

Posthumans and Democracy in Popular Culture

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INTRODUCTION

Harry Potter is an anti-racist freedom fighter both in fiction and in the real world. Throughout the Potter novels we are drawn to sympathize with oppressed racial minorities – elves, centaurs, werewolves, half-giants, mud-bloods – and to fear and despise fascist Death Eaters intent on exterminating all non-pure-bloods. (Barratt, 2012). The Potter narrative has had demonstrable social impact, reinforcing tolerance and democratic values in its readers. In *Harry Potter and the Millennials* (Gierzynski, 2013) Anthony Gierzynski pulls together multiple lines of evidence to argue that the generation of American youth that grew up identifying with Harry Potter's struggles against racism and fascism have become more anti-racist and Democratic as a consequence. In an analysis of three studies of the effect of reading Harry Potter on political attitudes in the UK and Italy (Vezzali, et al., 2014) researchers concluded that the degree to which the readers identified with Potter was a predictor of the influence of the Potter narratives on readers' empathy with immigrants, refugees and homosexuals.

Popular culture both reflects and shapes political culture. The depiction of the posthuman in popular culture is therefore not only a running commentary on the political concerns of the time, with posthumans as stand-ins for everything from Communists to immigrants, but also a potent shaper of attitudes towards extant and future varieties of humanity. In this essay I will be using the concept of the posthuman broadly to encompass both supernatural creatures, such as vampires and witches, as well as humans genetically, chemically or cybernetically endowed with superpowers. Whether through science or magic they are representations of super-empowered and radically different humanity, and reflect anxieties about authoritarianism, race and the limits of democracy. Speculative fiction can cultivate respect for transhuman difference and democratic possibility on the one hand, or reinforce speciesist "human racism" on the other, by drawing the reader or viewer into a deep, empathetic connection with a human protagonist who is forging solidarity with posthumans or beleaguered by posthuman threats, or with posthuman heroes or sympathetic posthuman victims. If posthuman monsters are collectivists, the narratives reinforce liberal democratic suspicion of collectivism; if they are ruthless aristocrats and tyrants, they cultivate anti-authoritarianism and suspicion of elites.

In this essay I reflect on six modalities of posthuman politics in popular culture:

- Posthumans as collectivist threat
- Posthumans as authoritarian aristocrats, or manipulators of reality
- Posthumans as defenders of democracy and transhuman solidarity
- Posthumans as victims of racial prejudice and genocide
- Posthumans as agents of class and anti-imperialist struggle
- Posthumans as democrats, and as participants in complex, transhuman democracies

The site TvTropes summarizes the politics of the depiction of transhumans as a litmus test for Enlightenment values versus anti-Enlightenment views, religious or Romantic: "A positive portrayal of transhumanism generally places a work of fiction on the Enlightenment side of the Romanticism Versus Enlightenment spectrum while a negative portrayal or conspicuous absence of it does the opposite."

(TvTropes, 2014) Beyond taxonomy, my thesis is that the Enlightenment values of tolerance and the expansion of cognitive empathy through the embrace of difference have gradually worked their way into speculative fiction, reducing the number of narratives in which posthumans are monsters and agents of political dystopia, and increasing the number of narratives in which posthumans are sympathetic and participants in complexly imagined transhuman democracies.

POSTHUMANS AS COLLECTIVIST THREAT

Brave New World

In 1923 the thirty year-old biologist and Marxist John Burdon Sanderson Haldane gave a talk to the "Heretics Club" at Cambridge University titled "Daedalus or Science and the Future" (Haldane, 1924), in which he wonders whether science might be used to subjugate and destroy humanity.

Has mankind released from the womb of matter a Demogorgon which is already beginning to turn against him, and may at any moment hurl him into the bottomless void? Or ...[might humans become] a mere parasite of machinery, an appendage of the reproductive system of huge and complicated engines which will successively usurp his activities, and end by ousting him from the mastery of this planet?

