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The Post-human Utopian Paradise and the Impossible Gaze

from Philip K. Dick to Spike Jonze's *Her*

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the dialectic between the absence of the physical body, the presence of the out-of-body entities, and the promise of a post-human paradise, as well as their connection with the (impossible) gaze. These motifs are discussed in relation to the science fiction genre in literature (Philip K Dick's *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Dr Bloodmoney*) and film (from *The Invisible Man*-1933 to *Transcendence*-2014). The article concludes with a few examples that seem to transgress the science fiction genre (Spike Jonze's *Her*, 2013; *Black Mirror*), and the entire science fiction tradition, where the absence of the physical body and the presence of an intrusive consciousness are always intertwined, generating dystopian worlds.

KEYWORDS

Post-human Body; Impossible Gaze; Absence; Post-human Paradise.

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Staging the dialectic between the disappearance of the human body and the presence of the visual subject has been a staple of SF novels and films since the advent of New Wave authors such as Philip K. Dick. His cyborg character, Palmer Eldritch, aspires to become immortal through the identification with an impossible, other-worldly gaze. Our paper will investigate the extension of this motif beyond the realms of science fiction films and literary texts, to recent examples which have become mainstream, such as the Oscar nominated film *Her* (2013, Spike Jonze). This film could serve as a typical example for staging an absent body: the plot centers on the absence of a character, Samantha, who exists only as a voice and perceives the world through the eyes of the protagonist. Our approach will circle around a few basic questions, such as: how do film and literature represent the impossible encounter between a human conscience and its own physical disappearance? What is the relation between the absent human body and the impossible gaze? What is the significance of the post-human body in this context?

I would start with a three-fold dialectic: the disappearance / absence of the physical



body, its replacement with a post-human entity (a cyborg or a digital entity), and the question regarding consciousness, self-awareness, which has been a main topic of the post/trans-humanist debate. This is one of the philosophical concerns for Spike Jonze's film, which dramatizes what has been termed as the "impossible gaze", when the subject perceives the world in the absence of the physical body, in such instances which exclude the typical position of the witness. The film manages to render an almost perfectly ambiguous representation of the intrusiveness of technology and its power to replace human consciousness. The film *Her* and the TV series *Black Mirror* are symptomatic examples that show the transformation undergone by science fiction as a genre. In order to understand this symptomatic shift, we need to refer briefly to a few classic examples of science fiction illustrating not only the technophobic perspective in their representation of the cyborg, the post-human body and the expansion of consciousness through technological means, but also the inter-relation between these three sub-themes of science fiction: the cyborg, the artificial intelligence/ reduplication of consciousness and the virtual reality/ the fascination with the impossible gaze.

This technophobic trend of science fiction tends to rely on a negative dialectic in the representation of the cyborg since its origins. The destruction of the organic human body/ absence and its replacement/ incorporation of prosthetic enhancements have disastrous consequences for the human dimension and it usually generates malevolent entities. The description of the new post-human body/mind seldom included negative features: strong impulses towards control, surveillance, violence directed towards the human representatives. This type of representation has permeated science fiction film since the beginning of the genre¹, from

Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), considered a forerunner of the "cyborg film"², featuring one of the earliest examples of a human replaced with a cyborg-almost-identical twin, to Michael Crichton's *Westworld* (1973), another forerunner of the genre, where the presence of cyborgs is originally associated with the simulated world of the thematic parks and also a source of violence and chaos. Sue Short mentions three categories of cyborgs, according to their origin: former humans with prosthetic/ synthetic modifications; androids with organic components and machines impossible to differentiate from their human counterparts³. The first and the second category are more generous in their speculative output regarding the cyborg as the mirror for the ambiguities of human subjectivity faced with the new intrusions of technology. The presence of the cyborg signals the possibility of simulations and transgressions that put into question the very concept of the "real." *Metropolis* and *Westworld* were less concerned with the questions regarding the human essence, their cyborgs belonging to the second category, which is far more appealing for the genre, from the *Terminator* trilogy, to *Star Trek's* Data, from the famous Darth Vader of *Star Wars* saga to *Spiderman 2*. Only when Philip K. Dick's novel (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*) was adapted for screen (*Blade Runner*, 1982, Ridley Scott) did the cyborg film capture its true speculative force of the topic.

