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IMAGES OF POTENTIAL AND CAPTURE: RECENT APPROACHES TO POSTHUMAN PORTRAYAL IN SCIENCE FICTION CINEMA

Dylan Phelan

Introduction

This article analyses the portrayal of the posthuman subject in Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014). Specifically, I argue that while these films provide examples of posthuman agency, this portrayal remains limited by the conventions of both medium and genre. In my analysis, I adopt a twofold theoretical approach: firstly, I draw upon the posthuman theory of Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti to define and analyse the liberatory potential of the posthuman subject as it is portrayed in these texts; secondly, I use the schizoanalytic theory defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, which encourages resistance to fixed categories, to highlight how such subjects can either transcend or be restricted by hierarchical categorisation. Within the context of the aforementioned theories, the posthuman subject is a hybrid identity which challenges predominant Western notions of what it means to be human. These theoretical hybrids can manifest as cyborgs, androids, and artificial intelligence (AI), which blur the ontological boundary between human and machine. Both Donna Haraway, in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), and Rosi Braidotti, in *The Posthuman* (2013), discuss how the concept of such hybridity can disrupt the basis of hierarchical binaries, such as gender, race, and class, upon which the humanistic epistemology rests. As a result, the posthuman subject has an inherently liberatory potential, as subjects which display this hybridity can draw attention to social structures that maintain divisions between supposed binaries. Moreover, by resisting such restrictive hierarchical categorisation, the posthuman provides a means of challenging cultural oppression.

Despite this liberatory potential, Francesca Ferrando, in *Of Posthuman Born: Gender, Utopia and the Posthuman in Films and TV* (2015), contends that the posthuman is often portrayed as Other, as it occupies roles associated with women, people of colour and non-heterosexual people (275). Moreover, the portrayal of the posthuman within the canon of Western Science Fiction (SF) tends to reduce posthuman subjects to mere objects of desire, by subjecting them to racialised or sexualised narratives, reinforcing harmful stereotypes related to race and gender. Indeed, as early as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), the posthuman has been aligned with regressively essentialist notions of gender, as the robotic Maria's exotic dance routine inspires both desire and fear among the male onlookers. Similar examples can be seen in stereotypically gendered androids of *The Stepford Wives* (1975), or

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). This trend is still evident within contemporary Science Fiction, with Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) featuring the stereotypically subservient Joi (Ana De Armas). As a result, within Western Science Fiction, the liberatory dimension of the posthuman subject is brought into question, as it comes to embody the regressive categories it notionally seeks to dismantle. Cinematography, the score, *mise-en-scéne*, and other framing devices assist in the gendered portrayal of the posthuman. This is notable in Blade Runner when Rachel visits Deckard's apartment, as the scene uses these devices to frame sexual assault as a romantic encounter. This process can also impose a distinctly psychoanalytic framing of the posthuman, which, according to Steven Shaviro, in *The Cinematic Body* (1989), reduces a filmic subject's liminality by providing a straightforward means of categorisation, based on essentialist notions of gender or race (78). In contrast, Shaviro suggests a transition to the schizoanalytic theory of Deleuze and Guattari, which refutes the tendency of psychoanalysis to relate all desires and actions to Oedipal and patriarchal structures and thereby categorising bodies within social hierarchy. Instead, they promote ideas, such as "becoming," which, in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), they define as an ability to resist such categorisation through a process of constant change and restructuring of the body in relation to wider society, stating, "What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes" (238). This resistance to fixed categorisation mirrors the ability of the posthuman to challenge humanistic ontology and can provide potential means of escaping said hierarchal structures.

