CHAPTER 10

The Vulnerable Posthuman in Popular Science Fiction Cinema

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10.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on representations of gender vulnerability and resistance in recent popular science fiction films, as they are embodied by the posthuman character. The issue of the posthuman has proved to be complex and contradictory and has been approached from many different perspectives. The posthuman is an ideology that makes us rethink our taken-for-granted modes but attending to the specificity of the human and its way of being in the world, its body and its relationship to non-human forms of life (Wolfe xxv). In spite of its diversity, and "whether imagined in biological, technological, or cultural terms, [posthumanism] represents a radical difference from the rules of human thought and human embodiment" (Milburn 1).

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The science fiction genre—especially literature—has long speculated on the posthuman condition by offering scenarios and bodies that question the humanist paradigm. In terms of representation on screen, the posthuman has frequently been aligned with the other; a marginal, vulnerable and passive figure that evokes human fears and/or desires. Yet, and as it will be argued in this chapter, there is a trend of contemporary movies in which the posthuman subject offers alternative ways of living/thinking the world, disrupting the understanding of difference on a humanistic self-other logic. This portrayal of vulnerability can be read, then, as a means of resistance that leaves viewers with a grasp of post/in/trans human subjectivities. The vulnerable posthuman on screen—present in recent films like *Never Let Me Go*, *Her*, *Under the Skin*, *Lucy*, *Ex Machina*, or *Ghost in the Shell*, among others—further encourages viewers to question the meaning of gender and/or race in our transnational times. The posthuman subject is understood, therefore, as an alternative way of resisting normative ideas regarding gender and race. In this sense, my approach to vulnerability follows feminist critical posthuman thinking (Braidotti, Ferrando, Vint) and considers the subject as "nomadic", that is, transversal, relational, affective, embedded and embodied (Braidotti 2013). It also relies on Butler *et al*.'s idea of the active role of vulnerability in practices of resistance to oppressing power structures (2016).

In order to discuss these ideas, I will focus my analysis on two recent popular science fiction movies portraying female characters that embody the concept of what I refer here as the vulnerable posthuman: Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013) and Sanders' *Ghost in the Shell* (2017). Significantly enough, the posthuman character is performed in both movies by popular actress Scarlett Johansson, whose normative (yet alien) body serves as a starting point for criticism. The posthuman is constructed as an unnamed and impassive alien who abducts and kills men around Scotland in *Under the Skin*; and as a human–machine hybrid working for the police in an unspecific Asian city who eventually discovers her true identity in *Ghost in the Shell*. In spite of the fact that in these two movies the posthuman (female) characters are depicted as vulnerable beings apparently doomed to privileging and perpetuating the normative idea of the body in terms of gender and race, they still manage to somehow disrupt established configurations of power by offering audiences an unfamiliar experience. Viewers see life through the posthuman perspective thanks to filmic strategies such as identification or sympathy,

enabling us to temporarily refuse normative human ethics and to understand the posthuman subject as it is, with its alien/transhuman body and non-normative actions and desires.

Before I turn to discussing the depiction of the vulnerable posthuman in *Under the Skin* and *Ghost in the Shell*, my approach to the posthuman subject needs to be clarified, due to the multiplicity of its meaning, as suggested above. The posthuman subject has been considered by critical thinking as a means to eradicate traditional configurations of power, contesting the old binary logic that assumed the subject to be rational, universal and ethical as opposed to the other. In this sense, Rosi Braidotti argues that the posthuman subject is "no longer cast in dualistic frame but aims at displacing the understanding of difference" (2013, 92). In line with critical posthumanism, my concern here relies heavily on the notions of subjectivity and difference. Braidotti takes an affirmative and vitalist Deleuzian approach to difference to argue that we exist in a plenitude of possible "becomings" that are continually changing and transforming. When dealing with the idea of "becoming", Braidotti contends that "the intensities this engenders create pleasures and affirmative and joyful affects that open the subject up to a multiplicity of possible differences" (2002, 71). Hence, examining subjectivity not as a universal consciousness but as a process is crucial for this (and any) analysis of the posthuman. Thus, I position my analysis of the vulnerable posthuman in recent science fiction films in relation to this liberatory politics proposed by critical thinking, specifically by Braidotti's ideas, yet being aware of the limitations and contradictions that this character encounters when represented on screen, as I will develop in the next section.

The very notion of posthuman subjectivity has many ethical implications, since it is not simply a state of being but an active and deliberate positioning. The posthuman subject is a process in constant change, it has the desire to be, and for that, the body represents this complex structure of subjectivity. Embodiment, is, then, crucial for understanding the posthuman. Throughout her work, Braidotti also recognises that the figure of the posthuman is ambiguous and that it is stuck in projections of desire or fantasies of domination and disembodiment. Braidotti is cautious when it comes to contemporary developments on science and technology, although she makes a call for a positive posthuman thinking: "these non-profit experiments with contemporary subjectivity actualize the virtual possibilities of an expanded, relational self that functions in a nature-culture continuum and is technologically mediated" (2013, 61).