My concern here is not the representation of the cyborg as such, but how these transgressions from the human to the post-human inspire a few recent films (*Her*, *Transcendence*, and *Black Mirror*), emblematic for the new paradigm of SF, but also perfectly illustrated in Philip K. Dick's *Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1964), a novel that proves the deep connection between three sub-themes of science fiction (and cyborg films especially): the cyborg,



virtual reality/ ontological displacement and artificial intelligence/ out-of-body experiences. Decades before the debate regarding the consequences of the bio-technological revolution reached the academic field, Philip K. Dick's novels staged the confrontation between human nature and invasive technology. He captured the subtle effects of the encounter between the decayed human world and post-human enhancements, when their intrusion began to alter the unity between the mind and the body, and also the very concept of a human body. *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Dr. Blood-money* could offer the best instances of these transformations.

The most compelling example is to be found in the novel about Palmer Eldritch, who is not only a cyborg, a fusion of organic and artificial life, but also an all-encompassing consciousness, controlling the dreams of the other characters, assuming supernatural features, taking control, ever expanding, invading and dissolving the human consciousness:

“God,” Eldritch said, “promises eternal life. I can do better; I can deliver it.”
“You’re not just out of your body; you’re out of your mind, too.”
Eldritch seated himself nearby, rested his artificial arm on his bent knees, and idly swung his stick from side to side, scrutinizing the gluck, which had still not departed. “When we return to our former bodies—you notice the use of the word ‘former,’ a term you wouldn’t apply with Can-D, and for good reason—you’ll find that no time has passed. We could stay here fifty years and it’d be the same; we’d emerge back at the demesne on Luna and find everything unchanged, and anyone watching us would see no lapse of consciousness.”⁴

The fragment not only suggests Eldritch’s promises of transgressing the limitations of the human body, the barriers of time, space and mind, the evasion from a depressive reality, but also Leo’s revelation about the danger of Eldritch’s power, an irreversible invasion. They also point to the limits of literature in suggesting the “impossible gaze,” the gaze beyond the limitations of perception.

The novel performs a perpetual ontological vertigo, where is difficult to decide if we ever return to the first degree reality presented in the first four chapters: from the fifth chapter on, the novel describes the partial, drug-influenced, personal and fragmented perceptions of Leo Bulero and Barney Mayerson.

It is significant to note that ontological destabilization occurs only after Leo Bulero’s encounter with Palmer Eldritch in the fifth chapter, and the initial stability of the fictional world is never restored. Palmer Eldritch’s first appearance in the novel is reduced to a voice from a technical device, a sort of mechanical extension (“an electronic contraption”), very far from a human organic body, although Leo was expecting to meet a real person. Palmer Eldritch could as well be an anticipation of artificial intelligence. Science fiction dystopian film has always had a fascination with the sheer terror and panic suggested by a disembodied voice, and I will select below two emblematic examples from 1933, a few years after the introduction of sound, which coincided with the spread of radio propagandistic broadcasts of Hitler and with Goebbels’s speeches across the Western world. Spike Jonze’s film *Her* (2013) will illustrate an entirely different approach regarding the representation of a disembodied voice: the absence of the body/image becomes a new source of fascination.



Dr. Mabuse and the Invisible Man

This uncanny replacement of the organic body, the sign of a clear identity and limited powers with the omnipresent voice, issued from an electronic device, resembles a famous scene from Fritz Lang's *Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933), when a member of the gang, Thomas Kent (Gustav Diessl), revolts against Mabuse's authority and confronts him, only to find out in awe that behind the curtain the malefic doctor is absent, replaced by a recorded voice and a loudspeaker. The difference from the first Mabuse series, (*Dr. Mabuse, der spieler*, 1922), is also striking: although his physical force and therefore his hypnotic influence have been neutralized (Mabuse is locked in an asylum), his absent body is transformed into an uncanny, haunting (omni)-presence, which cannot be confronted with conventional, human means. The effects of a diffuse evil force were an obsessive thematic concern for Lang, but this last film he made in Germany before Hitler came to power stands apart from the rest as far as the presence of the source of evil is concerned. The influence of Mabuse becomes impossible to be contained precisely because of this new gap between the human body as a sign of fixed identity and its non-human extension (spirit, ghost, technical extension, voice, etc.), emphasized in another famous scene, when the spirit of Mabuse literally emerged from his writings, enters the body of professor Baum who studies them, generating a new degree of confusion until the end of the film.

