

Introduction

As technological development accelerates, the distinctions between human and machine become increasingly fluid. Consequently, the robots imagined in early science fiction narratives (such as those of Karel Čapek or Isaac Asimov) appear outdated when compared with the current capacities of artificial intelligence. This ongoing evolution raises fundamental questions about the traditional meanings of ethics and progress, as well as about how we conceptualize human identity, social structures, and human interactions with the environment. In this context, it is worth mentioning Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's theory of the dialectic of Enlightenment, which briefly states that the emphasis on rationalism in the 18th century led to a huge technological development, the effects of which proved devastating in the 20th century with the dominance of fascism and totalitarianism in general¹. On the other hand, precisely such technological developments propelled by the systemic transformations of post-Fordist capitalism facilitated the emergence of postmodernism as a form of "cultural dominant" (characterized by heterogeneity and pluralism), according to Fredric Jameson and David Harvey².

Oscillating between the optimism of utopian projections and concerns about a dystopian future on a planetary scale, the debates about the role of technology in shaping our understanding of existence have become urgent in various spheres of knowledge and everyday life, not to mention the return of old dilemmas about the power and limits of the human condition. This volume builds on such topics and investigates the numerous connections between technology and social-cultural environments with the help of critical methods and theories proposed within trans-/posthumanism, cultural studies, utopian and dystopian studies³.

Transhumanism, for instance, promotes the idea of overcoming biological limitations through technology and offers solutions to enhance life, which can be viewed as both a form of salvation and a potential act of hubris. On the one hand, the promise of a life free from the problems of ageing and inevitable death responds to utopian aspirations of reaching perfection and immortality⁴. On the other hand, this attempt to artificially alter the course of human life may exacerbate the tensions between the idealistic vision and the pragmatic realities of its implementation, giving rise to fears of the danger of dehumanization. In this context, the figure of the cyborg as defined by Donna Haraway

is illustrative, based precisely on the blurring of the distinctions between man, animal, and the machine⁵.

In general, technologically saturated societies have been the subject of a considerable number of dystopian fictions, in which writers have signalled the danger of losing control over technological artifacts. Reality itself seems to be losing its classical materiality in an era of simulacra and simulation (in the sense of Jean Baudrillard⁶) and of secondary worlds generated by artificial intelligence. Likewise, within the current capitalist system (under the logic of “capitalist realism” as theorized by Mark Fisher⁷) and in the context of the growing threat of environmental crises, technology is increasing its liberating and alienating potential in ecological narratives. On the other hand, the importance of funding and deploying hyper technologies in fields such as neurosciences, advanced medicine or digital sciences is already a scientific consensus.

This volume proposes interdisciplinary approaches that interrogate how the literary, media, social, economic, political, and historical imaginaries mediate these tensions, offering insights into the emerging ontologies of the future. It opens with a section on speculative worlds, which reconfigure our understanding of technology, AI, identity, and narrative form. Ranging from cyberpunk to steampunk, posthumanist YA fiction, and intermedial world-building, the studies aim to map the diverse aesthetic and philosophical pathways through which speculative storytelling continues to imagine the futures of human and non-human existence. Stefan Firică examines a series of post-/metamodernist Russian cyberpunk novels written by Tatyana Tolstaya, Vladimir Sorokin, and Victor Pelevin, while Camelia Dinu delves deeper into the latter’s *iPhuck 10*, a book whose use of post-human and post-Soviet motifs distinguishes it as a key example of post-cyberpunk literature in contemporary Russian fiction. Monica Alina Toma turns to the cinematic adaptation of Philip Reeve’s *Mortal Engines* in order to analyze the retro-futurist aesthetics and techno-fantasy logic of the steampunk genre. In the following study, Maria Barbu and Marius Conkan look at Reeve’s *Railhead* trilogy through the lenses of posthumanist novum and cognitive estrangement, showing how its technoscientific world-building challenges fixed notions of humanity. Ultimately, Mihai Dacin offers an intermedial perspective on convergent evolution in the narrative architectures of videogames and literary fiction, emphasizing the shared strategies through which immersive worlds are constructed.

The second section moves the focus on several dystopian narratives which illustrate how biotechnological and ideological transformations reshape what it means to be human and to inhabit a body. Corin Braga interrogates the trope of immortality as a dystopian counter-ideal in works spanning from the 18th to the 20th century, revealing how the desire to transcend human finitude often generates new forms of existential and societal imbalance. Luca Mătăsaru revisits three early 20th century technological dystopias to show how they portray the individual’s revolt against totalitarian power, revealing these works as anti-utopian critiques that expose the dangers of collectivist ideology and unchecked faith in scientific progress. Angelo-Nicolae Mitchievici traces the evolution of the simulacrum from Philip K. Dick’s fiction to Ridley Scott’s cinematic reinterpretations, questioning what androids can feel and what their simulated affect tells us about authenticity in the

age of AI. Iren Boyarkina closes the section with an exploration of the interplay of utopian vision with science-fictional speculation in Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, showing how the writer uses assisted evolution and advanced technology to explore post- and transhumanist ideas that shed a different light on the meaning of utopia.

