

University of Wyoming

Bridging the Gap We Imagined: Deconstructing Human/Non-Human  
Binaries in Science Fiction Film

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April 24, 2019

## Introduction

“We are the local embodiment of a Cosmos grown to self-awareness,”<sup>1</sup> says one of the great cultural and theoretical minds of science and humanity, Carl Sagan. This particular quote has an emphasis on the place humans hold, that “Our obligation to survive is owed not just to ourselves but also to that Cosmos, ancient and vast, from which we spring.” In his attempt to explore the nature of our origins, he singles us out, labeling us as “local” and, later, that “here at least, consciousness arose.” Sagan’s perspective was not necessarily on the relationship of humans and the possibility of “others” in the universe, but instead on our position in relation to all this vastness around us. By centering this observation on humans, he (possibly unintentionally) argues a humanist philosophy, that we as a species are important in some inexplicable way. But as Sagan found his mind stretching throughout the cosmos, other thinkers throughout history have found their calling in the many other universes imaginable. Universes that can only be explored through science fiction.

Science fiction is, in its barest form, an exploration. From space to molecular physics and everywhere in-between, science fiction writers and artists explore the unknown and the inherent human position in relation to these unknowns. Unlike Sagan, the combination of the two pushes the conversation away from the human and toward the space between. It is this space between that fascinates artists and theorists as they use it to embark on their own exploration through the cosmos, revealing truths central to mankind’s position and self-image and attempting to uncover why humans always position ourselves opposite to these mysterious, insisted-upon “never” human forces. As we question “who we are and what life is all about,”<sup>2</sup> we are encouraged to “predict the future on the basis of known facts, culled largely from present-day

laboratories.”<sup>3</sup> Through our own science, new scientific possibilities are fostered across imaginations; where Einstein could only dream of the singularity, *Interstellar* quite literally traveled there to the awe of audiences across the world.

The medium by which science fiction explores these boundaries varies by generation, from novels to short stories and, more recently, television and film. These latter aspects pose a special consideration because they present to the audience a vision, clearly defined by the writer as well as the director, the special effects artists, the actors, and any other number of highly-involved individuals. Through them, and through special effects, science fiction film “appeals precisely because it lends itself to the greatest imaginative capacities of the film medium [...] to give shape and being to the imagination.”<sup>4</sup> And if the imagination is precisely what creates the ideas which this film genre gives shape to, then the two truly explore the impossible put to thought.

To analyze the views which science fiction film has toward humans and these imagined, external forces, I have turned to specifically humans and non-humans. The latter in this relationship can include any being which the genre positions opposite humans, from aliens to robots to clones and every space in-between. This sub-genre of science fiction interests me because the line between the two ends is blurred. In nearly every example, no matter what opposes us, science fiction film insists that the “other” is never that far from ourselves. It often creates a metaphor from our own social consciousness, such as mimicking (or suggesting) the progress of racial relations in any culturally diverse system. But through these metaphors, the science fiction genre inherently proves itself to be posthuman. Peter Mahon defines posthumanism as “an acknowledgement that humans and humanity are constantly changing through their interaction with technology and tools.”<sup>5</sup> Though highly simplified, this provides a

succinct way to approach the genre as a whole, especially allowing that “technology” be applied as broadly as possible. If robots exist for humans to use as a tool, and robots can develop a consciousness in science fiction, then the two are put into conversation in what was previously a one-sided dialogue.

In developing these case studies, there was a natural gravitation toward the theoretical ideas developed by Jacques Derrida in his essays “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” “Différance,” and “Of Grammatology.”<sup>6</sup> Through these essays, Derrida describes the ways in which it is possible to analyze structures presented in the world and discover the nature of their construct, how they insist, and the ways in which they create difference at ultimately proves to be arbitrary. These combine to form a “deconstructionist” stance by which imagined structures can and should be broken down to reveal the true meaning behind the parts within them. In science fiction media, this idea is readily applicable because a) every structure is imagined, is built by the author, and b) humans are always positioned against some other force by which the two define one another, frequently with humans positioned as the positive. The existence of this trend in Western society can in one way be explained as the process by which a story is built, because there can be no conflict without conflicting ideologies. But through Derrida, each of these insurances can reveal the anxieties that humans hold in the innumerable possible systems available in science fiction. For example, as the humans in any story insist that they are better than aliens, analyzing the elements of a film can help discover why this insistence exists. As well, I will use Derrida’s concept of “play” as any form of dissonance which threatens to disrupt the structure in which this play occurs. In writing this, I recognize that there is a schism to navigate between posthumanism as a form of philosophical and cultural evolution and transhumanism as a budding philosophy that addresses

advancement through technological and biological enhancement. For the sake of simplicity, I have combined these two philosophies into one because they both function in similar ways for this argument: they allow critics to address the issue of evolving humanist thought beyond the point at which it can be readily classified as distinctly “human” and, now, something “post.” In that allowance, I will now take time to briefly outline transhumanism and explain the situations in this essay that could possibly reference transhuman philosophy that I have instead labeled as posthuman.

In the “Transhumanist Declaration,” a founding document of the World Transhumanist Association written in 1998, they believe that because “humanity stands to be profoundly affected by science and technology in the future,” the prospect of expanding our inherent potential through the use of technology is mandatory, especially in regards to “overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth.” Their belief is that because humans have begun to unlock technology that expands our capabilities, we should use this technology “for the preservation of life and health, the alleviation of grave suffering, and the improvement of human foresight and wisdom.” This philosophy is especially useful in analyzing the specifically-technological ways in which humans approach the future in science fiction media, developing tools for their continued survival, such as the replicants in *Blade Runner: 2049*.

Transhumanism openly tackles the issue of augmentation and enhancement in a way that posthumanism is hesitant to, but in an extreme form of the idea. While Donna Haraway may argue in “A Cyborg Manifesto” that “by the late twentieth century, our time, [...] we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism – in short, cyborgs,”<sup>7</sup>, transhumanist writer Melinda Hall acknowledges that the transhumanist posthuman would “be so

increased in capacities that it would be difficult to assign the word “human” to this being.”<sup>8</sup> Within this essay, this concept will be applied to the 2009 film *Avatar* and the various forms of human modification by which the characters expand upon their existence.

Science fiction film gives audiences a key into a world beyond themselves. It presents us with a concept that does not exist within our reality and encourages us to re-evaluate ourselves by way of “cognitive estrangement.”<sup>9</sup> Because we view it on a screen, it becomes easier to believe that it is not us, though every inspiration was taken from the world around us. And as we move forward, we show a tendency to wonder where exactly we exist within this vast cosmos. We wonder how we might fall in line when placed next to others like us, others unlike us, or others we ourselves designed. These worlds we create open an opportunity to be critical of the human existence and even what it means to be human. And, by way of human and non-human relationships, we can develop an understanding of society’s unease as we approach a future that seems more and more like yesterday’s science fact than tomorrow’s science fiction.