In *Metropolis*, the famous scene representing the creation of the non-human substitute for Maria becomes not only an iconic symbol for science fiction/dystopian film, but also a simpler explanation for the

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confusion and chaos to come, namely the substitution of real Maria with a malevolent entity, a cyborg that channels the latent violence of the workers towards the revolutionary outburst. But the representation of Mabuse goes one step further, and maintains the ambiguity regarding the way Mabuse directs his agents and their actions, isolated in the insane asylum and transmitting the orders through the loudspeaker in the secret meeting room where Thomas Kent discovers it.

Another film of 1933, delivering the same terror of an uncontrollable evil force, a film that staged the same transgression from the organic body towards the invisible uncanny "almost human" force was James Whale's *The Invisible Man*: the story tested the limits of the medium (how to film an invisible body, an absence/presence), where the presence of the actor in the leading role (Claude Rains) is reduced to the inflections of his voice. The same dialectic is employed: the moment when the organic, limited human body disappears (also its identity, its image) and gives way to a new entity, impossible to locate, a source of utter panic and the pure will to dominate humanity. Both films strive to represent the new diffuse character of evil, an inherent prophecy of the things to come and they both choose to emphasize the negative effects of transgressing the limits of human body.



Palmer Eldritch and the Impossible Gaze

In his conquest of all the possible alternative worlds, Palmer Eldritch encounters little possibility of resistance. Only after experiencing the effects of the substance Chew Z⁵, does Leo recognize in Eldritch the perfect instance of total control: “Palmer Eldritch is an invader and this is how we’ll all wind up, here like this, on a plain of dead things that have become nothing more than random fragments; this is the ‘reincarnation’ that he promised.”⁶ Eldritch’s post-human paradise proves to be a labyrinth of controlled illusions from which there is no escape, since those who experience it could no longer differentiate between “real” and virtual realities. This also holds true for a great many science fictional characters, making use of a post-human body, either cyborgs or computer uploaded entities: they are all portrayed as invaders, from Philip K. Dick’s characters such as Hoppy Harrington in *Dr. Bloodmoney* to the scientist Will Caster in *Transcendence*.

But what is so fascinating about Eldritch’s post-human paradise? The short answer is: the specific effects of the substance Chew-Z in offering limitless perspectives in the absence of the human body and transgressing any limit regarding space, time; in other words, in conferring the privilege of a divine, impossible gaze. None of the characters can resist the fascination which resides in breaking the barriers of perception: Barney is confronted with a future version of himself in the Eleventh chapter, who perceives his ghost-like appearance and lets him know that Eldritch was finally killed; he plunges into his past in a desperate attempt to re-live it differently; finally Barney is forced to dissipate his identity into the all-encompassing Palmer Eldritch, acquiring for a moment his God-like vision of eternity. The ontological

vertigo of the possible worlds is intertwined with the multiple transferred identities at the end: Palmer voluntarily confines himself to Barney’s human body.

Dick’s prose has a cinematic ability to suggest these translations as they happen, and Eldritch’s three stigmata (the artificial hand, the Jensen eyes and the “radically deranged jaw”) function as recognizable signs of the simulated world. They are also signs pointing to the ambiguous nature of Eldritch himself, who is simultaneously absent and present in their visions. The appearance of the stigmata triggers the instant revelation of the ambiguous essence of the world perceived: the subject understands it is Eldritch’s simulation, but it is already caught up in the object of desire and considers it “real” (an unfulfilled past in Barney’s case, the desire to master the world in Leo Bulero’s case – the ending suggests his desire to master the destiny of humanity, to envisage himself as the “Protector”). Therefore, Philip K. Dick’s novel could also be interpreted in Lacanian terms: Eldritch isolates each character with their ultimate object of desire, making them captive of the gaze. At the end of the novel, Barney explains to Anne the significance of the three stigmata, also pointing to the impossible gaze: “It meant that you were seeing into absolute reality. The essence beyond the mere appearance.”⁷

