

# Diffractionally Watching *Queer Eye*: difficult knowledge through critical posthumanism and neoliberalism

## **Abstract**

Utilising a method of “diffractive watching” of the first of the 2018 series *Queer Eye* (Netflix) this article explores how qualitative methods can respond to different approaches to research brought to the forefront through philosophies of critical posthumanism and new materialism, whilst still understanding how these operate with neoliberal structures and discourses. Using Lather’s concept of difficult knowledge, the article suggests that posthumanism and neoliberalism might be read diffractively through one another, despite their potentially contradictory value structures of individuality vs. multiplicity, and individual agency vs. emergence. The supposed contradictions in the research are drawn through different diffractive prepositions, to demonstrate the insights offered by embracing complexity and avoiding representational readings of texts. This article, therefore, contributes an original methodological approach to textual analysis, as well as an original theoretical negotiation of the ways in which we can extend neoliberal and posthuman critique by diffractively reading them through one another.

## **Keywords**

Difficult knowledge, diffractive methodology, *Queer Eye*, critical posthumanism, neoliberalism, makeover television

## **Introduction**

In this article, I utilise a diffractive methodology to enable me to qualitatively read texts through both critical posthumanism and neoliberalism, rather than considering them as oppositional readings. By offering a diffractive reading (or, in this case, watching), which ‘takes into account that knowing is never done in isolation but is always effected by different forces coming together’<sup>1</sup>, theories and texts are read through one another rather than against, or in exclusion to, each other. This offers unique insight and room for theoretical growth, opening up debate and offer additional perspectives on the intersection of these standpoints. I demonstrate how this method provides an additional and original analysis of the makeover TV show *Queer Eye* (Netflix) (that might be applied to other texts), which is more suited to exploring the theoretical complexities that advancements in critical posthumanism and new materialism have contributed to philosophical worldviews.

Using the first 2018 series of *Queer Eye* as a case study, this article, therefore, considers how the show demonstrates the making over of an individual in ways that link to wider cultural theory, in order to explore the application of neoliberalism and critical posthumanism to contemporary media texts. From a critical perspective, it could be argued that the focus on “making over” an individual’s fashion sense, eating habits, interior decoration, culture and grooming constitutes a neatly packaged way of disseminating the neoliberal message. However, as Redden<sup>2</sup> has argued, ‘neoliberal rationalities reshape formations creating hybrid assemblages with socio-cultural elements that are other than neoliberal’ and through a diffractive watching I therefore consider how posthuman ideas can be read through this neoliberal perspective. I argue that whilst *Queer Eye* might be an

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Mazzei. “Beyond an Easy Sense: A Diffractive Analysis”. *Qualitative Inquiry* 20, no.6 (2014): 743.

<sup>2</sup> Guy Redden. “Is Reality TV Neoliberal?” *Television & New Media* 19, no.5 (2018): 410.

exercise in neoliberalism, it may also lead viewers to a more posthumanist understanding of themselves and the world. This article, therefore, considers how these things can be true at the same time, to explore how neoliberalism and critical posthumanism intra-act with one another, and offers a short case study of diffractive watching to demonstrate how this methodology allows alternative insights to the study of texts.

### **Neoliberalism and critical posthumanism**

There are a variety of ways in which makeover television as cultural texts have previously been analysed through neoliberalism. As Moseley<sup>3</sup> states, makeover television suggests that positive change is possible and Ouellette and Hay<sup>4</sup> argue that ‘the impetus to facilitate, improve and makeover people’s health, happiness and success through television programming is tied to distinctly “neoliberal” reasoning about governance and social welfare’. Linking to Foucauldian notions, they suggest that this is connected to the ways in which governmentality has moved away from the government and onto the individual through the promotion of personal responsibility and self-enterprise.<sup>5</sup> Together these notions constitute the moral imperative of performing the good citizen, where we are expected to actively self-care and self-govern, as well as see the self as an entrepreneur.<sup>6</sup> Whilst this is originally a Foucauldian perspective on governmentality, we can see how the ability to *self-govern* is therefore prioritised in neoliberal states that aim to ‘govern at a

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<sup>3</sup> Rachel Moseley. “Makeover Takeover on British Television”. *Screen* 41, no. 3 (2000): 300.

<sup>4</sup> Laurie Ouellette and James Hay. “Makeover television, governmentality and the good citizen”. *Continuum* 22, no. 4 (2008a): 471

<sup>5</sup> Ouellette and Hay, “Makeover television”: 471.

<sup>6</sup> Ouellette and Hay, “Makeover television”: 472.

distance'.<sup>7</sup> This work on the self is packaged as an opportunity to be responsible for one's own wellbeing and happiness, and is epitomised by the notion of meritocracy, wherein you are autonomous and agentic, and therefore hold the key to success at your fingertips – if only you will work hard enough for it.

Critical posthumanism draws on post-anthropocentrism, feminism, and post-dualism, whilst rejecting certain humanist ideologies such as the distinctiveness of humans from non-humans, Cartesian dualism, anthropocentrism, and subject/object binaries. In (seemingly) direct contradiction to neoliberal analyses, critical posthumanism suggests that rather than being individually autonomous beings, in control and masters of our own realisation, we are instead formed much more by what is around us. Entangled with other beings – human and non-human – we are affected through them in ways that shape our behaviours, performances, subjectivities. Combined with new materialist perspectives that suggest the post-anthropocentric ways in which materials and things around us contribute to our emergent subjectivity, we might utilise these theories when considering the intra-action demonstrated in makeover television between participants and their surroundings and technologies including clothing. This means acknowledging that our conditions of existence and being are not those that we can control; Barad uses a form of agency that is to some extent posthumanised and therefore does not see humans as the centre of all things. She proposes that 'agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has'.<sup>8</sup> Thus, whilst critical posthumanism challenges and reconceptualizes our understanding of what it means to be human, posthumanist

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose (eds) *Foucault and Political Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 14.

