some* particular map and the self-referential coordinates *of* that particular map, and actually, because those maps have historically proliferated over time, the object of knowledge called "the planet" has become more and more complex. If you only have one map, the object of knowledge is a lot simpler than if you have an increasing infinitude of maps based on different coordinates. So are you talking about hydrology, are you talking about meteorology, are you talking about geology, etcetera. And so this proliferation of maps, and the fact that all maps are self-referential, produces an object of knowledge called the planet that in a very important sense is a *virtual* object.

GU: A "hyperobject," as Morton calls it.

CW: Yes, but here "virtual" doesn't mean "less real," it means "more real," because it means "more complex." And so that's how I would reframe the philosophical and the epistemological challenges around thinking in a planetary way, which, strictly speaking, is impossible, but is also, of course, in this sense completely unavoidable. And this is not at all to downplay what people interested in climate change and the Anthropocene are talking about—*of course* that's important to talk about and think about. I'm talking about *how* you can and cannot talk and think about it.

GU: I think there's a striking discrepancy between the fact that humanity is now acting in a planetary way, as a "geological agent" as Dipesh Chakrabarty called it, but then *thinking* about it that way quickly becomes panic-infusing: Why do we do that, and how do we think about it productively?

CW: I think that's the problem. The problem is a kind of an unacknowledged trauma of running up against the impossibility of thinking the planetary, because there's a desire to think the planetary that would step outside the kind of constraints that I've just described. But the kind of constraints I've just described are the constraints of thinking, *period*, whether you're talking about the planetary or anything else. And so within this context, to put it in shorthand, the contingency of the self-referential nature of every particular map that you use to think the planetary is a generative reservoir of complexity. And that's not a bad thing, that's a good thing. But for it to be a good thing, you have to be willing to agree that there is no Archimedean point from which you can have a God's eye view not bound by some self-reference when thinking about the planet or anything else.

NS: I am reminded of Haraway's "God's eye that fucks the world."

CW: [laughs] Right! Well, you know Donna is one of these people—she's the only one who can spin some of these phrases!

NS: During one discussion of yours with Claire Colebrook you mention that the Anthropocene is characterized by a certain apocalyptic tone, or "doomsdayish" vibe if you will. What does this tone entail exactly, and why do you think it is such a dominant way of talking and thinking about the Anthropocene?

CW: The event in Berlin that Claire and I did was actually produced by the fact that we were assigned a particular question to discuss—and I don't know if this actually comes up in the YouTube video or not—but the question we were given was "Is the Anthropocene 'a doomsday-device'?" [laughs] So it's kind of hard to not address the apocalyptic tone when it's framed that way! So that partly accounts for the way that conversation was framed and took off. But I would say that in a way the Anthropocene by definition *is* a doomsday-device. And going back to my earlier answer about knowledge production and academic discourses, I think it's calculated to invite that kind of response (for good reasons, of course, and for reasons that people need to be worried

about). So I think that kind of apocalyptic tone with the Anthropocene is unavoidable. But I would also add that there are plenty of generations of people who thought that the world was ending, and we're certainly not the first to feel that way. This happens to be, I think, our current way of thinking, our particular thematic, but if you just limit yourself even to just the twentieth century, a sort of precursor in academic discourse, both in Europe and the United States, focused on mutual assured mass destruction by nuclear weapons. I grew up in the context of the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, and it's easy, I think, to forget that the whole apocalyptic sense of the Anthropocene is much less apocalyptic and much less immediate than the sense of doom and dread that permeated social life during the Cold War. During the Cold War, school children in the United States would go through drills in school once a week or twice a week that would teach students how to hide under their desk if a nuclear weapon fell on their school. The point I'm making is not to criticize the idea of the Anthropocene and taking it very seriously, but rather to contextualize it within a longer time-frame. To go back to my point about the production of novelty in academic discourse, I think a lot of the time these discourses and these labels—whether you're talking about the Anthropocene or you're talking about animal studies or anything else—are sort of calculated to forget, so that the prior conceptual frame can be surpassed or superseded. What it's *about* is forgetting, in a way. And forgetting is important, because you couldn't do any work *without* forgetting. So, to me that's an important contextualization of the Anthropocene as well. And I want to emphasize that I'm not saying this in some "oh wow, I'm more nihilistic or cynical than you are" sort of way. To come back to your point about scales, and to my conversation with Claire: with these questions you always have to ask, "For whom?" And you always have to ask "At what time-scale?" At a certain time-scale, of course, there's absolutely nothing negative, or pressing, or catastrophic, about the Anthropocene. Nothing. It's a blink of an eye in the history of the universe. So, I think these multiple contexts are important to specify in order to draw out and identify how people invest in them differently.

GU: Yes, absolutely. I wonder if also the apocalyptic tone is exacerbated by media these days, in comparison to, for instance, during the Cold War. Because you see this apocalyptic tone often being monopolized by journalists in order to sell newspapers.

