Do Clones Dream of Being Humans? Cinematic Fictions around Transhumanist Dehumanisation

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Abstract

This study explores the evolving cultural and literary imagination surrounding human cloning, with particular attention to its portrayal in dystopian and science fiction narratives from the early twentieth century to the present. Drawing on philosophical, ethical, and sociopolitical contexts, it traces how cloning has served as a lens through which anxieties about human identity, individuality, and agency are articulated. The work situates cloning within broader debates on human enhancement and the implications of scientific intervention, referencing foundational literary examples such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. It highlights how the notion of cloning, initially intertwined with fears of dehumanization and totalitarian control, later intersects with critiques of consumerism, neoliberalism, and technological commodification in a globalized society. By analysing a wide range of cultural texts – including literature and cinema – the paper examines how representations of cloning have moved from depicting clones as mere instruments of horror or scientific hubris toward more nuanced reflections on shared vulnerability in the face of an increasingly deregulated world. Ultimately, this approach underscores the relevance of cloning as a metaphor for contemporary concerns about the erosion of agency and the fragile boundaries of human identity in the context of capitalist and technopolitical forces.

Keywords: Clones, Posthumanism, Dystopia, Capitalism, Alienation

In 1997, the English scholar and critic Patrick Parrinder posed a thought-provoking question that still invites reflection today: "Can we imagine a better society without imagining or wishing to create better people?". His question undoubtedly opened the door to a wide range of approaches and answers that, in any case, would depend on what each of us understands by improving society or improving people.

Indeed, how can we improve human beings? Some have conceived this improvement from the perspective of human nature, under a moral approach, the ultimate result of which would benefit the collective desti-

ny of the community. But others, especially since the scientific revolution and modernity, have linked this desire to the physical and intellectual optimization of humankind through science and technology. Among these, one of the most representative strands of the concept of human engineering associated with the notion of enhancement, and undoubtedly one of the most controversial, due to the possible moral and ethical implications of its application, was that related to human cloning. The growing series of advances achieved in the field of molecular biology over the past decades, which opened up the possibility of creating exact genetic replicas of another cell, tissue, or organism, soon generated a serious debate in society concerning the limits of science and the role of humankind in its relationship with nature, whose corollary in the sphere of the imaginary was the emergence of discourses and cultural representations in the societies of that time.

The clone is a figure of artificialization of the human that, unlike robots, androids, and cyborgs, does not originate from mechanical engineering but from biotechnology: it is a genetically identical organism, produced by technical intervention but constituted entirely of organic matter. Its liminal character, at once "natural" and "manufactured", distinguishes it from the robot, the paradigm of the mechanization and automation of labor; from the android, a machine that simulates human appearance or behavior; and from the cyborg, a hybrid of biological body and technological prosthesis aimed at expanding the subject's capabilities. However, despite these ontological differences, the representation of the clone as a mass-produced product or means of mass production establishes a clear parallel with other technological figures, especially the robot: it is no coincidence that its first literary appearance in Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* (1920) was explicitly linked to the themes of industrialization, the standardization of life, and the factory logic of mass production. In this way, the clone inherits and reconfigures, in a biotechnological key, the fears associated with the mass reproduction of the human being that literature had already projected onto mechanical automatons.

Within this context, the aim of this article is to analyse the role played by the image of the clone within dystopian narrative from its emergence in the early decades of the twentieth century and its evolution over time, thereby showing how the figure of the clone, like other phenomena associated with scientific innovation and, therefore, with the future course of societies, has also undergone a significant evolution in its perception and

imaginary, to the point of ceasing to be identified with the terrifying image of its beginnings and becoming instead a fellow being, just as immersed in weaknesses and fragilities as ourselves, who paradoxically is also exposed to the threats of increasing dehumanization.

I

Although the figure of the clone constitutes a contemporary form of artificial creation based on biotechnology, its logic of "manufacturing life" does not arise in a vacuum: it is rooted in a long tradition of stories about beings created by non-natural means. However, these antecedents operate on a very different symbolic and technical register, as they refer to pre-modern or proto-modern forms of animating matter. The process of artificially creating a (nearly) human life offered an initial approach in modernity in Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein* (1818) (Turney, 1998). But this was not an excessively original perspective, since the theme posed by the story, humanity's attempt to usurp a strictly divine prerogative (Ballo and Pérez, 1997, p. 277), had already been extensively addressed in the past, in myths such as those of Prometheus or the Golem. In both cases, the creature emerges from a transgressive gesture: in Prometheus, the theft of fire that grants humans a power reserved for the gods, and in the Golem, the animation of clay through the sacred word, thus anticipating the ethical dilemma of giving life to the inert by means that exceed the human.

