

THE FINAL FRONTIER? THEOLOGY AT THE BOUNDARIES OF THE POSTMODERN, THE POSTHUMAN AND THE POSTSECULAR

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Have We Ever Been Human?

My paper this afternoon is going to try and offer an insight into the way theology and religious studies might be of use to interrogate some current trends in contemporary culture. In particular, I want to engage with two areas in particular: debates about our human futures in the face of advanced technologies; and the apparent resurgence and re-emergence of religion in global society, in the face of the predictions of the secularization thesis. What these two things have in common is that they represent a thorough-going critique of many of the assumptions that shaped Western modernity, and in particular the elevation of the human subject as autonomous and self-determining, distinguished from animals, nature and machines, but also uniquely rational and unconstrained by the bounds of superstition, tradition and religion.

The work of the French philosopher and historian of science Bruno Latour is especially relevant here. The title of his 2003 work, *We Have Never Been Modern*, reflects his concerns to ask, through the perspective of the epistemology (the philosophy of what counts as knowledge) of

Introduction

- 'We have never been modern' (Latour, 1993): an interrogation of the epistemological and material assumptions underlying Western modernity.
- What were the strategies by which the categories of the 'secular' and the 'human' were established?
- A conversation between critical theory and popular culture (science fiction's representations of the posthuman)

modern science, about the very conventions that govern how we talk about what it means to be human. In his view, advanced technologies, such as genetic modification, artificial intelligence and cybernetics, serve to confound and confuse certain sets of dualisms by which conventionally we have separated the human from the non-human, the technological from the biological, artificial from natural. More precisely, he says it is a fiction born of Western modernity: it allowed scientists to secularise nature, the better to dissect and objectify it; it allowed humanism to flourish; but it may now be functioning more as an ideology than a creative truth.

For Latour, we have always been mixed up, co-evolving with our tools, living a hybrid existence. What the rapid intensification of new technologies has done has simply exposed us to that understanding. In a digital and biotechnological age, it is impossible to speak of a pristine, unadulterated 'human nature' without considering the ways in which humans have always, as it were, co-evolved with their tools and technologies.

But if Latour's assertion that 'we have never been modern' is a way of exposing the constructedness of modernity as a social, cultural and philosophical era, then a newer speculation, that 'we have never been secular' similarly challenges the eclipse of religion in our modern world, along with the fixity of the boundaries between science and religion, the profane and the sacred and the modernist evacuation of faith from accepted conventions of public and moral reasoning. Both statements are designed to bring us up short and think again about the taken-for-grantedness of the boundaries by which supposedly fixed identities are defined.

So today, I'm dealing with some fairly heavy-duty conceptual ideas, in order to offer a case study of how theoretical frameworks offer us 'things to think with' when we are attempting to engage with how contemporary culture conceives of what it means to be human, what it means to be religious, and what kinds of narratives we use to make value-judgements about exemplary and normative human nature. Is it true that religion is vanishing from public, political and cultural discourse? Or is it re-emerging, mutating and rejuvenating, to assist in providing new understandings of who we are, what we value, and how we should live?

As if that wasn't enough, I'm going to try and link the theoretical or conceptual at various points with something far more entertaining: how popular culture and the creative arts is also mirroring some of these philosophical debates about who we are – indeed, who gets included as 'we' in the first place – and what characterises human nature, what constitutes our human future, especially in a highly technological and globalised age. In particular, science fiction has always refracted back to us in the shape of fantastic, monstrous or alien creatures some of the deepest musings on the boundaries, limits and possibilities of human nature itself. And the ways theological or religious themes are mediated through science fiction serves to illustrate how we use the tools of the human imagination to debate and reflect on these deeper technological and existential questions.



The idea of the posthuman reflects the emergence over the past half-century of a technoscientific¹ culture in which, thanks to cybernetics, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, plastic surgery, gene therapies and assisted reproduction, biological humans are everywhere surrounded – and transformed – into mixtures of machine and organism. Technologies are now incorporated into our bodies as permanent, autonomously-functioning devices, such as cochlear implants, intraocular lenses, heart pacemakers or even artificial hearts; or they create immersive environments, such as cyberspace, which reshape our physical concepts of time, space and distance. In a more prosaic sense, insofar as most of the population of the ‘first world’ are completely dependent on technologies such as computer-mediated communications, broadcasting media, transport infrastructure and smart gadgetry, technologies of many kinds now completely permeate everyday life.