<sup>8</sup> Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter". *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no.3 (2003): 235.

methodologies challenge our understanding of what, or how, we know something. Furthermore, as critical posthumanism aims to destabilise binaries, it seems imperative to turn that task towards the different positions and points of analysis available – not seeing neoliberalism and posthumanism as dichotomous, but understanding how they inform one another. In the current age of divisive politics, there is something to be said for a method that negotiates supposed difference in an open and affirmative manner.

Building on this methodological need, I draw on Barad’s work on diffraction as a posthumanist method. As Pomerantz and Raby<sup>9</sup> point out, Barad’s posthuman ‘understanding of diffraction is applied across human and non-human phenomena, where meanings are produced through interference as they become constantly entangled in various apparatuses that bend, turn, and divert their trajectories’. In many ways, this is a methodology that aligns with the critical posthumanist imperative to challenge assumptions, critique fixed and static understandings, and focus on emergence.

### **A close eye – methods**

Data for this article has been gathered via a method I have termed “diffractive watching”. With both an understanding of the neoliberal analysis, as well as a posthuman perspective in mind, I have watched the first series of *Queer Eye* looking to the ways in which it speaks to a more open, fluid conception of the human, acknowledging our entanglement with external aspects such as objects, material, environment. Whilst this may appear to suggest a subject-object binary, suggesting a hierarchy between researcher and the phenomenon at

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<sup>9</sup> Shauna Pomerantz and Rebecca Raby. “Bodies, hoodies, schools, and success: post-human performativity and smart girlhood”, *Gender and Education* [Online First] (2018): 6.

study, instead, I would argue that this is demonstrative of the ways that diffraction ‘can be used to acknowledge the influential role of the knower in knowledge production [...] Diffraction is thus predicated on a relational ontology, an ongoing process in which matter and meaning are co-constituted.’<sup>10</sup> Based on my subjective, yet entangled, engagement with the phenomena, *Queer Eye*, critical posthumanism, and neoliberalism all intra-act to give each other meaning. This becomes an alternative watching in the ways that it aims to utilise and draw upon academic neoliberal readings of reality TV but also to look beyond and through it to offer a distinctive way to view the source. This methodology can therefore be considered a diffractive reading, or watching, of the series.

Diffractive methodology stems initially from the work of Donna Haraway, to be used against the overused and potentially reductive notion of reflection. Haraway<sup>11</sup> uses diffraction as a ‘metaphor for another kind of critical consciousness’ where rather than looking for a reflective sameness, instead, an awareness of difference and how difference emerges is at the forefront. Thiele<sup>12</sup> argues that Haraway’s work continually critiques and disrupts ‘misleading dualisms and binaries’ and Barad<sup>13</sup> extends the notion of a diffractive methodology by arguing that it displaces ‘the binary of stale choices between determinism and free will, past and future’. I aim to bring this displacement to some of the oppositional concepts of critical posthumanism and (humanist) neoliberalism. Through *Queer Eye*, I

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<sup>10</sup> Vivienne Bozalek and Michalinos Zembylas. “Diffraction or reflection? Sketching the contours of two methodologies in educational research”. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 30, no.2 (2017): 112.

<sup>11</sup> Donna Haraway. *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan\_Meets\_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*. (London: Routledge, 1997): 273.

<sup>12</sup> Kathrin Thiele. “Ethos of Diffraction: New Paradigms for a (Post)humanist Ethics”. *Parallax* 20, no.3 (2014): 204.

<sup>13</sup> Karen Barad. “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Parallax Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come”. *Derrida Today* 3, no.2 (2010): 254.

demonstrate how different readings are made available by reading/watching these texts together. *Queer Eye*, neoliberalism and posthumanism are intertwined – one philosophy cannot be evident without the other; a diffractive reading ‘does not foreground any texts as foundational, but through reading texts through one another, comes to new insights.’<sup>14</sup>

Bozaleck and Zembylas<sup>15</sup> suggest that critique has previously been seen as a ‘potentially epistemologically damaging process of distancing, othering and putting others down’ whereas in a diffractive methodology one discipline is read ‘attentively and with care through another [...] in order to come to more creative insights’. They explain that diffractive methodologies involve reading ideas *through* one another, rather than *against* one another, culminating in a generative transdisciplinarity.<sup>16</sup> In this case, any reading of *Queer Eye* that I make will be affected through my own prior knowledge of posthumanism and neoliberalism, as well as through externalities such as previous literature that I have read, and analyses that other researchers have made. Diffraction, therefore, enables ‘respectful engagements with different disciplinary practices’<sup>17</sup> prompting the ability to read neoliberalism through posthumanism or posthumanism through neoliberalism, in ways that consider how notions of, for example, individuality and multiplicity emerge in ways that are not mutually exclusive.

Thus, despite the deeply rooted neoliberal regimes that are embedded within makeover TV shows and *Queer Eye* in particular, and in spite of the seemingly contradictory

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<sup>14</sup> Karin Murris and Vivienne Bozalek. “Diffracting diffractive readings of texts as methodology: Some propositions”, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 51, no.14 (2019): 1506.

<sup>15</sup> Bozaleck and Zembylas, “Diffraction or reflection?”, 115.

<sup>16</sup> Bozaleck and Zembylas, “Diffraction or reflection?”, 115.

<sup>17</sup> Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (London: Duke University Press, 2007): 93.

philosophies embodied by critical posthumanism when we consider the shift from individuality to multiplicity, a diffractive reading has enabled me to consider how these theories intra-act through and alongside one another.

