

The Otherness Within Us. The (Post)human Condition in Times of Crisis

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Literature, film, TV series, comics, video games, and new narrative media have always imagined the relationship between *naturalia* and *artificialia* and told the world through the lens, often twisted, of several embodiments of one of the most beloved and feared posthuman archetypes in history: the Frankenstein monster. Robots, androids, cyborgs, sentient computers, along with other alien lifeforms endowed with human-like intelligence have crowded and still crowd popular culture. The advent of a new digital understanding, enabled by the development of various forms of artificial intelligence, has rapidly transformed human society, becoming an increasingly widespread everyday presence. While AI can be seen and conceived as an opportunity to improve human life, such as in the medical or technological fields, concern persists that it may replace human values and undermine our independence and our ability to make choices. The new relationship between humans, machines, and algorithms has raised important ethical issues related to data collection and privacy control, impacts on employment, human responsibility, cognitive bias, moral automation, environmental impact, biological evolution, and international crises. Popular culture has always played a key role in helping people understand these and other complex situations: it provides tools for resistance, as even the darkest narrative can invoke awareness, mobilization, challenge to the status quo, and imagination of a utopian future. As Stuart Hall states, “popular culture is one of the site where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost *in* that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance” (1981, p. 239). In this sense, popular culture can be seen as a means of emancipation and building a better world, since “it almost goes without saying that ‘the popular’ is a site where ‘the political’ happens – and that ‘the political,’ even in the most narrow sense of the term ..., is deeply invested in ‘the popular’” (Rodman, 2016, p. 389). Therein, the posthuman represents a dream and a nightmare, a possibility of progress and a sentence, a medium of freedom or an act of exploitation. It embodies both an otherness to be embraced and an enemy to be feared. Rosi Braidotti envisions

the posthuman turn as an amazing opportunity to decide together what and who we are capable of becoming, and a unique opportunity for humanity to reinvent itself affirmatively, through creativity and empowering ethical relations, and not only negatively, through vulnerability and fear. It is a chance to identify opportunities for resistance and empowerment on a planetary scale (2013, p. 195).

The posthuman could therefore become a game – at once material and philosophical – through which to reflect on diversity, explore the world's heterogeneity, and open up new paths of integration, interweaving, empathy and respect, as in the works of Isaac Asimov and Greg Egan, in the films of Neill Blomkamp, in video games such as *Detroit: Become Human*. At the same time, however, going beyond the human could imply dangers and new problems and even lay the groundwork for unprecedented social upheavals. As many dark fantasies have shown us, from *Metropolis* to *Westworld*, via *Blade Runner* and *Deus Ex*, oppressive, hypermechanized and dehumanized realities could also await us, in which the *Homo sapiens* and the *Machina sapiens* could blur into one another or find themselves in stark opposition, in serious conflict.

How do novels, short stories, films, television series, comic books, video games, and other hybrid narrative forms depict the relationship between humans and the Other and what solutions do they propose in this regard? How do the concepts of posthuman and transhuman shape culture and the collective imagination? How has speculative fiction changed during and after the advent of machines and algorithms in our everyday lives and what impact have they generated on the world around us? These are just some of the questions that the present special issue will address, since the essays collected here continue the discussions initiated during the second edition of the international conference Electricdreams – Between Fiction and Society, titled *The (Post)human Condition in Times of Crisis: The Interplay between Artificial Intelligence, Otherness, and Environmentalism*. The event took place from 18 to 20 October 2023 at IULM University in Milan, in collaboration with the Complutense University of Madrid and the research group HISTOPIA, as part of the Electricdreams International Film Festival (16-21 October 2023). The editorial work for this special issue, as previously noted (Di Minico & Locati, 2024), has once again allowed us to observe the potentially boundless range of approaches to the study of speculative fiction, as well as the theoretical density that

emerges from an inter- and multidisciplinary perspective. The dialogue between close and distant readings, combined with insights from media, cultural, political, semiotic, and social studies – and with the specificities of each medium under consideration – contributes to shaping the vibrant critical arena that the analysis of speculative fiction and popular culture continues to offer.

