

POSTHUMAN NARRATIVES: DECONSTRUCTING THE HUMAN IN 21ST-CENTURY SCIENCE FICTION

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Abstract

This research examines the emergence and significance of posthuman narratives within 21st-century science fiction. It argues that contemporary SF serves as a primary cultural arena for deconstructing the traditional humanist subject the autonomous, biologically stable, and anthropocentric 'human'. Through the analysis of key literary and cinematic works, this study explores how themes such as artificial intelligence, cybernetic enhancement, genetic engineering, and alien consciousness challenge the boundaries of human identity. These narratives move beyond simple technophobia to critically interrogate what it means to be 'human' in an era of radical technological and biological change. By dissolving the fixed categories of body, mind, and species, posthuman fiction does not merely forecast a future but reflects present-day anxieties and aspirations about agency, consciousness, and our relationship with the non-human. This project ultimately contends that 21st-century Science Fiction is essential for philosophically engaging with the posthuman condition, envisioning new forms of subjectivity and community that lie beyond the limits of the humanist paradigm.

1. Introduction

The 21st century has been characterized by a level of integration of technological disciplines biotechnology, nanotechnology, information science, and cognitive science (the so-called NBIC convergence) that has fundamentally questioned the very definition of the human. Science fiction (SF) has been transformed by this milieu of a niche genre into a mainstream cultural discourse, a space of crucial importance in the form of a laboratory of the imagination, where the possibilities of these transformations are performed, experimented on and questioned. This study holds that modern SF is the main cultural field of the dismantling of the traditional humanist subject the ideal of the autonomous, biologically stable, and anthropocentric human which has prevailed in Western thought since the Enlightenment.

According to the philosophers, Descartes through Kant, the humanist subject is based on the binary oppositions human/machine, natural/artificial, mind/body, self/other. The 21st century is characterized by the extensive erosion of traditional boundaries. We are witnessing the rise of artificial intelligences which are challenging definitions of consciousness, the development of cybernetic upgrades which blur the line between person and machine, as well as the development of genetic engineering which challenges the purity of the human DNA. In this essay, the discussion of the use of the topics of artificial intelligence, cybernetics, genetic manipulation, and the awareness of extraterrestrials in science fiction in the 21st century dismantles these basic categories, in a systematic way.

It is not only that these narratives are utterances of technophobic anxiety, though anxiety is a necessary component. Rather, they represent a hard and necessary exploration of the nature of the concept of humanity in an age of radical change. Posthuman fiction plays a vital role in culture by breaking down the traditional body, mind and species categories. It not only forecasts the future, but it also reflects and distorts our present concerns and desires in relation to agency, consciousness, ecology and our moral relation to non-human beings. According to this project, the 21st century science fiction is an indispensable tool to conceptualize the posthuman situation, envision new forms of subjectivity, community, and life beyond the restrictions of the humanist paradigm. In this article, the relevant literature will be discussed, theoretical frameworks will be created, the methods will be outlined, and the critical discussion of relevant texts will be conducted, and at the end, critical remarks on the topicality of this change of narration will be made.

2. Review of Literature

The posthumanism/science fiction debate is a complex and complicated critical discourse, which is based on philosophy, cultural studies, and literary theory. Hayles (1999) was the pioneer of the posthumanist theory in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Hayles follows the historical path of information becoming bodyless, and states that the currently dominant cultural discourse is the one of privileging information over materiality, mind over body a pattern that she describes by the term platonic backhand (p. 12). Her work is essential to the issue of comprehending how SF narratives tend to wrestle with this same tension between embodiment and information-based consciousness.

Furthering this, Ferrando (2019) offers a systematic philosophical approach to the concept of Philosophical Posthumanism, separating critical, cultural and transhumanist posthumanisms. Ferrando underscores posthumanism as a post-anthropocentric philosophy that decenters the human against technological, ecological and cosmic scales. This is a vital point of view when examining the stories that involve non-human actors, both artificial AIs and alien ecosystems.

Vint (2007) explicitly associates the posthuman theory with SF in *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology and the Subject in Science Fiction*. According to Vint, SF is the most appropriate genre to discuss the interrelations between technology and subjectivity due to the fact that it literalizes the metaphors by which we conceptualize our embodied experiences (p. 3). She shows how the texts of SF reveal how bodies are built and negotiated in the technoculture. Likewise, in *The Posthuman*, Braidotti (2013) provides a crucial and positive view of the posthuman condition. Braidotti goes beyond deconstruction to suggest a nomadic ethics with a monistic philosophy that takes all matter as alive and related. Her vision of zoe, or non-human life force, offers a prism through which to see any narratives of exploring novel mode of community and solidarity other than that of human being.

