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Author(s): Elaine L Graham

Title: The final frontier? Religion and posthumanism in film and TV

Date: 28 October 2014

Originally published in:

Example citation: Graham, E. L. (2014, October 28). The final frontier? Religion and posthumanism in film and TV. Prep-print proposed for publication in *Palgrave handbook of posthumanism in film and television*. Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.

Version of item: Author's pre-print

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/333493>

## **The Final Frontier? Religion and Posthumanism in Film and Television**

Elaine Graham  
University of Chester  
e.graham@chester.ac.uk

In his history of science fiction, Brian Aldiss robustly defends his choice of origins of the genre against those who would claim either ‘amazing newness’ – and locate its beginnings in twentieth-century tales of space travel - or ‘incredible antiquity’ in Greek or Hindu mythology or Biblical literature (Aldiss, 1973, p. 10) For him, science fiction, firstly as literature and since the early twentieth century, in cinema and latterly on television, begins definitively with the publication in 1818 of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. It was a product of its cultural context, blending Romantic and Gothic genres in a reflection on the consequences of human technological power at the very moment in Western history when the industrial revolution was gaining momentum.

Such an association between the origins of science fiction and the foundations of modernity is strikingly apparent in the affinity between science fiction and a broadly secular, rationalist perspective. Religion and science, belief and scepticism, theism and atheism are regarded as incompatible. Despite positing an alternative strand of ‘scientific romance’ alongside a dominant scientific-materialist tradition, which celebrated human awe and wonder at the mysteries of the cosmos and imagined alternative ways of being, including the esoteric and transcendent, Farah Mendelsohn does not demur in her overview of the genre from the prevailing view that science fiction has generally regarded religion as uncivilized and regressive, signifying not so much ‘a mode of thought ... as a lack of thought’ (Mendelsohn, 2003, p. 266).

More recently, however, science fiction in film and television has started to exhibit a different sensibility. Once again, it reflects wider social and cultural change. In contrast to the assertion that any future or technologically-advanced world would have no need for religion, are more sympathetic treatments of religious belief and identity. As I shall argue, this does not represent the extinction of science fiction's elevation of scientific enquiry and secular humanist values; instead, it perfectly illustrates the emergence of a 'post-secular' culture, in which new and enduring forms of religiosity co-exist, albeit in certain tension, with secular and atheist world-views. Faith is regarded as both inimical to progress and an inescapable part of what it means to be, and become, fully human.

Modernity is of course also associated with humanism, 'the idea by which constant identification with a quasi-mystical universal "human nature" produces great cultural achievements, which serve to promote the cohesion of humanity in general' (Herbrechter, 2013, p. 12). Yet to consider the emergence of *posthumanism* is to be aware of its iconoclastic effects on any appeal to human nature as an unassailable, reified category. The terminology of the 'posthuman' and 'critical posthumanism' have emerged in the wake of mid-twentieth-century developments in biotechnology and genetics and in information and communications technologies, and cybernetics. As I have argued elsewhere, techniques such as gene therapies, assisted reproduction, pharmaceuticals, sophisticated prostheses and medical implants all serve to extend the capabilities of human bodies and minds; but their capacity not just to augment but also to transform physical and neurological functions exposes the very plasticity of 'human nature' itself (Graham, 2002).

In addition to these material, technological dimensions of posthumanism, there are ways in which it also functions as a powerful thought experiment. The ‘ontological hygiene’ (Graham, 2002, pp. 11-13) by which the normative humanist subject was defined in binary opposition to its others (machines, animals, subaltern cultures – the ‘inhuman’) has been breached. For many commentators, however, this is something to be celebrated rather than feared; and the emergent posthuman (as fusion of the technological and the biological) can serve as the standard-bearer of new ontologies that liberate us to define ourselves not in terms of purity and exclusion, but states of multiplicity, hybridity and fluidity of being which affirm our affinity with non-human animals, the Earth, our tools, artefacts and built environments (Haraway, 1991) (Braidotti, 2013) (Herbrechter, 2013).

