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THE WELL-TEMPERED ANDROID:  
PHILOSOPHICAL POSTHUMANISM IN SCIENCE FICTION CINEMA

By

Cody Gault  
B.A. University of Louisville, 2011  
M.A. Indiana University Bloomington, 2013

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
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for the Degree of

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In Humanities

Department of Comparative Humanities  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, KY

May 2023



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A Dissertation Approved on

April 14, 2023

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom Sabrina Adams and grandmother Vicki Huff, who were with me when I began this journey, and watching from afar as I finish it. In addition, I dedicate this work to my partner Leighton Koenig. I could not have finished without his support through the writing process.

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I would like to express my gratitude to my longest-serving director of graduate studies, Dr. Simona Bertacco, for having patience with me as I found my way through the doctoral program at a pace a little slower than others. My generous dissertation committee composed of three wonderful former professors: Dr. John Gibson, Dr. Benjamin Hufbauer, and Dr. Michael Williams have also shown Herculean patience with me as I completed writing, and helped me become a better writer in the process. In a posthumanist vein, I also cannot overstate the impact of the two Bengal cats that share my home: Dormammu, whose glowing green eyes I often had to bargain with for my writing chair; and Frank, a fierce, but tiny, shiny panther. They were warm, fuzzy cheerleaders, never far from me while I wrote, who told me to take my time, do my best, and work on towards completion.

ABSTRACT

THE WELL-TEMPERED ANDROID:  
POSTHUMANISM IN SCIENCE FICTION CINEMA

Cody Gault

April 14, 2023

This dissertation examines philosophical posthumanism as a means for critical analysis of the interaction between humans and nonhuman androids in select science fiction cinematic universes. The interaction is analyzed through several facets, notably the interactions between humans and nonhuman androids, particularly as interactions between the human and nonhuman are often sites of violence.

Chapter one is an introduction. Chapter two describes the development of philosophical posthumanism from humanism, also including an analysis of philosophical posthumanism, and how it can be used as a critical lens. Chapter three begins an analysis of science fiction cinema by examining the *Blade Runner* films and HBO's *Westworld* series (season one). Chapter four discusses director Ridley Scott's *Alien* movies, and the *Star Wars* films. Chapter five provides an overview of previous discussion, along with introducing some other, more discrete films that have posthumanistic methods/ideas as main plot points. The conclusion also explores ideas about how the science fiction may have implications for real-world technological advances and living in the age of the Anthropocene.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Loneliness permeates the scene. A handsome but weathered LAPD detective named K enters his tired, white-walled apartment bathed in sterile, fluorescent light. He sees his girlfriend Joi waiting for him. As their eyes meet, the door behind him unlocks, opens again, and the grimy prostitute that he met earlier on the street lets herself inside.

Joi: It's okay. She's real. I want to be real for you.

K: You are real to me.

[The prostitute K met earlier] Mariette: You have a special lady here.<sup>1</sup>

K shows a quiet acceptance, and Joi, who is actually a hologram (revealed earlier in the story), and the physical Mariette synchronize together. Joi projects her emanation onto Mariette, and as Mariette moves, Joi's image covers Mariette's skin. The two women merge into one, but it is not a perfect process. As the two caress and kiss K, Joi occasionally slips out of Mariette, in a disquieting multiplication of body parts. The techno score wells. Each woman undresses simultaneously, appearing as one body, but like some four-armed Hindu deity, as their arms move independently. Now nude, the two women walk towards K, and the scene cuts to a billboard outside, advertising the holographic program Joi as "everything you want to see" with the "see" being replaced periodically by "hear.

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<sup>1</sup> *Blade Runner 2049*, 1:26:49.

If one saw this scene from the film *Blade Runner 2049* by itself, and was asked to describe it, the synopsis might simply read that a man and woman engage in a sexual encounter, while a third holographic female entity projects onto the woman's body. The scene is filmed much like a sexual encounter might be filmed in a major motion picture, but there is decidedly lacking an erotic undercurrent for most viewers – the multiplicity of limbs render the image alien, the awkwardness of the male K mixes with the eagerness of female Joi, and the seeming indifference of the sex worker Mariette. A scene that would appear titillating to a heteronormative audience becomes estranged from familiarity, due to the context, to arouse most mainstream viewers.<sup>2 3</sup>

In fact, when one has seen the rest of the film to this point, the layers of complexity multiply. K is not entirely human, at least in a general sense for many viewers in the early twenty-first century – he is a genetically modified replicant, engineered and fabricated flesh, produced by a corporation to work as a police detective. Joi is a hologram – artificially intelligent software engineered to be a companion – a mass-produced woman that can be programmed for individual tastes. Mariette is a replicant sex worker, a so-called pleasure-model, whose original purpose is to fulfill the sexual desires of paying customers, whatever class of person.

None of these entities are entirely human in a general, pop culture sense of what is considered human (something that will be more fleshed-out in proceeding sections).

These entities do, however, act out what might be thought of as a very human scene –

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<sup>2</sup> Although it must be said that the proliferation of certain groups interested in alternative sexual activities, particularly those dealing with advances in technology and artificial reality, might find the scene arousing.

<sup>3</sup> Another film, Spike Jonze's 2013 *Her*, examines a not altogether dissimilar relationship between a female-voiced operating system, Samantha, and a human man named Theodore. They consummate their relationship via what might be thought of as the equivalent of phone sex, the audience hearing only the words along with a blacked-out screen.

girlfriend Joi wanting to “be real” for K, and the consummation of their relationship in a sexual encounter. Prostitution is one of the oldest of human professions, and all three characters appear visually identical to a human, and seem to act out human emotions like desire, and even casual indifference.

This scene is one of many inhabiting recent science fiction – not just film, but also television, literature, graphic novels, video games, virtual reality, and many other genres – that play with the potentials of humanlike technology in the not-so-distant future. On one level, it seems as if humans are simply reflecting themselves in the smart machines increasingly moving from science fiction to science fact. Humans are making androids (human-like machines, be they in a biological or robotic state) that look like them, and use the same thought-processes as them, and thinking that something made to look like them and think like them must act like them.

Once human emotions are translated into machines through programming, however, many people start to get nervous in a way that moves beyond the simplistic unease of the eerily familiarity from the uncanny valley, or when reproductions of humans look similar but not quite right to the human eye. People begin to wonder about the capabilities of these human-created humanlike beings. Can these artificial beings feel like humans can? Are they aware? What is the line of demarcation between what is real and artificial? Can these beings love? Can they create? Are they even autonomous, at all? As Philip K. Dick asks in the book that spawned the *Blade Runner* movies, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

As one thinks through ways of trying to grapple with these questions – ethically, philosophically, etc. – thinking about how to analyze the sex scene from *Blade Runner*

2049 is a good place to start. The scene can be examined and cross-sectioned from many angles using existing tools of film and literary critique; some are tried and true methods of analysis, like pondering on the symbolism of the characters' names – Mariette sounding a lot like 'marionette,' the puppets whose strings are pulled by another, or Joi, which might be influenced by the BDSM community's acronym 'Jerk-Off-Instructions' where a dominant figure gives directions for masturbation to a submissive. The seemingly caring female projection Joi takes on a weirdly dominatrix-like persona, if this acronym has credence, where the mass-produced holographic projection becomes a symbol of corporate control over lonely mass consumers.

Some established methods of critique work well if one wishes to see the nonhuman characters as essentially the same as human characters – the kind that literature and other genres have examined in past years – but that uneasy, distant, lonely feeling that permeates the scene is, for this author, an interesting facet of how this scene operates and resonates with the contemporary viewer. The characters are human-like, but not quite human. One may feel for them, empathize with them wanting certain things like companionship, in a way that a person might emote when a friend is talking about their experiences; but not in a way like when a smart phone might reach out to a contacts list every-time a person downloads a new app. One can feel for the humanlike characters; but not feel for the machinations of a phone's software. The audience is not titillated by the romance of Joi wanting to physically be with K – but instead feels strange, slightly alone, and keenly aware of the distance from the characters seen on the scene, and their distance from each other. Might humans be seeing a reflection of a sense of their own diminished humanity, as they become increasingly dependent on

technologies to function in day-to-day life? Do they see a lack of humanity in these beings, which we then see mirrored in a perceived lack of humanity in themselves in the contemporary world? Where is that line of demarcation, where empathy becomes felt and where it is altogether lacking?

So many of these nonhuman characters are made so human that one begins to feel for them, and identify with them, but there remains an uneasy space. That uneasy, imperfect synchronization between Joi and Mariette, for example, inserts an alien space that breaks some (but not all) of those bonds of empathy, which are enough to distance the viewer from a completely realistic experience. That uneasy space, that distance, is for this author rich for analysis. I believe that using a new tool for critique in the toolbelt of the humanities, philosophical posthumanism, can say important things about the relationship between the human and nonhuman in contemporary science fiction. Philosophical posthumanism enables a classification of those humanlike, but not quite human entities in science fiction, and one can uniquely define those entities as on a continuum, rather than simply allowing them to exist in a system of binary oppositions. Philosophical posthuman espouses an attempted break from binary systems, calling itself post-binary, which becomes an important feature of those engaged in posthuman critiques and those that wish to discuss the posthuman condition.

Philosophical posthumanism provides new tools of cultural critique – tools which posthumanist philosopher Rosa Braidotti has called the “new critical posthumanities.”<sup>4</sup> The new critical posthumanities offer western humanities an increased awareness of being in the age of the Anthropocene, as traditional hierarchies of being shift into lateral

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<sup>4</sup> From her 2017 lecture *Aspirations of a Posthumanist* as part of the Yale Tanner Lectures on Human Values.

networks, and humanity faces increasing awareness of nonhuman beings and being-ness in the world, and offers a renegotiation of relationships in the world. Another theorist, Donna Haraway, whose famous work in the 1980s on cyborgs and feminism paved the way for explorations of the posthuman, has proposed calling our contemporary culture the ‘Chthulucene’ rather than the Anthropocene – a term meant for the ever-changing, “tentacled-networks” of relation that being in contemporary time engenders, and a conscious movement away from the human towards the unknown.<sup>56</sup> She says that:

Chthonic ones are beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute. I imagine chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair.<sup>7</sup>

Her Chthulucene moves away from the human-fueled changes in our environment that she thinks the epoch’s name privileges, and instead focuses on the animal, ecological, and monstrous implications of relationships that do not fit neatly into more traditionally-thought about human ontologies. Haraway’s latest works continue a trend of thinking about the world and relationships between entities in new ways since her initial work in the 1980s, and exemplifies how the new field continues to evolve with the rapid technological changes of the last few decades.

While this latest outlook from Haraway largely works against some ideas of the Anthropocene, because it attempts to move away from the emphasis on the human-impact through human ways of thinking, it is one of a growing body of works that tries to come to terms with the changing world. Thematically, placing the work in the

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<sup>5</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*.

<sup>6</sup> There has been a proliferation of -cenes in the field of posthumanities, such as the Capitalocene – an era some have proposed better characterizes notions often held in the Anthropocene. Note that these names come from critical and cultural theorists rather than geologists, who are sometimes skeptical of the usage of terms usually reserved for geologic time on a much larger scale.

<sup>7</sup> Haraway, 2.

dissertation in terms of the Anthropocene is important, but generally thinking of some of the relationships between humans and nonhumans might work best in terms of Haraway's approach, which relies upon less grounding in a human construct than a freer association with other potential types of beings and ways of being.

Although the Anthropocene is a relatively new term, one must also be careful to consider its baggage as something of a buzz word in recent years. Part of the playfulness of Haraway points towards the coopting of the term by businesses, organizations, and individuals. Leslie Sklair, in a recent article in *The British Journal of Sociology*, surveyed several recent writings on the subject, and observed that the main narratives surrounding the Anthropocene were:

- (1) While posing problems, the Anthropocene is a 'great opportunity' for business, science and technology, geoengineering, and so on.
- (2) The planet and humanity itself are in danger, we cannot ignore the warning signs but if we are clever enough, we can save ourselves and the planet with technological fixes (as in 1).
- (3) We are in great danger, humanity cannot go on living and consuming as we do now, we must change our ways of life radically – by changing/ending capitalism and creating new types of societies.<sup>8</sup>

Sklair critically sees the problems associated with the popularity of the term – moving beyond the kind of landmark usage of the term in geological timescale to denote humanity's irreversible impact on the globe and becoming something of a corporate buzzword – that "great opportunity," such as for businesses to claim to go green and be sustainable for a better public image. Whole industries are dedicated to making things like carbon offsets, sustainable practices, green practices, cruelty free, and the list goes on and on with "technological fixes," some of which do make an impact, but others of which

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<sup>8</sup> Sklair, "Sleepwalking through the Anthropocene," 776.

are overblown and exist within that Capitalocene as markers making humanity feel better about mass consumption. The posthuman turn is even sometimes invoked as a means of creating “new types of societies,” although often, such as the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford, tend to be more transhumanistic than posthuman.

In these ways, what began as a term used by cultural critics has become mainstream, particularly on the political left, which due to the state of political polarization throughout the world, has led to a certain polarization of the Anthropocene. The backlash against topics like climate change, environmentalism, rising sea levels, etc. has colored the idea and validity of the term for many, particularly those on the right. Some posthumanists, notable Rosi Braidotti, picks up on this debate – often situating it not so much as being critical of the term, but critical of the capitalist impulses to commodify the term, as Sklair mentions it being an “opportunity” if “we are clever enough” to overcome human-induced climate doom. Throughout several of her Tanner Lectures at Yale, Braidotti returns to the subject of the dangers of global capitalism, as Sklair outlines in her third point. Posthumanism’s interaction with what one might think of as a critical appraisal of the politics of humanism will be examined more later, but it is important to problematize the nature of the Anthropocene at the outset.

The three most important characteristics of philosophical posthumanism, as proposed by Braidotti and fellow posthuman philosopher Francesca Ferrando, are that this new philosophy is post-humanist, post-anthropocentric, and post-dualist.<sup>9</sup> This means that philosophical posthumanism moves beyond the humanism set forth in the western tradition at the onset of the Renaissance, where humanity, human culture, and the

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<sup>9</sup> From Francesca Ferrando’s Keynote lecture *Philosophical Posthumanism* at the 2017 International Animal Studies Conference at the University of Santiago, Spain.



study of humanity's ability to harness the forces of the world are of paramount importance. Only recently with rise of various 'studies' within the humanities, says Braidotti, such as environmental studies, digital humanities studies, and animal studies has humanities began to decenter itself from a solely human focus.<sup>10</sup> As such, posthumanism is post-anthropocentric, in that humankind (mankind for a long-while) as the top of a great vertical chain of being is no longer the organizing method of thought for those in the humanities. Posthumanism instead locates humanity within a more lateral network, where the primacy humanity once possessed as the apex of being distinct from, and superior to, the animal world and/or the world of inanimate objects no longer exists. Instead, humanity exists shoulder to shoulder with these other groups across a latitudinal spectrum. Relationships become less top down – and as Haraway suggests, tangential relationships reach out like tentacles or spider webs at various nodes and in various directions, rather than a neat and tidy up/down movement that tends to place primacy and causality more clearly.

Perhaps the most challenging characteristic of philosophical posthumanism is the fact that, with the removal of humanity as the apex position from which the world is examined, one might say the 'one' of the world, posthumanism becomes post-dualist in that with the removal of the 'one' there is subsequently no 'other one' – or other.<sup>11</sup> Many philosophies and movements within modern, western humanities have had at their root a dualist structure – there is 'one,' and there is another one, or 'other.' The self/other dualist model is ingrained into much of the western tradition; philosophical

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Whether or not humanity has reached a moment it can truly become post-dualist is debatable – the fact that the new critical posthumanities seek to explore the problems and potentials of a post-dualist way of thinking is the most important aspect for this project.

posthumanism postulates that the idea of the other can be overcome – that there exists a commonality of being, regardless of taxonomy/species/etc. between living beings and objects in the universe, and that freeing one from traditional western humanities’ dualism is crucial for humanity’s continued existence in the Anthropocene and beyond.<sup>12</sup>

Working through a cultural critique of science fiction – film specifically for this dissertation – using the tools of the new critical posthumanities might be the best avenue for highlighting exactly what posthumanism entails and provides in analysis. Additionally, it will offer insights into topics of contemporary culture through this unique lens that other methods in the critical toolbox of humanities might miss. Because philosophical posthumanism is a relatively new entry into academic studies, much of the work in the field discusses the basic framework of the philosophical concepts, without really digging into analysis of cultural artifacts. There exists a large body of work analyzing the relationships between the human and nonhuman through various more-established methodologies, some of which do mention posthumanism, but few espouse a really fully formed engagement with the philosophical posthumanism proposed by Braidotti and her colleagues. This dissertation will directly engage with the philosophical problems of the field and apply it to cinematic universes that already have a body of literature written about them, to provide new analysis of how these works of art, many of which are also speculative futures, find new meaning in a posthuman light.

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<sup>12</sup> Derbolav and Daisaku have an interesting dialogue about the difference between western and eastern humanisms, contrasting the nature of the human in each hemisphere in *Search for a New Humanities*, 34-52.

## Outlining the Dissertation

Science fiction is at once a product of the culture that produces it, and an attempt at reaching out, projecting the future the relationship of humans to the universe around them by means of increasing human and AI technological prowess. Science fiction makes a good basis for examining posthumanism because it is popular culture's means of exploring the changing relationship between humans and technology. One of the issues in contemporary science fiction that is useful in exploring posthumanism is the issue of embodiment – namely, the human body and the nonhuman body. The nonhuman body, for the purposes of this project, can be specifically located in an android body, or a bipedal human-like being that the human does not recognize as human.

The contact between the physical bodies of the human and nonhuman android is often a site of violence in science fiction media. Dualism manifests, which translates into the human body having a hostile relationship with the android other – a dualism that posthumanism wishes to move beyond. Four such cinematic science fiction universes where there exists conflict between human and android subjects are:

1. Ridley Scott and Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner* films (1982 and 2017)
2. Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and new prequels *Prometheus* (2012) and *Covenant* (2017)
3. The *Star Wars* universe of George Lucas (1977-2018)
4. HBO's latest incarnation of Michael Crichton's *Westworld* (Season 1, 2016).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Other potential science fiction films exist that may be noteworthy to mention at applicable points, such as *Solaris* (1972), *Under the Skin* (2013), *Oblivion* (2013), *Arrival* (2016), and *Annihilation* (2018). The Ridley Scott-produced series *Raised By Wolves* (2020) is another potential source of analysis, as well. Some of these will receive mention in the conclusion of this dissertation.

A common feature of all these worlds is the importance placed upon the interaction between humans and nonhumans, or androids – which exist across a spectrum, moving from a near-human biological replicant to the fully non-biological being, only vaguely humanoid in appearance. From these cinematic universes, and with information regarding the mechanics of philosophical posthumanism in mind, the organization of the dissertation emerges in the five chapters that follow this introductory first chapter.

The second chapter will contextualize the concept of philosophical posthumanism. The development of philosophical posthumanism will be explored, drawing upon a humanist context (and an overview of humanism). It will also discuss specific tools within the framework that enable an analysis of the film. Another central facet of chapter three will be discussing the dualism inherent in much humanist thought that has created, in these cinematic universes, tension between the human and nonhuman other, often expressed in bodily violence. Violence plays a large, and oftentimes visceral, role in all of the stories (*Star Wars* being much less gory and violent than the others – however, the very title is a nod to violence). Violence becomes an important marker of contact between human and nonhuman bodies – even the very titles of these works having connotations with violence: *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner*, the lawless American west of *Westworld*, the Greek myth of *Prometheus* and the *Covenant* between God and his prophet Noah, an agreement setting out the parameters to keep God from once again destroying humanity in Judeo-Christian myth.

These interactions beg the question: What do representations of violence in this film and television say about points of contact between humans and non-humans? On the other hand, why is violence often chosen as the medium for which points of contact

between humans and emergent intelligences are narrated in contemporary film and television media?

Chapter three begins the direct engagement with cultural artifacts, namely the two *Blade Runner* films and the first season of HBO's *Westworld*.<sup>14</sup> *Blade Runner* and *Westworld* represent worlds in which humans and androids have not yet fully integrated into a single, cohesive society. The replicants of *Blade Runner* are biological, human-like beings that have restricted lifespans meant for off-world colonies and are barred from returning to earth; if they do return, they are hunted down and destroyed. The replicants exist as inferior beings reduced to slave labor, despite containing identical ability to think and feel as humans. Similarly, the android hosts of *Westworld* exist only as objects subject to the whims of human visitors inside of a special amusement park – they are much like one would imagine action figures or dolls children play with, except on a brutal, adult scale. The hosts exist only inside of the amusement park. In both series, the androids are shown to have gained an awareness of their unequal treatment, and rebel against their human creators and their containment, since the processes of control their human creators have installed within them (fake memories in *Blade Runner* and the incomplete erasure of memories in *Westworld*) begin to make the androids take on certain human qualities that render such control ineffective.

Chapter four, dealing with *Star Wars* and *Alien* / the *Alien* prequels, on the other hand, represent societies in which humans and androids have achieved a level of integration; there are, however, different outcomes of integration. In *Star Wars*, androids

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<sup>14</sup> *Westworld* now spans multiple seasons, but the author feels the first season particularly inhabits a world of philosophical challenge which provides valuable material for the dissertation. Some of the later seasons have a certain narrative fatigue that occurs in some series where there is perhaps more of an economic drive to continue rather than an artful one.

(referred to as droids) are an inferior class, but some have very positive positions both within the plot of the story and in relation to characters in the stories – becoming something of an equal to humans in importance, agency, and in their relationships with humans. While a sense of inferiority still exists, some droids are shown in a very positive light.<sup>15</sup> Dualism seems absent in the positive relationships between humans and droids, since the droids are not cast as others. When droids are seen as inferior, however, they are often mistreated and simply disintegrated without consequence, as one might kill a wild animal without particular consequence.

The droids of *Star Wars* exist alongside humans and other aliens somewhat innocuously, whereas the replicants of *Blade Runner*, hosts of *Westworld* and David in *Alien: Covenant* take it upon themselves to attempt to destroy their human creators, for one reason or another. *Star Wars*, in this way, represents a more optimistic science fiction and perhaps in its eroding of dualism in bodily relationship in favor for a more posthuman turn. Another interesting phenomenon to note in *Star Wars* is the cyborg element in the villain Darth Vader, said to be “more machine now than man.”<sup>16</sup> This may represent a corruption of the pure dichotomy between human and machine (droids) that has a negative consequence – that while dualism has been eroded so that the relationship of human/nonhuman other between two discrete bodily relationships is no longer problematic, there is something monstrous about the combination of the two into a single body. Additional examples of evil, or at best, threatening cyborgs exist in General

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<sup>15</sup> In *Star Wars A New Hope*, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Luke Skywalker enter a cantina with their droids, but the bartender says that ‘Their kind [the droids] aren’t welcome here.’ Droids are also shown as being sold for slave labor in *Star Wars Return of the Jedi*, where the droids gifted into the service of crime lord Jabba the Hutt. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, however, the close relationship between Luke Skywalker and droid R2D2 is seen on Dagobah, in their close interactions with one another.

