

## PhD course

### New technologies and the future of the human

#### PROGRAMME and INFORMATION

**PhD Course, 28. – 31. March 2022**

**Paris, Centre Universitaire de Norvège (CUNP), 54, Boulevard Raspail**

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#### WELCOME!

Welcome to this PhD course entitled *New technologies and the future of the human*! The PhD course will be held in Paris and will involve lectures, presentations of papers by PhD students and discussions—formal and informal. While grounded in social anthropological approaches to technology and the human being, we aim for the course to be fundamentally open in its approach to the theme and anticipate exchanges enriched by a diversity of experiences and perspectives.

Organizing a physical format PhD course in the current situation is challenging and we therefore ask for your understanding if changes are made to the programme in the months leading up to the course. Needless to say, please also note that the PhD course will be organized adhering to all relevant covid-19 policies.

Should you have any questions regarding travel or other practicalities, please contact Ms. Anne-Kathrin Thomassen ( [anne-kathrin.thomassen@uib.no](mailto:anne-kathrin.thomassen@uib.no) ) at the Department of Social Anthropology, UiB.

We look very much forward to seeing you all in Paris in March 2022! Should you have any questions concerning the academic contents of the course, please get in touch with one of us.

Yours sincerely,

Annelin Eriksen ( [annelin.eriksen@uib.no](mailto:annelin.eriksen@uib.no) )

Bjørn Enge Bertelsen ( [bjorn.bertelsen@uib.no](mailto:bjorn.bertelsen@uib.no) )

Knut Rio ( [knut.rio@uib.no](mailto:knut.rio@uib.no) )

The course is organized by the *Egalitarian Futures Research Group* at UiB:

<https://www.uib.no/en/egalitarianism>

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# Tentative Programme

Venue: Centre Universitaire de Norvège à Paris (CUNP), 54, Boulevard Raspail.

## **Monday 28<sup>th</sup> March**

On Monday morning we meet at Place de la Sorbonne, outside *Select Hotel*, at 9.30 to walk together to the venue at Bvd Raspail.

10:00 Welcome by CUNP Centre Leader

10:15 – 11.00 Round of presentation and introduction to course theme

### **Session on Immortality and human engineering**

11: 00 – 12.00 Annelin Eriksen: *The Human Version 2.0*.

**12:00-14:00 Joint lunch**

14:00-15:00 Anya Bernstein: *The Future of Immortality: Remaking Life and Death*

**15:00-15:30 Break**

15:30-17:00 PhD student presentations with commentary and general discussion

**19:00 Joint dinner**

## **Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> March**

### **Session on urban orders and the human being**

10.00 – 12.00 Bjørn Enge Bertelsen: *Urban postcolonial politics and (non-)futures:  
In/visible forms of mobilization against the end of time*

Kerry Chance: *Urban inequality and the concept of the human in the time of  
climate Change*.

**12:00-14:00 Lunch**

14:00-17:00 PhD student presentations with commentary and general discussion

**19:00 Joint dinner**

## **Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> March**

### **Session on humanoids, robots, AI and the techno-scientific imagination**

10.00 – 12.00 Joffrey Becker : *Humans, machines and the anthropology of cybernetic practices*

Knut Rio: *The android as our future humanity: A view from science-fiction*

12:00 – 14.00 **Lunch**

**Time for joint excursion of relevance to theme**

19.00            Joint inner

## **Thursday 31<sup>st</sup> March**

10:00 - 11.00 Discussion and impressions from the course so far

**11:00 - 11:15 Break**

11.15 – 12.00 PhD student presentations with commentary and general discussion

**12:00-14:00 Lunch**

14:00-17:00 PhD student presentation with student commentary and general discussion

17:15-18:00 **Summary and evaluation of course**

**19:00            Joint dinner**

## **Friday 1<sup>st</sup> April**

Departure

# Readings and lecture titles for PhD course, Paris, March 2022

## **1) Organization of lectures and readings**

There are six lectures planned for the PhD course, below we list the relevant themes and literature for each of these. Participants are meant to have familiarized themselves with these readings in advance. At the end of this list there is a list of further books and participants as resources for students in their work with their essays.