### **The context of *Queer Eye***

*Queer Eye* started life in 2003 as reality TV show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. The basic premise was that a team of five “queer” makeover experts visit a nominated “straight guy” in need of a makeover. The team of five each had different specialities: fashion, food and drink, culture, interior decoration and grooming. Over the course of a few days they would coach the participant in how to improve their life by getting these five areas “into shape”. The show was hailed as an ‘instant pop culture phenomenon’, winning an Emmy in 2004 for Outstanding Reality Program, before ending in 2007 after 100 episodes.<sup>18</sup>

In 2018, *Queer Eye* was revamped by online streaming service and production company, Netflix. Netflix’s reboot of reality TV show *Queer Eye* again follows five makeover experts as they visit nominated participants for a makeover on various aspects of the participants’ lives. Despite previous successes from the Netflix studios, reactions to the announcement of a reboot for *Queer Eye* were apparently ambivalent, with ‘a palpable sense of dread among the gay community’ with apprehension that the show would be a step backwards in media representations of gay men.<sup>19</sup> The use and profit from the

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<sup>18</sup> Nellie Andreeva “Netflix Reboots ‘Queer Eye For The Straight Guy’ For New Season.” (2017) Available at: <https://deadline.com/2017/01/queer-eye-for-the-straight-guy-netflix-reboot-new-season-1201893553/> (accessed 24 January 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Paul Davis. “Queer Eye on Netflix is the reboot we ALL need”. (2018) Available at: <https://www.digitalspy.com/tv/reality-tv/a851553/queer-eye-netflix-season-one-review/> (accessed 2 February 2021).



expertise and labour of gay men as cultural intermediaries is undoubtedly problematic. These representations mean that the gay man is represented as stereotypically more “culturally attuned”, and whose labour is there to benefit a cis-het audience (or participant). Yet, in the face of these concerns, the series has been a success. The reboot of the show has received strong critical acclaim with fans and critics alike applauding the work of the “Fab Five”: Tan France; Antoni Porowski; Bobby Berk; Karamo Brown; and Jonathan Van Ness. Reviews have been positive and have suggested that the show ‘portrays gay men in a flattering, accurate, and overall exceptional light’ and that ‘gay people are seeing themselves represented in the “*Queer Eye*” stars.’<sup>20</sup> Kavka<sup>21</sup> further suggests that the show also offers ‘kinder, more caring and more overtly politicised take on social attitudes to gay sexuality’. The relaunch of the show has also been celebrated for how it tackles important political issues, such as toxic masculinities, police brutality, and religious homophobia.

Conversely, in the latter series of the reboot, there have been critiques of how the show dealt with, for example, disability (S4E2) and for its lack of queerness. Indeed, the title could be argued to be something of an appropriation of the term “queer” as the expert “eye” has traditionally been that of five gay men, rather than being representative of alternative queer identities. That said, in 2019 Jonathan Van Ness, *Queer Eye* 2018-grooming expert, revealed he identifies as nonbinary and genderqueer,<sup>22</sup> and he now uses he/she/they pronouns. However, the diversity of the hosts could be critiqued due to the

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<sup>20</sup> Louis Baragona. “Here's why we need the 'Queer Eye' reboot now more than ever”. (2018) Available at: <https://www.thisinsider.com/queer-eye-reboot-netflix-review-2018-3> (accessed 15 February 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Misha Kavka. “Reality TV: Its contents and discontents”. *Critical Quarterly* 60, no.4 (2018): 13.

<sup>22</sup> Fran Tidrado. “Queer Eye’s Jonathan Van Ness: “I’m Nonbinary”.” (2019) Available at: <https://www.out.com/lifestyle/2019/6/10/queer-eyes-jonathan-van-ness-im-nonbinary> (accessed 22 August 2021).

representation of them as homonormative – though ethnically diverse they are all young, attractive, fit men in mostly normative family set-ups (e.g. married/having children), with lives and aspirations that are also accessible and relatable to a mainstream heterosexual audience.

The series has therefore been praised for exploring more political portrayals of queerness in the media and critiqued for its shortfalls. However, aside from these specific examples, makeover television in general has been widely researched for its place in a neoliberal society, embodying the ideal that we should all be accountable citizens: taking care of our own responsibilities and being the best contributing members of society that we can be. In the below section I, therefore, draw on appropriate literature to offer an overview of the ways in which these neoliberal expectations are evident in makeover television programmes, with further, specific reference to *Queer Eye* based on literature analysing the original series.

### **Neoliberal sensibilities as an analytical framework**

The makeover programme, Ouellette and Hay<sup>23</sup> argue, embodies neoliberal ideals through ‘transforming “needy” individuals into functioning citizens’, that is, transforming individuals originally not seen to be enacting the good citizen, and turning them into citizens who ‘expand their capacities, work harder on themselves and exploit the resources of self-care made available to them.’<sup>24</sup> Moreover, this form of self-responsibility not only shapes the

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<sup>23</sup> Laurie Ouellette and James Hay. *Better Living through Reality TV*. (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2008b): 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ouellette and Hay, “Makeover television”, 472.

conduct of the makeover participants, but also the conduct of the viewers, as they too learn what are acceptable and unacceptable forms of behaviour. Rather than only being surveilled by the government, we are surveilled most often by ourselves, thereby emphasising 'subjectification entails active submission to surveillance, which means that we don't just endure the monitoring gaze, we embrace the drive to make ourselves seen.'<sup>25</sup> The reality television show adds another layer to this by negotiating the governmental role through the experts – in the case of *Queer Eye*, the Fab Five – but this external embodiment of surveillance then becomes internalised, as 'participants learn to see themselves as strange – as lacking in shared cultural mores.'<sup>26</sup>

What is interesting in the renewed version of *Queer Eye* is the journeys that the Fab Five themselves seem to go on, which to some degree humanises them and makes them seem more accessible. However, this simultaneously places a greater expectation on the participants; if the Fab Five are "just like us" – negotiating their own issues and working to improve their political relations – what they represent becomes more of a viable actuality. Their aesthetic cleanliness and apparent social ease become bound up in an affective discourse of perpetual effort-making, that nevertheless pays off for them – the implied narrative being that it can also pay off for the participants too – *if* they make the appropriate effort. In this respect, we can see how neoliberalism treads a fine line where 'individuals are identified as, on the one hand, the *object* and target of governmental action and, on the other hand, as in some sense the necessary (voluntary) *partner* or accomplice of

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<sup>25</sup> Mark Andrejevic. *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefields, 2004): 189.

