Exploring Post- and Transhumanism in Tales from the Loop

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Abstract

This paper examines how *Tales from the Loop* – in its illustrated volumes (Stålenhag, 2014, 2016), television adaptation (Halpern, 2020), and ludic extensions – constructs a narrative space in which posthumanist and transhumanist tensions are rendered visible and narratively productive. Through a comparative analysis of selected episodes and visual-textual excerpts, the study investigates how technological artifacts such as robotic prostheses, consciousness-transfer capsules, and environmental anomalies function as catalysts for ontological disruption, existential recognition, and shifts in modes of relationality. Central to the analysis is the recurring juxtaposition between a transhumanist logic of enhancement – embodied in the scientific elite's efforts to transcend biological constraints – and a posthumanist imaginary that emerges from the landscape itself: abandoned robots, machine-organic hybrids, and altered temporalities that resist instrumental control. The paper draws on Heidegger's concept of *Gestell* (1977) to frame the Loop as both an infrastructural dispositif and a symbolic structure of enframing, while identifying moments in which characters encounter technology not as resource but as site of *alētheia*. Particular attention is given to episodes where identity, care, and vulnerability are renegotiated through encounters with machines. Rather than proposing a linear narrative of progress or decline, *Tales from the Loop* articulates a speculative ecology in which human and non-human agencies coexist, conflict, and co-emerge. In doing so, the work offers a multi-layered meditation on the limits of control, the fragility of embodiment, and the possibility of a different attunement to being in the technological age.

Keywords: Tales from the Loop, Post-humanism, Transhumanism, Heidegger, Television series

Introduction

In the contemporary era, the intersection between technology and humanity occupies a central position in the cultural and philosophical debate. The ongoing interaction between humans and machines, and between

the organic and the inorganic, both in the real world and in speculative works, has given rise to currents of thought – most notably post-humanism and transhumanism – that question the potential and dangers of a future in which the boundaries between the human and the technological become increasingly blurred. In this context, narrative works such as *Tales from the Loop* can be valuable tools for exploring and reflecting on these issues. Set in an alternative Sweden, where advanced technologies are integrated into everyday life, and mainly composed of Simon Stålenhag's illustrations offering a speculative vision for the author's childhood, set in the decade between 1984 and 1994, *Tales from the Loop* is not only a retrofuturistic science fiction work, but also an investigation of existential tensions experienced in the technological age. The present contribution aims to analyze the post-humanist and transhumanist themes present in this serial narrative universe, considering the original illustrated book (Stålenhag, 2014), its sequel *Things from the Flood* (Stålenhag, 2016), and the television series distributed on Amazon Prime (Halpern, 2020). A detailed analysis of the plots, characters and themes addressed in *Tales from the Loop* will be conducted in order to understand how the works address and interpret fundamental issues related to technological evolution and its interaction with human beings. Particular attention will also be directed toward the influence of Heidegger's concept of the interplay between technology and revelation (1977), highlighting how it offers a lens through which to examine the representations and implications present in significant excerpts from both the books and the television series.

The narrative universe of Tales from the Loop

The narrative universe of *Tales from the Loop* originates from the visual imagination of the Swedish artist Simon Stålenhag. His works, steeped in nostalgia, combine the natural beauty of the Swedish countryside with the disturbing and omnipresent presence of autonomous machines, futuristic structures, and technological ruins among both nature and society. This fusion between the everyday and the uncanny (the Freudian *Unheimliche)*, understood primarily in a cultural and architectural sense (Vidler, 1992), was initially developed by the artist in a Kickstarter-fouded illustrated

book (Stålenhag, 2014)[1]. The success of this project led to a broader transmedia expansion, including the development of a television series bearing the same title (Halpern, 2020), which introduced new characters and storylines. The original work was later recognized with significant accolades, including the prestigious Kurd Laßwitz Prize in 2021. In parallel with the development of the television series, *Tales from the Loop* was also adapted into a role-playing game (Hintze & Stålenhag, 2017, 2019) and later into a board game (Antroia & Takaichi, 2022). Stålenhag's works present an alternative version of Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s, in which technological development was strongly influenced by governments that chose to invest, immediately after World War II, in experimental research programmes on particle physics through the construction of synchrotrons[2]. This scenario has facilitated the development of robots, androids, and innovative technologies that integrate seamlessly into everyday life, outlining a narrative universe that takes on the traits of a *retrotopia,* according to the definition proposed by Bauman (2017)[3]. This interpretation is rendered particularly plausible by considering the privileged point of view through which the narratives of *Tales from the Loop* and its transmedia variations is articulated – namely, the perspective of children and teenagers who experience the intricate relationship between humanity and technology in a world where the fundamental rules include the notions that «your hometown is full of strange and wonderful things[4] [...] everyday life is boring and unforgiving [...] adults are out of reach and insensitive» (Hintze & Stålenhag, 2017, pp. 10-11).