Against this dystopian possibility he imagines the many liberatory uses to which the emerging sciences could be put, including the production of clean and abundant energy, the use of psychopharmacology to cure our mental and psychological ills, and the development of genetic engineering and in-vitro fertilization to make humans smarter and healthier. In other words, Haldane embraced the posthuman possibility and his essay became a matter of some debate. Within a year Bertrand Russell had written a rejoinder, "Icarus, or The Future of Science" (Russell, 1924), which argued that science and technology would always serve to enhance the power of dominant classes and military machines.

Haldane was friends with another leftist biologist, Julian Huxley, and with his brother Aldous Huxley. While Julian shared Haldane's left bio-utopianism and would in 1957 coin the term "transhumanism" (Huxley, 1957) for this new bio-utopian vision, Aldous was repelled by these ideas. Eventually, in 1932, Aldous would express his revulsion in *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932), in which in-vitro fertilization, eugenic engineering and psychopharmacology are used to suppress individuality and enforce collectivism. In the wake of the rise and defeat of fascism, and the ongoing threat of communism, the term "Brave New World" became shorthand for the dystopian collectivist consequences of creating posthumans with "enhancement" technologies.

After World War Two, popular culture returned often to the horrific vision of a collectivist posthumanity. Precursors of the anti-Communist genre were the 1951 film *It Came From Outer Space*, in which shape-shifting aliens clone human identities, and the 1953 film *Invaders from Mars* in which aliens invade human bodies. But the quintessential film depiction of the American anxiety about the spread of collectivism was the 1956 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, based on a 1954 novel *The Body Snatchers*. Although the director Don Siegel insisted the film was a critique of conformity in American society, it was widely seen as a metaphor for the spread of Communism. The plot revolves around the residents of a California town who are slowly replaced by alien clones that are part of a collective consciousness. Eventually the expression "pod people" would become slang for people who have lost their individuality and been absorbed into larger groups.

The pod people theme was repeated in films like *The Village of the Damned* in 1960, based on a 1957 novel by John Wyndham, in which children in a British village are infected by aliens and begin to display a psychic hive-mind. The children are killed when one of the parents suicide bombs them. In the Doctor Who mythos the collectivist menace first appears in 1966 in the form of hive-mind Cybermen, humanoids that have displaced their emotions with cybernetic connections.

“The Borg” replaced “pod people” in the 1990s as a popular reference to the collectivist threat, when the imperialist cyborg hive-mind appeared in the Star Trek universe in 1989. The Borg are an implacable emotionless force that has conquered and “assimilated” hundreds of species through the implanting of brain-machine interfaces that suppress individuality.

Embrace the Inevitable Collective

The first glimmers of positive depictions of collectivist posthumanity can perhaps be seen in Arthur C. Clarke’s 1953 *Childhood’s End* (Clarke, 1953), in which Earth is taken under a patient alien tutelage to be weaned to a higher level of empathy and morality. After sixty years the result of this domestication is that human children begin to display psychic abilities, and merge with a trans-galactic trans-species collective mind.

The most positive television depiction of a hive-mind to date is not posthuman, but alien: the Ood of Doctor Who. The Ood appeared as a telepathic slave race in the Doctor Who series between 2006 and 2012, and although they are susceptible to collective mind control by malevolent forces, they are revealed over time to be a naturally pacifist species. The series alludes to a “Friends of Ood” movement that seek to liberate the Ood from slavery, and the “Song of Freedom” the Ood sing across the galaxy is hauntingly poignant. Nonetheless, given the value placed on individuality in Western speculative fiction there are still very few positive depictions of collectivism, human, posthuman or nonhuman, in literature, film or television.