<sup>26</sup> Katherine Sender. "Queens for a Day: Queer Eye for the Straight Guy and the Neoliberal Project". *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no.2 (2006): 143.

government'<sup>27</sup> as we become complicit in the societal expectations placed upon us (see also Rose<sup>28</sup>). These expectations undoubtedly operate through systems of networked affect; as Grossberg<sup>29</sup> argues, we are affectively invested in certain ideologies, leading to an internalisation and naturalisation of these norms.

This neoliberal focus on individual responsibility, self-governmentality, well-being, and “being the best you can be” is linked explicitly to consumerism, where being the best you can be often equals buying the best you can buy. As Sender<sup>30</sup> argued of the original series, ‘*Queer Eye* trains its candidates in a life of responsible and fulfilling citizenship through consumption’. In order to move away from the abject position that they have been placed in, Sender<sup>31</sup> argues that candidates’ individual shortcomings are linked to inadequate consumption, which the Fab Five “fix” through the introduction of a variety of new products, and this holds true in the 2018- reboot.

From this perspective, *Queer Eye*, both old and new, positions itself as an active promoter of the notion of the authentic self, which is utilised<sup>32</sup> in a ‘therapeutic’ way, as though to affirm the subjects’ sense of self finally being able to be conveyed, once freed from the supposed constraints of ignorance and laze. This links to the ways in which we see ourselves as a project to be worked on: as human capital in competition with others around us – epitomising the entrepreneurial self.<sup>33</sup> In this model, consumption is also linked to the

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<sup>27</sup> Graham Burchell. “Liberal government and techniques of the self”. In Barry A, Osborne T and Rose N (eds) *Foucault and Political Reason*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): 23.

<sup>28</sup> Rose, *Inventing our Selves*.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence Grossberg. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*. (Oxon: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Sender, “Queens for a Day”, 137.

<sup>31</sup> Sender, “Queens for a Day”, 145.

<sup>32</sup> As Sender, “Queens for a Day”, says of the original series.

<sup>33</sup> Lois McNay. “Self as Enterprise Dilemmas of Control and Resistance in Foucault’s The Birth of Biopolitics”. *Theory, Culture & Society* 26 no.6 (2009): 63.

*enterprise* of producing our own satisfaction.<sup>34</sup> Labour practices expand to not only include authentic labour but also emotional labour and aesthetic labour.

Based on the above, we can see there are certain aspects of *Queer Eye* that are deeply rooted in neoliberal sentiments including the ultimate function of the good citizen, improving functionality and aspirations, increasing work practices and self-responsibilisation, as well as humanistic notions of the authentic and rational self, and consumer practices. Society has changed (if only a little) in the period between the original series and the reboot, and neoliberalism and neoliberal regimes of control have come under a great deal of critique, not least the fact that the focus on individuality ignores all class, gender, race, sex, ability, etc. social inequalities, and so what is seen as a positive – freedom to enact individual choice and personal responsibility – becomes a form of measurement and judgement; if you are not good enough it is your own individual failing, rather than a flaw in social structures or hierarchical impositions based on prejudice and discrimination. This aligns with a society-wide focus on affirmative well-being, which is further drawn into discourses of “loving yourself”, again as if this were a personal choice that we should each take responsibility for, rather than a societally governed possibility.<sup>35</sup>

The reading of the makeover TV show as neoliberal is well-founded, as scholars of reality TV have demonstrated ‘that neoliberal logic is evident in both the main recurring textual features of reality programming and in the material conditions of their production.’<sup>36</sup> By employing a diffractive watching of *Queer Eye*, which could therefore be seen as a

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<sup>34</sup> Jacques Donzelot. “Michel Foucault and liberal intelligence”. *Economy and Society* 37, no.1 (2008): 130.

<sup>35</sup> See Rebecca Hazleden. “Love Yourself: The Relationship of the Self with Itself in Popular Self-Help Texts”. *Journal of Sociology* 39, no.4 (2003): 413-428.

<sup>36</sup> Redden, “Is Reality TV Neoliberal?”, 400.

neoliberal text, I am able to explore the ways in which the series might also be considered to be disseminating posthumanist worldviews. Whilst the neoliberal position privileges individuality, and the individual being autonomous, responsible, and understood as in control of the self, critical posthumanism provides a reading of subjectivity as multiple, entangled with other beings, and emergent from the specific contexts in which it operates. Considering *Queer Eye* through this lens not only provides an original reading of the series, but also helps to bring academic debate to the application of neoliberalism and explore its usage and the practices through which it operates in alternative, critical ways.

### **Adding a posthumanist perspective**

At its most basic roots, critical posthumanism discusses the ways in which humanism, as a liberal ideology in which the human is a singular static being in charge of their own actions (discussed above through neoliberalism) is inherently flawed.

Humanistic thinking, enhanced through the Enlightenment period and increases in scientific thought and discovery, positioned reason, rationality, and autonomy as the central characteristics that distinguished humans above other creatures. Consequently, humans were seen to be masters of their own destiny, the most intelligent beings, and those whom the world should revolve around. The mastery implicit within this way of thinking suited the most prominent figures of the time: namely those who were male, upper class, educated, White, non-disabled, cisgender, and heterosexual. There was an understanding of this being the “best” subjectivity, hierarchically, and the privileges associated with that position went unacknowledged, or were seen as the “natural” order of things. These privileged figures

helped to perpetuate and promote a worldview wherein their own experiences and values were the most important and lauded of the day.

