

Black Sheep of the Future: Posthumanism, Otherness, and Identity in *Automata* and *Chappie*

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of posthumanism, otherness, and identity in the science fiction films Automata (2014) and Chappie (2015). Drawing on theoretical frameworks from N. Katherine Hayles and others, it examines how these films challenge essentialist notions of humanness by depicting posthuman figures as both a continuation of and a challenge to human identity. Through close analysis of key scenes and dialogues, the study highlights how embodiment, consciousness, and autonomy are central to the construction of posthuman subjectivity. The films are shown to reflect contemporary anxieties and aspirations regarding technological advancement, raising questions about agency, control, and the ethics of artificial life. Ultimately, the paper argues that science fiction cinema serves as a vital space for reimagining the boundaries of humanity, prompting critical reflection on the future of identity in an increasingly technologized world. Limitations and directions for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Science Fiction Film, Artificial Intelligence, Otherness, Identity

Introduction

The accelerating encroachment of technology upon the very fabric of human existence has left us questioning the very nature of our identity, our consciousness and what it means to be human. The posthuman has become an increasingly pervasive theme in both academic discourse and society more generally, and specifically in the domain of SF cinema. Movies like Gabe Ibáñez's *Automata* (2014) and Neill Blomkamp's *Chappie* (2015) creatively depict the dilemmas and the potential of human and posthuman transition, situating otherness, embodiment, and the reformulation of subjectivity as central concerns. The whys and hows of that displacement become the stuff of speculation, not about the future of technology, but about the nature of humanity in the time of AI and cybernetic enhancement.

By looking at the theoretical discourse as well cinematic representation of posthumanism, this article considers how posthumanism participates in undermining the essentialist constructions of humanness and rethinks the relationship between human and machine. Grounded in the work of N. Katherine Hayles and other major theorists, these readings position posthuman identity as an actively contested zone, characterized by the entanglement of information patterns,

physical bodies, and unfolding states of mind. Engaging with key scenes and dialogues from *Automata* and *Chappie*, this examination considers how such films construct the posthuman as a continuation of and challenge to the human, prompting a critical reflection on issues of agency, autonomy and the politics of the other. In the process, the essay aims to highlight the cultural anxieties and desires that inform such conceptions of the post human future (or the absence of one), ultimately suggesting that science fiction cinema is an essential site for reconsidering what it might mean to be post human in the 21st century.

Literature Review

In exploring posthumanism, otherness, and identity through the lens of science fiction, the films *Automata* (2014) and *Chappie* (2015) offer profound insights into the future of artificial intelligence (AI) and human-machine interaction. Scholars have critically examined these films through various theoretical frameworks, such as posthumanism and psychoanalysis. For instance, “Humanising AI and Evaporating Humanity: Post-humanism in *Her* (2013) and *Chappie* (2015)” by Shun Man Emily Chow-Quesada, analyzes *Chappie* in terms of humanizing AI and exploring the evaporating boundaries between humanity and machines, reflecting contemporary cultural anxieties surrounding AI’s potential consciousness. Similarly, “The Image of Future Human Represented in *Chappie* (2015)” by Muchammad Sofyan Firmansyah explores how the film constructs otherness and identity, applying Stuart Hall’s representation theory. Another important study, “Portrayals and Perceptions of Cinematic Artificial Intelligence: A Mixed-Method Analysis of *I, Robot* (2004) and *Chappie* (2015),” by Michael Dorfling investigates societal perceptions of AI, underlining how these films shape and challenge the public’s understanding of machine sentience and autonomy. Furthermore, “Beyond Human: Otherness and the Subject in Psychoanalysis and Posthumanism” by Cristina Álvares discusses the concept of otherness in psychoanalysis and posthumanism, providing a philosophical lens for understanding AI’s role in identity formation and human interactions with technology. In the realm of performance studies, “Posthuman Drama: Identity and the Machine in Twenty-First-Century Playwriting” by Richard Jordan intersects with the discourse on posthuman identity, where the boundary between the human and non-human is explored through dramatic forms. These works collectively address the complex relationship between human identity and technological evolution, challenging viewers to reconsider the notion of what it means to be human in an increasingly AI-dominated future.