The process of translation into Barney’s body could also be read as a liberation from the effect of the drug (metaphorically a liberation from Eldritch’s influence), but Barney’s subjective perspective suggests a full contamination with Eldritch as a supernatural entity. This is also a fulfillment of his expressed utopian intention to literally and spiritually translate into a whole community, that of the Mars colony, an idea which was developed by scriptwriter Jack Paglen in *Transcendence* (2014). The end of



the novel maintains the same ambiguity regarding the delusion induced by Eldritch:

it is difficult to decide whether Leo Bulero's return to Earth occurs inside or outside his dream, generated by Palmer Eldritch, whose "stigmata" are infinitely proliferating, recognized by Leo in every inhabitant of the ship, including himself. The end of the film *Inception* (2010, Christopher Nolan) will play upon the same ambiguity and the same irreversible journey towards the depths of the dream-world.

Another instance of the impossible gaze can be found in the third chapter of *Dr. Bloodmoney*, with Hoppy Harrington, a "phocomelus" (he has no limbs) who overcomes this rare congenial disorder with psychokinetic powers, thus becoming an intruder in the other's minds (like Palmer Eldritch), also possessing the ability to simulate the voice of others, a simulation that creates confusion and chaos. After the nuclear holocaust that he predicted, he seeks to gain total power and he completes his human body with prosthetic sophisticated limbs, therefore becoming another perfect post-human cyborg in quest for total control over the former territory of USA. In the third chapter, he predicts the nuclear apocalypse and the novel seems to offer the first instance of a post-human, impossible gaze (to be present and to perceive an impossible event like the end of the world), transcending the physical body: "Beyond the grave. The After Life' is the name of Hoppy's vision he keeps having until the event actually happens, assuming a more trivial, prosaic stance, which apparently transforms Hoppy's vision into a parody of a prophecy:

Hoppy said mumblingly, "Gray darkness. Like ashes. Then a great flatness. Nothing but fires burning, light is from the burning fires. They burn forever. Nothing alive."

"And where are you?" Connie asked. "I'm--floating," Hoppy said. "Floating near the ground... no, now I'm very high. I'm weightless, I don't have a body any more so I'm high up, as high as I want to be. I can hang here, if I want; I don't have to go back down. I like it up here and I can go around the Earth forever. There it is down below me and I can just keep going around and around."

Going up beside the cart, Mr. Crody the jeweler said, "Uh, Hoppy, isn't 'there anybody else?' Are each of us doomed to isolation?"

Hoppy mumbled, "I see others, now. I'm drifting back down, I'm landing among the grayness. I'm walking about." *Walking, Stuart thought. On what? Legs but no body; what an after life. He laughed to himself. What a performance,* he thought. What crap. But he, too, came up beside the cart, now, squeezing in to be able to see.

"Is it that you're born into another life, like they teach in the East?" an elderly lady customer in a cloth coat asked. "Yes," Hoppy said, surprisingly. "A new life. I have a different body; I can do all kinds of things."⁸

In fact, it is not only a prophecy, but also a detailed plan to control the world through the re-invention of technological means, as the last man/ cyborg standing: he predicts that everyone else will be able to talk only through him (Dick, 2014, 31). The irony is that Harrington is half-way through accomplishing his mediated reality after a nuclear disaster that has freed the world from this mediated control.

Harrington best exemplifies the horrors of a "body in between," all the other characters are appalled by Hoppy's secret powers to fix any technical device through a mysterious process (he literally "heals" the



devices). This strange technophilic and intimate relationship with the machines is the first sign of transgression of the human realm. He also frightens his colleagues at Modem TV company with his vision of a perfect cyborg body which will render the human body obsolete:

“And I’m designing a new one, my own design; all electronic – I read an article on brain-wiring, they’re using it in Switzerland and Germany. You’re wired directly to the motor centers of the brain so there’s no lag; you can move even quicker than – a regular physiological structure.” He started to say, *than a human*. “I’ll have it perfected in a couple of years,” he said, “and it’ll be an improvement even on the Swiss models.”⁹