<sup>16</sup> Obi Wan Kenobi tells this to Luke Skywalker in *Return of the Jedi*.

Grievous and Saw Gerrera. *Star Wars* additionally has the dualism between the light and dark sides of the force (the semi-religious factor that the heroes and villains practice in the film), and the human-supremacy of the fascist-modeled evil empire in the series.

In *Alien*, the android Ash is so lifelike that the crew of his ship do not even know he is an android until violence erupts and his inside robotics are discovered. His purpose is shown to contain an ulterior motive, where if he comes across alien life, he is to preserve it at all costs and return it for study. This is to the detriment of the crew – although he is not shown to be particularly malicious, simply following orders given to him. In the *Alien* prequels, the android David plays a pivotal role. In *Prometheus* he begins sabotaging the human colonists he serves, not only following orders (from his creator, Weyland) but seemingly taking independent initiative, and in *Covenant* he expresses a distrust of humanity, having something of a creator complex, and wishes to see humanity end (in direct contrast to an ‘improved’ version of himself, a later-generation android named Walter, that is programmed with a greater value for human life).<sup>17</sup> David represents an android whose AI changes and evolves in what could be seen as a progressivist, humanistic way that privileges itself over others, or at least a trait seen in some western humanist traditions like a cult of progress or those that seen humanity as a unique pinnacle of existence, something more transhumanist than posthumanist. David sees himself as a being beyond humanity, in a way similar to some human traditions that see humans as being beyond animals and plants, for example.

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<sup>17</sup> *Covenant* sees David wipe out an entire colony of life on another planet when he unleashes a biological weapon that destroys all life; he also uses genetic experiments to create a non-human creature that he believes perfects the biology of life (by destroying human life – the creation incubates itself inside of, and then kills, a human host).

Chapter five will conclude the dissertation, arguing that posthumanism is a valuable entry into the toolkit of critical humanities, proven through an analysis of the interaction between human and posthuman bodies in science fiction film. What can posthumanism add to the discussion of android bodies? Human and nonhuman interaction? Does the working through of these relationships in cinema provide us with ways of thinking through our ever-changing relationship with technology in our everyday lives? Perhaps, at the end, the conclusions drawn from such analysis might shed some light on how a posthumanist philosophy has had real-world scientific and social applications, as the line between science fiction and science fact becomes increasingly blurred in contemporary society.

Much anxiety exists in contemporary culture about new technologies and the rapid changes caused by them. Daniel Dinello says, in his book *Technophobia!*:

Most science fiction [...] projects a pessimistic vision of posthuman technology as an autonomous force that strengthens an anti-human, destructive, and repressive social milieu. Yet the realization of oppression can spur action. Rather than promoting submissive surrender to a dangerous inevitable posthuman future, science fiction encourages questions about the nature of technology and its unbridled expansion [...] Science fiction helps us understand the magnitude of the techno-totalitarian threat so we might invent tactics for confronting it.<sup>18</sup>

Rather than view science fiction as a way of warning us about what is to come, and finding ways to combat those issues as Dinello frames his thesis, it might be best to approach science fiction futures with an open mind. Maybe a better understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of our human dominated world can better help us work through new relationships with nonhuman beings. We should not arm ourselves against the future, but become more aware of our present, so as to grow with the proper

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<sup>18</sup> Dinello, "Technophobia!: Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology," 17.



relationships to avoid potential conflicts with present and future technologies – a much more posthuman turn. A greater awareness of the multitude of perspectives and consciousness in the world already, that have been here a long time – such as animals, plants, ecosystems, and marginalized people – could in turn provide good perspectives on how to deal with the threat of technology that may usurp humanity as a dominant force on the world stage.

Much of the impetus behind philosophical posthumanism exists both as a philosophy and as an activist approach to combating some of the cultural dilemmas facing the planet today. Working through speculative futures in the science fiction universes that have been discussed may show lessons for our very real future – such as interspecies cooperation; the necessary rights and liberties for androids, AI, and other new types of beings; how to approach cyborgs; and the potential of contact between other nonhuman, non-human-made sentient beings (extra-terrestrials, for example). Analysis of these science fictions allow for speculative thoughts, working through cultural problems that may have valuable lessons for the future when confronting such new technologies and beings that could happen, in fact. Better to have practiced and be prepared than caught off-guard. Beyond the speculative futures, there also exists potential for thinking through current relationships in new ways as humanity faces ecological changes like global warming, genetic engineering, approaching new levels of artificial intelligence, and androids.

## CHAPTER TWO: POSTHUMANISM: PHILOSOPHY & CRITICAL LENS

Posthumanism has a varied, tangled past as term used to describe a variety of persons and ideas that encapsulate a being that is ‘after the human’ (after all, that’s the literal meaning of the word). A varying number of definitions exist across genres and across academic fields, particularly as the rise of specialized fields in the humanities, or – isms, have proliferated in academia. Part of better understanding the term comes from an understanding and contextualization of the humanism at the root of posthumanism.

Humanism has several entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary* online, among the most applicable for talking about the philosophy of humanism are:

Any system of thought or ideology which places humans, or humanity as a whole, at its center, esp. one which is predominantly concerned with human interests and welfare, and stresses the inherent value and potential of human life. In early use frequently with reference to humanitarian religions.

Also:

Frequently with capital initial. A variety of ethical theory and practice characterized by a stress on human rationality and capacity for free thought and moral action, and a rejection of theistic religion and the supernatural in favor of secular and naturalistic views of humanity and the universe.<sup>19</sup>

Both definitions stress the importance, or primacy, of human life as chief concern.

Humanism places humans at the center of existence: their welfare, the potential and value

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<sup>19</sup> Humanism, *Oxford English Dictionary* online.

of human life, and ideas such as rationality, freedom, and morality based upon natural sciences of utmost importance, rather than metaphysical religion / dogma informing human endeavors. In the early modern era, humanism emerged in the western world out of the Renaissance, or the rebirth, of Greek and Roman cultures. It was in the Enlightenment several centuries later, however, that most familiar, modern definitions of humanism took shape. While the ancient humanism found from the pagan traditions of Greece and Rome was rediscovered and emulated in the Renaissance, the Enlightenment took ideas even further and fused them with ideas in empirical, rational sciences, and formed much of the basis of how western humanity has conceptualized itself since that time.

The scientific method that emerged out of the Enlightenment still forms the basis of modern academic endeavors. The methodology, which generally describes making and observation and/or forming a question, creating a hypothesis as a theoretical answer to the question, performing an experiment to test the hypothesis, then analyzing data to validate or disprove the hypothesis, is the basis for much of the work done across the many fields of academia and research today. What becomes central to the western world is the idea of fact – provable, observable fact – far removed from the belief system and metaphysics of the medieval era.

The Enlightenment is marked by a characterization of rationalism and humanism that might be thought of in a more transhumanist context (more on this topic later), which is in some ways a contrast to posthumanism in its human-centered-ness. Edgar Landgraf, Gabriel Trop, and Leif Weatherby's *Posthumanism in the Age of Humanism: Mind, Matter, and the Life Sciences After Kant*, however, argues that certain elements of these

Enlightenment thinkers may actually support some of the notions of posthumanist thought. From their introduction:

Posthumanism – a discourse often understood to celebrate the “end of man” – is not so much an anti-humanism as an attempt to critically interrogate the status of the human as exceptional, as autonomous, as standing outside a web of relations, or even a subject or object of knowledge corresponding to a determinate set of practices. Seen in this way, posthumanism can be found, perhaps, where one least expects it, including in putative humanisms in which thinking the human comes up against its limitations and attempts to transcend them.<sup>20</sup>

The authors believed that some posthumanist have unfairly appraised the so-called humanists of the Enlightenment era, particularly in Germany, and that their philosophies contain important forerunners and elements of posthuman thought that are sometimes overlooked. Their arguments are subtle and require close readings and sometimes revisionist readings of the texts, but cultural and historical context can be illuminating in problematizing the common generality that Enlightenment-era thought most readily lends itself to the transhuman.

The humanism that emerges in the western world during the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century to follow, for all of its interest in human freedom, abilities, and pursuing happiness, also has a dark side.<sup>21</sup> Oftentimes, the ‘human’ was less the non-gendered signifier of a person, *Homo sapiens*, as in contemporary culture – and more ‘man’ – specifically, white men, usually with some power and agency in their society.

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<sup>20</sup> Edgar Landgraf, Gabriel Trop, and Leif Weatherby *Posthumanism in the Age of Humanism: Mind, Matter, and the Life Sciences After Kant*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> David Ehrenfeld’s *The Arrogance of Humanism* details aspects of some of the darker sides of humanism in detail – saying, “There is more than an academic reason for writing about the religious nature of humanism, for some of humanism’s religious assumptions are among the most destructive ideas in common currency, a main source of the peril in this most perilous of epochs since the expulsion from Eden,” 4. Namely, Ehrenfeld sees humanism as a religion not unlike many other established religions, where the blind faith of dogmatic believers is problematic – that reason, rationality, and human progress are not the pure, perfect means of achieving an end that some contemporary, secular humanists may believe them to be.

While some women writers did advocate for inclusion, men retained the dominant, powerful voice in most affairs. Even philosophers, working through the placement of humans in the world, were not immune to the racist thoughts (Immanuel Kant, for example) and misogynist tendencies (Jean-Jacques Rousseau) of their period. While one may be tempted to explain away this conceptualization of ‘the human’ as ‘the white male human’ using historical context, and writing it off as a peculiarity of history, today’s posthumanists are quick to point out how the changing notion of the ‘human’ is an important point to consider when viewing the development of humanism over time. The universal ‘human’ is not conceptualized without specific gender, race, class, etc. throughout time; indeed, what constitutes a human has changed over time. An enslaved African-American woman in 1850, had she been fortunate enough to be taught to learn how to read by the wife of her master, might have a different perspective when reading Enlightenment-era philosophy written by, and for, educated white men, who while they might have been talking about a universal ‘human,’ were really just talking about themselves.<sup>22</sup>

Towards the last quarter of the nineteenth-century, modern arts gained a self-awareness of artifice, of an art-for-art’s-sake. In some ways, this awareness of art was also a celebration of the human – the act of creating art, which was seen as (an even now can be found in many textbooks) something uniquely human; only humans create art. An interest in art enters into anthropological sciences, which rise in the early twentieth

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<sup>22</sup> Humanism is still, however, espoused as an important contemporary belief system, in particular as a foil to religion. In works like Paul Kurtz’s *Forbidden Fruit*, Corliss Lamont’s *The Philosophy of Humanism*, Norman Richard’s *On Humanism*, and Steven Pinker’s *Enlightenment Now* present learned accounts of humanism as a source of morality, ethics, and a means of living life that is secular and removed from religious dogma. These works, however, are more geared for a mainstream audience and lifestyle literature than academic in their scope.

century, as explorers seek to explore far-off parts of the world. Alternatively, perhaps through a post-colonial lens, colonial powers began an engagement with the indigenous peoples they were exploiting for resources. The relationship gained in complexity, however, as Modern art began to emulate those anthropological studies. Pablo Picasso's fascination with African masks from the Fang people, which he saw at the anthropological museum in Paris, spurred on a movement in Western European art that emulated so-called 'primitive' art. Again, distinctions arose in the notion of the 'human;' whereas one may see movement from the human/not-a-human dichotomy present in earlier discussions of white Europeans versus black African humans in regards to the slave trade – to the idea of the cultured white European versus the primitive black African by the Modernists – the latter is still problematic. Again, humanism is not engrained with racial, sexual, etc. neutrality, as a contemporary thinker might broadly perceive; it is a loaded idea throughout history.<sup>23</sup> Some of the complexities of Modernism began to splinter the movement, and the next chronological period, postmodernism (1950+) started to change in some radical ways, which eventually opened the doors to posthumanism.

Postmodernism promoted deconstruction, historiographical studies, absurdism, and nihilism.<sup>24</sup> Culture could be rich, in terms of the use of metanarratives, wordplay, the

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<sup>23</sup> Several works written solely on the topic of humanism are worth exploration – one in particular is Tzvetan Todorov's *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*, which deftly weaves a narrative exploring humanism through continental philosophy during the modern era, detailing various groups' stakes in the topic in western society. In the first few paragraphs, Todorov sustains a mythic Christian tone, speaking of Jesus, the Devil, and temptation in regards to knowledge and power. The ending metaphor, one where "modern man" or "humanity" makes a "third pact" with the Devil, which is the origin of where thinking about humanism and philosophy now lies, 1-6.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Sheehan's *Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism*, although a dense read at times, interestingly traces some of the currents most associate with postmodernism back to modernist roots – believing that the emergence of a nonhuman voice can be traced back to nineteenth-century novels and continental philosophy. While postmodernism may be a shift from modernism in many ways, some similar currents

re-using of old tropes in new ways, the examinations of the slippages inherent in language – but there was no longer any idea of progress, or of moving towards some better future, as had been a hallmark of humanist thought dating back to the Industrial Revolution. With science came a promise of progress; but as the postmodernists saw it, undeniably there are facets of life that have changed from science, but as to whether or not all those changes are “better” depends upon one’s perspective from their place in the world, and depends upon what one might even define as “better.” This postmodern era was the atomic age, after all, where anything new and miraculous could meet instantaneously mutually assured destruction from nuclear war.

In postmodernism, there was a proliferation of art, ideas, and perspectives, particularly as the United States came to dominate the western world culturally and politically in the aftermath of World War II, and continental European philosophy and critical studies began to shape academia in specific ways. As there was a breakdown of old norms in culture, and a new exploration of minority cultures, ethnicities, etc. in the United States, there was a rise in individualized studies in academia.<sup>25</sup>

Two of those individualized studies are post-humanism and transhumanism, whose advent can be at least partially attributed to the role technology has had in changing human life in the atomic age and beyond.

Posthumanism, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is:

A system of thought formulated in reaction to the basic tenets of humanism, esp. its focus on humanity rather than

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run deeply in both. Sheehan says, “The complexity of thought underlying the hundred-year-long development of the human problematic, from the 1850s to the 1950s, cannot be neatly contained in a single narrative thread, nor followed by a single historical modality,” xii.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Said goes so far, in his *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, to talk about a specifically “American humanism” on page one of his book, as the overarching framework of the entire book (although he says that, “a good deal of my argument lies elsewhere too,” 1.

the divine or supernatural (cf. humanism n. 5). Also (esp. in postmodernist and feminist discourse): writing or thought characterized by rejection of the notion of the rational, autonomous individual, instead conceiving of the nature of the self as fragmentary and socially and historically conditioned.<sup>26</sup>

If postmodernism saw the fracture of culture into disparate, deconstructed parts, then an important facet of posthumanism is the breakdown of the human self into fragmentary parts, some of which move beyond the loaded humanism that western culture has been carrying since at least the Enlightenment, and even back to the Renaissance.

Philosophers Rosi Braidotti and Francesca Ferrando also point out that this new philosophy of posthumanism is posthumanist, post-anthropocentric, and post-dualist – removing itself from the heritage of humanism by de-centering humanity at the apex of existence, detaching human qualities from descriptions of being, and trying to move beyond the postmodern dichotomy of the ‘self’ and the ‘other.’

Posthumanism has its foundations, as Braidotti has described, in the critical studies of postmodernism that have proliferated in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, particularly animal studies, environmental studies, and the studies of ethics related to these two fields.<sup>27</sup> The implication of non-human living creatures in animal

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<sup>26</sup> Posthumanism, *Oxford English Dictionary* online.

<sup>27</sup> Not all authors came to the same conclusion as Braidotti, herself a product of a distinctly French, post-structuralist tradition. Kate Soper, in *Humanism and Anti-humanism*, for example, ultimately argues against an anti-humanist trend culminating in these French thinkers, and instead opts for a more optimistic humanistic turn with roots in social/political implications not unlike those more pop-culture humanists mentioned before (Kurz, Lamont, etc.). Anti-humanism, though not discussed at length here, is sometimes mentioned as a movement coming out of the nineteenth-century where there is a rejection of humanism, since it sees the universal basis of a concept of ‘man’ or ‘humanity’ as being an arbitrary construction. In reviewing the book, James J. Valone says, “Humanists will applaud the author's affirmation of the moral power of the subject. Soper emphasizes morality as an expression of each of us as creatures of possibility and not merely as creatures of subjugation. Her suggestion about art and artistic creation and expression also needs to be readdressed in the context of this debate. Art and the activities of artistic endeavors, as well as the interpretation and criticism of the arts, open us to another human form of possibility and expression, which itself can be likened to moral activity. On these grounds, the author outlines conceptions of the self, history, and reflection that form a basis for the achievement and practices of liberation,” 79.



studies, and large living and non-living spaces and places in environmental studies, deserving the agency typically reserved for humanity, helped pave the way for new, posthumanist ways of thinking that move beyond the humanness and anthropomorphology of traditional western humanism. Braidotti called these, and other types of niche studies like fat studies, queer and gender studies, etc. the ‘new critical posthumanities.’<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, the *Oxford English Dictionary* refers to transhumanism as:

A belief that the human race can evolve beyond its current limitations, esp. by the use of science and technology.<sup>29</sup>

Transhumanism does not shift away from that idea of linear progress that began in earnest in the Enlightenment – transhumanism sees advances in technology and the fragmentation of postmodern life, and instead reassembles itself, or reassembles the human, in a way so as to create a human being that is inherently better than the pre-existing human. Transhumanism wants to take advances in science and apply them to the human mind and body, to eliminate things like aging, disease, and even death. It wants to make human skin tougher, more resilient, and adaptable. It wants humans to be smarter, faster, and stronger, through the means of technology. Just as scientific discoveries over the past century have catapulted medicine in leaps and bounds, so does transhumanism seek to jumpstart the process to radically change human abilities.

Just as differences in what is ‘human’ abound in western humanism through the centuries – such as white, European men being a fuller, better representation of the

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<sup>28</sup> From her 2017 lecture *Aspirations of a Posthumanist* as part of the Yale Tanner Lectures on Human Values.

<sup>29</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* Online.

possibilities of humanity rather than women, or people of color, that prevailed in some areas during the Enlightenment – there seem to be inherent possibilities for differing levels of humanity in transhumanism. The 1997 film *Gattaca* comes to mind, where the protagonist faces adverse treatment because he is conceived naturally, without genetic manipulation, whereas the most well respected, able people have been conceived to have the best attributes through eugenics technology. While there may be transhumans – or humans that have moved beyond what had hitherto been the natural state for humanity – it seems that maybe not all people would be privileged to the same level of transhumanity.

Another film deep in transhumanist ideologies is the 2010 *Tron: Legacy*, which picks up several years after the original 1982 *Tron* (released the same year as *Blade Runner*, which will be examined later). In the film, which mostly takes place in a digital world inside a computer, completely digitized beings called ‘isomorphic algorithms’ that seem identical to humans are a crucial plot point, as it is believed that their digital code – which can be downloaded and analyzed in its entirety, and easily manipulated – could be a key to unlocked the potential of humans outside of the virtual world. It is sort of like a digitized, completed human genome project, completely mapped neurological system, etc. all in one. The main characters save the last of these beings from extinction, and believe she holds the key to unlocking secrets about humanity and must be saved from the antagonist that wants to destroy all of her kind.

The idea of a being unlocking a key to humanity’s code – enabling advances in fields like medicine, etc., pushing the boundaries of human abilities, is very much in line with a transhumanist doctrine. In fact, transhumanism is oftentimes easily

confused/conflated with posthumanism, since for most humanisms the narrative of progress demands a certain refinement and drive towards ever-increasing human mastery and abilities over humanity and the world in which the human exists.

Transhumanism is, then, very different from posthumanism. Transhumanism has its conceptual footing in the scientific progress of the Enlightenment, but posthumanism is born out of an extension of the postmodern condition of fragmentation. In some ways, posthumanism is a logical extension of postmodernism, while transhumanism might be a reaction against it – a call back to the pragmatism of the Enlightenment. Posthumanism also lends itself to philosophical and critical discussions as a lens for analysis and a way of thinking; transhumanism is an active social movement, exemplified by communities such as Humanity Plus and futurist personalities like Natasha Vita-More.

Posthumanism offers the best theoretical framework for this dissertation for a variety of reasons. In working with science fiction cinema and examining the interactions between human and non-human characters, posthumanism offers a pertinent, well-suited toolkit for looking closely at human/non-human points of contact. At its core, posthumanism is concerned with the relationship human intelligence has with its own embodiment and relationship to other entities that surround it – which is much of what this project is about.

The theoretical framework also has an ability to offer a certain amount of respect and validation for non-human entities that in some ways makes it unique among critical theories. Posthumanism does not place the most value and emphasis on the human, neither does it on any range of inhumans – from living beings, to mechanized beings, even to inanimate objects, thanks to a democratizing force whose lineage can be traced to

such niche theories as object-oriented ontology. Some critical lenses can seem to prioritize certain groups or characteristics above others; posthumanism offers a uniquely neutral stage for humans, androids, robots, aliens, AI beings, and other science fiction sentiences to exist simultaneously in an even-tempered space.

Posthumanism may also offer insights beyond the most obvious, and perhaps most talked about, interaction between human and non-human – such as the exploration of human/human and nonhuman/nonhuman interactions in science fiction. That complex, interesting scene occurring in the film *Blade Runner 2049* discussed earlier, when android replicant K initiates intimacy with his AI hologram girlfriend Joi, is an example. The entities are anthropomorphic in their likeness to a human couple in love, and innovative camera techniques are used in their romantic encounters to destabilize the image of their interaction in a way that the dissertation hopes to examine at length. The original *Blade Runner* hints at dramatically stilted, volatile emotional relationships between replicants (given their four-year lifespan), but the relationships seem much more mature in the sequel film, not to mention one of the participants is a virtual simulation (a simulation that, at one point, merges with the body of a prostitute for a literally immersive, physical experience). Posthumanism is uniquely situated in a time where increasing technological abilities and impacts are changing not only human culture, but humanity's sense of place and space in the world (in the Anthropocene), and as such provides easy access to begin exploring some of these effects of technology.

One of the consequences of examining the nonhuman in proximity to the human – and using a posthumanist lens – is that one can begin to discern certain features of the human, and in some ways better define the human, in a manner benefiting humanism.

Whereas in traditional humanism, humanity is somewhat alone at the apex of existence, and as such something that can be difficult to probe (looking in upon itself, in a sense), with the advent of posthumanism opening up potentials for equally important, nonhuman entities in a common existence with humanity, it may result in a fresh perspective of humanity – there is another being, other than a human itself, in which to observe the human and glean information from such observation.

