Posthuman Aesthetics and the Critique of Transhumanism in the Cinema of Neill Blomkamp

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Abstract

This essay examines posthuman aesthetics in the films of Neill Blomkamp, focusing on *District 9* (2009), *Elysium* (2013), and *Chappie* (2015). It argues that Blomkamp's cinema develops a disillusioned critique of transhumanist utopias, problematizing human-machine hybridization in bioethical and socio-political terms. At the same time, his films outline an alternative, affirmative posthumanist anthropology. The study adopts a qualitative methodology based on a semiotic-narrative analytical grid and is situated within the theoretical framework of posthuman studies.

Keywords: posthuman, transhumanism, science fiction, body, Neill Blomkamp, bioethics, cinema, hybridization

Introduction: Science fiction as an ethical device

Science fiction has long been a privileged arena for reflecting on the relationship between humans and technology. From early literary works to contemporary cinema, the genre has articulated hopes and anxieties about the inventions that shape human life, from fire and writing to artificial intelligence (Tortoreto, 2018). It has also anticipated possible future developments of these technologies.

In the current context of pervasive digitalization and increasing hybridization between the human and the artificial, debates on transhumanism and posthumanism have become central. Philosophers, scientists and ethicists employ the categories of the "transhuman" and the "posthuman" to interrogate what it means to be human in a world where technology alters not only our identities but also our bodies.

Questions that once belonged mainly to speculative fiction now permeate public discourse: What does it mean to be human when technology is deeply embedded in our lives? What forms might future humanity take? How can we develop a new anthropology in a world where machines are no longer subordinate tools but active participants in shaping

reality? Science fiction is one of the cultural devices that make these questions widely accessible.

Luciano Floridi, a leading voice in the ethics of artificial intelligence, argues that our capacity to understand the contemporary condition and to build a sustainable infosphere depends on how we create, design and manage information. This, in turn, requires new narratives: new stories about who we are, where we are, and which human project we intend to pursue (Floridi, 2022, p. 409).

Science fiction cinema can be understood as one of these narratives. It helps to configure our relationship with technology, which has always been a constitutive element of the human condition. Much science fiction has articulated this relationship through a broadly humanist lens, often foregrounding questions of dignity, responsibility and agency (Dalla Torre, 2024).

Within this landscape, Neill Blomkamp has emerged as a particularly relevant filmmaker. His trilogy – *District 9*, *Elysium* and *Chappie* – stages transhuman futures marked by dystopian tensions and raises bioethical questions that resonate strongly with current debates. This essay has two main aims:

to show how Blomkamp's cinema critiques transhumanist utopias by presenting a disenchanted and ethically charged vision of technological futures.

to demonstrate that his work also advances a constructive perspective that identifies positive, transformative elements within a posthuman horizon.

Through an analysis of the narrative and visual strategies with which Blomkamp addresses human–machine hybridization, technological capitalism and global inequality, the article argues that his filmography articulates a distinctive "bioethical attitude". His science fiction worlds invite viewers to reflect on human responsibility in designing the future and contribute to the circulation of bioethical concerns in popular culture.

Theoretical framework: transhumanism, posthumanism and the augmented body

The analysis adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach that combines film studies with philosophical and ethical inquiry. Following cultural and visual studies, Blomkamp's films are treated as cultural texts

that encode collective anxieties about technology, identity and power. The method is interpretive rather than empirical and situates the films in relation to debates in bioethics, posthumanism and critical digital studies.

Transhumanism and posthumanism constitute a crucial starting point. Although often conflated, the two terms point to partly distinct yet interconnected discourses. Both name a utopian ideal of radical transcendence of human limits: a philosophical and scientific ideology that envisages the passage of humanity to a higher condition of existence, freed from the constraints of biological finitude – a condition termed "posthuman" (Reichlin, 2012, p. 753).

Transhumanism, in particular, is a contemporary philosophical and cultural movement that sees human–machine hybridization as a means of empowering the human. It advances the idea that human nature can and should be altered, enhanced and prolonged. Its advocates envision a "beyond-man" that will inaugurate a posthuman world. Laura Palazzani summarizes the core of this project in the "Central Maxim of Transhumanism," according to which it is ethical and desirable to use technoscientific means to overcome the human condition, moving from the enhancement of specific functions to the enhancement of the human as such, understood as an "enhanced human" (Palazzani, 2020, p. 70).