Arguably, human evolution has always been driven in part by the emerging capacity for the manufacture and use of tools and artefacts, however rudimentary; but our relationship with our

¹ ‘Technoscience’ is intended to evoke the interpenetration of science and technology. Rather than being separate enterprises, scientific endeavour is conducted within certain material and political economic contexts and is always already a cultural practice. Similarly, technologies are more than tools or instruments but historically situated in networks of human labour and organizational systems (Latour, 2003; Haraway, 1991; Graham, 2002: 30).

tools and technologies has intensified with the construction of the world's first stored-memory computer in 1948 and the identification of DNA in 1953. These have made possible innovations in genetics, cybernetics, neurology and information and communications technologies that have transformed our personal and cultural lives (Graham, 2002). Yet consideration of the material implications of new technologies also gives rise to philosophical reflection as well: not only about the practical or social consequences of our increasing dependence on such technologies, but also to what the ethical, political and cultural implications are likely to be.

We can see this through the medium of contemporary science fiction, and in particular how the advent of advanced technologies calls up a mix of responses. On the one hand, technologies are seen as bearers of human diminishment; on the other, as heralds of a brave new world of unlimited human self-actualization.



This ambivalence or polarization is played out in a recent SF film, *Transcendence* (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 (according to a real-life

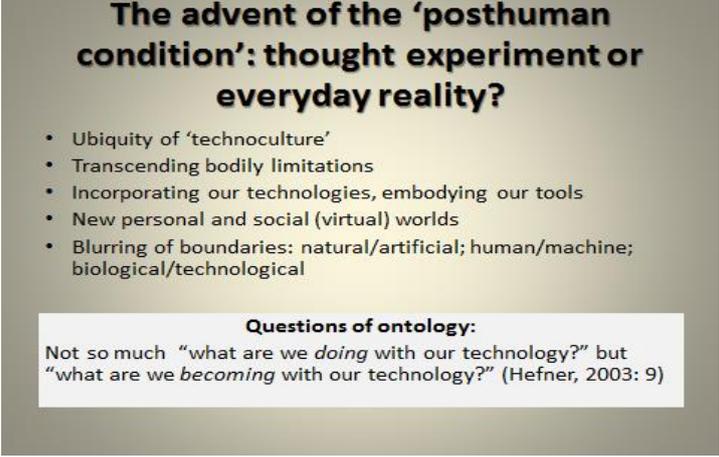
scientific theory known as the Singularity) rival, possibly surpass, human capabilities. Cather is confronted at a presentation by an angry opponent who shouts, 'You want to create a god! Your

own god!' Will's riposte when first challenged is to reply, 'Isn't that what man [sic] has always done?'

In that brief encounter we see the two poles of technophobia and technophilia; not just fear at the ethical or environmental benefits or perils of technology, however, but the very promise or threat they represent to human integrity itself. Do technologies fulfil our essential qualities of free enquiry, autonomy and self-actualisation by harnessing these advanced technologies; 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'?

So whilst the digital and biotechnological age is rendering problematic taken-for-granted boundaries between humans, machines and what we call 'nature' – be that non-human animals or our environment, in turn, it raises questions about how we – as humans, as builders and users of tools, artefacts and technologies – think about ourselves. (Graham, 2002) What has been termed 'critical posthumanism' (Simon, 2003) therefore, argues that digital, cybernetic and genetic technologies have not only material but existential impact, in their ability to question the boundaries and categories by which we have always delineated 'human nature', and in the way those very technologies expose the discourses and values informing our assumptions about what it means to be human. In this respect, the posthuman might be best conceived as a kind of 'thought experiment': an opportunity to think anew about the relationship between humans and our environments, artefacts and tools in a digital and biotechnological age. In that respect, the

right question is anthropological, even ontological: as the theologian Philip Hefner has put it, "... the question can never be first of all "what are we *doing* with our technology?" but it must be "what are we *becoming* with our technology?" (Hefner, 2003, p. 9)



The advent of the 'posthuman condition': thought experiment or everyday reality?