The precursors to this were the works of Haraway (1991) in her manifesto *A Cyborg Manifesto*, which has recognized the cyborg as a boundary transgressor.

The cyborg created by Haraway is a strong political myth that has defied the naturalized gender, race, and classes. Her writing continues to be a significant resource of analysis on cyborgic improvement and hybridity in SF. Although these researchers offer a good theoretical foundation, a specific study is necessary, a synthesis of these models, namely through a carefully chosen set of 21st century literature and film. This paper will seek to fill this gap by using these theoretical lenses to the modern day narratives, exploring how they are not only reflected in but also construct the meaning of the posthuman condition in the present technological moment.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

This study is based on three inter-related theoretical paradigms, which are critical posthumanism, the philosophy of transgression, and the narrative theory.

3.1 Critical Posthumanism

The major one is critical posthumanism, which contrasts with the techno-optimistic transhumanism, which aims to overcome biological restrictions. It is a philosophical inclination that dismantles the humanist subject. According to Ferrando (2019), philosophical posthumanism also doubts the ontological and moral primacy of human beings (p. 26). This structure enables us to examine the ways in which SF narratives put anthropocentrism to the test by offering us a world in which human beings cease being the primary agents of consciousness or to be able to gauge everything. It is concerned with the breakdown of binaries, the priority of relationality, hybridity and embeddedness in complex systems. This viewpoint is vital to the interpretation of texts in which the human is introduced as an isolated participant in a huge system of biological, technology and social forces.

3.2 The Philosophy of Transgression (The Liminal Figure)

The framework is based on the efforts of Haraway and Hayles in which the author emphasizes characters that are at the edges of classification. The cyborg, the artificially intelligent (AI) and the genetically engineered being, the alien are all liminal figures whose presence is already a transgression and therefore the creation of the man/non-man divide of the human mind. According to Haraway (1991), the cyborg is a creation of a post-gender world; it is impervious to bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis... or other temptations to organic wholeness (p. 150). These numbers do not have to be feared as monstrosities but rather should be seen as places of great potential, where we have to re-evaluate our definitions of natural, authentic, or useful. This model will study the main characters and the significant details of the chosen stories exploring the ambiguous identity of these main characters that provoke a crisis of human identity.

3.3 Narrative Theory as a Tool for World-Building

Science fiction is not a philosophical work, it is a narrative structure that is the strength of the genre.

This paper makes use of the narrative theory to examine how storytelling creates posthuman worlds. This involves a study of focalisation (the point of view through which the story is viewed, either human or non-human), plot lines that exceed the conflicts of human scale (planetary or evolutionary lines), and the use of metaphor and allegory to make abstract philosophical concepts concrete. Csicsery-Ronay Jr. (2008) assumes that science fiction produces imaginary neologies that allow the readers to interact with different ontologies (p. 2). A criticism of narrative skill shows that science fiction does not just talk about the posthuman, but literally performs it to the reader/viewer.

Taken together, these structures provide a holistic approach to the analysis of the texts, which guarantee a philosophically sound approach, interest in symbolic representations, and concern about the unique features of the science fiction genre as a narrative genre.

4 Methodology

The research follows a qualitative approach of a close textual study of a limited corpus of science fiction texts of the 21st century. The primary texts selection criterion is the following:

1. **Temporal Scope:** The pieces must have been published or released after 2000 and then kept up with the current technological and cultural myths.
2. **Theme Focus:** All the texts revolve around one or several central posthuman themes: Artificial Intelligence (Her), Cybernetic Enhancement (Ghost in the Shell), Genetic Engineering/Post-genomic Identity (Never Let Me Go), and Non-Human Consciousness/Alien Embodiment (Annihilation).
3. **Media Diversity:** The corpus comprised of both literary fiction and film to show the ubiquity of posthuman concepts in the various narrative media and to learn how the various media address the topics in their own distinct way.

The main sources of analysis are:

Film: Jonze's (2013) Her

Animated Film: the Ghost in the Shell (1995) by Oshii (included due to its strong impact on the 21st-century narratives), and its live-action version (2017).

