CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Screening the Posthuman, by Missy Molloy, Pansy Duncan, and Claire Henry
Authors	Townsend, Karim
Publication date	2023-11-01
Original Citation	Townsend, K. (2024) 'Screening the Posthuman, by Missy Molloy, Pansy Duncan, and Claire Henry', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 26, pp. 225-230. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.26.20
Type of publication	Article (not peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.26.20
Rights	© 2024, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/
Download date	2026-11-02 12:13:00
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/15531



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 26, 2023, pp. 225–230
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.26.20

Screening the Posthuman, by Missy Molloy, Pansy Duncan, and Claire Henry. Oxford University Press, 2023, 320 pp.

Karim Townsend

The polysemous nature of the term "posthuman" has inspired contentious debates in critical theory, leading both to the term's miscomprehension and misapplication. Despite its somewhat misleading prefix, the "post" of posthumanism is not to be understood solely in futural terms. Rather than simply encompassing conceptualisations of humanity following the alarming technological, scientific, and environmental developments of late capitalism, the term instead enacts a decentring of the human in order to attain a richer sense of what it means to be human amidst these developments. For Missy Molloy, Pansy Duncan, and Claire Henry, authors of *Screening the Posthuman*, three core theoretical strands—cultural, deconstructive, and materialist—constitute their understanding of critical posthumanism, developed primarily by theorists such as Donna Harraway, Cary Wolfe, and Rosi Braidotti, among others. Diverging from the discourses of human exceptionalism that have contoured theorisations of humanism and transhumanism, the posthuman, in contrast, rejects the ontological separation of human and the nonhuman. And cinema, as the authors contend, is a vital tool to illuminate the complexity of critical posthumanism's emphasis on the imbrications of the human and nonhuman, in the process functioning as a "riposte to humanism as a hegemonic cultural model" (4).

For readers new to posthuman theory, a core strength of the book is the manner in which the authors traverse rigorous theoretical terrain, presenting challenging concepts in an accessible manner without sacrificing the nuances and ambivalences that mark posthumanism and its representations in cinema. For instance, the authors suggest that although recurring phenomena in recent global cinema, such as "cyborgs, climate change, monstrously hybridized animals, and assisted reproductive technologies", have been analysed under the term "posthuman", one cannot designate a film as posthumanist based on its scenario alone (8). The authors suggest that in order to be considered "properly posthumanist", a film must consistently "challenge core conceptions" of the human (8). This is a feat much less common than one may suppose, as many contemporary films widely understood as posthumanist falter in their negotiation of posthumanism's ambivalences, ultimately serving to perpetuate either "a humanist nostalgia or a euphoric excitement that tends toward transhumanism" (8). The films selected for analysis, therefore, allow the authors to examine critical posthumanist ambivalences in a sustained and interdisciplinary manner that has heretofore been absent in film studies. This interdisciplinarity constitutes one of the primary appeals of *Screening the Posthuman*, as readers wishing to stage their own productive encounters between posthumanism and the various disciplines addressed in the book—including queer theory, disability studies, animal studies, critical race theory, and postcolonial theory—should find the

© *Karim Townsend*
This article is published as Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0) which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the original work is cited

analyses here generative and offering compelling concrete materialisations of posthumanism's often abstract theoretical strands.

In Chapter One, the authors address the complex question of genre, positing the posthuman as a genre in its own right, particularly in light of the emergence of new "technologies, ecologies, attitudes, relationships, and belief structures" in the twenty-first century that have shaped narrative screen media (27). The chapter cohesively traces the commonalities that structure posthuman representations in film, focusing on three central themes: relationships, the body, and affect. Moving across a corpus of independent films, virtual reality installations, and popular films such as *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 2016), *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013) and *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014), the chapter's textual analyses explore wide-ranging themes such as the parasocial and virtual relationships engendered by social media, bodily prosthetics, neuropharmacology, and artificial intelligence. Of particular interest are the authors' reflections on ambivalence in posthuman cinema and the way in which it elicits affective and embodied responses, recalling Linda Williams's pioneering work on generic formations such as melodrama, pornography, and horror (49). This ambivalence, understood as an affective register, conjures an "oscillation between fear and desire, [and/or] excitement and anxiety" (50), which may ultimately allow us to shine new light, the authors suggest, on conventional genres. In this way, the chapter offers readers a useful framework in the identification of posthuman themes beyond the selected films analysed in the book. In doing so, the chapter also encourages readers to think critically about genre orthodoxy and how posthumanism inflects the affective dimensions of the spectator-screen relationship more broadly.