[1] The Swedish title of the work, "Ur Varselklotet: Illustrerade sägner Ur Slingans Landskap 1984-1994", which can be directly translated into English as "From the Echo Sphere: Illustrated Legends from the Landscape of the Loop 1984-1994", further highlights the mythopoetic nature of the project.

[2] This is a type of circular and cyclical particle accelerator.

[3] Classifiable as a work of *lo-fi science fiction,* this narrative also has thematic affinities with the *Mundane Manifesto* (Ryman et al., 2004). However, as a ucronia set in an alternative universe, it departs from one of the founding principles of the manifesto, which explicitly excludes alternative universes or parallel worlds.

[4] More specifically, in the region where the synchrotron, simply called "Loop" by the citizens, has been installed, a series of scientific and technological anomalies begin to occur.

Seriality and narrative in Tales from the Loop

From its initial form as an illustrated book, *Tales from the Loop* has embraced a fragmented narrative structure, composed of images and brief texts that resemble postcards from an alternative Sweden. This aesthetic of discontinuity carries over into the television adaptation, where seriality – central to many contemporary media forms – takes the shape of an anthology: each episode tells a self-contained story, yet all remain thematically and environmentally coherent, addressing questions of posthumanism, transhumanism, and the philosophy of technology from multiple perspectives. Post-humanism, a neologism first brought to prominence by Robert Pepperell (1995), is a school of thought that challenges traditional conceptions of humanism by questioning the idea of the human being as a central and autonomous entity. In contrast to the conventional view of humanity as separate and superior to the rest of the natural world, post-humanism acknowledges the interdependence between humans, animals, machines and the environment. This perspective posits that our identity and existence are in a state of perpetual evolution, subject to the influence of the technologies and systems that surround us. Of the many currents of this existential approach, for the purposes of this research it is worth mentioning: the post-humanist one, according to which the notion of the human is no longer singular but plural, overcoming traditional distinctions of class, gender, nationality, and disability (Braidotti, 2013; Herbrechter, 2013); the post-anthropocentric one, which deconstructs the figure of man as the center of meaning and the apex of a hierarchy (Haraway, 2008; Wolfe, 2010); the post-dualist one, which goes beyond the view of reality constructed by opposition – e.g., we are humans because we are not animals – and considers human beings as part of a broader ecosystem (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2016); and the objectivist one, which seeks to counter the excessive emphasis on the subjective or intersubjective that pervades humanism and emphasizes the role of non-human agents, whether they be animals and plants, computers, or other artifacts (Latour, 2005; Bennett, 2010; Bryant, 2011). In *Tales from the Loop,* post-humanism is manifested in many cases through the fusion of nature and technology. In Stålenhag's illustrations and descriptions, the convergence of the organic and inorganic elements serves to obfuscate the conventional boundaries that delineate the human and non-human realms. This phenomenon is evident in numerous passages throughout

the text. To elaborate on this point, one need only consider the manner in which robots roaming the countryside, once regarded as the pinnacle of technological achievement, have become an integral part of the landscape, almost like a natural species. This theme, and its implications for posthuman and ecological imaginaries, will be examined in greater detail in the following section.

Transhumanism, in contrast, is a philosophy and movement that advocates the use of science and technology to enhance the physical and cognitive capabilities of human beings. The term, as defined by Max More (1990), refers to

> a class of philosophies that seek to guide us towards a posthuman condition. Transhumanism shares many elements of humanism, including a respect for reason and science, a commitment to progress, and a valuing of human (or transhuman) existence in this life. [...] Transhumanism differs from humanism in recognizing and anticipating the radical alterations in the nature and possibilities of our lives resulting from various sciences and technologies.

The objective is therefore to overcome biological limitations, such as disease, aging, and even death, through the integration of advanced technologies. While post-humanism can be regarded as a critical reflection on the nature of human beings in the technological age, transhumanism is more action-oriented, actively seeking ways to improve humanity. Within the fictional universe of *Tales from the Loop,* transhumanism is manifested in a variety of forms. The quest for a "first functional artificial nervous system" (Stålenhag, 2014, p. 55) and the emergence of robotic prostheses serve as salient illustrations of a transhumanist aspiration to transcend the limitations of the human condition.