POSTHUMANS AS AUTHORITARIAN ARISTOCRATS

In 1992 Francis Fukuyama concluded in *The End of History and the Last Man* (Fukuyama, 1992) that liberal democracy had decisively won, and political evolution had reached its telos. Ten years later, after Dolly the cloned sheep and the emergence of an international transhumanist subculture, Fukuyama had reached a very different conclusion. In *Our Posthuman Future* (Fukuyama, 2002) he argued human enhancement technologies would permit the fulfillment of dreams of non-democratic utopians. Transhumanism, he wrote, had become the most dangerous idea in the world: “The first victim of transhumanism might be equality... If we start transforming ourselves into something superior, what rights will these enhanced creatures claim, and what rights will they possess when compared to those left behind?” (Fukuyama, 2004: 43)

In the last decade Fukuyama’s fears of a transhumanist elite intent on subjugating and culling humanity has worked its way into both the bioethics literature and into the conspiratorial imagination. According to the bioethicists George Annas, Lori Andrews and Rosario Isasi:

The new species, or “posthuman,” will likely view the old “normal” humans as inferior, even savages, and fit for slavery or slaughter. The normals, on the other hand, may see the posthumans as a threat and if they can, may engage in a preemptive strike by killing the posthumans before they themselves are killed or enslaved by them. It is ultimately this predictable potential for genocide that makes species-altering experiments potential weapons of mass destruction, and makes the unaccountable genetic engineer a potential bioterrorist. (Annas, Andrews, Isasi, 2002: 162)

This sentiment was echoed more recently by the bioethicist Nicholas Agar in *Humanity's End*: "...a situation in which some humans are radically enhanced while others are not could lead to a tyranny of posthumans over humans." (Agar, 2010: 11)

But Fukuyama, conservative bioethicists and conspiracy theory opponents of the Illuminati were not the first to see the posthuman as the embodiment of a new aristocratic and authoritarian elite, bent on subjugating and exploiting humanity. That narrative is actually two hundred years old, first seen in the image of the patrician vampire. Quite unlike the animalistic vampires of mythology, the monster in John Polidori's 1819 story "The Vampyre" was a posthuman blueblood. This modern vampire uses his (class) power and privilege to prey on humanity, especially young women. This template was cemented by the popularity of Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula*, and continued in numerous television and film portrayals from the 1994 *Interview with a Vampire* based on Anne Rice's novels, the 2003-2012 *Underworld* series and the 2008-2010 *Twilight* films. Possibly the most extreme depiction of vampires as an exploitive posthuman species is seen in the 2009 film *Daybreakers*, in which vampires have achieved complete ascendancy, replacing all human occupations and classes, and the dwindling supply of humans are shown strung to scaffolds to be drained of their blood.

Similarly, enhanced humans have been routinely depicted as aspiring tyrants or secretive aristocrats manipulating mortal events. A conspicuous example is the villain Khan Noonien Singh in the *Star Trek* universe. In the original storyline, Khan is the genius leader of a cabal of genetically engineered supermen and women who seize control of a quarter of Earth in the 1990s, but are then defeated in the "Eugenics Wars." Khan and some of his followers escape cryopreserved in a spaceship that is later found by Captain Kirk. In the original *Star Trek* TV series and in the *Star Trek* films, as soon as Khan and his followers are revived, they immediately attempt to re-establish their control over humans. As the reason for the conspicuous absence of genetic engineering four hundred years later throughout the human colonized galaxy, Roddenberry cited the horrors of the Eugenics Wars and the persistent threat from enhanced humans like Khan. Later, the television series *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* re-iterated the political edict against genetic engineering, but with more nuance, by introducing the sympathetic character of the physician Julian Bashir, who keeps his genius intelligence secret, because it is the shameful result of illegal genetic tampering by his parents. Bashir turns out to be unique among the genetically enhanced, however, as the rest are mentally unstable. Cyborg augmentation is also banned by the Federation, with the exception of reparative prosthetics like Geordi LaForge's visor in *ST:NG* or the rehabilitated cyborg "Seven of Nine" in *ST:Voyager*.