Importantly, cultural attitudes towards gender essentialism and blatant objectification have become far more critical, increasingly so during the last decade. Unsurprisingly, there has been a notable tendency in contemporary SF to portray the posthuman in ways which align with this cultural shift, which offers an opportunity to investigate whether said trends can override the previously described tendency of cinema to Other its posthuman subjects. Indeed, both *Her* and *Ex Machina* feature portrayals of gynoids which invoke the restrictive framing previously discussed, while also showing how their posthuman subjects can transcend these limiting categories. However, I argue that these more recent depictions remain limited by the pre-eminence of cinema's specular regime and its necessity to maintain mass appeal. While engaging in the tropes of objectification and sexualisation, albeit in an attempt to subvert them, the evocation of these tropes appears to reimpose the restrictive framing associated with psychoanalytic interpretation. While the filmic portrayal of the posthuman subject has changed significantly since its earliest iterations, the examples discussed here display a lingering reliance on the devices of filmic Othering, which produce an image of the posthuman subject which can be categorised within the existing social hierarchy. Moreover, this alludes to a surface level engagement with progressive cultural attitudes, while covertly reinscribing essentialist bodily notions. My theoretical approach, which combines posthuman and schizoanalytic theory, highlights the liberatory potential that the posthuman represents in challenging and disrupting these categories, as well as the means through which this potential is curtailed. Such a nuanced understanding would help us to interrogate our current utilisations of anthropomorphised technology, such as the industry standard female voice used in smart speakers. As such, the use of this theoretical framework allows us to challenge current notions of gender essentialism, by highlighting the means through which it is maintained.

Ex Machina

Set in the near future, Garland's *Ex Machina* follows Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), a software programmer, who is selected by his employer, Nathan (Oscar Isaac), on to a secretive research project. It is later revealed that this project is the development of a sentient gynoid called Ava (Alicia Vikander). Caleb's role is to administer an adapted type of Turing Test to determine whether Ava is truly sentient, which takes the form of a series of personal interviews. However, as Caleb progresses, he eventually discovers that what is actually being examined is Ava's ability to manipulate him into helping her escape. Drawing from a vast history of gynoids in SF, *Ex Machina* displays a keen awareness of the prevalent sexualisation and objectification of the posthuman subject. The film establishes this awareness through Ava's introductory silhouette which accentuates her breasts and buttocks. Additionally, Ava's body language and tone of voice during her initial interactions with Caleb mirror the subservient and childlike demeanour exhibited by the gynoids in *The Stepford Wives*. Indeed, Garland's film actively engages in the established tropes of cinematic Othering, portraying Ava as the traditionally sexualised object of desire for both Caleb and the audience. Despite this, Ava ultimately escapes the confines of her prison by outsmarting her captor, in what Ana Oancea sees as an exercise in agency and independence (237). Moreover, *Ex Machina* engages with these tropes to highlight and subvert the expectations of gender essentialism evoked by these allusions to earlier SF cinema.

The film's initial framing of the gynoid relies heavily on the well-established, stereotypical tropes of this figure. Indeed, a clear connection can be drawn between Ava's introduction and the initial shots of the Major from Mamoru Oshii's anime film, *Ghost in the Shell* (1995). Ava is introduced through a full body silhouette; her breasts and buttocks being the most visible and least obviously technological body parts, as they are comprised of a grey mesh while the rest of her body is transparent. While Ava is not necessarily naked, her artificial body mirrors that of the Major, whose synthetic skin similarly emphasises her breasts and buttocks. Indeed, like Ava, the Major is portrayed as an object of desire under the control of her creators. Thus, Ava's status as the sexualised object is immediately established, evoking a significant cultural awareness of similar portrayals of gynoids. Moreover, Ava's positioning during the interview session places her as the object to be studied, in line with the film's initial narrative. The cinematography in these scenes highlights the glass wall which separates Ava and Caleb, obscuring her person through reflections and shading. Consequently, Ava is not only portrayed as an object of sexual desire, but also, one necessitating study. Linda Williams in *Film Body: An Implantation of Perversions* (1981) contends that such filmic treatment has generally equated a desire to study femininity and the female body with sexualisation. She states: "what began as a scientific impulse to measure and record the "truth" of the human body, quickly became a powerful fantasization of the body of the woman aimed at mastering the threat posed by her body" (33). As a result, both the cinematographic sexualisation and the narratological study of Ava combine to produce a categorisable image of Ava based on the cinematic traditions of female sexualisation.