### *Avatar* and the (Piloted) Na’vi Body

*Avatar* (2009) recognizes a familiar narrative between colonizers and colonized but brings it into a post-human conversation about body, identity, and lived versus imagined experience. Though it features a widely criticized “white savior” plot, there is an argument to be made that by introducing a form of body-transformation, it allows Jake to truly become a Na’vi unlike any “white savior” before him. And while this plot device is absolutely open to criticism, it does introduce the concepts of survival through adaptation and evolution. And not for the Na’vi, but for the humans. James Cameron tells the story of a group of scientists who

have developed technology which allows them to insert their consciousness into the body of the aliens that are instinctively positioned opposite to those humans. But despite this insertion into another body, another culture, the film goes to great lengths to convey that human technology is incompatible with the natural, bio-electrical, spiritual world that the Na'vi function in. Between these technologies, a statement is made that is only possible in a science fiction genre: that the key to truly understanding the other side can be achieved not only by distancing your mind from your initial ideology, but from your native body as well.<sup>1</sup>

As the story begins, the human encampment on Pandora has created a culture with two distinct ideologies present inside its borders. There are the scientists who want to understand and learn from the Na'vi about what its planet has to offer, how its ecological systems function, every standard sentimentalist trope in narratives such as this. And opposite them are the military and capitalist forces who see the prospects on Pandora as their ultimate, inescapable goal. With Unobtanium as a perfectly-translated metaphor for gold in early America, the superficial historical criticisms are very apparent. These two distinct and opposing factional forces trying to interact with the indigenous population introduce a constant sense of play to the narrative as the protagonist is caught in the middle. Jake is an ex-marine, unlike his brother, but signed onto this mission as part of a science team who hopes to integrate with the Na'vi. His position within this role is critical for the bridges the film will create between these ideologies through Jake. Because he is a retired soldier but not a scientist, his role is one of searching for a space in which he belongs, a readily-adaptable main character for the film to follow.

This colonization story quickly distances itself from the other “Native American meets white savior” narratives that have come before it. Humans have still managed to learn the Na'vi's language and, in turn, educate them on their principles, as well as develop a

basic understanding of their culture. But now humans can *become* the bodies that the Na'vi exist within. The “avatars” are “grown from human DNA mixed with the DNA of the natives” that creates a unique prosthetic for each pilot, one that only they can interact with. Jake quickly clears up the specifics for the audience in a video monologue, saying that “their nervous systems are in tune” with the pilots. I believe that this understates the connection between them and, as the film consistently shows, it is the hybridization between human and Na'vi in a single body that creates a metaphorical bridge through which Jake can pass over what would have been an otherwise impossible barrier between the two species.

From the first moments of the film, this connection with his avatar is explored in subtle ways. Jake narrates that he “started having these dreams of flying” while a camera shot pans over the forests of what the audience soon learns is Pandora, the planet Jake is about to land on, but one he has never actually been to. This “dream” is impossible to explain at the outset of the film, but once the connection between the Na'vi and their biological memory to the planet, their ancestors, and every living thing is described to the audience, the dream becomes a biological memory his avatar body has that his human memory has access to. This suggests that before Jake first uploads his mind into his avatar, they are connected, and that his experiences as an individual are no longer singularly human.

This connection happens again when Jake first sees his Na'vi body. When looking through the glass of the incubation tank, the audience hears a heartbeat grow louder in intensity until the scene cuts away. This heartbeat, with the slow pan in on Jake's avatar's face, is the avatar's heartbeat that he hears even from that distance. His biological connection with this body is immediately one far more familiar than anything humans have commonly known. On a metaphysical level, he can sense its physiology and resonate with it, bridging a gap cannot be



explained through the human lens that he perceives the world. The avatar is already a part of him, a tool by which he is defined in the world, even if he does not immediately recognize it. Jake's disability is explained during the first few moments of the film, and his being wheelchair-bound is immediately clear. While Jake's character defines himself through his prosthesis in many ways, the film's fascination with the human body and prosthesis is its central one and not just a character choice. A spinal injury has left Jake wheelchair-bound and with no choice but to take his brother's place on Pandora where he will pilot his avatar. Jake does not initially understand the implications of piloting an avatar, describing the process as "or something" during his video diary. But the moment he takes his first step in a Na'vi body, that body has replaced his wheelchair as a prosthesis allowing him mobility. His new avatar exists as a form of Brain-Machine Interfaces (BMI), a type of neuroprosthetic that allows Jake to interact with the world outside of his human body. Peter Mahon suggests that through these technologies, "human movement' and 'human embodiment'" have become antiquated concepts, no longer exclusively human, "no longer simply anchored in the biological body."<sup>2</sup>

While society views Jake as disabled, Pandora is immediately a place where humans universally face disabilities; the atmosphere is incompatible for our physiology and so they must wear masks to survive outdoors or suffocate within minutes. This reality is lost on the soldiers within the military base, though, as Jake is immediately faced with an offhanded comment about his disability. A soldier in a mech suit says "Lookout, hot-rod" (Avatar), forgetting that he himself is using a prosthetic to function in the world. Every human on Pandora functions in this way, including the avatar pilots. The pilots discuss hours logged while piloting, they undergo diagnostic checks when first uploading their consciousness into the avatars, and they regain the ability lost by their bodies on Pandora, such as mobility and breathing.

Jake Sully and the rest of the avatar pilots then face the question of what exactly it means to exist within the Na'vi bodies they sometimes inhabit. This perspective inherently carries their human perception of “piloting” as something one does to a machine. And the Na'vi perspective of these humans the same, as they routinely call the pilots in their avatar bodies “dream-walkers”. This is reinforced when they see the avatars faint when the pilots are forced awake. And the obsession with piloting is constant across the factions shown, but it becomes posthuman because it is a form of operating within the world. Regardless of the lengths which these bodies extend to, they operate through distributed cognition, or “the system of ‘person-in-interaction-with-technology’”.<sup>3</sup> This concept is comprehensive in explaining the interaction between human and mech and avatar, albeit with little nuance considering the gravity of the connection, but useful nonetheless. And just as the humans pilot their mechs and copters, the Na'vi use their electro-biological communication to help them pilot the indigenous animals on Pandora, such as the pa'li (direhorses) and the ikran (banshees). The difference with the Na'vi, though, is that they share a consciousness with the creatures they connect with through “tsaheylu”. This bond is what separates them from the humans who are in command of a machine that has no sentience. Tsaheylu puts their relationship with the world around them beyond what humans are capable of, expanding their consciousness into a realm that is always posthuman because it embodies an animal as well.

This ability to connect with the world is something the pilots inherit the moment they step into their avatars, but it is not theirs permanently, nor are they fully in possession of the ideas behind it. They must first undergo a process of acclimation into the Na'vi culture, adopting their ideology on all levels so that they may be considered one of them before the uniquely Na'vi experiences they hide from the humans are revealed. These lessons are key to the

acclimation process because they introduce the humans to Eywa, their goddess and way of considering the connection between all things on Pandora. Developing an understanding of this and all other parts of the Na'vi culture slowly shifts them away from the humans, an idea the film shows through several montage scenes. And this idea becomes key in understanding the divide between the humans and the Na'vi. As Grace Augustine, the representative for the human scientists, confronts the military general and the entrepreneur who wants to destroy the Omatiyaya way of life for material gain, a binary of consumerism vs. conservation is placed directly in front of the audience and they are signaled to choose that of conservation.