A posthuman view initially challenges the ideas of who the category of the “human” even ever belonged to, and what it really means; as Braidotti<sup>37</sup> suggests, not all of us can claim that we have always been human, considering the barriers to rights around that subject that have traditionally existed. Furthermore, posthumanism challenges the stable, unitary, autonomous liberal humanist subject. The posthuman suggests a disruption of the static individuality, anthropocentrism and self-regulation promoted by liberal (and now neoliberal) forms of humanism. Similarly, the notion of authenticity is met with deep scepticism; whilst it is beyond the scope of the paper to offer a full overview, poststructuralist critiques have questioned the sanctity of selfhood and suggested that notions of individuality are culturally produced, and are utilised and governed through institutional practices to control and oppress citizens (see Rose<sup>38</sup> and Butler<sup>39</sup>). By problematizing these taken-for-granted notions of selfhood we can begin to deconstruct the practices that enforce them, and critique their implications. A posthuman critique of such suggestions is based on the premise that this autonomous individual never really existed.

In the posthuman view, rather than humanism’s illusion that the individual is in control and that subjecthood suggests a hierarchical privileging over objecthood, agency is seen as emergent, defying boundaries between subject and object and instead arising from specific entanglements. Thus, “subject” and “object” are entwined and mutually reliant

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<sup>37</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013): 1.

<sup>38</sup> Nikolas Rose. *Inventing our Selves*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>39</sup> Judith Butler. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

components. Barad<sup>40</sup> describes this through the notion of intra-action: where interaction suggests distinct, separate agencies attributed to specific entities, intra-action instead discusses the ways in which agencies are emergent, and only possible due to their entanglements.

This demonstrates one of the main tensions between neoliberalism and critical posthumanism – which I explore in detail, with reference also to new materialism, through my analysis. In my findings, I offer a new way of making sense of neoliberalism and posthumanism. As Mazzei<sup>41</sup> states, in terms of a diffractive reading this is ‘a moment of plugging in, of reading-the-data-while-thinking the-theory, of entering the assemblage, of making new connectives’. Applying this diffractive watching to *Queer Eye*, my findings from the show demonstrate key points at which a multiplicity of readings is evident and emergent. This allows us to consider how we can develop theory further in order to account for the ways in which societal systems operate and are practiced, thus contributing to the use of the theories in applied research contexts.

However, it is important to state that this is not an argument that *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007) was purely neoliberal, and *Queer Eye* (2018-) is definitively posthuman. Rather, the new iteration of the show has allowed an opportunity for new examinations, rather than merely comparisons, and the opportunity to apply new and emerging methodological interventions. As a makeover show, by definition, *Queer Eye* imposes hierarchical understandings of “correct” choices and ways of living, that are deeply entrenched within humanistic, neoliberal, and capitalist regimes of control. Furthermore,

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<sup>40</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

<sup>41</sup> Mazzei, “Beyond an Easy Sense”, 743.



this form of TV programming could be argued to capitalise on the emotional labour of its often under-privileged participants, for the benefit of the voyeurs' pleasure,<sup>42</sup> which again goes against a posthuman ethics of care. The idea that a subject needs to be "made-over" at all is in direct contradiction to many aspects of posthumanism, which emphasise the importance of non-hierarchical relational ontologies. Moreover, given critical posthumanism's focus on displacing and breaking of binaries and oppositions, the notion of a "good" or "bad" choice of clothes or lifestyle is again highly problematic. However, what is evident through the *idea* and *ideology* of makeover is that in order to affect the self, it is in fact others that are worked on – others such as environment, clothing, food etc. By drawing posthumanism into this reading I am not suggesting this allows a clean or straightforward use of the theory. However, diffractive methodologies involve '[r]eading texts through and around one another, rather than against each other. Taking someone's work to new and unpredictable places. Creating provocations, new imaginaries and imaginings and new practices.'<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Lather<sup>44</sup> advocates getting lost in the research:

the concept of getting lost functions as a paradox. It is a means of critiquing a certain confidence that research must muster in the audit culture. [...] It is a way to engage a new interdisciplinarity that is able to question not just the nature of knowledge but its grounds of practice in postfoundational times.

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<sup>42</sup> Redden, "Is Reality TV Neoliberal?", 411.

<sup>43</sup> Murriss and Bozalek, "Diffracting Diffractive Readings", 1514.

<sup>44</sup> Patti Lather. *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double(d) Science*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007): 12-13.

I have drawn inspiration from the above quote to question and query the conclusions from this research. This is the distinction that Lather makes, drawing on Pitt and Britzman,<sup>45</sup> between 'lovely knowledge' and 'difficult knowledge', where lovely knowledge represents neat narratives and coherent structures that have been passed onto us from our humanist constructs of self and research. Difficult knowledge, by contrast shows us how impossible our representations of knowledge are. But, according to Lather, it's only by giving up lovely knowledge that we experience 'the promise of thinking and doing otherwise'.<sup>46</sup> Whilst "lovely" and "difficult" might suggest a (rather humanist) binary, most "lovely" knowledge is a mere construction of loveliness, and it is this representation of knowledge as neat or correct that is critiqued here.

Murriss and Bozalek<sup>47</sup>, who have each worked with diffractive methodologies extensively, offer some propositions to 'diffractively reading texts, oeuvres and philosophies through one another'. One of their propositions is:

To live without bodily boundaries by: resisting the desire to fix meanings and to pin down sense; 1. Deconstructing the foundations of certain concepts and ideas; seeing how contingency operates to secure the 'foundations' of the concepts we cannot live without. And using that contingency to open up other possible meanings/matterings. 2. Not holding one text, theory, oeuvre, perspective as foundational.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Alice Pitt and Deborah Britzman. "Speculations on Qualities of Difficult Knowledge in Teaching and Learning: An Experiment in Psychoanalytic Research". *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16 no.6 (2003): 755-776.