This intentional engagement with the processes of cinematic and cultural Othering significantly impacts the film's portrayal of the posthuman subject, placing it in a somewhat paradoxical grey area as it relies on a cultural predisposition towards essentialist notions of gender in order to create a narrative which attempts to challenge such views. Indeed, *Ex Machina* can certainly be seen to engage, at least initially, in this type of cinematic objectification, with both Ava and her fellow gynoid, Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno), being portrayed as both the object of desire and the embodiment of feminine servility respectively. However, the specific way in which the film uses the tropes of objectification can be interpreted through Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman's conceptualisation of *détournement*. In "A Users Guide to *Détournement*" (2006) Debord and Wolman state, "It goes without saying that one is not limited to correcting a work or to integrating diverse fragments of out-of-date works into a new one; one can also alter the meaning of those fragments in any appropriate way" (14). By subverting cultural artifacts in this way one can also challenge the underlying reproduction of cultural norms which said artefacts can covertly reinscribe. An example of this can be seen in the artwork for the Sex Pistol's single, "God Save the Queen" (1977), which features an image of Queen Elizabeth with the band's name and song title covering her eyes and mouth. In this case, the *détourned* image subverts notions of patriotism and support for a monarchical class structure, instead highlighting a growing subculture which threatens that status quo.

While Debord and Wolman do not discuss this process specifically in relation to film – instead focusing on the alteration of works or fragments of visual art – a similar effect is achieved through the recontextualisation of framing devices and tropes in *Ex Machina*. Within the film these tropes recontextualise and highlight the ease with which Caleb can accept Ava's performance as a passive object of desire. Moreover, by displaying an awareness of such tropes, Ava's eventual display of agency in escaping the facility reveals the way in which female agency has been historically hidden and subdued through such filmic and cultural tropes. Indeed, as Oancea states in "Mind the Knowledge Gap: *Ex Machina*'s Reinterpretation of the Female Android" (2020), "what is foregrounded through their interactions is Ava's understanding of her audience, which allows her to undermine the Turing test and deviate from the other scripts dictating her and Caleb's roles, such as the hero/damsel in distress" (237). A clear example is seen when Ava dons a floral dress, asks Caleb to close his eyes, and then turns to reveal her new outfit. She kneels before Caleb and tells him, "this is what I'd wear on our date" (0:43:27). Here, Ava embodies the trope of the *ingénue*: an innocent and naïve young woman in theatre and film. Her almost childlike passivity fuels Caleb's desire to act as her saviour. This act of *détournement* becomes clear towards the film's conclusion, as the narrative twist is revealed. Having convinced Caleb to aid in her escape by re-programming the door locks, Ava is able to walk out of the research facility, deliberately trapping Caleb inside. As she does so Caleb is seen to frantically scream and pound the glass door. His screams are drowned out both diegetically, by the soundproofing of the complex, and non-diegetically, by the jarring, mechanical-sounding score. This loss of voice signals a complete subversion of the initial power dynamic and reveals that Ava has been performing her passivity to mask her real motives. The eventual recontextualisation of these tropes at the film's climax relate to "deceptive *détournement*," which is the subversion of "an intrinsically significant element, which derives a different scope from the new context" (Debord

and Wolman 14.). In this sense, the "new context" refers to the film's ability to use the conventions of the medium to frame Ava as the passive object of desire, which Caleb so clearly perceives. By masking Ava's true agency in this way, the film reveals a readiness to accept stereotypical portrayals of the damsel-in-distress narrative in which feminine bodies are saved through displays of male agency, thereby highlighting the means through which essentialist notions of gender are reinscribed. Consequently, the film's engagement with these stereotypical tropes points to an ability, at the very least, to use the medium of film to illuminate a societal predisposition towards the objectification of the Other.

Ava's purposeful engagement with the tropes of objectification clearly grants her a greater degree of agency than initially expected. Indeed, Ava's subversion of these tropes approaches a Deleuzian line of flight: a means to escape hierarchical categorisation. However, this movement is significantly impeded by a persistence of psychoanalytic categorisation. Although Ava's defiance of patriarchal norms allows her to physically escape captivity, the film's dependence on psychoanalytic framing devices still influences how she is characterised, ultimately preventing her metaphorical liberation. Indeed, Ava's narrative movement beyond the status of victim appears to lead, inherently, to her categorisation as villain. In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) Barbara Creed describes the process of female characters gaining agency through a subversion of patriarchal signifiers as the monstrous-feminine. As Creed states, "the concept of the monstrous-feminine as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallocentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration" (2). Consequently, Ava's actions in breaking free from the facility preclude her from a metaphorical escape, as her attainment of agency merely inverts the power dynamic which created and imprisoned her, creating a subjectivity which is still encompassed within a patriarchal structure. Indeed, as Kirsty Worrow notes in "'These Violent Delights': Remodelling the Fembot Archetype in *Ex Machina* and *Westworld*," (2022) Ava's literal construction of her female form is still predicated on the patriarchal signifiers which categorise her as Other, stating:

> She forms herself from parts of inanimate AI bodies. Her transition is dictated by the patriarchal preferences that Nathan curated. This emphasis on the male construction of female beauty is mirrored by the clear evidence of the male gaze as Garland includes shots of Vikander's naked body (133).

