

Posthumanism: An Introduction
Professor Pramod K. Nayar
Department of English
The University of Hyderabad
Lecture 05
Lec 05: Popular Posthumanism

This is Pramod Nair of the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad. Here we continue our lessons on posthumanism, and today's session will be devoted to what we can think of as arguably the most visible component of post-human theory, the post-humanist school of thought, and expressions of these. And that is what we will call popular post-humanism. You can think of any number of novels, popular films, and TV series that have dealt with a range of post-humanist themes and concerns, problematized several of them, and asked ethical and moral questions about them. And you know that

(Refer slide Time 00:41)

The slide features a list of works on the left side, including *Ex Machina*, *Blade Runner*, *Blade Runner 2049*, *Minority Report*, *The Terminator (series)*, *Avengers (series)*, *Lucy*, *Ex Machina*, *AI*, *Transcendence*, *Limitless*, *Her*, *The Matrix (series)*, *Replicas*, and *Never Let Me Go*. On the right side, there is a video feed of Professor Pramod K. Nayar. The slide is branded with the NPTEL logo in the top right corner and has a teal header and footer with the title 'Popular Posthumanism'.

Many of these originated in the 80s when the first wave of popular representations of the cyborg emerged in the form of the now-cult works, Arnold Schwarzenegger playing the cyborg in the Terminator series. It appears Even before that, in the fiction of a writer we unfortunately don't read anymore Philip K. Dick whose *Minority Report* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* provided the basis for any number of hugely successful films. and adaptations. We now have more and more films of that variety: *Blade Runner*, *Blade Runner Sequel*, *AI*, *Transcendence*, *Ex Machina*, and numerous others.

We have Lucy, the Matrix series, which are also versions of it, and Replicas. Then, of course, the clone texts, which would include Never Let Me Go and others. So, in other words, there is a vast variety of popular culture representations of the post-human. They are not identified within the popular culture lexicon as post-human, but if you look at the thematic concerns and ideological positions in these films and texts,

By which I mean, of course, fiction as well as the film versions. You will see that some of the concerns we have been talking about and will be talking about in the next sessions, next classes, are to be found in these cultural texts. The main thing about popular posthumanism in literature and in films is that it focuses on corporeal fluidity, which is to say the fluidity of the body. So it's interested in blurred identities and lives that are a crossover between the machine and the human. And the corporeal fluidity, the blurred identities.

(Refer slide Time 02:41)

Popular posthumanism in films and literature focuses on corporeal-physiological fluidity, blurred identities, machinic lives. These consist of representations of:

- Organic-inorganic hybrids of human and the machine and bionic bodies,
- Digitized personae with disembodied status,
- Trans-species bodies of human-animal hybrids,
- Artificial Beings,
- Enhanced humans

In most of these popular representations, the posthuman is a hypothetical, *in-the-future* being whose abilities are way ahead of the humans'. Popular posthumanism's principal interest lies in exploring how a future would emerge from contemporary technology – although the attitude is one of fear and anxiety.



Popular Posthumanism

are, as we know, central to how post-humanists visualize the human itself, that we share borders with the machine, we share borders with the non-human, we share borders with the non-living. And the modified bodies, the advanced, quote, enhanced bodies, primarily to do with Schwarzenegger's representation in Terminator and, of course, Robocop and other texts, are It means that we can look at three or four principal thematic representations of post-humanism in the popular cultural imagination, and that is the organic-inorganic hybrids of human and the machine, bionic bodies, the digitized personalities, where the personality exists primarily in digital form with a disembodied status, then the trans-species bodies of human beings, and animal hybrids, artificial beings which would be clowns and others, never let me go will figure prominently in all these narratives, and enhanced humans. In most of the popular representations listed here,

the post-human is projected as an in-the-future creature, hypothetical, speculative, whose abilities, whose personalities are way ahead of the humans.

So the interest in popular posthumanism is to speculate on the kind of human hybridized trans-species, corporeally fluid, of the kind of human who will emerge in the future. Who, like I said, will be hybrid with machines or will be a trans-species with other non-human life forms perhaps. So, the popular post-humanist concern is with the future of human evolution. How does the human look forward to the next stage in evolution? So, this is

Popular posthumanism's principal focus. And it has a specific interest in certain kinds of technologies. You may recall that we began our lessons on the context of posthumanism by looking at the forms of technological innovation that post humanists are concerned with. Their favorite technologies for documenting and speculating on human futures and posthuman lives are It's a short list.