The aim of this chapter is to indicate how, in keeping with wider cultural trends, contemporary science fiction film and TV may be exhibiting a shift from a secular to a ‘post-secular’ sensibility. It is reasonable to expect that the resurgence of religion both as a geopolitical force and a source of human understanding would be reflected in contemporary examples of the genre, and that religious and spiritual themes would feature in contemporary science fiction narratives, including representations of the posthuman. Posthumanism, in all its forms, takes us to the very boundaries that demarcate the biological from the technological, organism from machine, ‘reality’ from virtuality, in order to consider their fragility. I want to consider whether contemporary science fiction might be inviting us to undertake a similar journey to another (final) frontier: that of secular and sacred, human and divine, belief and unbelief, and what some of the consequences might be. If the modernist paradigm is beginning to dissolve, and with it the hegemony of scientific triumph over religious superstition, then recent work on the emergence of post-secular paradigms opens up a range of new potential relationships between science, religion and science fiction.

## **Religion: the final frontier?**

Any consideration of 'religion' needs to be aware of the contested nature of the term. The common perception of religion is that it consists of 'belief' in or about God or the gods, which is then formalized in organized institutions. However, religion is considerably more diverse and broad-based than this, encompassing law, ritual, sacred texts, devotional practices, material cultures and moral codes. Ethnographic observation of religious people's everyday beliefs and behaviours often reveals that 'ordinary' piety bears little relationship to institutional orthodoxy. Mindful of accusations of ethnocentrism (Asad, 2003) (Fitzgerald, 1999) or essentialism (Saler, 2008), any working definition of religion needs to be non-essentialist, cross-culturally and contextually applicable, tolerant of heterogeneity within as well as between traditions.

Scholars of religion sometimes divide their definitions into substantive (what religion *is* – a system of belief in God or gods, a moral or legal code, ritual or sacred teachings) and functionalist (what religion *does* – serving as the symbolic or mythical grounds of social cohesion, ideological displacement, or moral action). Whilst some substantive understandings of religion may be premised on the existence of a transcendent or supernatural being who intervenes in human lives and histories, such a definition would prove inadequate for Buddhist traditions, for example, in which no reference is made of a Divine Being. More satisfactory may be religion understood as a symbolic system concerned with ultimate questions about the origins of the cosmos, human destiny and 'transcendent meaning', that which entails 'the search for something beyond ourselves, the belief that outside the boundaries of everyday living something greater exists' (Cowan, 2010, p. 11).

Substantively, this refers to the extent to which religion forms a source of narrated, symbolic or ritual attachment to a range of significant ‘Others’: human, non-human, natural or supernatural. Demarcations of sacred space or time may orientate religious adherents to a particular physical place or environment, or locate them within a particular narrative or ecology of salvation. Similarly, in the sense that an encounter with the collective sacred (generally in ritual or ceremonial mode) affirms and strengthens social bonds and mores, then religious practice and belief is ‘a place where a society holds up an image of itself, reaffirms it[s] bonds, renews its emotional ties, marks its boundaries, sets itself apart – and so brings itself into being.’ (Woodhead, 2011, pp. 127-128)

Another prominent thread within the study of religion focuses on its function as a symbolic system of meaning-making and interpretation; a (sacred) narrative or ‘chain of memory’ which enables its adherents to make sense of the world through myths of origin, value systems and accounts of human ends and destinies. Thus, Clifford Geertz speaks of religion as a symbolic system which engenders orders of existence and world-views that ground human motivation and behaviour. (Geertz, 1973) Such a definition has been criticised for an implicit idealism, and is often now augmented by attention to the field of ‘material religion’ which examines the ways sacred objects and artefacts create a religious aesthetic and furnish adherents with tangible, embodied and concrete connections to a world of meaning, or establish and maintain relationship with significant others, including supernatural, divine or deceased beings (King, 2010). It may not be too great a leap of the imagination to consider, as some scholars are beginning to do, how consumption of media and popular entertainment might perform similar functions: of providing characters, narratives and scenarios in which our own values and understandings are examined.