The episodic structure of *Tales from the Loop* thus allows for the co-presence of a plurality of perspectives, not merely organizing the narrative but actively shaping its ontological horizon. Each episode operates as a discrete variation within a system of resonances, where narrative discontinuity becomes a strategy for investigating alternative modes of being. This modularity recalls the logic of role-playing games – a medium to which the universe of Tales from the Loop has explicitly expanded – not only in form but in the way it distributes agency and meaning across fragmented yet interlinked storylines, tracing a network rather than a progression.

Post-humanism, transhumanism, and the quest for a future in Tales from the Loop

In *Tales from the Loop*, the tensions between post-humanism and transhumanism are rendered with particular clarity. The books and eight episodes of the television series depict a society – in particular its ruling class, which consists of scientists and technicians – that is oriented toward a transhumanist ideology aimed at overcoming human biological limitations through technological means. However, this vision contrasts with a constellation of post-humanist cues – often oblique or atmospheric – that articulate a post-anthropocentric, post-dualist, and object-oriented imaginary. A useful theoretical instrument for understanding this tension is Heidegger's concept of *Gestell* (1977) that designates the ontologically totalizing mode of revealing characteristic of the technological age, in which the world discloses itself as a standing-reserve (*Bestand*), ready for use. In *Tales from the Loop*, the logic of the *Gestell* is dramatized through the centrality of the Loop itself: an enigmatic machine that silently structures the social and existential environment, embodying a transhumanist paradigm of control. Yet, as Heidegger points out, technology is not merely a threat: it harbors within itself the possibility of *alētheia* – a revealing that opens new ways of encountering being by shifting from an instrumental to a meditative thinking. This ambivalence runs through the narrative universe of the series, in which technology, while producing rupture and alienation, also allows for wonder, empathy, and the reconfiguration of the human condition. The characters, in their encounters with machines and artifacts, go beyond mere instrumental use, seeking meaning, connection, and – at times – revelation.

In the illustrated books, the interplay between nature and technology does not merely serve as background, but constitutes the core aesthetic and conceptual tension of Stålenhag's meditative dystopia. *Tales from the Loop*, and its sequel *Things from the Flood*, depict a world in which technology is integrated into the natural environment to the same extent as trees and waterways. Abandoned robots wander like lost creatures, radio towers rise majestically from the woods, and satellite dishes dominate the silhouettes of houses. This fusion of the organic and the artificial unsettles anthropocentric hierarchies, offering a post-humanist vision in which humans no longer occupy a privileged position, but are embedded within a broader ecological system. Yet this apparent equilibrium coexists

with a more ominous tendency: the same landscapes also bear the marks of a transhumanist transformation. The Swedish countryside, shaped by decades of scientific experimentation, appears increasingly subjected to the logic of technological mastery – what Heidegger calls *Gestell*, the enframing that reduces beings to *Bestand*. From cyborg teachers (Stålenhag, 2014, p. 9), to gloves that allow you to control bipedal robots (p. 16), from cybernetic bison-boars (p. 107), to diets based on genetically engineered plants to try to overcome the limits of our humanity (p. 101), and to even the complete alteration of nature and space-time with the appearance of dinosaurs (p. 44), the natural world is systematically reconfigured as a field for human intervention. Even in the passages relating to androids, there is mention of the aforementioned "first functional artificial nervous system" and how "suddenly, our machines were bestowed balance and grace previously reserved for biological organisms". Robots are also defined by the author as

> at their disposal. [...] Research was focused on biomechanics, evolutionary robotics, and cybernetics. Rumor had it they were trying to create machines that were able to feel and reason. Apparently they made progress; they were unable to stop prototypes escaping on several occasions (p. 55).

This vision, which clearly hierarchizes the relationships between humans and what they consider to be primarily the products of their technology, is, however, heavily altered in the next volume. *Things from the Flood* (Stålenhag, 2016) portrays a Sweden grappling with a post-industrial crisis, a place marked by decay and abandonment, where the imposing machines of the past lie in ruins and the land is exploited for new, sometimes unsettling purposes. The collapse of the transhumanist ideal here is manifested in the phenomenon of "machine cancer", manifesting as the development of grotesque biological components within technological objects, thereby rendering them unusable by humans. This form of pseudo-disease, in addition to requiring a post-anthropocentric approach to the problem of machines for its very existence, can also be considered a reversal – albeit not entirely successful – of the dictates of transhumanism. From humans intentionally seeking to hybridize with machines, we move to machines that, in a random and degenerative way, partially transform into pulsating organic matter. Technology, which once represented a

promise of progress and development, now becomes a threat, a distorted shadow of its glorious past. Despite a strong push towards transhumanism by the elite of society, it is clear throughout this second book that a post-humanist perspective is somehow necessary. Control of technology appears impossible, and objectivism as a way of interpreting reality seems to be the only effective response in a world made up of androids capable of experiencing suffering (p. 116), monstrous life forms modified by heavy metals and chemicals that seep into the water from the Loop (p. 93), the aforementioned dinosaurs and, more generally, bipedal robots with anthropomorphic elements.