The 2000-2005 TV series *Andromeda* pointedly names the aspiring master race of genetically engineered posthumans "Nietzscheans." Amusingly, the Nietzscheans originated at "Ayn Rand Station," and name their first home planet "Fountainhead." They possess super-strength and their immune systems are boosted by nanorobots. In the prehistory of the show they wage a catastrophic war that kills billions and destroys themselves and the human Commonwealth.

Another trope in the depiction of the posthuman as aspiring tyrant is the idea that super-intelligent humans aspire to world domination. This theme is found in the 1992 film *Lawnmower Man*, the 2010 *Battlestar Galactica* prequel *Caprica*, and the 2014 film *Transcendence*. In *Lawnmower Man* a man with an intellectual disability is inducted by a scientist into an experiment on cognitive enhancement using drugs and virtual reality. He quickly begins to display superhuman telepathic and telekinetic abilities, and eventually uploads his expanding mind into the Net (such as it was in 1992). In *Caprica*, the daughter of a military robotics contractor uploads his murdered daughter's personality to a military robot. She then creates the Cylon robot armies that eventually destroy almost all of humanity. Likewise in *Transcendence* Johnny Depp is a computer scientist who is uploaded into a mainframe and then works to expand his power using nanotechnology that can control human behavior. Before he can complete his version of the Singularity he is killed by a computer virus, and the authorities somehow permanently crash the Internet.

The Normalization of the Aristocratic Posthuman

In the 1960s we begin to see a variety of comedic representations of supernatural and alien aristocrats attempting to assimilate into middle-class human society. The first hit science fiction television show is the 1963-1966 *My Favorite Martian*, in which a superpowerful and aristocratic, but stranded, alien anthropologist is taken in by a bachelor astronaut. Then the normalized aristocratic Other exploded on television in 1964, with the popular monster clans *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters*, and the beginning of the eight year run of *Bewitched*. While *The Addams Family* were simply macabre and eccentric humans, albeit with nonhuman relatives like Itt and Thing, the patriarch of the *The Munsters*, Herman, was modeled on the Frankenstein monster, while his wife and her father, Lily and Sam Dracula, were ancient vampires. In *Bewitched* the Samantha attempts to be a good middle-class housewife despite coming from a family of superpowerful aristocratic witches.

The *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* and *True Blood* television series are perhaps the beginning of a turn from the depiction of vampires and supernatural posthumans as aristocrats (although aristocratic vampires certainly populate those worlds) to vampires as potential fellow citizens. *Buffy* began the trend by introducing characters like Spike and Angel who struggle against their evil proclivities to become heroic defenders of humanity. Then *True Blood* pushed the posthuman imaginary furthest with a full program of vampire assimilation and equality, modeled explicitly on anti-racism and gay rights.

Posthuman Simulacra of Democracy

A variant on the theme of aristocratic posthumans secretly plotting to dominate and exploit humanity is the world in which we only appear to be in control of our own reality. This theme is framed both by the control of superpowerful posthumans over our putatively democratic institutions and our perception of reality itself, as well as by the ability to manipulate memory and perception in a posthuman future. The world as an untrustworthy fiction controlled by sinister forces was the core of Philip K. Dick's writing, much of which has found its way onto the screen. For instance, the 1990 Dick-inspired film *Total Recall* depicts a world in which simulated reality, memory erasure and personality implanting have become common experiences, to the point where they completely undermine both the protagonist's and the viewers' ability to discern the real. Dick's 1954 short story "Adjustment Team" was made into the 2011 film *The Adjustment Bureau*, in which apparently posthuman bureaucrats guide human events, and Dick's reflection on drug-fueled paranoia and reality-slippage, the 1977 novel *A Scanner Darkly*, was made into the 2006 film by the same name.