- Ubiquity of 'technoculture'
- Transcending bodily limitations
- Incorporating our technologies, embodying our tools
- New personal and social (virtual) worlds
- Blurring of boundaries: natural/artificial; human/machine; biological/technological

Questions of ontology:
Not so much "what are we *doing* with our technology?" but "what are we *becoming* with our technology?" (Hefner, 2003: 9)

Have We Ever Been Modern?

In preparing this paper, I found it helpful to return to the work of a social and cultural theorist whose work has proved influential in thinking about these issues: Bruno Latour (2003). In particular, his work locates the capacity of modern technoscience to unsettle the axioms of what it means to be human in the face of advanced digital, medical and biotechnological procedures and systems.

On the one hand, he says, Western modernity rests on the establishment of 'distinct ontological zones' (Latour, 1993, p. 10) between species and categories: human/non-human, active/inert, culture/nature. This he terms a process of 'purification'. But the paradox is that the very fruits of modern science and technology which depend on the demarcation between human manipulation

and transformation of its non-human others engenders, in its resulting products, a series of phenomena which precisely breach these boundaries. He characterises this as a parallel – and contradictory – process of ‘translation’ (Latour, 1993, pp. 10-11). Once we introduce a level of reflexivity or self-awareness regarding the co-existence of these two processes, he argues, we cease to consider ourselves truly ‘modern’.

Have we ever been Modern?

[Latour, 1993]

Modern scientific processes of ‘translation’ create new species or hybrids of nature and culture, organic and technological.

Yet these very practices depend on the establishment of ontological categories (and hierarchies) of human and non-human via epistemological and material practices of ‘purification’.



One of the chief artefacts of modernity and its twin processes of purification and translation, argues Latour, is of course the human subject itself: or perhaps more precisely the discourse of humanism. The strong affinities between human and non-human nature, the malleability of genetic and digital

technologies, the ubiquity of virtual and computer-mediated communications and their accompanying influence on everyday life, not least in taken for granted understandings of space, place, community and embodiment means that ‘matter is not dialectically opposed to culture, nor to technological mediation’ (Braidotti, 2013, p. 35). In other words, the biological and the technological, the material (or ‘real’) and the virtual are co-existent and co-evolving. The inability to disentangle everyday life from its (inter)dependence upon or with advanced technologies renders the classical humanist subject obsolete. According to this account of human evolution and ontology, then, it is a mistake to assume that sometime before the advent of biomedical, cybernetic and genetic technologies the boundaries between the human/non-human,

natural/artificial, organic/technological were fixed and axiomatic, and to be human rested on a clear 'ontological hygiene' of essential qualities (Graham, 2002).

Technologies are thus an integral part of our very human nature; or in the words of Philip Hefner, a necessary means of 'human becoming'. (Hefner, 2003, p. 43) And this may be no more than a reminder that, via the processes of transforming or constructing the world, humanity cannot but re-fashion *itself* as integral elements of that world. 'Human nature' ceases to be a fixed category and re-emerges as a constantly changing set of possibilities and configurations. The possibility of human evolution continuing through technologies is not to be rejected. Rather, it is possible to argue that a quintessential aspect of our very humanity is realised in and through our relationships with our tools and technologies.

You may already be familiar with the work of the feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway, and her famous use of the science fictional 'cyborg' figure. She argues that technologies have become so ubiquitous that notions of purity of origin, of human uniqueness, are redundant. Better to think of ourselves as cyborgs, she says: a blend of the cybernetic and the organic. That way, we are divested of the illusions of innocence, purity, detachment and the pretence of transcendence – all dangerous facets of a kind of will to power. The cyborg delights in her technological complicity and recognizes the plasticity of categories of being. In the cyborg Haraway advances a metaphor for post/human experience that resists seeing technology as a deterministic monolithic force or as a quick fix whose social and political implications are somebody else's concern. Ethically and existentially it rejects solutions of either denial or mastery. It suggests that ethical and political engagement with our technologies proceeds not from a

position of abstraction or purity, but from a recognition of our affinities with and immersion in, a highly-technologized world. (Graham, 2002, Garner, 2011)

Cyborg Manifesto (Donna Haraway)

'Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally-designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.'

Science Fiction 2: Boundaries

Once again, if we consider contemporary science fiction we see how much of it is preoccupied with tracing the boundaries between 'human' and fully human or almost-human. Yet, if Latour is to be believed, the boundaries have always been contested, and attempts 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.