CW: I think you're right. That's what the media do—that's their job, actually. I think they do that with the Anthropocene just as they do that with a range of other topics, whether we talk about the Cold War and nuclear destruction or other so-called "hot-button" issues in Europe and the U.S. right now—like immigration, for instance. One of Luhmann's points about social systems is that the media, like higher education, also depends, but in a much more radical way, on the production of novelty as a way of maintaining its autopoiesis, which is to say, as a way of maintaining its reason for being. It's just that in the media, the production of novelty has to happen on almost a daily basis, whereas in academia we're working with longer time-frames, we have more time to do this. So I think that's a huge part of how the discourse of the Anthropocene has developed.

GU: Clark and Adam Trexler have in recent years made use of the concept of the Anthropocene to address the upsurge in "climate fiction." Trexler for instance argues in *Anthropocene Fictions* that "by emphasizing a geological process, [literature] can usefully indicate the larger, *nonhuman* aspects of climate change" (5), and that literature can contribute to "what it means to live in the Anthropocene" (26). You have also addressed literary texts and different forms of art—for instance music by David Byrne and Brian Eno—in your work, so what role do you think that art can play in articulating questions concerning the Anthropocene, as well as the question of the animal and the posthuman?

CW: I think, as I argued in *What Is Posthumanism?*, that art is an absolutely crucial part of this conversation. And it's crucial because the medium that I work in, compared to the media that artists work in, is a very impoverished medium: it's words, it's texts. For artists, the value of art, or *one* of the values of art in these conversations, is that art can

engage in "non-propositional conceptualization" of problems, in ways that are not limited by the textual medium, and that are not limited by the logical form of argumentation and so on.

NS: Is this similar to Deleuze and Guattari's claim that art produces affects, whereas science deals with functions and propositions and philosophy with the creation of concepts?

CW: Yes, I think that's right, but I would add to that that art doesn't just produce affects, art also produces affects that then get taken up paradoxically as part of art's own communication about the meaning of particular things that we're going through and experiencing. As I point out in *What Is Posthumanism?*, you can't collapse the meaning of an artwork into the material substrate of the artwork and its affective charge. This is the whole lesson of conceptual art: What else is Duchamp's *Fountain*, which is a urinal that he signs with a made-up name [laughs]? What else is the lesson of conceptual art except reminding you that the meaning of a work of art can't be reduced to the affective experience of the work of art and the material substrate? That's not to say that the experience of the work of art isn't crucial to what art does. It is, and it's crucial in a way that's completely different from the kind of medium that I work in. So one way to think about this, if you follow Luhmann's theorization of this in *Art as a Social System*, is that art is actually able to take advantage of the difference between psychic systems and social systems, or consciousness and communication, which operate at different speeds, and it is able to use that difference in a way that is different from all the other social systems. It's actually able to re-enter the difference between consciousness and communication and their speeds into art's own form of communication. So something that, paradoxically, is incommunicable—what Romantic discourse would call "the ineffability of art," or "the experience of the sublime"—paradoxically gets re-entered back into art's form of communication itself. This is something that art can do that what we're doing right now can't. And so—to come back to your opening questions—this is a crucial intervention in this question of how do you think these things, like the Anthropocene, that are in a fundamental sense not thinkable?

Art can intervene in this kind of non-propositional conceptualization in a really, really useful way that reveals the limitations of just theorizing and philosophizing when thinking about these questions. Two really good recent films are worth looking at in this regard: *Chasing Ice*, which is about the melting of the polar icecaps and the glaciers, and *Into Eternity*, which is about the Onkalo nuclear waste burial site in Finland that's been built to house nuclear waste that would be buried there in a facility that is supposed to last a hundred thousand years. I won't go into the films in any more detail, but both of these films are very interesting to look at precisely in terms of how art makes palpable and represents these phenomena that in some sense defy conceptualization. In *Into Eternity*, they interview the designers, and the architects, and the people who are building it, and you can see the people who designed the Onkalo burial site struggling with questions like "how do we mark the site so that one hundred thousand years from now, whatever beings are on the planet will see how we've marked the site and realise 'Don't go here,' 'Don't dig here,' 'Don't mess with this site.'" And they're like "OK, but are people in the future going to see the markers we leave and think 'Oh! This is an art installation!'" [laughs] You can see them struggling with actual, real, pragmatic questions about how we connect the contingency and situatedness of our own relationship to this problem, to the actions that we need to take now, and how those actions will be interpreted a hundred thousand years from now. It's a nice dramatization that, in a way, can only happen in an artistic medium. As Luhmann puts it in one of his more "Zen-like" moments: in art, this doesn't make sense, but it makes meaning. And that's the crucial role that art has to play, I would say, in rethinking "What do we mean when we talk about ecology?" "How do we rethink and reconceptualise ecology and what role can art play in helping us do that?"