Artificial intelligence. Cloning and stem cell or biotech engineering. Cryogenics, which is the freezing of the body and then reviving it later. We spoke about this the other day when we referred to Nick Bostrom and the transhumanists. Bionic implants and prostheses.

(Refer slide Time 05:57)



Popular posthumanism's pet technologies include

- AI
- Cloning and stem-cell engineering
- Cryogenics
- Bionic implants and prosthesis
- Alien technologies far in advance of humans'

etc



Popular Posthumanism



Alien technologies which might be well ahead of those of humans, which, of course, is the source of considerable sci-fi horror that there might come a race, a species from a distant planet whose technological advances are way beyond what we can even imagine, and if so, would those aliens, creatures, ETs, extraterrestrials pose a threat to human

civilization on Earth? This is very speculative fiction for many people. So what we can think of as alien technology. So let's start with the

(Refer slide Time 07:03)



The cyborg in popular posthumanism is a liminal creature, between the human and the machine, neither human nor machine, both human and machine.



The cyborg disturbs the taxon, the classificatory systems – the hybrid is a source of anxiety because it looks human, but is not fully so.

In popular posthumanism, it represents the extinction of the human.

A certain nostalgia for the lost human is also present alongside an anxiety directed at the cyborg.

In many cases, a humanization of the human is visible (eg. The *Terminator* films, *Robocop*, etc)

Popular Posthumanism



the most popular version even within the popularity of the post-human and that would be the cyborg or a cybernetic organism which is the original science term which becomes amalgamated into cyborg, cybernetic organism. The cyborg in popular or populist post-humanism is a border creature. It is somewhere between the human and the machine. It's neither human nor machine. It's both human and machine.

The cyborg is somebody or something. It depends on which ideological position you take. Do you want to classify the human as a cyborg or the cyborg as a human? Or do you want to classify the cyborg as just a machine? That is a certain kind of ideological position to take in post-humanism.

But the cyborg is one that disturbs the taxonomic system, disturbs the classificatory system. The point is the cyborg looks like a human but is not fully human. The cyborg might behave like a human but is not human. And the anxiety that the cyborg induces in humanity is because not that it is different from us but that it is a little too much, too familiar and too alike in terms of its resemblance to the humans. Which means to say that

A creature made clearly of just metal and looks like a machine is less threatening than a machine that looks like a human. And I want this distinction to be underscored so I'll repeat it. A chair which is motorized and behaves like a living creature. A particular alien monster like you see in the film *Alien* Those are one kind of threat, one kind of monstrosity.

But they are very clearly not human. They are very evidently strange, bizarre creatures. Those induce dread and anxiety, yes. But what is more frightening is to look at a creature that is very similar to the human but is not quite human. So the cyborg is one that induces anxiety not because it looks like a completely alien creature, but because it looks like us.

It looks like a human. So the more parallels that you can see, the more affinity that you can see between the cyborg creature and the human means more anxiety levels. For popular humanists and post-humanists and for popular critiques of this, The cyborg is the marker of the end of the human. It marks an extinction of the human race and in many cases you see a certain nostalgia for humanity which is lost, humanity which is dead, which is extinct.

So the cyborg is an index, a symbol of considerable cultural and social anxiety that the human is disappearing. And therefore, there is a little bit of nostalgia that humans, as we know them, are disappearing. And as a way of dealing with this threat, you discover in many of these popular texts a re-humanization of the cyborg, which usually means a cyborg who has sentiments. The Terminator series initiated this theme where, over a period of its sequels, the cyborg, Arnold Schwarzenegger, eventually begins to exhibit human-like qualities whether concern for the child or the woman, questions of care, the emotional idea of compassion, and things like that. So in a way of countering the

anxiety about the disappearing human, the popular film or popular novel speaks and represents a rehumanization of the human itself so that you feel the threat is a little less intense. The cyborg and the popular representations of the cyborg focus on disembodiment. Disembodiment is and please recall what we have looked at here in terms of transhumanism: the desire to move beyond the body, beyond the biological body, to transcend its weaknesses, as we discussed when we talked about transhumanism. Bionic beings, prosthetic memory, humans with weird kinds of attachments and technological advancements are bionic; they have implants, and they represent the secret human desire to transcend the limits of the human form, to overcome the weaknesses of the human form, so that the human is no longer restricted to or limited by his or her body.