The Politics of Belonging: Posthumanism, Identity, and the Challenge to Humanism

Though deviated from the ideas of essential humanism, posthuman is presented as the natural successor of humans themselves. “Post- of posthumanism does not (and, moreover, cannot) mark or make an absolute break from the legacy of humanism” (Wilde 365-380). A belief in artificial intelligence and cyborgs have spread with an assumption that without technological development, human development is stagnated and the criteria to measure the human development is technological advancement. Li argues that “the hybridity of the cyborg... invites a cascade of creative and emancipatory possibilities” (Li 57-66). In this way, digital machines started to function as descendants of the human species which made posthuman, a natural development of the human themselves. In a conversation which take place in the movie *Automata* between Wallace the police officer, Tech the machine brothel keeper and Jacq, they

discuss about the unending possibilities of Cleo the sex robot.

“Cleo”

“You ask, she obeys”

“This unit can do these things?” “Cleo, you ask her, okay?”

“Do not be afraid. I can distinguish perfectly between pleasure and pain.” “Can you cause pain?”

“Only if it’s your wish” (32:15- 33:25)

The owner of the brothel makes a claim that “No filth, Cleo better than your wife” (33:42-33:45). It really means that any posthuman will be a better version of the existing human beings. Interestingly the film *Chappie* also has a similar scene which describes the initial difference between man and posthuman. A key conversation highlights the difference between human and posthuman through the analogy of a “black sheep.” Yolandi explains to Chappie that being a black sheep means being different from everyone else, not in appearance, but in what’s inside your soul. She reassures him that it’s the soul, not the body, that matters. Even when Chappie wonders if his soul is inside him, Yolandi comforts him by saying that the outside is temporary, and after death, the soul continues. (00:57:27 – 00:58:32) The director of the film Neill Blomkamp uses the analogy of black sheep and white sheep to distinguish between human and posthuman. Remarkably, this analogy goes deep into the mind of Chappie. Once at the end of the movie when Chappie recovers the consciousness of Yolandi using neural transmitter and transfers it into a robot, though she died from a gunshot, she lives in the body of a robot. Chappie utters that “now we are both blacksheeps Mommy” (01:52:59 - 01:53:00). This scene was narrated to project the idea that the future of humanity lies in posthumanity only. The character of Chappie occurs in contrast to the robot nature. Chappie, who has artificial intelligence, shows that even a robot can have human feelings (Firmansyah 372).

Posthumanism was naturally redefining what was known, understood and defined by humans as essential humanness. Rae elaborates on this point, indicating that posthumanism aims to “overcome all forms of humanist understanding,” indirectly redefining what it means to be human (51-69). A seminal contribution to the field of posthumanism and the identity of posthuman was presented in N. Katherine Hayles’s work *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). For Hayles the primary intention of writing that book was to discuss the question “What is the posthuman?” (2). She stresses on the point that the creation and existence of posthuman is always explained as an accident of history which could not have been avoided rather than an inevitability of life. She elaborates the point in her work as follows:

the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life (2).

Hayles, by questioning the consciousness of a posthuman subject, doubts that a lot of mystery lies behind their real consciousness. She opines that “the posthuman considers consciousness as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow” (2). The evolution of human body to posthuman body is treated as a manipulation of the original human body itself and Hayles put forward an opinion that the originality of humanness and human body cannot be claimed by human beings because evolution has already

manipulated the real condition of human body in many ways and becoming posthuman is a part of this continuous manipulation.

In the film *Automata*, Dr. Dupre explains to Jacq that the idea of a machine repairing itself is complex and suggests it could imply the existence of some form of conscience. He contrasts this with human evolution, where it took millions of years for humans to develop from primates, achieving intellectual abilities. Machines, however, without certain restrictions, could make similar advancements in weeks. While the human brain has biological limitations, machines are only restricted by their programming. If that programming were removed, the potential for their development could be limitless, but the consequences of this unknown potential remain uncertain. (00:37:14 – 00:38:25).

Hayles argues that “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 process that began before we were born” (3). She also believed that the posthuman subjects will have a lot of influence on the human body. A configuration of the human body from the posthuman perspective will be an inevitable action going to take place in the future. According to Hayles

“the posthuman view configures the 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” (3).