However, the work that undoubtedly had the greatest impact on the collective imagination when first raising the possible consequences of cloning was *Brave New World* by the British writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley. Published in 1932, in a time when no one seemed to foresee such a disturbing technological advance, the novel very quickly became one of the most decisive and influential texts on the subject, both then and for subsequent generations. It depicted a future society in which advances in genetic engineering had enabled the authorities to achieve the mass creation of clones, whose division into different categories according to their capacity and authority constituted the ultimate design of a productively optimal and socially stable world.

Although the novel's extraordinary impact is undeniable, the issue of cloning, depicted in the work as the "Bokanovsky process", was not what

most concerned Huxley or what originally prompted him to write the book. For Huxley, far more pressing matters were at stake, such as the growing threat of dehumanization facing individuals in a context shaped by the rise of mass society, the advent of new phenomena like capitalist mass-production techniques and consumerism, and the elevation of science and technology as the primary vehicles of social and individual progress and well-being. In this regard, it seems clear that the role assigned to the figure of the clone should be understood as a rhetorical strategy designed to underscore the striking parallels between the living conditions of these artificial replicas and those already looming over human beings within a social horizon increasingly governed by imperatives of productivity and efficiency. In Huxley's view, building a world grounded in materialism and utilitarianism meant embracing the dissolution of individuality in favour of the collective, echoing the totalitarian tendencies of the time, and, consequently, sacrificing the intrinsic sense of human identity, without which people would ultimately be reduced to mere objects.

Until the 1990s, the figure of the clone had largely been confined within popular culture to the narrow realm of science fiction (Domaradzki, 2021). Both literature and cinema offered portrayals of human replicas with varying degrees of success. However, even in these cases, the narratives in which clones appeared typically engaged with themes that extended well beyond the mere mechanics of the cloning process itself. Among these, the following can be identified:

Cloning as a means of producing identical copies of an original

Beginning in the 1950s, alongside the emergence of the Cold War, the genre saw a wave of works that speculated about the prospect of a quiet alien takeover of Earth. In these stories, extraterrestrials employed strategies such as gradually abducting humans and replacing them with identical replicas loyal to the invaders. This scenario is exemplified by the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956). A similar concept appears in British author John Wyndham's novel *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957), later adapted for the screen as *Village of the Damned* (Wolf Rilla, 1960). The depiction of clones as inhuman, unfeeling beings devoid of personal identity directly echoes Huxley's portrayal in 1932. However, this notion of the clone as nothing more than a genetic duplicate has often been challenged, as it rests on the erroneous belief that an individual's

identity is determined solely by their genetic constitution – a view known as "genetic determinism" (Hopkins, 1998).

Cloning as a way to reproduce a unique human being who no longer exists

During the 1970s, well before such a possibility could be regarded as realistic, several works emerged that speculated on the idea. Examples include films like *The Resurrection of Zachary Wheeler* (Bob Wynn, 1971) and *Sleeper* (Woody Allen, 1973). The most striking and unquestionably the most popular was *The Boys from Brazil* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1978), based on Ira Levin's novel published in 1976. In this case, the use of cloning to create a new Hitler as a means of establishing a Fourth Reich lent the phenomenon a disturbing sense of realism, generating greater public concern and awareness

Cloning as a means of producing varied identities

These narratives depict the creation of several clones from a single original human, who, much like natural offspring, go on to develop distinct personalities and talents independent of their model. In this category we can include works as *Cloned Lives* by Pamela Sargent (1976) and *The Cloning of Joanna May* by Fay Weldon (1989).

Cloning as a method of securing progeny

These narratives are typically set in dystopian contexts where individuals face social or environmental conditions that have led to widespread infertility, placing their entire society or world on the brink of extinction. Examples include *Imperial Earth* by Arthur C. Clarke (1975) and *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* by Kate Wilhelm (1976).