If this is, in essence, a statement to the effect that 'being human' has never come naturally, then 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 – and how advanced technologies constantly destabilise the fixity of human identity. It is the marginal figures who

occupy these very boundaries of machine/organism, natural/artificial, born/made, subject/artefact, who vicariously test the ontological hygiene of our own concepts 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. Morally speaking, this may have contemporary resonances with 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.

Here, the 'Other' both tests and commends certain understandings of what it means to be human; and there's a continuity between these posthuman characters 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. Their power rests in the way they refract back to us our deepest aspirations and prejudices about what it means to be human. 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 how 'monstrous' (from the Latin to show or show forth, after all) or marginal creatures on the boundaries of humanity might also serve as bearers of sacred or religious insights.

This begins with the creature in the greatest science fiction narrative of them all: Mary Shelley's 1818 novella, *Frankenstein*, in which Victor, a self-obsessed scholar, creates a being from a dead body using electricity. The creature's blasphemous origins and misshapen physical form are contrasted with his love of beauty and high culture. His longings – for learning, love and companionship – serve to highlight Victor's megalomania. Film depictions have tended to overlook this, emphasising instead its 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.

A more strongly-drawn version of the posthuman as noble is the character of Roy Batty in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). A brand of androids, or 'replicants' have become virtually indistinguishable from humans, and are outlawed as a result. The replicant leader, Roy Batty, is cultured, well-read and intelligent, and 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*. The replicants have developed to a stage of self-consciousness, and believe their implanted, synthetic memories to be genuine. However, despite his cultivation, Roy has a ruthless streak, killing anyone who stands in his way: does his lack of moral sense mark him as inhuman, therefore? Unexpectedly, Roy seems to transcend even beyond his programming, for he sacrifices his own life to save that of his antagonist, the bounty-hunter, Rick Deckard.

The Crossed-Out God: the Paradoxes of Post-Secular Society

And I'm now heading in the direction of beginning to point to a further set of philosophical, not to mention theological, dimensions to the posthuman in science fiction and beyond. In speaking about the ascendancy of modern humanism, Latour himself argues that it was premised on 'the simultaneous birth of "nonhumanity" – things, or objects, or beasts – *and* the equally strange beginning of a *crossed-out God*, relegated to the sidelines.' (Latour, 1993, p. 13) (my emphasis, see also pp. 32-35). And here we begin to get glimpses of the other element within the emergence of modernity: the birth of a discrete philosophy, or sphere of life, known as the 'secular'. The creation of an immutable, autonomous, self-actualizing humanity was as dependent on the suppression of the transcendent, the divine non-human, as it was on the creation of a binary

opposition between the normatively human and its 'others' in nature, the animal kingdom or in the world of tools, technologies and machines.

**The post-secular, or
The Crossed-Out God of Modernity**

The process of purification within modernity was premised on 'the simultaneous birth of "nonhumanity" – things, or objects, or beasts – and the equally strange beginning of a *crossed-out God*, relegated to the sidelines.'

(Latour, 1993)

Are categories such as sacred/secular or transcendent/immanent themselves constructs of modernity?

Enlightenment humanism often assumed an implicitly anti-religious and secular basis, since it placed human self-determination and autonomy – freedom from dependence on the forces of tradition, superstition and autocracy – at the heart of its ambitions. Humanism is premised on ideals of self-determination through pursuit of individual rights and liberation from irrational influences such as tradition, ignorance or religion. Personal conscience and reason became the guiding source of moral authority, unmediated by the power of monarch or Church. 'Profoundly secular in orientation, Humanism promotes respect for science and culture, against the authority of holy texts and religious dogma.' (Braidotti, 2013, p. 29).

The revival of religion as a global political force from late 1970s (on empirical and theoretical grounds) engendered a wave of revisionist interpretations of the sociological secularization thesis. As it has emerged in contemporary debate within philosophy, theology and social theory, the post-

secular refers in particular to a revisionist understanding of classic secularization theory, understood broadly as both a separation of church and state, the privatization of faith, and the general decreased importance of religion in public life. The conventional account of secularization sees religious decline – even extinction – as an inevitable consequence of modernization. Yet evidence suggests that this is not the case. In many of the most rapidly-developing economies, such as Brazil, China, or India, religion continues to grow and to be a significant part of public life. A feature of the post-secular condition thus entails a shift in consciousness to allow a certain public recognition of religion, as in for example the interventions of faith-based activism within civil society but also in terms of recognition of religious identity and the legitimacy of religious reasoning in public debate. (Beckford, 2012) (Habermas, 2008) (Dinham, 2012)

What the post-secular is not

A religious revival or 'desecularization' (Peter Berger), because:

- Religion is newly resurgent and visible in global politics, but
- Conventional religious belief and affiliation is declining in the West ('Spiritual but not Religious')
- Scepticism, atheism and resistance to religion as a legitimate form of public reason is unabated.

