

Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal

The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television by
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Science fiction has served the film industry like a dreamy stepchild. It gets only scant accolades from its master but must do heavy lifting: that is, make money. While science-fiction films often emphasize spectacle and action, they also inspire philosophical contemplation. Why? Science fiction, dating back to Shelley and Verne, came into existence speculating about humanity's social and physical worlds. Many books and articles over the past several years discuss the philosophical issues raised by films. One small and fairly new school of thought, "posthumanism," explicitly deriving from postmodernism, with touches of critical theory, has seized on science fiction movies as support for its theorizing.

This volume and its 42 authors from film theory, science and technology studies, literary criticism, media studies, and philosophy, offer an array of posthumanist scholarship. The patient reader can glean many interpretations of Hollywood's dreamy stepchild and a view into posthumanist goals for human existence. The works covered stretch back to one of the earliest films, by Edison, through every decade until the present. Readers interested in current sociopolitical theory may find some startling analyses.

First, a note on posthumanism. It has two interrelated versions. One can be considered as "post-humanism," that is, coming after the presumably moribund school of "humanism." Here, humanism is an amalgam of Western schools of thought dating from Descartes, through the Enlightenment to 19th- and 20th-Century schools promoting reason as the route to human progress. The purported outcome is an anthropocentric sociopolitical world of supposedly autonomous individuals, which has been responsible for racism, sexism, and speciesism. It has failed to make a just society. It reduces to ideology both science and rationality, whose simplistic logic divides the world into facile dualities, such as body/mind, human/animal, male/female. Yet it upholds human technologies as inseparable from the human, beyond any individual's control. Posthumanism aspires to put humans in their proper place, as not morally superior to other species or even to their own artifacts. With all groups living in humble peace, the posthumanist world will experience no sexism, speciesism, or discrimination against artifacts.

The other posthumanism, 'posthuman-ism,' focuses on ushering in "posthumans," entities arriving after humans, possibly incorporating some human or animal traits. Emerging technologies such as supercomputers and neurotropic drugs are to aid this change. Posthuman-ism bleeds into transhumanism, the faith that technologies will allow the species to direct its evolution.

This book's authors, many professed as posthumanist, look to on-screen science fiction to help illuminate this philosophy. Many science fiction works seem to reflect some posthuman tenets and make them palatable for the public—ideally, as some authors here urge, as a way to welcome the posthuman era. These movies do not merely depict posthuman ideals such as cyborgism and artificial superintelligence, they supposedly reflect how movie audiences are digesting posthumanist ideals. Those audiences, so the claim goes, have learned over the decades to accept increasingly posthuman-like movie characters—and by implication are themselves becoming posthuman.

Thomas Philbeck's chapter and one by James Hughes take this deterministic approach. Hughes examines science-fiction history through the doctrinal lens of posthumanism-as-fulfilled-democracy. In the early and mid-20th Century, nonhuman science-fiction characters were monsters, reflecting 1950s thermonuclear radiation paranoia. But by the 1980s, movies included sympathetic posthumans such as *Blade Runner's* replicants. By the 2010s, numerous movies and TV-series increasingly included sympathetic posthumans such as cyborgs (*Spiderman*), and AI entities (*Her, AI*). "[T]he evidence from popular culture suggests a trend towards more sympathetic treatment of posthumanism" Hughes writes (244). Philbeck calls a similar trajectory in posthuman-depictions a "posthumanist paradigm shift" that has occurred, in six stages, generally moving from a cinematic first-stage of "desire and fear" (392) of technologies, through a 1970s-1980s awe of "technology's power... on display," (393), to the 2000s fifth-stage "belief in humans as enhancement-ready organisms" (396). In the current sixth stage, individuals will be dissolved into a great, possibly universe-sized amalgam.