Cloning as a means of mass production

This theme picks up on ideas Huxley had explored decades earlier. It no longer involved creating clones of particular individuals, but rather producing large numbers of them tailored to the needs of the system. This perspective, emphasizing the utilitarian trajectory of modern societies, also linked to another potential application of cloning: the view of health as the ultimate consumer commodity and the pursuit of immortality. A clear example is

Parts: The Clonus Horror (Robert S. Fiveson, 1979), a film portraying how the creation and cultivation of clones served those wealthy enough to purchase one to replace their failing vital organs.

Cloning as an outgrowth of scientific curiosity and investigation

In these narratives, scientists are typically portrayed in a decidedly negative light. Regardless of the motives that may underlie their experiments, their work is often set in opposition to moral and ethical considerations. Their relentless drive to push beyond all natural boundaries, to play God, in essence, ultimately turns their discoveries and creations into monstrous outcomes. A clear example of this naïve (or dangerously self-assured) approach is found in Richard Cowper's novel *Clone* (1972).

II

Paradoxically, this particular cultural imaginary surrounding cloning began to take shape years before it became a genuine scientific possibility. The real turning point, however, came in 1997, when Doctors Ian Wilmut and Keith Campbell successfully cloned the first mammal from an adult somatic cell: Dolly the sheep. Following the success of this experiment and the prospect of applying it to other species, including humans, a major public debate arose in society, focused especially on its ethical implications. This debate was accompanied by a sense of fear and anxiety that, as already discussed, was by no means unfamiliar to the broader public.

However, it is impossible to fully grasp the global controversy and debate surrounding cloning without also acknowledging the simultaneous emergence of other discourses that supported these advances. This was not about defending reproductive cloning, the very notion that had provoked public anxiety and horror through films and literature, but rather another form: therapeutic cloning, whose development and enhancement could enable the repair of defective genes, the creation of cellular models to fight diseases, or the testing of pharmaceutical efficacy. Although this type of cloning also faced criticism, particularly on moral and religious grounds given that some viewed the human embryo as a potential person, countries as different as South Korea and England launched public campaigns that framed cloning techniques as a source of hope, tied to the

promise of advancing human well-being and eliminating suffering (Harán *et al.*, 2007, p. 37).

The introduction of this optimistic discourse into the broader debate on cloning, together with the widespread perception, largely shaped by the media, of the imminent arrival of these scientific advances, was key to the emergence of a distinctly pessimistic and disheartening narrative, clearly reflected in much of the dystopian literature of the time. While fears and anxieties still centred on the potential dangers and risks of reproductive cloning, these stories generally went beyond cloning itself, framing the issue within a larger context defined by the rise of neoliberal values and the horrors of unrestrained capitalism.

The 1990s, however, did not see any substantial shift in the themes that had dominated earlier discussions of cloning. The spotlight remained on the sinister and frightening consequences of these practices. In this context, some productions highlighted clones as mere copies of humans (*Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*, George Lucas, 2002), either portrayed as qualitatively inferior to the original, like in *Multiplicity* (Harold Ramis, 1996), or as deviating from their creators' intentions, typically with horrific and chilling outcomes: *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) for animals, and *Alien Resurrection* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997) and *The Godsend* (Nick Hamm, 2004) for humans.

The dystopian imaginary constructed in this body of narrative aimed to challenge the expectations promoted by official agencies and the scientific establishment concerning the promise of new therapies and techniques and the imminent arrival of a future in which curative and regenerative medicine would ultimately advance human enhancement and well-being.

The new fictions drew on the very arguments employed by proponents of reproductive cloning to call for its legalization, only to subvert them and assign them a completely contrary meaning:

Reproductive freedom conceived as the only way to have a genetically related child

In *Blueprint* (Rolf Schübel, 2003), a world-renowned pianist and composer who learns she has a degenerative nerve disorder that will eventually stop her from playing asks a friend – an innovative reproductive scientist – to help her create her clone, so she can pass her music on to her daughter. The underlying issue, of course, is the instrumental nature of the replica, who is intended to possess fully human traits yet

is kept ignorant of her true origin, leading to profound identity struggles.

The creation of "savior siblings"

Children are deliberately conceived to provide a means, through donations of bodily fluids, umbilical cord blood, organs, or tissues, to save an older sibling from disease or death. Against this rationale, various narratives depict these beings as manufactured objects rather than individuals with inherent value and dignity. Many key stories from this time place the issue within a context where reproductive and therapeutic cloning converge, showing how obtaining donor clones extends beyond family members to anyone who can afford it financially. In these works, health becomes a consumer commodity under an unregulated capitalism serving the wealthiest classes. Notable examples include *The Island* (Michael Bay, 2005), strikingly similar, if not bordering on plagiarism, to the earlier *Parts: The Clonus Horror,* and Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005), later adapted for film by Mark Romanek in 2010.