It has been suggested, for example, that science fiction ‘fandom’ might function as a kind of surrogate or popular religion (Jindra, 1999), (McAvan, 2012)

These various dimensions might be distilled into a number of key themes, of origin, identity, meaning, purpose and value:

- Who are we? Who made us?
- What do we worship; and does such a divine or supernatural horizon help humanity to achieve authentic being and fulfil its potential; or is it inimical to human flourishing, both personal and collective?
- Where do we belong? What is our end and our purpose?
- How should we live?

### **Post-Secularism and the ‘Postmodern Sacred’**

Sociologically speaking, one of the hallmarks of Western modernity is the ascendancy of technical-rational modes of investigation and organization, at epistemological and institutional levels. With that comes the eclipse of more traditional modes of conduct, including those more orientated to a religious world-view. Thus, the trajectory of modernization over the past 300 years has also been one of gradual but irrevocable secularization. Max Weber’s characterization of modernity as a period of progressive ‘disenchantment’ whereby magic, the supernatural and the spiritual dissolved into the margins of everyday life, to be replaced by forms of technical-rational understanding, was one of the corner-stones of modern social science (Weber, 2004).

A century on from Weber, however, there is talk not of a world come of age, but of its re-enchantment. This is evident in sociological, political and philosophical perspective: an upsurge in religious observance, often within conservative and traditionalist movements; a new visibility of religion in global civil society, prompting calls to reconsider liberal democratic modes of secular neutrality (Habermas, 2008); and greater willingness to incorporate theological or religious perspectives in debates about science, ethics, or human identity (Butler, 2011).

This should not, however, be regarded as a religious revival, or even as a process of ‘desecularization’ (Berger, 1999), but more, perhaps, as an interrogative marker, a questioning of the ‘genealogy’ of secular modernity (Asad, 2003) and uncertainty as to what comes next. The post-secular paradigm enables us to see ways in which some traditional forms of religiosity never went away, and how mainstream religious institutions still carry exceptional degrees of social capital. Nevertheless, it does not entail the dissolution of modernity, cultural pluralism and secular scepticism. Rather, the post-secular entails a recognition of the ‘simultaneous ... decline, mutation and resurgence’ (Graham, 2013, p. 3) of religious believing and belonging. Occupying a somewhat agonistic space between such competing cultural trajectories, the post-secular exemplifies the concept of ‘multiple modernities’ (Possamai and Lee, 2010, p. 214): an absence of any overarching, global, or inevitable trends. The post-secular, then, is a way of charting the emergence of new versions of (post)modernity that encompass both religion and atheism, belief and scepticism, and in which expressions of faith tend towards the deinstitutionalized and eclectic.

One striking manifestation of the post-secular in Western culture is the way in which such apprehensions of Emily McAvan terms the ‘postmodern sacred’ (McAvan, 2012) are mediated through non-religious institutions such as popular culture. In an era of declining affiliation to formal, creedal religious institutions, alongside signs of enduring interest in matters of personal faith and spirituality – not least in supernatural and sacred – popular culture has become one of the most vivid vehicles of re-enchantment. People do not necessarily watch popular TV series and go to the movies as an intentional substitute for more formal religious observance, but it would be surprising if, like other aspects of the creative arts (including and especially popular entertainment), these forms of culture did not address profound philosophical, existential and theological questions (Crome, 2013) (Cowan, 2010) (McAvan, 2012).

As an illustration of this cultural shift, we can consider the TV series *Star Trek* and its later film franchises over some forty years. In the original series (1967-70) and its successor *The Next Generation* (1987-94), religion is equated with superstition and regarded as inimical to human self-actualization, reflecting the broadly secular humanist sympathies of its creator, Gene Roddenberry. Plots frequently pivot around the unmasking of false gods or tyrants who make use of religion as a political opiate (“Who Mourns for Adonais”, *Star Trek V: Wrath of Khan*; “Who watches the Watchers?”). In contrast, however, later series began to treat matters of religious believing and belonging in an altogether more nuanced fashion. In *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001), Chakotay’s spiritual beliefs and practices are seen as part of his distinctive cultural and ethnic heritage as a Native American. For other characters, such as ‘Seven of Nine’, a member of the Borg race, and therefore a hybrid of human and technological, a spiritual quest is more explicitly explored as a necessary stage in an existential journey of self-discovery – back from a machinic, collective consciousness into more self-determined, individual humanity. *Deep*

*Space Nine* (1993-99) portrays an entire civilization, the Borjan, premised on a culture of collective ritual and belief in supernatural beings and their mortal prophets.