The next section brings together a set of articles that investigate how past and present debates about mind, memory, (ir)rationality and technology adjust our understanding of human and artificial consciousness. Carmen Borbely examines Margaret Cavendish's 17th century materialist philosophy of mind through her poetic and prose treatments of melancholy, imagining thought as fundamentally embodied and shaped by the entanglement of affect, matter, and the turbulent political world around her. Alice Popescu uses the analysis of several texts from British industrial literature, science fiction and socialist realist literature in order to explore the relationship between technology and different dimensions of rationality and irrationality. Catrinel Popa compares Samantha Harvey's *Orbital*, Stanisław Lem's *Solaris* and Chinghiz Aitmatov's *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* by investigating concepts such as imagination, temporality, and emotion in the context of posthumanism. Drawing on the theories of Baudrillard, Hayles, Bostrom, Braidotti, and Haraway, Nicolae Bobaru problematizes how emerging AI and robotic agents destabilize human-centered concepts of personhood and propose a new model of "synthetic sovereignty" as the foundation of posthuman agency.

The articles of the fourth section collectively examine the ethical and philosophical tensions surrounding biotechnology, cyborgs, and other forms of posthuman subjects and artificial entities. Mădălina Ionescu reevaluates the Oedipus myth to diagnose a broader crisis in humanist thought within the age of post-truth, post-temporality, and simulacra, while Iulia Andreea Milică discusses Hawthorne's *Rappaccini's Daughter* and Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* with the purpose of exposing how biotechnology oscillates between hubristic danger and redemptive promise. Alexandra Vranceanu Pagliardini revisits the Promethean myth to illuminate its renewed significance in posthumanist narratives, and Mohamed-Sami Alloun traces early literary formations of the posthuman to show how such figures anticipate contemporary debates within feminist and postmodern paradigms. Maria Ioana Oancea interrogates the lineage from Pygmalion to Frankenstein to better understand modern receptions of artificial creation and intelligence, while Alina Bako explores Romanian literary portrayals of robotic "bioengineering" to reveal culturally specific visions of machinic life. Carina-Iulia Chereji studies Kurt Vonnegut's war stories to chart the shifting distinctions between the human and the inhuman, and Ana-Maria řtefan demonstrates how Okorafor's cyborg figures "write back" through hybridized storytelling, asserting voices at the margins of posthuman discourse.

The contributions of the fifth section probe the philosophical and ethical boundaries of representation as they intersect with artificial intelligence and contemporary technologies. Through a Kantian lens, Caius Dobrescu redefines mimesis as an internal cognitive process, questioning where and why machine imitation reaches its conceptual limits. Laura T. Ilea brings Achille Mbembe's theorization of necropolitics to bear on algorithmic governance, examining how automated systems reshape responsibility, vulnerability,

and democratic erosion in everyday encounters. Alina Buzatu investigates responses to pain and suffering, contrasting symbolic, culturally embedded practices with emergent biotechnological interventions to assess how transhumanism reframes ontological experiences of illness. Finally, Călină Părău considers how AI transforms the ethics of reading and interpretation, exploring whether digitally mediated communication can sustain genuine encounters with difference in a hyperconnected age.

The final section broadens the discussion to consider the impact of artificial intelligence on cultural, educational, ethical and creative landscapes in various fields. In his study, Iulian Boldea critically examines AI's algorithmic creativity and situates emerging text-generating tools like ChatGPT, MidJourney and GitHub Copilot within literary and philosophical frameworks, arguing that human imagination and reflective subjectivity remain indispensable. Ruxandra Cesereanu surveys recent public debates on AI and presents the prospects, challenges, and risks that have emerged from its rapid expansion. Meanwhile, Tudor Budușanu explores the potential ethical, epistemic, and cultural crises posed by unregulated generative AI, offering a critical examination of institutional narratives and highlighting the urgent need for informed, accessible AI literacy. Maria-Carina Lechințan traces the evolution of digitalisation and AI in education, emphasising pivotal moments that have transformed learning environments and pedagogical practices. Petre Nicolescu focuses on human-AI creative collaboration, proposing new ways of understanding the role of the artist in contemporary visual art. Finally, Ioana-Alexandra Pavăl analyzes the “charismatic illusion” of social media viewing, revealing how AI-driven platforms influence audience behaviour and perceptions in the digital sphere.

Together, the contributions in this volume chart a multifaceted exploration of the evolving boundaries of humanity in an era defined by digital systems, algorithmic cultures and posthuman narratives. By moving fluidly from speculative fiction to philosophical critique, from ethical debates to aesthetic experimentation, and from cognitive theory to sociocultural analysis, the sections depict the contemporary terrain where technological innovation and human self-understanding collide. Overall, the journal invites readers to confront the challenges and possibilities opened by artificial intelligence and its attendant transformations, encouraging a critical, imaginative, and ethically attuned engagement with the futures now unfolding before us.

Maria Barbu & Marius Conkan

NOTES

1. See Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 2002.
2. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, Duke UP, 1991; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Cambridge, Blackwell, 1990.

3. See Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge & Malden, Polity Press, 2013; N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 1999; Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism*, Minneapolis & London, University of Minnesota Press, 2010; Gregory Claeys, *Utopianism for a Dying Planet: Life after Consumerism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2022.
4. See Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.
5. See Donna J. Harraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, Technology, And Socialist-Feminism In The Late Twentieth Century*, ProQuest Ebook Central, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
6. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1994.
7. See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, 2009.