So an inspection of the origins of modernity and of humanism through the construction of certain material and discursive boundaries leads us to another frontier: that which demarcates the secular from the religious, the material from the metaphysical. In adopting the terminology

of the 'post-secular', I should not be misunderstood as attempting to make a philosophical or theological case for the existence of God, or for advocating a return to pre-modern understandings of medical science, human rights, the humanity of women, the creation of the universe, or similar. The whole point about the post-secular is that it does not simply represent a reversal of the processes of secularization that has taken place in the Western world since the

European Enlightenment. Instead, whilst we can point to evidence of a 'new visibility' of religion and religious pluralism within global politics and society, there is no sign of a diminishment in long-term institutional decline of the Christian churches as well as the continuation of vigorous and principled resistance to the legitimacy of religious reasoning within political, legal, legislative and moral debate (Harris, 2005) (Dennett, 2007).

What the post-secular might be (probably)

'No sooner had a thoroughly atheistic culture arrived on the scene ... than the deity himself was suddenly back on the agenda with a vengeance ... The world is ... divided between those who believe too much and those who believe too little' (Eagleton, 2014, pp. 197-8).

'The postmodern sacred ... is an age of cultural agnosticism, in which "spirit" provides a useful medium between the two unsustainable poles of belief and total unbelief.' (McAvan, 2012)

So we are confronted with a paradoxical, almost agonistic situation, of two simultaneous and seemingly incompatible developments: the attenuation of organized religion and the drift away from institutional affiliation, alongside the resurgence of religion as a global and local

political and cultural force. Like Latour's analysis of modernity, then, it is only when we can no longer deny the co-existence of the forces both of resurgent religion and its 'cultured despisers' that the solidities of humanism, modernity and secularity begin to melt into thin air. For me, that is the essence of what we might term the post-secular, and what makes it - to both advocates of secularization and religious orthodoxy alike - unprecedented and theoretically intriguing. The *post-secular* denotes not simply the end of the secularization thesis, but its unpredictable after-life, in which currents of disenchantment and re-enchantment co-exist:

‘No sooner had a thoroughly atheistic culture arrived on the scene ... than the deity himself was suddenly back on the agenda with a vengeance ... The world is ... divided between those who believe too much and those who believe too little’ (Eagleton, 2014, pp. 197-8).

Posthumanism, Transcendence and the Sacred

Elements of this post-secular condition are even apparent in representations of the posthuman and our debates about human futures in an age of technologies. Despite the equation of modern science (and science fiction) with secularism, it is intriguing to identify a number of ways in which religious discourses still imbue many of the considerations of what should constitute our post/human future. Even in a supposedly secular age, prevailing concepts of God and transcendence still impinge on the kinds of normative and exemplary models of divine and human nature that fuel our technological visions. So it’s evident in the attitudes of writers who regard technologies as responsible for the *disenchantment* of the world (Borgmann, 2003).

For some, the technologisation of everyday life represents an unwelcome encroachment upon human integrity and the immediacy of our encounter with reality. The contemporary philosopher Albert Borgmann, argues that technologies have colonized everyday life to

Posthumanism, Transcendence and the Sacred

Disenchantment (Martin Heidegger, Jacques Ellul, Albert Borgmann)

Technologies as ‘vehicles of deliverance’ (David Noble); imbuing humanity with divine or demi-urgic power (Ray Kurzweil, Transhumanism); cyberspace as sacred space

such an extent that they have become virtually invisible (1984; 2003). The conveniences of processed food, television, text messaging and labour-saving gadgets have displaced more traditional skills and pastimes which may have involved more effort but which also constituted the essential fabric of daily life. By removing technologies from their human creators and from any sense of connectedness to their social or cultural contexts of production, Borgmann argues that we have emptied their accompanying activities of meaning. The everyday familiarity of technologies blunts our sense of wonder at their complexity and dulls our curiosity toward their origins in the actual processes and relations of production, and their ubiquity serves as an ideological opiate to dull our moral and political sensibilities. The solution for Borgmann is to restore a sense of the origins of technologies in the human practices of fabrication and sociability, thereby returning them to the status of 'focal things' (Borgmann, 2003: 27) – the Christian ritual of the Eucharist being one such example.