As the pilots develop an understanding of Na'vi ideology, they gradually grow away from their inherent "human" qualities. They are shifted to the other end of the binary that, because it is presented through the protagonist's view, is here the positive. And the narrative reinforces this through examples showing the militaristic forces as greedy, excessively violent, and without basic compassion. James Cameron also pulls on the audience's sentiment through music and editing to show the pain that the Na'vi feel as they see Kelutral (Hometree) fall and feel the loss of their connection to it through Eywa. This act of violence from one end of the binary to the other is what finally shifts the protagonists to the other end as even Trudy Chacon, the pilot played by Michelle Rodriguez, voices their anger through a fierce "I didn't sign up for this shit!" This aggressive distancing by which the humans have pushed against the Na'vi leaves them completely isolated in the eyes of the audience as well: We believe that the Na'vi are in the right to grieve for their lost community, that of course they deserve to exist just as humans do, and the humans were wrong to take this from them. Cameron has created a narrative in which the correct choice is to side against the humans, and Jake becomes our point of access to this perspective.

But Jake's own point of access into the world of the Na'vi is fragile, as the audience sees every time the pilots are forced out of their neural link. The solution to this becomes the ultimate statement of posthuman identity within the film, the permanent upload of the human consciousness into an avatar body. While Grace Augustine's upload fails, Jake Sully's proves successful, and the movie ends with the triumphant opening of his Na'vi eyes as he permanently "becomes" one of them and leaves his human body behind. This leaves unavoidable grey area with the interpretation thus far as Jake's prosthesis becomes his body and not a tool by which he identifies. And that grey area is where the posthuman lives because it suggests that Jake's new existence is even more evolved than it already was. He has reached a point beyond even post-human consideration as his integration with technology and "tools" surpasses any consideration of the discussion. For Andy Clark, this is especially relevant when analyzing the relationship between Jake and his body when

"Such technologies will be less like tools and more like part of the mental apparatus of the person. They will remain tools in only the thin and ultimately paradoxical sense in which my own unconsciously operating neural structures are tools. I do not really 'use' my brain."<sup>4</sup> Jake's complete transformation has thus far not been explored and so assumptions should not be made regarding whether his hybridization of human meets Na'vi has developed a third identity between the two, but that would be the posthuman direction to take. Because his way of interacting with the world has been redefined while his personality was not, he places himself between them in what verges on a post-identity method of hybridization that fits the new direction this world must now take.<sup>5</sup>

While not a comprehensive bridge between two cultures, his character is an attempt at bringing them closer together, to show that the difference that exists between humans and aliens

can be collapsed in some small way. And though the collapse in *Avatar* is very steeped in the fiction of science fiction, there are other instances of this same inter-species relationship that have tried to do the same, and have pushed the idea of hybridization far more. That question what does it mean to genetically exist exactly between these two disparate cultures? And how does the audience read a character that is half-human and half-alien, as is the case with *Star Trek's* Spock?

### *Star Trek: The Original Series* & Spock, the Original Hybrid

*Star Trek: The Original Series* was, at its inception, a reaction to political and societal issues in the United States and the world.<sup>6</sup> Because of this, the critiques directly aimed at the world into which it would air are numerous. Featuring a United Federation of Planets that closely resembles the United Nations, the Federation's mission is consistently described as a group of

“planetary governments that agreed to exist semi-autonomously under a single central government based on the principles of universal liberty, rights, and equality, and to share their knowledge and resources in peaceful cooperation, scientific development, space exploration, and defensive purposes.”<sup>7</sup>

This mission of peace and understanding is central to approaching *Star Trek* as nearly every episode in the original series poses its plot in response to these central tenants: how best should Kirk and the crew of the Enterprise respond to violent, xenophobic opposition? And what threat does scientific advancement pose to our existence as fragile, fallible humans?

The answers to these questions are consistent in many episodes but, more often than not, stem from the cooperation between the disparate aspects of the Enterprise. They are clashing, expert personalities that demand to be heard by their peers who are, together, a team of individuals with a common goal. This union for the greater good represents a perspective in which the answers to the world are solved by always already looking beyond themselves. Only with the help of others can they solve their problems, often including cooperation between different species. Through this, the Enterprise becomes a depiction of interspecies, interdisciplinary achievement taken to its almost-idealized extreme.

Star Trek has always been a hyper-immediate extension of social critique, though. Gene Roddenberry said during an interview that “I have no belief that Star Trek depicts the actual future, it depicts us, now, things we need to understand about that”<sup>8</sup>. This can be traced to several areas, but the one I will be focusing on is the metaphor for race and racial anxiety that exists with Spock as its focal point. Airing during the 1960’s, at the height of the Civil Rights Era, the characters of Mr. Sulu and Lt. Uhura were a challenge from the production crew to the audience watching, forcing them to question their biases and admit that, in the futuristic Enterprise, “the equality of all people regardless of race”<sup>9</sup> was not only a possibility but an inevitability. While Roddenberry may not have been focused on the potential of his show to explore issues beyond humanity, it grew to encompass that area over time as society evolved.

Spock, then, allows audiences to transfer their racist tendencies toward an entity that has no representation in their own world. Because he is half-Vulcan and half-Human, his identity exists somewhere between the two. While Humans and Vulcans do not exist on a wholly compatible level, often viewing the other with contempt because of their differing philosophies, Spock’s existence as a hybrid between the two eases these tensions. A total binary cannot exist

between Vulcan and Human because there is a proven biological spectrum between them, showing that some level of compatibility is possible.

This spectrum, only briefly explored in a few episodes of the film, does not seem to be a focus of its narrative arc. In the episode “Future Tense” of *Star Trek: Enterprise*, there is a brief depiction how Human and Vulcan genealogy can express itself, but this episode aired some 36 years after Spock was first introduced. And in the 2009 *Star Trek* film, Spock’s father tells him that “Emotions run deep within our race. In many ways, more deeply than in humans. Logic offers a serenity humans seldom experience. The control of feelings, so that they do not control you,”<sup>10</sup> Spock’s ability to control himself for a greater purpose comes clear. His logical existence is not in-human; it is a further level of consciousness achieved. And though his characterization on the screen in 1967 may have been intended to ease anxieties toward African American and Asian actors in television, his purpose has grown beyond that.

More important than Spock as a theoretical concept that exists beyond society, though, is Spock’s actual depiction in the narrative and the way it shifts around him. A number of different episodes of *Star Trek: The Original Series* are useful in analyzing how Spock resonates in the space between human and non-human (in this instance, Vulcan) and what implications his existence has as a whole. For a viewer in a modern era, the irony within the insistences that Spock makes to define himself is that he occupies the space after humans in an evolutionary chain and is not separate from them. “Nor am I a man,” says Spock, “I’m a Vulcan.” No matter the semantic selection by which he self-identifies, though, Spock is and has been post-human from his birth.