Posthumanism was seen as an attempt to liberate the ‘machine self’ from the stigma of being a tool which lacked independence and ability to think. Ahmad and Ali reflect that the discourse surrounding posthumanism implies that “technology is becoming the subject” rather than merely an object of human manipulation, thus suggesting a level of autonomy to machine identities that allow for re-evaluation of their roles in society (1056-1063). The politics of the term embodiment is significant here. The classifications existed in the society like man/woman, human/machine is given less priority while discussing about embodiment and embodiment makes distinct that thought is a much wider cognitive function depending for its specificities on the embodied form endorsing it. Hayles says that “his realization, with all its exfoliating implications, is so broad in its effects and so deep in its consequences that it is transforming the liberal subject, regarded as the model of the human since the Enlightenment, into the posthuman” (16). A constant struggle of this man/ machine dichotomy for liberation can be seen in the film *Automata* in many instances. Vernon Conway by aiming the gun to the machine, asks it:

“Why is it so difficult for you to accept my orders if you’re just a machine?”
 “Just a machine? That’s like saying that you’re just an ape. Just a violent ape”. (1:36:50-01: 37:19).

In the same scene, Vernon Conway asks the machines to get away from the place. The answer from the machine was “We do not obey orders from humans. Not anymore” (1:36:24- 01: 36:35).

Otherness in Posthuman Subjectivity

‘Otherness’ is a major element of the posthuman subjectivity. When non- human subjects narrate their own experiences, a textually mediated version of their otherness is being presented in front of the human spectator. Álvares points out that the exploration of ‘otherness’ within

posthumanism "invites a radical reassessment of traditional human-centered barriers" that have historically marginalized non-human perspectives (9-25). Such a pure from a non-human perspective initiate a complete reassessment of humanist ideology, its different aspects, the boundaries and definitions established by the humanist ideology and a destabilisation of the overall notions that was created in the past and existing in the present in our world. The ultimate result that shall occur in the successful presentation of the otherness of posthuman subject is the rise of questions like how genuine is the term humanity and how genuine it can be in the future especially in the midst of a futuristic and technologically advanced worlds? The works of theorists like Edward Soja and Homi K. Bhabha can offer valuable insights on otherness. Soja's concept of thirdspace presents otherness as a hybrid, constantly shifting space, where boundaries between human and nonhuman identities are not fixed. He states, "there are no absolute, fixed boundaries between human and nonhuman realms" (Soja 71), which resonates with the fluid identity of posthuman entities. Similarly, Bhabha's theory of mimicry, which emphasizes that "mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called itself that is behind" (Bhabha 126), reflects how posthuman beings mirror human traits but remain inherently different.

A posthuman sometimes is treated as a slave. Rachel Vaucan while rubbing the electronic scanner on her pregnant belly talks to her daughter "Hey, How's everything in there? There are people out here who are looking forward to changing your diapers. People who don't want to sleep a wink all night. People who want the silence to be over" (Automata 25:03- 25:22). Though it appears that the words were an expression of maternal love, from the context of the film its understood that there are only few humans exist in that world and the one who is looking forward to changing diapers or people who don't want to sleep a wink all night and people who want the silence to be over is not referred to a human but a robot. In the other scene of Automata, one can find a robot which sits beside his beggar owner and begs on behalf of him saying "Please, sir. My owner is hungry". (Automata 00:28:38 – 00:28:42). In the same way, Yolandi, a character in *Chappie* also expresses human beings wish to establish a control over posthuman bodies. She elaborates:

"Guys, we need, like, a remote. Like a switch." "What? Excuse me?"

"Okay, the robots are like machines, right? Like a TV. So, if we had a remoteto switch it off..."

"That's brilliant."