In a similar line of thought, Sherryl Vint argues that some versions of the posthuman repeat a few errors of the previous discourses. Yet, the posthuman in its embodied form can be also used as a liberating force that overcomes the negativity of contemporary practices. New forms of posthuman subjectivities should be the focus of contemporary analyses. These approaches to the posthuman have much to contribute to the ongoing debates over controversial topics such as gene mutation, cloning, transgenderism, hybridity, biological enhancement and many more.

When dealing with the posthuman being as a site of resistance, I rely on Butler's notion of vulnerability, which she uses to theorise how the subject is constituted through social norms and relation to others. In *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016), Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay revise the notion of vulnerability and relate it to practices of resistance. They describe possible strategies of bodily resistance that do not deny forms of vulnerability, such as practices of self-defence, hunger strikes, transgressive enactments of solidarity and mourning, etc. In a similar way, the normally precarious position of the cinematic posthuman being leads to meaningful ways of resistance, in the sense that these characters foster an understanding of difference. The feminine posthuman subjectivity developed in some recent narratives of cloning (*The Island*, *Never Let Me Go*), artificial intelligence (*Ex Machina*, *Her*) and transhumanism (*Lucy*, *Ghost in the Shell*), to name a few, disturb normative understandings of gender, race, and humanist ethics and rules, yet within their own vulnerability and alienness.

Thus, and as it will be argued in the next section, the possibility of having a posthuman subjectivity is suggested in some contemporary films, opening a space for reflection and deconstruction of certain humanist values in the search for alternative modes of understanding difference. In this sense, the posthuman subject can be then regarded as a powerful tool for fighting against hegemonic discourses. As Braidotti contends, "the others are not merely the markers of exclusion or marginality but also the sites of powerful and alternative subject positions" (2013, 139). It is precisely this idea what I intend to highlight in this chapter, how the alienated/vulnerable female character offers an alternative position that is offered to audiences, who become closer and momentarily share the posthuman experience. This idea coalesces with the notion of subaltern identity developed by Hidalgo-Ciudad's chapter in this same volume, in which he discusses the way certain vulnerable LGBTQ+ Black and Latinx characters are given voice and agency within the ballroom community they live after they have been deprived of liveable conditions in homo and hetero communities.

10.2 Gender Vulnerability and Popular Cinema: The Posthuman Character

Frequently, science fiction portrays the posthuman as the object of cultural admiration or aberration, offering a dystopian reflection of the biogenetic structure of contemporary capitalism, impeding hence fruitful interactions between the human and the non-human. Indeed, early representations of the cinematic posthuman body—linked to the figure of the mechanical cyborg—were strongly related to politics of fear and domination. This is what has been called "teratogenesis" or "monsterisation" of the posthuman: the monster is regarded as a symptom of human fears and desires, as an embodiment of the other, as a projection of our phantasms, becoming a political-cultural metaphor. Braidotti regards our current state of posthumanisation as "techno-teratological" and encourages us to find a politics of representation that is able to resist this "techno-hysteria" and overcome the humanist fear of a posthuman subjectivity. Many popular science fiction films rely on the triumph of the restoration of humanism after presenting dangerous and devastating posthumanist scenarios. In relation to this issue, Herbrechter notes that in the teratology or the creation of monsters, inhumanity can be used to inscribe and uphold a system of differences and hierarchies, supported by a mystical notion of human nature with its insistence on uniqueness and exceptionalism, a device which sanctions and perpetuates processes of inclusion and exclusion (29). This insistence on the supremacy of human qualities over technological/biological rationality accounts for the humanisation of the other in order to preserve a "safe" or "uncontaminated" world. In films like *AI*, *I, Robot,* or *Minority Report*, anthropocentrism is privileged over a true posthuman subjectivity. Indeed, the paradox of the posthuman has been pointed out by many authors (Clarke 2009), who recognise that science fiction films consciously present these contradictions on the topic of the posthuman (Clarke 2).

However, and at the same time, science fiction films mean a point of departure for our critical understanding of our convulsive times since they encourage us to find new (more positive and inclusive) cartographies for the posthuman. Herbrechter has argued in this sense that "the return of the repressed body under techno-teratological, posthuman conditions has to be a time of vigilance as well as of new possibilities" (105). It is in this more positive line of thought in which I want to focus my attention. As I see it, there is a trend of recent movies that aim at offering an