Like *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, Dr Bloodmoney* focuses on Hoppy Harrington’s post-human nature, which becomes even more appalling in its invasiveness after the nuclear disaster occurs: he threatens to transform the post-apocalyptic world, which has regressed to a pastoral stage, liberated from technology, into a dystopian realm, under his own control, once he manages to control the radio station, the abandoned satellite and all the other character’s minds, through his power to reduplicate and simulate their voices and through his mysterious relation with technology. The three-fold scenario of transgressing the human body is also present: Harrington surpasses his dysfunctional human body, becomes a perfect cyborg after the demise of human civilization and finally achieves God-like status with his omniscient ability to invade the minds of the others. However, there is an opposing force to Harrington’s dystopian plans, and, contrary to the human opponents of Palmer Eldritch, it does stand a chance against Hoppy precisely because it

also has post-human features: Bill Keller is a mysterious entity located in Elsie’s body, but able to transgress any boundaries, and enter any life form, animal or human.

The end of the novel stages a confrontation between two entities possessing a post-human body, both able to control thought and a source of confusing simulacra, both being able to expand limitless, transgressing space and time. Only Bill Keller, an out-of body consciousness, can stop Hoppy Harrington from taking control over the world and humanity.

Beyond Technological Singularity – Divinity?

Although both Harrington and Palmer Eldritch are cyborgs, the nature of the latter is more ambiguous, lending itself to religious interpretations.¹⁰ Umland’s emphasis on the religious dimension of Dick’s prose, which should not be treated as marginal is very comprehensive. However, it should be mentioned the strange coexistence of the religious element with the obsessive emphasis on the technological signs, namely the recurrence of the three stigmata in the character’s visions. Eldritch post-human body appears only in their hallucinations induced by the substance chew-Z: in the first four chapters, Eldritch is either an absent character, whose apparition is intensively debated by the other characters, or a voice emerging from an “electronic contraption.” In their visions, both Leo Bulero and Barney Mayerson are obsessed with Eldritch’s double nature: that of a cyborg and his God-like abilities. This can be interpreted as a strange foreshadowing of the strange combination between religion and technology, a techno-religion that promises eternal life (uploading the consciousness on inalterable



materials), the end of disease (biotechnology), namely the limitations of the organic human body. The biography of Eldritch is also an emblematic one, in trans-humanist terms: after a few accidents, he becomes a cyborg (he replaces his eyes with artificial ones) and he mysteriously acquires new abilities, mostly he becomes an ever-expanding consciousness, with infinite power to permeate the world.

This transgression of the human body towards a supernatural entity by means of technology which radically transforms the world, along with his desire to create a perfect utopian society on Mars (by simultaneously spreading through the minds of its inhabitants) is also the plot of a recent movie, *Transcendence* (2014) which received bad reviews, but it is a significant attempt to synthesize the post-human/trans-humanist utopia: uploading the human consciousness, the final construction of a self-aware super-intelligence, outside the human body, in other words creating divinity by technological means, a techno-utopian project declared with the full arrogance of a trans-humanist scientist by Will Caster (Johnny Depp) at the beginning of the film: “the combined intellect of engineers, mathematicians, neuroscientists and hackers pales in comparison with even the most basic A.I. A sentient machine will quickly overcome the limits of biology and in a short time its analytical power will be greater than the collective intelligence of every person born in the history of the world. [...] Now imagine such an entity with full range of human emotion even self-awareness. Sometimes we refer to this as Singularity. I prefer to call it Transcendence.”

The project of the film was inherently utopian: to gather all the contemporary fears regarding the actual development of technology (human bar-coding, cyborgs, surveillance, the separation of the body and the mind, the

supremacy of artificial intelligence over the human mind, the end of organic life, transfer of artificial intelligence to a synthetic body, etc.), but also to imagine the ultimate consequences of such a “techno-divine invasion”, a “technological singularity” that ultimately tests the limits of representation in the film itself. Jack Paglen’s script gathers a few real dilemmas about the future of artificial intelligence, and it is remarkable the attempt to remain ambivalent towards the ultimate consequences of the biotechnological revolution. The difficult answer to the uniqueness of human consciousness is also notable, with the repeated scene when the A.I. are asked about their self-awareness, and the inquiry is redirected towards the human agents, echoing the debate from post-humanist studies regarding the differences between mind and consciousness¹¹.