The essays map a dense constellation of posthuman imaginaries in which crisis, hybridity and control are repeatedly negotiated across media, genres and scales. Ondřej Váša's black holes, Francisco José Martínez Mesa's clones and Javier Álvarez's Crakers all figure a cosmos and a biosphere in which human-centred meaning collapses, displacing Enlightenment subjectivity with indifferent or multispecies agencies. Paola Dalla Torre, Dario Altobelli, and Marco Favaro read, respectively, Blomkamp's films, Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future*, and the video-game worlds of *Horizon* and *The Last of Us* as laboratories of corporeal and ecological hybridisation, where enhancement, mutation and environmental ruin expose the violence of technocapitalist progress while also sketching fragile, relational posthuman futures. Silvia Storti, Hiroko Inose and Anwesha Maiti relocate crisis to the intimate terrains of beauty, everyday normativity and motherhood, showing how cyborg bodies, "continuously updated" subjects and surveilled carers are reconfigured through biopolitical regimes of optimisation and discipline. Valerio Moccia and Teuvo Peltoniemi extend this inquiry to technological ecologies and utopian experiments, from the Loop's Heideggerian dispositif to virtual and space-based "semi-utopias" that test new forms of community under planetary duress. Finally, Pierandrea Villa, Maria Raffa and Ciarán Kavanagh foreground AI as both agent and symptom of a posthuman crisis of control, where human/AI entanglements, unsustainable infrastructures and *Terminator*-inflected imaginaries force a radical rethinking of autonomy, responsibility and governance beyond the human.

Ondřej Váša examines how black holes have become "favorites of 'speculative nihilism', revered as saboteurs within the cosmic order", arguing that they function as cardinal objects through which contemporary thought negotiates the collapse of human-centred meaning. Tracing a lineage from Lucretius to speculative realism, he shows how black holes crystallise a posthumanist sensibility in which the cosmos appears radically indifferent, "a kingdom of 'caprice and disorder, eternally unintelligible'". The article demonstrates that these figures of "eternal and

unfathomable blackness” encode a double crisis: of Enlightenment faith in rational progress and of the human as privileged epistemic subject, thereby turning cosmology into a privileged site for thinking extinction, inhuman agency and the limits of correlationism.

Francisco José Martínez Mesa traces how the cultural imagination of cloning evolves from early dystopian fears to a broader posthuman reflection on the contemporary crisis of identity under technocapitalism. Noting that Huxley’s clones already mirrored “the looming horrors and fears” of mass society, he shows how later fictions – from *The Island* to *Never Let Me Go* – shift the focus from scientific hubris to systemic dehumanisation: clones become figures of shared vulnerability, revealing how posthumanism destabilises notions of uniqueness and agency in a world where both humans and their replicas risk being reduced to “mere tools and commodities” within an increasingly deregulated global order.

Paola Dalla Torre analyses how Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9*, *Elysium* and *Chappie* articulate a dual movement: a disenchanted critique of transhumanist utopias and the outline of an affirmative, relational posthumanism. Showing how his dystopias expose the socio-political and bioethical costs of enhancement, she argues that Blomkamp visualises a civilisation in crisis, where technological progress “deepens social inequalities rather than alleviating them” and where the human is destabilised by hybridisation. At the same time, the films gesture toward alternative posthuman subjectivities grounded in vulnerability, interdependence and responsibility, thus reframing posthumanism as an ethical response to the contemporary technological and ecological crisis.