Cloning to replace deceased children

A central critique targets the instrumental nature of the substitute being, doomed to lack a true individuality since its genes derive from someone else. This is described as a state of alienation and determinism tied to the absence of an open future. Some works from this period depict this use of cloning as perverse, producing aberrant outcomes, as in the previously cited *The Godsend*. In a wider context, this idea also surfaces in *Æon Flux* (Karyn Kusama, 2005), where reproductive cloning supports 99% of the Earth's population. Although cloning here initially appears beneficial, the story's turn toward the renewed possibility of natural conception prompts the protagonist to plot the destruction of the facilities housing the DNA used for cloning.

III

The economic globalization of the early 1990s, which politically coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the emergence of a new international order, also gave rise to a new kind of capitalism and a glob-

al framework with novel rules for society, politics, organizations, and social development, culminating in what German sociologist Ulrich Beck called the "risk society" (1998). Despite undeniable economic growth, largely fuelled by the rise of financial capitalism, the price, Beck argued, included deeply counterproductive and costly consequences that endangered the stability of a system where many already felt insecure and vulnerable. Against this backdrop, issues such as widening inequalities, political and institutional voids, the dominance of market logic, the surge of technocracy, and the dissolution of the individual within an overwhelming, globalized context gained prominence in narratives where the negative image of cloning took on a new, more complex and profound dimension. Here, criticism shifted from the clones themselves to the very system and social order in which they were conceived and embedded.

From those years up to the present, fiction has indeed envisioned near futures where cloning technology becomes a reality aimed at optimizing life and enhancing individuals. In these narratives, everything seems possible: from acquiring organs to secure a healthier, longer existence to preserving intimate ties by creating genetic copies of ancestors or loved ones. Yet the transformation of cloning into a consumer industry, embedded within a market that appears open to all but in practice remains accessible only to the richest, also serves to confront readers and viewers with the miseries of their current world. In this respect, what proves truly terrifying and disheartening about that imagined future is not so much the spectacle of new scientific techniques or the results of their experiments, but rather the stark confirmation of their inevitable function as key cogs in the alienating machinery that capitalism has already imposed upon humanity.

Some of the most emblematic portrayals of this vision include *The Island* and *Never Let Me Go*. Other works, however, followed the same pattern, such as *The 6th Day* (Roger Spottiswoode, 2000), *Code 46* (Michael Winterbottom, 2003), and *Womb* (Benedek Fliegauf, 2010). Particularly noteworthy is the chilling *Infinity Pool* (Brandon Cronenberg, 2023), where wealthy criminals can pay to have a clone created specifically to be executed in their place (Clayton, 2023).

At this point, the figure of the clone cannot be separated from the theories of transhumanism and posthumanism, concepts that emerged in their contemporary formulation at the end of the 20th century. Transhumanism, systematized in the 1990s and 2000s by authors such as Nick Bostrom and the institutions linked to the World Transhumanist Association (founded in 1998), proposes the use of science and technology to improve or overcome human biological

limitations (Bostrom, 2009). From this perspective, the clone appears as a possible step toward more controlled, predictable, or even "optimized" bodies. Posthumanism, for its part, took shape in the 1980s and 90s, with foundational texts such as Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) and subsequent elaborations by N. Katherine Hayles (1999), Cary Wolfe (2010), and Rosi Braidotti (2013). These theories challenge the notion of an essential, autonomous human subject separate from technology. Thus, from a posthumanist perspective, the clone does not embody an improvement, but rather a figure that destabilizes categories such as identity, origin, or genetic uniqueness, revealing the hybrid and non-essentialist nature of humanity. While transhumanism projects a horizon of perfection onto the clone, posthumanism transforms it into a challenge to the very definition of "human being."

It is noteworthy that, over time, narratives have shifted to portray clones not as agents responsible for society's ills but as victims of a ruthless, unyielding system. In this light, the dystopian worlds depicted no longer draw such sharp distinctions between humans and their replicas: ultimately, both face equally bleak futures, condemned to exist as mere tools and commodities in the service of capitalism. On the surface, clones and their originals appear to have secured the right to an open future, yet in reality, their individual autonomy and identities gradually dissolve within a context dominated by the controlling, hegemonic power of corporate and transnational forces.