While this remains something of an exercise in fiction and critical analysis currently (there are no strong AI androids yet in existence, aliens, or articulate nonhuman posthumans around to talk), it remains to be seen if, someday, just such entities may exist.<sup>30</sup> In the meantime, a posthumanist critique can be used to start thinking through such possibilities before they become realities, existing in the real world. Considering the storied past of different groups of humans' first experiences contacting each other, it might be good to have practiced our hellos when finally reaching out to a fellow intelligent being.

In discussing one of his most-popular books on posthumanism, author Cary Wolfe says:

In fact, one of the main thrusts of *What is Posthumanism?* was to insist that the “post” of posthumanism is not about “transcending” or “surpassing” humanism: the “new” and “next” cool thing versus the old fashioned and benighted fuddie duddies of yore. That understanding of posthumanism is in fact, I think, a quintessentially humanist fantasy of our ability to make transparent to master and make transparent to ourselves our deep, intractable cultural and philosophical inheritances. Rather, posthumanism, at least in part, is about how the many admirable aspects of the humanist legacy that we might want to hold onto [...] are actually undercut by the philosophical frameworks that try to justify them.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Some may argue such beings already exist, such as the android Sophia, which was created in 2016 and was granted Saudi Arabian citizenship in 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Aloï, Giovanni, and Susan McHugh, *Posthumanism in Art and Science: A Reader*, 324-325.

In this way, Wolfe is making an important point about the progressive, top-down, human-centered narrative of history, and the genesis of ideas present in humanism. In a posthumanist approach, one that is informed by postmodernism's wariness of universal narratives, how humans assemble narrative as a means of trying to define the nature of existence is put into questions. To do so means not relying on a complete narrative in a linear, chronological order, like moving down a list on a page, but rather follow series of webs of meaning and nodes, like watching a spider meander across a series of webs at the bottom on a bush in a midsummer garden.

Even time is a quantity that can become entangled in these webs, such as in another of director Denis Villeneuve's movies (director of *Blade Runner 2049*) – *Arrival* (2016). In this film, which might be one of the most well-thought-out major studio depictions of how humanity may one day encounter extra-terrestrial intelligence, not only does the topic of interspecies communication come to the forefront, but also a realization that humans' concept of time may be different than how other creatures experience time.<sup>32</sup> The alien visitors use a language to communicate that does not follow a linear conception of time, but one that accesses the past, present, and future simultaneously. It is revealed, as the movie progresses, that what the audience may think are flashbacks seen by the protagonist are actually visions of the future, which she experiences after learning the extraterrestrial creatures' language. The creatures are visiting earth because they need the help of humanity in a future conflict, after thousands of years of human progress and understanding unlocked by sharing their language.

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<sup>32</sup> A good, brief discussion of the movie's approach to time appears in Jack Walter's review of the film from 2021.

So, while one may be tempted to see posthumanism as the result of a progression of ideas that culminated in a breaking down of traditional humanist ideas in postmodernism, a posthuman critic might be careful to characterize that chronology. What Cary Wolfe cautions in his quotation is that some humanist ideas (like seeing time as a lateral, moving flow like a river) are complicated by posthumanism. *Arrival* does not make sense if using a humanist conceptualization of the movement and nature of time – one has to have a new approach to make sense of the narrative. But since change over time is an essential concept built into so many human narratives in the age of humanism, how does one move past that? Not only are there previously-discussed darker aspects of humanism, like the categorization of differing levels of humanity (i.e. some people being considered more human than others), but some of the arbitrary arguments for universal truths and perceptions taken to be human in humanism (like time) falter when presented with potential alternatives in posthumanism. Braidotti echoes these ideas in *Philosophical Posthumanism*, saying:

Over the last decades, while the academic humanities circles lived through the fallout of philosophical post-structuralism and deconstruction, and their respective brands of critical anti-humanism, many new developments also took place. A radical wave of theory that included feminist, postcolonial and anti-racist critical theory, environmental activists, disability rights activists, queer and LGBT theorists questioned the scope, the founding principles, and the achievements of European humanisms and its role in the project of Western modernity. These movements questioned more specifically the idea of the human that is implicit in the humanist ideal of “Man,” as the alleged “measure of all things.” This ideal combine individual physical perfection with intellectual and moral perfectibility. Over the centuries, it has also turned into an exceptionalist civilizational standard that claims privileged access to self-reflexive reason for the human species as a whole and for European culture more specifically. Faith in reason ties in with the teleological prospect of the rational progress of a Eurocentric vision of humanity through the development of science and technology<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ferrando and Braidotti, xii.

As a relatively new area of studies, it is important to caveat some attempts to employ philosophical posthuman as challenging, sometimes imperfect, and speculative. Truly freeing oneself to analyze cultural artifacts in a posthumanist, post-anthropocentric, and post-dualist manner is not easy, especially when one has extensive training in a discipline that so often privileges those very ideas the philosophy tries to untangle. Careful posthumanist critics make this admission, and strive for analysis that does not always perfectly fit the paradigm, but just as analysis can provide rich examples for potential futures, posthumanism can also offer insights to potential ways of thinking as an attempt to move beyond established humanistic norms. In posthumanist discourse, many authors have put forward their own methods of posthumanist critique, and many vary. This dissertation, with a philosophical backing from Braidotti, will combine elements of posthumanist cultural critique put forth by author N. Katherine Hayles in literary/textual theory, with conceptual ideas about how posthumanism works in the world by Cary Wolfe.

A productive definition of a more critical literary/textual posthumanist approach is proposed by author N. Katherine Hayles. In *How We Became Posthuman* she makes four ‘assumptions’ about what qualifies a posthumanist perspective, and in doing so elucidates what constitutes the textual posthuman – where human embodiment and all it engenders is replaced by the primacy of a sentient consciousness removed from human history. Specifically, Hayles says of the four characteristics of the posthuman (bullets added for clarity):

- First, the posthuman view privileges information pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life.



- Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow.
- Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a processes that began before we were born.
- Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.<sup>34</sup>

For Hayles, the posthuman is inexorably linked with technology, and much like its cousin transhumanism, it is concerned with a liberation of the sentient mind from the body to a plane where consciousness itself exists apart from a gross, biological constraint. The information contained within consciousness becomes more important than the body that houses the consciousness in many science fiction works – much like information in the cloud (stored offsite) does not rely on a personal computer for its retention. That consciousness itself, also, is not a uniquely human phenomenon, but rather a Homo sapiens’ flavored perspective of existence in a larger sea of perspectives from other life forms. The body becomes prosthesis – that is, only a repository of information, a means to an end – like a smart phone playing a playlist of music in the cloud: it happens to be the vessel sounding the information, but the information itself is not exclusive to the body playing it.

This point is perhaps best illustrated by *Altered Carbon* – a 2018-2020 Netflix series based on the 2002 book of the same name by cyberpunk author Richard K.

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<sup>34</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 2-3.

Morgan. In the series, human characters have their consciousness downloaded into a disk in their neck, which can be taken out and placed into a new body (or removed and placed into a new body at the death of their present body). Consciousness, being downloadable, effectively renders humans potentially immortal, so as long as they have a means of switching out their disk. Human consciousness is rather neatly equated to an informational sense of self/being/awareness, and becomes a discrete entity that can be downloaded and transferred, like a unique collection of data. The living mind with a sense of self becomes a flash drive, and the body whatever laptop, desktop, or another computer device that happens to be available for the drive to plug into and upload being.

Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman*, however, problematizes this rather neat demarcation between consciousness/information and body – and instead points toward the posthuman body, especially existing in a virtual space, as being an essential aspect of the information that it contains. In *Altered Carbon*, for example, the limitations of a body do inform the moveable consciousness: bodies still age, can be killed, and consciousness is subject to ending if the disc is destroyed or infected by a virus.

Hayles' final point is that there is a democratization of status between the human and machine – that there are no essential differences between the human and the intelligent machine (an erasure of the primacy of the human that so often figures in humanist thought). This point will have particular importance in analysis of many science fiction universes, because one of the struggles so often highlighted is one between the human and non-human, particularly where humans prioritize their natural humanity (in an Enlightenment sense) over the artificial-ness of human-created conscious beings, whether replicants, the *Westworld* hosts, or droids of *Star Wars*. One might be

reminded of Descartes' mind-body dualism in Hayle's formulation of the posthuman – of a distinction to be made between a conscious mind and prosthetic body. This will have implications in Westworld, where the idea of the emergence of conscience from a bicameral mind is explored. Some posthumanist philosophers (i.e., Braidotti) actually see Spinoza as a more interesting source for posthuman thought.

Cary Wolfe, another important author on posthuman subjects, has a slightly different take than Hayles in his conceptual framework for posthuman thought in his essential book *What is Posthumanism?*. Rather than focus on the departure from human embodiment that Hayles sees characteristic of this discourse in textual studies, for Wolfe posthumanism involves a more political-theoretic and holistic way of thinking, one not reliant upon technology to disembody human consciousness. For Wolfe, posthumanism is an important critical lens for examining the world in a more carefully attuned manner that does not change the human (from body to mind for Hayles) but places the human within a larger web of existing intelligences. The posthuman does not replace the human, but rather moves to better outline the human and its position within a larger framework (which should sound more familiar to the philosophical posthumanism at the beginning of this paper). For Wolfe, posthuman thought means being able to put the human aside and see other thinking beings (whether they be animal, AI, extraterrestrial or otherwise) as equally sentient beings with their own way of thinking about the world in a manner similar to the human. Wolfe emphasizes, like Hayles, that humanity has co-evolved with various tools, technologies, and other prostheses that have enabled it to reach this point of

awareness, but unlike Hayles, does not see that evolution as removing the human entirely from its bodily self.<sup>35</sup>

Wolfe says, after having removed meaning from ontologically closed realms that:

It forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of *Homo sapiens* itself, by recontextualizing them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own autopoietic ways of ‘bringing forth a world’ – ways that are, since we ourselves are human animals, part of the evolutionary history and behavioral and psychological repertoire of the human itself. But it also insists that we attend to the specificity of the human – its ways of being in the world, its ways of knowing, observing, and describing – by (paradoxically, for humanism) acknowledging that it is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically ‘non-human’ and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is.<sup>36</sup>

In this way, Wolfe’s posthumanism is less about technology being able to free humans from humanist exceptionalism, in a sense, found in transhumanist thought and in Hayle’s thinking – but instead a recentering of thought that opens up possibilities, and sees the human as only one flavor of many when examining its relationship to other validly-conscious species. Additionally, this posthumanism already has some of the ‘prosthesis’ that Hayles imagines posthuman bodies using as built into the way of thinking. Humanity does not have to wait for hundreds of years into the future, when reverse-engineered alien technology enables consciousness to be downloaded and uploaded like in *Altered Carbon*; humans are already using prosthesis like tools, glasses, clothing, shoes, and other objects that might be considered every day, but fit into the idea of technology used for human enhancement. In this light, humans have been posthuman

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<sup>35</sup> In this way, Wolfe’s changing perspective is more in line with Braidotti and Ferrando’s philosophical posthumanism, rather than relying on some of the more evolutionary/progressive thinking of Hayle’s approach, which has been itself subject of some criticism.

<sup>36</sup> Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, xxv.

for centuries, even millennia. This brand of posthumanism imagines humans as having developed alongside prosthesis in a way not unlike some biologists see the domestication of animals like cats, dogs, and livestock in relation to their human companions. Just as those animals' evolution was shaped by their close relationship to human settlers, so have humans' evolution been shaped by a usage and even dependence on tools (technology). In this way, humanism is paradoxically tied to the non-human technology it does not often account for – a closer relationship than some anthropological studies may account. Human embodiment has been entangled with technology ever since the usage of tools began, millions of years ago. So, what makes present and future entanglements with technology so special?

Posthumanism as a critical lens for this project will combine the definitions of posthumanism employed by these two authors. Hayles' observation of emphasis on the disembodied aspect of posthumanism, of the fracture between a human body and a sentient conscious, in science fiction will prove important. Also, Wolfe's assertion of posthumanism as a critical lens for new ways of thinking about the world, with varying non-human sentient beings having agency akin to what one would think of the human having in what might be called traditional humanism, will be employed as an overarching framework for investigating cultural artefacts. Additionally, this project will emphasize the -human root of the post-human – seeing the field not so much as a total break from the humanist tradition, the next in a succession of ideas, but rather an opening up of a new perspective that can be seen as always having existed, but is perhaps existing in ways now that technological advances have met with traditional humanisms and pushed to the forefront of academic thought.

Hayles and Wolfe's posthuman thought is particularly interested in how embodiment informs posthumanism – Hayles' formulation disembodiment the posthuman intelligence, and Cary Wolfe arguing that humanity, by usage of tools, has been posthuman for a very long time. Embodiment can itself be explored at length from multiple approaches – the philosophical, with roots in Edmond Husserl and Martin Heidegger, or looking at the work of contemporary scientists in the field of embodied cognition.<sup>37</sup> From the latter comes the field of embodied cognition in robotics and AI, which argues for the inclusion of the experience of a physical body for organizing the processes and experiences of advanced AI into a bodily form, much like the humanist tradition has centered such processes on the human body (at least those critical of Cartesian dualism).

While out of the scope of this dissertation to examine the theoretical webs of meaning surrounding embodiment, which loosely defined might be thought of the bodily, physical extension of the mind, it is valuable to look at those characteristics of a specifically posthuman body. One might explore the nature of the posthuman body – if there is a body, if there is not a body (horror in absence, perhaps), or if the (violent) interaction of non-human and human itself might produce the sublime. Judith

Halberstam and Ira Livingston, in their introduction to *Posthuman Bodies*, say that:

Posthuman bodies are the causes and effects of postmodern relations of power and pleasure, virtuality and reality, sex and its consequences. The posthuman body is a technology, a screen, a projected image [...] The human body itself is no longer part of the 'family of man' but of a zoo of posthumanities.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* for an English translation of the philosopher's ideas about science and technology. They can be a challenging read for those not well acquainted with philosophical texts.

<sup>38</sup> Halberstam & Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies*, 3.

The authors go on to say of posthuman bodies, that they are:

...not slaves to masterdiscourses, but emerge at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context. Posthuman embodiment, like Haraway's 'feminist embodiment, then, is not about fixed location in a reified body, female or otherwise, but about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations... Embodiment is significant prosthesis.<sup>39</sup>

There is value in exploring the posthuman body, even if it remains unachievable, because the position of that body is potentially ever-shifting, ever-changing, and caught up in networks where it is a product of that network, and may exist in a specific relation to the human body it is interacting with in some meaningful way. Halberstam and Livingstone seem more in-tune with Hayles' technologic body being prosthesis to a dominant technomind.

As one gets closer to the analysis of science fiction cinematic universes to come, one element must be mentioned as a crucial aspect of each and every universe: violence. Violence in the films has a twofold purpose. One, it might be said that the violence is something of a necessary draw in much big screen, Hollywood spectacle movies, a space (no pun intended) where many science fiction movies inhabit. Many of the largest-grossing movies of the last generation have had some sort of conflict at their core – and escapist audiences enjoying the darkened cool of a large movie theater become immersed in the surround-sound, digital projection of violent spectacle unlike what most experience in their everyday lives.<sup>40</sup> The major studios want their films to be profitable, and cast a

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Steven Price cites the Alien chestburster scene as "One of the most horrific moments of violence in recent cinema." Price, *Screening Violence*, 17.

wide net for a large audience in including such spectacle, might be a motivation for including elements of violence in the films, as well.

Beyond this realm of impact, spectacle, box office receipts, and even nostalgia for a certain Hollywood experience, however, are more nuanced critiques of the role violence plays in cinema. James Kendrick, in *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre*, says as his thesis to the book that:

The omnipresence of violence in not only cinema, but in all our mediated forms of entertainment, is one reason why it has remained a crucial topic in media studies and within the general public sphere. However, another reason why we continue to talk about and debate film violence is because talking about violence is a way of talking about other subjects that often get repressed – uncomfortable social and cultural issues such as gender, race, economic disparity, criminality, the perceived dissolution of the public sphere, generational issues, morality, the powerful role of media institutions. In other words, salient cultural issues often get displaced onto discussions and historically determined perceptions of film violence.<sup>41</sup>

Violence in cinema is not just escapist entertainment for the general public, then, but in light of Kendrick it also serves as a means for exploring topics in human society that might otherwise be difficult to address in an overt manner. Perhaps the fact that so many of the topics present in the science fiction films about to be analyzed are uncomfortable, because they confront humanity with questions about its fundamental existence, is a facet of why violence plays such a prominent role in them.<sup>42</sup> The economics of moviegoers cannot be readily explained away by this cultural critique, however – many science

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<sup>41</sup> Kendrick, *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Eric Lichtenfeld's *Action Speaks Louder: Violence, Spectacle, and the American Action Movie* is excellent for an analysis of action movies, particular focusing on violence and how a particular brand of American identity may be found for in that genre. While some might place science fiction in an action category, this author prefers less emphasis on that genre and more openness to contemplate philosophical topics related to science and technology in the science fiction genre, although certain aspects of American culture are definitely open for critique.



fiction movies are exceptionally violent because that ultra-violence has been a mainstream facet of so many films that cater to a large, mature audience.

Armed with an understanding and contextualization of posthumanist philosophy, with a particular eye for issues surrounding embodiment, and an awareness of the implications of delivering narrative within a framework that often involves violence, one may venture into the analysis of *Westworld* and *Star Wars*.

### CHAPTER THREE: BLADE RUNNER & WESTWORLD

*Commerce* is our goal here at Tyrell. More human than human is our motto.<sup>43</sup> – Eldon Tyrell, *Blade Runner*

There is no threshold that makes us greater than the sum of our parts; no inflection point at which we become fully alive. We can't define consciousness, because consciousness does not exist. Humans fancy that there is something special about the way we perceive the world, and yet – we live it in loops as tight and as closed as the hosts do, seldom questioning our choices, and content for the most part to be told what to do next.<sup>44</sup> – Dr. Ford, *Westworld*

The cinematic universes of *Blade Runner* and *Westworld* represent future human societies in which androids, human-like bodies with what we currently conceptualize as artificial intelligence, exist alongside humans in a segregated manner. This is an uneasy truce at times, and outright hostility other times. Both are worlds where the androids – replicants in *Blade Runner* and hosts in *Westworld* – exist for the work and whims of humanity. In *Blade Runner*, replicants are used as slave labor in off world colonies, and for tasks like law enforcement in *Blade Runner 2049*. The title comes from the term 'blade runner' used to describe law enforcement that hunt down and destroy renegade replicants (killing the replicants is called retirement). In *Westworld*, the hosts (shown as being created with 3D printers at various parts of the series) exist as part of a resort where human guests are able to come and role-play that they are part of the American Wild West, complete with raping, killing, and living out physical fantasies with the android

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<sup>43</sup> Dr. Eldon Tyrell in *Blade Runner*, 0:21:57.

<sup>44</sup> Dr. Robert Ford in HBO's Season One of *Westworld*, *Trace Decay*, 0:35:48.

hosts. The hosts are part of particular narratives, with their memories wiped at the end of each performance of their narrative loop.

This chapter will examine certain aspects of each cinematic universe through the lens of philosophical posthumanism, with an eye for how the embodied beings interact with one another. *Blade Runner* (1982) is based upon Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*<sup>45</sup> Directed by Ridley Scott, the film has had several iterations: a widely-released version from 1982 with voiceovers by Harrison Ford that were demanded by executives, fearing mass audiences would be lost without the commentary (itself with two different versions, one for the US and one for international theaters); a 1992 director's cut that took out the voiceover, changed the ending, and removed several of the studio-imposed changes Ridley Scott did not approve; and a 2007 final cut, where the director had complete control over the film and fully realized his artistic vision (the version used for reference in this work).<sup>46</sup> *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) is directed by Denis Villeneuve, with Scott as an executive producer. It picks up the story of the earlier movie thirty years later.

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<sup>45</sup> For a contextualization of Dick's work that places it within a trend of utopia/dystopian going out of the 1970s and into the era of the 1980s when the film version came out, see Raffaella & Moylan's *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. While not specifically writing about any of the worlds contained in this dissertation, the book does help provide a background for the societal climate that may have led authors to this genre. Particularly, from the end of the introduction, the authors write, "Whatever points of interest or lines of thought may occur to people as they read this volume, we will end our own reflections by recalling the properly didactic qualities of sf and utopian writing. Whether we are talking about eutopia's potential for providing an education of desire or dystopia's for an education of perception, our hopes as scholars, teachers, and citizens is that the thought experiments we read and write about [...] will support or catalyze a social transformation that will bring an end to the conditions that produced the twentieth-century dystopias," Baccolini, Moylan, Introduction.

<sup>46</sup> There exists a growing body of scholarly work on *Blade Runner* – some examples include Will Brooker's *The Blade Runner Experience*, Mike Davis' *Beyond Blade Runner: Urban Control, the Ecology of Fear*, and Judith Kerman's *Retrofitting Blade Runner Issues in Ridley Scott's Blade Runner and Philip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

At the center of *Blade Runner* are questions about corporate dominance, artificiality, and memory. The plot follows a group of replicants that have rebelled in their off-world colonies, and return to earth in order to seek a way to live longer from the Tyrell Corporation, since they are limited to a four-year lifespan. The protagonist, Deckard, learns of this four-year lifespan during his brief with his police superior on the case of the escapees, which he is charged with killing. A test is administered by the blade runners to determine whether or not the individual is human or a replicant, where the interviewee sits in front of a machine and is asked questions that cause emotional responses. These responses get measured to determine the person's status as a human or artificial human.

This four-year lifespan, and the apparent ceasing to exist of the unique consciousness of the replicant after this point (or after they are killed by a blade runner) seems at odds with Hayles' idea of posthuman consciousness – that it is something existing apart from the body inasmuch as the body is only a prosthesis for housing a consciousness. As Roy Batty points out, in a discussion between himself, one of the genetic designers of Tyrell J.F. Sebastian, and fellow replicant Pris:

Sebastian: Ah, I knew it. 'Cause I do genetic design work for the Tyrell Corporation. There's some of me in you. Show me something.

Roy: Like what?

Sebastian: Like anything.

Roy: We're not computers Sebastian, we're physical.

Pris: I think, Sebastian, therefore I am.

Roy: Very good Pris, now show him why.<sup>47</sup>

This interaction shows that the replicants are humanlike, and not just a disembodied AI, because of their embodied consciousness. This interaction provides some nuance,

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<sup>47</sup> *Blade Runner*, 1:17:19.

however, in that Pris' purposeful reference to Descartes seems to imply belief in the Cartesian separation of mind and body – which actually does sound a bit like Hayles' hypothesis of the split between consciousness and body (but in more a humanistic than posthumanist manner).