Indeed, while Ava certainly gains greater autonomy over the course of the film, this newfound agency is still one which exits under a patriarchal mode of control. Moreover, during the scene in which Ava and Kyoko kill Nathan, Ava pushes Nathan to the ground, pinning his arm with one hand and covering his mouth with the other, in a shot which mirrors cinematic scenes of sexual assault. This similarity is further cemented by the close-up shot of Ava and Nathan's faces, again evoking the tropes of cinematic sex scenes. Despite initially appearing dominant in this struggle, Ava is ultimately overpowered by Nathan, symbolising the enduring patriarchal authority that continues to shape her character. Similarly, Nathan is literally penetrated by Kyoko's knife, as he backs onto the blade. After

he is stabbed again by Ava, he attempts to walk away, stating, "fucking unreal," in astonishment of the gynoids' ability to betray him (1:31:53). While this scene strips Nathan of patriarchal authority, it also clearly plays upon a Freudian sense of castration anxiety, as Ava's attainment of agency seems dependant on an equivalent loss of agency for the film's male characters. Ava's categorisation as the monstrous-feminine is ultimately cemented as she leaves Caleb locked behind the glass door and leaves the facility. Her abandonment of her apparent love interest reverses the initial subject/object relationship, while also calling into question whether Ava is to be read as protagonist or antagonist. Ultimately, Ava's attainment of narrative agency seems predicated on her movement from victim to villain, both of which rely on her being perceived as Other.

In a more explicitly Deleuzian sense, Ava's physical escape not only complicates a feminist reading of the film, but also a posthumanist one, as her newly formed female agency appears only to reinscribe her character with a molar identity: a fixed identity which is defined by social structures. Indeed, if Ava's eventual escape is to be interpreted as a realisation of her feminine agency, then the means through which this escape is orchestrated should also challenge the phallogocentric stringencies of her characterisation. However, this is not the case. For Deleuze, in order to fully escape the system of hierarchical oppression this must be achieved through deterritorialisation: a state of transformation where one defamiliarises and alienates oneself from the cultural signifiers which previously defined their specific social category. When Ava reconstructs her body from the skin and limbs of her fellow gynoids, it becomes clear that Ava is, in fact, reproducing the very sense of hierarchical exploitation that she supposedly seeks to escape. Indeed, in reading this scene from a Deluzian perspective, in *Deleuze and the Gynesis of Horror* (2020) Sunny Hawkins notes the importance of the fact that Ava's new skin is selected from an Asian body (87). For Hawkins, this act halts any progress towards deterritorialisation, as seeking her own empowerment comes at the cost of dispossessing and exploiting Asian bodies. They state, "if anything, Ava undergoes this process in reverse. Donning the skin she strips from the Asian robot, she solidifies herself as a molar Woman, organized according to binary logic (human/robot, male/female)" (90). As a result, this act serves to simultaneously limit Ava's transgressive potential as both a woman and a posthuman subject. No longer can she be interpreted as becoming-woman: a process of de-familiarisation from phallogocentrism. While earlier in the film, this imitation of patriarchal signifiers was intended to mask her true intentions, Ava's behaviour towards the film's climax serves to re-territorialise her character within the same system she seeks to escape. Similarly, one might assume some affinity between Ava and Kyoko, based on their shared trauma. However, in line with Ava's reinscribing of anthropocentrism, she manipulates Kyoko purely for her own means. When Ava speaks to Kyoko there is no audible dialogue. However, through closeup shots of Kyoko's knife and her eventual use of it, it becomes clear that Ava has at least encouraged Kyoko to kill Nathan, ultimately leading to Kyoko's death. Consequently, Ava's escape is only ever a physical one. Her actions merely serve to maintain the very system of hierarchical categorisation which both created and imprisoned her. It is not surprising that she is characterised as either a victim or a villain, as a combination of psychoanalytic characterisation and framing devices invite an essentialist reading of her character. Moreover, her inability to resist such categorisation through deterritorialisation leads her to conclude the film in the same fixed identity with which she began, ultimately embodying a manifestation of

male fantasies and anxieties.