Nick Bostrom has been one of the most influential theorists of this movement and former President of the World Transhumanist Association. He presents transhumanism as a new paradigm for thinking about the future of humanity, one that brings together scientists working in artificial intelligence, neurology, nanotechnology and biotechnology with philosophers and intellectuals committed to the alteration and improvement of human nature. He defines transhumanism as "a cultural, intellectual and scientific movement that affirms the moral duty to improve the physical and cognitive capacities of the human species and to apply new technologies to humans so that we can eliminate unwanted and unnecessary aspects of the human condition such as suffering, disease, aging, and even being mortal" (Postigo Solana, 2009, p. 267). In this perspective, the posthuman appears as a relatively invincible figure produced by technological progress.

More recently, however, Bostrom has revised his initially enthusiastic stance. He now calls for ethical limits on technological development and warns against a future in which artificial intelligence might gain control over humanity (Bostrom, 2018). His shift reflects a broader movement

from techno-utopian optimism to a more cautious, risk-aware approach.

Opposed to transhumanist and posthumanist ideologies, authors such as Francis Fukuyama and Jürgen Habermas stress the dangers of a radical transformation of the human. They argue that what is at stake is not the enhancement but the possible erasure of the human. Fukuyama warns of "technological monsters" produced by unchecked hybridization between humans and machines, which risk destroying humanity itself (Fukuyama, 2002). Habermas, for his part, insists on the legacy of humanism, especially its emphasis on universal rights, and urges us to maintain this heritage at the center of communicative action if we are not to become subjects deprived of agency in a technologically dominated world (Habermas, 2002).

At the same time, other theorists have attempted to move beyond the simple opposition between techno-enthusiasm and technophobia. Rosi Braidotti's posthumanism is emblematic in this respect. For Braidotti, the posthuman condition is not merely the result of technological advances but a deeper reconfiguration of subjectivity that decenters the human and foregrounds relational, interdependent and ecologically embedded forms of existence. Posthuman ethics, in this sense, is non-anthropocentric and oriented toward transversal alliances across species and entities (Braidotti, 2013).

Katherine Hayles offers a complementary contribution with her theory of "posthuman embodiment". She challenges dualist separations of mind and body and argues that human cognition is increasingly distributed across technological, communicative and algorithmic networks. In her view, information is always materially instantiated, and human subjectivity must be rethought in interaction with technical systems rather than in opposition to them (Hayles, 1999).

These perspectives are particularly useful for reading Blomkamp's films, which display both a sceptical stance toward transhumanist ideologies and an interest in alternative, relational forms of posthuman subjectivity.

The analysis is further framed by Luciano Floridi's philosophy of information. Floridi introduces the concept of the "infosphere", a shared environment in which humans, machines and data coexist and co-evolve. He proposes a new ethical paradigm suited to this hybrid reality, no longer grounded in human exceptionalism but in the responsible management of information and technological infrastructures (Floridi, 2014). This paradigm resonates with Hans Jonas's "imperative of responsibility,"

which calls for a future-oriented ethics attentive to the long-term and often unpredictable consequences of innovation. Jonas famously attributes a productive role to fear, understood as a heuristic affect that stimulates anticipatory ethical reflection (Jonas, 2009).

Within the infosphere, the dynamics of digital capitalism also become central. Shoshana Zuboff's concept of "surveillance capitalism" highlights how personal data and predictive technologies are mobilized for profit and control (Zuboff, 2019). Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's work on "programmability" likewise shows how social relations and power structures are encoded in software, shaping behaviors and expectations (Chun, 2021).

Taken together, these theoretical contributions provide the conceptual background against which Blomkamp's cinema can be understood. His films can be seen as speculative laboratories in which the promises and perils of posthuman futures are tested and problematized.

Between humanism and algorethics: Blomkamp's science fiction trilogy

Blomkamp's biography is crucial for understanding his perspective. Although he is now based in Canada, he was born and raised in South Africa and experienced racism and segregation first-hand. This background informs his imagination and sets his science fiction apart from many contemporary productions. His films repeatedly return to postcolonial themes and foreground the entanglement of technological development with histories of racialized inequality and exploitation.

District 9, *Elysium* and *Chappie* (released as *Humandroid* in some territories) form an informal trilogy. While *Elysium* features Hollywood actors such as Jodie Foster and Matt Damon and benefited from major studio funding, Blomkamp has consistently tried to maintain a degree of independence from the Hollywood system. In 2020, he launched Oats Studios, a Canadian-based production company devoted to experimental science fiction shorts distributed via a YouTube channel and supported through crowdfunding. This move indicates his interest in alternative production and distribution models and his willingness to operate at the margins of the dominant industry.

This strategy anticipates broader changes in the audiovisual landscape. Recent research suggests that YouTube has become the most watched streaming platform on smart televisions in the United States, surpassing

Netflix, Prime Video and traditional linear television. The film market, already undergoing transformation before the Covid-19 pandemic, has been further reshaped by shifting consumption patterns and the growing role of platforms, including the likely future use of artificial intelligence in production and distribution (Lotz, 2014; Noam, 2024). Blomkamp's trajectory illustrates how filmmakers can navigate and exploit these changes to preserve thematic and narrative autonomy.