(Refer slide Time 11:26)



Disembodiment in popular posthumanism is the desire for moving beyond/transcending the body. Bionic beings and prosthetic memory in humans are articulations of this desire

Disembodiment is the repetition of the Enlightenment dichotomy of mind *versus* body where the primacy is given to the mind.

In the cyberpunk of William Gibson, people are reduced to pure consciousness as their memories and traits are digitally preserved while their bodies wither away

Popular Posthumanism



Disembodiment, as I mentioned in the other class on transhumanism, simply reiterates the Enlightenment dichotomy of mind versus body, where the primacy is given to the mind. And in cyberpunk fiction, initiated by William Gibson in his early novel *Neuromancer*, which coined the term cyberspace, Gibson did it on a typewriter when there was no concept of something called the internet or cyberspace. He defined it. Cyberpunk fiction and cyberpunk film are particularly fond of the disembodiment theme.

Where they reduce or modify the human exclusively into consciousness. And the body is secondary to it. The body is something that can collapse, erode, and even waste away. But the consciousness remains. So it gives primacy to consciousness as being at the core of the human.

As being a human. This is what humans are. And this is important because, as I said, it reiterates the Enlightenment ideology of the primacy of the human mind over the human body. Now, the next theme is artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence in films of different kinds: we have *Lucy*, we have *AI*, we have *Transcendence*, and, of course, the *Avengers* series.

(Refer slide Time 13:56)

The AI in films as varied as *AI*, *Lucy*, *Transcendence* and the *Avengers* series, suggest, initially a techno-utopia which quickly turns into a nightmare where the AI move beyond human control.

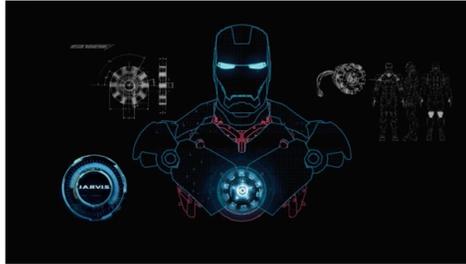
In *Lucy*, the AI develops telekinesis and other powers while also becoming emotionless due to the drugs in her system. She becomes the network, the system.

Ultron in the *Avengers* series rather than serve the human race decides that it/he shall destroy the world.

In the *Matrix* series the AIs and computers have already taken over the world.

The fear of the created overwhelming the creator is the stuff of popular posthumanism, originating from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Dystopias often represent automatons and AI beings in control or in the hands of totalitarian regimes.



Popular Posthumanism

These are attempts to decide, to determine Whether the arrival of artificial intelligence creates a technological utopia or whether this utopia will turn into a dystopia, where all the ideals and ideas about perfection, efficiency, and productivity are inverted because of what the AI sets out to do. The AI in these films usually initiates a collapse. And the conditions of life and existence turn into a nightmare because the artificial intelligence proceeds to the point where it is no longer under human control. And this is the stuff of scientific and cultural nightmares.