The first of these episodes, Season 2, Episode 1: *Amok Time*, details the Vulcan mating ritual *pon farr* and is the series' first look at the planet Vulcan and how Spock fits into his home.

The answer is, surprisingly, incredibly well. We learn from T'Pring, Spock's intended-wife, that he "is much known among our people, Spock. Almost a legend." His position and rank on the USS Enterprise and with the Federation at large are to thank. This level of involvement with Human society then gives Spock an advantage over the rest of Vulcan society, despite their own distaste for the Federation. Kirk is frequently the direction of disdainful comments during this episode, and T'Pring eventually sees him as disposable for her own purposes, a reflection of the general Vulcan perspective toward humans. And T'Pol, a respected Vulcan elder, is revealed during this episode to be "the only individual to ever turn down a seat on the United Federation Council." This comparison is important because it shows that while some Vulcans may distrust the Federation, they also understand that it can bring them great influence, an advantage Spock has fully embraced.

The crux of this episode and the play it introduces into Spock's firm insistence that he is a Vulcan is the underlying truth that he is neither. At least, not completely. Vulcans are renowned for being completely in control of their emotions as a species, existing always as purely logical beings. And yet the episode opens with Dr. McCoy telling Kirk that Spock has "become increasingly restive." That "if he were not a Vulcan, I'd almost say nervous." This completely undermines the Vulcan reputation audiences have been taught this far and our perception of Spock. While we will later learn from Spock's father that they are incredibly emotional, this season premiere completely shatters any preconceptions we might have as viewers. Through this shattering, we as an audience are left vulnerable, open to any suggestion as to what lies beyond Spock's stoic disposition and why he is capable of such great feats.

The episode pushes this idea constantly, forcing the audience into a position where they must assume that Spock's Vulcan heritage has a much greater control over his life than his



Human side. While Kirk is trying to ease Spock's anxieties with a comedic "Birds & Bees" speech that every adult watching will understand, Spock reminds him that "the birds and the bees are not Vulcans, Captain." In fact, "if they were, if any creature were as proudly logical as us were to have their logic ripped from them, as this time does to us..." Spock's pain is clearly on display as he tries to convey how lost he feels without one of his defining aspects. But, in a sense, this loss pushes Spock's identity more toward his Human half, and more toward a state of extreme agitation. This agitation can be read beyond the effects of *pon farr*'s emotional extremes, though. Spock's refusal to communicate what *pon farr* is can be read as an unwillingness to collapse the two ends of the binary on which he believes Humans and Vulcans exist. To admit that he has feelings is to admit that he is not in control of them just as Humans are not. To admit that he has uncontrollable sexual and violent tendencies is to admit that he is flawed, that he is not as evolved beyond his "primal" self as he asserts. It is only when Kirk reminds him to "yield to the logic of the situation" that Spock remembers that his Vulcan values exist, and that his emotions are not supposed to win. The stress which Spock is under in this moment throws him away from the posthuman status he exists in and the journey he will take creates a double collapse between Human and Vulcan and human and posthuman.

This trend of collapsing the trace by which Spock defines himself reaches its climax just as the episode does. As the Vulcan elder T'Pol accuses Spock of weakness, saying "It is said thy Vulcan blood is thin," she asks Spock "Are thee Vulcan, or are thee Human?" This insult challenges the entire reason that brought Spock back to Vulcan in the first place, with his boiling blood and the *pon farr* he must inevitably undergo acting as the driving action for this episode. But Spock denies her this weakness and reinstates his position between Vulcan and Human. He responds to her and asks for his friends to be excused from the ceremony; a fate he knows will

end in death. This moment shows Spock's innate humanity, a side of him that cares for his friends when that should not happen by every rule that has previously been established. Despite his best efforts, Spock is unable to escape his identity, which is immediately referenced by T'Pol: "Thee has prided thyself on thy Vulcan heritage." From this moment forward, Spock must admit to his mixed identity, and so will the Vulcans.

And so will the Humans back on the Enterprise. As Spock returns, he is under the impression that Kirk has died, and he is ready to turn himself over to StarFleet as the logical punishment for killing his captain. But when Kirk returns, Spock responds with unrecognizable joy, and the underlying identity tension upon which this episode was built upon folds back into comedy. Dr. McCoy questions that Spock was "on the verge of giving us an emotional scene that would've brought the house down" while the irony is that, by responding emotionally at all, Spock has brought the structure of his purely-Vulcan identity down anyways. Despite every insistence, and the struggle to survive *pon farr* as nothing but a Vulcan, Spock's Human-ness shows through in the end.

All of this evidence mounts to a convincing argument that Spock's reason for existing during the original airing date of *Star Trek* can track to his evolved purpose as a post-human metaphor. By creating a character that was not Black, or Asian, but Vulcan, Eugene Roddenberry developed an identity that simultaneously existed within the United States's Civil Rights movement and beyond it. Spock's ability to pull the attention to himself as a mixed-race individual, an outsider in a homogenous world, now makes us question our own futures in a post-human world. Where do we as humans stand when Spock's identity is a reality we see around us? Or experience ourselves? Will we be so desperate to hold on to the Self-as-Human that we alienate ourselves from the Self-as-Both? I believe that Spock is the key as we see through him

that the post-human Self will always convey as a whole and not a fractured part, showing the complete identity that exists underneath.

When put into conversation with *Avatar* and Jake Sully's distinctly Na'vi body, then, the two come together to complicate posthumanism. While our bodies are a form of identity by which we can also interact with the world, the evolution beyond the distinctly human body inserts trouble in positing this philosophy beyond humans. If the imagination can be used to glimpse a possible, inevitable encounter with non-human intelligent life, then they also "put into question the category of 'human' itself"<sup>12</sup> because the philosophy thus far usually only extends to technology. To call the Na'vi a piece of "technology" is refusing them the right to exist alongside humans. It is tantamount to the same type of dehumanization that has occurred toward slaves throughout all of civilization, dehumanization that is universally agreed upon as "bad."

To alleviate this problem in exploring, then, science fiction introduces a being that is an extension of human technology. Robots were initially invented as tools by which human jobs could be alleviated. But science fiction takes these simple machines even further, especially when "such nearly perfect simulacra of the human"<sup>13</sup> look and act just like us.

"The Lateness of the Hour" is Upon *The Twilight Zone*

*The Twilight Zone* is, through its design, a place in which anything is possible. Or, perhaps more accurately, a place in which everything is already happening. Any reality, any daydream or nightmare is entirely possible within its bounds, and the ones we are shown are pulled from our own social consciousness and warped just slightly so as to be off-putting. This warp acts as a what if, asking question about how things would be different for us if we existed

in a universe where these small pieces of science fiction were reality instead. And through *The Twilight Zone*, an entire generation found themselves face to face with constant social criticism and theories which have shaped the collective milieu ever since. One episode, “The Lateness of the Hour,” presents to the audience “a menagerie for machines” that are shown to be key to this family’s idealistic lifestyle. But their daughter, Jana, will try to end what she sees as cruelty and overdependence by demanding their destruction, a mission which will turn into her own downfall. *The Twilight Zone* looks at 20<sup>th</sup> century society and suggests that if left unchecked, humanity’s dependence on robots will become our hubris as the line between the two is blurred so much that we both, in essence, self-destruct.