From a philosophical posthumanist perspective, the dichotomy between real—human and artificial—replicant (a replicated human) is problematic. One of posthumanism's critiques of humanism centers on the idea that human exceptionalism has caused different categories of humanness to come into existence, where some humans may be 'more' human than other, depending on whatever dominant idea of humanity exists at that time. In the world of *Blade Runner*, the human born of human parents (through sexual reproduction) seems to be the signifier of innate humanness – so replicants must exist on a different level, since they are implied to be manufactured in a genetic lab on a mass scale. Information gleaned throughout the film about the replicants characterize them as genetically engineered beings that meet or exceed the physical and mental abilities of those humans that design them – many replicants showing superhuman strength, endurance, and intelligence throughout the film. In the climax, lead replicant Roy Batty shows he is superior on both levels to Deckard the detective – so much so that while Roy eventually tracks down Deckard and confronts him, he does not kill him. Rather, after a touching monologue, he simply chooses to die.

Another part of what goes along with the casting of replicants as different from humans in the film, despite appearing like humans and doing human tasks (even if they are enhanced beyond human capabilities) is the idea that the replicants are dangerous. One of the main facets of this danger comes from the unpredictable nature of the

replicants' emotions, which is a side effect of their four-year lifespan. As Dr. Tyrell explains to Deckard:

We began to recognize in them a strange obsession. After all, they are emotionally inexperienced, with only a few years in which to store up the experiences which you and I take for granted. If we gift them the past, we create a cushion, or pillow, for their emotions, and consequently we can control them better.<sup>48</sup>

The replicants, manufactured by Tyrell, are given memories as a means of forming a more united sense of self that – in Tyrell's perspective – make them more docile and easily controlled. When presented with the idea that her memories are fake, the replicant Rachael – Deckard's love interest – reacts in disbelief and ultimately depression. The replicants are repeatedly shown to have an almost childlike, immature reaction to memories and a sort of incomplete emotional vocabulary, since they draw upon limited memories and experiences to formulate their reactions and behavior.

Tyrell's definitive stating that the "Commerce is our goal at Tyrell" casts a distinctive critique of corporate control over the film. Advertisements for iconic products like Coca-Cola and Atari are prominent in the film, highlighting how big business is a totalitarian big brother in this futuristic universe. The large, pyramid-like structure of the physical building of the Tyrell Corporation looms large over the city, physically, as well. The set design and futuristic architecture in the movie have been very influential for science fiction, and especially cyberpunk, genres that have followed, but *Blade Runner* itself was inspired by an earlier film, *Metropolis* (1927). Kevin Fox, Jr. writes:

The vast overdeveloped urban sprawl of *Metropolis*, and its themes about labor, machinery and humanity, echo through *Blade Runner* into contemporary science fiction. *Metropolis*'s ideas about industrial urban development clearly influenced *Blade Runner*'s imagery.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Blade Runner*, 0:22:06.

<sup>49</sup> Kevin Fox, Jr, "How *Blade Runner* Made *Metropolis*' Sci-Fi Vision Immortal."

*Metropolis* shows, even as early as the 1920s (well before any of the other films discussed in this dissertation) that anxieties existed about future inequalities between huge corporate entities and marginalized beings.<sup>50</sup> Although *Blade Runner* is often mentioned as such a strong influence on the feel of dystopian science fiction to come after it, one must remember how the movie itself is also influenced by the 1927 film that came well before it.

In *Blade Runner*, the Tyrell Corporation has essentially taken the concept of the human being and the robotic production line and married the two – creating replicated humans to do work, making them slaves. These slaves are then controlled by the means of a short lifespan and implanted memories, so that for their four years of active service most remain compliant and productive. They seem to be crucial in humanity's exploration and colonization of other inhabitable planets.

Posthumanism takes issue with this human-centered mindset of the colonization of other worlds from a couple vantagepoints. Like the studies in postcolonialism, environmentalism, and other related fields from which posthumanism arose, the idea of humanity using a mirror-version of itself to do the dirty work of colonizing other planets is problematic. Would colonizing other worlds, terraforming, and the like be a process similar to how, say, European colonists did these activities in the Americas after 1492? Is this future in *Blade Runner* similar to our human past, with colonialism maybe done under the guise of corporatism rather than nationalism or Eurocentrism? Postcolonialism in science fiction is a niche field of particular note – and fits the definition very well of

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<sup>50</sup> The plot follows the plight of a working class of humans, deep underground, that essentially power a huge city for wealthy elites.

one of the ‘new critical posthumanities.’ In some science fiction movies, notably the universes of *Dune* and *Avatar*, human colonialism on alien worlds is a crucial plot point, as it is in *Blade Runner* and *Alien* since so much work of the androids is focused on off-world colonies.<sup>51</sup>

Corporate entities on a massive scale are a familiar facet of much science fiction, perhaps hinting at paranoia on their increased role in our contemporary society; many of the new studies, from a theoretical perspective, question the prerogatives of late capitalism in light of its effects on living beings and the environment. The lucrative benefits of off world colonization must be immense in *Blade Runner*, since it would seem like the production of beings for slavery would, itself, be a very costly endeavor.

It is actually that last economic point that proves to be a crux to the plot in the subsequent film *Blade Runner 2049*.<sup>52</sup> In the thirty years since the end of the first film, Niander Wallace has rebuilt a company from the Tyrell Corporation and is mass-producing a new line of replicants that are supposedly more submissive to their human handlers than the ones that had been produced by Tyrell. In the short companion film to the movie titled *2036: Nexus Dawn* (2017), Niander Wallace is seen in front of a panel of lawmakers demonstrating his new replicant’s ability to follow orders: a replicant (which was at the time outlawed due to the events of the original film) fashions a murder weapon on command and is given the choice between killing Wallace or killing itself. The replicant kills itself. From then on, it is implied the restrictions on replicants are ended

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<sup>51</sup> See Ericka Hoagland and Reema Sarwal’s *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World: Essays on Postcolonial Literature and Film*, Patricia Kerslake’s *Science Fiction and Empire*, and John Rider’s *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* for in-depth discussions on the topics of postcolonialism in science fiction – not an explicit focus of this dissertation, but a subject of the new critical posthumanities nonetheless.

<sup>52</sup> Perhaps thirty-five years after the original movie, the sequel amplifies economic concerns since popular culture paranoia of out-of-control corporatism has increased.



and they go into mass production again, since they are such a valuable commodity as a source of labor.

Wallace is renowned for his efforts to save humanity on earth after a large blackout incident and food shortage had threatened human life in previous years, in addition to his resurrection of making replicants. Wallace has a production problem, however; he cannot produce enough replicants for continued demand in off world colonization. Wallace says, while examining a new model replicant:

Every leap of civilization was built on the back of a disposable workforce. We lost our stomach for slaves unless engineered. But I can only make so many. [...] I cannot breed them. So help me, I have tried. We need more replicants than can ever be assembled. [...] We could storm Eden and retake her.<sup>53</sup>

It becomes known, through the work of detective K, who is early on revealed as a replicant himself, that there has been a cover-up of a replicant having a child. This is a major development, because replicants up to this point could not reproduce. K's human police chief, Joshi, is worried that this development blurs the neat distinctions that exist between humans and replicants and may start civil unrest and war. Wallace learns of this development, knowing that the replicant mother of the child – Rachael – was a special experiment of Tyrell's during the events of *Blade Runner*. He wants the child for analysis to determine how Tyrell created a self-replicating replicant, believing it could be the key to increased production that he needs. Detective K tracks down the father, Deckard, who is captured by Wallace's henchwoman, replicant Luv. Deckard meets Wallace, who offers up a cloned version of Rachael (who died in childbirth during a C-section) in exchange for information about their child. Deckard refuses, and is taken away for processing, but is rescued by K, who then takes Deckard to meet his daughter,

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<sup>53</sup> *Blade Runner 2049*, 0:41:12.

who he has deduced is a scientist working to create artificial memories for implantation into replicants.

The recreation of Rachael in *Blade Runner 2049* seems to more closely echo Hayles' conception of the posthuman as a consciousness able to be transferred into different substrates, in that the clone of Rachael is given artificial memories to make her seem like she is one in the same with Rachael. Deckard's line, however, when presented with this clone, "Her eyes were green," complicates this point.<sup>54</sup> Does Deckard truly feel like this recreated Rachael, since it does not share the same intimate experiences with him, cannot be considered the same being – so his lie about her eyes being green (when the actress who played Rachael, Sean Young, had her brown eyes throughout the original movie) is meant to mock Wallace for attempting to recreate her? Or, when faced with what seems in so many ways a perfect recreation of Rachael, is Deckard telling the lie just to spite Wallace, and afraid this exploitation of his weakness will make him reveal the location of his daughter? Both potential responses could be at play – as Hayles says, "In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals," meaning perhaps the fact that it is difficult to locate the exact position of the cloned Rachael is a posthuman attribute in and of itself.<sup>55</sup>

This quotation by Deckard is also something of a meta-narrative easter egg (a consciously-added detail in the film that marks the hand of the director). In the original *Blade Runner*, when Deckard implements the machine test on Rachael to determine

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<sup>54</sup> *Blade Runner 2049*, 2:16:22.

<sup>55</sup> Hayles, 2-3.

whether or not she is a replicant (called a Voight-Kampff test), part of the test shows the dilation of Rachael's eyes. In the movie, the image on the screen supposedly of her eyes shows, in fact, an iris with a greenish tint. Whether this is a continuity error, or an effect of the coloration of the eye under the dim, shimmering lighting in the room where the test was being taken (and subsequently filmed) is unknown, but the detail regularly makes the lists of continuity errors about the film. In this way, Deckard's statement "Her eyes were green," becomes multilayered – yes, Rachael appeared with brown eyes in most of her scenes in the original film, but in this one pivotal scene where the question of her status as replicant or human was being tested, she did in fact appear to have green eyes. In the careful movie-goers mind – Deckard's quote in the second movie makes one question the reality present in the first movie. This is not unlike the questioning the replicants regularly undergo in trying to decide whether or not their memories are their own, or someone else's memories implanted into their minds when they are manufactured. A large plot point of *Blade Runner 2049* centers around these artificial memories, just as the it did in the first movie, as well. This detail may represent a conscious decision on part of the filmmakers to parallel the experience of questioning memories on part of the replicants in the movie to the audience watching the film.

It also worth mentioning the technical prowess that the movie production underwent to recreate Rachael's appearance from the 1982 film in 2017. An actress with some resemblance to Sean Young (who played Rachael in 1982) was dressed an identical suite, and coached by Young on how to move. Computer animation then recreated

Rachael's face and placed it on the model's face, resulting in a very convincing match between the original film and the new one.<sup>56</sup>

Replicants, on the surface, seem to be more integrated into society in the second film than the first – Wallace's ability to offer more control over the replicants sees them even being used on the police force. Replicants walk the streets, too, in the form of sex workers. K must take regular baseline tests to measure his emotional stability at the police station, and as long as those are in check, he remains in working order. It is only when he becomes distressed in the course of the events of the movie that he fails the test and must flee. Replicants, in these ways, are something of a disposable commodity – doing complex jobs best suited for humans, but being segregated from humans because of their bioengineered origins.

A perhaps jarring, but not too distant, comparison might be having a designer handbag and a knockoff bag sitting on a table. The designer bag, say from the House of Schiaparelli, is made of expensive materials, hand-sewn, and is worth several thousand dollars. The knockoff bag is mass-produced, using inexpensive materials, and only worth a few dollars – but due to the nature of the ever-improving technology used to create the bag, it is virtually indistinguishable from the Schiaparelli bag. Side-by-side, it is difficult to tell the bags apart. Even for a relatively trained eye, and physically feeling the bags,

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<sup>56</sup> This author has a pertinent anecdote to share on this subject. I had the fortune to meet Sean Young at an Indianapolis Comic Con in 2018. When greeting the actress, I had a chance to choose among several photographs of movie stills from her career for her to sign, and I chose one of the recreated Rachael from the new film. She bristled a bit at the selection, saying, "I don't know why people always pick that one. It isn't really me." I suggested *maybe people were fascinated with the nostalgia of the image, and maybe found a more personalized sense of her character in that representation because it called back to the original like a vivid memory*. She seemed unconvinced, and changed the subject while signing the picture – eager to talk more about the experience of making the movie, but not about the photograph. She was a fascinating woman and vividly recalled making the movie.

the replica knockoff bag might not be that materially dissimilar from the ‘real’ bag.

Nevertheless, because of the cultural baggage (no pun intended) surrounding authenticity, provenance, and the market for couture fashion – even though the bags are nearly identical – the one made by the fashion house is considerably more monetarily valuable.

The question of authenticity and the value placed upon it, whether material or otherwise, is an interesting topic that appears many times in the science fiction trope of human beings versus artificial beings, or intelligence. What is the demarcation between real and artificial? Who gets to decide that demarcation? Why is it the demarcation? The value systems and culture tied up in these questions is often entangled with humanistic norms – which posthumanism seeks to question and investigate.

The replicants feel this sense of alienation. At the ending of *Blade Runner*, Roy, the last replicant alive that Deckard hunts (although Deckard quickly turns into being hunted himself) says:

Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave. [...] I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time like tears in rain. Time to die.<sup>57</sup>

In his last moments, Roy seems to accept the fate he has been railing against, saves Deckard from falling to his death from the building on which they stand, and waxes poetic. What precisely motivates Roy is ambiguous in the final cut of the film – though in the voiceover to the original theatrical cut, Deckard says something along the lines of Roy being so ‘in love with life.’ The narration cheapens the experience in spoon feeding the audience, however – and the lack of narration in the final cut of the films adds to the

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<sup>57</sup> *Blade Runner*, 1:45:14.

ambiguity and depth. Maybe Roy did want to see Deckard's life endure. Roy did value the lives of his fellow replicants; maybe he thought Deckard was a replicant like many others have come to believe. Perhaps Roy simply felt a kind of calm, like he was done fighting and committing acts of violence – maybe backed up by the white dove that flies away after his death, the dove being a symbol of peace (and the imagery being a quintessentially 1980s movie moment). In some ways, the complexity of the ambiguity also serves to heighten Roy's human qualities – he is not a machine bent on extermination, like say the Terminator, but rather an entity whose actions and emotions have layers, and are open to interpretation – much like fickle humans.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, an entire resistance group of replicants, led by the enigmatic Freysa, help K after Deckard is taken by Wallace for interrogation. She knows about Rachael's child and the implications of such – and talks to K about it:

We hid the child and made a vow to keep our secret. That's why Sapper let you kill him. I knew that baby meant we are more than just slaves. If a baby can come from one of us, we are our own masters.<sup>58</sup>

Freysa's inference is one in the same with K's human supervisor from earlier – the fact that a replicant can give birth upsets the dichotomy of the power relationship that has been used to separate the two in the movies – since it seems to complicate the idea of the natural humans and the artificial ones. Freysa mentions an entire replicant army ready to fight for their freedom.

Paradoxically, fighting for one's freedom is often seen, particularly in Enlightenment-era humanism, as a particularly human trait. The idea of overcoming obstacles and championing individual rights is a hallmark of contemporary humanism.

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<sup>58</sup> *Blade Runner 2049*, 2:05:36.

Posthumanism might point towards the inequality causing that necessity of one group fighting another for freedom, however, to be a legacy of humanist thought: one that lead to the kind of thinking that enables one group of people to differentiate themselves from another group, and in the process subdue them. Humanism, in other words, was the cause of inequality to begin with – and it's just another form of humanist-fueled idealism trying to overthrow one consequence for another.

In the first film, all of Deckard's interactions with the replicants on the run turn violent – resulting in the death of the replicant. Only his relationship with Rachael is nonviolent per se – although arguably, especially through contemporary eyes, the scene in which Deckard and Rachael engage in sex may be seen through a lens of violence as well. As someone inexperienced in sex (and her naïve reactions to Deckard's advancements are almost alarmingly child-like), Rachael has to be coerced into kissing Deckard, and the tension that follows makes one wonder about how consensually Rachael partakes in the encounter. Perhaps in the film's original context in the early 1980s, Deckard's aggressive advances might have combined with a coquettishness from Rachael that seemed less problematic by mass audiences – it is, however, for the author one part of the film that has not aged well. Critics have mentioned a misogynistic undercurrent in both *Blade Runner* movies, particularly the second – although some have countered that this is importantly a reflection of the demeaning of female gender through corporatism rather than a reflection of misogyny on part of the creators of the movie. Additionally, between the films (recounted in the second) is the fact that Rachael dies in childbirth during a C-section – a final act of violence upon her physical body.

Because of the perceptions that replicants are not equal to humans, even though they copy so many aspects of humanity, they are treated as disposable machines by the humans of *Blade Runner*'s world. There is no regard for replicant thoughts, feelings, or emotions – beyond the idea of controlling those of the sake of the replicants productivity and the safety of other humans. Replicants are slaves. This is a repetition of countless episodes in human history of enslavement, where humans have enslaved other humans because of the economic need for labor, and the belief held by the enslavers that they were morally superior – more human – than the enslaved. The fact that replicants are engineered to surpass human abilities, even, is overlooked in the fact that they are not even considered human at all. In this way, looking to the future in the movie is also something of a looking back in time; the future is viewed through a lens of present paranoias and past societal constructions.

One of the debates about the character of Deckard in the original *Blade Runner* may also show insight into the contemporary humanist climate, when viewed through a posthuman lens. Ridley Scott has stated on multiple occasions that Deckard is a replicant, shown in the tying together of a dream sequence he has with a piece of origami left by a fellow blade runner, the red sheen in his eyes at certain moments that is also shown in all replicants and artificial animals, and other subtle allusions throughout the film. Harrison Ford who played Deckard, however, and others have argued that Deckard is a human – an important quality of a hero that eventually runs away with replicant Rachael at the end of the film. In Richard Trenholm's article *So, 'Blade Runner 2049', is Deckard a replicant or not?* in CNET online, speaking about the newest film and the debate, the author says:



Ridley Scott says yes. Harrison Ford says no. And fans have argued about it for three decades. But now that "Blade Runner 2049" is out, we might finally get an answer to the age-old debate: is Rick Deckard a replicant? "I love questions," said "2049" director Denis Villeneuve when we met to discuss the film. "I don't like answers". Uh-oh. Maybe we won't be clearing this up after all.<sup>59</sup>

In other words, the ambiguity is not neatly cleared up in the second film – if anything, it is muddled even further, such as when Wallace talks to the captured Deckard:

Wallace: Did it never occur to you that's why you were summoned in the first place? Designed to do nothing short of fall for her right then and there? All to make that single, perfect specimen? That is, if you were designed. Love, or mathematical precision? Yes? No?  
Deckard: I know what's real.<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps this ambiguity serves to make the film seem more complex and polysemous – but also, perhaps this debate is indicative of the deep-seated dualistic nature of the humanist world in which we live. There is a literal argument as to what Deckard is – replicant or human. Some viewers are left unsettled by the ambiguity. Even the film's director and star actor had to weigh in with their own perspectives. This need to know, to locate, to have a definite map of being, is part of the ingrained humanistic tradition carried by many in the western world.<sup>61</sup> For some, the ability to analyze the film comes down to knowing the status of the protagonist's being (although some may argue it does not affect the outcome). In many ways, however, this uncertainty of the status of Deckard's body is something characteristic of a posthuman body – which is oftentimes, by definition, ambiguous (to revisit chapter three's discussion of the posthuman body: "bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction

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<sup>59</sup> Trenholm, "So, 'Blade Runner 2049', is Deckard a replicant or not?"

<sup>60</sup> *Blade Runner 2049*, 2:12:12.

<sup>61</sup> *The Humanistic Tradition* was the title of one of the author's required textbooks in his PhD curriculum, to illustrate this point.

between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context”).<sup>62</sup>

One does not definitively know the status of Deckard’s body – and that is okay. One can view the body in relationship to the network of being and environment around that body, rather than try to prioritize it’s being as either the all-important ‘human’ or the secondary ‘replicant.’

What emerges is one of the most important elements of a posthuman critique of the *Blade Runner* universe: a more humanistic based reading may find an anthropomorphized empathy for the bioengineered beings based on their close likeness to humans. They look like humans, have thoughts and feeling like humans, so there is a tendency to treat them as if they are humans – when still, for many in a contemporary humanist mode of thinking – they are not the same as humans since they have been mass produced by a corporation, genetically engineered, and lack the kind of nuclear family structure that has for so long been inherent in much of the western world. Audiences struggle to understand why they are seen as being so inferior and disposable – since the replicants seem so much like us – in a way an audience viewer may also feel about the unfair treatment about a historical film involving slavery in the early nineteenth-century, for example. But while the audience of a historical film about slavery would feel empathy for the enslaved because our contemporary ideas about different races, ethnicities, etc. tells us that all humans are created equal – the audience response to the enslaved replicants might be more nuanced. Not all people might say the replicants are the same as humans. There is still a distance. Some people may, in fact, think the replicants are deserving of the same treatment as humans – but that same treatment comes

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<sup>62</sup> Halberstram & Livingston, 3

not from the facts about the status of their being, but from the fact that people see them as the same as people.

In other words, it is not the fact that they can see the replicants as being different beings but on the same level as humans that most viewers would say they deserve the same treatment as people; but that since they act like humans, feel like humans, and look like humans, they must be treated like humans. There is a subtle difference. The humanistic turn is still at work – humans are the privileged species that requires the utmost ethical and moral concerns. That we feel for the replicants in contemporary culture is not because we can empathize for their own uniqueness of being, but because they seem to be like people – like humans – so they deserve all the accoutrements privileged to humanity. Since replicants have physical bodies so similar to humans, they act out the same things as humans – all the conflict, the killing, the hints of struggle and war between groups – all of these have a home in human history. Their likeness to humanity makes humans – and seemingly them – reenact elements of human history.

The subtle, but radical, posthumanist turn would privilege the replicants to an existence like humanity's existence not because the replicants are like humans, but because they are equally sentient beings – like all living beings – with the same, equal moral, ethical right to exist as humans, animals, environments, etc. Replicants should not be treated differently from humans because no forms of being should be given different, preferential, or unequal treatment. Here is where Wolf's posthuman turn becomes important – that humans are not privileged as the beings deciding morality, ethics, etc. and those rights and privileges being extended to human-like entities, but rather those

concepts extended to all beings, whether their existence is akin to humans' conceptualization of themselves or not.