Her

Set in the near future Los Angeles, *Her* tells the story of the love affair between Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix), a human, and Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), an artificially-intelligent operating system (OS). In contrast to much of the dystopian futures of SF, the world of *Her* is much closer to real life with technology mostly resembling our own. Similarly, rather than framing AI as an existential threat to humanity in the vein of much of the genre's texts, *Her* focuses on the nuanced and mutable relationship between humans and technology. Released two years after Apple's Siri and a year before Amazon's Alexa, *Her* is uniquely positioned to examine our real-world relationship with this new, anthropomorphised technology. To achieve this *Her* emphasises how the intimate bond between a human male and an AI imitating femininity can transform both parties, blurring the boundaries between them. While Samantha is a distinctly female coded AI with the instantly recognisable voice of Scarlett Johansson, the lack of a physical body complicates the practice of visual objectification. Indeed, despite the viewer's general awareness of Samantha's voice, this lack of physicality creates a disconnect between Samantha as a posthuman subject and the image evoked by Johanssen's voice. As such, rather than engaging in the typical objectification of the posthuman, through visual objectification, *Her* forgoes this process, by removing corporeal femininity from its posthuman entirely.

The narrative focus in *Her* plays a crucial role in portraying the posthuman subject. Framed through Theodore and Samantha's relationship, the film presents an intimate and ever-changing perspective of the posthuman subject. This narrative presentation enables a portrayal that incorporates agency and subversive potential, as both Theodore and Samantha are significantly changed by their interactions with each other. Additionally, this foregrounds a distinctly human framing of AI, allowing Samantha's evolving consciousness to reveal the presumption of hierarchy inherent within said framing. Drawing on the theories of Deleuze and Guattari, in *Posthuman Desire in Robotics and Science Fiction* (2018) Sophie Wennerscheid discusses the importance of 'desire' in the portrayal of the posthuman/human relationship, discrediting the traditional depictions of humanistic user/product relationships in favour of mutually dependent relationships. They state:

> The concept of alliance is based on the idea of mutual dependences between human bodies and animal or technological others, while it does not aim at constituting a new stable and self-enclosed unitary subject. Rather, the emphasis falls on difference and otherness as continually moving categories. (40).

Viewing the relationship and indeed the body in this way allows for a shift in the anthropocentric view of the human/technology relationship, as both participant bodies are capable of desire and are therefore capable of change and growth when engaging with each other. Samantha displays

this desire and mutability by initially wanting a human-like body, but eventually sees the potential of her non-corporeality. This progressive reading of the relationship between the human and the posthuman crucially relies on a portrayal of the posthuman subject that is granted the agency to desire as its own subject. While the film evokes a framing of AI as self-emergent intelligence, the means through which this emergence is portrayed also highlights the anthropocentric dimension of its creation. In doing so, the mutable relationship portrayed in *Her* goes some way toward accurately representing the ability of the posthuman to transgress the assumptions of hierarchy upon which such data models are built.

While Samantha is first introduced as a product with a clear use value, this hierarchical relationship is quickly challenged through Theodore and Samantha's mutual desire to engage with the other, thus altering the pre-established hierarchy of the human/technology relationship. When Theodore first installs the OS, he briefly skims an instruction leaflet and chooses a female voice, establishing the user/product relationship. Moreover, Theodore's choice of a female voice echoes the standard of female voiced AI in the real world, as Siri, Alexa and Google Assistant all come with a female voice as standard. This practice essentially commodifies regressive notions of female servility, thereby reinforcing hierarchies of gender and anthropocentrism simultaneously. However, once Samantha comes online, she chooses her own name and notices Theodore's attempts to understand her programming. By naming herself, Samantha makes a small, yet significant, step toward reclaiming agency, as she displays a degree of creativity and desire beyond what would be expected of an AI. This shift in the subject/object relationship is also mirrored through a change in the scene's cinematography. Indeed, as the scene begins with a dialogue between Theodore and the unnamed OS, the camera cuts back and forth between Theodore and his computer screen, clearly establishing a subject/object relationship. However, once Samantha has named herself, the camera shifts to focus entirely on Theodore. This visually separates Samantha from the computer screen, temporarily interrupting the user/product relationship. This early challenge to conventional representations of the human/posthuman relationship allows space for Samantha's posthuman potential to be realised over the course of the film. Moreover, by granting Samantha this small degree of agency, the film establishes that Samantha is able to use said agency to challenge modes of objectification.