## **2) Lectures, themes and readings**

### **Anya Bernstein: *The Future of Immortality: Remaking Life and Death***

As long as we have known death, we have dreamed of life without end. In the session, *Remaking Life and Death*, we will explore the contemporary Russian and American communities of visionaries and utopians who are pressing at the very limits of the human, focusing on how these techno-scientific and religious futurisms hope to transform our very being. Bernstein will talk about a diverse cast of characters, from the owners of a small cryonics outfit to scientists inaugurating the field of biogerontology, from grassroots neurotech enthusiasts to believers in the Cosmist ideas of the Russian Orthodox thinker Nikolai Fedorov. She puts their debates and polemics in the context of a long history of immortalist thought in Russia, with global implications that reach to Silicon Valley and beyond. She also discusses two articles by anthropologists Farman and Romain on similar movements in the United States, which focus on how the respective American communities conceptualize time, matter, and the body. If aging is a curable disease, do we have a moral obligation to end the suffering it causes? Could immortality be the foundation of a truly liberated utopian society extending beyond the confines of the earth—something that Russians, historically, have pondered more than most? If life without end requires radical genetic modification or separating consciousness from our biological selves, how does that affect what it means to be human?

### **Suggested readings:**

Anya Bernstein. 2019. *The Future of Immortality: Remaking Life and Death in Russia*. Princeton University Press.

Abou Farman. 2013. "Speculative Matter: Secular Bodies, Minds, and Persons." *Cultural Anthropology* 28(4): 737–59.

Tiffany Romain. 2010. "Extreme Life Extension: Investing in Cryonics for the Long, Long Term." *Medical Anthropology* 29(2): 194–215.

### **Annelin Eriksen: *The Human Version 2.0***

In this lecture Eriksen will present the ethnography of the US-based Terasem movement and the Bina48 experiment as an entry into a discussion about US-based techno-scientific immortality practices. She gives an outline of the wider “landscape” of these practices, and the relationship between mind-upload/mind-cloning and cryonics, transhumanism and religion, and relate this to discussions in anthropology (and beyond) about the role of techno-science for imaginaries of what a human being is. She will draw on discussions about secularization, individualization and material ontologies.

#### **Suggested reading:**

Eriksen, A. (2021). The Human Version 2.0: AI, Humanoids, and Immortality. *Social Analysis*, 65(1), 70-88.

Farman, A. (2020). *On not dying: Secular immortality in the age of technoscience*. U of Minnesota Press.

Bialecki, J. (2020). Future-Day Saints: Abrahamic Astronomy, Anthropological Futures, and Speculative Religion. *Religions*, 11(11), 612.

### **Bjørn Enge Bertelsen: *Urban postcolonial politics and (non-)futurity: In/visible forms of mobilization against the end of time***

Based on empirical material from urban Africa - especially Ghana and Mozambique - this lecture will focus on urban politics and its articulations, especially underlining their key links to temporal configurations, such as potentiality, (non-)futurity, (non-)linearity and chrononormativity. Treating the urban order also as technology (in its material, ideational and governing sense), it will be underlined how contemporary postcolonial urban politics does neither only centre on liberal-political notions (such as citizenship) nor only revolves around urban space/place: Instead Bertelsen will attempt to show how urban politics' orientation around time also involves conjuring new forms of the human and, with that, novel possible forms of politics. He will ask: What are the relations between globally hegemonic and future-oriented notions of “resilience” and urban politics and its forms and reformatting of time? How can we conceive of political mobilization in postcolonial Africa as demonstrating novel and, perhaps, future urban political subjects that have global relevance?

#### **Reading:**

Bertelsen, Bjørn Enge. 2021. [A lesser human? Utopic registers of urban reconfiguration in Maputo, Mozambique](#). *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 29(1): 87-107

Goldberg, David Theo. 2021. *Dread. Facing Futureless Futures*. Cambridge: Polity, pages 1-35, 198-214.

Simone, AbdouMaliq 2019. *Improvised lives. Rhythms of endurance in an urban South*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

## **Kerry Ryan Chance: *Urban Inequality and the Concept of the Human in the Time of Climate Change*.**

This lecture will examine how urban inequality is transforming the concept of “the human” in the time of climate change. Drawing from social theory and ethnography, we will explore the following questions: How do we reevaluate “the human” in relation to new scientific and technical knowledge about the increasing impact of pollution and climate change upon urban life? How is the intersection of the amplification of divisions in major democracies and the rapid growth of urban inequality affecting local and national communities at different scales of climate governance, law, and policy? What are the community strategies and tactics in cities of the global South and North, for instance resonate claims to rights, recognition, or reparation, that reflect new forms of politics, value, and speculation about the human and non-human? By interrogating these questions in interconnected petrochemical hubs of South Africa and the United States, we also will attend to the role of energy industries in the making of the current world order.