<sup>46</sup> Lather, *Getting Lost*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> Murriss and Bozalek, "Diffracting Diffractive Readings", 1504.

<sup>48</sup> Murriss and Bozalek, "Diffracting Diffractive Readings", 1507.

As such we might therefore conclude that diffractive methodologies are ways of embracing difficult knowledge. It is the above approach I aim to achieve here: resisting the desire to fix makeover television to one theory, and demonstrating how a diffractive methodology enables an opening up of alternative meanings for critical posthumanism and neoliberalism. It is therefore hoped that the following analysis adds to the contemporary conversations about qualitative methodological approaches that explore tensions in findings as productive.

In order to account for the neoliberal-posthuman perspective demonstrated within the narratives of *Queer Eye*, I have considered influences of external materialities; subjectivity as constructed by environment and activities; and performativity rather than representation. Evidently, these notions are all intertwined. These categories have therefore been emergent within the research process in and of itself, accepting that the researcher and their knowledge are also inherently evident in any research.

## **Posthuman interventions**

### ***Materially enacted “versions”***

Firstly, I will consider how a form of new materialism, ‘whereby matter as an active force is not only sculpted by, but also co-productive in conditioning and enabling social worlds and expression, human life and experience’<sup>49</sup> is apparent in the show. Smelik<sup>50</sup> explains that new

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<sup>49</sup> Susan Yi Sencindiver. “New Materialism”. *Oxford Bibliographies*. (2017) Available at <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0016.xml> (accessed 15 February 2021).

<sup>50</sup> Anneke Smelik. “New materialism: A theoretical framework for fashion in the age of technological innovation”. *International Journal of Fashion Studies* 5 no.1 (2018): 33-54.

materialism operates within the context of posthuman, and sees human bodies, fabrics and garments as ‘inextricably entangled’, decentering the human and considering the agency of things. A reliance on the “external” materialities to construct a subjectivity is evident throughout the *Queer Eye*, in both micro and macro ways. In one episode, the Fab Five lament:

*This is [the participant] Remington’s house. There’s no sense of Remy. It’s not in the house, it’s not in his closet, not on him.*

There is a sense of sadness here, a disappointment in this lack of apparent mirroring between Remy’s personality and his external environment and appearance. This demonstrates the expectation that a subject should be tangible through their home and their wardrobe. Whilst the “sense of Remy” leans on neoliberal ideation of the authentic self, the Fab Five link this sense not only to Remy as an individual but to his material surroundings. Less than a sense of the house being representative of him, their critique suggests this lack is curbing his ability to embody a particular subject position. Pepperell<sup>51</sup> argues that ‘the human is a “fuzzy edged” entity that is profoundly dependent into its surroundings,’ and that ‘[b]ecause of this perpetual exchange between the living human organism and its surroundings, there can be no fixed state of a living human’. We are profoundly dependent on our clothes from a survival perspective, but this is evident in our subject formations also. Taking this into consideration, the importance of Remy’s wardrobe

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Pepperell. *The Posthuman Condition*. (Bristol: Intellect, 2003): 20.

in shaping his subjectivity demonstrates a complex negotiation of neoliberal authenticity with posthuman new materiality.

This continues through materials in closer proximity with the body, such as clothes and glasses:

*Tan [fashion expert]: When you stand next to me now, dressed the way you are, hair the way it is, glasses off, you carry yourself differently than you did when we first met you. The fact that we have achieved that is fantastic, and that's what we wanted.*

*Remy: I'm feeling overwhelmed. It's just incredible. What you did knocked me out of the park.*

Linking the above extract to Pepperell's work, we can see how this focus on clothes, glasses and haircuts is indicative of one of the very basic ways in which we do not stop at the boundary of the skin, and instead incorporate "other" materials into our sense and performance of "self". Moreover, it demonstrates an engagement with stimuli that disrupts a subject-object or internal-external binary. Such binaries might conceive of clothing as a representation of the individual, whereas to extend Barad's<sup>52</sup> notions of performativity over representation we instead see these "representations" as performative in themselves. Rather than clothes "representing" the personality of the wearer, the clothes are performative in that it is through the clothes that that personality is able to emerge and through which it is evident. Clothing becomes a particular embodiment and enactment that

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<sup>52</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

enable certain subjectivities (such claims will be familiar to those who have studied the historically performative constraints of women's clothing, feminist literature and fashion literature). The clothes we wear in everyday life enable certain subject positions and constrain certain abilities. Clothing is therefore another entity and aspect that a subjectivity emerges through – it contributes to the available agency in terms of denoting what a subjectivity can be or do, and how it must be enacted.

Tan epitomises this in the below extract:

*Tan, to camera: Clothes maketh the man. [...] I wanna give him versions of that that make sense for Remy's personal style. I don't want Remy to be somebody else. I want Remy to be his best version.*

*Tan, to Remy: I really hope that with everything that me and the boys teach you, that you're able to see that you should push. [...] If you can't make an effort in what you're wearing, you won't be able to make the effort to create a company. My job is to make sure that you've got the confidence when you step out to get what you want to get. I really did take into consideration who you are, what you want. [...] I'm not going crazy by getting you more [clothes/styles]. That's not you. I am sending a memo to every man in the world, making an effort with your wardrobe doesn't make you a wuss. Making an effort means you're serious about the life you want..*