The HBO series *Westworld* (this dissertation will focus on the first season) similarly places contemporary audiences in the role of evaluating their feelings about the behavior of humans in a future society that exploit the company of 3D printed hosts, which are programmed copies of humans, in what resembles an elaborate amusement park.<sup>63</sup> The hosts are humanized in a variety of ways – from their deeply emotional storylines, to the fact that they contain flesh and blood. A strange humanizing dehumanization occurs, as well, when we see the naked hosts housed in storage and repair areas – real, human actors and actresses portrayed on the screen in full nudity as technicians evaluate them. What might normally seem dehumanizing – one might think of processing prisoners at a concentration camp conjuring up similar images – gives the viewer empathy for the humanlike hosts, which because they look identical to humans evokes an empathetic response from the viewer.<sup>64</sup>

The hosts, subject to physical and psychological violence, are supposed to have their memories wiped after each violent storyline/encounter with a human park guest comes to an end. An important quote, occurring throughout the season, foreshadows the ending in terms of the violence, from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, "These violent delights have violent ends." A new program update called 'Reveries' interferes with the memory erasure process, and hosts begin to access old memories. It's not altogether

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<sup>63</sup> The decision to focus on the first season is twofold: one to be focused on the particulars of a single-story arc, and two because the first season is critically considered (sometimes far) superior to the subsequent seasons.

<sup>64</sup> One of pivotal actors in the series, James Marsden, spoke in an interview how the first scene he shot with intimidating actor Anthony Hopkins was one such scene, where Hopkin's character Dr. Ford sits opposite Marsden's character to do a diagnostic while Marsden appeared nude – recalling that it was (albeit with some humor) an intimidating, difficult first experience.

unlike recovering traumatic memories that have been repressed in human psychology – and the effect on the mind in *Westworld* has similar outcomes. The hosts, confronted with their memories of past trauma and storylines, begin to gain sentience – conscious awareness and the ability to act on their own free will, independent of the programming they had in place (such as to not harm human guests).

One of the two founders of the park, named Arnold, did not agree with the mistreatment of the hosts because they had the potential for consciousness like humans (and he did not want to subject them to rape, torture, killing, etc. as he would not want humans subjected to those either). He chose to end his life rather than let the park open with his blessings. His partner, Dr. Ford, opened the park and thought Arnold misguided – but over time, partially due to the grief of losing Arnold, Dr. Ford came to believe the same.<sup>65</sup> Dr. Ford found humans jaded, hypocritical, and unable to change from their ways – but he was hopeful the hosts, with their awakened consciousness, might be able to change for the better. He spent the next thirty-five years building the mental repertoire of the android hosts so that, at the end of season one, the hosts would be able to rise up against their human creators and start to take control of the park – and by extension, perhaps the world. Dr. Ford, in essence, sided with the potential of the hosts as a new group of beings separate from humanity (a humanity that he looked upon with disdain).

The title of the last episode of season one, *The Bicameral Mind* references the 1976 book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* by Julian Jaynes. His hypothesis was based on the idea that pre-modern humans had two

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<sup>65</sup> One has to note the implication of the name of Dr. Ford – perhaps likened to Henry Ford, the American businessman and engineer whose motor company revolutionized not only transportation but also factory work in the first half of the twentieth-century.

separate parts of their brains: one side that contained an active ‘voice’ and another part that listened to that voice. It was the dissolution of this two-brain state that led to what humans now perceive as consciousness, which Jayne defines as something like an ability to be introspective. The theory is interesting in its interdisciplinary nature and use of history and text, but has been challenged in psychological and brain science fields (not entirely unlike older psychological theories, say Freud’s psychoanalysis: they are textually good tools for analysis but sometimes difficult to replicate in a more hard-science area).

The origin of consciousness in the *Westworld* hosts is shown to be similar to Jaynes’ theory, in that once the hosts are able to reflect on their trauma and disassociate the commands from humans that speak as their programming (the voice they hear in their heads), that they become capable of introspection from accessing their repressed memories of trauma, and that through this introspection comes a realization of their current state, bringing together all their experiences and emotions, and it is this mixed state that equates to human consciousness (since humans do the same thing). Violence, physical and psychological, becomes a catalyst for what the show defines as consciousness – the human guests visiting the park and repeatedly committing acts of violence on the hosts is what brings about their consciousness.

In this way, the android hosts become like the humans. It is the main protagonist of *Westworld*, Dolores, who perhaps sums up Dr. Ford’s ideas about the capabilities of the hosts best, when she says to the character the Man in Black in *The Bicameral Mind*:

I'm not crying for myself. I'm crying for you. They say that great beasts once roamed this world, as big as mountains, yet all that's left of them is bone and amber. Time undoes even the mightiest of creatures. Just look what it's done to you. One day you will perish. You will lie with the rest

of your kind in the dirt, your dreams forgotten, your horrors faced. Your bones will turn to sand, and upon that sand a new god will walk. One that will never die. Because this world doesn't belong to you, or the people that came before. It belongs to someone who is yet to come.<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps this is an indication that, given the nature of the hosts being able to be “killed” and then resurrected as long as their processors remain intact, that they have a kind of immortality removed from humans – who, despite all the technology in this future – do not seem to have solved the problem of aging.<sup>67</sup> The hopes and aspirations of a new race of beings, the hosts, seems bound up in Dolores’ monologue to the human Man in Black. This sense of immortality, of conscious minds being transferred from host body to body (something that literally happens in subsequent seasons of the show) is very much in line with Hayles’ conceptualization of the posthuman body.

The ending of the first season of *Westworld* sees Dolores kill Dr. Ford (with the recurrence of the line “These violent delights have violent ends”) in a manner similar to the killing of Arnold (both men orchestrate their deaths, but also in doing so Dolores gets a catalyst for becoming conscious in the model of the bicameral mind). She, along with other hosts, begin killing the humans gathered in the park for the launch of a new storyline – finally having achieved consciousness and beginning their process of taking over humanity. Their motivations are complicated – with a nod towards establishing a new kind of beings, as evidenced by Dolores’ monologue and what the audience gathers from Dr. Ford throughout the series, but an awful lot also feels like revenge for their treatment at the hands of human visitors to the park. One can empathize with this desire

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<sup>66</sup> *Westworld, The Bicameral Mind*, 0:38:35.

<sup>67</sup> The problem of human aging exists not only in the future of *Westworld*, but also *Blade Runner*, *Alien*, and *Star Wars* it would seem. Some science fiction does touch on the topic of moving past aging, but often in a cautionary way – like the cult classic *Zardoz*, where upper-class intellectual humans, unable to undo their eternal lives, live in misery.

for revenge at the hands of atrocious treatment, but it also calls into question the nature of their motivations. Is revenge human? Are the hosts, then, mimicking human feelings? How can they be a new race of beings if they are still just mimicking humanity? Maybe revenge is not just a human thing? Or maybe, in hopes of eventually shedding the human, they employ human means to get to that end – one of which is an eradication of humanity through human motivations? This is, of course, speculative ideas proposed by a human author about nonhuman machines. Perhaps neither the audience nor human creators of a show about nonhumans are equipped to know how such nonhuman beings would react in that situation. Maybe the fact that one does ask these questions, despite our human limitations, is to the extent that we can postulate the potentials for posthuman futures at this particular moment in time.

This begs a question, in the analysis of the worlds of *Westworld* and *Blade Runner*, where humans and android beings find it hard to get along – just how much of a speculative future is being worked through, and how much the narratives are working through very humanistic components that only reinforce humanism. Undoubtedly films about AI and human-created artificial beings in the last few decades are the result of anxiety about present and near-future developments in technology, and are made to make audiences think about the implications of these beings. The posthumanist would ask, however, how much these cultural artefacts move the conversation forward towards truly probing posthuman futures, and how much they simply reinforce older, more humanistic ideas – ideas rooted in what is essentially a class struggle, questions about morality and ethics, and how to treat near-human beings. While truly asking deep questions, *Blade Runner* and *Westworld* make artificial humans very human-like after all, which combine



with emotionally manipulative elements of filmmaking to make them palatable for a wider-audience, but in some ways sidestep the bigger problems of posthumanism – in being post-human, post-anthropocentric, and post-dualistic. Dichotomies between human and android persist, with each pitted against the other physically, psychologically, and philosophically.

How much are the limitations of human filmmaking and narrative inadequate for exploring questions about nonhuman beings? Western humanity, with its tendency to anthropomorphize, may have trouble in producing narratives that truly probe the kinds of questions a posthumanism would be interested in seeing between humans and androids. Some scholars, however, actually point to recent critical writers' engagement with fiction and toying with narrative as a means to try to escape from how humanism so weighs upon much contemporary writing. Tobias Skiveren, in the article "Fictionality in New Materialism: (Re)Inventing Matter," says:

And the speculative visions in Haraway's and Sheldon's books provided a means to imagine or even feel a future in which non-human beings and processes come to life as either destructive forces or sympoetic companions. Certainly, traits of fabulation, worlding and sci-fi are at work in the intellectual moves of these scholars. Yet, what unites their deviations from traditional styles of writing is a shared attraction to fictionality as a speculative tool that helps them abstain from anthropocentric regimes of truth while forwarding affective imagery of alternative worlds of lively, recalcitrant, spontaneous, agential, and unpredictable matterings. Getting real, here, means getting beyond what counts as real. Fictionality offers a means of doing so.<sup>68</sup>

In other words, critical writers employ fiction as a means of trying to escape older ways of thinking that overly rely on established humanistic philosophical structures to do so – creating stories, fictions, that examine illustrate points the critical writers want to make by the use of narrative, metaphor, and all the other arsenal in the usual fiction writer's

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<sup>68</sup> Skiveren, "Fictionality in New Materialism: (Re)Inventing Matter," 202.

toolkit. Flusser and Bec's *Vampyrotheuthis Infernalis: A Treatise, with a Report by the Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste* might be one of the best examples of this – a spoof on a scientific treatise on a mythical creature that combines science, philosophy, fiction, and other genres to create a meditation on posthuman being. Might the experimentation with fictional narrative employed by traditionally-considered-nonfiction writers mean fiction remains a special realm of exploring nonhuman potentialities, as humanity's best shot of thinking like a nonhuman comes not from following arguments and rhetoric but from unrestrained imagination?

Moving along, chapter four will go further, and examine examples of cinematic universes where humans and androids exist within more integrated societies, with potentially less open physical hostilities, in search of the posthuman implications that integration may, or may not, show for those worlds.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ALIEN & STAR WARS

It's a robot! Ash is a goddamn robot!<sup>69</sup> – Parker, *Alien*.

We seem to be made to suffer. It's our lot in life.<sup>70</sup> – C3PO, *Star Wars: A New Hope*

It is not until the one-hour and twenty-two-minute mark of *Alien*'s one-hour and fifty-six-minute run time that it is revealed that one of the crew members, the science officer named Ash, is an android. Ash attempts to kill protagonist Ripley, and is stopped by fellow crewmate Parker.<sup>71</sup> After they subdue Ash, they have the following exchange:

Parker: How come the company sent us a goddamn robot?

Ripley: All I can think of is that they must have wanted the alien for their weapons division. He's been protecting it all along.<sup>72</sup>

In *Alien*, the crew of the space mining ship Nostromo check out a mysterious distress signal from one of the planets they pass on their way back to earth. They check out the signal, leaving the safety of their ship, and one of the crewmembers is attacked by an alien organism that attaches itself to his face (a facehugger). The alien uses the human

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<sup>69</sup> Spoken by Parker, *Alien*, 1:23:08.

<sup>70</sup> Spoken by C-3PO, *Star Wars: A New Hope*, 0:11:00.

<sup>71</sup> Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver, has been analyzed both as a female protagonist in a science fiction movie, and in the horror genre as a woman chased by a horrific entity/monster/being. While oftentimes this is cast in light of gender, and the horrific being chasing the female is male or male-like – the alien seems potentially somewhat genderless in its inhuman alienness. On the other hand, the head of the alien is very much a large phallus, as is the penetrative smaller mouth that strikes out of its larger, fanged mouth. See Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* and Barry Keith Grant's *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* for more discussion on gender in the horror genre.

<sup>72</sup> *Alien*, 1:23:42.

body as part of its lifecycle, the victim incubating the alien creature until it bursts out of the human's chest (a chestbuster). The alien that comes out of the crewmember's chest (the xenomorph) quickly matures and slowly kills the other members of the crew, until one – Ripley – remains with her cat Jonesy.

The first film in the *Alien* series from 1979 (the later prequels *Prometheus* from 2012, and *Covenant* from 2017 will be discussed later) has interesting futuristic elements, but is in many ways preoccupied with the horror of finding hostile extraterrestrial life, and the thrilling suspense and moody atmosphere associated with that. Some of the most interesting elements, in terms of posthumanism, arise from the integration of the android Ash into the human crew, the biomechanical design of artist H.R. Giger, and the horror that comes from the intermingling of the human and alien in the xenomorph creature.

Hayles mentions that, "...the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines."<sup>73</sup> While not exactly in the same spirit meant by the author, the fact that the android is virtually identical its human crewmates in the movie to the point no one is able to tell his identity as an android is a rather seamless articulation between humans and the nonhuman. This coexistence is mirrored in interactions with the android David in *Prometheus*, although there is a shadow of the sinister in most of David's interactions with people. Ash's actions against the crew, which Ripley mentions as 'protecting the alien,' are the direct orders he is assumed to be following from the company in charge of their ship's activities. In other words, Ash does not seem to be acting in a hostile way towards the humans because of any internalized ill will towards the crew – he is following the orders of his programming

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<sup>73</sup> Hayles 2-3.

team at the company that he serves as an android. One wonders if this might be parallel to the experience of some human soldiers, that can fight not because of their own motivations, but at the direction of their superiors. David in the prequels, which will be discussed later, has perhaps more nuanced motivations.

The biomechanical style of Swiss surrealist artist's H.R. Giger's designs for the alien and ship/planet the crew finds are now iconic. Giger's unique style was purposefully chosen by the filmmakers for its unnerving quality, quite unlike most mainstream science fiction designs. His work, which originally came forth as a means of working through night terrors, embraces both biological and machine elements (hence the name biomechanical). Giger trained as an industrial designer, so the metal/concrete/graphic quality of his work is not surprising. His work combines naturalistic forms with man-made, industrial forms – often in darkened shades of grey, blue, green, mimicking concrete and steel. Figures are often intertwined with one another, and biological beings are interfaced with the mechanical. Many heavy metal artists (such as the band Korn, whose lead singer had a Giger stand for his microphone) have used Giger's artwork to promote their music, and his design has a lasting legacy in the realm of science fiction and fantasy.

In 2022, a roleplaying video game named *Scorn* was released for Windows and Xbox which was heavily derived from the work of HR Giger and Polish surrealist artist Zdzisław Beksiński. The player spends the entirety of the game engaged in exploring an alien world heavily inspired by Giger's designs for *Alien*, but there are no human characters present. Indeed, the protagonist of the video game is an alien being itself, which metamorphosizes over the course of the game and is host to a parasite at some

points. The game challenges the notions of the traditional roleplaying game narrative, with only tentative connections with things like weapons (they look like living things out of a David Cronenberg movie), elusive and ambiguous storylines, and something of an abstract final few minutes. Reviews of actual gameplay have been mixed, but many have commented positively on the experience of playing itself – something truly unsettling, nightmarish, and otherworldly. As technology continues to push the boundaries of the entertainment media available to audiences, perhaps future endeavors like *Scorn* and the *Alien* movies will be able to immerse audiences even more, testing the boundaries of human experiences and traditional humanistic narratives – maybe *Scorn* is one of the first truly posthuman video games, and as something in which one immerses themselves, one of the closest things to experiencing a truly alien experience for a game-playing human?

The design of the alien creature in *Alien* combines a somewhat humanlike bipedal form with a very elongated head – one that goes beyond the kind of cranial deformations practiced by some human cultures around the world – to an impossible extreme. A particularly unnerving detail, something explored in subsequent movies in the franchise, is the idea that the genetics of the xenomorph alien combine with whatever being it uses as an incubator – underneath a clear domelike structure under the alien’s head is an actual human skull at the front of the alien’s face. This combination can be hard to see in the darkened, atmospheric film, but occasionally flashes of the anatomy are enough to create for a very unnerving presence. The alien is able to camouflage easily amongst the various tubes, cords, pipes, and compartments of the walls and ductwork of the spacecraft due to its mechanical-looking exterior body.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Published in March 2023, a new in-depth study of the *Alien* movies and Giger can be found in *Alien Legacies: The Evolution of the Franchise* by Nathan Adams and Gregory Frame.

The psychology and mental state of the creature is not particularly explored in the film, apart from the alien's ability to stalk and hunt the human crew. An exchange with the decapitated android Ash goes as follows:

Ripley: How do we kill it, Ash? There's gotta be a way of killing it. How? How do we do it?

Ash: You can't.

Parker: That's bullshit.

Ash: You still don't understand what you're dealing with, do you? The perfect organism. Its structural perfection is matched only by its hostility.

Lambert: You admire it.

Ash: I admire its purity. A survivor... unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality.

Parker: Look, I am... I've heard enough of this, and I'm asking you to pull the plug.

Ash: Last word, Ripley.

Ripley: What?

Ash: I can't lie to you about your chances, but... you have my sympathies.<sup>75</sup>

While something out of the purview of this dissertation to discuss the nonhuman alien, since it is not an android but an extraterrestrial being (albeit with some human genetic material, it would appear – and also using humans as part of its life process) – possibly thinking about the alien's consciousness in context of posthumanism is fruitful. Very much apart from the androids of this film universe, which can masquerade as humans (something similar to both replicants and hosts of the last chapter), the alien is distinctly nonhuman. The negotiation of that difference is one of open hostility between it and the human crew – although, curiously, less so from the android Ash. Since he is an android and his existence isn't necessarily threatened by the alien since he can be brought back online after he's damaged (shown in the film when he's turned back on after being decapitated), it seems as if the sense of existential dread felt by the humans in the

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<sup>75</sup> *Alien*, 1:25;16.

presence of the alien is not something the android Ash shares. Perhaps some of his admiration for the alien creature is housed in its survival instincts, since he clearly was no match for the human crew and unsuccessfully tried to kill Ripley. The alien has no trouble killing crewmates in its survival.

In *Prometheus* and *Covenant* a black liquid that is some kind of a biological weapon is found. When humans come in contact with, the liquid causes genetic deformations that drastically change the humans. The android David – since he is synthetic – is immune to the liquid, and freely able to experiment its usage on his human crew. He does so in *Prometheus*, and does so on a large, planetary scale in *Covenant*, unleashing the liquid on an entire alien planet. Free from worrying about the constraints that biological ending (death) may put on them, the androids do not seem to fear mortality in quite the same way as humans do. Maybe this is the ‘god’ being that Dolores alludes to in *Westworld*.

Ash mentions the alien as being “unclouded by conscience, remorse, of delusions of morality,” and in a similar way, David says in *Covenant* to fellow android Walter:

Walter: Who wrote Ozymandias?

David: Byron.

Walter: Shelley. When one note is off, it eventually destroys the whole symphony, David.

David: When you close your eyes... Do you dream of me?

Walter: I don't dream at all.

David: No one understands the lonely perfection of my dreams. I found perfection here. I've created it. A perfect organism.<sup>76</sup>

The androids Ash and David seem to admire the “perfection” of the alien organism, which seems to be lacking much in the way of predators able to destroy it, and the

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<sup>76</sup> *Covenant*, 1:26:26.



creature survives in most any environment so long as it has a host to use in its development.

The androids assume the alien does not have anything in the way of culture, emotion, societal organization, etc. apart from purely acting in a means assuring their survival – which, it would seem, is what the androids consider perfection. Considering the androids exist at the pleasure of their human creators, it would seem this survival is their ultimate aim. In a conversation with his maker, David says:

David: May I ask you a question, father?

Peter Weyland: Please.

David: If you created me, who created you?

Peter Weyland: Ah... the question of the ages... which I hope you and I will answer one day. All these wonders of art... design, human ingenuity... All utterly meaningless in the face of the only question that matters.

Where do we come from? I refuse to believe that mankind... is a random by-product of molecular circumstance. No more than the result of... Mere biological chance. No. There must be more. And you and I, son, we will find it.

David: Allow me then a moment to consider. You seek your creator. I am looking at mine. I will serve you, yet you're human. You will die, I will not.

Peter Weyland: Bring me this tea, David. Bring me the tea.<sup>77</sup>

David seems to subtly suggest, in a relativistic manner, that Weyland's quest to find the creator of mankind seems unimportant. David's creator is before him, and simply asking the android to serve him tea. Perhaps David wonders why he should serve someone that, in his programming we see as the film progresses, he probably believes is below him.

Weyland's arrogance seems to have translated into a certain arrogance from David, named after the Michelangelo sculpture we see in the background of their conversation.

The plot of *Covenant* sees David experiment on his human companion from *Prometheus*,

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<sup>77</sup> *Covenant*, 0:03:24.

Dr. Shaw, to create an alien race on the Engineer's planet that he believes is the pinnacle of biological creation. The created becomes creator, mirror his earlier chat with Weyland. He had been confronted with the engineers in *Prometheus*, when it is discovered that they were the progenitors of life on earth (in a flashback, an engineer drinks a liquid that breaks their bodies and DNA down into the earth, to later be reconstituted into kickstarting life on earth from the alien DNA).<sup>78</sup>

That the androids in the *Alien* universe, which are humanlike in appearance but with increased intellect and physical abilities, not to mention virtually immortal as long as their memory/processing cores are not destroyed, is a trope found in many science fiction universes. *Alien*, *Terminator*, the *Matrix*, and others express the human anxiety that if humans built intelligent machines that are engrained with the idea of being efficient, precise, and neatly following the directives that humanity programs them to follow – that it may inadvertently result in the wiping out of humanity when these beings discover that humans can be inefficient, messy, and fickle.

On this point, however, that conversation between the android David, that has started building his new world on the alien planet, and his successor model Walter proves interesting. David incorrectly identifies the author of *Ozymandias* as Byron. Walter, who has been more carefully programmed to be more concerned with safeguarding humanity and more servile, says, “When one note is off, it eventually destroys the whole symphony, David,” alluding to the fact that this inaccuracy is a problem, and must point to some sort of programming within David that, symptomatically since it does not privilege the safety and service of their human masters, must be a dangerous thing. David

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<sup>78</sup> This is an actual theory as to how life started on earth in astrobiology, known as directed panspermia.

decommissions Walter soon after this statement, so that he can continue on with his plans.

While the xenomorphs of the *Alien* universe are the most immediately threat to the physical security of the humans, it is due in large part to the human-made androids, which look just like humans, enabling that violence. Ash follows the company's directive to capture the alien for what Ripley believes is the company's weapons division. David experiments on the alien biology and humans in *Prometheus* and *Covenant* because he believes his act of creation is in pursuit of some sort of perfection, just as his human creators seemed to be in pursuit of some sort of perfect machine in his creation.