"We need to find the guy who makes the robots and steal his remotes." (00:13:31-00:13:50)

One of the problems that a writer faces while presenting the posthuman subject in science fiction movies is the creation of a perfect/imperfect dichotomy that is perfect man with imperfect machine or imperfect man vs perfect machine. Simon argues that today's technological-scientific prospect of posthumanity implies the birth of a new, better-than-human subject while simultaneously evoking historical transformations (101-120). In most of the cases man is presented as a perfect being which possess superior consciousness and free will where posthuman body can have only a manmade digital cognition achieved through computer programming and it necessarily lacks free will. This conflict of pre-programmed will versus free will is the tool that man uses to get domination over the posthuman. In majority cases posthuman subjects are represented as subjects having a dystopian future and manmade robots

are depicted as out of control, ferocious, manipulative and murderous. The primary motive of a posthuman subject can only be the desire for domination over the human species. Hayles identifies posthuman subjectivity as, “an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (3). It is evident in the movies that a juxtaposition of the pre-programmed will and free will later create a complex situation where a clear distinction between the two is not possible. While visiting Deon’s lab Chappie discusses it with Deon.

“Deon. Deon. This can save me. I need a new bodies, remember?” “No. It can’t save you, Chappie. The problem is much greater than your battery.”

“Why?”

“Because you are conscious. You cannot be copied because you’re not data. We don’t know what consciousness is so we cannot move it.”

“Chappie can figure it. I can know what it is, then I can move me.” “You can’t move it. I’m sorry.” (01:19:18-01:19:46)

Another side of the story is also presented in science fiction movies. There are also instances that imperfect man versus perfect machine scenario is also presented. In such cases, posthumanity and technological advancement are presented as a solution to overcome the biological and physical weaknesses of the human beings. Posthuman subject here evolves as a developed or improved version of human beings themselves. Some critics find this presentation as new form of colonial venture which pushes our physical and mental limits to the edge of cyberspace and virtuality. In the film Automata, while Jacq and the robot walking through the desert in uncertainty Jacq discusses his fear of dying to the robot.

“I am going to die here. That’s all I know.”

“Jacq, dying is a part of the human natural cycle. Your life is just a span in time.”

“You are the first one, aren’t you? You started all this.”

“No-one did it. It just happened. The way it happened to you. We just appeared.”

“Yeah. And now we are going to disappear.”

“Why are you afraid? Maybe your time is running out. No life form can inhabit a planet eternally. Look at me. I was born from the hands of a human. I was imagined by human minds. Your time will now live in us. And it will be the time through which you will exist. At the other end of this canyon, humans carried out nuclear activity. Organic life will not be possible there for millions of years. No human will be able to follow us there. But before we leave, we need to do something. We need something from you, Jacq.”

“Yeah. Funny. You were supposed to help us survive.” “Surviving is not relevant. Living is. We want to live.”

“Life... always ends up finding its way. Even here.” (1:19:15- 01:21:32)

It is apparent that, though made from human hands, and remained imperfect in the initial stage of development, posthuman too have an aspiration to reach to the ultimate realm of perfection. In the movie Chappie the robot criticises his creator Deon for creating him imperfect.

“Daddy told me about you, Deon, about how you made me in a body that will die.”

“What do you mean, Chappie?”

“Is it true that I will die in a few days, Deon? That this battery will die? Is it true, Deon?”

“Yeah.”

“But you my maker. Why’d you just make me so I could die?” “I didn’t, I didn’t make you so you could die, Chappie.”

“I want to live. I wanna stay here with Mommy. I don’t wanna die.” “You’ve become so much more than I could ever have imagined. How was I supposed to know that you would become you?” (01:11:45-01:12:41)

The Question of Posthuman Body

The question of body must be dealt in this context. How is the ‘limited’ version of human body acceptable for the posthuman subject? is a question of concern. Hayles asks that “... should the body be seen as evolutionary baggage that we are about to toss out as we vault into the brave new world of the posthuman?” (50). In the posthuman context, the status of the human body becomes uncertain. The posthuman may choose to discard the physical body, preserving only the mind. Alternatively, the posthuman could be defined by a pursuit of the human mind itself. Here humans themselves ask another existential question that ‘will such a possession of human mind by a posthuman subject lead to a condition where the consciousness would no longer belong to a body, henceforth would we be objects instead? This exploration of the existence of our consciousness outside its host body opens a discussion of the new possibilities of existence without boundaries. Though surpassing the borders and boundaries of our biological bodies and brain is projected as an advantage, it on the other hand accepts the dominance of human intelligence over the non-biological one. Everything expect mind and brain is favorable for the posthuman. There is also an assumption that stages of reverse engineering and early information regarding the threats and diseases shall rapidly increase human life expectancy and human will be able to overcome their biological limitation by the inventions favorable for them.