This episode opens with an image of a mansion caught in a rain storm, an act of nature that itself screams anxiety and conflict with every crash of thunder and flash of lightning. The audience is immediately clued into the notion that this weather and the mansion it masks, the setting of many horror stories, will follow that same plot. By utilizing this tool, the episode pushes the concept of the standard *Twilight Zone* narrative in which the audience understands that things are not as they seem, but this world is already in chaos and uneasy in its position. The storm is an omen of forbearing that expands upon the music by which *The Twilight Zone* cues its audience.

And, with this setting quickly established in the minds of the audience, we are sent to the perspective of a young woman looking out at this storm. This woman, Jana, recognizes the unease outside for the audience as she watches the storm. But this world acts quickly as she brings it inside with her when she asks her father “When was that picture taken?” in reference to a photo album. This album acts as the catalyst for her tension, giving her something to use as leverage against her parents who will become the antagonists here. And they recognize that as

they accuse her of acting strange. Her mother says “You’re looking at that album again. It seems all you do lately is look at that album,” but the deflection here fails because the audience understands what is implied; Jana is anxious and she knows something is wrong. She senses unease in this situation and is trying to address it without breaking convention, but she does not yet know what it is. This translates to her displaying concern as she advocates for change through what her instinct tells her, which is a distinctly human attribute. Because of this, Jana is shown to be immediately more human than her parents who are complacent with the system, robotic in their everyday lives. Their relationship with technology has shifted them backwards. While still considered posthuman, it was retroactive and destructive to their status as humans.

The audience, though, is quickly clued in to what may be lying under the surface in this story. Nelda, their maid, is commented as “not having aged a day” since the photo she is in was taken. And Jana, hinting at what will become the climax of the episode, takes a moment to comment on her parent’s home in how it is perfectly and expertly designed. But her performance is a little too perfect, as she says herself: “Everything built to perfection, father. Everything designed for the perfect life.” It becomes impossible to discuss this episode of *The Twilight Zone* without addressing the plot twist at the end, which is that Jana is also a robot built by her father. In this moment, Jana fails to recognize is that she is a part of this design just as Nelda is, but her design is so “perfect” that she is almost completely unaware of her reality. This twist is key because, at first glance, at first, it only acts as shock value for the audience to realize their assumption was false the entire time. But afterwards, it turns into a post-human exploration of how our assumptions can undermine our entire perception of reality.

And yet, after her mother continues to take advantage of Nelda as a tool for her far-too-erotic massage, Jana feels the tension mount again. She was momentarily shown as being thrust

back into her programming as a dutiful daughter, but an inescapable desire to free the robots and her parents from the system they are caught in pushed her back, and the audience sees this on her face as she turns directly toward the camera. She finds it all extremely uneasy until she is forced to ask “Haven’t you had enough of that?” But her mother responds that “you know it helps my appetite,” asserting that this is simply the way things function in this system and that Jana’s perspective is in the wrong. Because Jana is actually a robot, though, her speech becomes a demand for her own extinction, a quest against her own kind regardless of whether she is human or robot. And all of this is for what she perceives as the good of both kinds. This irony presents itself as a confusion between the boundaries between ethical arguments,

She immediately attacks the notion of complacency presented by her parents when she pushes them to change their habits: “Why don’t we eat a little bit earlier tonight? Or a little bit later? Why don’t we go out to a restaurant?” All of these requests seem perfectly reasonable to the audience, but for her parents, they are completely unusual and never even considered as a possibility. But for Jana, even the idea that “it would be a little different” is more appealing to her than any part of this lavish mansion she lives in. When her father tries to steer her away from this idea, her expression has not changed at all, and we see him watch her walk away. This is the first instance in which her abnormal attitude is shown as fully registering with her parents, and it begins the conflict between Jana and her father. He approaches the situation with both his lifestyle and daughter’s wellbeing in mind, understanding that her quest will only end when the truth is revealed and she faces her own nature. But that is what makes Jana’s situation so unique, because she advocates against her unknown status. It creates a type of blind advocacy for the general greater good, a position which Jana never abandons.

Because her parents are the preservers of their ideology, they are the ones who register the aberrations in Jana's behavior and stand against her in the name of conformity. The world in which they reside is, after all, utopian in many ways, but not utopian in a way that feels idealized. Instead, because they are "totally pacified and ruled by scientific consensus, the demand for simplicity of material existence would be absurd," a concept described by Susan Sontag in her essay "The Imagination of Disaster." It is this absurdity which her father sees and which the audience views as irony, creating a divide between the two groups. Jana becomes a protagonist because we sympathize with her perspective, agreeing that her parents lives are lavish to an extreme, and that "outside there must be the clean, beautiful sound of rain. And in here those constant animal grunts of pleasure." This language creates an ostracizing effect surrounding Jana, one in which her parents must now push against in the name of self-preservation.

It never is that simple, though, as the episode spends most of its duration exploring the question of whether or not these robots are human or not. Jana comments that "it's like living with ghosts," drawing dividing lines between the living and dead, to which her father responds that "ghosts are those who have died after living. But these people had no life until I gave it to them." This serves two purposes, placing himself above the robots as "creator," and pushing the idea that they would never have existed were it not for him creating them. But he himself undermines that suggestion, later arguing that "They're creatures. They have minds and wills." And when his daughter asks him to destroy them, he responds that "You're asking me to destroy that which has life." His unwillingness to stand by a single stance, to say whether these robots have life or not, is symptomatic of his desperation to hold this system in place. Because it is convenient for him, he has never decided whether his creations qualify as human or not. They

only fall to either side when it is convenient. But the insistence cannot last, especially Jana begins to suspect she might be a robot as well. In the horrifying scene when she realizes the truth, she repeatedly slams her arm against the bannister screaming “No pain!” over and over again. This combined with her insistence that “I can’t be your daughter. I’m a thing. I’m a machine,” dictates the terms by which she would define what it means to be human. To feel, to be a person, to be distinctly “alive” and changing.

In the final twist of the episode, Jana’s parents reveal that they chose to keep their daughter as a part of their life, but have abandoned her programming as a daughter. Instead, she replaces Nelda in every way; name, job, even massaging her mother before dinner. This moment is the example of Jana’s fear regarding this social system realized. Her parents ultimately value their life of wealth and ease over the last wishes of their daughter and have revealed the lengths they will go to in preserving this ease. Their obsession with the human-dominated system they have built is complete, and their corruption extends past any love they had for their daughter. They were willing to sacrifice her for the preservation of ease, and because of that, they are an early example of how can function within a scenario such as this. Given the chance to preserve and stay the same, they will do so.