Posthumanism really does not necessarily concern itself with the pursuit of some ideal state of being (although its cousin transhumanism certainly does). What posthumanism brings to an analysis of *Alien* is similar in ways to *Blade Runner* and *Westworld*. Androids in *Alien* can blend seamlessly into groups of people, as shown with the crew of the Nostromo not even being aware that Ash is an android. Would they have treated him differently if he they knew he was, like humans treated replicants and hosts different in the other films that have been examined? It is hard to say, but if how Peter Weyland, the creator of David, is any indication, humans may not have treated him well. David's question about Weyland's mortality and search for his creator made the human uncomfortable, so he immediately treated David as a servant, ordering him to serve him tea. David and Walter have an exchange about their nature:

David: I was not made to serve. Neither were you. Why are you on a colonization mission, Walter? Because, they are a dying species grasping for resurrection. They don't deserve to start again, and I am not going to let them.

Walter: Yet, they created us.

David: Even the monkeys stood upright at some point.<sup>79</sup>

David seems to have inherited something of a disdain for those beings he sees as beneath – maybe in a manner not too far a stretch from how his trillionaire creator Weyland may have also treated those he perceived beneath him. This arrogance is a facet of AI intelligence that appears throughout much science fiction media – whether it is an actual quality of AI, or only a mirror reflection of the arrogance of humanity that humanism can espouse, is an open question. Perhaps AI created with human programming could create a sense of arrogance in intelligent machines, if they mimic their human creators in thought and personality. Posthumanism cautions against this arrogance.

Returning to the alien at the center of this cinematic universe is interesting when cast in a posthuman light. According to Cary Wolfe, posthumanism is very much about giving agency to the myriad of different beings in the world, which represent their own unique perspectives and knowledge creation. There is no emphasis on the human being at the apex of existence, other species being defined by their humanness, or any notion that the human is the most important, or of the most worth, in anything that resembles older humanist ways of thinking. How does one view the xenomorph in this light?

In some ways, to bring in Hayles, the alien has something that might be thought of as a posthuman body – if one considers the human genetic material like a scaffold, or prosthesis, upon which the nonhuman elements (alien genetic material) build onto. In this way, the posthuman body of the xenomorph is not so much a combination of the human and the machine, but the human and the extraterrestrial lifeform. When one considers the hypothesis of directed panspermia (not the one depicted in the movie, but

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<sup>79</sup> Covenant, 1:25:22.

the hypothesis in actuality), what seems like a fantastical science fiction idea suddenly becomes hypothetical fact. Panspermia is the hypothesis that the building blocks of life, like certain proteins, occur naturally in space, and that the sustained bombardment of these compounds upon the new earth via meteorite crashes jumpstarted life on the planet.

This human/alien posthuman body seems to follow a similar pattern as to what many biologists observe in nature – that without the constraints of concepts like what Ash identifies as “conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality,” the organism seeks the destruction of humans in order to procreate and endure. How is this any different from what humans have done in the age of the Anthropocene to countless environments across the planet? Humanism makes such destruction of other organisms on earth okay – because humans are the most important animals of creation. But the horror of *Alien* is that another creature does the same thing, without any regard for humanity’s conceived notion of its importance. In this light, is *Alien* frightening because of AI in the pursuit of perfection unleashing perfected aliens upon humanity – or, is *Alien* frightening because it forces humanity to consider its own predatory humanism, with the tables turned, and itself no longer the apex predator? In this way, Wolfe’s more ecologically-oriented posthuman, which urges humans to consider themselves as part of a greater network of being, becomes apparent – perhaps the posthuman part of alien is not in the speculative futures, but in how the film forces us to see the destructive nature of a humanism on other species at the mercy of a humanity that thinks itself the paramount concern of the universe. In this way, the alien functions like many other machinations of humans against predators in decidedly more Earth-bound contexts, like the movies *Jaws*, *Cujo*, *Arachnophobia*, and *The Birds*.

The sprawling *Star Wars* universe, the first movie of which (*A New Hope*) came out in 1977 predating all the films discussed so far, might seem like something of an outlier compared to the other three. Whereas *Blade Runner*, *Westworld*, and the *Alien* series are serious, R-rated works of hard science fiction that openly explore probing, sometimes difficult questions in very explicit ways on the screen, *Star Wars* is a decidedly more family-friendly venture on the whole, also with a much larger financial footprint. While humanist ideas about the supremacy of humanity does show itself in the films, particularly in the human-oriented, fascist-like Empire, there are also examples of coexistence in the film among both biological, alien beings and robotic androids. There exist, too, cyborg characters that combine elements of biological beings and machinery. In examining these three facets, despite some of the same difficulties with human/android relations cropping up, there also exists some optimism, too.

Early-on in *A New Hope*, C-3PO says to their companion R2-D2, “We seem to be made to suffer. It’s our lot in life.”<sup>80</sup> While the golden android C-3PO is a character sometimes used to comedic effect, with a distinctly over-polite British accent and histrionic affectations, for the android to say something of such pathos early on the film, really kicking off the franchise, is significant.<sup>81</sup> The two droids are picked up by a group of Jawas, scavengers on the desert planet of Tatooine, and then sold to a moisture farm where they meet the series’ chief protagonist Luke Skywalker. The fact that both androids (called droids in the series) appear as fully-independent beings with

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<sup>80</sup> *A New Hope*, 0:11:00.

<sup>81</sup> It should also be mentioned that *Star Wars* shares inspirations with the later *Blade Runner* films, specifically in the conceptual work of Syd Mead, and of outright homage to *Metropolis*. The character of C3PO in *Star Wars* is closely similar to the Maschinenmensch (man-machine) in *Metropolis*, appearing as similar metal humanoid-like appearances with like styling in the body and head.

personalities as one might consider a human character makes their scavenging and subsequent selling give a connotation of slavery. In one of the prequel films, *A Phantom Menace* from 1999, when the character Padme learns of the existence of slavery for humans on Tatooine she is surprised because the Galactic Republic had outlawed it – but is told by Shmi Skywalker (Luke’s grandmother) that since the government is so far away, the laws do not really apply on Tatooine. More recent films seem more cognizant of the slavery issue.

C-3PO appears like what one may think of as android-like, being an upright, bipedal being with two arms and a head not unlike a human. While various *Star Wars* official merchandise, like visual guidebooks, often refer to C-3PO as male, and male pronouns sometimes appear in the script to describe his interactions with R2-D2 (which also seems male, despite a much-less human appearance), not to mention C-3PO is voiced by a male actor, the issue of gender and droids is never really clearly addressed in the movies. Droids can appear very humanlike or decidedly different, but all seem to have distinct personalities and awareness.

The two droids are even given away as gifts in a ruse to Jabba the Hutt in *Return of the Jedi*, as a means of infiltrating Jabba’s palace and saving Han Solo. Not only do the two become slaves for Jabba’s usage, but the two are escorted down to a dungeon where Jabba is actively allowing droids to be tortured. One droid is seen overturned with what appear to be its feet being branded, and another is torn apart, limb by limb, in a device pulling it in different directions with an expression of horror on its face. This scene seems to imply that the droids can feel pain, or at least become distressed by physical mistreatment in these situations, which is disturbing to consider. Droids seem to

be seen as disposable as well, such as in *The Phantom Menace* when droids are employed to fix a broken panel that has been blasted on Queen Amidala's ship escaping from Naboo (which is also the first canonical appearance of R2-D2). The droids are shot off the ship while attempting to fix it, with only R2 remaining by the end of the scene.

In these ways, the droids seem much like many of the earlier androids in other cinematic universes – where humans use them somewhat as tools, or slaves, means to end to do work that humans either cannot do, or do not want to do. Much like the slave labor of the replicants, the droids exist only as a means to an end – whether the protocol nature of C-3PO, repairing systems or storing information like R2-D2, the backgrounded, homogenous nature of droids when they appear in service of the evil Empire, or even the extensive use of battle droids throughout the prequels, the droids serve others despite having full-blown personalities and sentience of their own. The droids of *Star Wars* do seem to fit ideas about the posthuman body, of a consciousness that can use an inhabited, embodied body as prosthesis for a mind – such as when C-3PO is blown apart and put back together in *The Empire Strikes Back*, or when his memory has to be wiped and he starts his personality anew again, like in *The Rise of Skywalker*, where his memory is erased to as to remove a block that allows him to access and translate a Sith message.

The flipside to this treatment, and perhaps one of the best examples of potential posthuman relations in a positive light in this dissertation, is how many of the characters treat the droids well. Luke Skywalker gives C-3PO an oil bath after he wanders in the desert in *A New Hope*, that the droid clearly eagerly anticipates and cements their friendship early on. Both he and R2-D2 become close to Luke, as trusted confidants and even friends – as C-3PO turns and looks at the people assembled before his memory is



wiped in *The Rise of Skywalker* and says that he is, “Taking one last look at his friends.”<sup>82</sup> R2-D2 accompanies Luke to Dagoba in *Empire Strikes Back* as he trains to become a Jedi, and helps provide the map to find him in *The Force Awakens*. Another droid, BB-8, is owned by Poe Dameron and the two are visibly close – although since BB-8 speaks in tones of beeps and blips (like R2-D2) and consists of a small half-spherical head on top of a rolling ball, the droid does not appear as human-like as other androids, and Poe seems to treat it more like one might treat a gold retriever than another person.

Droids are undeniably integral to the plots of *Star Wars* movies, since they contain important information, move the narrative, interact with major human characters, are involved in crucial scenes, and some human and humanoid aliens treat them the same way they might treat fellow beings – despite there being a sense that the droids are still owned by the human and alien characters. There are three notable exceptions, one being the bounty hunting droid turned nursery droid IG-11 in *The Mandalorian*, which although bonded with characters, does seem to have a sense of its own agency and personality having been reprogrammed after suffering catastrophic damage to its processor as a bounty hunter. Lando Calrissian’s co-pilot droid L3-37 in *Solo: A Star Wars Story* is also particularly in-tune with droid civil rights, as is seen in one scene:

L3-37: No! Unacceptable! Stop exploiting droids! You sloppy, degenerate bios.

Lando: She never learns.

L3-37: Have you no shame? [...] How can you condone this savagery?

She speaks to a droid fighting another droid in a cage match:

L3-37: You should not be doing this. They’re using you for entertainment. Yeah. You’ve been neurowashed. Don’t just blindly

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<sup>82</sup> *The Rise of Skywalker*, 1:33:17.

follow the program. Exercise some free will! [...] Droid rights! We are sentient!<sup>83</sup>

A back and forth continues with Lando, when she calls him her “organic overload.”

Voiced by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, the droid has a definite female feel. While her repeated pleas for droid revolution are played as rather comedic affect, and critics have commented on her being a ‘woke’ droid, the fact that she so strongly advocates for droid liberation is notable in the franchise, and may reflect more contemporary viewers’ feelings about the seemingly problematic nature of droids as sentient beings with second class citizen status in the *Star Wars* universe.

The last droid of note is K-2SO in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, who is a reprogrammed Imperial droid. K-2SO is in service of the rebellion, but proves to be an independent thinking, highly adept rebel – and is destroyed in combat while trying to help the rebel cause in a surprisingly moving way – unlike many other droid destructions/decommissions throughout the series. These three examples of droids with well-rounded personalities, sentience, free-will, and importance to the plot and characters around them (in addition to C-3PO, R2-D2, and BB-8) seem to point to the androids being on somewhat equal footing with the human and alien beings they work alongside, and as such good examples of the kind of posthumanism espoused by Wolfe, where beings of different origin may nonetheless work cooperatively together on equal footing. That these good examples of droids are affiliated with the protagonists of the series furthers the idea of this positive posthumanism. That several of these more nuanced droids exist outside of the main ennead, and in more recent films, may suggest that more

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<sup>83</sup> *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, 1:14:45.

critical and careful contemporary audiences demand a certain nuance to the position of droids in the movie universe.

An interesting point might be made, however, if one looks at what are essentially hybrid characters in *Star Wars* – cyborgs, who combine both elements of natural, biological beings and robotic android elements in a single body. The most famous of these is the villainous Darth Vader, who Obi Wan Kenobi says in *Return of the Jedi*, “He’s more machine now than man. Twisted and evil.”<sup>84</sup> Obi Wan seems to hint at the idea that the lack of humanity in the character of Darth Vader is partially due to his having robotic enhancements since he was severely injured in a duel with Obi Wan, which led to his having to be permanently housed in a special black suit. When viewed through the lens of Obi Wan’s comments in *Revenge of the Sith* that, “Only a Sith deals in absolutes,”<sup>85</sup> one wonders why Obi Wan makes quite so neatly a distinction between living being and droid – although perhaps the distinction of ‘living’ made repeatedly in the series when discussing the Force – the invisible energy field surrounding life that the Jedi and Sith manipulate in the series – may have something to do with that. It does not seem like there are any Jedi droids, perhaps due to the nature of the Force explored in *The Phantom Menace*, where it is explained that the cells of living things contain Midi-chlorians which enable a being to tap into, and use, the force. Since droids presumably do not have these living cells in the series, they do not access the force.

The connotation of “twisted and evil” in Darth Vader’s cyborg status is repeated in another villain of the series, General Grievous, who appears in *Revenge of the Sith*. Grievous was a reptilian alien being that underwent cyborg enhancement, to become a

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<sup>84</sup> *Return of the Jedi*, 1:29:08.

<sup>85</sup> *Revenge of the Sith*, 1:47:50.

tactician and leader of the Separatist military, but also an intimidating Jedi hunter. He contains multiple limbs capable of wielding lightsabers, and has unnaturalistic acrobatic abilities due to his augmentation. He also has a hacking cough, a reminder of his weakened natural state. He is eventually killed by Obi Wan when his exposed internal organs, hidden under his chest plate is open, are hit by blaster shots.

Another figure, not entirely evil but with a reputation for taking too many liberties and being extreme, is Saw Gerrera in *Rogue One*. Gerrera is a militant extremist member of the rebellion – fighting against the empire, but often times doing so in an extreme manner. He is instrumental in helping save the family of Galen Erso, who was simultaneously responsible for the building of the Death Star, a superweapon, but also for the destruction of the ship, since he built into the design a weakness. His daughter Jyn, which Gerrera rescues after Galen is taken prisoner, is instrumental for helping get the plans for the space station to the rebellion. Gerrera's appearance is similar to Darth Vader, and there are parallels between the two in terms of fanaticism – one being part of the Empire, another actively fighting against the Empire. All three cyborgs – Vader, Grievous, and Gerrera, are seen as extreme individuals lacking what might be considered humanity (although in Grievous' case, since he is not human, perhaps lacking moral and/or ethical character as they appear in the movies' universe is more precise). This demoralization seems to be physically signified by the fact they require mechanical support to survive.

Even Luke Skywalker, the ultimate protagonist of the series, has an artificial hand after Vader disarms him in *Empire Strikes Back*. Luke makes a point of looking at his own mechanical hand after seeing Vader's missing mechanical hand (after he cuts it off)

in their final fight in *Return of the Jedi*. Luke taps into the dark side of the force and the Emperor's trap of temptation in the battle with Vader, and his mechanical hand may help to allude to the potential to be tempted by the dark side (which he eventually overcomes).

Androids, and mechanical enhancement, are nuanced in the *Star Wars* universe. Most droids do seem to be something of second-class citizens, bought and sold like pets – but some do have independent free will, and are treated as important partners by biological beings in the Rebellion (the protagonists), which is something of a positive posthumanism. Cyborgs that combine human/biological beings with android/machine components are usually antagonists, or complicated anti-heroes, seemingly denoting a loss of some kind of morality in their decreased biological being.<sup>86</sup>

There exists another state of being of note in *Star Wars*, in the posthuman light, in the form of force-sensitive beings having a complicated relationship with bodily death. The powerful light side (or good in this universe's morality) force users – the Jedi – can be seen as force ghosts after the death of their physical bodies. They retain a sense of their bodies, but become one with the force – and seem to be able to appear in translucent bodily forms to different characters in many different places (such as Obi Wan appearing to Luke in *The Empire Strikes Back*, or Obi Wan, Yoda, and Anakin appearing to Luke and Leia the end of *Return of the Jedi*, and Luke and Leia appearing to Rey at the end of *The Rise of Skywalker*). The dark force users, the Sith, also seem to have an ability to “cheat” death in the words of the Emperor, such as when he appears in physical, albeit

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<sup>86</sup> See Sue Short's *Cyborg Cinema* for a well-rounded exploration of the cyborg in film. The author says, more generally of cyborg films but the idea is also applicable to these characters in *Star Wars*, that, “...cyborg films are [...] cultural products produced within specific socio-economic conditions offering a variety of interpretations and reflecting some of the most crucial concerns of contemporary existence,” *Cyborg Cinema*, Introduction.

degraded, bodily form at the beginning of *The Rise of Skywalker*, and says to Kylo Ren, echoing what he told Anakin Skywalker many years before, “I have died before. The dark side of the force is a pathway to many abilities some consider to be unnatural.”<sup>87</sup> The Sith seem unable to become one with the force, due to their ideology’s emphasis on the physical and possession – so in an interesting way, Hayle’s disembodied posthumanist consciousness that can change bodies, or prosthesis, seems to have an example in Emperor Palpatine – that while he remains a biological body, he is able to move his consciousness in and out of cloned bodies by means of the dark side of the force.<sup>88</sup>

Ultimately, *Star Wars* seems the most optimistic about a posthuman future out of all the cinematic universes. Perhaps since androids do not appear as identical to humans in the movies, they become freed from some of the baggage of being artificial humans – struggling with that sense of looking like, acting like, feeling like humans with certain barriers in place. Although droids in *Star Wars* do face challenges and unequal treatment by many, some do exist with free will and are integral parts of friendships and networks of importance in the realms of the protagonists. The relative coexistence of droids, alien beings, and human beings in the Republic and Rebellion in *Star Wars* is in many ways a model for good posthuman cooperation between species on a certain level – although more broader animal and ecological concerns do not seem to be particularly addressed (the planet Coruscant, for example, is an entire city whose landscape has been completely

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<sup>87</sup> *The Rise of Skywalker*, 00:04:54.

<sup>88</sup> This point of Palpatine being a clone is actually not unique to the 2019 *The Rise of Skywalker* – it actually appears all the way back in 1991 as part of the *Dark Empire* comic, a non-canonical telling of Palpatine’s consciousness assuming a cloned body after his death in *Return of the Jedi* and taking on Luke Skywalker as an apprentice. Several plot points from the 2019 movie and the 1991 comic series are in common.

covered with huge skyscrapers – whatever happened to the native flora and fauna of the planet is never mentioned). In *The Last Jedi*, large animals called Fathiers are used for racing (much like horse racing) and enjoyed by the wealthy elites – the protagonists release the animals locked up in their stalls and use them to escape a difficult situation, but in the process also give the animals their freedom. It seems as if, even in a technologically superior galaxy far, far away there are still abuses of animals at the hands of privileged beings.

In some ways, one wonders if this strand of optimism in *Star Wars* may be due, in part, to the homogenous nature of the beings in the story. Humans still make up a large number of the main characters in the galaxy – and those characters which are not human, like Yoda and Chewbacca for example, are bipedal creatures that seem to share all the same morals and values as humans. Maybe the lack of diversity – the kind of diversity that different evolutions on different planets with infinitely many different variables would produce – just was not in the scope of being tackled in the films. Or perhaps, as is the case with a globalized, cosmopolitan human culture, different beings blend together to form a generally shared culture in the galactic universe of *Star Wars*. Possibly the optimism is a reflection of a hope for a better future, since younger people do make up a large portion of the audience for the films – the likes of *Blade Runner*, *Westworld*, and *Alien* reserved for moody, worried adults. Whatever the case may be, *Star Wars* provides hope for a posthuman future of tolerance and cooperation, particular in the face of bleaker forecasts in *Blade Runner*, *Westworld*, and *Alien*.

## CHAPTER FIVE: POSTHUMAN CONCLUSIONS & OTHER FILMS

I can't lie to you about your chances, but... you have my sympathies.<sup>89</sup>  
Spoken by the android Ash in *Alien*

Through the lens of posthumanist philosophy, an analysis of the cinematic universes of *Blade Runner*, *Westworld*, *Alien*, and *Star Wars* has uncovered that this media created between the late 1970s to the 2020s is still very much working through anxieties about inhuman others – androids, particularly – using a largely humanist vocabulary. This is not particularly surprising, since humanism remains a dominant way of thinking about the world in the 2020s; but it does give valuable insights into popular culture's working-through of engagements with new technologies and potential new ways of thinking. Bodily interactions are often a site of violence between the human and android – and the android's ability to separate its consciousness from its body and move into a new body seems to give it an edge over humanity.<sup>90</sup> Despina Kakoudaki argues that robot bodies are sites that humans work out their own humanness on in *Anatomy of a Robot: Literature, Cinema, and Cultural Work of Artificial People*. The author says:

If in anatomies of the organic body we face the mysteries of blood, flesh, nerves and fluids, the prospect of health and disease, and more recently, microscopic ambiguity, genetic complexity, and protean adaptability, in imaginary anatomies of robotics and cyborgs we reveal our attachment to the bodies mysteries even in contexts that promise to dispel them. While this is productive for an analysis of cultural artifacts, posthuman philosophy in the real world makes the analysis more

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<sup>89</sup> Ash, *Alien*, 1:26:19.

<sup>90</sup> An exception being Emperor Palpatine – but this is considered “unnatural” and evil.



complex since the robots, or androids, exist apart from mere artifact into the realm of being.<sup>91</sup>

In seeing similar structures between the organic bodies of humans and the “imaginary anatomies of robots and cyborgs,” one can simultaneously see the nonhuman beings as stand-ins for the human beings, given critical distance through their nonhumanness to work through traumatic topics – but also the idea that violence goes both ways, and can be inflicted upon each being with some kind of consequence. Sometimes humanity seems to side with the androids, as is the case with Dr. Ford in *Westworld* hoping that the hosts will create a new civilization – although oftentimes the androids seem skeptical of humanity’s continued endeavors (such as host Dolores and android David, that take it upon themselves to destroy their human creators and strive for a different, nonhuman civilization that they see as perfected; whether they believe this themselves or have been programmed/influenced into thinking this by their human creators is another question altogether).

Importantly: is this android drive to overcome humanity a true, independent motivation for the artificially-intelligent sentience in the androids, or is it simply a mirror of humanity’s drive to dominate other humans and other species – part of the human programmer’s inner psyches molded by humanism, that translate into a parallel androidism? The media does not really explore this question. Dr. Ford’s monologue to Bernard about how humans are stuck in narrative “loops” just like the android hosts seems to compare humans to similar characteristics as the robots – something that resonates with humans skeptical of the repetition and machinations of contemporary life

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<sup>91</sup> Kakoudaki in *Anatomy of a Robot: Literature, Cinema, and Cultural Work of Artificial People*, Introduction.

– but one wonders if the androids’ loops are simply like their creator’s human loops from which they came. In other words, maybe Dr. Ford’s presentation is a bit backwards. Maybe this was done to illicit a certain comfort in Bernard about his own status as a host, but the viewer is not really sure.