The majority of the subsequent chapters of the book are written by a single author. In Chapter Two, Molloy examines apocalyptic scenarios in posthuman cinema. As she notes, whereas disaster films were often regarded as lacking in "sophistication" in the mid-twentieth century (64), a time inflected by anxieties surrounding the Cold War and the threat of nuclear catastrophe, contemporary posthuman cinema has engaged with themes of dystopia and the destruction of humanity itself in ways that offer complex forms of social criticism and narrative sophistication. Analysing what she calls "critical posthumanist disaster cinema", Molloy identifies several criteria that can be used to engage critically with this specific type of posthumanist cinema (65). Given its popularity among cinephiles and scholars, readers might be especially drawn to Molloy's analysis of Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011). Indeed, Molloy's analysis compellingly synthesises the abundance of previous scholarly writing on the film and brings the question of intersectionality to the fore, particularly in relation to the film's questionable appropriation of Indigenous iconography in a pivotal scene. For Molloy, the film, in its Eurocentrism, "fails to provide the intersectional and/or postcolonial insights required for it to properly critique the foundations of humanism or 'life on earth'" (72). To that end, the chapter's remaining analyses address this question of intersectionality, with Molloy arguing that "clear sight regarding where humanity has been and where it could potentially end up is a commitment critical posthumanism and posthuman cinema share" (100).

In Chapter Three, Molloy tackles the complexities of feminist posthumanism, drawing on Donna Haraway's influential "A Cyborg Manifesto". While Haraway's cyborg seeks to disrupt the binaries that structure gender and humanism, representations of cyborg figures in posthumanist cinema have perpetuated these binaries in their persistent regimes of gendering. In her close readings, Molloy offers a range of insights into the ways in which fetishistic framings of female cyborg embodiment, such as Scarlett Johansson's alien in *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013), foreclose an exploration of posthuman subjectivities. The remaining

sections of the chapter focus on questions of technosexuality and the intersection of female cyborg embodiment and motherhood, although this latter section is perhaps not given as much sustained attention as the chapter's previous sections. In any case, the chapter lays out the important groundwork for further critical engagements with feminist posthumanism as it relates to cinema. Indeed, readers will no doubt find this chapter useful as the issues at stake here continue to manifest in recent films, most notably in Julia Ducournau's *Titane* (2021).

Chapter Four, written by Henry, explores queer posthumanism. As Henry argues, queer theory and critical posthumanism are mutually enriching fields. Henry structures her close readings around three conceptual figures that destabilise and enact a queering of heteronormative humanist identities: the cyborg, the monster, and the collective. The chapter's various sections explore topics such as queer desire and technology in the films of Spike Jonze, the queer potential of the "monster" figure in the works of queer-auteur provocateurs, and issues of collectivity, drawing on Deleuzo-Guattarian questions of rhizomatic and networked identities. In the zombie films of Bruce LaBruce, for instance, the zombie serves as a figure that "resists homonormativity and animates queer politics, negotiating tensions between assimilationist and radical factions of gay communities" (166). The question of radicalism in this section—read affirmatively in relation to the films that straddle the boundary between pornography and the art film—might, however, be enriched by further theorisation, particularly in relation to the question of how the perceived radicalism of dissident sexualities may or may not intersect with anti-capitalism, a subject that is not fully addressed within the remit of the chapter. Above all, however, the chapter effectively foregrounds the ways in which queer posthuman cinema serves to disrupt normative binaries pertaining to gender and sexuality.

In Chapter Five, Molloy and Duncan examine posthumanism's alignment with crip theory and disability studies. As the authors suggest, both disability studies and critical posthumanism are characterised by their shared "commitment to alternative forms of embodiment and subjectivity" (182). The analyses here are centred primarily on two films: Pedro Almodóvar's *Talk to Her* (*Hable con ella*, 2002) and Darius Marder's *Sound of Metal* (2019). Both films, the authors argue, "subvert ableist cinematic conventions for the representation of disability", in the process teasing out posthuman engagements with differently abled bodies (183). Yet the question of ambivalence once again emerges. Whereas previous scholarship on *Talk to Her* has been critical towards the film's central relationship between a male nurse and a female comatose patient, the authors here offer a recuperative reading of the film shaped by an insistently posthumanist perspective. The film's formal techniques used to depict the comatose patient's subjectivity, they suggest, gesture towards "new, posthumanist forms of subjectivity that destabilize humanist oppositions between valid and invalid emotional being" (192). Meanwhile, *Sound of Metal*'s complex sound design approximates the protagonist's lived experience of hearing loss, yet the authors suggest that the film regrettably evinces "humanistic hang-ups that hinder the imagination of posthuman disability" (193), most notably in its rigid stance on cochlear implant technology—a complex issue within the deaf community—which is represented as a "prosthetic intrusion on [the protagonist's] bodily integrity" (183).

The question of human–animal relationality serves as the focus of Chapter Six, in which Henry suggests that the figure of the nonhuman animal offers rich connections with critical posthumanism. What distinguishes Henry's analysis in this chapter from recent studies of animal representation in film is its identification of surrealist and post-surrealist strategies that deploy the figure of the animal, and the notion of animality more broadly, to "playfully undermine human exceptionalism" (211). Henry analyses European films well-known for their

success on the international film festival circuit, such as *The Lobster* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2015) and *On Body and Soul* (*Testről és lélekről*, Ildikó Enyedi, 2017), effectively demonstrating how their engagements with surrealism serve to critique the presumption of the human as a "distinct and elevated species" (211). Of perhaps most interest in this chapter, however, is the turn to contemporary Thai cinema, such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Tropical Malady* (2004). While this Thai film also deploys surrealism, this engagement with surrealism works in a different register than that of Western cinema, as Henry notes when parsing Western critics' befuddlement at *Tropical Malady*'s unconventional structure (228). Henry views this film as an example of what she terms "new animism" (228), which, both in its theoretical and cinematic manifestations, offers an alternative view to humanist binaries and Cartesian dualisms in the hopes of foregrounding "different possibilities of human-nonhuman relationality" (239). As with other chapters, the theoretical framework introduced here offers fertile ground for readers to build on.