Film scholars have noted the specificity of Blomkamp's position. Thomas Schatz, for instance, has described the critical and commercial success of *District 9*, produced on a relatively modest budget of 30 million dollars, as atypical in a Hollywood landscape dominated by existing franchises and intellectual properties (Schatz, 2009, p. 45). Geoff King places Blomkamp among a group of directors who work within and against Hollywood, occupying a hybrid space he labels "indy-mainstream". According to King, Blomkamp's career, from *District 9* to *Chappie*, exemplifies the tensions between authorial vision and commercial constraints typical of this position (King, 2009, p. 191).

The three films share a thematic focus on human-machine hybridization, the social consequences of technological enhancement and the dynamics of surveillance capitalism. They can be described as transhumanist dystopias: they depict futures in which enhancement technologies exist but are unevenly distributed, and in which technological progress deepens social inequalities rather than alleviating them (Hauskeller et al., 2015). In this context, an ethical, and more specifically bioethical, gaze becomes central.

In *District 9*, a group of aliens arrives in Johannesburg and is confined to a ghetto on the city's outskirts, where they are subjected to violent experiments. The film clearly evokes apartheid and the dehumanization of racialized others. Its pseudo-documentary style, combining handheld footage and fictional interviews, creates a strong "reality effect" that enhances the critical impact of the narrative (Sobchack, 1987, p. 223). As Rieder notes, the film "reinterpret[s] South African apartheid through the lens of science fiction, creating a displaced colonial discourse, where the alien becomes a metaphor for the racialized Other" (Rieder, 2008, p. 7). Langer likewise argues that *District 9*'s segregationist imagery functions not only as historical reference but as a critique of persistent neocolonial structures in a globalized era (Langer, 2011, p. 83).

Elysium reworks the classic narrative of *Metropolis* in a posthuman

key. The film imagines a future Los Angeles that visually resembles Johannesburg, where the poor remain on an environmentally devastated Earth while a wealthy elite lives on the luxurious space habitat Elysium. On Earth, a quasi-authoritarian regime relies on robotic police forces and pervasive surveillance to maintain order. On Elysium, the elite enjoy advanced medical technologies, abundant green spaces and security. The protagonist, played by Matt Damon, becomes a cyborg through invasive prosthetics that allow him to infiltrate the enclave of privilege. The film thus literalizes the link between technological enhancement and class privilege and offers a powerful metaphor for predatory neoliberalism and its exploitation of the Global South.

Chappie (*Humandroid*) addresses another central transhuman theme: the creation of a robot endowed with technological singularity. The film follows an engineer in Johannesburg who develops an artificial intelligence capable of thinking, feeling and loving like a human being. The narrative engages directly with contemporary fears surrounding fully autonomous AI, which some scientists warn could eventually threaten or even destroy humanity.

Across these films, Blomkamp foregrounds questions typical of "frontier bioethics," which deals with the ethical implications of new biotechnologies and digital systems, rather than those of "everyday bioethics," concerned with more traditional clinical contexts. His futures are shaped by what Floridi calls the "fourth revolution," a world in which the artificial is deeply embedded in everyday life and in which humans are increasingly displaced by automated systems. In this world, a central question arises: on what grounds can and should technoscience be limited?

Blomkamp's films propose a clear answer. If technological development is not constrained by ethical–moral boundaries and if humans do not actively guide it, the future that awaits us is dystopian. His imagined worlds dramatize the risks of a technological trajectory driven exclusively by profit and power.

This perspective aligns with Hans Jonas's Principle of Responsibility. Jonas criticizes modern technology for transforming humans and nature into manipulable objects and insists that the unprecedented power of technological action requires a new ethics grounded in responsibility for distant and unknown futures. Fear, in this context, is not mere paralysis but a productive affect that motivates precaution and care (Jonas, 2009).

In Blomkamp's dystopias, this fear takes shape in images of dehuman-

ization and dispossession. Technology does not primarily lighten the burden of work; instead, it exposes poor workers, such as Damon's character in *Elysium*, to new forms of exploitation and risk. Robots do not simply serve humans; they police and control them. Medical technologies capable of curing all diseases exist but are reserved for a tiny elite. Enhancement becomes an instrument of militarization and domination.

Blomkamp's visions thus resonate with the concerns of authors such as Fukuyama and Habermas, who warn against technological transformations that undermine human dignity. The hybrid creatures in *District 9* and the brutal mercenary in *Elysium* can be read as cinematic embodiments of the "monsters" imagined in these critiques.