Yet the language of spirit, transcendence and the divine is strongly present in the discourse of those who celebrate new technologies – often in quite overtly religious and theological terms. New technologies, it is said, will enable humanity to transcend physical limits, such as bodily finitude, illness and mortality, or to 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 our flesh in favour of ascending to a kind of virtual Platonic realm of pure information.

Post-Secular Posthumanisms

There are alternative models of the posthuman which, whilst appealing to a post-secular sensibility, seek to reinstate 'religion' not by reasserting the binaries of transcendence and immanence but by blurring them. Rosi Braidotti deconstructs the categories of sacred and secular via an ecofeminist deconstruction of modernity's objectification of 'nature'. Whether or not it is expressed in explicitly spiritual or religious terms, it is this conception of the earth as sacred that renders the environment as irreducible to human appropriation. Braidotti pursues a panentheistic, Spinozan, neo-vitalist philosophy in which the notion of transcendence or becoming divine through technology is less about achieving immortality or other-worldly existence as about the re-enchantment of matter itself.

Post-secular Posthumanisms

Critical Posthumanism is about recognising and celebrating humans' affinity with those whom the purification of modernity rendered as 'Other'. It refuses the binary logic of secularism and may incorporate the 're-enchantment' of nature (neo-vitalism) in which the material is infused with the sacred.

'A posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or "earth" others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism.' (Braidotti, 2013)

'Transcendence' ... 'does not depend on fusion with something beyond the world, but, rather, relies on the extent to which the world itself is beyond us, is enormous, and is, at least in the aspect of its beauty, whole.' (Craig Calhoun, 2012)

Like many of the manifestations of religion within the post-secular, Braidotti's serve to challenge conventional demarcations of sacred/secular, religion/spirituality, transcendence/immanence, and overturn assumptions of the material world as devoid of spirit, and the spiritual necessarily as being

disembodied, virtual, other-worldly in the name of new ontologies and anthropologies of hybridity and re-enchantment. is it also about 'becoming divine' (Jantzen, 1998)?

This particular post-secular take on a 'posthuman feminism in the neo-vitalist mode' (Braidotti, 2008, p. 14) opts for a more integrated notion of all matter, including nature as infused by 'spirit' and a relocation of transcendence not as negation but confirmation of, beyond and within the immanent. The material is always already invested with the symbolic, the profane with the sacred, human fabrication with divine agency. For Braidotti, the posthuman is about 'becoming-animal, becoming-earth and becoming-machine' (Braidotti, 2013, p. 66) So this post-secular version of 'transcendence' is not premised on absence from this world in order to achieve consummation with the next – an essentially spatial definition founded on a premodern understanding of heaven 'up there' and earth 'down here'– but more in temporal terms, as reaching beyond the now and the given towards future, unrealised possibilities. This sort of transcendence describes a non-reductiveness and deep connectivity to experience that 'does not depend on fusion with something beyond the world, but, rather, relies on the extent to which the world itself is beyond us, is enormous, and is, at least in the aspect of its beauty, whole.' (Calhoun, 2012, p. 357)

Science Fiction 3: the Spiritual Cyborg

Science fiction's visions of the future, imagined alien worlds or alternative realities have always served as a refracted mirror through which we consider our own contemporary preoccupations. It is reasonable to expect, therefore, 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 and especially around questions of meaning, value and what it means to be human. How are wider geo-political and cultural issues – 9/11 and the 'war on terror', secularization, multi-

culturalism, globalisation - refracted through the handling of religious and theological themes?

Debates about the proper place for religion in a civilised society: as a cohesive or divisive force; as a fount of deep wisdom or source of delusion?

It's been said before that the TV series *Star Trek*, which first screened in the US in 1967, reflected the broadly secular humanist sympathies of its creator, Gene Roddenberry (who was actually a Unitarian Universalist). In the original series (1967-70), religion is equated with



superstition and regarded as inimical to human self-actualization. Plots frequently pivoted 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*).