Rather than merely considering this focus on clothing as a neoliberal/capitalist imperative to consume more, we can see in the wording above that there is a real sense of a

transformative reliance on the intra-action with clothing; that through clothing a different “version” of Remy can emerge. The words “I really did take into account who you are, what you want,” might again be suggestive of a neoliberal sense of the “authentic self” re-appearing in the *Queer Eye* remake, alongside the therapeutic narrative. Nevertheless, this exchange also demonstrates a deep sense of the connection between human and clothing, and how impactful this relationship can be. What is problematic from a posthuman perspective, is the *hierarchy* that is imposed regarding which of these performative clothing choices is correct and desirable. As Redden<sup>53</sup> has argued, the makeover TV show ‘typically depicts the passage of a person’s life from being worth less to being worth more through means of elective consumption in areas such as fashion, surgery, and home decoration’. However, a posthuman perspective would see all life as of equal value, rather than in a hierarchical relationship.<sup>54</sup> This sense of (hierarchical) version control that clothing can contribute to is echoed in participant Bobby Cash’s final words to the Fab Five:

*I can’t express enough how thankful I am that you guys were here. I feel different, I feel more confidently me. The better version of me. The one I want to present to my wife, that I want for my kids to look up to, spend more time with them and we can enjoy each other more.*

Although a sceptical perspective might critique this statement and question the longevity of such a (self-proclaimed) transformation, I argue it is evident of the ways in which subjectivities are emergent through and because of their entanglements with non-human

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<sup>53</sup> Redden, “Is Reality TV Neoliberal?”, 405.

<sup>54</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*.

bodies. As Smelik<sup>55</sup> argues, ‘material agency is not located exclusively in the technology nor in the human body, but in an assemblage of wearer, fashion and technology’. This is evidence of intra-action occurring as multiple entities come together, allowing new possibilities and agentic capacities for Bobby. Thus we are involved in what Braidotti<sup>56</sup> calls a ‘vital web of complex interrelations’ wherein we should acknowledge how intra-dependent we are on multiple others, breaking up ‘the fantasy of unity, totality and one-ness’ that the notion of the authentic self might suggest through autonomy and individuality. As such this is a diffractive reading in that it does not negate the presence of the neoliberal discourse in *Queer Eye*, but considers how that “self” is, in fact, reliant upon *more than* the “self”, thereby extending neoliberalism *through* posthumanism (or vice versa). This reading also allows us to reframe a neoliberal/capitalist focus on consumption through posthumanism as a demonstration of the not one-ness of the subject.

### ***Environmental impacts on subjectivity***

The above argument can be extended through further new materialist values that again aim to displace anthropocentric worldviews inherent in the construction of the (neo)liberal human subject. Bennett<sup>57</sup> argues that: ‘[t]he quarantines of matter and life encourage us to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations’. Vital materialism is therefore not about claiming that there is no difference between life and matter, but that the anthropocentric worldview and hierarchical structuring of these is not a necessary

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<sup>55</sup> Smelik, “New Materialism”.

<sup>56</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 100.

<sup>57</sup> Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter*. (London: Duke University Press, 2010): vii.



conclusion to these differences.<sup>58</sup> Bennett<sup>59</sup> restructures the focus on ‘thing-power’, arguing that ‘[i]f matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects, as the thing-powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief’. This thing power is evident throughout *Queer Eye* through the demonstration of how not only clothing but surroundings affect the *Queer Eye* subject/ivity.

Moreover, this links to the ways in which we are governed by that which is outside of our physical bodies, as binary categorisations such as subject/object, representation/reality, inside/outside and human/nonhuman “become decidedly less sure and more nonsequential (any notion of strict “determination” or directly linear cause and effect goes out the window too)’<sup>60</sup> thus demonstrating another way in which notions of “self” and “other” are in flux and are not wholly separate, distinct entities. As humans are both affected and can affect others and the subject and object begins to blur, the anthropocentric idea that humans are the most important part in an amalgamation or assemblage is incorrect. Whilst a neoliberal reading of the focus on these external materialities might suggest a capitalist/consumerist agenda, by integrating a posthuman perspective we begin to also see how generative this process is in terms of enabling certain subjectivities to emerge.

This is evident on the simplest level in terms of the ways in which the Fab Five relate to objects as shaping subjectivity through specific practices. They ask of their first participant: “Is this recliner making you a bit of a creature of habit?” referring to an old

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<sup>58</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 11.

<sup>59</sup> Bennett. *Vibrant Matter*, 13.

<sup>60</sup> Melissa Greig and Greg Seigworth. *The Affect Theory Reader*. (London: Duke University Press, 2010): 4.

stained recliner chair that dominates his front room. Read from a neoliberal perspective this seems like nothing more than an admonishment for being lazy, and as the Fab Five critique the said recliner they incorporate a critique of the lifestyle this subject must be living in order to find the dirty, stain ridden recliner, acceptable. The recliner comes to embody and epitomise a *refusal* by the participant of neoliberalism and self-governmentality – a refusal that must be corrected. However, if we read this through a more posthuman lens, we can consider the way in which this focus on materiality demonstrates how the subjectivity is formed not just through the individual human, but through the objects and environment around them that allow that subjectivity to emerge in different (lazy) ways. The stained recliner becomes evidence of ‘the perpetual exchange of liquids, chemicals and energies’ that Pepperell<sup>61</sup> suggests demonstrates how integrated we are with our environment, and how the human is, therefore, a contingent approximation rather than a static self, ‘neither bounded by our skin nor isolated from the environment we are woven into, and woven of.’<sup>62</sup> It is interesting to note that the neoliberal agenda of the show means that this recliner has to be removed and destroyed; that whilst there is an acknowledgement of how it allows a particular subjectivity to emerge, there is a governmental imperative that dictates it is not the *right* subjectivity. Again, this demonstrates a tension in the posthuman potential of the show, which would not place a value judgment (the whole concept of laziness being formed as a “negative” binary to the perceived “correct”, productive behaviours for society).

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<sup>61</sup> Pepperell, *Posthuman Condition*, 20.

<sup>62</sup> Pepperell, *Posthuman Condition*, 21.

In another episode, Bobby, the Fab Five interior design expert, discusses the impact of the home environment on the way in which subjectivity is constructed and experienced, specifically with regard to making a room for the six children of the family to be in charge of.