At the same time, Blomkamp situates these developments within a broader framework of global inequality and environmental crisis. His films depict worlds structured by what Mike Davis calls an "urban apocalyptic imaginary," where segregated slums become spatial metaphors for economic and social polarization (Davis, 2006, p. 174). The ecological collapse that forms the backdrop to *Elysium* echoes Amitav Ghosh's reflections on the "great derangement," that is, the failure of contemporary culture to fully register the climate crisis (Ghosh, 2016, p. 9). The idea that these crises are driven less by "humanity" in general than by specific socio-economic arrangements recalls Jason W. Moore's notion of the "Capitalocene" (Moore, 2016, p. 6).

Crucially, Blomkamp does not reject technology as such. His films are not anti-technological but anti-ideological. They question narratives that promote technological innovation without integrating ethics. They suggest that the problem lies not in the existence of powerful technologies but in the political and economic frameworks that govern their development and use.

Embracing difference: toward a digital posthumanism

While Blomkamp shares many concerns with mainstream dystopian science fiction, his cinema also takes a partial step beyond it. This shift becomes especially visible in *Chappie* and, more specifically, in its ending.

The final sequence of the film shows the consciousness of one of the protagonists, Mami, being uploaded into a robotic body. The new subjectivity that emerges, neither simply man nor woman, neither fully human nor purely machine, opens a different vision of the posthuman. Trium-

phant rock music accompanies the scene, underscoring its affirmative charge.

This conclusion suggests that the posthuman future will not necessarily be grounded in the classical subject of Western humanism: white, male and Western. Instead, Blomkamp's posthuman is shaped by a feminine, marginalized subject. Mami lives in a South African slum, is poor and belongs to a criminal gang that the film ultimately portrays as a pocket of resistance to a ruthless neoliberal system. The posthuman subjectivity that arises at the end of *Chappie* is thus rooted in a history of exclusion and struggle.

In this way, Blomkamp sketches the contours of a new humanism that neither abandons fundamental ethical values nor reproduces the exclusions of earlier models. His posthumanism seeks to learn from past failures and is in line with Braidotti's idea of a non-unitary subject, aware of its interconnections with other humans, non-humans and the environment, and opposed to self-centred individualism (Braidotti, 2013).

Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* provides another fruitful lens. Haraway proposes the cyborg as a figure of hybrid and transgressive identity that destabilizes binary oppositions such as human/machine, male/female, nature/culture (Haraway, 1991). Chappie can be read as a cinematic cyborg in this sense: not entirely machine, not fully social subject, but a fluid hybrid shaped by conflicting forces and relationships.

These theoretical tools underline how Blomkamp's dystopian futures are not simply cautionary tales about technology. They also explore the possibility of reconfiguring subjectivity and community in a posthuman world. His films are driven by a constant ethical concern: the fate of human dignity in contexts where the boundaries between biology and technology have become porous.

Blomkamp's dystopias depict societies in which technological progress has been decoupled from moral responsibility. Medicine capable of curing all exists, but only for the privileged few. Artificial intelligences can learn, feel and love, but they are trained in environments structured by violence and crime. Enhancement technologies amplify militarized or capitalist power rather than supporting emancipation. These worlds expose the fallacy of the transhumanist assumption that technological progress automatically yields human flourishing.

At the same time, Blomkamp's films refuse fatalism. They maintain a small but significant space for ethical awakening and re-humanization.

In *Chappie*, for example, the central question is not whether AI can become human but how it is socialized and by whom. The robot's moral development depends on the relationships that shape it. This focus on relationality connects Blomkamp's cinema to broader discourses on digital humanism.

Digital humanism, as articulated by authors such as Paolo Benanti, seeks to integrate humanistic values into the design and governance of digital technologies. Building on the principles of bioethics, beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice and explicability, it proposes an "algorethics" capable of orienting technological innovation (Benanti, 2018, p. 51). The goal is not to halt progress but to ensure that it serves genuinely human ends.

Blomkamp's films do not provide a fully articulated theory of digital posthumanism. Rather, they perform a critical function by visualizing what happens when technological development proceeds without ethical guidance. They show the social and existential costs of an unregulated alliance between technoscience and neoliberal capitalism. In doing so, they prompt viewers to reconsider what kind of world they wish to inhabit and what forms of humanity they wish to preserve and transform.

By highlighting the bioethical, postcolonial and anthropological dimensions of Blomkamp's cinema, this essay has argued that science fiction can function as more than a mirror of contemporary fears. It can also be a space for moral imagination and critical experimentation. Faced with increasing algorithmic power and perceived reductions in human agency, cinematic dystopias like Blomkamp's may provide some of the conceptual and affective tools needed to imagine more just and more humane futures.

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