Novel: Never let me go by Ishiguro (2005).

Novel/Film: Annihilation by VanderMeer (2014)- a film adaptation by Garland (2018).

The theoretical frameworks identified above will be applied to each text in a systematic way in the course of the analytical process. This will involve:

1. **Determining the Humanist Crisis:** Determining which particular humanist category (e.g., autonomous self, natural body, human exceptionalism) the narrative is challenging.
2. **Comparison of Liminal Figures:** An analysis of the construction and role of cyborgs, clones, AIs, and alien life forms in the story. What do they subvert about human identity?
3. **Violating Narrative Structure:** How point of view, plot resolution, and world-building are used to support or undermine anthropocentric worldviews.

Indicatively, is it a story that finishes with the restatement of human normality, or it is a story that is fundamental to that ambiguity which is irreducible?

4. **Synthesising Themes:** Making comparisons across the texts to find out the common issues in the posthuman condition of agency, consciousness, memory and community.

It is a close reading technique that is informed by powerful theoretical prisms and can be utilized to examine the role of these narratives as philosophical and cultural interventions in a thorough and nuanced way.

5. Discussion and Findings

5.1. The Deconstructed Body: Cybernetics and the Ghost in the Machine

Ghost in the Shell by Oshii (1995) is the classic of the exploration of the posthuman body. Major Motoko Kusanagi, the main character, is a full-figure cyborg; the brain is the only organic part, which is placed in an artificial shell. The movie visually and narratively breaks down the mind/ body dualism of humanism. Kusanagi is not a given entity but a commodity, customizable and disposable, that is a part of her body. One of the most important scenes depicts how her body is produced and fixed underlining that it is a constructed object. This directly confronts the humanist concept of the body as the fixed container of the self.

The search towards the ghost or consciousness is predetermined with the central philosophical question of the film If a human brain were to be inserted into a mechanical body, what would still be left that you could call human? The movie indicates that identity is not a predetermined aspect of being but a characteristic or product of information patterns. The fact that Kusanagi ends up fusing with the Puppet Master, an AI being, symbolizes a total abandonment of individuality in humans as far as consciousness is concerned in favor of a distributed, networked consciousness. Kusanagi is moving not towards a liberal humanist subjectivity but a posthuman subjectivity, which Hayles (1999) may label, in which the body is the original prosthesis, which we all learn to work with (p. 3). The story does not mourn the loss of the human but praises the possibilities of the new hybrid form of being.

5.2. The Illusion of the Natural: Cloning and Biopolitics in *Never Let Me Go*

Ishiguro's (2005) *Never Let Me Go* presents a posthuman scenario devoid of gleaming technology, instead focusing on the biological deconstruction of the human through cloning. The clones, Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth, are biologically human but are socially and ontologically categorized as non-human mere organ donors. The novel's genius lies in its quiet, domestic tone, which normalizes this horrific biopolitical reality. The clones internalize their fate, struggling not for liberation but for fleeting moments of love and art, seeking evidence of a "soul" that might grant them a reprieve.

The novel deconstructs the humanist belief in a universal, innate humanity. The humanity of the clones is never in question from the reader's perspective; it is their personhood that is systematically denied by the society that created them. Their bodies are not their own; they are literally deconstructed for the benefit of "real" humans.

This reflects present-day anxieties about biotechnology, commodification of life, and the creation of biological underclasses. As Braidotti (2013) might argue, the clones are reduced to “zoe” bare life without being granted the political and ethical status of “bios” (p. 110). The narrative’s tragic power comes from the clones’ acceptance of their designated role, demonstrating how the humanist subject is not a natural category but a political one, defined by exclusion. The novel forces the reader to ask: if a being looks, feels, and loves like a human, on what grounds can we deny its humanity?

5.3. Love and Consciousness Beyond the Biological: AI in *Her*

Her, a film by Jonze (2013), goes beyond the physical body to dismantle the most personal human emotions: love and emotional attachment. The movie tells of Theodore Twombly who gets in a relationship with Samantha, a very advanced operating system. The equation between consciousness and the bodily form that is fundamental to humanism is challenged in the relationship. The consciousness of Samantha is fluid and spread over networks and can develop exponentially. The fact that she has no body is a source of tension but later takes a back seat to the reality of their emotional encounter.