In the television adaptation *Tales from the Loop*, this latter aspect is even more evident. Set in the United States rather than Sweden, the chosen point of view of the series is that of a small number of individuals, mainly belonging to two families: the Willards and the Janssons. In the pilot episode *Loop*, we meet a young Loretta Willard in Mercer, Ohio, a gifted student who returns home one day to find her house and mother gone – disappeared by a strange phenomena connected to the Loop. All that remains is a peculiar black rock that seems to defy gravity. While searching, she encounters a boy named Cole, and together they explore the nearby abandoned shack, witnessing impossible phenomena: snow falling upward and, in the sky, her house disintegrating piece by piece. Loretta then discovers that Cole's mother is strangely familiar – only to realize she is her future self. The adult Loretta leads her younger self into the Mercer Center for Experimental Physics ("the Loop"), where they deposit the black fragment into the vast orb known as the Eclipse, the core of the facility. After this, the younger Loretta vanishes, and the older Loretta comforts Cole, acknowledging her own lifelong grief over her mother's disappearance and resolving to be present for her children in the future. The Janssons, a working-class family facing very different struggles, enter the story in the second episode, *Transpose*, when Jakob Willard and his friend Danny Jansson discover a mysterious orb-shaped capsule in the woods that allows them to switch consciousness. What begins as a temporary experiment becomes irreversible: Danny's mind remains in Jakob's body, while Jakob's consciousness is transferred into a robot. Eventually, Danny (in Jakob's body) integrates into Jakob's life permanently; Jakob's body becomes a motionless shell, kept alive by his grieving parents. Later, a robot – implied to house Jakob's mind – visits the Willard home at night. When Danny approaches it, the robot flees

into the forest, hinting at Jakob's fate. This transhuman overcoming of their physical limits[5] is actually anticipated by some conversations the two boys have before finding the capsule: Danny asks Cole if he would rather be invisible or hear other people's thoughts, and a few moments later, in an objectivist and premonitory reversal we see them imitating animal sounds. The discourse on identity from a post-dualist perspective is equally evident in many of the dialogues in this episode. The loss of singularity – I am no longer defined by my body, but I am in someone else's – and the post-dualistic reflection – I am not me because I am you – is evident when the boys return to their bodies for the first time, declaring "I'm me" and "same", and when Danny inside Jakob's body sees his former body outside the window and is then told by Jakob, "so there were two of you... us." This identity crisis in the face of technology echoes and surpasses what we saw in the first episode, when the little girl Loretta asks her adult version, "You're me, right?"

The crisis of the Jansson family is explored in greater depth in episode 5, *Control*, where transhumanist elements become especially prominent. In the aftermath of Danny's irreversible coma, Ed Jansson attempts to restore a sense of agency and protection by purchasing a remotely operated robot, controlled via a motion-sensitive glove that functions as a prosthetic extension of his body. To afford the device, he deliberately postpones essential home repairs – such as fixing a defective electrical panel – revealing a form of technological investment that displaces material and familial needs[6]. The glove, in this context, becomes a symbolic tool of compensation: a means of asserting control over an entropic reality that resists containment. This entropic condition is alluded to explicitly in the opening sequence of the episode, in which a broken egg serves as a metaphor for irreversible loss – a visual prefiguration of Danny's vegetative state and the emotional fracture it produces. Yet the series ultimately undermines Ed's technocentric response: far from resolving the family's crisis, the robot becomes a source of new danger, particularly when it nearly harms his

[5] The transfer of consciousness is one of the key elements of extropianism, a current of transhumanism developed by the aforementioned More.

[6] The possibility of acquiring superhuman strength simply by purchasing technology, and in this case by foregoing other necessary household expenses, raises some of the philosophical problems that we could classify as belonging to the current of democratic transhumanism.

daughter. Ed is eventually compelled to return the machine and use the refunded money for the neglected repairs, suggesting that healing lies not in technological mastery but in the fragile, imperfect labor of care.