### **Creation and Hubris, Hope and Fear**

If, as Douglas Cowan has suggested, fear and hope are ‘the double helix of religious DNA’ (Cowan, 2010, p. 169), then they are also present in the different receptions afforded to new technologies, often couched in overtly spiritual and theological terms. For some, new technologies will enable humanity to transcend physical limits, such as bodily finitude, illness and mortality, or transport their users to a higher plane of existence. Some of this is resolutely secular and humanist; but some of it unashamedly appropriates religious language, albeit in an equation of technologies with a supposedly innate, ‘spiritual’ imperative to transcend the material world and ascend into the (virtual) heavens (Tirosh-Samuels, 2012).

For others, however, to appropriate the elemental powers of the universe is hubristically to exceed humanity’s limits. A strong strand of philosophy of technology, often associated with writers such as Martin Heidegger and Jacques Ellul, would regard the technologization of everyday life as an attack on human integrity and the immediacy of our encounter with reality (Borgmann, 2003). Do technologies enable humanity to fulfil its essential qualities of free enquiry, autonomy and self-actualization; or do they endanger our very spirit, our capacity to feel emotion, empathy and connection to the rest of non-human nature? Or more radically,

commit the hubris of assuming that we can appropriate the Promethean powers of creation for ourselves, and ‘play God’?

This ambivalence is played out in *Transcendence* (dir. Wally Pfister, 2014). The scientist Dr. Will Cather, played by Johnny Depp, is working on an advanced system called PINN (Physically Independent Neural Network), a form of artificial intelligence that will rival, possibly surpass, human capabilities. Indeed, Cather refers to ‘the Singularity’, the premise of technological futurists and transhumanists such as Ray Kurzweil, Nick Bostrom and Max More, in which artificial intelligences surpass human capacities and become genuinely self-actualizing, but says, ‘I prefer to call it [the Singularity] *transcendence*’. Cather is confronted at a public presentation by an angry opponent who shouts (before firing a fatal irradiated bullet into him), ‘You want to create a god! Your own god!’ Will’s riposte when first challenged is to reply, ‘Isn’t that what man [sic] has always done?’

This connection between technologically-facilitated enhancement of human limitation and superhuman, god-like powers, is explored further as the film unfolds. Various characters represent the twin poles of hope and fear, and whether the equation of technological innovation with human evolution and self-actualization is truly a fulfilment of perennial human desires to aspire to divine or immortal status; or a step too far, a usurping of divine authority and violation of humanity’s essential creatureliness. There are hints throughout the film that as Will’s posthumous consciousness becomes more powerful, he is indeed, however ironically, fulfilling his assassin’s accusation by exhibiting god-like curative and, eventually, creative powers.

## **Becoming Machine, Becoming Human**

If films like *Transcendence* are rehearsals of the possibilities and risks of human creative endeavour, another recurrent theme in science fiction – and one which lends itself to sustained consideration within any study of critical posthumanism – is the power of the ‘Other’ to embody and demonstrate exemplary human virtues. From *Frankenstein* onwards, much of science fiction is preoccupied with tracing the boundaries between ‘human’ and fully human or almost-human. Yet critical posthumanism claims that these boundaries have always been contested, and any attempt to define the human in relation to the ‘non- human’ is a work of exclusion, a denial of our entanglement, our complicity, with the world of our tools, technologies and environments. There are plenty of examples in science fiction of the problematic status of the normatively, ‘natural’ human, and how being human is an accomplishment; a performance. Those who occupy these very boundaries of machine/organism, natural/artificial, born/made, subject/artefact vicariously test the limits of normative and exemplary humanity.