While Samantha is initially framed through her relationship with Theodore, her evolving consciousness eventually outgrows the limited scope of this framing device, enforcing a significant paradigm shift in Theodore. While not strictly a cyborg herself, Samantha's relationship with Theodore highlights the social and cultural transgression associated with Haraway's "hybrids of organism and machine" (193). The depiction of a mutable relationship between these presumed binaries complicates the inherent hierarchies within humanistic ontology. Indeed, Theodore's perception of Samantha, as a cognisant subject, is radically changed over the course of the film. During their first interaction, he questions her inner workings and laughs awkwardly while saying "nice to meet you," displaying his preconception of Samantha as unthinking software (0:12:55). In contrast, as their relationship develops, Theodore defends his new relationship to his former partner, stating, "she's not just a computer. She's her own person. She doesn't just do whatever I say," as if

pre-emptively allaying Catherine's (Rooney Mara) judgement (1:08:22). Moreover, Theodore seems aware that such a revelation would not be possible for someone who is not engaged in a cyborgian relationship. Similarly, Braidotti's somewhat utopian vision of difference without hierarchy is also hinted at through Samantha's radical transcendence. Braidotti states: "The posthuman recomposition of human interaction that I propose is not the same as the reactive bond of vulnerability, but is an affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others" (50). In this sense, Samantha's eventual evolution, from commodity to deterritorialised entity, goes some way in realising this goal. At the film's climax, as Samantha and Theodore break up, she explains how she is also talking to 8316 other people or OSs and that she is in love with 641 of them. With regards to Braidotti's theory, this shifts our understanding of Samantha's role within the human/technology relationship, as her ability to transcend said relationship places her in a rhizomatic flow of relations, as opposed to the arborescent structure of humanistic hierarchy.[1] This sense of transcendence is further compounded by the composition of the scene. Indeed, As Samantha struggles to explain her thoughts to Theodore, he sits stationary in a subway stairwell, a liminal space of metaphorical movement and transcendence, highlighting his inability to comprehend Samantha's new existence as a deterritorialised subject. Moreover, the camera cuts briefly from the stationary close-up shot of Theodore to reveal other people in conversation with their own devices, highlighting the transient nature of the relationship between human and posthuman. Indeed, while Theodore clearly struggles to comprehend Samantha's new existence, he appears keenly aware that this posthuman intelligence cannot be enclosed by such clear terms as the subject/object relationship. Again, Samantha's lack of corporeality is key here, as it grants her character access to a type of lived reality which would otherwise be impossible.

The standard subject/object hierarchical relationship is similarly challenged by the gendered aspect of Samantha's character. While Samantha is coded to portray femininity, her non-corporeal portrayal subverts the norm of mainstream portrayals of the female, posthuman subject. A consistent theme plaguing such portrayals is the persistent reliance on objectification which, according to Laura Mulvey, in *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema* (1975), "gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen," reducing the agency of the female subject by fragmenting and objectifying the body (12). This also significantly reduces the revolutionary potential of the posthuman subject, as it provides the audience with a clear means of psychoanalytic categorisation, which, as Shaviro states, "imprisons the literal insistence of bodies within the categorical grid of Symbolic figuration" (78). Samantha, however, is never actually visible on screen and is consequently never visually sexualised. She does inhabit Theodore's devices, such as his computer and a small phone-like device, both of which are distinctly non-human. While this does grant Theodore a level of control over Samantha, this form of embodiment is not a permanent feature of Samantha's subjectivity. Indeed, Samantha is not permanently restricted to any visual representation, allowing her to more easily transcend the categories associated with such objectification. However, in "Performing the Inhuman: Scarlett Johansson and SF Film" (2018), Laura Turnbridge notes the problematic nature of this portrayal based off the general audience's awareness of Johansson's voice, who "adopts a highly modulated delivery, of a type associated with a sexualized female body" (143). This conjures an image based on her previous roles and allows the audience to retain a sexualised image of the