*Bobby: I think this room is not working smart, it's working hard. I'd love to kind of make this a space where the kids stay. This is where they play, it's their responsibility to keep it clean, and the rest of the house stays clutter-free. [...] You can tell them, "Know what? You see how it's supposed to be now, the status quo. If you don't keep it that way, no swimming, no dance, no going over to friend's house until you do your chores." [...] People with six kids need a home that functions. [...] It needs places for those six maniacs [the children] to put all their stuff, and that's what I wanna accomplish, for them to learn organisation and how to do their chores so they can help their parents as they get older.*

In the above extract, although a neoliberal reading might suggest the implications of self-responsibilisation and “work smart not hard” and the ways in which those are embedded from a young age, to incorporate a posthuman lens we can suggest that rather than merely teaching these neoliberal values, we can see how those values are intra-dependent on an environment and entities to enact that attitude. Whilst the participant, Bobby Cash, has been (seemingly) enacting the “good citizen” of neoliberal practices through self-responsibilisation, being a good community member, a good father, a good husband, and working two jobs to support his family, he has nevertheless been unable to reap the rewards, leading to his nomination for the show. It takes the Fab Five’s *material*

interventions to allow this (presumably temporary) reward, demonstrating the way that entities enable one another.

The complexity of the non-unity of selfhood is also demonstrated through ‘the awareness that one is the effect of irrepressible flows of encounters, interactions, affectivity and desire, which one is not in charge of’.<sup>63</sup> In material practices this is evident throughout the series by the multiple demonstrations by subjects that they are shaped by that which is outside of their physical body. The participant Bobby Cash states:

*When I walked into my house, the disorganisation, it was a reminder that I’m not enough.*

*Now when I walk in, I see organization, structure, and I feel peace. I see home.*

Where Remy, who lives in his grandmother’s old house says:

*I think my grandma would be happy to see something that she was able to pass down to me, but have my own modern spin on it.*

Braidotti<sup>64</sup> argues that our entanglements with “others” allow a ‘humbling experience of not-Oneness, which is constitutive of the non-unitary subject’. From this perspective, it could be argued that the ways in which *Queer Eye* embodies and whole-heartedly

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<sup>63</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 100.

<sup>64</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 100.

demonstrates the impact of that which is around us might lead not only to neoliberal governmentality and self-surveillance, but also to a wider acknowledgement of the impact of materiality and multiplicity of entities that construct subjectivity.

## Conclusion

I have shown that, despite the many ways in which *Queer Eye* disseminates neoliberal ideals, through a diffractive reading there are various ways in which we can see a shift in the embodiment and understanding of self to move away from anthropocentric, subject-object divisions. Whilst this reading does not negate the neoliberal values inherent in the TV show, a diffractive reading means that it does not have to – rather than considering the oppositions of posthumanism and neoliberalism, we can instead utilise them together to shed more light on the ways in which either is maintained and performed through our mass media.

Sender's<sup>65</sup> arguments regarding the original series of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* provided a pivotal demonstration that the show was focused on consumption, product placement, and ultimately promoting and encouraging self-monitoring. This paper has therefore drawn on this earlier work and provided an additive analysis to illuminate the ways in which we can see how these neoliberal packages are also entangled with and through posthuman sentiments. This article has shown that there are aspects of posthuman philosophy evident in, for example, the ways in which *Queer Eye* promotes intra-dependence on external materialities, and the acceptance of the affective aspects of

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<sup>65</sup> Sender, "Queens for a Day", 141-142.

environment and culture on the shaping of subjectivities, as well as an acknowledgement of the indivisibility of matter and meaning. This has therefore laid the foundation for how a diffractive reading of posthumanism and neoliberalism demonstrates how entangled these sometimes contradictory philosophies are.

To embrace complex, contradictory, and “difficult” knowledge allows an open avenue for experimentation that could lead to more insights and a multiplicity of analyses, removed from the notions of “right” or “wrong”. Lovely knowledge ‘reinforces what we think we want from what we find, and [difficult knowledge] is knowledge that induces breakdowns in representing experience’.<sup>66</sup> I hope that the framing of this article has demonstrated my awareness that the above analysis depicts a coherent yet complex (and partial) telling of the methodological conclusions – that we can posthumanise humanist concepts in an imperfect way. This could also be related to Lather’s notion of “doubled” deconstructive logic, which recognises that ‘[a]uthority becomes contingent’.<sup>67</sup> She, therefore, advises interrogating our own writings to ‘unmaster’ our conclusions – critiquing our original ideas to present an opposing reading. ‘Doubled logic [...] endorses a problematic attitude, a double reading that is both critique and complicity, a way to move beyond inside and outside.’<sup>68</sup>

It is also important to note that I do not wish for this argument to nullify the essential critiques that demonstrate the powerful and negative effects of neoliberalism, and the work done by scholars in this area previously. However, as Redden<sup>69</sup> has argued, ‘the

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<sup>66</sup> Lather, *Getting Lost*, 13.

<sup>67</sup> Lather, *Getting Lost*, 14.

<sup>68</sup> Lather, *Getting Lost*, 14.

<sup>69</sup> Redden, “Is Reality TV Neoliberal?”, 410.

question of exactly how its influence spreads is an important topic in studies of neoliberalism'. Considering more thoroughly how neoliberal ideologies are enacted and embodied can lead us to consider how we might renegotiate these practices and lead towards a future that avoids the pressures and pitfalls of neoliberal expectations but understands and utilises the ways in which they have functioned. This involves not rejecting the past, but learning from how we have been governed and what we have been taught to value in order to more comprehensively critique it, and readdress it. By acknowledging how these systems function and providing an understanding of how neoliberal ideologies are embedded, it is hoped that we might begin to consider how a posthuman ethic of multiplicity, post-anthropocentrism, and intra-action can arise from a society currently deeply aligned with neoliberalism, capitalism, and meritocracy.

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