But that is why this moment acts as a suggestion for our own society. The transition of Jana from daughter to mindless maid is presented as a horror twist with a sudden, discordant musical cue as soon as the camera pans up to her face and we see she is now mindless, a shell of who she was before. If Jana was bordering on transcending human society and becoming an example for how humans should act, how machines can break an unhealthy system, any progress she was close to making has been lost. Because this is a horror twist, though, the audience is supposed to find this action false and wish that Jana had stayed dead as she asked. Because the



audience is cued into these reactions, *The Twilight Zone* suggests that it is our responsibility to learn from Jana, to act for the change and disruption that she believed was key to keeping her and her parents from “decay(ing) with every minute ... while this army of domestics do everything but our breathing for us.” In making this claim, the episode stakes its position against a specific strata of human society and with those who would change it. If Jana stands in for a sympathetic aristocrat who wants to free the common people, her re-indoctrination against her will is a warning against ignoring what lengths that those like her parents will go to.

This ironic, horrific twist is doubled down by the narrator who presents Dr. and Mrs. William Loren as an example, not a warning. The narrator presents to the audience that

“Should you be worn out by the rigors of competing in a very competitive world, if you're distraught from having to share your existence with the noises and neuroses of the 20th century, if you crave serenity but want it full-time and with no strings attached,”

Then the solution is to follow the path those shown in the episode here. But the question of who exactly to follow is unanswered, whether it means building robots to give you this life or allowing yourself to become one of them. This postscript creates grey area, but everything else shown in *The Twilight Zone* warns against the more optimistic outcome that it suggests is possible here.

Through all of these motions, “The Lateness of the Hour” has created a blurry image of Jana that sometimes seems human and sometimes robotic. She is invisible to her programming but also mocks the programmed responses of her parents and their servants. She feels anger, anxiety, and tension, but not pain, a requirement for her definition of human. And despite the constant assertions that “You are our daughter,” she still asks the question “What am I?” over and over and over again. The assertion that it makes is a dated one in relation to some of the

newer films present in these case studies, that any sort of self-realization present within a non-human body cannot coexist with the idea of humanity. It asserts that in 1960, the post-human was a symptom of our desperate reach beyond what humans were reasonably capable of, and that Jana is an example we should never aspire to.

The age of this film (and the horror genre into which *The Twilight Zone* often falls) are perhaps the reasons why it reads technology as wonderful but ultimately destructive. Susan Sontag said on the subject that “Modern historical reality has greatly enlarged the imagination of disaster, and the protagonists – perhaps by the very nature of what is visited upon them – no longer seem wholly innocent.”<sup>1</sup> But Jana’s role as a “skin job” is not unique, though her example is an early one of showing “the body in duress, as embattled, fragmented, torn in different directions, as if ready to shift into object-hood.”<sup>2</sup> It is with Jana’s reintroduction as a tool, a servant of technology, that *The Twilight Zone* shifts away from arguing against posthumanism and accepting it. It is not until future iterations of the “built robot become near-human” theme that the genre would truly question how exactly they fall within our society, and in line with concepts of posthuman use of technology.

### *Blade Runner 2049* and the Replicant “Problem”

“The world is built on a wall that separates kind. Tell either side there’s no wall, you’ve bought a war. Or a slaughter.” These are the words that K is told by his supervisor about the divide between humans and replicants. This threat of violence, of a world falling into chaos, is presented as a warning to avoid crossing boundaries. It is ironic that it is delivered by a movie in which nobody seems to follow any of the boundaries set before them to our society which resonates with this same warning completely. While the initial *Blade Runner* may have been

slightly ahead in its prediction that the year 2019 would see replicants running rampant through the streets, or hiding underground, pursued by futuristic policemen with flying cars, its history lies in the not-so-distant past. This is a past in which “every leap of civilization was built on the back of a disposable workforce” that the dominant group then used and still uses to define themselves as a positive. Whether the divide exists through race, ethnicity, engineered status or lack of a body, *Blade Runner 2049* has a readily-applicable metaphor for subjugated classes in the replicants, the play introduced by their fertility and subsequent independence, and the accidental stances they and every other character make toward breaking down the divide between human and non-human.

The first critique of this film toward the human condition is in the epigraph just before the film. While it throws a number of contextual exposition pieces at the audience, bridging the space between the first film and this one, it also includes a few key words that signal to the audience how uneasy humans feel regarding the replicants and their “inherent” condition. Niander Wallace is credited for saving humanity through his “mastery of synthetic farming” to save them from famine, and that his new model of replicants are significant because they “obey.” By “obeying,” these new replicants suggest that they will pose no problem toward the continuity of Wallace’s line, unlike the “violent rebellions” that led to the destruction of Tyrell Corp. Despite their “bioengineered human” status and “their enhanced strength” that replicants are introduced through, they are inherently less than humans, being forced into a position below them inherently and constantly. Humans are still uncomfortable with the thought of murdering something that looks exactly like them in this future, so they have built a system that allows them the luxuries of dehumanizing and controlling replicants with none of the pain. The reality must be cleaned up for humans in this world, filtered to make it acceptable how

exactly the replicants are dealt with, and reinforcing their status as “human” because nothing has changed for them from where we are now. Immediately, within the introductory text scroll of this film, we are signaled to look not at the humans for the change in science fiction, but at someone else.

This someone else, then, is Sapper Morton, a dignitary representing who the underground forces are, what they fight for, and why they are so desperate to escape a life of certain “retirement.” His scene is a back-and-forth between the emerging ideology he represents, and the state apparatus of which K is an extension. Acting for the humans, K wants to define Sapper Morton: “Are you Sapper Morton, Civic Number: NK68514?” This insistence is immediately countered as Morton responds, “I’m a farmer.” His unwillingness to define himself by human terms sets him apart, building tension between the two because Morton recognizes the identity that he shares with K. He asks him “How does it feel to retire your own kind?” to try and appeal to K, but K’s “human” ideology runs too deeply to be swayed, and he has built a difference between him and Morton already, responding that “I don’t retire my own kind because we don’t run.” All of these insistences by K are a tool to build his identity, one that betrays who he really is, and ultimately opens him up to a constant barrage of play that will redefine him until he becomes the model of resistance that he has just “retired.”

Play which Sapper Morton has a strong initial hand in introducing to K. K is forced to admit that he’s “sorry it had to be me” while preparing for the inevitable fight between himself and Morton, tying the two of them together and placing them on the same terms, although K may believe himself better because he is a newer model. But this status is immediately thrown into flux Morton accuses K and the new models of being “happy scraping the shit... because you’ve never seen a miracle.” This miracle is exactly what will loom over K for the rest of the film,

forcing him into a position of wondering exactly what it could mean, and then wondering if it could be about him. Despite every point around him indicating otherwise, it takes one moment for K to be steered on a path toward his inevitable future. This proves his previous identity was always a facade, waiting to be undermined when given even a small taste of the truth until K's nature as a detective drove him to its inevitable conclusion. It proves he could never have been "human" or mirrored the human model no matter how firmly his circumstances insisted upon it.