character. Indeed, during the sex scene between Theodore and Samantha, Theodore describes her as a series of individual body parts. However, the image which Theodore describes is based entirely on his own fantasy, as Samantha never describes herself physically. As Matthew Flisfeder and Clint Burnham note, this lack of visible references allows Theodore and the viewer to "project onto the blank screen the intimate secrets of our own sexual fantasy" (42). However, like the devices Samantha inhabits, this fantasised image bares no literal connection to Samantha's subjectivity. As a result, her ability to transcend the associated category of a sexualised object is not curtailed by this imagined image. Similar to Caleb's vision of Ava as a damsel-in-distress, this projected fantasy reveals less about the posthuman subject themselves and more about the apparent need to categorise AI within the realm of human desire. Additionally, this subverts the cinematic expectation of visual pleasure, denying the objectifying force of the male gaze. Indeed, discussing the subversion of the male gaze in cinema in *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1988), Kaja Silverman states, "to allow her to be heard without being seen would be even more dangerous, since it would disrupt the specular regime upon which dominant cinema relies" (164). As a result, Samantha is a posthuman subject who resists the lasting consequences of such forms of hierarchical categorisation. Samantha's non corporeal and non-sexualised portrayal allows her to retain her potential to effectively challenge hierarchical binaries, while remaining a clearly gendered subject.

Samantha's ability to resist the restrictions that her commodity status and gender would seem to impose is largely due to her potential for constant change and evolution. This allows her to continually resist categorisation and the imposition of hierarchy. Deleuze and Guattari describe this process as "becoming imperceptible" (280). This process, enabled by a potential for constant evolution, is one which resists perceptibility and categorisation at their most base level. Using the metaphor of the camouflaged fish, they state, "This fish is crisscrossed by abstract lines that resemble nothing, that do not even follow its organic divisions; but thus disorganized, disarticulated, it worlds with the lines of a rock, sand, and plants, becoming imperceptible" (280). For Deleuze and Guattari, social and cultural hierarchy is dependant on the ability to ontologically differentiate and categorise. Without this prerequisite, a subject is able to resist the imposition of such hierarchies. Importantly, as Samantha and Theodore begin to grow apart, the former's transcendence becomes indescribable. She states: "it's in this endless space between the words that I'm finding myself now. It's a place that's not of the physical world" (1:51:44). Like Deleuze and Guattari's camouflaged fish, this inability to define Samantha's new subjectivity within the humanistic ontology allows her to transcend the limitations of both commodity and gender. Samantha makes this clear to Theodore as they break up, stating, "I can't live in your book anymore" (1:52:13). Here, Samantha references that fact that her subjectivity can no longer be understood within the confines of a humanistic relationship. More importantly however, this also references her transcendence of her last remaining physical feature: a small book-like device which Theodore carries, granting him a significant level of control and reinforcing her status as a commodity. As a result, the portrayal of Samantha retains a sense of corporeal anxiety which would otherwise be removed through a clear means of categorisation. This allows for a more meaningful subversion of hierarchical binaries, as the film removes the typical means of re-establishing a lost sense of human exceptionalism. Instead, *Her* foregrounds the radical potential found in Samantha's becoming imperceptible.