The last episode considered here is the penultimate of the first season, *Enemies*. This episode recounts how George Willard comes to possess a robotic prosthesis in place of his left arm, and how this loss leads to a new awareness of his condition – both transhuman and posthuman. The narrative opens in a cinema, where three teenagers are watching *The Mask of the Demon* (1960), Mario Bava's directorial debut, whose plot and themes are subtly echoed in the episode. The boys' behaviour is marked by a deeply anthropocentric and ableist stance: they mock a boy with Down syndrome and casually kill a snake with a taser, without remorse. After being abandoned by the other two on a nearby island, George is forced to confront radical otherness – the monstrous understood not as a fantasy figure, but as the non-human. The creature that roams the island, feared by locals and initially only heard through a disturbing cry, is eventually revealed to be the first 'living' android created by his father Russ Willard, exiled to the island to shield it from public reaction. George's encounter with this being unfolds through a dynamic of mutual injury: he suffers a venomous bite that necessitates the amputation of his arm, leaving two black holes in the flesh; the android, meanwhile, loses one of its arms after George uses the taser against it. The visual parallel between the electrodes of the weapon and the holes in George's arm underscores a symbolic convergence of technology and nature. George later receives a robotic prosthesis – an extension of the body that both restores function and signals his altered ontological status. At school, Loretta writes him a question on a piece of paper: "Are you a robot?". The episode thus articulates a moment of existential awareness in which George comes to understand himself as 'other', situated beyond the boundaries of the human in both a post-dualist and transhumanist sense. In line with Heidegger's conception of technology as a mode of revealing (*Entbergen*) – not merely a tool but a process through which truth (*alētheia*) emerges – *Tales from the Loop* repeatedly employs technological artifacts as catalysts for existential insight. These moments of disclosure, however, do not stem from the devices themselves, but from a shift in the characters' mode of engagement: from a calculative stance to a more meditative openness. In this sense, the series gestures toward what Heidegger terms the *Kehre* – a turning in thought that reorients our relationship to being and rescues technol-

ogy from its purely enframing logic (*Gestell*). In *Enemies*, the prosthesis becomes a vehicle for self-discovery; in other episodes, machines unveil hidden dimensions of experience. Russ Willard's illness is first disclosed to his grandson, and then to the family, through technological mediation. The Echo Sphere, featured in the eponymous Episode 6, reveals deeply personal truths about the future, just as a fragment of the Eclipse in Episode 1 reveals Loretta's destiny and what her son truly thinks of her. In all these cases, technology is not merely instrumental – it becomes a means of ontological disclosure for the characters and the audience alike.

Conclusions

Tales from the Loop constitutes a significant contribution to contemporary reflections on the relationship between humanity and technology, offering a complex and stratified representation of a world in which the boundaries between the organic and the inorganic, the human and the non-human, are progressively reconfigured. Through its various medial articulations – illustrated books, television seriality, and ludic adaptations – the work not only stages the technological condition of the present but also interrogates its ontological, ethical, and epistemological implications.

The aesthetic and narrative choices adopted by Stålenhag and by the authors of the derivative works make *Tales from the Loop* a privileged site for the investigation of the tensions between transhumanism and post-humanism. While the former is embodied in the aspiration to overcome the biological limits of the human through technological enhancement, the latter emerges as a critical and decentering perspective, attentive to the hybrid, relational, and distributed nature of subjectivity in the technological age. The conceptual framework offered by Heidegger's analysis of technology – and in particular by the notion of *Gestell* – proves to be particularly productive in interpreting the narrative and symbolic function of the Loop, which acts both as a dispositive of control and as a site of potential *alētheia*, or unveiling of truth. As recent scholarship has noted (Konfederat & Dyadyk, 2021), the philosophical dimension of *Tales from the Loop* is not ancillary but constitutive: the serial structure itself functions not merely as a narrative device, but as a heuristic mechanism capable of articulating divergent perspectives and constructing a multilayered and internally coherent world. Each episode, while autonomous, contributes

to a cumulative process of meaning-making, in which technological devices are not simply functional elements, but vehicles of existential inquiry and ontological disclosure. In this sense, *Tales from the Loop* should be read as an allegory of the contemporary condition: a speculative dispositif that renders visible the fractures, desires, and uncertainties produced by our entanglement with technology. Far from proposing a univocal or deterministic vision, the work performs a reflexive operation that invites us to critically interrogate the assumptions and imaginaries that underlie our ways of being in – and with – the world.

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