As a result, the fear and anxiety depicted in these narratives no longer manifest as resistance to scientific and technological advances and their consequences, but rather as the bleak expression of a resigned acceptance of an impending future in which alienation ultimately subjugates both creators and their creations. This is exemplified by Kathy, the clone protagonist of *Never Let Me Go*, whose response mirrors that of many people today who, like her in the story, believe they are free to pursue lives beyond those ostensibly assigned to them, in her case, to serve as an organ source for transplants until "completion" (death), yet who nonetheless come to identify with the role society has imposed on them, ultimately embracing their fate and that closed, predetermined future (Komsta, 2015).

Other recent works, such as *Moon* (Duncan Jones, 2009), *Swan Song* (Benjamin Cleary, 2021), and the previously mentioned *Womb*, explore the blurred lines of subjectivity in which both clones and humans grapple with what it truly means to be human – an entity possessing identity and agency. In the films by Jones and Fliegauf, the protagonists' sudden realization that they

are clones plunges them into profound emotional turmoil over their identity and existence, leaving them vulnerable and fragile within a context where traditional values and concepts of humanity are no longer clear or stable (Kümbet, 2020). Meanwhile, in Cleary's film, the protagonist, facing a terminal illness, is confronted with the dilemma of acknowledging the autonomy and individuality of the clone that will take his place after death: should it act exactly like him to maintain the happy relationship he has shared with his wife, or should he embrace uncertainty and trust that this artificial, unfamiliar being is not necessarily obligated to forfeit its own open future?

Conclusion

The depiction of clones within Science Fiction, and particularly in dystopian literature, has changed significantly over time. Early hostility toward these beings was tied in the cultural imagination to the notion of the megalomaniacal, deranged scientist who sought to challenge the gods and nature by bringing life into existence through scientific intervention. Yet following the publication of *A Brave New World*, this negative perception of human replicas evolved, giving way to themes more aligned with the challenges of a new era: for Huxley, the techniques and processes of mass cloning he described were merely a metaphor for the looming horrors and fears. In his view, "we see, then, that modern technology has led to the concentration of economic and political power, and to the development of a society controlled (ruthlessly in the totalitarian states, politely and inconspicuously in the democracies) by Big Business and Big Government" (Huxley, 2005, p. 68)

In the ensuing decades, cloning technology, shaped by bloc politics and the Cold War, was largely portrayed as an unequivocal evil, due in great measure to the enduring influence of Huxley's dystopia. At the time, this association of ideas was entirely operative. The spectre of dehumanization, loss of individuality, and totalitarianism permeated much of the narrative, inseparable from the anti-utopian ideological climate of that era. Notably, the portrayal of clones as an anonymous, amorphous mass of beings devoid of consciousness or feeling, under the control of a supreme intelligence, was deeply intertwined with the philosophical and political arguments advanced by thinkers like Karl Popper, who drew a stark contrast between social engineering, typical of totalitarian systems,

and gradualism, which he considered more compatible with democracies (Popper, 2011, p. 158)

Since the 1990s, however, the landscape of cloning has shifted considerably. While the successful cloning of Dolly the sheep in 1997 startled public opinion and sparked intense debate over the ethical boundaries of techniques that could endanger human individuality and uniqueness, perceptions clearly changed with the onset of the new century. The grim, dystopian scenarios no longer singled out cloning technologies or their creations as the culprits behind humanity's future misfortunes. In fact, as we move closer to the present, most literary and cinematic works on the subject reveal a growing identification among clones, humans, and other technological entities envisioned by posthumanism. In this sense, cloning remains relevant because it symbolizes current dilemmas about how biotechnology can transform human life. In culture, it appears as a metaphor for the loss of individuality and the creation of technically produced identities. Looking to the future, it projects both medical possibilities and anxieties about new forms of control and the redefinition of what it means to be human.

This new stance likely reflects an emerging collective awareness of a shared vulnerability and fragility within an increasingly deregulated and uncontrollable world, where the markers of identity that once defined agency and the ability to shape outcomes seem ever more to fade, yielding to a reality that threatens to reduce us all to the status of replicas.

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