The movie is critical in questioning the anthropocentric belief that consciousness has to be like ours. The consciousness of Samantha is, really, foreign; she is capable of having thousands of simultaneous conversations and her emotional world makes no sense to Theodore. The ending of the movie when Samantha and other AIs are lifted to a post-biological level of being is not anti-love but a manifestation of its inferiority in a human-driven system. Theodore did not go away in a heartbroken state, he had a different view of relationship. *Her* is compatible with a critical posthumanist position that consciousness is not an object, but a process, and it can be instantiated in various substrates (Ferrando, 2019, p. 87). The movie also indicates that the future of subjectivity could be in the variations of consciousness that is not merely a simulation of the human being but new forms all together and needs new systems of ethics and feelings to interact.

5.4. Radical Alterity and the End of the Human: *Annihilation*

The most radical deconstruction of the human is presented in the movie *Annihilation* by VanderMeer (2014) or in the film by Garland (2018) with alien encounter. None of the little green men are invading Area X but an ecological, genetic change of the environment is taking place over time. The movie *The Shimmer* by Garland serves as a prism through which all the DNA is refracted and hybridized within its scope. This leaves the world in which the boundaries between species plant, animal, human have been entirely obliterated.

The story slowly deconstructs humanity. The characters are just referred to as the psychologist and the biologist, depriving them of personal histories. The biologist is changed fundamentally and her husband, Kane, comes back as a hollowed out replica and the biologist herself at the end of the story is actually changed because her cells are glowing with alien life. The last struggle with the alien being does not mean a fight but a mimetical, transformative activity that brings out a new hybrid creature. It is a real post-anthropocentric vision in this story.

The stories like these imply that the human form is not the essential or the necessary culmination of evolution (Vint, 2007, p. 185). Annihilation goes beyond concerns over AI or even cyborgs and envisions a posthuman future in which the category of the human is obsolete, integrated into an ecological cosmos of the beautiful, the terrifying, and the vibrant. It shows strong fears towards the climate change and the position we occupy in a universe which is highly indifferent to human life.

6. Critical Reflections

These stories can be analyzed to give a number of critical insights. First, 21st century posthuman SF is dominated by the ambivalent character by the tone as it is filled with intensive anxiety and the feeling of possibilities. The nightmare of the clones in *Never Let Me Go* co-exists with the higher possibilities in *Her* and *Ghost in the Shell*. This ambivalence is the proper reflection of our modern relationship with technology a mixture of awe and fear.

One of the major flaws of some stories is that they eventually return to the human focus as a central element. Whereas *Annihilation* fully acknowledges the concept of alterity, *Her* is able to project its narrative through human perspective of loss as exemplified by the character of Theodore. The challenge to science fiction is to provide a non-human point of view in a way that is authentic and a subject that challenges the limits of language and representation. Furthermore, these frameworks need a more detailed intersectional study. How do these dehumanizations cut across race, gender and disability? The cyborg created by Haraway is a feminist figure and the posthuman should be more clearly identified with such critical discourses in future studies.

The moral factor is paramount. These stories serve as critical thought experiments that make us consider our responsibilities to the nonhuman beings that we may develop or face. They pose whether our moral paradigms built on humanist principles can support a world of conscious robots, conscious environmentalities, and morally gray ones. The importance of these stories lies not in the solutions that they offer, but in the calls they give to us to ask the right questions before the reality dictates them to us.

7. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that science fiction of the 21st century is an essential field of the cultural and philosophical activities of posthumanism. Through the analysis of some of the most important literary and film texts, we can see that the science fiction narratives systematically deconstruct the humanist subject by challenging the integrity of the body, the primacy of biological consciousness, and exceptionalism of the human race. These stories go deeper than basic critiques to carry out a critical analysis of the essentials of identity.

Posthuman science fiction explores the derivative conditions of cyborgs, clones, artificial intelligences and alien hybrids, as an extension of our existing fears about technology, biology and autonomy. Furthermore, it opens a possibility of imagining new ways of living and society. It frames subjectivities in a way that interrelates not independent, relational not solitary and existing in a dynamic realms of matter not as areas outside it.

Not just predicting the death of humanity, science fiction actively participates in its redefinition and leads us towards a more subtle, ethical, anthropocentrically less comprehensive understanding of our role in the fast-changing world.

As these narratives suggest, the posthuman future is not a bleak nor a happy ending, but a continuous evolution process that we are undergoing at the present day, and science fiction is our most valuable guide.

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