This continues in the successor series, *The Next Generation*, in which the Enterprise's Captain, Jean-Luc Picard, is a latter-day Enlightenment rationalist *philosophe*. In one episode, a group of Federation anthropologists are secretly observing a pre-technological culture, but have their cover blown by a technological failure. One of the indigenous people, the Mintakans, is transported to the Enterprise for medical treatment, and mistakes Captain Picard for a god and instigates a religious movement in his name. Star Fleet and anthropologists take opposing views as to whether

such a cult should be discouraged, with Picard adopting a classically humanist-secularist position, viewing all religious belief as inimical to what he regards as the over-arching imperative of reason and progress:

PICARD: 'Millennia ago [these people] abandoned their belief in the supernatural. Now you are asking me to sabotage that achievement? To send them back into the dark ages of superstition and ignorance and fear? NO!' (*Star Trek: TNG*, "Who Watches the Watchers?" 1989.)

In contrast, however, later series of the franchise extending to the start of the twenty-first century, however, began to feature themes and characters who took religion more seriously and, arguably, treated matters of religious believing and belonging in an altogether more nuanced fashion. In *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001), for example, Chakotay's spiritual beliefs and practices are seen, somewhat in passing, as part of his distinctive cultural and ethnic heritage as a Native American; but 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.

Let's return, also, to the replicant Roy Batty in *Blade Runner* who for some is not simply an heroic figure, but redemptive, Christ-like, in his sacrificial act of saving his own bounty-hunter. In the final scenes, his hands are pierced by nails (a reference to the crucifixion of Christ). 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?'

But in passing, it's significant that Roy's death scene has been criticised for being overblown and far too full of somewhat random and profligate theological imagery. The same is said, of course, of the metaphorical and symbolic feast that is *The Matrix* in all its guises, as Buddhist, Hindu, kabbalistic, Christian and Gnostic archetypes and themes all vie for the viewer's attention. It's as if, to greet the return of the sacred, a post-secular sensibility is grasping at whatever religious references it can find, but with little heed for coherence or authenticity either to the realities of lived religion or the complexity of traditions going back centuries.

More recently, the fears of a post-9/11 world have been refracted through the TV remake of *Battlestar Galactica*, in which a race of androids, the Cylons, have evolved to a superior capacity than humans but are now virtually indistinguishable from them. Humanity finds itself under attack at the very nerve-centres of its operations, besieged and threatened by 'the enemy within'. Remind you of anything? 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 militarised, rationalistic (but strangely, polytheistic) human culture. (But I think this is more a kind of civil religion for them.)

Conclusion: Human, Non-Human and More-Than-Human

Contemporary science fiction, then, not least in its representations of posthuman characters, displays a considerable post-secular sensibility. Depending on where you look, faith is regarded as both inimical to progress and an inescapable part of what it means to be, and become, fully human.

The post-secular is located, in a sense, 'between a rock and a hard place' (Graham, 2013): confronted by the resilience of religion, spirituality and the sacred on the one hand and by the political settlements and epistemological convictions of secularism, materialism and humanism on the other. For Rosi Braidotti, similarly, there needs to be a way to steer between the Scylla of a 'new belligerent discourses about the alleged superiority of the West [...] expressed in terms of the legacy of secular Humanism' and the Charybdis of 'post-secular practices of politicized religion' (p. 36) – a third space, potentially, of qualified, contextual but principled humanist politics and ethics that is capable of articulating alternative less polarized accounts of what it means to be human. This is where critical posthumanism comes in, as a means of transcending the binary divisions towards an account of contemporary, global (in its political and ecological senses), post-secular visions of truth and obligation.

And if the posthuman condition signals the return of the repressed Other of liberal humanism, a refusal to accept that 'we have ever been modern', then the post-secular reflects the recognition of the endurance of the sacred, often in unexpected ways. My own take on the post-secular is that it is a very long way from delineating any kind of religious revival; and yet, as I have begun to indicate, it may provide a route away from Western modernist traditions of divine transcendence that bifurcate the spiritual and the material, in favour of a future which is more fully prepared to acknowledge the affinities between the human, non-human, and more-than-human (in the form of re-enchanted realms of nature and cosmos) in a more integrated and responsible celebration of life in all its fullness and diversity.

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