Dario Altobelli argues that David Cronenberg’s *Crimes of the Future* reveals transhumanism not as a future horizon but as the crisis-ridden condition of the present, in which humanity has already crossed decisive anthropological thresholds. Through Cronenberg’s metamorphic bodies – altered in nutrition, sexuality and sleep – the article shows a world where technoscience and capitalism fuse into a bio-techno-social regime that erodes agency and dissolves the human form. Altobelli contends that this aesthetic dystopia exposes a genuinely posthuman transition: a nihilistic passage in which both subjectivity and society are progressively annihilated, signalling the disappearance of *Homo sapiens* within an emerging posthuman order.

Marco Favaro reads *Horizon* and *The Last of Us* as complementary meditations on ecological collapse, arguing that both video games

translate our contemporary condition of permanent crisis into interactive dystopias. Noting that “society as we know it ceases to exist, and its destruction is ultimately a ‘suicide’”, he shows how the games expose the self-destructive logic of capitalist modernity while staging divergent post-human futures. *Horizon* articulates a technologically mediated, optimistic posthumanism grounded in “dystopic hope”, whereas *The Last of Us* rejects renewal altogether, presenting a world where “we lose” and post-human life emerges only as inhumanity. Together, they reveal how digital narratives negotiate the limits of humanity in an age of environmental and moral breakdown.

Silvia Storti argues that *The Lunar Chronicles* mobilises fairy-tale rewritings to articulate a transglossic, posthuman imaginary that interrogates beauty, identity, and otherness in a moment of cultural crisis. Her reading shows how Meyer’s cyborg Cinderella and the wider cast of Lunars, shells, androids, and hybrids destabilise humanist assumptions by inhabiting multiple, simultaneous subject positions. Through deep simultaneity, planetary consciousness, and intersectional transversality, the series reframes fairy-tale motifs to expose the violence of normative beauty and the exclusions embedded in patriarchal and anthropocentric narratives. Storti demonstrates that Meyer’s fractured retellings use speculative fiction to rethink the human/non-human boundary, revealing how posthuman bodies – marked by technological alteration, disability, or racialised difference – become sites where contemporary anxieties about identity, vulnerability, and systemic injustice are negotiated.

Hiroko Inose argues that Yukiko Motoya’s 2021 novel *Oshiko no deforuto* (“Oshiko’s Default Standard”) dismantles the comforting binary between human essence and machine, showing instead how, in a post-crisis Japan, humans “continuously updated” adapt so fully to technological norms that the distinction collapses. Through the satire of a society where “differences are the origin of all types of unhappiness”, Inose demonstrates that posthumanism here is not transcendence but capitulation: humans mimic AI, internalise obscurantism, and redefine “functioning” as the ability to swallow reality. The article shows that the true crisis is not domination by machines but the human capacity to erase its own boundaries, making posthumanism an everyday, unsettling normality.

Anwesha Maiti argues that Jessamine Chan’s *The School for Good Mothers* (2022) exposes motherhood as a site of posthuman crisis, where care is reconfigured through surveillance, biopolitical discipline, and

techno-authoritarian norms. Reading the novel as a dystopian allegory of contemporary reproductive anxieties, Maiti shows how the state's mechanised training of "good mothers" reduces maternal identity to quantifiable performance, revealing the erosion of empathy, autonomy, and relationality. Therefore, Chan's narrative reframes motherhood as a posthuman condition – one in which women confront the collapse of humanist ideals under regimes that treat both bodies and emotions as programmable, optimisable data.

Javier Álvarez argues that Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy rethinks humanity from within a planetary crisis, using posthumanism to dismantle anthropocentric identity and to foreground multispecies interdependence. Noting how the Crakers' engineered harmony makes Snowman reflect that "they were so beautiful... each individual was exquisite", Álvarez shows how the novels expose the fragility of humanist categories and the ethical limits of biotechnological mastery: Atwood envisions a posthuman condition grounded not in transcendence but in vulnerability, relationality and ecological entanglement, where humans, animals and synthetic beings form a shared, precarious world that demands new ethical frameworks beyond human exceptionalism.