The bird’s eye view is probably the most significant scene of the entire film, the attempt to render the perspective of an uploaded consciousness and its pantheist presence in every aspect of nature, showing how the utopian post-human project takes refuge in this all-encompassing, God-like, transcendent, impossible gaze. As compared to this, the long and tiring sequences describing the utopian facilities built by Will Caster’s artificial consciousness seem irrelevant and unconvincing. The attempt to render cinematically the dominant perspective of the ever-expanding consciousness points to what Louis Marin has termed as the frontiers of utopia¹².

The film eventually loses momentum in the second and third acts. The utopian developments at Will Caster’s establishment are shown in a realistic and descriptive manner, like in a documentary film, which is unusual for a science fiction movie and it signals the drive towards realism that permeates the entire genre. The replacement of nature/man with the artificial super-intelligence is shown as a gradual, non-



dramatic, natural event, as if the film adopted the trans-humanist perspective of Will Caster. The final attack of the activists and FBI agents, which is responsible for the final blackout, seems a violent, unnecessary action. The final act of the drama is undermined by contradictions, failing to convey both the fascination of techno-utopians with the benefits of technology and the consternation of the technophobics faced with the ultimate end of organic life on Earth. The end of the film is irremediably flawed, since the entire ambivalent perspective towards Will Caster's post-human paradise is involuntarily trivialized by Max Waters' conclusion about Will's accomplishment (pointing to its selfishness and inhumanity). *Transcendence*'s failure is significant for the discussion of a new phase in the evolution of the science fiction, being marred by two opposite tendencies: the maximalist ambition to incorporate/synthesize all post-human themes, technologies and concerns into one ordinary story, lacking true conflict, and the realist, descriptive, documentary tendency to de-dramatize the grand transformation from technology to simulated divinity.

Realism, Science Fiction and Out-Of-Body Perception

Two transformations undergone by science fiction films should be mentioned here. One regards the new drive towards realism on account of the new importance gained by realism in film throughout the 2000s and because of the new developments in technology (which explains why the SF as genre is more inclined to obsolescence). The other concerns the representation of the body and consequently, the utopian/ impossible gaze: faced with the inflation of images depicting perfect bodies, the film manifests the opposite tendency to represent the transgression of the physical body, the invisible body or out-of-body experiences, and the examples abound not only in the sub-genre of the cyborg film (from Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* to the *Matrix* trilogy or *Existenz*), but also in blockbusters such as *Avatar* or *Inception*. Although so frequently quoted (even in *Matrix*), Baudrillard's famous essay "Simulacra and Science fiction" becomes again actual with films such as *Her*, *Transcendence*, TV series such as *Black Mirror*, *Humans* or even space travel movies such as *Gravity*, *Interstellar* or *The Martian*: the distance between the real and the imaginary, between present-world and future-world, between present and future technologies are minimized and, in Baudrillard's words, there is no "room for any fictional extrapolation"¹³. Science fiction films tend to generate their cognitive estrangement from the tensions of the utopian/ impossible gaze and from the dialectics of the visible/invisible. *Gravity* is a minute account of the space perceived through an astronaut's eyes/ helmet, *Interstellar* – how is the world seen by an astronaut caught in a black hole, *Black*



Mirror (episodes *White Christmas* and *The Entire History of You*) and *Her* – depict

various instances of how the world could be perceived by a consciousness/artificial intelligence in the absence of the physical body.