A few other articles convey a similar intention to urge society—including, naturally, the reader—to accept this inevitable future. The volume's introduction also paints this future for society as empirically evidenced and happening now. "This [cinematic] trajectory from monsters to heroes is evidence of a change in social consciousness concerning what we consider acceptable posthuman attributes" (4). Looking to movies as a source of presumed evidence about social attitudes, Rhys Thomas intones, "... social discomfort with the integration of the body and technology has abated, and corporeality itself increasingly regarded as obsolete and discarded..." (64). Francesca Fernando sees society's accepting chimeras—blends of human and nonhuman—in movies as reflections of attitude change: "At first looked at with fear, then fetishized into a new exotic lover, the symbolic hybrid... has finally been accepted into the saga of the human" (278).

This argument about the inevitability for the human race is puzzling, in light of posthumanist doctrine, which rejects rationality as intrinsic to the debunked "humanism." Supposedly, with that riddance goes the centrality of science (and, implicitly, science-fed technologies). Yet, the most thoroughly technologized products to come from this derided rational/scientific march are to be celebrated and welcomed. It appears, then, that posthumanism stretches itself far to both reject rationality, science, and technologies and to embrace its products. The only explanation for such internal contradiction seems to be a punishment for humanism's wrongdoings: The onset of the posthumanist era will render justice by ending the species' existence. Most puzzling in this posthumanist interpretation of movies' reflecting a shift in citizens' willingness to embrace posthumanism is the book's failure to consider an alternative explanation. Such lack of alternatives is extraordinary for an academic school that presents itself as alternative.

One obvious alternative explanation would be that filmmakers, in a competitive industry that scrambles for profit, seek ever more unusual plots and story bases. Monsters have been done; let's try sweet extraterrestrials. Then, filmmakers worldwide track the new "rage." Another alternative is how many of these movies, costing hundreds of millions to

make, attract deep pockets that themselves may cherish exposing audiences to posthumanist ideals. As the first alternative suggests, audience are always ready for new rides—but they don't necessarily want to invite the roller-coaster home. Hollywood and its f/x have partnered with Silicon Valley, whose idealists dream of the species' non-human future. Furthermore, films about friendly, heroic robots may afford relief from anxiety for audiences self-conscious about their own machine dependencies. That is, SF still has much of kindred Horror.

The determinism-promulgating motivations that surface in a handful of chapters are about the only places where the book's purpose is apparent: apology for the posthumanist cause. But it is hard to fathom what purpose most of the other chapters serve. These repeatedly refer to the same cinematic canon, which provides grounds for the chapters' shoring up what appears to be a mere tenet or two of the posthumanist doctrine, and then the chapter ends. The result is not exactly film criticism, meditations on movie viewing, culture studies, philosophical speculation, or even evident arguments *for* the posthumanist doctrine. These chapters are neither really about film and television nor about posthumanism.

Most charitably, these chapters are mining posthumanist doctrine from filmmakers' minds, which planted them in the rock-field of story to be dug up like nuggets of galena. But such approach to art-interpretation would be rather rudimentary. Story development and its aesthetics—balance, character development, and denouement—rarely make for sound philosophy. Yet, if these chapters look to movies and television series as a means to support posthumanist tenets, it is not apparent why they bother with the movies at all instead of offering polemic.

A few chapters fall outside this majority. Hauskeller, one of the editors, offers a refreshing discussion of the ironies of immortality as portrayed in several movies. The prospect of manufactured immortality runs into self-defeat: "... the enhanced human or posthuman and the monster appear to be two sides of the same" kind of entity (209). Tarja Laine's examination of Ulrich Seidl's *Paradise* trilogy, among the few not-really-science-fiction works the book covers, is a rarity here in finding the good in the "emotional vitality in human life"—that is, in a humanism that portrays the species as worthwhile. John Brui's chapter on "Environmental Narratives" and how "losing connection with the planet... means losing connection with ourselves," (305) also provides a welcome break, examining work of the giants Tarkovsky and Antonioni.

It is hard to recommend to specific readerships this compilation, impressive for its effort and thoroughness in covering the canon. Readers who seek to be conversant about science fiction without spending time watching the films may find the book useful. Posthumanist readers may be heartened to see their doctrine interpreted as appearing in many screen gems. While not a history of science-fiction cinema, the volume may aid film and intellectual history scholars in fitting this genre's canon into a larger historical movement. While general readers may not favor this volume, the scholarly effort should be applauded for its earnestness.