### **Readings:**

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2021. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nixon, Rob. 2013. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.

Povinelli, Elizabeth. 2016. *Geontologies: a Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Chance, Kerry. 2020. “Governing Through Eco-Anxiety”, *Cultural Anthropology*, March 24, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/governing-through-eco-anxiety>

## **Joffrey Becker: *Humans, machines and the anthropology of cybernetic practices***

For more than a decade now strategy and foresight experts have been working to anticipate the impact of robotics and artificial intelligence on human activities. But the problems associated with automation are certainly not recent. They point to a long history of the stormy yet passionate relationship between humans and machines that began during the first industrial revolution. But today, as so-called intelligent autonomous systems integrate more and more domains of our social life, these issues find new expressions. Recent research conducted in mechanical engineering and computer science arouses both concern and hope. They now stir social questions that are no longer possible to ignore. At the first glance the presence of these objects in our societies are mainly connected to technological issues. But on a social level they also raise deep and fundamental questions related to their power to transform society. What kind of society is being created around robots and artificial intelligence? How can we anticipate their impact? Using examples from an ethnographic survey conducted since 2010 with manufacturers, researchers in robotics and artificial intelligence and users, Becker will seek to show that the relationship between humans and machines is crossed by at least three categories of problems. The first one

refers to the status of these objects and to the way they rely on life processes to function. The second emerges from the very particular interactions humans can have with them. Finally, the third issue is related to the ways they reconfigure our activities and the way we organize them. Leaning on the description of these ontological, interactional and organizational dimensions, Becker will argue that we cannot fully grasp the impact of robots and artificial intelligence without taking these dimensions into account.

**Reading:**

Helmreich Stefan, 1998. *Silicon Second Nature, Culturing Artificial Life in a Digital World*. Oakland, University of California Press.

Riskin Jessica, 2003. The Defecating Duck, or the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life. *Critical Inquiry*, 29(4):599-633.

Suchman, Lucy 2007. *Human-Machine Reconfiguration, Plans and Situated Actions, 2nd Edition*. New-York, Cambridge University Press.

Vidal Denis, 2007. Anthropomorphism of sub-anthropomorphism? An anthropological approach to gods and robots. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13(4):917-933.

**Knut Rio: *The android as our future humanity: A view from science-fiction***

Rio will discuss sci-fi films and literature as an entry-point into the question of technology and human being. The android, humanoid, cyborg, the robot or automaton, or other scientific animate creations, have figured in the popular imagination of the future for a long time. Rio departs from Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* to move into recent popular films and series like *Her* (2013), *Automata* (2014), *Ex Machina* (2014), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), *Devs* (2020) and *Finch* (2021). Treating them as ethnographic material, Rio discusses how they imagine human families, kinship, gender, community and the issue of how to preserve human qualities beyond the predicted apocalypse. We have since 2010 seen a growing techno-optimism, and cinematic disaster myths have perhaps changed in the way symbolic value is attributed to social relations. Whereas disaster movies used to feature human children as the hope for a human future on earth, now the search for a new and better world is often about creating an android for advancing and extending humanity into the future. Rio will talk about how such android heroes are portrayed, and what human qualities they carry; these new creatures that both frighten and fascinate us with their unknown potentials of both love and violence. For the discussion we raise the question of what the relation is between cinema and reality.

**Reading:**

Bryant, R., & Knight, D. 2019. *The Anthropology of the Future* (New Departures in Anthropology). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108378277 OPEN ACCESS

### 3) Further readings of choice:

Bernstein, A. 2019. *The Future of Immortality: Remaking Life and Death in Contemporary Russia*. Princeton: Prince University Press.

Boellstorff, Tom 2008. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton University Press.

Bryant, R., & Knight, D. 2019. *The Anthropology of the Future* (New Departures in Anthropology). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108378277 OPEN ACCESS

Buck-Morss, S. 2002. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Dove, Michael R., ed. 2013. *The Anthropology of Climate Change: An historical reader*. John Wiley & Sons.

Farman, Abou 2020. *On not dying*. University of Minnesota Press.

Goldberg, David Theo. 2021. *Dread. Facing futureless futures*. Cambridge and Medford, MA: Polity.

McKenzie Wark 2019. *Capital is dead, is this something worse?* London: Verso

Rabinow, P. (1999). *Essays on the Anthropology of Reason*. Princeton: Princeton University Press