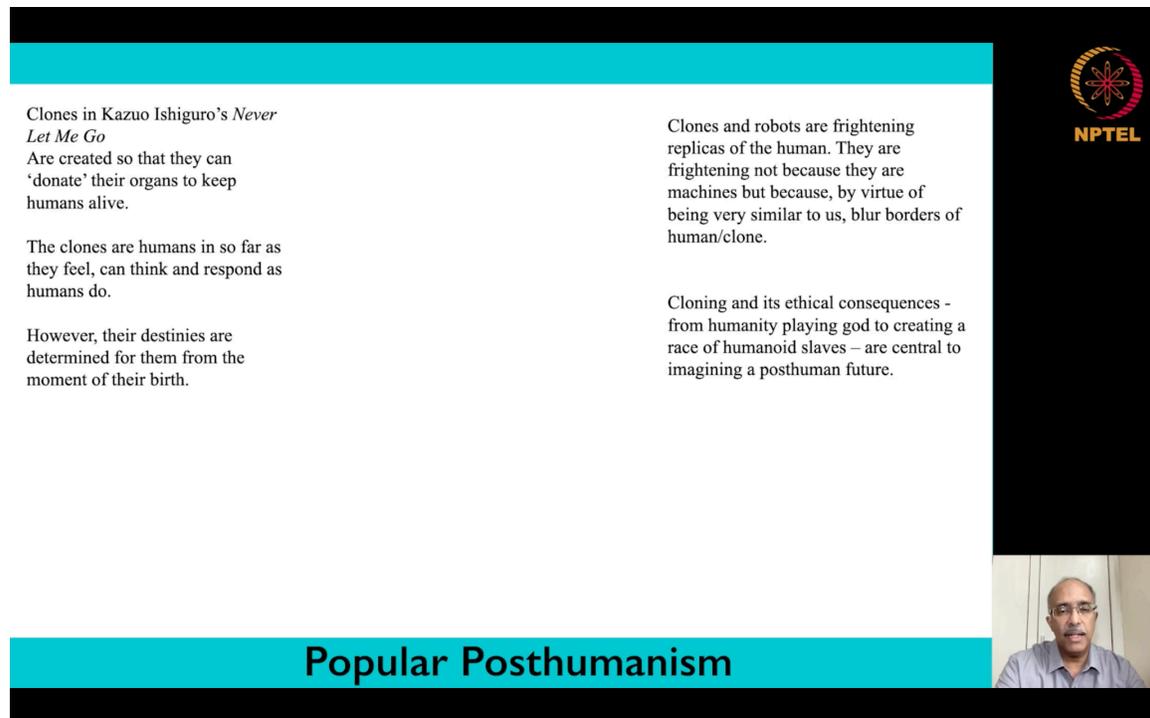
For example, in *Lucy*, as you might recall from the film, The artificial intelligence develops telekinesis while also being emotionless, and *Lucy* becomes the network, becomes the system. In the *Matrix* series, we also have the AIs and the computers, which have asserted considerably more power and control over the universe than the humans had intended. We have *Ultron* in the *Avengers*, who wishes to do the same thing eventually taking control of the Earth. The fear of the created becoming more powerful than the creator

is a favorite theme in all these texts. It's initiated, of course, by Mary Shelley's classic work, *Frankenstein*, where the creature, as it's called, must be remembered that the creature is not *Frankenstein*. *Frankenstein* is the creator. Victor *Frankenstein* is a scientist. But we always refer to the creature itself as *Frankenstein*, which is not true.

The creature appears to become more and more powerful, and the scientist is worried that the creature has far more agency, far more power, and far more abilities than originally bestowed upon it. This is the stuff of nightmares. In dystopias or inverted technotopias techno-utopias the fear of artificial intelligence taking over the world, or artificial intelligence in the hands of, say, totalitarian regimes, is the stuff that drives many

techno-dystopias. Then, of course, we come to a different set of ethical problems in films and novels that are about artificial beings, such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*.

(Refer slide Time 16:51)



Clones in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*
Are created so that they can 'donate' their organs to keep humans alive.

The clones are humans in so far as they feel, can think and respond as humans do.

However, their destinies are determined for them from the moment of their birth.

Clones and robots are frightening replicas of the human. They are frightening not because they are machines but because, by virtue of being very similar to us, blur borders of human/clone.

Cloning and its ethical consequences - from humanity playing god to creating a race of humanoid slaves - are central to imagining a posthuman future.

Popular Posthumanism

The clones in Shigeru's *Never Let Me Go*, as some of you may be aware, have been created so that they can donate their vital organs in order to keep the humans alive. Now, the word 'donate' is interestingly used because donation implies voluntary sacrifice, voluntary donation, as in you offer to do it of your own free will. But the clones in *Never Let Me Go* are not given the choice of whether they want to donate their organs or not. So, for those of you who are unfamiliar with the novel, the clones are supposed to give up their vital organs because the dying or sick humans need them. And after the fourth such donation of their vital organs, the clones complete.

Basically, they die. So the humans are actually kept alive by the clones and their organs. So in many ways, the clones are humans insofar as they can feel, think, and behave like humans do. But their destinies are not something they govern. Their destinies are what has been predestined in very neutral ways for them.

And there is no choice there. The clones and the replicas are frightening because they look like humans. They are not frightening because they are machines but because they are very similar to us. Cloning and its ethical consequences and we know this debate well outside literature as well from the cloning of Dolly the sheep to the present, where they are trying to bring back animals that have been extinct for some time, including the woolly mammoth and the ibex, via cloning technologies. But the point I want to underscore is that the boundary between the human and the clone is blurred in these texts, particularly *Never Let Me Go*.