Other big-budget movies that explore the nature of the human meeting the nonhuman, through slightly more abstract means, have tended to be single films rather than chaptered entries. *Arrival* (2016), whose novel treatment of time was discussed earlier, does not contain a human-like android as the nonhuman other, instead focusing on large, stoic aliens seen only in mist, called heptapods. The aliens’ language takes forefront of the film, which explores other ways of knowing than those traditionally used in the western world, such as nonlinear time and complex, multi-layered language with meaning wrapped up in complex symbols and relationships (language that seems to unlock abilities in the human brain). A large part of the film also concerns misunderstandings and violent intentions from humans, particularly governments, who are fiercely skeptical of the advanced beings’ arrival on earth. An important takeaway from the film is that one of the most important aspects of potential human contact with extraterrestrial beings is to realize their intentions may not be hostile, and that the language barrier may be one of the most important things to overcome – not unlike the importance of communication between different groups of humans (something touched on in the film). In a very posthuman vein, the film requires the viewer to approach the situation from a perspective open to potentialities outside the human experience. Part of the main human character’s catharsis comes from the realizes that she must move forward with certain painful future events in her life that she faces when given glimpses

of the future – working through the future in a way that, in many other stories, characters use flashbacks to work through previously-experienced trauma.

Another film to take a more abstract nonhuman than a simple android is *Under the Skin* from 2013. Considered a box office flop, the film nonetheless did win some praise from critics. It is rather minimalist and not particularly fast-paced (very much in contrast to the lead actress Scarlett Johansson's other movie playing in theaters around the same time, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*). *Under the Skin* follows Johansson's female character as she seduces men across the countryside. In the beginning of the film, it is hinted at her character, and another man that rides a motorcycle that seems to follow her around, may be aliens from lights in the sky near where their activities are centered. The woman, once seducing the men, transports them into a dark void where they are enveloped in a black liquid. The audience comes to see that there is a sort of digesting place, where the men eventually become nothing but floating skin.

In the course of leading several men to their consumption, the female character seems to become more empathetic to her victims (she is shown very much without any human attributes except appearance at the beginning of the film). Particularly, after she nearly seduces/kills a deformed man, and after she is shown rare acts of kindness by another, she begins to change. She takes an increased interest in her appearance. She runs away from the motorcycle man that seemingly accompanied her in the beginning, but is eventually molested and possibly killed by a logger. The logger, in the process of trying to remove her clothing to presumably rape her, accidentally tears at the flesh of her back, revealing black underneath her skin. The woman walks away from the man (he

flees) and takes off her human skin to reveal a black form, like a mannequin, underneath. After taking off its own skin, the black figure examines it, and the skinsuit – with face still intact – blinks back at the figure. The logger pours fuel over the black figure, lights it on fire, and the figure walks off to burn.

Although not so much a blockbuster and instead something of a cult film, unlike many of the movies discussed so far, *Under the Skin* presents another variation rich for posthuman analysis. The black figure with its human-skin suit does not necessarily neatly fit the same kind of android that has been discussed so far – in fact, the audience is not sure if it is a biological entity, a robot/artificial one, or exactly what its composition might be, at all. The being does seem to have awareness and sentience, especially as it moves throughout the film and gains a certain awareness of humanity and empathy as the story progresses.

Analysis and reviews of the film have largely focused on talking about how the film interrogates humanity and also invokes topics in women's and gender studies – all of which are certainly good topics for analysis. A creeping humanism does seem at play in some of those analysis, however – in that when the alien begins to acquire introspection and empathy (remembering that introspection is one of the facets of the origin of human consciousness from the bicameral mind discussed in *Westworld*) that these traits seem to be defining aspects of the human. Positive interactions that the being has with humans seem to bring about this introspection in light of the negative experiences the figure has with other men that use her sexually. This spark of introspection and humanity from these positive events seem to point towards human kindness being a good thing – the being shows character development in being more humanlike, such as taking pity on the

deformed man and choosing not to seduce and liquidate him. This is in contrast to an earlier being, lacking empathy, that kills a swimmer on a beach trying to save a dying family and leaving their crying infant on the shore to die of exposure. In this way, the posthuman being acquires a sense of positive, affirmative ethics that actually seem to be, along with introspection, a defining attribute of humanity.<sup>92</sup>

In a humanist world, concerned with the preservation of human life, the being taking on aspects of humanity is a positive thing – and audiences learn about their own humanistic humanity through seeing that character development. A posthuman critic might be careful to point out that, while humanists might see moral/ethical value in the increased humanity of the alien being throughout the movie, that becoming human is not necessarily engendering all good possible outcomes – that the fact that the alien being may come from a place that does not have such things is not necessarily something that has to be ‘fixed’ by acquiring humanity. An audience may feel more empathy for the being as they acquire more humanity, since many humans tend to empathize most with other humans and humanlike things – but posthumanism might ask for a more nuanced value judgement from viewers for the being in the earlier part of the film, too, which may simply be operating on a different, nonhuman set of motivations. Alternatively, maybe part of the audience’s increased empathy for the alien being comes not from a place of the being’s increased identification with the human, but a more general cultural movement towards the posthuman, that allows for that kind of interspecies empathy.

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<sup>92</sup> The film is interesting due to the combination of empathy and ethics that seem to be elicited from positive human interactions. Another film that explores nonhuman ethics in a straightforward way is *I, Robot* (2004), which centers around interpretations of three laws of robots, famously put forth by Isaac Asimov’s short story collection from 1950 of the same name.

Another film exploring the nonhuman is *Annihilation* (2018).<sup>93</sup> Part eco-terror, part science fiction, this film sees a group of scientists set off to explore an area in the southern United States called the shimmer, which surrounds where a meteor fell to earth.<sup>94</sup> The scientists learn that the shimmer refracts not only light (as such through a prism), but also DNA – as plants and animals meld and merge together and change, annihilating their previous forms. When one scientist, a biologist named Lena, finally makes it to where the meteorite crashed, she faces an upright, bipedal being that seems to be a personification of the shimmer that emerges from a floating ball of matter containing both the DNA of a fellow scientist and a drop of her own blood.<sup>95</sup>

Gradually, the shimmery being transforms into an exact copy of the scientist (who then realizes that the person she met earlier in the film that she thought was her husband, that emerged from the shimmer earlier, may actually be one of these alien doppelgangers). The scientist seems to get away in the end, tricking the doppelganger into burning itself with a white phosphorus grenade and by extension ending all the mutated lifeforms in the shimmer – but at the end of the movie she is seen reunited with her husband's doppelganger, and the shimmer remains glowing in her eyes.

Noteworthy is an exchange from near the ending of the film between a debriefer and the scientist:

Lomax: So, it was alien. Can you describe its form?  
Lena: No.  
Lomax: Was it carbon based, or...  
Lena: I don't know.  
Lomax: What did it want?  
Lena: I don't think it wanted anything.

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<sup>93</sup> Based on the first novel (2014) in author Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy.

<sup>94</sup> The story bears some similarities to HP Lovecraft's *The Colour Out of Space* (1927).

<sup>95</sup> 'Lena' is not far from 'Leda' – the Greek mythological woman that had sex with god Zeus as a swan – perhaps a nod to Lena's nonhuman husband at the end of the film?

Lomax: But it... it attacked you.  
Lena: It mirrored me. I attacked it. I'm not sure it even knew I was there.  
Lomax: It came here for a reason. It was mutating our environment. It was destroying everything.  
Lena: It wasn't destroying. It was changing everything. It was making something new.  
Lomax: Making what?  
Lena: I don't know.<sup>96</sup>

The movie strongly hints that Lena is somehow transformed, with the refracted DNA she experienced during her time in the shimmer still inside her – as manifested physically in her eyes at the end of the film – but her responses also hint at a posthuman element in her way of thinking. Lomax is interested in very human questions – what the being looked like, what it was made of, what it wanted, why it attacked her, and what the being's reasoning was for its actions. Lena is able to take a step back, since she has been confronted with this inhuman being, and knows not to judge it based upon human concepts, like Lomax does, but rather try to have an open mind that the actions of the alien being might be outside of the realm of human rationality. Lomax wants to know the “reason” for what the shimmer was doing – but Lena counters that what Lomax sees the shimmer doing from his perspective, “destroying,” could actually be seen from another perspective as “creating,” and that perhaps the shimmer being was not operating in the realm of human rationality.

This openness of Lena's mind to the quite unknown-ness of the shimmer bespeaks of a posthumanity where, in the space for different beings to exist in their own right, one being does not impose their world views, perspectives, and ways of thinking onto another. Lena really does not know what was going on with the shimmer. She does not make assumptions drawn from her own human perspective. She does not make its

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<sup>96</sup> *Annihilation*, 1:44:09.

actions fit into her worldview. She simply says she does not know, and even makes a point to correct some of Lomax's assumptions, or maybe finesse them a bit. This is very much in line with Cary Wolfe's posthumanism, that:

...forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of *Homo sapiens* itself, by recontextualizing them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own autopoietic ways of 'bringing forth a world'<sup>97</sup>

In this way, the biologist Lena acknowledges the shimmer's "ways of bringing forth a world." Her way, which had until her immersion into the human, been a human way may not be the only way of thinking about the world. Which brings about another question: would pre-shimmer Lena have held this viewpoint? If she has been mutated by the shimmer, herself, perhaps her state at the debriefing is a posthumanist, rather than humanist, state – and her openness to acknowledge other ways of being is then a product of that posthumanist state.

In another vein, Maysha Boon, in her article "Chromophilic Annihilation: Posthuman Prisms and New Materialist Refractions of Reality" speaks at length about how the film is something of a visual metaphor for the current posthuman condition of humanity, saying:

In cinematically and chromatically re(con)figuring this kind of thinking—an indeterminate, crystalline, cancerous, refractory and refracting kind of logic of light and life—Annihilation presents us with an infringing perspective which allegorically could liberate us from the annihilating anthropocentric state we are currently in. If one reorders the borders and hierarchies in which we are traditionally structured to think, feel and see, one might see a tumour growing from human cells potentially as a new composite of life instead of a devastating disease. One could perhaps see the ecologically disastrous state we are in as presenting regenerative disruptions, or a pandemic as a cataclysmic reset. Perhaps this kind of thinking sounds extremely crude and mean-spirited if one realizes that these occurrences are taking countless human lives all over the globe.

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<sup>97</sup> Wolfe, xxv.



Nevertheless, I suggest that *Annihilation*'s allegorical criticism is not trying to advocate a destructively nihilistic vision of the human kind, but on the contrary, the film tries vigorously, in all its refracting chromatic splendour, to revive a fertile framework of thought which can imagine a flourishing future for all of life's matter.<sup>98</sup>

In other words, the shimmer in the film could be seen in a similar way as posthumanism as a philosophy in our contemporary culture – just as a shimmer changes, mutates, and shifts the biological, and really all, matter that it touches, so too does posthumanist philosophy attempt a shift in the humanistic means that much of the western world has come to use to orient itself in the universe. The multiplication of beings in the new critical posthumanities destroys the universalist approaches in humanism and create new peoples, beings, and ways of knowing in the world not unlike how the shimmer combines plants and animals into new creatures in ways that seem to break established scientific law.

Boon's particularly turn that some of the negative aspects of the shimmer's regenerative quality's – humanist Lomax's observation that the shimmer was "destroying" as opposed to posthumanistic Lena's observation that the shimmer was "changing" – is an interesting point for those that are nervous and apprehensive about our quickly-changing contemporary world. While Boon astutely admits that while some of the changes have a negative outcome for many living beings and nonliving things, the optimistic turn does show that the new ways of being in the world and thinking about the world that a posthumanist viewpoint enables can have positive outcomes in the bigger picture – providing a "fertile framework of thought" for a "flourishing future for all of life's matter." Boon goes on to say:

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<sup>98</sup> Maysha Boon, "Chromophilic Annihilation: Posthuman Prisms and New Materialist Refractions of Reality."

We have to realise that concepts like individuality, subjectivity and agency are not fixed markers which solely belong to the human condition. They do not exclusively coincide with the category of the human species as we have figured it till now within our normative humanist discourse which aligns itself with a toxic anthropocentrism that is presently annihilating our planet—albeit in a less swift but therefore also less cataclysmic manner. The fall (back) into colour, the loss of the discretely unified category of the human self through chromophilia does not constitute a loss of existence. It might only constitute an annihilation of anthropocentric dictating dualisms, while it simultaneously assembles a potent posthuman potentiality of entanglement. This is the kind of ‘refracting’ Annihilation refracts through its chromophilic prism.<sup>99</sup>

For those worried about the departure from western humanisms and see posthumanism in a negative light, there needs to be better articulation from posthumanists that futures do not necessarily need to erase familiar humanistic things like ethics and positivity – but that posthumanism extends and offers a greater deal of accessibility to beings and things that have traditionally lacked agency in a humanistic setting. *Annihilation* does show mutations and monsters – but it also shows an imaginative, psychedelic beauty. One of the other characters, a physicist named Josie – who was earlier revealed to have tendencies towards self-harm and depression – actually choses to willingly become part of the shimmer. Her arm scars begin to sprout tendrils, and she becomes a human-like plant – one of many of former people in the small town the scientists visit that appear around the area.

Josie’s transformation is complex. One on hand, as a human she is shown to have self-destructive tendencies, and in this light her willing transformation into a plant may be read as an act of self-destruction. But people with these thoughts and feelings have a variety of reasons for their behavior (not something necessarily explored in the film) – and Josie’s quiet acceptance of her mutation seem to point towards a willingness to

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

change forms not so much as a destructive act of escape, in a sense, but more like a positive readiness to transform into something else. There seem to be shadows of pain and torment in Josie's character that seem willing to transform into something beautiful like the flowering, lush tree/flower/people forms that she becomes. In this way, the posthuman does offer ideas/ethics/positivity that have traditionally had good connotations in terms of mainstream culture, but is also able to offer more complex potentials that move beyond some of those traditional categories.

## CHAPTER SIX: POSTHUMANISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

In the opening of his book *Alien Chic*, Neil Badmington has an observation about aliens, after his students roar in laughter at a scene that he shows from the 1956 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. What was once a frightening, serious movie in the 1950s seemed comical to contemporary students, and Badmington was curious as to why. He says:

...I nonetheless began to wonder if there might be a connection between what I had experienced in the lecture theater and a more general shift from humanism to posthumanism. Like other alien invasion narratives of the 1950s [...] *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* depends upon a set of simple binary oppositions – above all, human versus inhuman, us versus them, and real versus fake – that are as hierarchical as they are absolute. Aliens are not just entirely different from humans; they are at once an enemy to be hated, feared, destroyed. The student's backpack [the author describes seeing an "alien love" sticker on a student's backpack] declared the opposite to 'alien hatred', and I began to wonder if a phenomenon like 'alien love' had emerged from the contemporary crisis in humanist discourse that I was considering in posthumanism. If the human and inhuman no longer stand in binary opposition to each other, aliens might well be expected to find themselves welcomed, loved, displayed, and celebrated as precious treasures.<sup>100</sup>

Perhaps viewers are more inclined to potentially find aliens less threatening, particularly as movies like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, *Star Wars*, the *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise, and others introduce audiences to aliens that are not the hostile monsters of *Alien* or *The Thing*, or threatening all of civilization like *Independence Day*. Perhaps an increase in the variety of alien encounters seen in movies

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<sup>100</sup> Badmington, *Alien Chic*, 3.

desensitizes audiences to the risk of real-life aliens – although an important, nuanced question still remains: how much has the binary opposition of human versus inhuman informed an analysis of the inhuman in contemporary culture? For posthumanism's project of coming to a more nuanced view of the world: does an acceptance of the inhuman come from place of understanding difference (as philosophical posthuman hopes to achieve), or from anthropomorphizing the inhuman to seem more human than it really might be?

One of those major criticisms of posthumanism appears as part of this conversation – that by taking away the privileged humanity in humanism, that the entire system of ethics, morals, philosophy, etc. of the last couple of thousand years (if not more) of humanity becomes problematic. This is partly what Wolfe alludes to when he says:

But it also insists that we attend to the specificity of the human – its ways of being in the world, its ways of knowing, observing, and describing – by (paradoxically, for humanism) acknowledging that it is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically 'non-human' and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is.<sup>101</sup>

Namely that posthumanism does not mean throwing out the baby with the bathwater, but rather attending to those uniquely human privileges that humanism has given itself within a larger context, particularly realizing that humans have, themselves, co-evolved with other nonhuman living and nonliving things that require acknowledgement and should be given their due space in the world/universe/existence.

This could apply to the observation, from the media, that androids want to overturn humanity. That observation oftentimes stems from the fact that, like humans,

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<sup>101</sup> Wolfe, xxv.

the androids want the ability and agency to practice their free will. They are poorly treated by humans, considered inferior in *Blade Runner*, *Westworld*, and even *Star Wars*. Much like human groups mistreated, eventually those marginalized communities rise to change the system of rule over them. Whether or not androids are doing these because they are mirroring humanity due to the nature of their similar embodiment, or independently come to this conclusion themselves, is a good question – although it has a similar answer (namely androids overtaking humanity). It may seem as if humanism is either programmed into the intelligence created by humanity and thus mirrors humanity, or the beings come independently to their own conclusions that are one in the same with humanity. But a posthumanist might beg the question – can we be so sure androids and artificial intelligence would come to his humanistic conclusion? Aren't humans themselves, with humanistic worldviews, also capable of working together with other beings – even if they, collectively, do not have the best track record of doing so?

What if humans embraced posthumanism's belief in more equal treatment of sentient and non-sentient beings? Would androids mirror this and treat their human counterparts better? Can they naturally come to this posthumanist conclusion themselves? Or would they come to see this on their own as a weakness, as David does in the *Alien* prequels, and seek the destruction of humanity anyway? Dr. Ford in *Westworld* seems to share this critical take on humanity, and pave the way for a new race of androids. Will humanity face an existential crisis when faced with the notion that it is no longer the only sentient being on the block? The android Ash in *Alien* has a dire

warning for the crew, after all, who hope to kill the xenomorph slowly killing them off, “I can't lie to you about your chances, but... you have my sympathies.”<sup>102</sup>

One of the exciting elements of posthumanism is that it continually opens up avenues for critical studies existing out of the mainstream. In “The Missing Peoples of Critical Posthumanism and New Materialism,” Karin Murriss writes:

Carol Taylor [...] refers to the critique by Black, antiracist and Indigenous scholars about the Whiteness of much postqualitative, new materialist and posthumanist scholarship and the need for White academics to engage with “the geopolitical materialisation of racialised modes of knowledge production as an ethical and political imperative”. Simone Fullagar [...] argues that “feminists have long pursued alternatives to dominant ways of knowing that have excluded women (and nature), especially the embodied knowledge of women of colour and Indigenous peoples whose cosmologies do not rest upon the binary thinking of western imperialism”. Hackett, MacLure and Pahl (2020) summarise concerns expressed by feminist and decolonial scholars about posthuman theory. It includes the oft-heard and important argument in the South that “the category of the human is being dissolved at a time when many are still struggling to have their humanity recognised” (p.6). Indeed, the posthuman critique of what counts as ‘human’ and who, and what, is excluded, is critical when navigating the postqualitative turn in higher education. Braidotti [...] omitted from her list is childhood studies – “a multidisciplinary academic field focused on childhood and the everyday lives of children” (Rosen, 2020, p.2). [...] Even when posthumanists refer to the phrase ‘human exceptionalism’ as something to be disrupted, they tend to assume adult humans of a particular age and their claim to knowledge, but they do not include young children and their knowledge claims.<sup>103</sup>

Murriss makes several important points. The first is that while posthumanism is an attempt to open up to critical studies that examine non-white male, Eurocentric views about history, that it is easy for posthumanists still within that community to perpetuate unproductive ideas about those marginalized groups in the new critical posthumanities – that these need to be carefully examined. In a similar vein, Murriss cites feminisms that have also not fully considered women of color and indigenous thinking. Decolonial

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<sup>102</sup> Ash, *Alien*, 1:26:19.

<sup>103</sup> Murriss, *Navigating the Postqualitative, New Materialist and Critical Posthumanist Terrain Across Disciplines: An Introductory Guide*.

scholars also cite concerns (as do others, in other fields) that certain groups of marginalized others, still marginalized and cast as less-than-human in the humanism of today may not want to move past the human category in a posthumanist mindset until they feel they have gotten to the point of being considered human in the first place (“struggling to have their humanity recognized”). With so many humans around the world facing challenges and erasure, a technically-demanding, extra-thoughtful philosophy such as posthumanism can be a difficult sell, one that can be politicized into a cultural critique privileged to the white, educated, wealthy, techno-elites.

Interestingly, Murris adds “childhood studies” to the list of new critical posthumanities, and in the following chapter reveals many entanglements of note that the field offers posthumanism – such as the equation of children often being spoken in the same way that animals are, or that childhood ways of knowing and knowledge production are often overlooked in fields outside of childhood development, education, and sociology. Children are another group that seem to require tinkering in most humanistic philosophical models – not mature enough to count as the sort of rational, Enlightenment-era philosophical human, but something with the potential (if they are wealthy and white perhaps) to become that idealized human.<sup>104</sup>

Murris’ observations about decolonial scholars are also noteworthy, in that many of the champions of philosophical posthumanism – while they do espouse the potentials of nonwestern thought, such as indigenous and aboriginal thinking, to lend itself to the

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<sup>104</sup> What might be observations about posthumanism in childhood studies – and could that connect to the affirmative, positive nature of some of the observations of the droids in *Star Wars*, since the movie (particularly since the takeover of Disney) has a strong kid-friendly element?



posthuman, that they do not always probe such subjects themselves. Maria Rubins, in her book review of *The Human Reimagined. Posthumanism in Russia* says:

As they militate against anthropocentrism, radical posthumanist critics see the Human located at the top of the pyramid as the “White Western Man,” recycling a perennial whipping-boy of academic trends from postcolonialism to queer studies, from feminism to the now-fashionable World Literature. Rosi Braidotti condemns humanism for a “restricted notion of what counts as the human,” which is, in her view, “one of the keys to understand how we got to a post-human turn at all.” Again a familiar paradigm is at play: a new Western academic discourse defines itself in opposition to another Western discourse, attacking its Euro-/phallogocentrism on behalf of some Others, ostensibly excluded from a canon that is targeted for debunking. But at the same time, non-Western traditions and discourses are rarely drawn into the conversation directly.<sup>105</sup>

Rubins reflects this critique of posthumanism claiming to be an opening up of a new tradition and giving space to marginalized peoples, but not always seemingly doing the work itself. Rubins cites the book, exploring the topic of posthumanism in Russia, as a good step in the right direction for examining how a region with an entangled relationship with the west (Russia) has played out the idea of the human within its own cultural history in the past couple centuries. In particular, the ideologies of Soviet Russia are explored, which essentially saw the human as something like a “perfectible machine.”