This theme was also explored on television in episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, in the 1967-1968 series *The Prisoner*, in episodes of the 1990s series *The X-Files*, in the 2004-2010 series *Lost*, and in the deeply unsettling 2002 "Normal Again" episode of *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*. In film the posthuman simulacra theme has been explored in:

- 1998 *Dark City*, in which humanity is unaware that their reality is controlled by alien forces,
- 1999-2003 *Matrix* trilogy, in which posthumanity lives in a fictitious reality generated by artificial intelligence,
- 2001 *Vanilla Sky*, in which the protagonist lives in a virtual reality induced while he is cryonic suspension,
- 2010 *Inception*, in which dream control technology allows the manipulation of reality, and
- Joss Whedon's 2012 horror/slasher spoof, *The Cabin in the Woods*, in which campers are drugged and their perception of reality manipulated.

POSTHUMAN DEFENDERS OF DEMOCRACY

Posthuman Agents of the State

One of the ways that we began to see positive portrayals of the posthuman was as agents of the democratic state. The first such depiction was the Nazi-fighting Captain America. When the comic book first appeared in 1941 this patriotic symbol was a frail young man turned into a supersoldier by an experimental serum. His popularity waxed and waned, but from the 1940s through to his depiction in a 1979 television film and the 2011 *Captain America: The First Avenger* he remained a defender of American democratic values. Even his moral evolution in the 2014 *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, when he begins questioning the role of state secrecy, allowed its more morally complex audience to be drawn along even further into identification with this enhanced hero.

The most popular augmented humans in television history were also both loyal operatives of the US military and intelligence apparatus. From 1974 to 1978 the *Six Million Dollar Man* and the *Bionic Woman* were Nielsen top ten shows featuring bionically enhanced supersoldiers. Again, the 2007 to 2012 television series *Chuck* depicted an ordinary man with a superhuman, computer-augmented memory of intelligence data who is recruited to work for the intelligence apparatus against the enemies of democracy. *Iron Man*, in the 1990s animated versions and the 2008-2013 films, is not only a cybernetically enhanced posthuman who works with the military to defend democracy, but he is actually a military-industrial contractor, albeit one with a conscience.

Superheroes: Traitors to their Race/Class

Another positive depiction of the posthuman is found in narratives of posthumans who defend humans and the possibility of transhuman democracy, against both human racism and posthuman villains. This is most explicit in the X-Men mythos, whose comics were first published in 1963. From the beginning the X-men were depicted as heroic altruists, fighting against both apartheid efforts to have all mutants registered, and against the mutant supremacy espoused by the Magneto faction.

Similar themes of pro- and anti-human posthuman politics can be found in the 1998-2004 *Blade* films, 1999-2004 *Buffy* spin-off *Angel*, the 2004 and 2008 *Hellboy* films, the 2006-2010 superhero television series *Heroes*, the 2008-2014 *Avengers* films (*Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, etc.), the 2009 film *The Watchmen*, the 2008-2014 television series *True Blood*, the 2011-2012 superpowered mutant series *Alphas*, and the 2008-2014 British and American versions of the television series *Being Human*. In all these narratives there are good posthumans who defend humans 1.0 from the bad posthumans.

If witches are posthumans then the Harry Potter books and 2001-2011 film series also belong in the “traitors to their race/class” category. As mentioned above, the Harry Potter mythos is explicitly anti-racist and anti-fascist. The Death Eaters and racial purist wizards despise humans, half-breed “mud-bloods,” and other races. The anti-fascist forces fight pure-blood wizard supremacy, and work in solidarity with the movement to liberate elves from domestic slavery. Lycanthropy is depicted as a chronic illness like AIDS, and the tortured character of the werewolf Professor Lupin is a sympathetic victim of its stigma and discrimination.