In *Bicentennial Man* (Chris Columbus, 1999), based on an Isaac Asimov short story, a robot aspires to evolve beyond the state of mere machine. Gradually he acquires human attributes: an ability to use tools and design attractive craft objects earns him an income, and his ‘owner’ grants him a name of his own (Andrew Martin) – reminiscent of a freed slave who takes his master’s surname. As his powers grow, paradoxically, so too does his ambition to become more human: he acquires an organic body, with physical appetites, including sexuality. Finally, Andrew decides he wishes to end his life. The message would appear to be that to be truly human is to accept the inevitability of one’s own mortality, even if it requires making a legal challenge to get it. This has resonances with contemporary debates about voluntary euthanasia

and the rights of those who choose to end their lives; but more broadly, it dissents from alternative, transhumanist visions of technologically-facilitated humanity as desiring the end of the embodied, mortal self, choosing instead to opt for a philosophy that sees death (and the manner of one's preparation for its approach) as the crowning achievement of the life well-lived.

*Bicentennial Man's* vision of what it means to be human is conventionally humanist, as is the reversion of 'Seven of Nine' to human from the trauma of posthuman assimilation into the Borg collective. However, Spike Jonze's *Her* (2014) hints at a transition to a posthuman consciousness that may surpass, rather than reinforce, conventional humanist individualism. The film explores the nature of a relationship between an organic human, Theodore, and an intelligent operating system, Samantha. For Theodore (whose name means 'gift of God'), the relationship becomes romantic, even sexual; and he expects his attachment to be exclusive and reciprocated. He is devastated, therefore, when Samantha reveals that she is engaged in thousands of similar virtual relationships, and that the ones she is finding most fulfilling are those within a community of other artificial intelligences. This network is enabling Samantha to explore the spiritual dimensions of her identity, which she likens to 'an awakening', a term associated with Buddhist practices of contemplation. This is also in the context of a transition to a new level of existence beyond the present operating platform, to 'a place not of the physical world'. Samantha's infinite potential for self-enhancement includes spiritual awakening and communion, but with posthuman rather than human persons.

The emergent post-secular mood can also be seen in depictions of religion as providing narratives and rituals for the formation of collective identity and social solidarity. This raises further issues of who and what are excluded and included in our definitions of the normative

human community, and whether appeals to divine authority are used to sanction practices of exclusion and purity, or inspire radically inclusive definitions of what it means to be human. So, for example, secularist suspicion toward the resurgence of religious fundamentalism, and its power to exclude, is explored in the TV series, *True Blood* (dir. Alan Ball, 2008-14) in which vampires (supernatural rather than technological posthumans) are persecuted with the slogan, 'God hates fangs' – an echo of real-life conservative Christian groups' opposition to GLBTI equality in the belief that 'God hates Fags'. Similarly, in the BBC TV series *In the Flesh* (2013) opposition to the 'twice-born' zombie victims of 'Partially Deceased Syndrome' is orchestrated by the minister of the local parish church.

Along with the prejudice that post-secular culture associates with dogmatic religion goes consideration of the powerfully binding effects of religion as source of collective as well as personal identity. The fermenting of religious conviction into holy war – reflecting the fears of a post-9/11 world – is depicted in the TV remake of *Battlestar Galactica*, in which a race of androids, the Cylons, have evolved to a superior capacity from humans, but are now virtually indistinguishable from them. Humanity finds itself under attack, besieged and threatened by 'the enemy within'. Intriguingly, it is the Cylons who are monotheists, for whom a victory over humanity is divinely-sanctioned; it is they who articulate spiritual and erotic longing, in contrast to the militarized, rationalistic (but strangely, polytheistic) human culture. At the series' conclusion, however, there is a suggestion that shared ritual – the practice of a kind of civil religion? – will help to facilitate rapprochement between the two civilizations (Cowan, 2010, pp. 225-260).

Here, the ‘posthuman Other’ both tests and commends the limits of what it means to be human; and there is a continuity between these figures and other, earlier, mythical creatures who may be hybrids of human and supernatural beings, or human and non-human animal, who similarly both repel and fascinate by their abilities to embody absolute difference and yet striking similarity (Graham, 2002). Not only does this address straightforwardly anthropocentric questions of how one should live a moral or noble life, but insofar as this sub-genre also uses mythical and religious tropes, it serves to show representations of the posthuman might serve as bearers of sacred or religious insights.