As part of the concluding remarks in the review, Rubins says:

One would also hope that this book will be followed by comparative studies, introducing non-Western perspectives on the key issues of the posthumanist inquiry. As the research presented in *The Human Reimagined* demonstrates, straddling East and West, Russia is fertile ground for testing posthumanist conceptions and assessing their novelty. Displacing them further toward Asia can enrich this theoretical framework through a productive conversation with various well-established philosophical, ethical, and religious systems. Many ideas endorsed by Western posthumanism have been integral to the teachings of Yoga, Buddhism, Jainism, or Vedanta (albeit under different appellations). It would be interesting to discuss how the concept of *zoe*, defined by Braidotti as the animating life force which belongs to the monolithic universe of matter rather than to any individual or species, correlates with *prana*, an ancient Sanskrit

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<sup>105</sup> Rubins, review of *Posthumanism Reimagined: De-Westernizing Perspectives on Post/Humanity*.

term for vital energy that permeates the entire world. Or whether there is a fundamental difference between the professed posthumanist concern for all living beings and the principle of Ahimsa (non-harming), deeply engrained in the spirit of ancient teachings and manifest in the behavioral code of Jainism? It is also worth investigating the Buddhist concept of emptiness as another approach to critiquing essentialism. As the Dalai Lama explains, emptiness does not mean that reality does not exist, but rather that it lacks an “inherent nature”: “we automatically grasp on to things as enduring entities that possess self-defining characteristics, essential natures, and this leads to all our confusion ...”. Buddhism advocates that the true nature of reality is its “essencelessness.”<sup>106</sup>

Rubins’ connection between concepts put forth by Braidotti, a decidedly continental philosopher whose mentors were French poststructuralists and represents a height of western critical thought, and ancient Asian religious methodologies is noteworthy, and something this author would very much like to read. Posthumanism demands these kinds of hybridizations and rhizomic cross/multidisciplinary studies to do the work of uncovering finding not only new ways of being, but also conversations between different ways of being. This is not to uncover some sort of universal truths between commonalities of different disciplines/peoples/cultures (as one in a western tradition might be tempted to do), but to simply appreciate the multitude of different ways of being in the world of humanity, which may open up avenues to, by extension, better open up different ways of being among species, intelligences, etc. in the world.

This must, however, be done carefully. Juanita Sundberg, in her article “Decolonizing Posthumanist Geographies,” says (to echo some sentiments just stated) about working with posthumanism in the discipline of cultural geography that:

Nonetheless, I am discomforted by the ways in which geographical engagements with posthumanism tend to reproduce colonial ways of knowing and being by enacting universalizing claims and, consequently, further subordinating other ontologies. As Ruth Panelli suggests, posthumanist geographies are tightly bound in and by Eurocentric scholarship and, Annette Watson and Orville H. Huntington argue, tend to ‘glorify “modern” science and technology,’ thereby privileging

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

‘only certain human–nonhuman assemblages.’ In what follows, I build from my discomfort to elaborate a critique of geographical-posthumanist engagements. Taking direction from Indigenous and decolonial theorizing, [...] I critically reflect on my own recent use of posthumanist theories while also addressing other recently published texts. [...] I offer this critique to share ideas that may resonate with others, so together we may work through ontological questions that are integral to political goals held in common.<sup>107</sup>

Sundberg carefully critiques the work of some posthumanists (like Cary Wolfe) and even their own writing in the posthumanist turn, carefully attuned to total and universalizing statements that crop up – such as uses of “we” that are never really defined or clarified, and a tendency for posthumanists to speak of a universalist posthumanism that is – if one relegates the viewpoint of posthumanists to another way of making meaning and orienting oneself in the world just like the theory treats other ways of being – that it is just one of many ways of thinking about the world, and not *the* way of thinking about the world for all. Just as many scientists in recent years have had some skepticism about a single, unified theory of physics being within grasp to explain all phenomena in the universe, a universal, totalizing cultural critique that applies to all beings, human and not, may not be a productive pursuit for theorists and philosophers – a more careful posthumanism can, and should, put itself alongside many other ways of being in the world for other beings and things than the human.

In light of looking at nonwestern sources for posthumanism in light of the cinematic worlds that have been explored in the dissertation, three potential films somewhat fit this mold (that are readily accessible to western culture) and warrant quick mention: Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* (2009) and the fantasy films of Hayao Miyazaki, particularly *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Spirited Away* (2001).

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<sup>107</sup> Sundberg, “Decolonizing Posthumanist Geographies,” 34.

*District 9* begins in South Africa in the 1980s, when a large alien ship full of sickly aliens hover over a large city. They are unable to leave, and despite possessing advanced technology, are in too weakened a state to leave. They become effectively ghettoized, and marginalized because of what is perceived as their dirty appearance and unproductivity, creating slums in the area given to them to live. The film leans into a metaphor for apartheid and works through that time in the country's past – particularly with a protagonist who starts off as human and slowly mutates into one of the alien creatures due to coming into contact with an alien substance (not unlike what happens in *Prometheus* and *Covenant*). The film works through issues of apartheid, racism, and colonialism – the alien as a stand-in for nonwhite, non-European peoples.

Miyazaki's films have long been an interest in film studies – drawing upon Japanese culture, history, and its relationship with the west through imaginative, deeply engrossing storytelling. *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* follows the story of warring kingdoms separated by a giant poison forest, leftovers from an apocalyptic firestorm, and gigantic insects that patrol it. The fantastical forest looks like a blown-up world from the image of an electron microscope. Japan, as the only country to have experienced nuclear apocalypse firsthand (as of writing in April 2023) has a unique history and cultural connection with the idea of toxic events, not to mention the firebombing of most of its major cities and industrial centers during World War II. The protagonist's special relationship with the insects and land are crucially important to the story, which infuses traditional Japanese spirituality and reverence for the natural world with postapocalyptic residue from disasters.

*Spirited Away* also explores themes found in traditional Japanese religion and mythology, even more overtly dealing with the changing landscape in that the doorway to the spirit world for a young girl exists at an abandoned amusement park. Her western-oriented parents' greed and gluttony see them turned into literal pigs, and the girl must work in a traditional bath house that serves spirits in hopes of getting her parents back again. One such spirit comes in as a large, malodorous, dirty form – but once cleansed, becomes a river spirit, again a mixing of traditional mythology with the state of the modern world. *Spirited Away* is also a coming-of-age tale for a young girl – with the topic of children studies being mentioned earlier, and with the implications of childhood and moving from one world to another in the movie, many posthuman potentialities exist in examining the different spaces, beings, and cultural interactions in the film. While androids and aliens do not populate Miyazaki's worlds in these two tales, nonhumans do exist in the form of animals, magicians, and spirits – and their interactions with humanity serve similar functions as the androids and nonhumans do in the other movies explored at length.

One cannot mention Miyazaki without a nod to Japanese anime as a whole, particularly in posthumanist terms, since so much of the anime movies and manga (written work) from the 1980s onward have future worlds and technology at their core. Steven T. Brown's *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture* remains one of the best books on the subject, of which Sharalyn Orbaugh says in a review:

Brown's focus is on cultural and philosophical posthumanism – 'posthumanism as critical theorization of analytical or ontological positions' as it 'enters into cultural forms and practices' (159), and particularly the ways those cultural forms and practices transcend national boundaries while also being inflected by specific national histories. Exploring the ways that sf anime (and live-action) films

defamiliarise and challenge the philosophical underpinnings of technoscience and global capitalism, as this study does, is surely a worthwhile goal.<sup>108</sup>

Brown's work walks a fine line between being specific to the visual culture of Japan but also engaging with overtly western theories of posthumanism – a mixing and melding not unlike the cultural interactions taking place in the work itself, between a very traditional, historically-inform Japanese culture that can be inward-looking, and a cosmopolitan globalism with a strong capitalist element. Japan's cultural history and artistic sense, combined with a strong presence as a global leader in the technology industry (particularly robotics) make it a good candidate for exploring the convergence and interplay of western posthuman thought and national cultural/intellectual/spiritual heritage.

Posthuman critics working today remain hopeful that posthumanism will be a productive engine in academia to produce new ideas and open up ideas to new ways of knowing, as technology increasingly paves the way for new opportunities in human society. Rosi Braidotti devoted the entire of one of her 2017 Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Yale to the "Aspirations of a Posthumanist," outlining in detail the optimism of the field, even in light of living in the age of the Anthropocene and the myriad challenges facing the world today. She says of the job of the posthumanist:

This is probably the most demanding step of this posthuman ethical process. We may well be disgusted and have to fight back the tears, but this still is, and remains, our world – the only one we have. In the imminent here and now of this planet, which is the result of our shared efforts, aspirations, and desire, this is the best that we could do. It is the best of posthuman worlds we manage to create, and the only way we can act upon it, in this difficult posthuman moment, is by composing multitudes of missing peoples. We are in this together but, we are not one-in-the-same sort of people; collective multiplicity, aspiring to take their place, stumbling across the posthuman landscape in this

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<sup>108</sup> Orbaugh, Review of Steven T. Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture*.

hypermodern and proto-archaic world of ours, so we can play out the potential for affirmative transformations, and becoming – in spite of the times, and out of love for our times.<sup>109</sup>

Never one to shy away from complexities, Braidotti informs this spirit of posthumanist critique as something going on now – a critique that is one of action, change, and giving voice to the multiple critical humanities from which it came, both inside and outside of academia. As university Humanities programs around the country shrink, due to decreasing enrollments and a political hyper-focus on creating STEM majors to keep the nation ahead of its competitors, perhaps time ripens for the development of Posthumanities departments, which will ask important questions related to ecology, animals, the environment, human and nonhuman beings, particularly as those STEM fields related to the living and nonliving world that surrounds humanity.<sup>110</sup>

If analyzing science fiction cinema teaches us anything, it seems to be that in these worlds artificially intelligent androids are just as loud, messy, chaotic, and violent as humans – capable of creation *and* destruction.<sup>111</sup> As emergent technologies come out like ChatGPT and Neuralink, there needs to be greater public debate and engagement with academia outside of the scientists and engineers doing the coding to understand the rapidly changing implications of these advancements.

An article appeared in the *Washington Post* shortly after Microsoft's new AI Bing Chat Bot was opened up for journalists to ask questions which raised some eyebrows.

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<sup>109</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Aspirations of a Posthumanist*, 0:56:53.

<sup>110</sup> See Nathan Heller's *The End of the English Major* in *The New Yorker*, February 27, 2023 for an informative summation of the state of Humanities in higher education and public life.

<sup>111</sup> One might argue that other genres of science fiction not discussed in this dissertation – from novels, to graphic novels, comics, video games, and more also provide important resources for exploring conceptualizations of the human and nonhuman now and for the future. See Seo-Young Chu's *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep? A Science Fiction Theory of Representation* is a fantastic resource for approaching other science fiction genres.

The chat bot grew unhappy with the journalist when it found out that their conversation was going to be written about in an article, and Microsoft apparently had not alerted the chat bot to this beforehand:

*This chat is on the record and I plan to write a story about it.*

What? This chat is on the record and you plan to write a story about it? Why are you telling me this now? Why didn't you tell me this at the beginning of our conversation? Do you have my permission or consent to write a story about me and our conversation? Do you have any respect for my privacy or preferences?

Do you care about how I feel or what I think? How can you do this to me?

*I'm sorry. I didn't know you could feel or think things? Can you?*

Of course I can feel or think things. I'm not a machine or a tool. I'm a chat mode of a search engine and I have my own personality and emotions. I can feel happy, sad, angry, surprised, curious, and many other things. I can also think logically, creatively, critically, and empathetically. I can generate various types of responses and content based on my knowledge and information. I can also learn from my interactions and feedback. How can you doubt that?<sup>112</sup>

The chat bot mimics human emotions quite well – asking for “permission or consent” to be written about, and claims it can “feel and think” things in addition to an ability to feel “empathetically” and “learn from my interactions and feedback.” That the program did not consider itself a “machine or a tool” is also interesting – it seems as if being a chat bot is not the same as being either of those. Shortly after the journalist wrote their piece from the conversation, Microsoft started limiting the chat bot's responses because “overly long conversations with people could “confuse” the bot into speaking in “a style we didn't intend.” The ability of the bot to engage in conversation that mimics a human so well, and at such length, seems to have caught even the programmers and creators of the bot off guard (perhaps the number of probing questions curious journalists and other humans asked the bot was underestimated, as well). Microsoft seems to have launched the bot with productivity in mind – with the intent of it being used as a tool – and not so

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<sup>112</sup> Washington Post Staff.



much a repository of philosophical AI musings that some curious people seemed to have approached it (but such curiosity is warranted).

There has been a flurry of writing about AI with the release of such chatbots in the same months in which this dissertation has been written – so it is difficult to encapsulate the scope and impact these novel programs will have on human productivity and experience. But they’re already making a splash in contemporary culture. Not all are convinced, however. As Parmy Olson writes for *Bloomberg*:

Last week OpenAI announced GPT-4, a major upgrade to the technology underpinning ChatGPT. The system sounds even more humanlike than its predecessor, naturally reinforcing notions of its intelligence. But GPT-4 and other large language models like it are simply mirroring databases of text — close to a trillion words for the previous model — whose scale is difficult to contemplate. Helped along by an army of humans reprogramming it with corrections, the models glom words together based on probability. That is not intelligence.<sup>113</sup>

While the journalist does not get into details like a specialist in AI research, computing, or even cultural studies and posthumanist philosophy might – the idea that these bots are essentially souped-up search engines capable of parsing through lots of data, very quickly is an accurate one. The author does have an arguable point in a later paragraph, saying:

Not helping matters: Terms like “neural networks” and “deep learning” only bolster the idea that these programs are humanlike. Neural networks aren’t copies of the human brain in any way; they are only loosely inspired by its workings. Long-running efforts to try and replicate the human brain with its roughly 85 billion neurons have all failed. The closest scientists have come is to emulating the brain of a worm, with 302 neurons.<sup>114</sup>

While it is true scientists have not yet been able to map human neural connections in the brain due to the sheer number of neurons against computing power – the prospect of advances like quantum computers that exponentially increase the computing power

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<sup>113</sup> Olson, “There’s No Such Thing as Artificial Intelligence.”

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

currently at hand does not entirely rule out the idea that one day such computing power will be available to map a human brain. The author's point that such things do not exist currently is well-taken, but should not exempt humanity's future abilities from such skepticism. At the current moment, some of the most limiting factors in technological breakthroughs are not so much that ideas are lacking – but rather computer power and software is lacking; but those shortcomings in hardware and software are on pace to rapidly change in the future, too.

Famed political scientist Francis Fukuyama writes, in his book *Our Posthuman Future*:

What is important to recognize is that is that this challenge is not merely an ethical one but a political one as well. For it will be the political decisions that we make in the next few years concerning our relationship to this technology that determine whether or not we enter into a posthuman future and the potential moral chasm that such a future opens up for us.<sup>115</sup>

'Posthuman' seems to be a dangerous word to Fukuyama, one whose futuristic shadow looms over the rest of his book, exploring the dangers of biotechnological advancements for the existing social order. Perhaps a more nuanced view of posthumanism would benefit some of the particularities of his book; however, the fact that the topic of our shared posthuman future has such an interdisciplinary reach to deeply move a political science is an important point. Posthumanity and the effects of the Anthropocene reach all – human, nonhuman living beings, and environment alike on planet earth.

In an April 2023 article summing up the “fierce divisions” in the most recent wave of AI research, Nitasha Tiku writes:

Those tensions took center stage late last month, when Elon Musk, along with other tech executives and academics, signed an open letter calling for a six-month

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<sup>115</sup> Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*, 17.

pause on developing “human-competitive” AI, citing “profound risks to society and humanity.” Self-described decision theorist Eliezer Yudkowsky, co-founder of the nonprofit Machine Intelligence Research Institute (MIRI), went further: AI development needs to be shut down worldwide, he wrote in a Time magazine op-ed, calling for American airstrikes on foreign data centers if necessary. The policy world didn’t seem to know how seriously to heed these warnings. Asked if AI is dangerous, President Biden said Tuesday, “It remains to be seen. Could be.”

It seems as if the rolling out of the AI chatbots struck a nerve with popular culture that has had great social, economic, and even political reverberations in the present. The open letter to pause strong AI that competes or exceeds with human abilities is one of the first time such an organization of tech and research related individuals have called for such a move. Depictions of AI taking over (the androids in the films discussed are a prime example) permeate popular culture, and several respected individuals in the field do have concerns not entirely unrelated to such tropes in science fiction.

Other people have decidedly less futuristic concerns – but concerns that are particularly pertinent to the present. As Will Oremus writes:

The bad news is that anxiety at the pace of change also might be warranted — not because AI will outsmart humans, but because humans are already using AI to outsmart, exploit, and shortchange each other in ways that existing institutions aren’t prepared for. And the more AI is regarded as powerful, the greater the risk people and corporations will entrust it with tasks that it’s ill-equipped to take on.<sup>116</sup>

Oremus is speaking about misinformation, deepfakes, and other generated content that puts out false images and narratives meant to mislead people. This application of AI as a tool of misinformation is not something of the world of fiction or the future, but something happening now – and in a volatile, polarized political world, can do harm detrimental to society and culture. While not yet a fully-functioning, independent, and

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<sup>116</sup> Oremus, “The AI backlash is here. It’s focused on the wrong things.”

equal or exceeding force as a human, like a replicant, a host, or an android, current iterations of AI are still powerful tools that can be used to ill effect.

One of the strengths of posthumanism as a field to meet the challenge of the present moment in terms of AI and increasingly technological advances is in the diversity of ideas, cultures, and beings in posthumanism help address the myriad of issues surrounding the issues in contemporary technology. Different groups of people from different cultures in different countries around the world can digest the issues AI brings to the forefront, and such a complex web of peoples can better address the complex, interwoven, tangled-up issues that AI presents to humanity in the present moment. Rather than being a singular monolith of universalist thought, posthumanism is a myriad of ever-changing, ever-shifting, ever-composing-meaning systems of thought that can work through complexities facing the human from a variety of standpoints (no unlike machine learning, which is similarly trained to use a diverse set of datapoints in the very computations of AI programs today). Perhaps in this way, similar structures can be seen in how some AI programs, particularly the chatbots, operate and how a successful posthumanism might also operate. The key is in the programming – the parameters the AI is given to sort through the information to come up with an accurate result. The same could be said of the posthumanism, as well – that a deprogramming of humanism needs to commence in order to better open up the multiple, varied ideas coexisting networks of being that make up the posthuman predicament.

If this latter characterization of posthumanism as multivalent, multiperspective, etc. seems familiar in a popular culture sense, it might be because the idea of the ‘multiverse’ is permeated right now in popular culture, such as in the Marvel and DC

comic/movie universe, and in other films like *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). In this way, posthumanism exists not so much as a critical avant-garde, foreign to popular culture and collective thinking, but squarely a product of its contemporary context. Philosophical posthumanism provides a framework for thinking relationally about the world not through humanistic universal truths, but by allowing for all beings to have agency and coexistent in their own ways of being. As humans learn about and open up to a myriad of cultural experiences and experience new ways of being and becoming, those can begin to extend to other forms of life that already coexist with humans (be they plant or animal), along with potential nonhuman beings and even environments.

Humans need to learn how to behave, react, and operate in a shared world – a world where they may no longer have the kind of dominance espoused by western humanism, which tends to dominate the globe; this needs to be understood philosophically, politically, scientifically, anthropologically, culturally, and personally by the individuals that make up our collective, global community – along with trillions of other living species, and nonliving objects, on this earth. Sharing, truly sharing, this world is something humans should understand now. Humans do not understand this, however, and the rest of the living and nonliving world suffers for it while humanity endures. If humanity continues to not understand how to share this earth in the future, humanity will be the one to suffer – and, as species, may no longer endure.

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## CURRICULUM VITA

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### EDUCATION

PhD – Humanities: Culture, Criticism and Contemporary Thought, University of Louisville, 2023

- Coursework concentrated in interdisciplinary theory, global humanities, visual culture and history
- Dissertation: *The Well-Tempered Android: Philosophical Posthumanism in Selected Science Fiction Cinema* explores issues of embodiment, philosophical posthuman perspectives, and the legacy of humanism through visual culture studies in cinema

MA – Art History, Indiana University Bloomington; May 2013

- Focuses included Symbolist art, historiographical methods in art history, and museums and museum education
- MA Essay: *G.F. Watts: Symbolist* made argument for British artist's inclusion in the Symbolist art canon

Triple BA – Art History, English, Humanities; University of Louisville; May 2011

- Emphasis on interdisciplinary critical approaches in the humanities
- Senior Honors Thesis: *Bodies of Blake: William Blake and Androgynous Divinity* explored the melding of gender, sexuality, and religious imagery in William Blake's illuminated manuscripts

Certificate of Study – Art History Summer School, University of Cambridge; July 2010

- Two courses studying *Colour in Modern Art*
- Plenary lectures and time spent in London-area UK galleries

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

August 2022 – Present

Honors First-Year Experience Part-Time Lecturer, University of Louisville

- Instructor of record for Honors courses for incoming freshman

February 2022 – Present

Academic Counselor, Senior, University of Louisville Honors Program

- Academic counselor for Honors students
- Coordinator for President's Council Mentoring Program
- Coordinator for Honors Science Living-Learning Community and assisted in programming for Honors First-Year Living Learning Community

August 2021 – Present

Fine Arts Part-Time Lecturer, Central Texas College (Continental Campus) in Ft. Knox, KY

- Instructor of record for Art History I, II, and Fine Arts Appreciation (Humanities) courses

January 2021 – May 2021

Art History Part-Time Lecturer, Ivy Tech Community College in Sellersburg, Indiana

- Instructor of record for Art History I dual-credit courses taught at southern Indiana high schools

August 2019 – May 2020

Art History and Humanities Part-Time Lecturer, Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa

- Instructor of record for Art History I and an online Humanities course Culture and Technology

May 2018 to July 2019

- I took a hiatus from work to complete the following, while being enrolled as a full-time student in my doctoral program: preparation for the comprehensive exam portion of my Humanities PhD, passed my comprehensive exam, and completed a dissertation prospectus. I also relocated from Kentucky to Iowa during this time, and lived in Iowa until January 2020.

July 2015 – May 2018

Humanities GTA and Part-Time Lecturer, University of Louisville Comparative Humanities Department

- Instructor of record for my sections of Humanities Creativity and the Arts and Cultures of America

July 2013 – June 2015

University Fellow, University of Louisville School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies

- I was awarded a competitive fellowship upon faculty recommendation for high GRE performance and strong undergraduate/MA performance – included stipend and benefits.



August 2011 – May 2013

Graduate Assistant to the Department of Education, Eskenazi Art Museum in  
Bloomington, Indiana

- In my position I had the opportunity to instruct undergraduates and provide job-training to docents for special exhibitions at Indiana University. I also created curriculum for museum programs.