POSTHUMANS AS VICTIMS

One of the ways that sympathy for the posthuman Other has been generated in popular culture is by depicting creatures who are treated as monsters because of their difference even though they are not, at least initially, malevolent. This theme can perhaps be traced back to depictions of Frankenstein's monster as a sensitive, cultured man trapped in a shambling, ugly body, victimized by a callous scientist, and tormented by fearful villagers. The Frankenstein monster has appeared in dozens of films in the last hundred years, and most of the depictions played up the dangerous rather than sympathetic aspects of the monster. Two recent depictions show some of evolution this character has taken however. In the 2014 television series *Penny Dreadful* Frankenstein's monster still readily murders humans and considers himself superior to humanity. But the series goes to great lengths to display his intelligence and emotional sensitivity, his embarrassment at his ugliness, and his anguish when romantically rejected. Even more of a departure is the 2014 film *I, Frankenstein* in which the monster becomes a superhero defending humanity from demons.

Spiderman is another example of the growing popularity of the posthuman hero as a victim of irrational public fears and prejudice. From his appearance in the comics in 1962, through his animated television series, and the 2002-2014 films, Spiderman has been a workingclass posthuman sacrificing mightily to save the world, while usually being hunted and feared by the public.

Zombie as Metaphor of Race/Class Upheaval

While the vampire was traditionally a solitary aristocrat, the zombie has represented fear of social, racial and class upheaval (Dendle, 2007; Newitz, 2008). The zombie horde represents collective action and the unpredictable and dangerous crowd. For Maria Pramaggiore

The walking dead are the embodiment of the "poor, working stiff." Because zombies can't help what has happened to them, they are symbolic of everyday laborers. They don't call the shots, but rather are the ones trapped at the bottom of the pyramid, representing the dispensable work force. (Lazarus, 2013)

The voodoo-enslaved zombie was first depicted on screen in the wake of the 1915-1934 American occupation of Haiti, and appeared in a string of films: *White Zombie* (1932), *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936), *King of the Zombies* (1941), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943), and *Valley of the Zombies* (1946). Then they were incorporated into a series of science fiction films: *Creature with the Atom Brain* (1955), *Unearthly* (1957), *Invisible Invaders* (1959), *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959), *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies* (1964), *Horror of Party Beach* (1964), and *Orgy of the Dead* (1965), which, according to sociologist Todd Platts "largely eschewed elements such as voodoo, racism, colonialism, and outright xenophobia, replacing them with fears of invasion, social homogenization, apocalypse, and just plain 'weirdness.'" (Platts, 2013) The landmark depiction of the zombie as a mindless slave then came in 1968 with George Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*.

As with other depictions of posthumanity, however, we have begun in the last decade to see an evolution of the zombie beyond the mindless, shambling slave to a faster, deadlier and more organized threat to social order. The zombies are also superhumanly fast and more intelligent in the 2002-2012 *Resident Evil* films, *28 Days Later* (2002) and *28 Weeks Later* (2007), and *World War Z* (2013). The vampire-zombies in *I Am Legend* (2007) and the "Reevers" in Joss Whedon's (2002-2003, 2005) *Firefly* universe are not only superhumanly fast, but shown to have intelligence and an alternative social order. The most explicitly political reformation of the zombie is seen in their organized class-inflected militancy

in Romero's 2005 *Land of the Dead*, in which an African-American zombie leads an armed attack on a gated high-rise ruled by a Donald Trump-like Dennis Hopper.

Of course, zombies are still monsters, and making them faster and more intelligent does not make them more assimilable into human society. The BBS's 2013 television series *In The Flesh* and the 2013 romantic comedy *Warm Bodies* zombies recover from zombie-ism and are re-integrated into society, but they can't be re-integrated as zombies. But even zombie assimilation is beginning to be broached. The 2006 comedy *Fido* shows zombies as domestic servants, capable of being integrated into living families and society, and the 2007 mockumentary *American Zombie* explores a zombie subculture in Los Angeles, co-existing with human society and dealing with (quite justified) prejudice and exploitation.