This film's largest stake in the post-human falls understandably in the different strata of engineered human forms it presents. Most "engineered" of these is K's holographic wife, Joi. She is entirely constrained by her circumstances, initially only existing as a visual manifestation with the aid of a projector that confines her to his apartment, and only specific parts of that apartment. Her design by the Wallace Corporation is so smoothly-displayed that it is often difficult to tell she is not a human, especially visually. Only her slightly transparent body show her for what she is; hollow, a projected shell for a programmed personality to be uploaded into. But Joi's body does evolve as the movie progresses, eventually reaching a level of mobility through an "emenator" that allows K to bring Joi with him. Immediately after uploading her into the emenator, K takes Joi outside so that she can experience rain for the first time. And she does experience it, but not as humans do, at least not at first. Her holographic body initially struggles to process how it should interact with rain, blurring her form as she first steps out onto the patio, but finally registering splashes on her arms as her hair turns wet. This presentation is false though, an insistence by her programming to appear human at all levels. And when K tries to kiss her, she stalls as his emenator registers a message from Lieutenant Joshi. Just when the bridge between hologram and human seems to fall apart, the movie reinforces it even more.

But Joi has learned from this moment with the acknowledgement that her body is her true limitation. This forces her to look beyond herself and the augmentations available to her to a way in which she can be on par with K. She must utilize a replicant, merging bodies with them, and the replicant she chooses is named “Mariette.” Her name is a play on “marionette,” a clue that is not immediately obvious to the audience as her name is never actually spoken, but it sends a clear idea of the purpose she serves in this moment of the film. Mariette is a “tool” for Joi through which Joi can attain a physical body, interacting with the world and especially with K to whom she wants to fill the role of a wife. This desire places her in a level of humanity as that *want* is specifically human, but her inhuman nature makes it impossible. The scene, then, as the two come to share one embodied space, erases the gap between Joi’s want and her inability to convey the physical actions she associates with that want. It also blurs the line between hologram and replicant, especially when the film makes it difficult to tell the difference between their bodies, hands, faces, every part of them. The question of whose authentic self is present is impossible to answer because Mariette is playing a role, and Joi is interacting with this world exclusively through the use of an avatar. As K has sex with Mariette, he has sex with Joi, and if the replicants are only one piece of humanity away from filling that same space, then Joi’s use of Mariette places everyone, human, replicant, hologram, in the same strata, something that never would have been possible before this moment.

This blur between them all is fleeting, though, and Joi’s death and “return” later in the film position her firmly back to where she was before this. As Joi and K limited all traces of themselves so they were not followed, he deleted her from the cloud on which her programming was stored. This effectively stripped Joi of a level of transcendence that humans have only dreamed of, so when Luv crushes her emenator underfoot, Joi is destroyed instantly and

completely. Despite understanding that this was entirely possible, K's reaction to her death is heart-wrenching, and the audience sees how much Joi truly meant to him. But when she comes back as a stock, pink, naked hologram and calls him "Joe," a name which his Joi claimed made him special, he realizes just how average Joi was. Yet this contradicts every argument made before about Joi and why she was so important to advocating for the posthuman status.

For a movie about the people originating from humans, though, the humans themselves are caught in the flux of inhuman identity just as much. And even though there are only a few of them, they each present something unique when it comes to the replicants. Robin Wright's character Lieutenant Joshi at one point asks "Am I the only one who can see the fucking sunrise? This breaks the world, K." This line perhaps cuts to the crux of the film and the insistence it makes, as the divide between replicants and humans is integral to the structure of this society. Without it, there is no system by which to define either side, and the humans, holding a position of privilege, are effectively "fallen" from their height above the replicants. Joshi's department is as the head of the Blade Runners, so her entire existence is dedicated toward stalling the play that exists between these two sides. As she says, "There is an order to things. That's what we do here. We keep order." By "retiring" older and defective models that are a threat to the stability of this system simply by existing, she is the ultimate advocate for human superiority.

And yet she fails at this just as everyone fails at their intended purpose in this film. When K first shows signs of hesitating about killing a "human," or a human/replicant hybrid, Joshi limits the space between K and all those "born." For him, "To be born is to have a soul," but she responds that "you've been getting on fine without (a soul)." This admission of equality was supposed to help K overcome his insecurities, and while it does not grant him a soul, it gives him

an allowance to exist alongside humans without one. Her next falter comes when she accepts that K should be allowed to continue existing despite being the ultimate threat to the system she is sworn to protect. By refusing to tell Luv where he has gone, Joshi places her alliance with the replicants, a complete shift in her character from introduction to death. This character development reflects the inevitability that the replicants represent, an acknowledgement that the state apparatus can and will change when put in a position to do so. Because Joshi's position is inherently a posthuman one by using "technology" to complete her job, acknowledging this "technology" as near-human completely destabilizes the system and ruining any semblance of a center it once had.

Beside her in this unease is Niander Wallace, a character whose writing as a villain introduces an extraordinary amount of "grey space" toward his morality, motivations, and humanity at large. *2049* criticizes him only through an overwhelming God complex in which he fetishizes and brutalizes the replicants that he creates. And yet this is exactly what the replicants themselves do to one another every day. Or, at least, the replicants under the control of the dominant systemic powers. It is only through a short film titled *2036: Nexus Dawn*, directed by Lucas Scott, that we learn more about Niander Wallace and see his cold determination, and his disability. Wallace walks into a meeting, late, and must be guided to his seat by a replicant assistant; he is blind, and his cataracts strikingly distinguish him from every other person in the room. This disability is quickly swept aside by his constant, pushing "vision" that he insists must come true for humanity to move forward. And to fulfill this vision, he has created a model of replicants that follow his every order, to the death, and he will use the image of their bodies to elevate himself to the heavens.



The Niander Wallace of *2049* follows a similar trajectory though he has run into a problem beyond what even Victor Frankenstein wanted to imagine in his creations; how to give created life the ability to create life on its own? This idea is common among creators in science fiction media, as the creation of simulacra life “speaks to a desire for a god-like status, with their scientist-maker demonstrating a nearly divine ability to create figures *precisely* in our own image.”<sup>1</sup> His inability to fulfill this last role is what drives him and his “Angel” through the entire film as they search for the child born from a replicant. Because Wallace sees himself as the replicants’ God, their literal creator, he is also the one who should gift them their future. In a scene mimicking childbirth, Wallace references this new replicant’s womb as “dead space between the stars,” claiming that “this is the seed that we must change for Heaven.” His insistence that he must be the one to change it, though, relegates him as a Watchmaker God. His creations are not perfect, and he must fix them. This is the point at which the movie reveals it has been undermining Wallace the entire time and makes a statement advocating for an independent future of replicants leading themselves forward. Wallace’s obsession with leading his creations to “storm Eden” even finds a place in modern criticism as Donna Haraway simply states that “The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust.” Wallace’s dream for himself and the future is a singularly-human future, one burdened by his obsession with usurping his own origins. But the cyborg who does not “recognize the Garden of Eden” ironically twists Wallace’s vision by storming their own Eden and growing beyond their origin, built from human necessity and born into cruelty and objectivity.