Valerio Moccia argues that *Tales from the Loop* constructs a narrative ecology in which posthumanism and transhumanism intersect to reveal a deeper crisis of the human in the technological age. Through Stålenhag's illustrations and Halpern's series, he shows how robotic prostheses, consciousness-transfer devices and machine-organic anomalies unsettle anthropocentric certainties. The Loop functions both as a transhumanist dispositif of control and, in Heideggerian terms, as a site of *alētheia*, where characters confront vulnerability, relationality and the limits of mastery. Moccia demonstrates that the work reframes crisis not as collapse but as an ontological turning, where human and non-human agencies co-emerge in a fragile, shared world.

Pierandrea Villa argues that human/AI interaction must be understood within a broader posthuman crisis of the subject, where the boundaries between humans, animals and machines collapse. Drawing on Haraway's claim that "nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal", he shows how speculative fiction – from *Frankenstein* to *Terminator* and *Matrix Resurrections* – maps fears of autonomy, rebellion and Promethean shame: the replicability of consciousness destabilises human exceptionalism, revealing a posthuman condition in which intelligence, agency and even "functioning" selves can no longer be confined to the human, forcing a radi-

cal rethinking of hierarchy and ontology.

Maria Raffa presents AI as a field marked by a profound sustainability crisis, showing how the same technologies promoted as solutions to environmental and social challenges often generate new forms of ecological, economic, and ethical strain. Examining machine-learning models and social robots deployed for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (the global framework of 17 targets for environmental, social and economic well-being), she highlights their hidden costs: extractive supply chains, high energy consumption, labour exploitation, and techno-solutionist narratives that obscure structural injustices. Drawing on critiques of greenwashing and the distinction between “thin” and “thick” sustainability, Raffa demonstrates that AI frequently intensifies the posthuman condition of crisis unless its entire lifecycle is redesigned to integrate environmental integrity, social justice, and democratic accountability.

Ciarán Kavanagh examines how contemporary AI discourse reveals a posthuman media crisis in which science fiction – especially *The Terminator* – is repeatedly mobilised to frame fears of technological autonomy. Noting how headlines recycle images of “AI going ‘Terminator’,” he argues that this feedback loop grants speculative fiction an unintended authority, shaping which futures receive “serious” cultural attention: such analogies both inflate apocalyptic fantasies and obscure urgent regulatory issues, demonstrating that seriousness itself becomes a contested resource. In this sense, SF’s posthuman imaginaries do not merely reflect the crisis around AI – they actively participate in producing it.

Teuvo Peltoniemi presents virtual and space-based communities as contemporary expressions of a posthuman utopian impulse emerging from a moment of profound technological and ecological crisis. He argues how digital environments – from early online forums to the Metaverse – reproduce classic utopian features such as shared values and creative autonomy, yet remain incomplete because embodied human needs persist. This incompleteness leads to hybrid “semi-utopias,” where physical and virtual life intertwine. Furthermore, Peltoniemi reads space-colonisation projects – from Biosphere 2 to O’Neill’s L5 habitats and the International Space Station (ISS) – as techno-utopian responses to planetary fragility. Across both domains, he argues that utopian experimentation now unfolds within a posthuman condition in which technology reshapes community, identity and survival, revealing both new possibilities and new vulnerabilities.

The essays in this special issue reveal how posthuman imaginaries emerge precisely where crisis, vulnerability and interdependence intersect. Across media, genres and theoretical frameworks, they show that the posthuman is neither a distant horizon nor a purely speculative construct, but a lived condition in which bodies, technologies, ecosystems and narratives continually reshape one another. What these contributions collectively foreground is the need to rethink agency, responsibility and coexistence beyond the human, embracing forms of relationality capable of responding to planetary precarity. As Donna Haraway reminds us, “we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles” (2016, p. 4): it is within these unruly, generative entanglements that new ethical and imaginative possibilities take shape. The posthuman, in this sense, becomes not only a site of crisis but also a laboratory for re-imagining community, care and futurity in an age marked by profound technological and ecological transformation.

References

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