NS: In B*efore the Law*, you employ the concept of *Gestell*, commonly translated as "enframing," which is fitting, given the title of our journal.

CW: [laughs] It's almost too good to be true, right?

NS: "*Gestell*," as you put it, "while neither natural nor human, frames the human's relation both to itself and to nature, and in ways that are far from sanguine in Heidegger's view" (3). "The effect of this enframing," you continue, "is thus twofold: not only are human beings cut off from a more authentic relation to the natural world, they are also cut off from an authentic relationship to themselves" (4). Could you elaborate on how you use Heidegger's concept in your position in the debate on the Anthropocene?

CW: In the passage that you just read, what I'm really doing is summarizing and ventriloquizing Heidegger's position, which is different from mine. As you all know from reading my stuff, I don't really have an interest in or an investment in any kind of discourse of authenticity in a way that Heidegger does. "Situatedness," yes, "authenticity," no. What I was trying to get at in Heidegger—and this is part of why I am so interested in Derrida's relation to Heidegger—is what Heidegger was right about and what he was wrong about, philosophically speaking. So the reason I started the book this way is that Heidegger's discourse around the frame in "The Question Concerning Technology" is a very, very useful place to begin the conversation about the relationship of life and technology that is so central, as we talked about earlier, to biopolitical thought. His insistence that the essence of technology is nothing technological is an important, and I would say quintessentially *philosophical*, way to start asking the question of technology. One of the many places where I depart from Heidegger, however—and this is something I'm working on right now—is on the problem of Heidegger's whole sense of what "dwelling" is. As Peter Sloterdijk and Luce Irigaray and other people have pointed out, Heidegger's relationship to the concept of dwelling ends up being a lot like his relationship to technology. His relationship to technology really ends up being one, as Timothy Campbell has argued in his wonderful book *Improper Life*, of distinguishing between "proper" and "improper" modes of relating to technology. This breaks, for example, along the difference between handwriting for Heidegger and the use of the typewriter. And this relationship to technology, in turn, spins out to eventually establish what Foucault calls a "caesura," or a break, or pause, in the biological

continuum of *Homo sapiens* itself, so that for Heidegger, an improper relationship to technology actually produces the possibility of members of the species *Homo sapiens* who are not "properly" human because they have such an inauthentic and alienated relationship to themselves and to the world through this immersion in an "improper" relationship to technology. As Tim points out in his book, there are obvious biopolitical consequences of saying that an improper relationship to technology creates some human beings who are not human, or subhuman, or less than human. In a different register, for Heidegger this turns out to be simply a description of the urban masses and how they are immersed in a certain inauthentic relationship to technology, which also ends up being coded in Heidegger's work as a certain relationship—in this case: horror—to communism, and to the communist masses. My point, in other words, is that what starts off in Heidegger as a quite astute and appropriately philosophical way of approaching these questions ends up resulting in a dangerous set of moves, especially when we look at him in the context of biopolitics. With regard to his concept of dwelling, something that Sloterdijk and Irigaray and other people have pointed out is that Heidegger's idea of dwelling ends up not just being a kind of "cabin in the Black Forest paradigm" of what it means to dwell properly [laughs], on the planet; it also ends up being far too terrestrialist. It is too earthbound, it is too groundbound, it's too… I don't know, what would the word be? "Terrainian"? [laughs] It's too terrainian, and so it's useful to step back from that and think about how that idea of dwelling feeds back into the entire analysis of the "eco-" of both ecology and economics. *Oikos* is etymologically at the root of both of those, as we know, which is really about the home, the hearth, the definition of an inside versus an outside as a form of dwelling, the proper name, sovereignty, and finally the phallus. How does Heidegger's terrainian idea of proper dwelling feed back into that problem of the *oikos*? Maybe it's better to try to use different theoretical tools to think of dwelling as more of a dynamic and fluid process, not of inhabiting, and not of locking down a fixed relationship between an inside and an outside, two places, two "theres," two different zones, but rather as a process of movement and migration in which time and dynamism are constitutive components.

GU: Or "nomadism," as Rosi Braidotti would call it.

CW: Or nomadism, as Rosi would call it. So, is there a way to think dwelling otherwise and to think it not as a process of fixing the *oikos*, but to think of it as a process of movement and migration and treading lightly, and being amongst others, and never being clear and obvious about the inside-outside relation, or the friend-enemy relation, if we want to use Carl Schmitt's language. That's where I think Heidegger's work is crucial in inviting us to open these questions in ways that his own thought is not, I think, prepared to fully theorize in the ways that we need now. It certainly won't enable us to think the problem of the "Anthropocene," given not just the multi-species dwelling involved in that question, but also that it is constituted by an ever-shifting, ever more complex set of relations between the "living" and the technical, the biological and the technology: given that it is, in a word, radically "improper."

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BIOGRAPHY

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