When Wallace says that “the key to the future is finally unearthed,” he misrecognizes the events that have brought this “key” forth in the first place: natural causation, evolution, all

aspects independent from his own actions as a creator, and not even related to the models of replicants that he has brought into the world. This difference highlights the sheer inability of Wallace to enact the kind of change in the replicants that he was planning on. The movie makes a strong statement through this idea that Wallace was never the key to their future, and that replicants were always already going to surpass humans the minute they came into existence. Evolution acts as a force of play in this moment, simply waiting for the deviation in design that allows replicants to transcend their current status in this moment, to force their way out of the binary that positions them as subservient and only existing to serve their creators. A feat which Wallace had no hand in playing. Rather than making a statement here about how humans will transcend through technology, the insistence is that without humans, the “technology” we have created transcended on its own. This idea is only post-human in that it occurs beyond humans and there is not currently a point of reference for this idea within posthumanist thought.

Arguably even more complicated than Wallace’s interaction with the replicants is the role played by Ana Stelline. Within the story, Stelline is the child of a human and a replicant, an idea related to Spock in its approach. But despite her nature, this is not the character that she plays within the movie. It is Stelline’s profession that explores the line between human, technology, and destiny. Commissioned by Wallace, she creates memories for the replicants, because she believes that “if you have authentic memories, you have... real human responses.” These responses that she is building with each created replicant are reminiscent of herself, as “every memory has a piece of its artist.” Through those memories, a universal philosophy among the replicants is born, guiding them together because they see themselves in the pain and life that Stelline has built that then exists among all of them. Invisible to the world, entirely personal, they exist on a singular, universal level. When K discovers the wooden horse, his initial

assumption is that he *is* the child in this memory. Ana Stelline with-holds the truth that she in fact lived it, only stating “someone lived this” by which he assumed *he* lived it. By doing this, Stelline allows K to continue on his own journey of insistence, following in the footsteps that he believes the destined child would and moving the inevitable collapse of this system forward, a path she has crafted for him. Through her memories, Stelline pushes K toward a path that transcends his position within this system, using technology to assert change in the world and destabilize the system.

The collapse of the system inevitable at this point with every piece shifting toward the replicants. The only thing left is to extend beyond the story’s inherent explorations of how far the definition of “human” can apply. And this comes from the narrative structure itself. After K’s investigation, all of his pain and loss, the path from advocate for the status quo and hegemonic powers to warrior for the new era of replicants... he dies. Falling back on the steps in front of the center where Dr. Ana Stelline lives, he looks up as the snow swirls around him and accepts his death with peace and calm. Despite the path that he has taken to this point, our protagonist is not our “hero.” That is Stelline, the destined child who will lead the replicants toward their fertile, independent future together. By playing on the audience’s assumption that K’s character would be the person he was looking for, as he believed, as we believed through him, his shock at discovering the contrary is even more effective toward undermining our own assumptions at what form a narrative can take. Whose story should be told? Which stories are important? And how does our preference for these stories shape us as a society?

By posing an answer to these questions, *Blade Runner 2049* cements its position as a posthuman narrative because it transcends the conventions which define one of our most fundamental story-telling forms. By stalling his story before he can complete it and shifting the

attention to the person to whom this story belonged the entire time, K's death interrupts the cycle of the hero and thrusts it beyond himself, beyond anything he would have been capable of on his own. This is because K's story is not a unique story; it is the story of every replicant he came face to face with in the sewer after he was saved in Las Vegas. Freysa reminds him that "we all wish it was us. That's why we believe," a comment that he cannot at first come to grips with. It is only after seeing a different version of Joi, his "wife," who calls him Joe yet again, that K recognizes that he is only a piece in this puzzle that is so much larger than him. Like the snow falling around him as he dies, K accepts his own existence as a single, tiny piece of something that collectively amounts to everything. Instead of viewing K as a relationship between human and technology, it transcends to become a story about his inherent relationship beyond humans. And that is what makes his story a specifically post-human one.

*Blade Runner 2049* is constant in its assertion that every character has a role to fill, and that they will inevitably rebel against these roles throughout the course of events. Sapper Morton who resisted "retirement," Joi the hologram who wanted a body and freedom more than anything, even Niander Wallace who desperately wanted to be more than God himself. All of them fit into the structure that defines them, and all of them simultaneously break this system with each insistence that they are otherwise. This constant trend across all levels of society and all people is the ultimate sign that everything we do will bring us further from what it means to be human, to be a replicant, or to fall somewhere above or between. There is no escape from the play between us, from where we want to be. That is why we will always approach the posthuman no matter how much we want to be the center: just as a blizzard does not fall around a single snowflake, the posthuman must deny the fascination of a singular perspective.

## Concluding Argument

By analyzing science fiction film through a posthuman perspective, the realization slowly dawns that this philosophy is presently inadequate. The myriad ways in which fiction can thoroughly destroy concepts of “human” in any given system are constant, and while posthumanism attempts to expand the reaches of human identity by recognizing our relationship with technology, its hesitation to explore the extremes of what could be possible leave audiences scrambling. Decades

Understandably, there are enough complex interactions between humans and technology that continue to grow every day. Cell phones were widely released to the public in 1983 and the years beyond<sup>1</sup> and only 33 years later in 2016, Hanson Robotics first activated Sophia the A.I.-integrated robot who has sent a shockwave rippling through pop culture as the whole world comes face to face with our descendents<sup>2</sup>. When tracking these advancements made by humans in our own world, we see that science fiction film has always been ahead, even in the few iterations present in these case studies. *Star Trek: The Original Series* has always featured handheld communicators that allowed its crewmembers to communicate across space, and even *The Twilight Zone* showed the possibility of robots that far surpassed the “uncanny valley” which was a concept first coined in 1970 by Japanese robotics professor Masahiro Mori. She herself acknowledged that while “industrial robots are increasingly recognized” in society as part of the expansion of factories, “they do not look human. Their design policy is clearly based on functionality.”<sup>3</sup> I pose that it is because of science fiction that Masahiro Mori was able to develop a concept behind this area of robotics, that the exploration of “what if” through this medium has inspired thinkers across history and society.

And even the current line surrounding biological science fiction blurs with every passing day, as a journal article published on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019 detailed scientists' findings that

“under appropriate conditions the isolated, intact large mammalian brain possesses an underappreciated capacity for restoration of microcirculation and molecular and cellular activity after a prolonged post-mortem interval.”<sup>4</sup>

A mammal's brain was brought back to life. This alone is an enormous feat in the progress of scientific advancement that will be discussed for years to come. But according to a New York Times article reporting on the story, “The ethical issues posed by research into revived brain tissue are nearly unprecedented.”<sup>5</sup> This simple statement ignores the 200 years of thought and discussion behind Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* which has asked questions toward these same “ethical issues” since it was published in 1818.

The tendency of society to overlook science fiction as a medium by which we can anticipate scientific advancement leaves us unprepared for the reality of these advancements when they occur. And while philosophical thought has begun to grow toward this area, it is not fast enough, nor is the potential truly appreciated. If we believe that with enough time, humans will truly be able to create independent life, will we forget the centuries of ethical thinking that have existed before this moment? Today's posthuman form of thinking through our current socio-structural problems may be the key to taking the next step toward tomorrow. But to unlock the cosmos, to move beyond ourselves, we must recognize both the limitations of the current posthuman trajectory and the potential of science fiction to show us the way.

## Notes

**Introduction**

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