Like I said, they are human because they think, they feel, they respond, and they behave like humans. And in what way are they less than human is a moot point. Cloning and its ethical consequences are the subject of popular post-humanist debates because it suggests, criticizes, and worries over the point that perhaps humanity is actually playing God, which is not acceptable, that we are not allowing nature to run its course, that we are determining the course nature will take. The popular post-humanist versions of these kinds of films also wonder and this goes all the way back to Blade Runner and we see versions of this even now. Blade Runner is, of course, based on Philip K. Dick's classic novel.

The debate also revolves around the question of whether humans ought to create a new slave race. So, clones serving as or artificial beings serving as servitors or servants is acceptable. So, popular post-humanism also dwells upon these. Then, of course, we turn to the most controversial one of all: the enhanced humans. When we look at Transcendence or Replicas, or even in many ways Robocop, these are popular representations of humans who have assimilated machinery and modifications into their bodies. We all know about the real-life sports person Pistorius, often nicknamed Blade Runner because he has prosthetic shoe blades on his feet as he is otherwise unable to function. So, for post-humanists, especially in popular post-humanism, the human who has assimilated machinery into his or her body, digitized their mind, cloned themselves, or enhanced themselves which means they might have superintelligence, superior abilities, and qualities, whether it is strength, immunity to disease, or whatever it might be this is a major ethical question: whether humans should enhance themselves via these interventions. As we will see in a later lesson, this has a whole host of ethical problems.

(Refer slide Time 21:46)



NPTEL

Enhanced humans are those that imply an alternate future for humanity.

Transcendence, Replicas, depict humans who have assimilated machinery into their bodies, digitized their minds, cloned themselves and/or enhanced themselves.



Superintelligence, enhanced abilities separate the human from the next stage: superhumans.



Popular Posthumanism

But for now, we will just think about and ponder over the fact that enhanced humans might have qualities that make them superhuman in that sense. So, in most of these popular representations, as we have seen, whether it's about AI, clowns, or the enhanced human, the larger debate is whether the post-human is an inevitable future avatar of the present-day human. Whether at some point, humans will evolve in this fashion. In some cases, it's the transcendence of the body, the escape from the body, an attempt to erase or avoid racial identities and their particularly terrible history; this is a moot point.

(Refer slide Time 23:48)



In most of these popular representations, the posthuman is a hypothetical, *in-the-future* being whose abilities are way ahead of the humans’.

In some cases, the escape from the body enables the individual to also escape racial identities and accompanying terrors (Rodine).

In the case of the female cyborg/posthuman, as in *Lucy*, *Ex Machina*, or *Never Let Me Go*, while there is a measure of agency and self-aware identity, she is subsumed under the social techno-order and are eventually ‘killed for her difference, designed as a dangerous fighting machine or considered a mere commodity’ (Carrasco-Carrasco)



Popular Posthumanism

(Refer slide Time 23:54)



References

Carrasco-Carrasco, Rocío, ‘The Vulnerable Posthuman in Popular Science Fiction Cinema’. In María Isabel Romero-Ruiz and Pilar Cuder-Domínguez (eds) *Cultural Representations of Gender Vulnerability and Resistance: A Mediterranean Approach to the Anglosphere*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

Rodine, Zoë, ‘Janelle Monáe, Dirty Computers, and Embodied Posthumanism’, *MELUS* 47.1 (2022): 154–74.

Popular Posthumanism

In the case of films like *Lucy*, *Ex Machina*, or *Never Let Me Go*, there is, of course, the gendered angle where there is a female cyborg, and whether this female cyborg's agency, self-awareness, and identity are to be subsumed under the social-techno order. In which case, the question is whether a female cyborg has the same kind of agency in a world such as ours as a male cyborg. Or do patriarchy and patriarchal structures of power, patriarchal structures of authority, also create complications for the female cyborg? So, popular posthumanism obviously has a range of themes, right from the question of whether we should clone is it ethical to clone whether the creatures we make, we create, are supposed to behave in a certain way, the role of artificial intelligence, which might at some point overcome its human creators and begin to function on its own, the question of the human

machine-human-animal hybrid, the cyborg and others, and, of course, the question of the enhanced human. We'll have reasons to return to most of these later. Thank you.