THE SOFIA UNIVERSITY CULTURAL CENTRE ANNOUNCES A

CALL FOR PAPERS

For the fifth in a series of international interdisciplinary conferences on the cultural history of modernity. The subject of the conference is:

THE INHUMAN 2015

This international conference will be held at the Centre Hotel in the Apriltsi resort (near the town of Troyan), on 7, 8 and 9 December 2015. The official languages of the conference will be Bulgarian and English. Application deadline: 15 October 2015.

Applications (accompanied by a topic within the thematic area of the conference, a 300-word abstract, and a short bibliography) should be submitted electronically to the following address: conference.cultcentersu@gmail.com.

Thematic Area of the Conference

The inhuman is all about boundaries – it is a question about where the human begins and ends.

But why has this age-old problem resurfaced at the beginning of the twenty-first century; what does its return really mean – is it a symptom of something? Could its reappearance imply that other questions which have dominated thinking for centuries – questions about the extent to which humans are the agent and motor of history, about the extent to which a rational, just, and happy project for the future is possible – have gone away, along with their inherent anthropocentrism?

We live in an era of anti-, post-, and transhumanism. Part of it are the widely propagated techno-utopias which unproblematically upgrade the human being by digital, genetic, or plastic-surgical means. Unlike their visions of a brave new world, the question of the inhuman does not have optimistic, techno-utopian implications: in it the “human” itself is fundamentally problematized. This question does not arouse faith in human agency, in progress and technology; it de-centres – in it humans are viewed as non-sovereign, being neither the Cartesian Cogito, nor autonomous agents and emancipated subjects who have taken responsibility for themselves, for their products, and for the future they are creating. They no longer realize themselves through self-knowledge and through their own civilizational and inventive achievements; they fear them. Having lost power over them, humans have also lost power over themselves. They have lost the famous imperative, “Werde wer Du bist” (“Become who you are”), with its requisite Bildung, self-overcomings and transcendences. Today humans think of and experience themselves through their limits and boundaries, which are obviously vulnerable and threatened. The “human” can always be attacked – by armies and enemies; it can be surprised by extragalactic races and species, by terrifying animals, cyborgs, clones, and aliens in human guise… It can be polluted at its core –
infected by viruses, poisoned by toxic foods, bitten by vampires… Extraterrestrial embryos can rip its belly and pop up their monstrous heads. The feeling that there is a problem with defining what is “human” can be found at all levels of culture – from the cultural industry and Hollywood blockbusters to esoterics, computer games, fantasy books, and advertisements; from “high” art (Pedro Almodóvar’s films, Michel Houellebecq’s novels) to science (medicine, genetics, biopolitics, bioethics, cognitive science, artificial intelligence sciences, neurophysiology…). In the last few decades the threat against the very concept of “human being” no longer appears to be only phobic and hypothetical: it is materializing, as it were, before our very eyes through the sequencing of the human genome and development of ground-breaking software, through GMO, cloned sheep, as well as through the “inhuman” explosions of aggressive religiosity which do not care about life and dignity, through transgressive surgical interventions and gender metamorphoses, through calls for legalizing pedophilia and zoophilia, through organ trade, cyborg-manifestoes, and New Age revelations about higher transhuman levels of existence… How should we view euthanasia? How much of the human body may be replaced and still remain a human body? Are all experiments with gender, cells, neurons, enzymes, admissible? Instead of aspiring towards a socially just world, shouldn’t we simply increase endorphin levels? Should we allow the complete technologization of childhood? And what about genetic therapy of hereditary diseases? Isn’t weak human reason rendered redundant by supercomputers, worldwide digital networks, search engines? How far should animal rights go?

Yet what seems even more frightening than those questions is that the human, thought of in terms of its boundaries, and nowadays appears to be surmountable – not just empirically but also theoretically and philosophically. As already Jean-François Lyotard said in the 1970s, the central human privilege – the complexity of human reason – is gradually losing its significance. This is happening by virtue of some grand law – cosmic, divine? Or perhaps systemic, mathematical, computer-like… In fact, no matter what it is, it is definitely inhuman, overcoming and dictating processes opposite to entropy in certain fields of chaos where unprecedented complexity is developed. Faced with those complexities, humans may simply become redundant, their reason – too simple and unnecessary.

So, how are we to live with the advance of the inhuman?

At the same time, serious philosophical reflection remembers that “the inhuman” is always human, all too human. That is because the centuries-old tradition has defined humans not through external but through immanent boundaries which have constitutively shaped everything in them: being a risk, indeterminacy, incompleteness, and a project, humans have assumed in themselves the tension between angels and animals, gods and machines – or, in other words, they have immanentized Otherness, negativity, absence, the rejection of substance, giving primacy to existence over essence. Humans live in and through their own constitutive negation. Thus the inhuman, in the final analysis, turns out to be a horizon and a condition. For humans are human only when they are simultaneously finite and infinite, self-sufficient and insufficient, when they include within themselves that which they are not (in all modalities of absence – that which they have been and will never be again; that which they will be but are not yet; that which they want to be but perhaps never will be; that which they do not want to be but perhaps inevitably are).