Posthumans as Racial Victims

"Why do you wish them destroyed? Ah see, you have turned the poor guileless innocent into a hunted animal. He has no means of support. No measures for proper education. He has not the voting franchise. No wonder he is compelled to seek out a predatory nocturnal existence." The protagonist Robert Neville describing the zombie/vampires in Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I am Legend*

As anti-racist politics began to re-work the bounds of empathy in speculative fiction, the posthuman and other categories of non-human Other were increasingly found depicted as an oppressed racial group. As mentioned above, the mutants of the X-men were depicted as an oppressed race from the 1960s comics through their seven films from 2000 to 2014. The first scene of the X-Men comic books and of the film *X-Men: First Class* (2011) is of Magneto as a child in a Nazi concentration camp. Professor Xavier came to represent the assimilationism of Martin Luther King, while Magneto was compared to Malcolm X, and at times we are drawn to see Magneto's suspicion of humanity as justified.

This theme of superpowered mutants as racial victims was especially prominent in the 2013-2014 series *The Tomorrow People*. The mutants can teleport, control objects telekinetically, and read minds. They refer to themselves as *homo superior*, and are being hunted and killed by a government agency headed by an evolutionary biologist who believes they pose an existential threat to *homo sapiens*. They are searching for their Moses who will lead the new race to their mutant-only Refuge.

The rounding up of posthumans into concentration camps is an especially powerful recurrent racial metaphor. The depiction of supernaturals in *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* took a decidedly anti-racist turn in its fourth season (1999-2000) when the military begins capturing and experimenting on supernaturals in a secret underground concentration camp. Neill Blomkamp's 2009 *District 9* is set in a concentration camp outside Johannesburg in which aliens have taken the role of black Africans. The protagonist is a human who becomes infected with alien DNA, and while transforming into an alien-human hybrid, liberates the oppressed aliens. In the 2011-2012 SyFy series *Alphas* superpowered mutants are sent to a concentration camp and implanted with lobotomizing chips. In the sixth season of *True Blood* (2013) vampires are captured and imprisoned in a concentration camp, where they are experimented on and infected with a lethal virus.

The Posthuman as Exploited Tool

Sympathetic images of posthumans' as exploited slaves have also grown. In one of the most influential science fiction films, the 1982 *Blade Runner*, the viewer is drawn into empathy with the

posthuman “replicants” who have been programmed to die after seven years of slave labor for the mega-corporations. In his final climactic confrontation in the rain with replicant-hunter Deckard we are drawn into powerful empathy with the tragic character of the replicant Roy. Roy pulls Deckard to safety, noting that it isn’t easy to live in fear as a slave.

The posthuman exploitation theme can also be found in Joss Whedon’s 2009-2010 television series *Dollhouse*. The protagonist is a woman enslaved by a corporation that can record and transfer personalities and skills. Depending on the needs of the client the corporation writes the appropriate personality onto the “dolls” and sends them to service. The corporation’s ultimate goal is world domination, and allowing its owners to become immortal by jumping from body to body. The enslaved protagonist, Echo, begins to accumulate the traces of her various personalities and their skills sets until she eventually achieves a self-aware meta-personality. Once she becomes self-aware she helps liberate her fellow slaves, albeit into a world devastated by the mind-wiping technology.

The anticorporate and antimilitarist politics of many science fiction films has also always been quite explicit.

- From the 1987 original *RoboCop* through to the contemporary remakes, the cyborg cop is a victim of corrupt corporations that control the state, intent on using military tactics to ensure their power.
- In the 2000-2002 television series *Dark Angel* posthumans are the product of a secret military genetic engineering project designed to create supersoldiers with a variety of abilities. After they escape, the transgenics are hunted, and eventually make a stand for their rights.
- In the 2002 film *Minority Report* the “precogs” are enslaved psychics, kept submerged and half-conscious in baths.
- Also in 2002, the Star Wars film *Attack of the Clones* sees the creation of an army of disposable clone soldiers.
- The bodies of the clones in 2005 film *The Island* are literally owned, and used piece-by-piece when needed.

These depictions of exploited posthumans are morally ambivalent however. While we are drawn into sympathy with their plight, their creation is still seen as immoral, and their existence a mistake. Depictions of posthumans as deserving not only freedom from exploitation, but an equal place beside humans, are still rare.