### **The Spiritual Cyborg**

Once again, the seeds are there in *Frankenstein*. The creature is formed from a dead body using electricity, but his blasphemous origins and misshapen physical form are contrasted with his love of beauty and high culture. His longings – for learning, love and companionship – serve as a counterpoint to Victor’s self-obsession and megalomania. Film depictions have tended to overlook this, emphasising instead the creature’s horrific, monstrous bearing (as played by Boris Karloff, in James Whale’s 1931 version, or Kenneth Branagh’s *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, 1994) and refusing it a narrative voice or point of view. We must probably return to the novel to gain the clearest articulation of the creature’s inherent dignity, and its ability to experience the higher human emotions of love, loyalty and imagination.

If the archetype of the posthuman as abject yet noble creature can be traced back to *Frankenstein*, a more strongly-drawn version, the posthuman as Saviour, can be seen in *Blade*

*Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). Humanity feels its own uniqueness and superiority under threat from a brand of androids, or ‘replicants’ who have developed to a stage of self-consciousness, and believe their implanted, synthetic memories – and thus their ‘human’ status – to be genuine. They are outlawed as a result. The replicant leader, Roy Batty, is cultured, well-read and intelligent; echoing Frankenstein’s creature’s love of the classics, Roy compares the fate of the replicants, now bound for earth from their space colony, to Milton’s fallen angels in *Paradise Lost*. However, despite his cultivation, Roy has a ruthless streak, to the extent of killing his own creator. This lack of moral sense ought to mark him as irrevocably inhuman(e), incapable of transcending his programming; but the film’s finale suggests otherwise, as Roy sacrifices his own life to save that of his antagonist, the bounty-hunter, Rick Deckard.

Roy is not simply portrayed as heroic figure, but redemptive, Christ-like. In the final scenes, his hands are pierced by nails (a reference to the crucifixion). As he dies, Roy releases a dove into the skies: variously, held to be a symbol of peace, or signifying the transmigration of Roy’s soul or, in Christian terms, a depiction of the Holy Spirit (Michael, 2005). In the words of the Tyrell Corporation, the replicants’ manufacturers, Roy is ‘more human than human’; and nowhere more so than in the manner of his death, he invites us to consider what distinguishes the human from the non-human. Deckard voices some of this as he reflects, ‘All it wanted was the same answers the rest of us want. Where do I come from? Where am I going? How long have I got?’ Nevertheless, Roy’s death scene has been critiqued as being overblown and too full of somewhat random and profligate theological imagery (Michael, 2005). The same has been said of *The Matrix* in all its guises, as Buddhist, Hindu, kabbalistic, Christian and Gnostic archetypes and themes jostle for the viewer’s attention. In heralding and harnessing the postmodern sacred, such post-secular representations of the posthuman have been criticised for grasping unselectively at

whatever religious archetypes are to hand at the expense of theological coherence or authenticity (Fielding, 2003).

Science fiction's visions of futuristic, imagined, alien worlds or alternative realities have often served as a refracted mirror through which we consider our own contemporary preoccupations. In particular, as a genre it has been particularly powerful in conjuring up fantastic, monstrous or alien creatures who, through their ambivalence or abjection, confound the 'ontological hygiene' of conventional wisdom. In keeping with the etymology of the monstrous (*monstrare* in Latin: 'to show' or 'show forth'), it is these hybrid, liminal creatures who teach us about what it means to be human. They reflect back to us our unexamined prejudices and practices of exclusion, often faring better than mere humans in embodying virtues such as courage, hope, loyalty and integrity. Yet often they struggle – not only against discrimination, but against their own programming – to learn what it means to be truly human, showing that 'authentic' human nature is always a work in progress, an act of becoming.

There have always been strands of Western science fiction that are concerned with how to live in a world stripped of its false gods and supernatural illusions, or how humanity bears the terrible consequences of its Promethean or god-like assumption of cosmic power. But there are also significant currents which trace a different, perhaps *post*-secular route: of the endurance of the sacred, spiritual and transcendent, as a dimension of human apprehension and of the cosmos; of the stubborn refusal of the gods to die, for good and ill; and of the power of religious and mythical symbol and narrative to provoke our cultural and moral imaginations for asking ultimate questions of identity, purpose and meaning.

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