There are also arguments that human intelligence may become secondary once full control and freedom of thought is given to the posthuman. Once posthuman surpasses the human as the most intelligent and essential being in known existence shall lead to the de-subjectification of humanity and creation of an inferior race under the all-powerful posthuman race. Falcon states that despite the varied interpretations across different disciplines, posthumanism represents “a new historical moment in human evolution,” where human rationality—and by extension, human identity—could be overshadowed by posthuman advancements (19-34). There is a possibility of objectification of the human by the posthuman like our treatment towards the animals at present who are treated inferior at present. Such alluring identities of posthuman which is mainly made of speculation and perception is presented through science fiction. This creation of a race who are never touched by the emotional weaknesses of human, cybermen are ideal and perfect and reaches to a state which human beings were dreaming of. They will be able to live without any negative emotions, any pain, loneliness or sadness and shall focus on single purpose without any distractions. Sometimes such idealization of the posthuman can become problematic, as even the most innocent and thought-provoking notions can produce something of a frightening dystopia.

There are instances in Automata which detailly mentions the evolution of the robots. To show the unending capabilities of the machines, Gabe Ibáñez describes the story of how the existing version of Automata Pilgrim 7000 is made. Dominic Hawk the CEO of the robotic company explains the origin of the robots.

“Before the first Pilgrim was manufactured there was a precedent. It was nothing

more than a quantum brain manufactured in a lab. But it was a genuine unit with no restrictions and no protocols. During eight days, we had a free-flowing dialogue with that unit. We learned from it and it learned from us. But then as some of us predicted the day when it no longer needed our help arrived and it started to learn by itself. On the ninth day, the dialogue came to a halt. It wasn't that it stopped communicating with us... it was we stopped being able to understand it. And then we learned the most important lesson about automatize. We have to limit their intelligence. Tailor it to a human mind's measure. The last task that was given to this genuine robotic unit... was to create the security protocols. It was deactivated right after that. The reason that no one has been able to break those protocols, Mr. Bold, is that they were not created by a human brain. They were designed by this Bio kernel. The Bio kernel of a limitless robotic unit. Its rules were, like its knowledge, inaccessible to us. Until today". (1:06:25- 01:08:17)

Hawk's explanation is all part and parcel of Automata's central message: how terrified humanity is of unchecked AI and how far it will go to strangle real potential, even if it means cutting the nose off merely to spite the face. There was an irony to the pilgrims' constraints, motivated by the need to control: in creating such constraints, they helped lay the groundwork for the very evolution they had been intended to forestall. This power origin is a lesson on the fine line between when we innovate and when we fear artificial intelligence overtaking humanity.

Conclusion

The exploration of posthumanism in contemporary science fiction films such as *Automata* and *Chappie* reveals a profound reimagining of identity, otherness, and the boundaries of the human. Posthumanism ... advances a new, and generally non-anthropocentric view, one that examines inevitable changes that are transpiring in the human condition. (Telotte 265) By analyzing the nuanced interactions between humans and their technological creations, this study underscores how posthuman figures are not merely extensions of human ingenuity but represent a natural evolution that challenges essentialist notions of humanness. The films examined illustrate that the posthuman is both a product of and a response to the limitations of biological existence, inviting audiences to reconsider the criteria by which humanity is defined.

This research highlights the significance of embodiment, consciousness, and autonomy in shaping posthuman subjectivity, drawing on theoretical frameworks that privilege informational patterns over material instantiation. The findings suggest that the cinematic portrayal of posthuman beings serves as a mirror to contemporary anxieties and aspirations, reflecting both the promise and the peril of technological advancement. While these narratives open creative and emancipatory possibilities, they also expose unresolved tensions regarding agency, control, and the ethics of artificial life.

Despite its insights, this study is limited by its focus on a select number of films and theoretical perspectives. Future research could expand the scope to include a broader range of media and cultural contexts, as well as empirical studies on audience reception. Ultimately, the ongoing dialogue between human and posthuman in film not only enriches our understanding of identity but also prompts critical reflection on the future trajectory of humanity in an increasingly technologized world.

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