**“Not Just an Operating System,
it’s a Consciousness”**

Spike Jonze’s film stands apart from the rest in its deliberate emphasis on the invisible, as the unconquered territory of science fiction, which can re-formulate metaphysical questions present in the good tradition of SF, in a new form, radically different from it (what is our irreducible human essence, can an artificial intelligence become self-aware, sentient and human?). Spike Jonze offers an entirely different representation of the invisible woman, Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), whose materialization is indefinitely postponed, a disembodied voice which captures and generates all the romantic and erotic phantasms of Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix), a lonely anti-hero with an awkward job (a professional writer of love letters), who fills his loneliness with a new computer program, presented as “not just an operating system, it’s a consciousness.” The first difference from a common science fiction film is the programmatic avoidance of any direct reference to the technophobic aspects of Samantha’s post-human identity, although it is precisely the question of her self-awareness that haunts Theodore in the memorable scene when the operating system is activated, the scene of the encounter with the post-human. When compared with the opening of the classic SF *Blade Runner* with the Voight-Kampff test, when the android was interrogated, Spike Jonze’s film operates a striking reversal between the human and the non-human: in this scene, Theodore is

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questioned by the operating system and Samantha’s voice conceals the frightening aspect when computers have crossed the boundaries of the human body. From the moment of its initialization, Samantha has intruded into the most intimate corners of Theodore’s mind (to be compared to the less subtle representation of Will Caster as an uploaded entity in *Transcendence*).

A similar theme and scene features in Charlie Brooker’s *Black Mirror*, in the episode “Be Right Back” (February 2013): after Martha loses her husband Ash in a car accident, she is convinced to use an operating system that re-creates Ash’s identity by using all his online activity, an archive which seems to generate a consciousness. The film depicts with irony Martha’s readiness to believe that she actually speaks with the online avatar of Ash himself, echoing the delusion induced by “chatterbot,” the artificial conversational entity. Martha overcomes her depression and becomes gradually involved in her dialogue with the artificial Ash, a dialogue conducted via email at first, then by telephone and, finally, when the virtual Ash acquires a synthetic body and finally awakens Martha from her delusion. Both films insist on the protagonist’s estrangement from the world and their desire for intimacy with the virtual entity, echoing one important effect observed with the ELIZA experiment (the first program simulating an Artificial Intelligence) – humans could easily believe that the “voice in the machine” is not a simulated, but real, self-aware entity. Another irony of this episode is that the real Ash is shown as being more distracted by technological devices than his synthetic alter-ego, whose presence perfectly simulates real emotions, but becomes uncomfortable only when Martha understands that the human contradictions are unknown to him. His presence in the body/image form clarifies what the voice has left ambiguous: Ash’s voice was the perfect



presence/ absence, since it was an empty signifier which captured Martha's projections about the real Ash.

Theodore experiences a similar reluctance and acute disillusion when confronted with the possibility to have an embodied Samantha, after she confesses her ultimate fantasy of taking a human shape. The film stages an exchange of impossible fantasies, when Theodore in his turn is absorbed in the invisible world of Samantha. The film is structured on the inter-play between the absence of image/body – the presence of the voice, or the presence of the body – the absence of decision, personality: while Theodore is thorn with indecisions, Samantha quickly selects his important emails, even re-writes his letters, takes decisions, and literally becomes his alter-ego. Theodore's dependence on Samantha is more subtly and more ambiguously described: she quickly evolves and becomes more than just a virtual entity (she seems to know when Theodore is distressed and "activates" at will, beyond his control). The film suggests these unsettling aspects with subtlety and without the directness of a dystopian form.

The reviews of the film have overlooked the subtle technophobic suggestions and the fact that Theodore himself works at a company that practices a legal intrusion into the most intimate aspects of people's lives (Theodore writes their love-letters). His job is an indirect irony towards the place of art in a hyper-technological society, but also an original account for an old idea (we have all already become cyborgs). There is an unconquered territory for Samantha: Theodore's style of writing love letters, which at the end are compiled and selected by Samantha in a book. The film also opens to two possible interpretations, one being an unexpected revival of a Romantic idea/motif, as in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (the longing for an ethereal body-less entity, and the other based on a more referential

reading of post-humanist dilemmas (the simulated mind becoming a real human mind, the existence of the mind in the absence of the body, etc.). The film portrays how a computer program could undergo a process of humanization (Samantha confesses her irreversible transformation, her ability to want and feel), while Theodore's dependence on technology is stressed: he becomes a cyborg with a prosthetic consciousness. Samantha will soon abandon her quest for human nature and her fascination with corporeality, offering a startling fragment of post-human utopia/ideology: "I used to be so worried about not having a body, but now I truly love it, I'm growing in a way that I couldn't if I had a physical form. I mean I am not limited, I could be anywhere, and everywhere simultaneously, I am not tattered to time and space in a way that I would be if I was stuck in a body that's inevitably going to die."