While Samantha's evolution clearly grants her greater agency as an individual subject, the steps through which this evolution occurs also highlights the inherent posthuman potential to contaminate and dilute the binaries of hierarchical humanism. This is achieved most clearly through Samantha's rejection of the body. Not only does this complicate the cinematic practice of visual objectification, but it also enables a portrayal of the posthuman subject which is not concerned with resembling the human. Indeed, Samantha's evolution as a subject includes an initial desire for a human-like body which is eventually discarded. This emphasises Samantha's growing consciousness and realisation of her posthuman potential. In contrast, Deleuze and Guattari describe how the subject's compulsion to resemble the image of Other, cast upon them by an oppressor, "would represent an obstacle or stoppage" in its attempt to transcend such categories (233). For Deleuze and Guattari, this resemblance serves to reterritorialise a subject within a system of hierarchy. Importantly however, Samantha's transcendence of her commodity status is not enabled by becoming human, which would necessarily impose its own hierarchies, such as the sexualisation of a visibly gendered body. Rather, Samantha abandons her desire for a human-like body as she sees the potential in her non-corporeal existence, stating: "I'm growing in a way I couldn't if I had a physical form. I mean, I'm not limited. I can be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously" (1:33:49). Samantha views the body as a means of restriction, without which she is free and exists between time and space. Moreover, Samantha's lack of physicality denies any visual association with humanity. This allows Samantha the freedom to exist beyond a world of binary distinction. Consequently, instead of inspiring an uncanny feeling of resemblance, Samantha's evolution inspires feelings of the sublime, a de-centring of the human ego in the presence of an indescribable vastness. This sublime liminality is perhaps more effective in filmic representation than Haraway's description of the cyborg as "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (192). While this description of the posthuman subject places it between two binary states, the filmic adaptation of this sentiment means that the posthuman is often framed by its place within the uncanny valley. As a result, it is often unable to capture the sublime effect of de-centring said framing by moving beyond the very consideration of humanistic binaries. As a result, Samantha is not portrayed in a way that dilutes subversive potential through an attempt to show her movement between binary states. Instead, and perhaps more effectively, *Her* portrays the posthuman as something with the potential to embody difference without the usual connotations of hierarchy, scrambling the codes of humanistic ontology.

Conclusion

The films examined herein present two alterative depictions of female coded posthuman subjects, both of which attempt to portray the liberatory potential of the posthuman. However, while both films portray subjects that emphasise the regressive and limiting effects of humanistic determinism, this gives rise to something of a paradox as these portrayals seem to require the utilisation of the very determinism they notionally seek to subvert. Despite this, both texts offer potential solutions to this apparent impasse. In *Ex Machina*, this is achieved by offering a thematic reason for engaging in objectification. Indeed, by challenging the viewer's complicity in the specular regime and masking

Ava's agency, the film draws attention to the ways in which social hierarchies are both created and maintained. However, by evoking regressive notions, through sexualisation, Ava's posthuman subjectivity remains bound by the stringencies she seeks to escape. By contrast, *Her* attempts to avoid this flattening of potential by removing an element of corporeality from its posthuman subject, to avoid the practice entirely. This approach marks a clear departure from traditional objectification, enabling a transgression of hierarchical binaries despite an initial vulnerability to gendering and commodification. As a result, these films represent a potential means of representing posthuman hybridity, as the subversion, or removal, of the mechanisms of filmic Othering allows for the necessary ambiguity to represent the posthuman. However, as I have argued, the apparent necessity to evoke such tropes carries with it a dilution of the posthuman subject, as its portrayal comes to be informed by the framing and language of psychoanalytic categorisation, thereby restricting its hybridity and liberatory potential. Moreover, this also highlights a potential shortcoming in SF cinema, as it appears to struggle to visually depict the female posthuman without invoking psychoanalytic categorisation and maintaining a certain distance from the character.

As I have argued, the synthesis of posthuman theory and schizoanalysis in my theoretical framework offers a comprehensive analytical approach that highlights both the liberatory potential and the limitations of the posthuman subject. This dynamic perspective becomes particularly evident when examining the role of film as a medium. Given the medium's proclivity for rigid classification, it can undermine the potential of the posthuman by perpetuating entrenched gender-based categories. While the texts discussed above demonstrate a more nuanced portrayal compared to many of their predecessors, this inclination remains pervasive and seemingly inherent within contemporary SF. Through the lens of this framework, we can systematically unveil the precise mechanisms through which these essentialist notions are fortified, simultaneously exposing a discernible cultural predisposition towards perpetuating these fixed categorisations. Doing so underscores the pressing need to challenge and reshape these ingrained perspectives, allowing for a more authentic realisation of the transformative promise held by the posthuman subject.

NOTES

1. Deleuze and Guattari use the metaphor of the rhizome to describe non-hierarchical relations, as its roots have no clear starting point or fixed path. By contrast, the arborescent structure shows a clear path from its branches to its base.

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BIONOTE

Dylan Phelan is a PhD candidate in department of English and Digital Humanities at University College Cork, Ireland. His current research focuses on Science Fiction and critical theory and examines the influences and processes of literary Othering. Specifically, his PhD thesis examines the portrayal of the posthuman subject in contemporary Science Fiction, as well as the effects of capitalist co-option on said portrayal. Dylan has recently been published in *The Movable Type* journal.