In the seventh and final chapter, Duncan turns to the Anthropocene and its implications for the human. If humans have assumed the role of geological agents, causing various ecological calamities in the process, then the Anthropocene has disrupted humanity's dominion over the planet. And it is this "challenge to familiar humanist orthodoxies" that finds expression in posthuman theory and cinema (244). Duncan proposes the term "eco-material posthuman" to designate a specific strand of posthumanism that rejects wholesale notions of transcendence, instead foregrounding "a renewed recognition of our embedded, embodied status as beings-in-the-(natural)-world" (245). The analyses here offer a diverse account of cinema's posthumanist engagements with materiality, drawing on new materialist theories developed by Braidotti, Haraway and Stacy Alaimo. Insightful readings of films such as *Annihilation* (Alex Garland, 2018), *Mother!* (Darren Aronofsky, 2017), and *First Reformed* (Paul Schrader, 2017), among others, designate the human body as a kind of "membrane" to nonhuman worlds (246). Most fascinating is Duncan's triadic theoretical framework encompassing the cellular affinities between human and nonhuman lifeforms (though Duncan, importantly, avoids reductionist and overly horizontalising models of networked agencies), questions of affect, and vital materiality. The key argument of the chapter, Duncan emphasises, is that the human body does not serve in these films as a signifier of human exceptionalism but rather "as an aperture to the nonhuman outside" (247). Ultimately, this question of cross-species affinities and assemblages emerges as an increasingly urgent issue for critical posthumanism in our age of the Anthropocene and ecological crisis.

The book's sheer diversity—even within the specific parameters it sets up—impressively demonstrates the multifaceted nature of critical posthumanism across a range of interdisciplinary fields. One could thus imagine each chapter's central topic as forming the basis of an entire monograph in its own right. Yet rather than viewing this vast theoretical and generic breadth as a shortcoming of the book, the authors' sustained commitment to this diversity gestures towards the importance of considering posthumanist cinema beyond science fiction, the "standard cinematic chronotope" with which it is most associated (276). The book thus serves as a foundational text for scholars interested in the posthuman in cinema, as it not only functions as a useful introduction to critical posthumanism and its cinematic manifestations, but also invites readers to think theoretically beyond the corpus of works analysed here. The authors do, however, emphasise the importance of viewing filmic texts "less as inert surfaces against which critical posthumanist theories can be mapped than as fellow travelers in the labor of critical posthuman critique" (277). A crucial part of this critique, as the authors stress throughout, is the imperative to consider posthumanism not simply as an "aspirational ideal" to counter discourses of transhumanism and humanism (278), but rather as

a critical tool, not without its many complexities and ambivalences, in making sense of our humanity in this critical moment of late capitalism and the Anthropocene.

References

Annihilation. Directed by Alex Garland, Paramount Pictures, 2018.

Arrival. Directed by Denis Villeneuve, Paramount Pictures, 2016.

Ex Machina. Directed by Alex Garland, A24, 2014.

First Reformed. Directed by Paul Schrader, A24, 2017.

Haraway, Donna J. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, 1991, pp. 149–81.

Her. Directed by Spike Jonze, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2013.

The Lobster. Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, Element Pictures, 2015.

Melancholia. Directed by Lars von Trier, Nordisk Film, 2011.

Mother! Directed by Darren Aronofsky, Paramount Pictures, 2017.

On Body and Soul [*Testről és lélekről*]. Directed by Ildikó Enyedi, Mozinet/Netflix, 2017.

Sound of Metal. Directed by Darius Marder, Amazon Studios, 2019.

Talk to Her [*Hable con ella*]. Directed by Pedro Almodóvar, Warner Sogefilms/Sony Pictures Classics, 2002.

Titane. Directed by Julia Ducournau, A24/Diaphana Distribution, 2021.

Tropical Malady. Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, GMM Pictures, 2004.

Under the Skin. Directed by Jonathan Glazer, A24/Studio Canal, 2013.

Suggested Citation

Townsend, Karim. "*Screening the Posthuman*, by Missy Molloy, Pansy Duncan, and Claire Henry." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 26, 2023, pp. 225–230. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.26.20.

Karim Townsend is a researcher in film and screen studies at the University of Cambridge. His research explores connections between contemporary film and screen media, neoliberalism, ecocriticism, and critical theory. His writing has been published or is forthcoming in journals such as *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, and the *European Journal of American Culture*.