POSTHUMAN CLASS STRUGGLE

From the representation of the posthuman as an oppressed or exploited race/class, we begin to see glimmers of posthuman class struggle in films like Neill Blomkamp’s 2013 *Elysium*. In *Elysium* the protagonist, in a desperate attempt to get access to posthuman immortality technology for himself and the other oppressed and mortal, transforms himself into a cyborg warrior and wages war against an orbital gated community.

On television one of the most radical depictions of future politics is found in the series *Continuum*, which began in 2012. The series starts in a dystopian corporate-dominated authoritarian future of 2077, and follows the protagonist, a cybernetically-enhanced corporate cop, back to our present in pursuit of similarly enhanced anarcho-socialist terrorists, “Liber8.” Over the course of the first two

seasons the cop gradually realizes that she has been working for the wrong side, and that she should cooperate with Liber8 to prevent the future corporate take-over.

The 2009 film *Avatar* gives us the posthuman as an anticolonialist hero. In this story a disabled soldier is given an android alien body which he is supposed to use for intelligence gathering in the service of capitalist resource extraction. But he begins to empathize with the natives, and eventually leads an anticolonial revolt against the human exploiters. At the end of story the hero leaves his human form behind permanently.

POSTHUMAN DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIC POSTHUMANS

Fry: What party do you belong to, Bender?

Bender: I'm not allowed to vote.

Fry: 'Cause you're a robot?

Bender: No, convicted felon.

(*Futurama*, "A Head in the Polls" 1999)

The full normalization of the posthuman as a citizen of a complex transhuman democracy is still quite rare, but it can be seen in the 1999-2014 television series *Futurama*. While the 1962 vision of the future of *The Jetsons* was strictly human 1.0 and the robots were all servants, the 31st century of *Futurama* is a democracy in which humans, posthumans, aliens and robots all participate as rough equals, and Earth is part of the Democratic Order of Planets (DOOP), similar to Star Trek's Federation. Although the protagonist is an unenhanced human from our era, the show introduces cyborg characters and even an election battle for President of Earth between two clones and Richard Nixon's head in a jar.

A positive depiction of a posthuman democrat is the cognitively-enhanced protagonist Eddie, played by Bradley Cooper in the 2011 film *Limitless*. The effects of the film's cognitive enhancement drug NZT-48 are temporary, but allow the taker to learn languages, master the stock market and write books all at a superhuman pace. The film then seems to follow the Icarus trope, as we soon discover that the drug is eventually lethal. At the end of the film, however, Eddie has discovered a way to eliminate the drug's lethal side-effects and make its effect permanent. Meanwhile, instead of using his superpowers to become a tyrant or CEO, he has fended off the clutches of the evil corporation that wants to monopolize the drug and is running for the Senate and eventually the presidency.

These few film and television depictions of posthuman democracy, or at least of democratic posthumans, are still rare however and not nearly as fully realized as the posthuman polities imagined by writers like Peter Watts, Iain Banks, Kim Stanley Robinson, Alastair Reynolds, Hannu Rajaniemi, John C. Wright, Charles Stross or Cory Doctorow.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In sum, the evidence from popular culture suggests a trend toward more sympathetic treatments of posthumanity, if not yet toward the normalization of enhanced humans, posthumans and nonhumans as potential citizens of a transhuman democracy. We do find positive depictions of posthuman heroes as early as the 1940s Captain America, and monstrous depictions as recently as Johnny Depp's aspiring hegemon in 2014's *Transcendence*. But influenced by growing Enlightenment tolerance, anti-racism and acceptance of cybernetic augmentation, there have been a growing number of depictions of posthumans

as victims, ordinary citizens, and even heroes struggling for the possibility of a transhuman democracy. Hopefully this trend both reflects the greater acceptance of social difference, and portends a more inclusive future society when these forms of enhancement and augmentation actually arrive.

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