Today the boundaries between the human and the inhuman are multiplying: they are not “below” and “above” the cosmic axis which has guaranteed the central place of humans in the
cosmos; nor are they in a “sub-human” or a “supra-human”. They are pluralized “to the side”, “inwards”, “outwards”, backwards and forwards in all directions of a multi-dimensional, rhizomatic, post-humanist space which stretches the very concept of human being. How, then, can we retain this concept and combine in it so many opposite things – technological hopes and bio-fears, kindness towards animals and cruelty towards people; how can we correlate God and entropy to the constitutive absence of humans from themselves? After all, how, and where, are we to draw some sort of boundaries of the human; is that possible, is that good, and what should those boundaries be? In what way can the humanities readdress the question of the human being – as a project and as an agent?

We welcome proposals for papers across a wide range of disciplines, including philosophy, the humanities, social sciences, literature, and the arts. Below we suggest possible thematic and disciplinary lines:

HUMANS AND “OTHERS”

- Philosophical anthropology and the question of the boundaries of the human: the history of those boundaries, and debates on them. Intellectual and artistic experiments with them.
- Humans and machines: where are the dividing lines in the digital and biopolitical age?
- Humans and animals: how are we to think of the boundaries between them today? Historical forms of empathy for animals, development of the concept of “animal”. Symbolic structure of the animal world and its anthropocentric focus. “The beast in man” and “man in the beast”.
- Theological anthropology: “Is God inhuman?” How can we communicate with the Sacred (Rudolf Otto’s das Ganz Andere, the Complete Otherness,); can the inhuman be Divine?

HUMAN, INHUMAN, AND TIME

- Humans as a promise, project, utopia – the fate of this utopian project in dystopian times.
- Humans as reminiscence, nostalgia, melancholy: mourning the loss, post-human melancholy.

HUMAN, INHUMAN, AND IMAGINATION

- Fear of, euphoria over, and fascination with the inhuman. Forms of imagination, repertoire of images of the inhuman. Limits and boundaries of imagination and representation of the
inhuman. Images of animals, machines, doubles, cyborgs, and extraterrestrials in the arts. The shifting boundaries of the human in the arts. Forms and images, symbols and emblems of the inhuman and its overcoming. The sublime (das Erhabene) and the uncanny (das Unheimliche).

- Genre forms. Genres of the chthonic (myths, horror, science fiction, Gothic...). Genres of the sublime (stories of angels, hierophanies, enlightenments, revelations, visions). Differences related to the arts, mediators, ways of representation.
- Figures of the monstrous. Monstrous and/as (in)human. Media multiplication and mediatization of the monstrous.
- The inhuman in popular culture. The society of the spectacle, and the commercialized images of the inhuman.

CONTEMPORARY IDEAS, DOCTRINES, DISCUSSIONS

- Humanism, antihumanism, transhumanism. The “posthuman”. Philosophical roots (Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and semiotics, post-structuralism and deconstruction).
- Contemporary philosophy of technology in the digital age.
- The advance of cyborgs and their manifestoes.
- Bioethics, technoethics.

POLICIES ON THE INHUMAN

- Which are the valid public forms of thinking of the inhuman today? Which are the points of heated public debates? Limits and boundaries of public representation and thinking of the inhuman – thinking of/against the self. Legal and moral framework of the problematics of the inhuman in the present day.

The conference has an organizing committee made up of eminent Bulgarian scholars. Part of them will present their papers at the conference. The other participants should apply for a paper or a presentation within the thematic areas of the conference, which is open to young scholars and people working in the sphere of the humanities, social sciences, and the arts from Sofia University
and elsewhere. Applications should include the title/topic of the paper/presentation, a 300-word abstract, and a short bibliography. General topics addressing the above-mentioned issues are also welcome, but the committee will particularly encourage analyses and presentations of specific case studies, specific research hypotheses, political programs, artistic projects and works, processes in philosophy, science, and the arts.

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The conference will be accompanied by a

DOCTORAL STUDENT SEMINAR

run by the members of the organizing committee. Applicants for the seminar (doctoral students in their second or third year) are invited to present a topic or problem related to their dissertation (the topic needs not necessarily fall within the thematic areas of the conference, but such proposals will be given priority). The seminar will provide a forum where the particular topics and problems of the doctoral theses will be discussed by experts and peers in a broad interdisciplinary context. Participants in the seminar will also have the opportunity to attend and take part in the discussions during the sessions and the round tables at the conference.

A limited number of participants will be admitted to the doctoral seminar, and it is available only to doctoral students at Sofia University. In their proposals, applicants must clearly indicate that they are applying for the doctoral seminar.

Application deadline for the doctoral seminar: 15 October 2015

Applications – which must include a topic from the dissertation, a 300-word abstract, and a letter of reference from the supervisor declaring that the student will be given credits for participating in the seminar – should be sent electronically to conference.cultcentersu@gmail.com.

Expenses of participants from Sofia University (for travel, meals and accommodation) will be covered by the organizers. External participants are expected to cover their own expenses.