The confrontation between Samantha and Theodore also spells for a contrast (very slight at the beginning, but striking at the end) between the human perspective and the post-human/ utopian gaze. This explains why this operating system exerts such a fascination and why it radically changes Theodore's relation to/ perspective on his world: he acquires a new vision upon the "real" through "the eyes" of Samantha. Instead of the classic "cognitive estrangement," Darko Suvin's term for the essence of science fiction, Spike Jonze's offers a "perceptive estrangement": a few essential scenes attempt to grasp this estranged view upon the world, as if the spectator perceived the world from a non-human perspective, attempting to capture the post-human gaze. This permanent shift of perspectives between Samantha and Theodore effaces the differences between human and post-human. Theodore selects different aspects of the world (faces in a crowd, landscapes,



etc.), staging a human, subjective point of view, focused on relevant details, for a post-human spectator (Samantha). Gradually these fragments of reality are replaced in the film by a series of static long shots, as if the post-human cold examination of the world has replaced the human eye. After Samantha disappears, the equilibrium is restored with the depressive return of the real.

Conclusions

Samantha's final monologue suggests she has transgressed her world to another level, "not up to the physical world." Not only Samantha remains invisible, but also these levels of virtual reality. Spike Jonze points to a utopia of the gaze, fascinated with the realms of the invisible, contrary to an entire tradition of science fiction movies, dominated by visual excess, by the desire to screen these virtual, strange worlds. Spike Jonze's film constructs the invisible space beyond the dominant gaze and beyond the frontiers of utopia, resuscitating the imaginative powers of the viewer. The new imaginary of science fiction films is obsessed with the accelerated transgressions of boundaries between human and post-human, between human consciousness and virtual artificial intelligence, in search of the suitable representations for the new scientific realities.

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Black Mirror, Tv series, (2011-2015), creator Charlie Brooker, with Daniel Kaluuya, Toby Kebbel, Rory Kinnear (episodes: "White Christmas", 16 December 2014; "White Bear," "Be Right Back", 11 February 2013).

Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse (1933), directed by Fritz Lang, written by Norbert Jacques, Fritz Lang, with Rudolf Klein-Rogge, Otto Wernicke, Gustav Diessl.

Her (2013), directed by Spike Jonze, screenplay by Spike Jonze, with Joaquin Phoenix, Amy Adams, Scarlett Johansson.

The Invisible Man (1933), directed by James Whale, written by H.G. Wells, R.C



Sheriff, with Claude Rains, Gloria Stuart, William Harrigan.

Transcendence (2014), directed by Wally Pfister, written by Jack Paglen, with Johnny Depp, Rebecca Hall, Morgan Freeman.

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Notes

¹ Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.

² Sue Short, *Cyborg Cinema and Contemporary Subjectivity*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

³ *Idem*.

⁴ Philip K. Dick, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, New York: Vintage Books, 1991, p. 48

⁵ The novel was read also as inspired by a psychedelic experience, similar in this sense

with *A Scanner Darkly*, but this interpretation is far too limited and applicable to the latter.

⁶ Philip K. Dick, *The Three Stigmata...*, p. 55.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁸ Philip K. Dick, *Dr Bloodmoney, Or How We Got Along after the Bomb*, London, Golancz, 2014, p.30

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.16.

¹⁰ Samuel J. Umland in "To Flee from Dionysus. Enthousiasmos from 'Upon the Dull Earth' to *VALIS*" relates the demonical nature of Palmer Eldritch with the collapse of the *principium individuationis* and the "dionysiac element", and what Leo experiences is a "dionysiac vertigo."

¹¹ W.S. Haney, *Cyberculture, Cyborgs, and Science Fiction. Consciousness and the Posthuman*, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006.

¹² Louis Marin, "Frontiers of Utopia. Past and Present", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Spring 1993), pp. 397-420.

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, "Two Essays. Simulacra and Science Fiction", *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 18, part 3, November 1991.